

**Matthew 12–14**

In these chapters, conflict with the Pharisees escalates as Jesus proclaims and proves himself Lord of the Sabbath. He will continue to teach about the kingdom of God through parables, but in his hometown, people question his authority—after all, wasn't he just the carpenter's son who had grown up among them? We will see Jesus' character displayed when, hearing of John the Baptist's horrid death, rather than withdrawing, he has compassion on the crowds that flock after him, healing their sick, and at the end of the day, miraculously feeding them. When Jesus comes to the disciples, walking on water and calming the storm that threatens them, they worship him and proclaim him the Son of God.

**Isaiah 40–55**

Our passages in Isaiah explore the future fulfillment of God's covenant promises and offer a message of good news, not just for Israel, but for the whole world. God's Servant is coming to bring justice to the nations. Despised and rejected, he will suffer shame, being pierced for our sins; but through his sacrificial, atoning death, he will bring redemption and establish God's kingdom for Israel and for all nations. God will establish an everlasting covenant with his people, inviting all who are thirsty to turn from their sins and come to him in faith to receive life, abundant and free.

**1 Corinthians 1–13**

Paul had established a church in Corinth, one of the largest and most influential cities in the Roman Empire. The values of the city were threatening to influence the small, young church more than those of God's kingdom. Having left to start churches in other cities, Paul heard of conflict in the Corinthian church and wrote to them to address their questions and problems.

Paul's letter seeks to unite and instruct the struggling congregation on issues not unfamiliar to us today, such as church divisions, sexual immorality, marriage, singleness, Christian liberty, worship, and spiritual gifts. Believing in the resurrection gives reason to see every part of life through the lens of the gospel.

**Genesis 12–25**

Our readings in Genesis this quarter summarize Abraham's life and faith journey. God will call him to leave his home and travel to a new land, covenanting to make him into a nation and that, through him, all people everywhere would be blessed. At times, we will see Abraham exercising great faith, and at other times, see his lack of it and his sin. But at all times, we will see God's faithfulness to his promises.

**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.

# CONTENTS

Introduction   Sharon Sacks	1
Matthew 12-14   Paul Oakley	5
Isaiah 40-55   Alison Lo	19
1 Corinthians 1-8   Peter Morden	47
Genesis 12-25   Julie Woods	67
1 Corinthians 9-13   Ray Porter	93
Final Note   Gail Martin	110
Prayers   Sharon Sacks	

Psalm 45   Paul Oakley
Psalms 46-49   Alison Lo
Psalms 50-52   Peter Morden
Psalms 53-55   Julie Woods
Psalms 56, 57   Ray Porter



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## MEMORY VERSES FOR THE MONTH

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

– **Psalm 44:8**

Week 2: After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.

– **Matthew 14:23a**

Week 3: “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.”

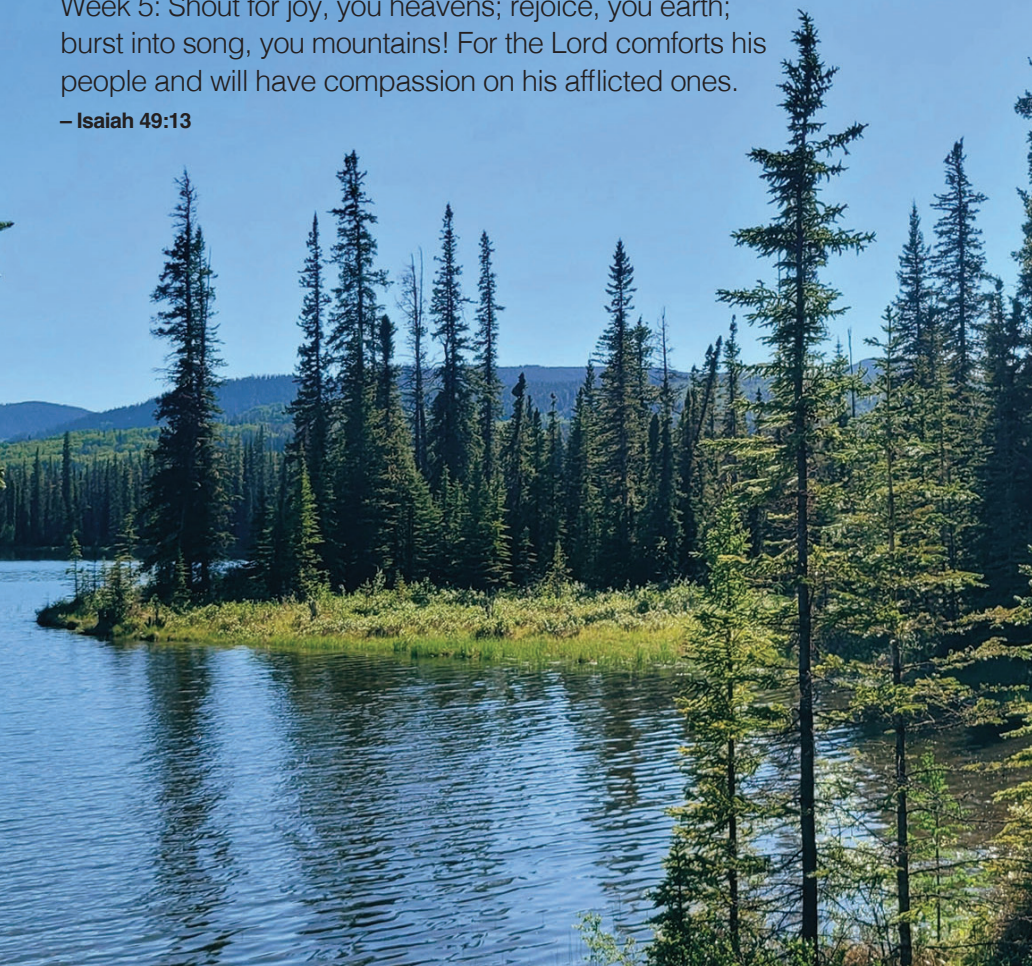
– **Isaiah 40:8**

Week 4: “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!”

– **Isaiah 43:18-19a**

Week 5: 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**



## MATTHEW 12–14

### TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED

My first step in preparing these notes was to read the four chapters in one sitting, trying to adopt the mindset of someone coming to them for the first time. As I did this, I became increasingly aware of how surprising Jesus' words and actions must have been to those who first encountered him. Hence, my title for these notes and the lens through which I have looked at each passage.

Commentaries tell us that three key themes in Matthew's gospel are: first, 'Who Jesus is' (i.e., Christology); second, 'Living in the kingdom of heaven,' and third, 'Jesus and the Jewish Law.' All these are present in our readings, but with surprising twists in how each one is portrayed. Frequently, Jesus is not the kind of Messiah his Jewish contemporaries expected, nor does he conform to our expectations; for example, his apparent harshness toward his mother and brothers in Chapter 12 makes us uncomfortable. His words about the kingdom, especially in the parables in Chapter 13, leave us with some untidy, troubling questions rather than neatly tying up everything. After 20 centuries of Christian history, we may be unsurprised by Jesus' attitude toward the law. Still, there are challenging, perhaps surprising, questions raised when we consider our cherished traditions and what might be our Lord's view of some of them.

This year, we have grown a small amount of fruit and salad in our garden. This homegrown produce is far more flavorful than the processed, pre-packed stuff from a supermarket. There is a danger that we get used to a Jesus who is 'pre-packed' by our traditional images, 'processed' by what we have heard from others, and so we miss the surprising flavor of the real Jesus. Let's open our minds and hearts to encounter the 'unexpected' Lord in these familiar passages.

#### FOR FURTHER READING

RT France, *Matthew, Tyndale NT Commentary* (IVP, 1985)

Paula Gooder, *The Parables* (Canterbury Press, 2020)

Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1* (SPCK, 2004)

WEDNESDAY, JULY 1, 2026

## ‘OUCH! THAT HURT!’

**PRAY** Lord Jesus, my Prophet, Priest, and King, when you are calling me not to conform to the norms of my society, give me ears to hear and courage to obey.

**READ** **MATTHEW 12:38–50**

**REFLECT** Are there passages in Scripture that challenge your understanding or make you uncomfortable?

The temperature of the conflict with the Pharisees is rising, and here Jesus turns up the heat. Earlier in the chapter, he claimed to be ‘Lord of the Sabbath’ (v. 8) and to be greater than the temple (v. 6). He now claims to be greater than Jonah and Solomon (vv. 41, 42). His accusers, already described in verse 34 as a ‘brood of vipers,’ he now sees as members of a ‘wicked and adulterous generation’ (v. 39), and they are the subject of the brief example of the exorcism (vv. 43–45).

The offense given to the Pharisees is undoubtedly less sharp than the hurt felt by Jesus’ brothers, and especially by Mary, on hearing his response to their arrival (v. 48). We hear Jesus’ words and exclaim, ‘Ouch!’ If we are honest, we are horrified by this apparent lack of respect and affection, especially in the light of the commandment to ‘Honor your father and your mother.’<sup>1</sup>

Whenever Jesus seems to contradict our assumptions and priorities, we should not be too quick to explain his words away, but take his challenge seriously. Do we sometimes use our obligations to our families as an excuse for neglecting obedience to Jesus? Notice, too, the remarkable status accorded to his disciples (vv. 49, 50). What effect do these words have on you, as a follower of Jesus today?

**APPLY** How important is the shed blood of Jesus in your life?

**PRAY** Holy Spirit, where there are Bible passages that I find challenging to understand and apply, help me to hear your voice and respond to what you are teaching me in life-changing ways.

<sup>1</sup> Exod 20:12.

THURSDAY, JULY 2, 2026

## PARABLES

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

**READ** **MATTHEW 13:1–17**

**REFLECT** Why do you think some passages of Scripture, even parables, can be difficult to understand?

In Matthew, five blocks of Jesus' teaching<sup>1</sup> are interwoven with the narrative of his life. Most of Chapter 13 consists of one of these teaching discourses, a collection of parables. We will look at the parable of the sower tomorrow; today, we will consider parables in general and, in particular, what Jesus says about their purpose. When I first encountered parables in the Gospels, I was told that they were 'earthly stories with a heavenly meaning' and that Jesus used them to make his profound teaching simpler and easier to understand. Jesus explained that he used parables to reveal truth to those who wanted to know it and conceal it from those who were indifferent.

In Chapter 11 (covered last quarter), we met the question of God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Jesus' opening words of explanation (13:10–12) present us with the same mystery again. The following verses, including the reference to Isaiah 6:9, 10, develop this theme: God's Word is comprehensible only to those (vv. 16, 17) who are prepared to respond in repentance and faith. Paula Gooder points out that the two categories of hearers, insiders and outsiders, are not set in stone.<sup>2</sup> In a later incident,<sup>3</sup> the disciples are rebuked by Jesus because of their slowness to understand. In contrast, there are numerous occasions in the Gospels where surprising faith is shown by outsiders. It seems that for some people, their understanding is blinded by their reluctance to become disciples, while for others, such as the Ethiopian in Acts 8:30–35, their discipleship is hindered by a lack of understanding.<sup>4</sup>

**APPLY** Ask God to enlighten you, and take some time to wrestle with a Bible passage you have found challenging to understand.

**PRAY** Lord, help me to not only understand your Word, but follow what it says with all that I am. Thank you for your Spirit, who speaks not only to my mind but also to my heart, enabling me to follow you.

<sup>1</sup> Chs. 5–7, 10, 13, 18, 23–25 <sup>2</sup> Paula Gooder, *The Parables* (Canterbury Press, 2020), 9; see Mark 4–8 <sup>3</sup> Matt 16:8, 9 <sup>4</sup> Acts 8:30–35.

FRIDAY, JULY 3, 2026

## EXTRAVAGANT SOWING

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

**READ** **MATTHEW 13:18–23**

**REFLECT** Consider some modern-day parables that teach important life lessons.

Some scholars insist that parables are very different from allegories. An allegory is a fictional story in which almost every person, object, and event represents something in the real world. For example, John Bunyan's book *Pilgrim's Progress* is a lengthy allegory. According to these scholars, a parable has only one point with a deeper meaning; all the other elements are included to make the story more vivid and memorable. They advise us not to try to find meaning in every detail of a parable, but to focus on just the main point. This is true of many parables, but certainly not all of them: Jesus' explanation to his disciples of the parable of the sower treats it as an allegory! The seed, the various soils, the birds, the sun's heat, the thorns, and the crop each represent something in reality.

Jesus' account of how different hearers respond to 'the message about the kingdom' (v. 19) will not surprise anyone who has been engaged in evangelism, preaching, or other Christian ministry. Can you think of individuals you know who apparently accepted the gospel but whose faith later seems to have disappeared, dried up, or been choked by the pressures of life? Why not pray for them now? Can you think of those whose faith has grown and produced a good crop of Christian character and service? Notice that Jesus describes this last group as the only ones showing evidence that they truly 'understand' the message (v. 23). Give thanks for them.

However, two elements in the parable are surprising: first, the extravagant, even wasteful, way the sower scatters the seed, allowing much of it to fall on unproductive soil, and second, the remarkably high yield from the seed falling on good soil. How do these two features of the parable encourage you?

**APPLY** Think of yourself as 'soil,' hearing God's Word in various ways. What kind of soil are you at present?

**PRAY** Father, thank you for your life-changing Word that convicts and encourages me. Continue to use its work in and through me to produce eternal fruit.

**SATURDAY, JULY 4, 2026**

## **SURPRISING POTENTIAL!**

**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** **MATTHEW 13:24–35**

**REFLECT** Have you ever made plans where the outcome turned out far greater than you expected?

The Olympic Games are thought to have been inspired by the annual sports day held in the small English town of Much Wenlock since the 1850s. Today, we look at two examples of remarkably large outcomes from insignificant beginnings: the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast. We will leave the parable of the weeds until tomorrow, when we look at Jesus' explanation of it.

The tiny mustard seed produces a plant of perhaps humorously exaggerated size, with a bonus for passing flocks of birds. Do you think the birds are included in the story to show the size of the plant, or is it legitimate to interpret the birds as having a deeper meaning? For example, could they represent those who benefit from kingdom activities (such as users of a church-based food bank) without becoming disciples?

A small amount of yeast leavens more than 66 pounds of flour, which would produce enough bread to feed about a hundred people. The word in verse 33 translated 'mixed' in the NIV would be better rendered 'hid'<sup>1</sup> and 'must be designed to emphasize the secret, inconspicuous way the kingdom of heaven begins to take effect.'<sup>2</sup> There is human activity involved in planting the seed and mixing/hiding the yeast, but the energy required for the subsequent powerful changes is not from humans but from God. These are two of the six parables in this chapter that are specifically said to reveal more of what 'the kingdom of heaven is like' (see vv. 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47), paraphrased by RT France as: 'This is what it is like when God is at work.'<sup>3</sup> Have you seen or heard of God at work in ways corresponding to anything in these two parables?

**APPLY** For the next week or so, look for examples of God's kingdom growing, however insignificant this may appear at present.

**PRAY** Father, please continue to show me how I can be a part of what you are doing in my community and in the world to extend your kingdom.

<sup>1</sup> RSV and KJV have 'hid', as does Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1* (SPCK, 2004)

<sup>2</sup> RT France, *Matthew, Tyndale NT Commentary* (IVP, 1985) 228 <sup>3</sup> France, 225.





SUNDAY, JULY 5, 2026

## WHO IS THIS KING?

**PRAY** Lord Jesus, you opened the Scriptures so that the disciples saw you in the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> Please open this psalm to me in the same way.

**READ** **PSALM 45**

**REFLECT** How would you describe Christ as the bridegroom of the church?

The introduction before verse 1 is the psalm's heading in the Hebrew text, which tells us that it is 'A wedding song.' Who is the bridegroom? He is a king, presumably of Israel, and his character, mission, honor, and appearance are vividly described in verses 2–9. The subject of verses 10–15 is the king's bride, and their descendants are foretold in verses 16 and 17. CS Lewis wrote that 'as a marriage ode ... it is magnificent.'<sup>2</sup> Read the psalm again, imagining the splendor of this royal wedding.

Verse 6a plants in our minds the thought that there is reference here to a more-than-human king. The writer to the Hebrews confirms this, quoting verses 6 and 7 and stating that they are 'about the Son,' namely the Lord Jesus.<sup>3</sup> He is superior to prophets, angels, and all other messengers from God, and is seated in the place of highest honor 'at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.'<sup>4</sup> Read verses 2–9 again and consider how they describe Jesus, sometimes literally, in other places figuratively. Graham Kendrick's song 'All the Glory (My heart is full of admiration)' is based on these verses.

The verses describing the bride (vv. 10–15) are not specifically quoted in the New Testament, though the image of the church as the 'bride of Christ' occurs several times.<sup>5</sup> What do these verses of Psalm 45 imply about the privileges, obligations, and joys of being members of Christ's church? What further reasons for praise are found in verses 16 and 17?

**APPLY** You might like to use the words of the psalm, or those of the Graham Kendrick song, as a basis for prayers of praise and adoration to Jesus.

**PRAY** All the glory, honor, and power belong to you, Lord Jesus. Savior and Anointed One, I worship you, I worship you.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Luke 25:45 <sup>2</sup> CS Lewis' *Reflections on the Psalms* (Collins, Fount, 1981 ed.), 107 <sup>3</sup> Heb 1:8, 9 <sup>4</sup> Heb 1:3 <sup>5</sup> e.g., 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:25–27, 31, 32 <sup>6</sup> 'All the Glory', Graham Kendricks, 1991.

MONDAY, JULY 6, 2026

## FEUDING AND FARMING

**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** **MATTHEW 13:36–43**

**REFLECT** ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.’

As with the parable of the sower, Jesus’ disciples ask him in private to explain the parable of the weeds, and he does so. There are various opinions about the precise species meant by the Greek word *zizania*, translated ‘weeds’ in these verses. An appealing suggestion is that it is darnel, a plant which closely resembles wheat until the latter forms ears (v. 26). Gooder notes that ‘[there] is even a Roman law against sowing darnel in a wheat field as an act of revenge against an enemy.’<sup>1</sup> The farm-owner’s servants had been puzzled—why did he not pull up and destroy the weeds as soon as the difference between them and the wheat became apparent? Surely there was a danger that the weeds would choke the wheat! (v. 28b–30)

Similarly, threatened with the growing animosity and danger of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, Jesus’ disciples may have been puzzled that he did not destroy his enemies and triumphantly establish his kingdom. In our time, we see evil on a global scale, with innocent civilians regarded as collateral damage in vicious ideological wars, and we long for the Lord to act decisively in judgment. Or we encounter someone whose physical or emotionally abusive behavior, sexual immorality, or financial dishonesty is profoundly damaging to those around them. The most galling aspect of these situations is that the perpetrators seem to be getting away with it. ‘Do something, Lord!’ is our cry. ‘Call them to account!’

Jesus’ reply to us, and to his first disciples, is that of the landowner to his servants: ‘Let both grow together until the harvest’ (v. 30). In other words, ‘Be patient—there will be a judgment, a perfect judgment, but not yet.’ So we are called not to weary resignation but to confident expectation that Christ’s kingdom will come.

**APPLY** Intercede for today’s victims and pray more earnestly, ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.’

**PRAY** Lord Jesus, help me to trust in you and your power—and in your timing—to bring justice to this world. Help me to wait patiently on you and stand firm in your promises.

<sup>1</sup> Paula Gooder, *The Parables* (Canterbury Press, 2020), 16; see also RT France, *Matthew, Tyndale NT Commentary* (IVP, 1985), 225.

TUESDAY, JULY 7, 2026

## WHAT'S IT WORTH?

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

**READ** **MATTHEW 13:44–52**

**REFLECT** What do you consider to be your greatest treasure?

The Staffordshire Hoard is the largest collection of Anglo-Saxon gold and silver metalwork ever found, comprising over 4,000 items. It had been buried in a field near the center of England for over 1,300 years before being discovered in 2009 by Terry Herbert. He had already agreed with Fred Johnson, the landowner, that they would divide equally the profit from anything Terry's metal detector unearthed in Fred's field, but a dispute arose between the two when the hoard was valued at over £3 million (\$4 million).

The finder of buried treasure in verse 44 of today's reading had a different strategy, which we may think morally dubious, but, like the merchant in verses 45 and 46, he certainly knew the value of what he had found. Jesus implies that the kingdom of heaven is similarly of enormous value to those who find it, or perhaps to those who are found by the King. Paula Gooder asks the penetrating question, 'What would make you sell all you had?'<sup>1</sup>

The parable of the net and the question with which it ends (vv. 47–51) form Jesus' concluding challenge to the crowd who have heard the series of parables which began at verse 1. It is perhaps significant that the words 'sat' and 'shore' in verse 48 repeat the words of verse 2, and the word translated 'caught' in verse 47 has the same root as 'gathered' in verse 2.<sup>2</sup> So perhaps Jesus is suggesting to his hearers that they, like the fish, are gathered on the shore, but only some of them are the 'righteous' (v. 49) who receive the kingdom of heaven. Those seated (the fishermen in the parable, Jesus in reality) will differentiate between these and the 'wicked' (v. 49), for whom the Word goes in one ear and out of the other.

**APPLY** Briefly review the parables in this chapter. Which ones are particular 'treasures' which you will keep and '[bring] out of [your] storeroom' (v. 52) by sharing them with others?

**PRAY** Lord Jesus, as I thank you for your parables, I ask that you continue to instruct me through them and strengthen my faith walk with you.

<sup>1</sup> Paula Gooder, *The Parables* (Canterbury Press, 2020), 201 <sup>2</sup> Gooder, 53.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 8, 2026

## LOCAL HERO?

**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** **MATTHEW 13:53–58**

**REFLECT** How do you feel when you share the gospel, and people respond negatively?

I used to live in a city that was home to an Olympic gold medalist. The gymnasium at the school she attended proudly displays her name in huge letters on its exterior walls. She truly is a local hero. What a shocking contrast to the way in which Jesus was regarded in his 'home town' (v. 54). 'Tales of the Unexpected' is the title for my introduction to Matthew 12-14: surely nothing could be more unexpected than Jesus' rejection by those in Nazareth.

For another period, I lived in a village where many of its inhabitants had lived for most of their lives. I would often hear something like this said of someone: 'I remember him from school—he's always been the same.' I realized this was usually said either to cut someone down to size if they were in danger of being regarded too highly or to suggest that people could never change, a belief that can hinder the spread of the gospel. There seems to be a similar dynamic at work here in Nazareth (vv. 54b–57a). After the increasingly sharp division caused by Jesus (Chpts. 11, 12) and the parables showing the different responses to his message (Chpt. 13), the question becomes more urgent: Who is Jesus—'the carpenter's son' (v. 55) or 'the Son of God'?<sup>1</sup>

Two encouragements emerge from this passage and its aftermath. First, we should not be surprised if we find it hardest to witness to those closest to us—be aware, though, that any 'offense' taken (v. 57) may be caused not by the gospel but by our own insensitivity or inconsistent living. Second, we should remember that, 'after Jesus' resurrection, many of his relatives became great leaders in the early church, and none greater than his brother James'<sup>2</sup>—so don't give up!

**APPLY** Whom do you find it most difficult to witness to? What light does this passage shed on the situation?

**PRAY** Holy Spirit, help me so that my attitudes and actions are as much of a message to my unbelieving family or friends as the words that I say when I share the gospel with them.

<sup>1</sup> Matt 14:33 <sup>2</sup> Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1* (SPCK, 2004), 180.

THURSDAY, JULY 9, 2026

## A POINTLESS TRAGEDY?

**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** **MATTHEW 14:1–12**

**REFLECT** Meditate on these words: ‘For your sake we face death all day long ... we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.’<sup>1</sup>

One commentator’s description of this as ‘an unedifying story’<sup>2</sup> is surely an understatement. It is the account of a horrific, brutal, quasi-judicial murder at the whim of a malevolent, immoral, weak-willed ruler who did not want to lose face at his licentious banquet. Perhaps Herod’s conscience later troubled him, or perhaps he was simply afraid of retribution at the hands of a risen John (v 2). Nevertheless, John’s shocking death still seems both degrading and pointless. Considered in more depth, this tragedy reveals the gathering of darker clouds of hostility toward Jesus. The Pharisees’ accusations have already led them to plot Jesus’ death,<sup>3</sup> the parables of chapter 13 spell out the sharp division caused by his message, and now Jesus’ forerunner pays the ultimate price for his commitment to God’s kingdom. Here too, Jesus’ own death is foreshadowed.<sup>4</sup>

We are reminded that, like John, many Christians throughout the world live with the threat or experience of persecution simply for their faithfulness to Christ. Let us commit to praying for them. In other places, notably in the West, we are attacked with words rather than actions. We are ridiculed or abused when we speak of God’s righteous requirements for human living, or accused of religious hatred if we dare to present Jesus as ‘the Way,’ rather than ‘one way among many.’ If we let John’s example confirm our determination to remain loyal to our Lord, then his death will not have been pointless.

A disconcerting challenge arises when I compare myself not with John but with Herod. I ask myself: am I influenced too much by wanting to save face in front of others? Am I ignoring small habitual acts of wrongdoing that could lead me to greater wickedness?

**APPLY** Which do you find more challenging—to compare yourself with the faithful witness of John, or with the compromises of Herod? Why?

**PRAY** Lord Jesus, I lift up to you the many Christians around the world who are facing persecution, and even death, because of their faith. Please give them courage and a profound sense of your presence. Being ever mindful of their plight, please keep me from laxity in the safety I enjoy.

<sup>1</sup> Rom 8:36, <sup>37</sup> 2 RT France, *Matthew, Tyndale NT Commentary* (IVP, 1985), 234 <sup>3</sup> Matt 12:14 <sup>4</sup> see Matt 17:11–13.

FRIDAY, JULY 10, 2026

## TWO MIRACLES

**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** **MATTHEW 14:13–21**

**REFLECT** The compassion of Jesus never fails. What about your compassion—when does it tend to fail? Consider this before God in prayer.

Astounding though this miracle must have been to its first witnesses, it has become familiar to us and so, has perhaps lost some of its impact. However, if we consider that Jesus has just heard the news of the murder of his close relative John the Baptist, the narrative takes on new poignancy. Tom Wright is undoubtedly correct that the reason Jesus ‘withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place’ (v. 13) was the same as ours would be in a similar bereavement, namely ‘to reflect, perhaps to pray; but above all to be still, and not have people bother you.’<sup>1</sup> The crowd shows no consideration for Jesus’ need for both physical and emotional space, and yet he meets them not with irritation but with compassion (v. 14). Perhaps this compassion is as great a miracle as the creation of the food.

We cannot plumb the depths of the mystery of Jesus’ divinity and humanity. We cannot know how far his miracles were due to his uniqueness as God the Son, nor how far he was dependent on his Father for power through the Holy Spirit. However, we do know that after healing the woman with a hemorrhage, he was aware that power had gone out from him.<sup>2</sup> We can deduce that, already emotionally drained by bereavement, he felt spiritually depleted after miraculously feeding this crowd. In the opening verses of tomorrow’s reading, Jesus finds the time and space he had been seeking for replenishment through solitude and prayer.

How do we respond when people’s demands on us seem to exceed our spiritual and emotional resources? Can we ask the Lord to transform our own sense of weakness into compassion for them? Then, when their need has been attended to, can we make sure that we take time for renewal and revitalization?

**APPLY** What do you find helpful for gaining emotional and spiritual replenishment? How will you ensure that you continue to avail yourself of these resources?

**PRAY** In ministries to others, Jesus, help me to be compassionate and selfless, like you were, and to follow your examples for restoration.

<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1* (SPCK, 2004), 185 <sup>2</sup> Luke 8:46.

**SATURDAY, JULY 11, 2026**

## **YET MORE UNEXPECTED!**

**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** **MATTHEW 14:22–36**

**REFLECT** Is your faith walk generally on even keel, or does it have its ups and downs depending on circumstances?

Today's reading brings to a vivid climax a recurring theme of Chapters 11–14: who Jesus is. As with yesterday's miracle with bread and fish, Jesus here shows his mastery over creation. There is an added dimension in that the unruly sea is often seen by biblical writers as the epitome of chaos—hence the statement that in the new heaven and new earth there is 'no longer any sea.'<sup>1</sup> So, in walking on the storm-tossed water, Jesus is shown to be Lord over all that threatens God's kingdom and Jesus' disciples, thus prompting the disciples' worship and affirmation of faith: 'Truly you are the Son of God' (v. 33).

Another motif of these chapters is evident in today's passage: living as a disciple. As they often are, Peter's ups and downs in following Jesus are painted with broad brushstrokes in primary colors. He responds with great faith to his Lord's invitation to step out of the boat, but then his trust spectacularly fails. Jesus both rescues and rebukes him, accepting his worship along with that of the others in the boat. Does this resemble your attempts to be a faithful disciple in any way?

We'll conclude our thoughts on these readings from Matthew by focusing on the words of Jesus in verse 27. First, we remind ourselves that these are not the words of 'a ghost' (v. 26) nor of a fantasy figure, but of the One who is as real and alive as it is possible to be. Second, our relationship with him is as earthy and challenging as was that of his first disciples, and, as with them, our faith often comes close to failing. Finally, in all the unpredictability and perils of life, we hear him say to us, 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.'

**APPLY** How can you be more prepared for meeting the unexpected in your life as a disciple?

**PRAY** Lord Jesus, help me to answer your call each day, even if I feel like Peter getting out of the boat and walking on the water.

<sup>1</sup> Rev 21:1.

**SUNDAY, JULY 12, 2026**

## CONFIDENT STILLNESS

**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** In what crises have you seen God intervene, even in unexpected ways, that have deepened your trust in him?

We can't imagine how we would respond when facing a magnitude 9.5 earthquake and a tsunami. The psalmist's fearlessness in the midst of trembling mountains and raging seas is utterly impressive (vv. 2, 3). Why does he have such radical confidence? It is because God is his refuge, strength, and ever-present help in trouble (v. 1). His divine presence in Jerusalem keeps this city of God safe. Kingdoms fall, and the earth melts before the roaring voice of God (vv. 5, 6). All these descriptions exhibit God's power and presence, which is the source of the psalmist's ultimate security.

Note the divine command 'Be still' (v. 10), which is not a call to be quiet or calm. In light of the portrayal of God as a triumphant warrior in verse 9, it should be understood as 'Stop' or 'Put down your weapons!' When they stop fighting and pay attention to the God of the Israelites, they can then acknowledge that the Lord is God (v. 10). The people (enemies or believers) here are challenged to depend on God rather than on themselves.

We live in a world in which our security is often built on our talents, possessions, technology, and weapons. This psalm reminds us that God can calm the earthquakes, watery chaos, and Jerusalem. Only when we stop relying on ourselves can we experience his working for us. We can then acknowledge the God who is all-powerful and ever-present. We will then not fear even in the face of a worst-case scenario in life.

**APPLY** In the coming week, observe what happens if you practice the command of 'Be still.' Pray and wait upon the Lord before making any move.

**PRAY** You are my mighty fortress, a bulwark never failing! You are my Helper, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.<sup>1</sup> I have every confidence in you, O God!

<sup>1</sup> Modified from Martin Luther's 'A mighty Fortress', 1529.

## ISAIAH 40–55

### GOD DELIVERS

The prophecy of Judah's downfall in Isaiah 39 is followed in chapters 40–55 by the imminent end of the Judean captivity in Babylon. This presupposes the earlier fall of Judah to Babylon, the destruction of the temple, and the exile to Babylon taking place in 586 BC,<sup>1</sup> but there is no account of this in Isaiah. Declaring the impending defeat of the Babylonian Empire by King Cyrus of Persia (44:28–45:1), our readings strive to persuade the exiles that the Lord is doing new things to Zion/Jerusalem through Cyrus (42:9; 43:18, 19; 48:6). To fulfill the duty as a witness to God among the nations, God's people must seize the opportunity to return to Judah.

The first section of our reading (Chapts. 40–48) deals with Israel's physical captivity in Babylon. It stresses God's power to deliver them and his desire to do so. He will raise up Cyrus to liberate the Jewish exiles and decree their homecoming. The second section (Chapts. 49–55) addresses Israel's spiritual captivity in sin. The focus here is their return to God. The deliverance will be achieved through the work of the servant. There is no coincidence that both sections culminate in urging the exiles to leave Babylon (48:20, 21; 55:12,13).

Prominent are the four Servant Songs (42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12). The servant of the Lord is first identified as Jacob-Israel (41:8), but God's people fail to fulfill the mission as God's servant. To renew their lives, it is eventually a mysterious servant who suffers on their behalf (50:4–9; 52:13–53:12)—the coming Messiah. Three themes stand out in our readings: first, God's people are exiled because of their sins, not because of God's failure to save them; second, their deportation proves that the Lord is God, because he foretold it; third, God will deliver his people through Cyrus and his servant(s). The course of history testifies to the one true God—there is no other.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 2 Kings 24, 25; 2 Chr 36:17–23; Jer 52.

MONDAY, JULY 13, 2026

## THE GOD OF ALL COMFORT

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

**READ** **ISAIAH 40:1–11**

**REFLECT** 'The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.'<sup>1</sup>

This passage looks forward to God bringing his people home. It begins with God in the heavenly court, announcing a command to comfort the exiles because their term of punishment for sin is over (vv. 1, 2). The time for restoration from Babylon has come. For those who suffered the trauma of exile for nearly 70 years,<sup>2</sup> they probably struggle to believe the message of homecoming.

To reboot their faith, three unidentified heavenly messengers bring out the key points of consolation (vv. 3, 6, 9). First, God will prepare a way for his people by leveling rugged mountains and valleys in the wilderness. The whole world will be astonished by the glory of God (vv. 3–5). Second, in contrast to human fragility and fickleness, God's Word stands forever. The message of hope and restoration here is guaranteed, as God will keep his promise (vv. 6–8). Third, God will come in power and carry the broken to his bosom. This all-powerful God will lead his people home with tender care, which portrays God as both a warrior and a shepherd (vv. 9–11).

We sometimes mess things up in life and feel so much regret that we can hardly face ourselves or God. This comforting message reminds us of God's willingness to grant his children a second chance. For them to start afresh, he even takes the initiative to offer help, guidance, care, and protection throughout the whole journey of restoration.

**APPLY** Take time to reflect on the second chances God has offered you.

**PRAY** Father, thank you for your comfort in all my troubles. Help me to comfort those in any trouble with the comfort I receive from you.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ps 34:18 <sup>2</sup> Jer 25:9–13 <sup>3</sup> 2 Cor 1:4.

TUESDAY, JULY 14, 2026

## GOD HAS NO EQUAL

**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.<sup>1</sup>

**READ** **ISAIAH 40:12–26**

**REFLECT** How would you describe the greatness of God?

The Judean exiles probably had many questions in their hearts on hearing the news of their imminent homecoming (vv. 1–11). They may have questioned whether their God was able to deliver them, since he had failed to protect his people from Babylon's conquest in the first place. Some people may even have thought that Babylon, its kings, and gods had defeated their God. To clear such doubt and misunderstanding, Isaiah, in these verses, reminds these people of God's supremacy.

First, God is a wise Creator who measured the waters in his palms, marked off the heavens with his hands, held the dust of the earth in a basket, and knew the weight of the mountains and hills. He needed no help in all his creative activities (vv. 12–14). Compared with the Creator, all the nations are nothing (vv. 15–17). Second, the images and idols are worthless to the Creator because they are made by the people God created (vv. 18–20). Third, princes and rulers are nobody to the sovereign God, as he is the one who determines their rule and territories (vv. 21–24).

Rhetorical questions feature often in this passage. Their purpose is to encourage people to give the answer they already know. Interestingly, verse 21 presses even harder: 'Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded?' These questions make it evident that the people should know the truth about their supreme God. They have no excuse, nor do we!

**APPLY** Where might there be struggles you are facing, where your actions do not reflect your trust in your great God?

**PRAY** Lord God, forgive me for not seeing you as the mighty being that you are. Help me to remember always that you are the Most High.

<sup>1</sup> Jer 10:6, 10.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 15, 2026

## KEEP HOPE ALIVE

**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 40:27–31**

**REFLECT** Have you ever made a complaint against God? What made you feel this way?

With the national disaster before them, the exiles (Jacob-Israel) question God's goodness. Does God still care for us? Are we too small to be worthy of his attention? Even if he ever cared about us, has he ceased to act for us? (v. 27). The core problem isn't the fact of their downheartedness, distrust, anger, and resentment, but the reason behind it. This is their inadequate view of God, which twists their perspective on life. However, God is the Creator, who will not grow tired or weary. Not only does God have endless power, but he also gives strength to the weary and weak. In addition, God acts according to his unfathomable wisdom (vv. 28, 29)—which may even allow Babylon to punish his people.

God's people are called to put their hope in the Lord (v. 31), meaning they confidently expect God to act on their behalf. With such hope, the weary regain vitality and perseverance to press on, as they see the future to be in God's hands. 'Hope' is also translated as 'wait' (NRSV), which is very much the thought of waiting on God expectantly. This God of all power can revitalize them, so that they may soar, run, and walk with strength (v. 31).

Our mighty God is so personal that he is interested in his creatures all the time. No one and nothing is too small to deserve his attention. He cares about us, though sometimes we may not feel it, especially during adversity. In him alone should we hope.

**APPLY** What do these verses tell you about God and yourself?

**PRAY** When my soul is downcast and disturbed within me, help me to put my hope in you and praise you, my Savior and my God.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ps 42:11.

THURSDAY, JULY 16, 2026

## THE TRUE ENABLER

**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 41:1–16**

**REFLECT** ‘Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you ... Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.’<sup>1</sup>

The nations are summoned by the Lord to the judgment throne (v. 1). Two figures are introduced to them: a conqueror from the east (v. 2), and his servant, Jacob-Israel (v. 8). The conqueror, later identified as Cyrus,<sup>2</sup> is able to subdue every nation (vv. 2, 3). His rapid advance has terrified them all. Obviously, their idols are impotent to save them, though they pretend otherwise (vv. 5–7). Who brought Cyrus onto the stage (vv. 2, 4a)? It is the Lord, who is the Master of the world (v. 4b). Idols are useless.

As for the chosen servant, Jacob-Israel, they (the people) may just be afraid of being forsaken by God and overcome by their many enemies. Here, God promises to be with them, to strengthen, help, and uphold them (v. 10). They will overcome their enemies (vv. 11, 12). How? God will transform his people from a vulnerable worm into a powerful threshing sledge. They will ‘thresh’ and ‘winnow’ their enemies to nothing (vv. 14–16), and their idols will fail to save them. Over and over again, Jacob-Israel is exhorted, ‘Do not fear’ because the Lord is their God, their Redeemer, and the Holy One of Israel (vv. 13, 14). What a contrast between the nations and Israel—and between the gods behind them!

Fear paralyzes us from moving forward, often leading to negative results. Facing our fears can help us accomplish things. Though we may be as weak as ‘worms’ (see v. 14), we need to shift our attention from our own inadequacy and insignificance to God himself, who is our true God and enabler. The One who enabled Cyrus and Jacob-Israel in the old days can enable us today. If the Master of the world is with us, who can be against us? So, fear not.

**APPLY** Think of one experience in which God helped you overcome your fear. Give thanks to him for it. Tell God what fears you have now, if there are any.

**PRAY** Father, Mighty God, I praise you; you are greater than anything, I fear. Thank you for your unchanging commitment to my welfare, for your love that passes all understanding.

<sup>1</sup> John 14:27 <sup>2</sup> Isa 44:28; 45:1–13.

FRIDAY, JULY 17, 2026

## MASTER OF HISTORY

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

**READ** **ISAIAH 41:17–29**

**REFLECT** ‘Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.’<sup>1</sup>

God and the idols are also different in their predictions and understanding. Here, God calls the idol-gods into court (v. 21). To prove their power, they are challenged to predict the future and explain the past. The idol-gods’ inability to predict the future and to interpret events proves them false (vv. 22–24). As for the Lord, he alone can foretell and announce good news, but idols cannot give counsel (vv. 26–28). More importantly, he is the only God who initiates those events, just as he has called Cyrus from the north (v. 25). The false gods are nothing. The verdict is: both idols and their worshippers are guilty (vv. 24, 29).

The life-giving and transforming nature of God the Creator is demonstrated. He listens to the poor and needy who are in hardship in the desert and provides water to quench their thirst. He transforms the barren wasteland into a flourishing, well-watered garden. People in the world will recognize and know that God has done this (vv. 17–20). This imagery symbolizes God’s restoration of his people, which idols cannot achieve. Guilty of worshipping idols, Israel needs to turn back to the life-transforming God.

What do idols have to do with Christians? An idol is anything one loves more than God, such as material things, money, a person, marriage, sex, a job, hobbies, oneself, food, fame, and so on. Kyle Idleman gives this warning: ‘Idolatry isn’t just one of many sins; rather, it’s the one great sin that all others come from... Until that [false] god is dethroned, and the Lord God takes his rightful place, you will not have victory.’<sup>2</sup> Where is this life-transforming God placed in you?

**APPLY** Might there be things (or people) taking the place of God in your life? Take an inventory.

**PRAY** Holy Spirit, examine and show me if there is anything that steals my affection for God. Please help me to remove all the idols that hinder my spiritual growth.

<sup>1</sup> Ps 139:23, 24 <sup>2</sup> Kyle Idleman, *Gods at War* (Zondervan, 2013), 22.

SATURDAY, JULY 18, 2026

## A MODEL TO EMULATE

**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 42:1–9**

**REFLECT** ‘Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me ... my hope is in you all day long.’<sup>1</sup>

These verses describe the mission of the Lord’s servant. This ‘servant’, who is ‘chosen’ and ‘upheld’ by God (v. 1), might refer to Jacob-Israel of 41:8–16—but whether Jacob-Israel can fulfill this role remains to be seen (42:18–20). On the other hand, this servant, who will bring justice to the world (vv. 1, 3, 4), starkly resembles the prophesied Messiah. The servant will mediate God’s covenant with all peoples and shine light to the nations (v. 6). The blind will see, and captives will be released from prison (v. 7). This ministry will reveal the glory of God (v. 8).

The way this servant carries out his mission is noteworthy. We tend to shout in order to seek the attention and respect that we think is our due, but the servant will conduct his service quietly (v. 2). He is so gentle that he will not crush a bruised reed or snuff a dim wick (v. 3). In establishing justice on earth, he will demonstrate his faithfulness and relentless determination (vv. 3, 4). His noble manner and attitude are just as impressive.

The passage models for us an ideal servant of God. We belong to a generation that wants to see the result of its work. The desire to be productive often drives people to be task-oriented, goal-driven, functional, and utilitarian. God’s servant does not just carry out his mission. He fulfills it in his heart, fully expressed by his humility, quiet gentleness, faithfulness, and perseverance. His mission to ‘establish justice’ is the ‘implementation of Yahweh’s decision regarding the ordering of the world.’<sup>2</sup> It reminds us to put God at the center when organizing our affairs.

**APPLY** What do you learn from the servant in this passage? What more do you know about God? How do you apply the message to your personal life or church ministry?

**PRAY** Holy Spirit, teach me to be a servant who brings glory to God, showing who he is through all my attitudes and actions. Please help me to be more and more like Jesus.

<sup>1</sup> Ps 25:4, 5 <sup>2</sup> J Gordon McConville, *Isaiah* (Baker Academic, 2023), 475.

**SUNDAY, JULY 19, 2026**

## **KING OF THE EARTH**

**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** 'Praise the Lord. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever ... Blessed are those who act justly, who always do what is right.'<sup>1</sup>

This enthronement psalm is often read on Ascension Day in Christian tradition. The psalmist summons all nations to worship God by clapping hands, shouting (v. 1), and singing praises (v. 6). Why should they do so? The threefold repetition of 'for' (see vv. 2, 7, 9) provides the reasons.

First, it's because the Lord Most High is awesome. He is the great King over all the earth (v. 2). He subjected the gentile peoples to Israel. Out of love, he provided Israel with land and wealth (vv. 3, 4). Second, God is praiseworthy because he is the King of all the earth (v. 7). He rules over nations and sits upon his holy throne. The leaders of all nations gather before God as the people of Abraham's God (vv. 8, 9a). That means the pagan people have become the people of God. The third reason in verse 9b is literally rendered as 'for the shields of the earth belong to God.' The 'shields' symbolize God's power and rule. By using the 'shield' metaphor, the final reason reiterates that God rules over the earth.

The unification of God's people and the nations is beautifully reflected in this psalm. The Israelites, all peoples, and their leaders are called by the psalmist to worship. Interestingly, the leaders of all nations assemble at the throne as the people of God. Before God, Israel and the gentiles share equal status, as he is the King and God of us all. We Christians sometimes forget that non-Christians in the world belong to God too, and it seems as though he is monopolized by us for our own business and benefits. This mentality deters us from reaching out to other peoples, let alone loving them. Let's take to heart Jesus' great commission.<sup>2</sup>

**APPLY** Get involved with, or offer support to, a Christian ministry that reaches out in Jesus' name to unbelievers.

**PRAY** O Lord, I pray for your peace and harmony among nations and for mutual respect and understanding between peoples.

<sup>1</sup> Ps 106:1, <sup>2</sup> Matt 28:18–20.

MONDAY, JULY 20, 2026

## DIVINE ENLIGHTENMENT

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

**READ** **ISAIAH 42:10–25**

**REFLECT** Over time in your faith walk, what attitudes or actions have you found God wanted you to change?

Today's reading is in two parts: a song praising the Lord's deliverance (vv. 10–17) and more details about God's servant, Israel (vv. 18–25). Sadly, the more the people heard of God's warning and instruction, the more blind and deaf they became (v. 20). Because of their sin, although the people were entrusted with the mission to bring light and justice to the nations, they were tragically humiliated by the Babylonian captivity. Failing to learn the lesson, they are challenged to recognize that it was the Lord who sent them into exile (vv. 22–25), which clears their doubt about his ability to protect them.

The manifold repetition of 'blind' and 'deaf' (vv. 18, 19) underscores the seriousness of Israel's problem. It is not that they are physically blind and deaf. The people have seen but paid no attention and heard with no true understanding (v. 20). Even when consumed by war and fire, they still did not understand that it was God who made them prey (v. 25). Only by opening their spiritual eyes and ears can they return to God. The song of verses 10–16 provides a clue. When God comes to deliver his people, he will lead the blind and bring enlightenment by shining light in the darkness (v. 16).

The way God dealt with Israel's stubborn rebelliousness gives us hope. The God who ordains the exile (vv. 22–25) is the same God who delivers his people (vv. 10–17). He has promised, 'I will not forsake them' (v. 16). With him, there is nothing that cannot be redeemed. Despite our failure, he sees the value of each person. Nothing can separate us from his love.<sup>1</sup>

**APPLY** Recall an experience when God opened your eyes to see your sin. How did you respond to him? Praise him.

**PRAY** Thank you, Lord, that your correction is always motivated by your love. Please continue to teach me how to live as your servant and draw me closer to you.

<sup>1</sup> Rom 8:35–39.

TUESDAY, JULY 21, 2026

## WE ARE HIS WITNESSES

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

**READ** **ISAIAH 43:1–13**

**REFLECT** ‘Hear my voice when I call, Lord; be merciful to me and answer me. My heart says of you, ‘Seek his face!’ Your face, Lord, I will seek.’<sup>1</sup>

Israel’s term of punishment is over. God will judge other nations in their place (vv. 3, 4). He will gather his people from all directions and bring them home (vv. 5, 6). Twice, they are encouraged, ‘Do not fear’ (see vv. 1, 5). What is the ground for their not fearing? They are reminded that God is their Creator (vv. 1, 7), Redeemer (v. 1), and Savior (v. 3). An intimate relationship is expressed in God’s Word. God has called them by name, and they are his possession: ‘you are mine’ (v. 1). God guarantees his presence—‘I will be with you’—to overcome trials (vv. 2, 5). The people of Israel are ‘precious’, ‘honored’, and ‘loved’ (v. 4). God calls them his ‘sons’ and ‘daughters’ (v. 6). All in all, the intimate relationship of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Savior with his people is the source of their security.

Now God calls his chosen people to be his ‘witnesses’ (vv. 10, 12). It is unthinkable that a blind and deaf servant (v. 8) could be a witness, so perhaps we should understand that ‘there is no excuse for their blind and deaf condition.’<sup>2</sup> The people are expected to testify to God’s absolute sovereignty (vv. 11–13) as they have seen God’s blessings and punishment on their nation. Both judgment and restoration prove the Lord to be God. No other god can do it.

Note that ‘witnesses’ parallels ‘servant’(v. 10). It means that the servant’s role is to witness. We have no excuse. Thank God for his saving grace, which makes us his servants and his witnesses. May the world see God in us and through us.

**APPLY** How does this passage speak to you? With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, reflect on whether and how your life is evidence of God’s redemptive and transforming power.

**PRAY** Father, you created me, redeemed me, and called me by name. Help me express my gratitude in ways that others can see and be drawn to you.

<sup>1</sup> Ps 27:7, <sup>2</sup> J Gordon McConville, *Isaiah* (Baker Academic, 2023), 475.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 22, 2026

## FORGETTING THE PAST

**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.<sup>1</sup>

**READ** **ISAIAH 43:14–28**

**REFLECT** Do you sometimes have a hard time forgetting past sins for which God has forgiven you?

God's plan of deliverance is further unfolded. He will bring down Babylon, which is mentioned explicitly for the first time. Is God able to overcome Babylon? Of course! It is because he is the Lord, Redeemer, Holy One, Creator, and King (vv. 14, 15). Hearers are reminded of the exodus from Egypt, but God says, 'Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past' (vv. 16–18), since he is going to do something new for them. He is making a way in the desert, rather than through the sea in the exodus. In addition, he will provide water to transform the desert and sustain his chosen people in the wilderness (vv. 18–20).<sup>2</sup>

God now points out why the Israelites were punished. Verse 22 reads in Hebrew, 'It was not me you called upon, Jacob!': they were refusing to worship God. Sacrifices should symbolize changed hearts and lives, but the false worship of the Israelites has dishonored God. They have wearied him with their sins and offenses (vv. 23, 24). That's why God brought disgrace and destruction to Israel (v. 28). Amazingly, God asserts that he is a forgiving God, who blots out and no longer remembers their sin (v. 25), which is part of the old things to be forgotten (v. 18). God truly forgives and forgets!

God reminds his people not to dwell on the past, which includes the former way of deliverance and failures. This is exactly what Paul admonishes: 'But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.'<sup>3</sup>

**APPLY** What are the old things that keep you from moving forward to achieve the goal to which God has called you? Follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit and take immediate action.

**PRAY** Father, thank you that your forgiveness is swift and complete when I come to you in repentance. Help me to fully embrace and enjoy the grace you offer me in Christ.

<sup>1</sup> Mic 7:18 <sup>2</sup> cf. Isa 41:17–20; 42:15, 16 <sup>3</sup> Phil 3:13, 14.

THURSDAY, JULY 23, 2026

## THERE IS NO OTHER ROCK

**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.<sup>1</sup>

**READ** **ISAIAH 44:1–23**

**REFLECT** ‘On Christ, the solid Rock I stand: all other ground is sinking sand.’<sup>2</sup>

Idols are created by craftsmen who are merely frail humans (vv. 10–13), limited by the earthly materials used (vv. 14–17). However, the idolaters don’t see the worthlessness of idols. Expressions about their spiritual blindness stand out in the passage. They are described as ‘blind’ and ‘ignorant’ (v. 9). ‘They know nothing,’ ‘they understand nothing,’ ‘they cannot see,’ and ‘they cannot understand’ (v. 18) the futility of idolatry. ‘No one stops to think’ and ‘no one has the knowledge or understanding’ (v. 19). Their deluded hearts mislead them (v. 20). It’s unthinkable how these people can be so foolish as to worship a lie they themselves created.

The other side of the coin is their blindness toward God—Israel’s King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty. He is the first and the last. Apart from him, there is no God (v. 6), no other Rock (v. 8). God reminds his people of their special relationship to him: he has made them, and they are his servants (v. 21). They are urged to forsake their sin and return to him. This call is grounded in his redemptive work: ‘I have redeemed you’ (vv. 22, 23).

As in 43:10, it is reiterated that Israel is both God’s ‘servant’ (vv. 1, 2, 21) and ‘witnesses’ (v. 8). The people who repent and turn back to God are truly evidence of his delivering and transforming power. No wonder all creation (including the elements for making idols) is summoned to sing praise to the true God for the redemption of Israel, which manifests his glory (v. 23). Let us remember that the angels of God rejoice ‘over one sinner who repents.’<sup>3</sup> What a witness!

**APPLY** Recall how you met Christ and how your life has been transformed since.

**PRAY** Lord God, with all that is on earth and in heaven, I praise you. Thank you for the redemption that is mine in Christ.

<sup>1</sup> Deut 32:4 <sup>2</sup> ‘My Hope is Built on Nothing Less’, Edward Mote, 1834 <sup>3</sup> Luke 15:10.

FRIDAY, JULY 24, 2026

## THE LORD OF HISTORY

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

**READ** **ISAIAH 44:24–45:8**

**REFLECT** Where have you seen God at work through unbelievers to accomplish his will?

God's redemptive plan is laid bare. The one 'from the east,' 'from the north,' and 'from a far-off land'<sup>1</sup> is named as Cyrus (44:28; 45:1). God appoints Cyrus as his 'shepherd' (a role implying royal authority), through whom he accomplishes his plan—rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple (v. 28). Chosen as God's 'anointed' (v. 1), Cyrus is commissioned for the campaign of conquests. With God's support, he will subdue nations and build up the Persian Empire. Why does God act through Cyrus?

First, God wants Cyrus to know that it is the Lord who empowers him to victory and prosperity, summons him by name, and gives him a title of honor (vv. 2, 3, 4). Second, God's work in history is done through Cyrus for the sake of his chosen servant, Israel. He uses Cyrus as an instrument to redeem his people (v. 4). The third goal is that people all over the world will recognize that there is no other god than the Lord, who is responsible for the coexistence of good and evil or light and darkness (vv. 5–7).

Though the story of Cyrus' naming and commission is fascinating, the passage's focus is not on Cyrus but on the God behind him. Cyrus does not acknowledge God (vv. 4, 5): he is not a believer. Since God is the Redeemer, Maker of all things (44:24), and Lord of history, who fulfills what he has predicted (v. 26), he is able to use a pagan king as his 'shepherd' (v. 28) and 'anointed' (v. 1) to achieve his plan of redemption in history. 'The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord. Like the rivers of water, he turns it wherever he wishes.'<sup>2</sup> How unfathomable is the wisdom of God!

**APPLY** Pray for the leaders of the nations. May God send godly advisers to give them wise counsel. May they recognize God as the Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

**PRAY** I praise you, Lord God, Ruler over all that exists, over history, the present, and the future. There is no other god but you.

<sup>1</sup> Isa 41:2, 25; 46:11 <sup>2</sup> Prov 21:1, NKJV.

SATURDAY, JULY 25, 2026

## A HIDING AND SAVING GOD

**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.<sup>1</sup>

**READ** **ISAIAH 45:9–25**

**REFLECT** Where are some unexpected places that you see God's hand at work in your community or throughout the world?

Far from seeing God in control of history, Israel questions how God can liberate his people by using the pagan conqueror, Cyrus. Perhaps, they are afraid that their hope for the Davidic promises may evaporate in Cyrus' takeover. A pot cannot criticize its potter and a baby cannot challenge its parents (vv. 9, 10). The Lord is not only Israel's 'Holy One' and 'Maker', but he is also the Maker of the whole universe and the Creator of all humankind (vv. 11, 12). If God does not have the sovereign freedom to liberate the exiles as he wills in the course of history, who else does (v. 13)? Israel is rebuked for its small-mindedness.

Indeed, God's ways are incomprehensible. The nations (represented by Egypt, Cush, and Seba) conquered by Cyrus will bring their tributes to Israel. Why? They will come to acknowledge the accomplishment of Israel's God, who liberates them along with the Jewish exiles. Unbelievably, they will confess the one true God. There is no other (v. 14). The nations' staggering change of heart evokes Israel's confession of a God who hides himself, doing things in unexpected ways (v. 15). As the Savior (v. 21), his salvation is not confined to Israel (v. 17). 'All you ends of the earth' are invited to turn to him and be saved (see v. 22) as he is the only God (vv. 14, 18, 21) and Creator of all things (vv. 12, 18). Every individual is exhorted to acknowledge him as Lord—'every knee will bow ... every tongue will swear' (v. 23).

God cannot be bound by us and our experience. The redemption of Israel and the nations through Cyrus expresses the mystery and wonderful richness of the divine will. His ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts higher than our thoughts.<sup>2</sup>

**APPLY** All nations have been included in God's salvation plan ever since ancient times. What do you think about this inclusion?

**PRAY** Lord, you so loved the world that you sent your Son. Show me how I can take part in advancing his kingdom.

<sup>1</sup> Rom 11:33 <sup>2</sup> Isa 55:9.

**SUNDAY, JULY 26, 2026**

## A LEGACY OF FAITH

**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.'<sup>1</sup>

**READ** **PSALM 48**

**REFLECT** If asked, how would you describe heaven?

The description of Zion/Jerusalem is indeed magnificent. The beauty of its loftiness is the joy of the whole earth (v. 2). The citadels (vv. 3, 13), towers (v. 12), and ramparts (v. 13) demonstrate its military power. Its enemies flee in terror when seeing this lofty, fortified city (vv. 4–8). The psalmist doesn't focus on the glories of Jerusalem, but on the God within. Why does God matter? Zion is the city of God, where the Great King dwells. Because of his presence, Mount Zion replaces Mount Zaphon of the Canaanite deities (v. 2). God is in its citadels, and he is its protective fortress (vv. 1–3). The God who defeats the enemy kings (vv. 4–7) rules with unfailing love (v. 9), righteousness (v. 10), and judgment (v. 11). Zion is therefore secure in the presence of the Lord Almighty forever (v. 8).

The psalm doesn't stop at praising God's power and character. It exhorts the worshippers to 'walk', 'go', 'count', 'consider', and 'view' the city of Zion and its military architecture so that they may describe them to the next generation (vv. 12, 13). The visit to the landmarks of God's presence and protection inspires confidence. 'As we have heard, so we have seen' (v. 8) indicates that what they hear shapes what they see. Likewise, the recounting of God's faithfulness will certainly help to shape the spiritual perspective of the generations to come.

Psalm 78:4 reminds us: 'We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done.' Are we committed to building a legacy of faith from generation to generation?

**APPLY** Recount a wondrous deed of God in your life to someone in the younger generation. Pray for this person before and after giving the testimony.

**PRAY** Thank you, Father, for making me part of your great story. Help me take every opportunity to tell it to others.

<sup>1</sup> Ps 115:1

MONDAY, JULY 27, 2026

## THE BURDEN-BEARING GOD

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

**READ** **ISAIAH 46**

**REFLECT** ‘Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.’<sup>1</sup>

God continues to appeal to his reluctant people, who are depicted as ‘rebels’ (v. 8), ‘stubborn-hearted’ (v. 12), and far from his ‘righteousness’ (i.e., salvation, v. 12). To elicit faith in his imminent deliverance, God draws their attention to the fall of Babylon. Then what happens to the Babylonian gods, Bel and Nebo? Instead of rescuing their worshippers from captivity, these burdening idol-gods are ‘carried’ off into exile (vv. 1, 2). God reminds his people that he is their Maker, having ‘carried’ them from the beginning of their existence. The One who brings down Babylon is able to rescue them (vv. 3, 4). The Maker of the universe has no equal. Ironically, the idol worshippers will have to carry their own idol-gods (vv. 5–7).

God’s people are urged to recognize his supremacy over all other gods by remembering past divine acts (v. 9). With his predictive and performative power, God fulfills what has been foretold. Nothing can stop him from working out his purpose. The rise of Cyrus (‘a bird of prey’) from the east testifies to ‘what I have planned, that I will do’ (vv. 10, 11). The Jewish exiles who are far from his salvation can take heart from God’s impending action—he is bringing his deliverance near. Their homecoming is drawing near (vv. 12, 13).

As we know, idols are anything that takes God’s place in our lives. They can become a heavy burden. We are often tempted to hold them tightly for fear of losing them, which eventually exhausts us. The passage reminds us to trust solely in the Maker of the universe, who can carry us through thick and thin. The One who works out his purpose can fulfill the meaning and purpose of our lives.

**APPLY** What burdening idols are you carrying? Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how to let go of them. Observe what happens to your life in the coming week.

**PRAY** Holy Spirit, thank you for drawing me to Jesus, the only One worthy of my praise and worship—the One who loves me with an everlasting love and in whom all my needs are known and met.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Pet 5:7.

TUESDAY, JULY 28, 2026

## THE FRUITS OF PRIDE

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

**READ** **ISAIAH 47**

**REFLECT** ‘Not to us, Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.’<sup>1</sup>

This poem is focused on the judgment of Babylon, personified as ‘Virgin Daughter Babylon’ (v. 1). She is the queen of kingdoms (v. 5), a position which she thinks she can keep forever (v. 7). Babylon has been executing the Lord’s punishment upon Judah, but she excessively oppresses the weak and vulnerable (v. 6). Complacency and false confidence make her believe that she will never suffer widowhood and bereavement (v. 8). Babylon trusts in her knowledge and wisdom in the form of magical spells, sorceries, astrology, and stargazing, which are consulted to avert disaster. Again, this is a false sense of security (vv. 9, 10, 12, 13). ‘No one sees me’ (v. 10) demonstrates her rejection of any accountability. Twice has she uttered, ‘I am, and there is none besides me’ (vv. 8, 10), which is a blasphemous claim to replace God (‘I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God’).<sup>2</sup>

Because of her great sins, Virgin Daughter Babylon will be violated, and the queen city dethroned. She will become a slave, suffering hard labor (vv. 1–3, 5). Widowhood and bereavement will overtake her (vv. 8, 9). Her religious resources are deceptive, failing to ward off the national calamity (vv. 9–11, 14, 15). The fall of Babylon is the prerequisite for Israel’s homecoming, promised by their Redeemer, the Lord Almighty, the Holy One of Israel (v. 4).

Reading through Babylon’s sins, it’s not difficult to discover that the root of its self-sufficiency, self-indulgence of power, complacency, false confidence, and self-deification is pride and arrogance. The problem of human pride began with Adam and Eve, who, tempted by the snake, wanted to be like God. Let us be warned: ‘Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.’<sup>3</sup>

**APPLY** Ask God to show you the fruits of pride in your life. Confess your sins, ask for forgiveness, and form an accountability group to spur on correction and growth.

**PRAY** Lord God, let nothing in me stand in the way of my relationship with you. Let me boast only in you and all you have done.

<sup>1</sup> Ps 115:1 <sup>2</sup> Is 45:5 <sup>3</sup> Prov 16:18.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 29, 2026

## LISTENING PLUS ACTIONS

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

**READ** **ISAIAH 48**

**REFLECT** How do you think God would describe your faith walk with him?

The impending defeat of Babylon by Cyrus has been foretold repeatedly, but are God's people ready for the liberation and homecoming? They are rebuked for their spiritual sickness in this chapter. Though these people call on God (v. 1) and claim to be 'citizens' of the holy city (v. 2), they are described as 'stubborn' with iron neck and bronze forehead (v. 4), treacherous and rebellious (v. 8), deaf to God's instruction, holding on to their idols (vv. 5–8) and giving up their peace and well-being through disobedience (v. 18).

Similar condemnations are found in other chapters. God's people are accused of trusting in idols,<sup>1</sup> and being blind and deaf,<sup>2</sup> plagued with national pride,<sup>3</sup> rebellious,<sup>4</sup> stubborn, and far from righteousness.<sup>5</sup> Chapter 48 brings the confrontation to its climax. The crux of the problem is their failure to listen. The manifold repetition of the appeal reveals the issue: 'Listen to this' (v. 1), 'Listen to me' (v. 12), 'Come together, all of you, and listen' (v. 14), 'Come near me and listen to this' (v. 16), and 'If only you had paid attention to my commands' (v. 18).

Listening to God means believing his Word and acting accordingly. Such obedience is grounded in the fact that God, the sole Creator (vv. 12, 13) and Lord of history (vv. 14, 15), is powerful enough to redeem his people. Though they failed to listen in the past, God hasn't given up on them. The One who delivered their ancestors through the exodus is able to perform a new exodus (vv. 20, 21). So, the exiles must respond to God's urge to 'leave Babylon!' No blessings ('peace') will come to the stubborn wicked (v. 22).

**APPLY** Ask God to illuminate the areas in which you haven't obeyed him yet. What deters you from listening to him? What action(s) will you take? Share your story with a friend.

**PRAY** Thank you, Father, for your Spirit whose voice calls me and helps me to do your will. Help me not only to hear, but to submit to what he teaches me.

1 Isa 42:17 2 Isa 42:18; 43:8 3 Isa 45:9–13 4 Isa 46:8 5 Isa 46:12.

THURSDAY, JULY 30, 2026

## HE WHO CALLS IS FAITHFUL

**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.<sup>1</sup>

**READ** **ISAIAH 49**

**REFLECT** Have you ever felt God call you to do the impossible? How did you respond?

The Lord's servant has a specific role to play,<sup>2</sup> but the blind and deaf Jacob-Israel fails to fulfill that role.<sup>3</sup> The servant in verses 1–6 speaks like the prophet 'I' in 40:6–8, yet he himself is called 'Israel' (v. 3). His name signifies him as a figure embodying the calling of the nation Israel. He is called to bring Israel back to God (vv. 5, 6). However, we hear his frustration and sense of futility, 'I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all' (v. 4). He has been 'despised' and 'abhorred' by his people (v. 7). How can the servant carry out his mission under such rejection?

The servant has a clear sense of calling (vv. 1, 5), which allows him to see his plight from a different perspective: 'Yet what is due to me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God' (v. 4). More importantly, the God who has called the servant empowers him for ministry—making him a 'polished arrow' and his mouth 'like a sharpened sword' (v. 2). God even gives the servant yet a greater responsibility—being a light to the gentiles and bringing God's salvation to the world (v. 6). The Lord makes him the servant of rulers. Kings and princes will come to pay their respect to him (v. 7). By making him the representative of God's covenant to his people (v. 8), God will restore the remnants of Israel from all directions and the people of all nations through this servant (v. 12). God is vindicated through his servant.

This account reminds us of Paul's teaching: 'being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.'<sup>4</sup>

**APPLY** What has God called you to do? What does God speak to you through the call of God's servant here? What would you speak to him in response?

**PRAY** Whatever you call me to do, Father, help me to be confident in your presence with me, your power to help, and your purpose to bring yourself glory through me.

<sup>1</sup> 2 Thess 1:11 <sup>2</sup> Isa 42:1–4 <sup>3</sup> Isa 42:19 <sup>4</sup> Phil 1:6.

FRIDAY, JULY 31, 2026

## UNRESERVED OBEDIENCE

**PRAY** O God, by calling you ‘Lord, Lord’ I need to do what you say. Remind me to hear your Word and obey it.<sup>1</sup>

**READ** **ISAIAH 50**

**REFLECT** Where do you see your need to make your attitude more like that of Jesus?

The servant is speaking in the first person (vv. 4–9). By making a sharp contrast with Israel, the servant describes himself as not being rebellious and not turning away from God (v. 5). He sustains the weary with a word. He attentively listens to the Lord, who consistently instructs him on what to say. The servant obediently follows the Sovereign God (vv. 4, 5). He is humiliated for God’s sake: ‘beat me’, ‘pulled out my beard’, ‘mocking’, and ‘spitting’, yet he stands firm like ‘flint’ (vv. 6, 7) because he knows that God will help him (vv. 7, 9) and ultimately vindicate him (v. 8). Who will bring charges against him? Who is his accuser? Who will condemn him (vv. 8, 9)? Of course, nobody!

Speaking to the same people as in verses 1–3, the servant challenges them to decide: ‘Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his servant?’ (v. 10) Those who have no light can still walk safely if they trust in the Lord’s way. Those who instead walk in their own light will eventually face catastrophe (vv. 10, 11). Why is the portrait of the perfect servant brought forth at this point? He is not simply an example par excellence to be emulated and admired, but he is to be obeyed. To listen to the servant is to fear God (v. 10).

Today, many of us may find obeying God the most challenging lesson to learn. It may involve a high price. Yet the servant’s ‘wholehearted, costly obedience’<sup>2</sup> depicted in this passage is impressive. In the end, it’s equally amazing that the servant who obeys God wholeheartedly is to be obeyed. What an honor!

**APPLY** What do you learn from God’s servant here? Do you find obeying God difficult? Why?

**PRAY** Lord, please continue to show me what you require of me, and give me a spirit eager to obey.

<sup>1</sup> Luke 6:46; 11:28 <sup>2</sup> Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* (IVP, 1996), 199.

## MEMORY VERSES FOR THE MONTH

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WEEK 1: But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

– **Isaiah 53:5**

WEEK 2: For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.

– **1 Corinthians 2:11**

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.

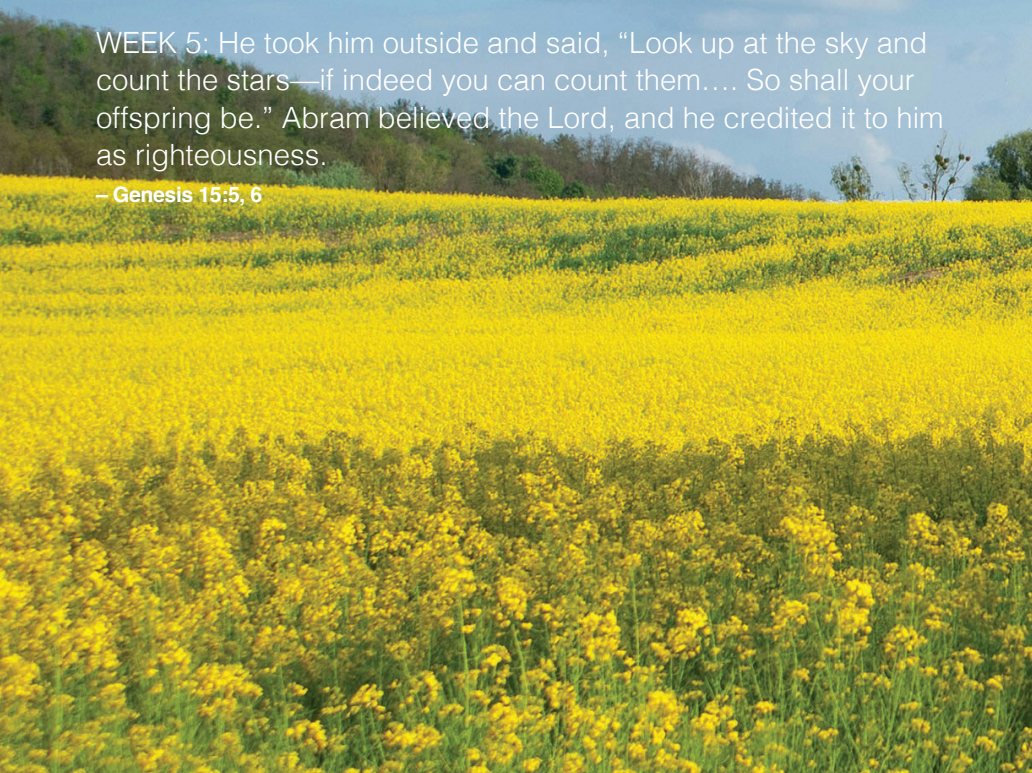
– **Psalms 51:10, 12**

WEEK 4: Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

– **1 Corinthians 8:9**

WEEK 5: He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.... So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

– **Genesis 15:5, 6**



**SATURDAY, AUGUST 1, 2026**

## **FOCUSING ON GOD SOLELY**

**PRAY** Lord Almighty, who is the Maker of heaven and earth, I lift up my eyes to you, from whom my help comes.<sup>1</sup>

**READ** **ISAIAH 51**

**REFLECT** How well do you think you listen to God? How often do you seek his guidance?

'Listen to me,' stated three times (vv. 1, 4, 7), challenges righteous people to look to the past, the future, and the present. First, they are reminded of their ancestors, Sarah and Abraham. God blessed Abraham, and he grew from one to many. God can do the same to Zion by transforming its wasteland into a garden like Eden (vv. 1–3). Second, God will bring justice to all nations, making them his people. The heavens and earth created by him will vanish one day, but his salvation and righteousness will last forever. This is beyond mere deliverance from Babylon and restoration of earthly Zion (vv. 4–6). Third, the righteous shouldn't be afraid of the persecution and insults facing them. God's work in the past and future helps to strengthen their confidence in overcoming the adversities of life today (vv. 7, 8).

The cry, 'Awake, awake ... Awake' to God reveals that these righteous exiles had no doubt of God's mighty power, but wondered why they had to wait so long for his intervention (vv. 9, 10). The Lord exhorts the captives to shift their attention from their oppressors to God himself. Their enemies are mere mortals, who will perish like short-lived grass, but their Maker is also the One who comforts them (v. 12). He is their God, the Lord Almighty, to whom all things in the world are subject (v. 15). Their foes are nothing to be feared.

God seeks to comfort and encourage the weary and discouraged. Let's turn our eyes upon him, for he is 'the Alpha and the Omega ... who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.'<sup>2</sup> He is bigger than our problems, troubles, and feelings!

**APPLY** How does your experience of God's past acts and your expectation for his future deeds impact your life in the present?

**PRAY** Father, over and over, you have proved your faithfulness to me. Thank you; there is nothing for which I cannot trust you, for my future is held in your strong and loving hands.

<sup>1</sup> Ps 121:1, <sup>2</sup> 2 Rev 1:8.



**SUNDAY, AUGUST 2, 2026**

## WEALTH OR WISDOM?

**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.<sup>1</sup>

**READ** **PSALM 49**

**REFLECT** In what ways do you see Jesus as your shepherd?

The psalmist of this wisdom poem poses a riddle: ‘Why should I fear when evil days come, when wicked deceivers surround me—those who trust in their wealth and boast of their great riches?’ (vv. 5, 6). No amount of payment can buy life (vv. 7–9). Human beings with such wealth will die, just as the animals will perish (v. 12). They cannot take wealth with them (vv. 10, 11, 17). Unlike sheep that follow their shepherd to pasture, those trusting in themselves will find death. (v. 14). Therefore, the abusive and arrogant rich are not to be feared (v. 16).

The Hebrew in the two refrains (vv. 12, 20) is different. In place of ‘endures’ (*yalin*, v. 12), the word ‘understanding’ (*yabin*, v. 20) echoes ‘understanding’ in verse 3. Like animals that fail to understand, wealthy people lacking in understanding perish without hope (v. 20). The wise (v. 3), however, who have understanding, are assured of God’s protection and presence (v. 15).

We live in a world where people define themselves by their possessions, income, shares, and savings. Jesus reminds us to store up treasure in heaven, but not to store up treasure on earth: ‘For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.’<sup>2</sup> Wise people seek his kingdom first, for the heavenly Father will provide for their needs.<sup>3</sup>

**APPLY** What does God speak to you through this psalm? Any struggles to do his will? How will you respond to his instruction?

**PRAY** Father, show me how to use who I am and what you give me for those things that have kingdom value.

<sup>1</sup> Matt 5:6, <sup>2</sup> Matt 6:19–21 <sup>3</sup> Luke 12:29–31.

MONDAY, AUGUST 3, 2026

## AWAKE AND DEPART

**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** **ISAIAH 52:1–12**

**REFLECT** ‘Thanks be to God, who ... uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere.’<sup>1</sup>

Again, Jerusalem is called to ‘Awake’ (vv. 1–6), reminding us of the previous chapter.<sup>2</sup> There, God claims that he will remove his judgment from Jerusalem and give the cup of his wrath to Jerusalem’s opponents. Now Daughter Zion is called to arise and come out of her slavery by removing dust and chains from her. She sits enthroned in a dignified and splendid manner. She will be redeemed. Babylon has taken Jerusalem for nothing. Therefore, God owes no one anything for Zion’s redemption (vv. 1–3). Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon had oppressed and mocked God’s people. On the day of deliverance, his people will know God’s name because he is the One who predicted it (vv. 4–6).

The way God redeems his people is impressive. By bringing ‘comfort’ to the ruins of Jerusalem (v. 9), he bares ‘his holy arm’ (just like rolling up his sleeves) before the whole world (v. 10). The salvation of his people is shown before them (v. 10). From the ‘uncircumcised’ and ‘defiled’ Babylon (v. 1), God’s people are called to depart as a pure people (v. 11). They will leave in calm order, not in panic or haste, because the presence of God will be with them. He will lead and protect them front and rear (v. 12).

The command ‘Depart, depart, go out’ (v. 11) is as powerful as the ‘Awake’ calls. Waking up without taking further action is futile. God’s people are supposed to purify themselves and not to touch unclean things, as God will be present in their midst. Now that the Holy Spirit is dwelling in us, we are also called to wake up and depart from sinful things that displease God.

**APPLY** Think of one experience in which you received a ‘Wake up and depart’ call from the Lord. How did you respond? What do you learn from this passage?

**PRAY** Lord God, help me to be responsive to your call, ready to do your will, and to proclaim and reflect your goodness in everything I do.

<sup>1</sup> 2 Cor 2:14 <sup>2</sup> Isa 51:17–23.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 4, 2026

## THE COSTLIEST SACRIFICE

**PRAY** Thank you, Jesus, for your death, resurrection, and now your intercession for me at the right hand of God.<sup>1</sup>

**READ** **ISAIAH 52:13–53:12**

**REFLECT** The extraordinary price paid for our sin tells us the gravity of our offense toward God.

Here comes the most powerful passage of the servant songs. ‘We—us—our’ is interwoven with ‘he—him—his’ in 53:1–6, where the servant ‘he’ is depicted from the perspective of the ‘we’ group. The latter is probably a group in Israel who, with hindsight, are able to understand the meaning of the servant’s suffering. They recognize that the servant did not suffer for his own sin and wrongdoing, but he bore their pain and suffering for their rebelliousness and sinfulness, bringing peace and healing to their lives (vv. 4, 5). They all have gone astray like sheep, each one turning to their own ways, but the servant willingly took on the sheer weight of iniquities the Lord laid on him (v. 6).

Obviously, the group has seen God’s hand in the servant’s suffering: he was ‘punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted’ (v. 4); ‘the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all’ (v. 6). Why should he be punished? Why didn’t God simply grant people forgiveness, which is so much easier? However, the justice of God doesn’t allow sin to go unpunished.<sup>2</sup> A penalty needs to be paid either by the sinner or through a substitute. God made the servant’s life an offering for sin (v. 10). He died for others’ sins, bore their punishment, and set them free.

The group of believers in Isaiah 53 knows that they are saved and chosen by God. Today we also belong to this group. While we were still sinners, Jesus died for us. God’s great love for us is fully demonstrated through this.<sup>3</sup> For the immense cost that Jesus has paid for us, Paul reminds us ‘to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.’<sup>4</sup> Truly, he deserves our all.

**APPLY** How do you feel about the servant’s suffering in the passage? Which part of the text touches your heart most deeply? What would you do for God in return?

**PRAY** Thank you, Jesus, for being willing to pay my debt, to suffer and die in my stead. Help me to express my gratitude in ways others can see and be drawn to you.

<sup>1</sup> Rom 8:34 <sup>2</sup> Exod 34:7 <sup>3</sup> Rom 5:8 <sup>4</sup> Rom 12:1.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 5, 2026

## HIS LOVE ENDURES FOREVER

**PRAY** Great is your faithfulness, Lord. Your great love and compassions are new every morning.<sup>1</sup>

**READ** **ISAIAH 54**

**REFLECT** In what ways has God transformed you since you committed your life to him?

Promises of comfort and restoration run through Isaiah 40–53 and culminate in chapters 54 and 55. In chapter 54, God addresses Zion, depicted as barren, widowed, and divorced—the images of a disgraced woman. Once barren, Zion will multiply in population. The city will be rebuilt. To make space for the people brought home by God, she is instructed to spread her tents out and expand her territory by dispossessing other nations (vv. 1–3). Zion has been a widow, but she is now loved by her husband, who is her Maker, the Lord Almighty, Holy One of Israel, Redeemer, and God of the entire world (vv. 4, 5). Formerly an abandoned wife, Zion is called back by her husband, the Lord, with deep compassion. God’s anger toward her is brief, but his compassion is everlasting (vv. 6, 8).

The transformation of God’s people from the image of a disgraced woman to a fertile, well-loved bride of God is powerful. The ‘servants’ of the Lord (v. 17), the redeemed community, will be given all the blessings of vindication and restoration. How can sinful Israel receive such gifts? Through the ministry of the suffering servant.<sup>2</sup>

More importantly, God will never remove his unfailing love and covenant of peace from Zion, just as he swore not to let the waters of Noah flood the earth again (vv. 9, 10). Paul reminds us: ‘neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons . . . nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’<sup>3</sup>

**APPLY** We were once disgraced sinners. What does this chapter speak to you about God’s love? Tell him how you feel.

**PRAY** Thank you, Lord Jesus, that in you, all things are possible. In you, I am redeemed, in you, I am changed, and in you, I have eternal hope.

<sup>1</sup> Lam 3:22, 23 <sup>2</sup> see Isa 53 <sup>3</sup> Rom 8:38, 39.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 6, 2026

## RETURN TO GOD FOREVER

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

**READ** **ISAIAH 55**

**REFLECT** How has your relationship with God been lately?

Isaiah 40 started with the prediction of the imminent return to Zion. Chapter 55 finishes with 'You will go out' (vv. 12, 13). However, the message of this chapter goes far beyond the departure from captivity in Babylon. In what way? First, the Lord summons the hungry and thirsty people to buy true riches to satisfy their ultimate needs: God's offer of a saving relationship with his people is free (vv. 1, 2). Second, God's people are called to remember his everlasting covenant with David, from which they will receive blessing. Just as God made David a witness to the nations, so he will use Israel to summon the nations (vv. 3–5). Third, far from physical captivity, the people's problem is their spiritual alienation from God. They are called to seek God, repent (vv. 6, 7), and marvel at his Word, which will accomplish its purpose (vv. 8–11).

On the day of salvation, joy and peace will accompany God's people and bear witness to the divine name. Mountains, hills, and trees will praise, on their return to God. The chapter ends on a high note: the people's spiritual renewal, symbolized by the transformation of thornbushes and briars into green trees (vv. 12, 13). All in all, it points to the everlasting kingdom of God, not the release of the Jewish exiles from Babylon.

We see God's earnest invitations to his people: 'Come ... come ... come ... Come ...' (v. 1). Just imagine someone is hosting a party. Invitations have been sent to all people. Now the time for arrival has come. The room is decorated. Food and drink are ready. Music is on. How disastrous it would be if the guests did not come!

**APPLY** Intentionally invite God to come into your life in new ways; observe what happens in the coming week.

**PRAY** When my loyalty is divided between you and the world, purify my heart, Lord. I long to come close to you, to have you come close to me.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> James 4:8.

# 1 CORINTHIANS 1–8

## LIVING BY THE CROSS

Today, we begin this remarkable letter, so full of contrasts. In particular, there is the wisdom of God contrasted with the wisdom of the world. The cross of Christ is ‘foolishness’ for many, unsurprisingly, given it was the instrument of execution for outcasts and rebels. Who would follow a crucified God? Surely, this is the very definition of foolishness! And yet, for those who ‘are being saved’ the cross is what they cling to, for here is the power of God for salvation (1:18). Expect to be challenged and changed as Paul draws out the implications of the ‘foolishness’ of the cross for Christian living.

The Corinthian church itself was one of contrasts. They were incredibly gifted but not especially godly, full of life yet riven by disputes and divided into parties. Many today are tempted to give up on the church, as I’m sure some in Corinth were. Yet—amazingly—I find nothing here, not even a hint or an inference, that Paul ever considered this an option. For sure, he was frustrated with the Corinthians and spoke to them strongly. Yet, to paraphrase the most famous chapter in the book, he always hoped in, always persevered with, and, above all, always loved the church (see especially 13:7). I am only too aware of how difficult it can be to do this. If we’re honest with ourselves, we recognize that we are sometimes part of the problem, for we bring our own struggles into the community. It’s easy to despair. Paul, however, loved the church and, more importantly, so does Jesus! The encouragement is to do likewise and be part of the solution. In a fragmented world, experiencing an epidemic of isolation and loneliness, diverse communities united by the gospel of Christ provide a powerful gospel counterpoint. The church will never be perfect, but together we can make a difference. As we journey through the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians, may God’s Word show us how.

## FOR FURTHER READING

Thomas R Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, *Tyndale NT Commentaries* (IVP, 2018).

FRIDAY, AUGUST 7, 2026

## THE HOLE IN OUR HOLINESS

**PRAY** As I begin my journey through this letter, Holy Spirit, travel with me and illuminate the way ahead. Please use it to encourage, convict, and inspire me in my walk of faith.

**READ** **1 CORINTHIANS 1:1–9**

**REFLECT** What things about your church family do you thank God for?

It seems strange to use the concepts of sanctification and holiness when writing about the church in Corinth. Yet, this is what Paul does (v. 2). They are ‘called to be his holy people’ and, most surprising of all, they are already ‘sanctified.’ The word sanctified (Greek, *hegiasmenois*, v. 2) means ‘set apart’ or ‘declared holy.’ The Corinthian church, with all its problems of belief and behavior, is already, in at least one sense, ‘holy.’ How can this be? The clue is in the words that follow the word ‘sanctified’: ‘in Christ Jesus.’ Through their union with Christ, they already have a right standing, a holy status before God. We could put it like this: when God looks on them, with all their flaws and failings, he sees his Son and his perfection. For them—and us—this is due entirely to his grace, his unmerited, overflowing love for us that forgives and restores. This is deep theology, but it is also wonderfully simple. You are declared holy! Take a moment to appreciate the truth and power of this personally. Here is living water. Drink deeply and be satisfied.

This glorious truth helps us with the call to ‘be holy,’ a call which has a strong practical thrust. You have a holy status, Paul effectively says, now become what you are in your day-to-day lives. They are to do this in their church relationships, and they are to live out their holy calling ‘in Corinth,’ a city that was known for immorality and that posed many challenges for faithful Christian discipleship. What was true for them is true for us. We are set apart ‘in Christ’ and called to be holy in ... (insert the name of your town, city, or village here!). Let’s adopt our high calling, right where we are, right now.

**APPLY** What are the particular challenges of living out your faith in your context?

**PRAY** Lord, whatever you call me to do, help me to respond reliant on your help and confident in your provisions.

**SATURDAY, AUGUST 8, 2026**

## **UNITED WE STAND**

**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** **1 CORINTHIANS 1:10–17**

**REFLECT** ‘Blest be the tie that binds / our hearts in Christian love.’<sup>1</sup>

Taken together, these verses form a strong appeal for unity. It is greatly needed in Corinth, because there are ‘divisions’ and ‘quarrels’ among them (vv. 10, 11). Paul immediately moves to address this foundational problem in the church, but at first sight, he does this in a surprising way. He doesn’t focus so much on unity but on Christ. In a context where people are ‘following’ (see v. 12) apostles like Peter or himself, or a faithful teacher like Apollos, he directs them to Christ and his gospel. What he says here links back to verse 9. They have all (the ‘you’ is plural) been drawn by God into fellowship with Jesus. God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in perfect unity, calls them to share that unity. They do this not by following a program but by maintaining an unwavering focus on Jesus.

Many who read these notes are in church leadership of some kind. There is a challenge to humility here. Paul wants to give Christ every shred of glory; none of it is for the apostle himself. He is an exceptionally gifted man, but he refuses to side with those who say, ‘I follow Paul.’ Instead, he points away from himself to his Lord. Church leaders are rarely so crass as to explicitly say, ‘Follow me’ (although I have known some who have effectively done so), but in subtle ways, sometimes unconsciously, we fail to give all the glory to Jesus. All of us, whether leaders or not, can assert ourselves and our agendas in church life. If we honestly look to Jesus, praying, reading God’s Word, being shaped by his character and priorities, then we will serve his agenda, not ours. In this way, true gospel unity will flourish.

**APPLY** Unity is a precious thing, as Psalm 133 reminds us. In what ways can you nurture unity in your church as you look to and reflect the character of Christ?

**PRAY** Thank you, Lord God, for the love I’ve experienced among fellow Christian believers. Help us to maintain our love and unity in ways that bring you glory and are a testimony to the unbelieving world around us.

<sup>1</sup> ‘Blest be the Tie that Binds’, John Fawcett, 1782.

**SUNDAY, AUGUST 9, 2026**

## THANKFUL HEARTS?

**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** Thank God it's Sunday! Say hallelujah for another resurrection day and praise God for what Jesus' rising from the dead means for you personally.

Offering thanksgiving to God is encouraged throughout the Scriptures. This psalm is a case in point. The people are to sacrifice 'thank offerings' to him (vv. 14, 23) or, as the NRSV renders verse 23, bring 'thanksgiving as their sacrifice.' Why is thanksgiving so important? Part of the answer is that it sets our relationship with God in the right perspective: he is the giver, and we are the recipients. The people were bringing extravagant 'sacrifices' to God, thinking they were somehow benefiting him (vv. 12, 13). However, he does not need food or drink; rather, as Paul reminds us, he is no one's debtor.<sup>1</sup> He is the mighty, covenant-making, covenant-keeping God, faithful in creation and salvation (see vv. 1, 10, 11, 23). He needs nothing from us, but graciously draws us into a saving knowledge of himself.

Verse 15 sums up the nature of the relationship: 'I will deliver you, and you will honor me.' The discipline of regular thanksgiving reminds us of this. We are all beneficiaries of his grace, and this is as true for the most mature Christian as it is for the most recent convert.

As you give thanks to him today, there may be many things in your personal circumstances you're grateful for, but it may be you're facing a 'day of trouble' (v. 15) and can't think of too much in your immediate situation that leads to thankfulness. Yet, if you know God through Jesus by the Spirit, you have his infinite riches. Use the themes of this psalm—for example, God's majesty, righteousness, salvation—as prompts for prayer. Give thanks and, in so doing, set the pattern of your relationship with him.

**APPLY** '... out of his infinite riches in Jesus / he giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.'<sup>2</sup> What sacrifice of thanksgiving will you offer to him today in response?

**PRAY** Thank you, Father, that your grace and mercy are always sufficient, even for my greatest burden.

<sup>1</sup> Rom 11:34–36, especially v. 35; cf. Job 41:11 **2** 'He Giveth More Grace', Annie Johnson Flint, 1093.

MONDAY, AUGUST 10, 2026

## THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

**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** **1 CORINTHIANS 1:18–25**

**REFLECT** ‘When I survey the wondrous cross ... / my richest gain I count but loss.’<sup>1</sup> Reflect on Isaac Watts’ famous lines as you come to God and his Word today.

There is a verse of Watts’ famous hymn that we rarely sing nowadays: *His dying crimson like a robe spreads o’er his body on the tree; then I am dead to all the globe, and all the globe is dead to me.*<sup>2</sup>

These words apply the message of the cross to our lives.<sup>3</sup> The verse is beautifully written, with its form emphasizing the cross-shaped nature of its content. Watts uses a so-called ‘chiastic’ structure. Draw a line joining the words ‘dead’ in the third and fourth lines, and then do the same between the two occurrences of ‘globe.’ In doing so, you will form an X, the Greek letter Chi. In other words, you’re drawing a cross.

Turning to our passage, we see that the cross not only deeply shapes what is said, but its pattern is indelibly inscribed onto Paul’s life. He has experienced its saving power so thoroughly that he preaches it above everything else, even though he knows that some will reject it (vv. 18, 23) and him. What is more, his very life is cruciform. The cross is his message and his way of being. Is the sign of the cross woven through the fabric of our own lives? If it is, then it will not only be on our lips but also in our hearts, shaping our behavior. We should not be surprised at this challenge, for the wondrous cross demands our lives, our souls, our all.

**APPLY** How cruciform is your life? Are you totally given over to God and engaging wholeheartedly in vulnerable and risky mission as you live and proclaim his gospel?

**PRAY** Holy Spirit, in everything I do, help me reflect Christ’s unwavering commitment to his Father’s will as he went to the cross on my behalf.

<sup>1</sup> ‘When I Survey the Wondrous Cross’, Isaac Watts, 1707 <sup>2</sup> This was originally the penultimate verse of ‘When I Survey the Wondrous Cross’ <sup>3</sup> Gal 6:14.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 11, 2026

## A TIME TO BOAST

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

**READ** **1 CORINTHIANS 1:26–2:5**

**REFLECT** 'In the cross of Christ I glory / towering o'er the wrecks of time.'<sup>1</sup>  
Praise God for the cross.

We recognize that boasting is not a particularly attractive trait, and yet most of us have a natural tendency to boast. Perhaps because of our insecurities, we seek to highlight our achievements and—often—exaggerate them. Furthermore, collectively as humans, we puff up our abilities and talk as if we had the capacity to do almost anything we want. Like those who built the tower of Babel, we reach for the sky.<sup>2</sup> Nothing, we think, is beyond us.

God shows us a different way. We exalt ourselves, but God, in the person of Jesus, humbles himself, coming down to our level and descending yet further, even to the extent of dying in weakness and utter desolation on the cross.<sup>3</sup> It should come as no surprise, then, that he uses a weak, fearful preacher like Paul (2:3) who lived among the Corinthians with such vulnerability. He both proclaimed and embodied the message. As he did this, great spiritual power was released (v. 4). No wonder Paul boasted in the cross, but this way of life was constantly challenging.

For those of us who are called to pastor and preach, these verses should be written on our hearts. In fact, as servants of Christ, we are all called to take these words with the utmost seriousness and make this pattern of living our own. It's a challenge but also an encouragement, for we often feel weak, faced with complex problems and powerful people in our communities and workplaces - maybe in our families too. We're personally in the firing line, and we feel afraid. Paul walked this road before us. What he offered to God was a cross-shaped proclamation and a consistently vulnerable, loving, and risk-filled lifestyle. Dare we do the same?

**APPLY** What is Christ calling you to? Do you sometimes feel his vision for what you can do is greater than yours?

**PRAY** Lord, you chose to use the foolish, the weak, and the lowly to change the world. Foolish, weak, and fearful though I might be, please use me in your mission and release your power.

<sup>1</sup> 'In the Cross of Christ I Glory', John Bowring, 1825 <sup>2</sup> Gen 11:1–9 <sup>3</sup> Phil 2:6–11, especially v. 8.

## WISE UP

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

**READ** **1 CORINTHIANS 2:6–16**

**REFLECT** ‘Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.’<sup>1</sup>

Paul has made it abundantly clear that the ‘wisdom’ of the prevailing culture is opposed to the message of the cross.<sup>2</sup> There is a deeper wisdom, however, that is much to be prized - the wisdom of Christ and his gospel. How do we get what Paul here calls ‘God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden’ (v. 7)? As he gives us the answer, we see a pervasive stress on the work of the Holy Spirit. God’s gospel wisdom was ‘hidden’ but is now ‘revealed’ by the Spirit (v. 10), communicated by the apostle who speaks the words taught by the Spirit (v. 13), and understood and lived out by us only by that same Spirit (v. 14).

Many of us place a strong emphasis on the Bible as the Word of God, but perhaps not a corresponding emphasis on the Spirit. However, in the space of five verses, the word ‘Spirit,’ *pneuma*, occurs seven times, referencing the Holy Spirit, and the word ‘spiritual,’ *pneumatikos*, three times (vv. 10–14). True, the Spirit works through the Word; he is essential in making it alive and driving it deeply into people’s hearts. God’s gospel wisdom may be a secret hidden in plain sight, but the indispensability of the Spirit in truly gaining it should be clear.

Such a God-centered approach to wisdom should humble us before him: we can’t work things out through our cleverness. This understanding of how revelation works and how wisdom is attained should drive us to our knees in prayer, as prayer and humility often go together. The person who humbly asks for God’s help may be simple, indeed ‘foolish’ in the eyes of the surrounding culture, but it is just such a person who has the ‘mind of Christ’ (v. 16). Here is wisdom indeed.

**APPLY** Where might you need clarity about how the gospel applies to your life—whether it’s your inner life, family, church, or workplace—and strength to live it out?

**PRAY** Holy Spirit, thank you for your presence with me, for enabling me to grow in godly wisdom, and in understanding that would be impossible without you.

<sup>1</sup> Prov 1:7, CEB <sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 1:22, 23.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 13, 2026

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS

**PRAY** I come to you today, Lord Jesus, with gratitude and in humble adoration. There is no love, no power, no grace and mercy greater than that which you offer me.

**READ** **1 CORINTHIANS 3:1–9**

**REFLECT** ‘God is working his purpose out, / as year succeeds to year.’<sup>1</sup>

What’s your understanding of ‘worldliness’? We might link the word with sexual sin, covetousness, or perhaps to attitudes and actions we think of as blasphemous. Paul uses the word ‘worldly’ three times in our opening verses—but in a way that might surprise us. The Corinthians are worldly because there is ‘jealousy’ and ‘quarreling’ among them (v. 3). Contemporary Corinth was a competitive dog-eat-dog society, and this spirit appears to have invaded the church.

Paul’s solution, once again, is to point away from himself and other leaders toward God. He deploys the image of a field with farm laborers whose task is to work in it, one planting and the next one watering the resulting crop. This is vital work, and it needs to be done well. The field is God’s, so is the seed, and, ultimately, it is God who makes it germinate and grow. So it is with the church. A clear understanding of this keeps us humble and helps us work collaboratively rather than competitively. If we’re tempted to display the type of worldliness the Corinthians were exhibiting, here is the perfect corrective.

As Paul leads them away from worldliness, he also shows them how churches are established and develop. It’s really God’s action from beginning to end, as verse 9 makes especially clear. Yet this doesn’t mean we’re not involved. We are to ‘labor’ in God’s field (vv. 8, 9). He gives us the energy and works with us—but make no mistake, it’s tough, and we’re to roll our sleeves up and get moving. William Carey, the pioneering cross-cultural missionary, had a motto: ‘Expect great things [from God], attempt great things [for God].’<sup>2</sup> This sums up these verses nicely and serves as a resounding call to action for us today.

**APPLY** If this is God’s work, we should have great expectations. What things is he calling you to attempt as you partner with him in the work of the kingdom?

**PRAY** I praise you, Lord God, for the ways you are causing the church to grow all over the world and thank you for the part you enable me to play in furthering your kingdom.

<sup>1</sup> ‘God is Working His Purpose Out’, Arthur Campbell Ainger, 1894 <sup>2</sup> See Peter Morden, *The Life and Thought of Andrew Fuller* (Authentic Media, 2015), 119, 120.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 14, 2026

## BUILDING REGULATIONS

**PRAY** As I open my Bible today, Jesus, help me to understand more of who you are and more of who I am because you died and rose for me.

**READ** **1 CORINTHIANS 3:10–17**

**REFLECT** ‘The church’s one foundation / is Jesus Christ her Lord.’

A good building has to meet specific standards. It needs to be stable, strong, and able to fulfill its purpose. If that’s the case with a physical building, what is God’s blueprint for the spiritual building, which is the church? Most importantly, what foundation needs to be laid? Those who have journeyed this far in Corinthians are unlikely to be surprised by the answer: Jesus Christ (v. 11). It sounds so simple, like the answer to many—if not every—Sunday school question. Straightforward as it seems, however, the church has a habit of getting this wrong. Sometimes a different foundation is laid; at other times, a building that begins well gets ruined later by inferior workers following inadequate plans. What does it mean to build with the materials listed in verse 12?

Today, there are many churches, many of which started well, that prioritize things other than Christ: it might be a particular brand of inclusivity, or church tradition (‘The way we’ve always done things here’), or respectability, or even social action, which, although good, has become so dominant that it takes over. All of the emphases in this list—I believe—might spring from good motives, but the building (which of course is the people, the community of faith) is not aligning with its essential foundation. The whole structure becomes shaky. Make no mistake, God takes these things seriously. Verses 16 and 17 are so often taken out of context, especially in the West, where we individualize things. They don’t refer here to an individual being the temple within which the Spirit dwells, rather the reference is to the church together—‘you yourselves’—being the place where God dwells.

Do you have the presence of the Spirit among you? If not, it may well be that God’s building regulations are not being followed.

**APPLY** Is Jesus central in your church? Is he present and working by the Spirit? What can you do positively and constructively to foster God’s plan for the church?

**PRAY** Mighty God, I praise you for the lordship of Christ over the church and, ultimately, the whole cosmos.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 15, 2026

## FAITHFUL SERVANTS

**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** **1 CORINTHIANS 3:18–4:5**

**REFLECT** The Lord knows our hearts. This is challenging but also liberating, especially when we realize that he couldn't love us any more than he already does.

It's easy for some of us to be people-pleasers. It's in our character; we like to be liked. I struggle with this personally. Maybe you identify with this too. Of course, we all need to listen to others. Christian disciples—especially leaders—are not called to be lone rangers; they must be accountable to fellow believers. However, people-pleasing is something different, often flowing from deep insecurities. Paul helps us move toward something healthier.

His sequence of thought in 4:1–5 goes like this. Apostles have been entrusted with a sacred charge, to share the glorious gospel of Christ widely and to live in accordance with that gospel. Moreover, they have been given this charge by God himself.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is God alone whose judgment matters. This saves Paul from arrogance, as he's acutely aware that God, who sees the secret places in our hearts, knows us better than we know ourselves. He finds this liberating (vv. 3, 4). Paul is living not to please people but to please God. He is playing for an audience of one.

I want to underscore the importance of human accountability for all of us, but I especially want to underscore the importance of these verses. Only God knows our hearts, and it's his verdict that counts. We are regularly faced with stark choices. Do I please God or do I please these people? Perhaps we have been asked to lie at work or collude with a workplace culture shot through with gossip and bitterness. To cave in to this would make us popular and give us an easy ride, but that is not the way to please God. Whether in community or church, let's live in the light of God's judgment, for ultimately this is all that matters.

**APPLY** Think of your own circumstances and challenges. How will the knowledge that God is your judge reshape the way you live?

**PRAY** Lord, with all of the world's expectations and pressures, keep me ever mindful that, above anyone else, you are the One I desire to please.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 1:1.

**SUNDAY, AUGUST 16, 2026**

## REPENTANCE AND RENEWAL

**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** Does your attitude toward your sin reflect the gravity with which God sees it?

This heartfelt prayer springs from David's utter brokenness before God, after his appalling sin.<sup>1</sup> It's worthwhile underlining that the glories of the forgiveness God offers in no way justify a lax attitude to sin. David's sinfulness wrecked people's lives, and his own was permanently scarred by it. May God create in us a holy hatred of the sin that always pollutes, corrodes, and destroys.

Even so, God's forgiveness is glorious. The first step to receiving it is to recognize his readiness to forgive: he has 'great compassion' (v. 1). Next, there is deep repentance as we turn from our sin and turn back to God, crying out 'have mercy.' Our sins are great indeed, but his grace is greater still, and this grace is guaranteed by his unshakeable covenant promises. The third step—a step God alone takes—is to forgive, wholly and completely. Our iniquity is blotted out, washed away (vv. 1, 2, 7). Both sin and guilt are dealt with (v. 14). All we do at this point is receive. From a New Testament perspective, we know that such grace and mercy flow to us through the 'righteous sacrifice' of Jesus on the cross (cf. v. 19). Forgiveness is wonderfully free to us, but it was immeasurably costly to him. We praise him for his amazing grace.

This psalm gives the step-by-step pattern of confession, forgiveness, and restoration to the right relationship (vv. 13–19) that we need to adopt daily. There is a further step, one that we take together with our God. His deliverance is from the penalty and the power of sin. He is at work transforming us, leading us on in truth, wisdom, service, and—crucially—purity (vv. 7, 10). Let's cooperate with him in all he wants to do in our lives.

**APPLY** Come to God in confession and repentance, receive his forgiveness, and make your commitment before God to grow. What step is he calling you to take today?

**PRAY** Holy Spirit, I ask that as you convict me of my sin, you bring to me wholehearted penitence and transformation.

<sup>1</sup> See 2 Sam Chpts. 11, 12

MONDAY, AUGUST 17, 2026

## UNDER PRESSURE

**PRAY** Father, please continue to guide me as I journey through this letter. Give me a greater understanding of your Word and the ability to put into practice what your Spirit teaches me.

**READ** 1 CORINTHIANS 4:6–21

**REFLECT** ‘Your word is lamp for my feet, a light on my path.’<sup>1</sup>

The Colosseum in Rome is one of the most impressive Roman buildings still standing, but this massive amphitheater has also played host to great cruelty. This is remembered with a simple cross that stands in the amphitheater, commemorating Christian martyrs. While the number of believers who gave their lives in this particular arena is uncertain, it is undisputed that throughout the empire, countless Christians were killed, often torn apart by wild beasts in front of baying crowds. Terrible persecution was also the reality for Paul (vv. 11–13) and is the reality of many Christians around the world today. If this is you, may God strengthen and deliver you. If it is not, then commit yourself to praying regularly for the persecuted church.

Even if the ‘brutal’ treatment (see v. 11) meted out to Paul isn’t our experience, we still undergo challenges as we live out our faith. How do we respond, for instance, when we’re cursed (v. 12)? We are liable to hit back, or at least try to justify ourselves. Alternatively, we might endure patiently, but then something within us snaps, and we lash out. However, in these verses, Paul works out in practice the theology of the cross.

Persecution is met with endurance, slander with kind answers, and cursing with blessing (vv. 12, 13). Let’s look at a practical example: slander. The word denotes a verbal attack based on falsehood or a distortion of the truth, calculated to harm someone, perhaps destroying their reputation. I suspect many readers will have experienced something like this. A kind answer doesn’t mean we never respond (although Jesus did remain silent before his accusers),<sup>2</sup> but it does mean that we speak the truth calmly and, of course, kindly. This is not easy, but if it simply seems too hard, then perhaps we can remember the cross in the Colosseum.

**APPLY** Next time you are slandered, how might you handle the situation differently in light of these verses?

**PRAY** Holy Spirit, continue to build in me the same mindset as that of Jesus. Help me, even when criticized or slandered, to respond with grace and mercy, humility and compassion.

<sup>1</sup> Ps 119:105 <sup>2</sup> Matt 26:63.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 18, 2026

## DARE TO DISCIPLINE

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

**READ** 1 CORINTHIANS 5

**REFLECT** When you think of worldliness, what comes to mind?

When Paul speaks of worldliness, he's not speaking about sexual sin, but this does not mean he's unconcerned about sexual immorality. This is present in the church at Corinth, and we see here that Paul is deeply shocked by it.

The particular sin is outrageous: incest. Even so, the discipline Paul insists on, that the man in question is expelled from the church, can grate some, even when it is understood that restoration is ultimately in view (vv. 2, 5, 13). Why is putting this man completely 'out of the fellowship' so important? Paul grounds his approach in the Passover, when a lamb was sacrificed and unleavened bread was eaten. In New Testament terms, Christ was the spotless Lamb who died to purify the church; God's people are the 'unleavened bread' who would lose their purity if this sin were tolerated (vv. 6–8). Even pagan Corinth didn't accept incest. Paul is not advocating expulsion for every misdemeanor (note also that it is the man, not the much more vulnerable woman, who is disciplined). Even so, the application is straightforward: church discipline for such shocking sins is important.

We often get things the wrong way around. We might accept sin in our own lives and churches, but are extremely critical of non-believers. Paul has no time for this practice and speaks of it again (vv. 9–13). Yet as far as the church is concerned, accountability is important. Early English Baptist churches would speak about covenanting together to watch over their daily 'walk,' that is, their Christian discipleship. This is not a denominational point, but perhaps we could learn from them? For whom are you providing accountability, and to whom are you accountable?

**APPLY** If you are in an accountability group or have an accountability partner, then give thanks; if you're not, is now the time to seek this out?

**PRAY** Lord Jesus, help me to keep the attitudes and actions expressed in my life and within my church consistent with those in Scripture. Please keep your Word ever before me.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 19, 2026

## GUILTY AS CHARGED

**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** **1 CORINTHIANS 6:1–11**

**REFLECT** In what ways have you changed (become more Christ-like) since coming to faith in him?

Context is really important here. These verses do not relate to criminal cases; such crimes were prosecuted differently. Sometimes, tragically, churches have tried to deal internally with sickening crimes such as rape or sexual harassment, even covering up what has happened and attempting to cite our reading today in support of their terrible approach. The relevant passage in these cases is Romans 13:1–5. Christians should submit to the authorities who have delegated authority from God to investigate and administer justice. Any other approach flies in the face of Scripture.

So, what is Paul so outraged about here? The Roman courts that dealt with litigation were often corrupt. Judges would take bribes, and the rich could buy a favorable verdict at the expense of the poor. A contemporary source scathingly observes that a poor man bringing a lawsuit would rarely succeed, regardless of the justice of his case. Some court proceedings were little more than a public auction: the highest bidder would win.<sup>1</sup> Were the rich Christians in Corinth oppressing the poor, using their wealth to manipulate the crooked court system (v. 8)? If this scenario is correct, no wonder Paul is scandalized.

The beauty of verse 11 starkly contrasts with the ugliness Paul describes unsparingly in the preceding part of the passage. The believers have a saving relationship with God, a right standing before him, and are set apart: note that the word ‘sanctified’ is deployed again. The church was behaving in a way that was diametrically opposed to the salvation it had received. Paul calls the church to deep repentance and thoroughgoing reformation, a call we need to hear and respond to today.

**APPLY** Reflect on verse 11. What areas of your discipleship fail to live up to the salvation you have received? Identify specific areas and also be specific in praying for change.

**PRAY** Holy Spirit, show me where my discipleship falls short of the salvation Jesus’ blood purchased for me, and help me commit to following him without compromise.

<sup>1</sup> Satyricon, Chpt. 14, as cited by Thomas R Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale NT Commentaries (IVP, 2018), 117.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 20, 2026

## LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX

**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** **1 CORINTHIANS 6:12–20**

**REFLECT** If we have been united with [Christ] in a death like his, we certainly also will be united with him in a resurrection like his.<sup>1</sup>

Paul challenges the prevailing culture in two distinct, yet linked, ways. Greeks held that the physical human body was not that important; they believed in the immortality of the soul but found teaching about the resurrection of the body difficult, even distasteful. In contrast, Paul holds firmly to the biblical doctrine of bodily resurrection (v. 14). Christ was raised from the dead, and one day we will be too, if Jesus has not returned before we die. This is foundational Christian teaching, and we should be clear about it. Paul's basic point here is that the body—and what we do with it—is really important (v. 20).

His second point is made with great force, 'Flee from sexual immorality' (v. 18). Sometimes Christians are accused of putting sexual sin on a different level from other sins. God is concerned about many sins, with oppression of the poor and injustice especially high on his agenda. Accordingly, we need to place these issues higher on our list of priorities than we sometimes do. However, there is something about sexual immorality that sets it apart in God's eyes, and verse 18 is clear on this, with the reference to the importance of our bodies. Sexual sin is impactful because something beautiful and tender, created by God for enjoyment within marriage, is warped into something that can be deeply damaging.

So, don't just turn away from sexual immorality; flee from it. Joseph running from sexual temptation serves as an apt illustration of Paul's injunction.<sup>2</sup> Such sin we should flee from includes pornography, so easily accessible today online. Verse 20 forms a fitting conclusion to today's reflection: 'You were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies.'

**APPLY** Sexual immorality wrecks lives. Are there carnal temptations over which you need to seek victory?

**PRAY** Whenever I am tempted, Father, I ask for conviction and strength to turn away without hesitation, to reject sin with everything in me.

<sup>1</sup> Rom 6:5 <sup>2</sup> Gen 39:12.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 21, 2026

## MARRIAGE MATTERS

**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** 1 CORINTHIANS 7:1–11

**REFLECT** 'Let us rejoice and be glad ... for the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.'<sup>1</sup>

Paul has spoken negatively about sexual immorality and the damage and misery it causes. Now he speaks positively about God's gift of sexual intimacy, that is to be enjoyed between a man and a woman in the context of marriage (vv. 3–5). He is enthusiastic about singleness as well, and this will be set out in a future reflection, but today the focus is on marriage.

The reciprocal nature of verses 3 and 4 would probably have greatly surprised the Corinthians. It would have been assumed that the wife's body belonged to her husband and that she had an obligation to fulfill her marital duty, but what Paul says about mutuality in respect of sexual intimacy was revolutionary and deeply subversive of the patriarchal power dynamics prevalent in the ancient world. The vision is for a loving, faithful union and self-giving that is patterned on the love Christ has for his church.<sup>2</sup>

Paul does not directly address the issue of domestic violence and abuse within marriage. However, given his extremely high view of mutual loving intimacy, it follows that Christians should be at the forefront of those standing against any abuse. Moreover, given that he allows separation and divorce in some circumstances (cf. vv. 15, 16), he would surely allow it where there is violence or coercion, since such behavior shatters the marriage covenant into pieces. Even so, Paul writes strongly in support of Christian marriage. If you're married, the norm is to love and work to make the relationship as good as it can be. If you're single, pray and work to uphold the marriage relationships of friends and family.

**APPLY** Marriage matters to God and to faithful disciples. What can you do to make Christian marriages stronger and, if appropriate, strengthen your own?

**PRAY** Lord Jesus, thank you for your relationship with your beloved bride, the church. Help your people bring glory to you.

<sup>1</sup> Rev 19:7, <sup>2</sup> Eph 5:22, 23.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 22, 2026

## RELATIONSHIPS REVOLUTION

**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** **1 CORINTHIANS 7:12–24**

**REFLECT** In what ways do you see your understanding of the cross impacting how you live?

There are significant questions concerning these verses, with which commentators have wrestled. First, what does it mean that an unbelieving spouse is ‘sanctified’ through their believing partner (the reference is to their sexual union), and what does it mean that children of this union are ‘holy’ (v. 14)? Clearly, it’s not that they are automatically saved: Paul explicitly rules out this interpretation (v. 16). Yet he is saying that something extraordinary happens in the sexual union and through it the unbeliever ‘enters the realm of the holy.’<sup>1</sup> There is great potential here for the unbeliever, together with any children, to come into a saving relationship with Jesus.

Another question concerns slavery. Paul states that the Corinthians should retain the place in life that God ‘has assigned to them’ (vv. 17, 20). This has been used in the past to support the institution of slavery, since Paul immediately turns to address the enslaved (vv. 21–23). Is this interpretation correct? Absolutely not. The wording and meaning of verse 21 are contested, but the best interpretation is that in the NIV: slaves who can gain freedom should do so. Moreover, the theology of the cross that Paul outlines cuts off slavery at the root (v. 23). Christ died to set us free. It is anathema to God to enslave another and unthinkable that a faithful believer would do so, or fail to support the abolition of slavery in all its forms.

There are several questions here, but essentially one answer: the cross of Christ. It is the sacrificial love displayed on the cross that informs intimacy and rules out the enslavement of another. We praise God for the cross and work out its implications in our everyday lives.

**APPLY** Seek God for areas where he would want to transform your attitudes and actions toward intimacy, enslavement, and all the issues you face.

**PRAY** Father, I praise you for the cross of Christ and ask that it would impact every part of who I am and how I act.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas R Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, *Tyndale NT Commentaries* (IVP, 2018), 145.

**SUNDAY, AUGUST 23, 2026**

## TWO WAYS TO LIVE

**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 would you describe the benefits of trusting in God and his love?

This psalm presents us with two people, one designated ‘evil’ and another who is ‘righteous.’ The picture of the evildoer is sharply drawn, quite literally, for their tongue is like a ‘sharpened razor’ (v. 2). The righteous person is also vividly described, but what a contrast! Such people are trusting, praising, grateful, embedded in community, and overflowing with hope (vv. 8, 9). The difference between them is as stark as night and day, and I know which portrait I find most attractive! Pray that verses 8 and 9 will increasingly become a picture of your own life.

The two people are further contrasted in their futures, a contrast made with reference to trees. The evildoer will not just be cut down but pulled up by the roots (v. 5). There will be nothing left, not even a stump in the ground. God’s judgment will be served, and their ruin will be complete and ‘everlasting’ (v. 5). Conversely, the righteous will be like a ‘green olive tree,’ full of life and vigor, rich with the promise of further growth (v. 8, NRSV). This tree will never be pulled up or felled. Its roots go deep and will enable an eternal flourishing. There are two ways to live and two vastly different outcomes. This parallels the message of Psalm 1 and also the words of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

If we know and love Jesus as Savior and Lord, we have the security of being declared righteous and belonging to him. Yet we still need to choose daily to follow him and sink our roots ever more deeply into him. As you make this deliberate choice again, know that in doing so you are choosing life in all its fullness.<sup>2</sup>

**APPLY** ‘... choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.’<sup>3</sup> Decide again that you will follow Jesus come what may, growing into the person described in verses 8 and 9.

**PRAY** Lord God, thank you that my hope is in you. Indeed, you are my stronghold, the One I can trust in all things because of your unfailing love for me.

<sup>1</sup> Matt 7:13, 14 <sup>2</sup> John 10:10 <sup>3</sup> Josh 24:15.

MONDAY, AUGUST 24, 2026

## THE SINGLE ISSUE

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

**READ** **1 CORINTHIANS 7:25–40**

**REFLECT** In what ways do you see singleness as a benefit within your church? Or don't you?

Paul has an extremely high view of sex and marriage. He also has an incredibly high view of being single and celibate; indeed, the burden of Chapter 7 read as a whole is to commend the unmarried state (vv. 1, 7, 8, 26, 32–35, 40). Marriage is a gift and reflects the glory of the gospel: the sacred union between Christ and his bride. Being celibate is also a gift of grace (v. 25, 26) which reflects the sufficiency of the gospel and allows 'undivided devotion' to the Lord (v. 35). Paul's approach is theologically grounded in his knowledge that the 'world in its present form is passing away' (v. 31). Heaven will come to earth, the dead will rise, we will all be changed, and creation itself will be renewed.<sup>1</sup> The time left to call people to repentance and faith and engage with the vital work of God's kingdom is short, and the task is urgent. Therefore—for Paul—being unmarried is preferable.

Yet the challenge is for all of us—married and unmarried—to prioritize God's work. Priscilla and Aquila, strongly associated with Corinth, offer a model of how such devotion can be worked out in practice for a couple.<sup>2</sup> We are all called to 'undivided devotion' (v. 35) to our Lord.<sup>3</sup>

Paul's positive estimation of being unmarried runs counter to that of many churches, where the assumption is that people will be married, and if they're not, there's something wrong. The apostle God used to write much of the New Testament takes a very different view. Do we honor unmarried people and support them? Paul's language helps us see the way forward for his people together, as he never uses the word 'single' at all. Those who are unmarried are fully included in the rich web of relationships, which is the church at its best.

**APPLY** Does your church support the unmarried and welcome them, opening homes and lives? Whatever your married state, how can you foster deep relationships within the church?

**PRAY** Thank you, God, for the body of Christ, for those who have helped me in my life of discipleship, and for the blessing of my relationship with them.

1 E.g., 1 Cor 15; Rom 8:18–25 2 Acts 18:18–26 3 e.g., Rom 12:1, 2.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 25, 2026

## LOVE AND KNOWLEDGE

**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** 1 CORINTHIANS 8

**REFLECT** 'Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.'<sup>1</sup>

How relevant are these verses for us today? If you live in a culture where food is sacrificed to idols, the application is clear and immediate, but in other cultures, both the details and the broad thrust of the argument seem far removed from daily life. Yet they carry an urgent message for all of God's people, for idolatry isn't limited to what takes place in a pagan temple. As Paul makes it clear elsewhere, greed is idolatry.<sup>2</sup> Material things, including food, are given by God for us to enjoy, but when they dominate our lives, they become idolatrous, for anything that takes the first place reserved for God himself is an idol. My relationship with Scripture Union Bible guides started early. I vividly remember, in my Bible-reading as a teenager, a reflection on idolatry accompanied by pictures of a football and a vinyl record (this was the 1970s), along with other things that might take over my life. What might be taking God's place in your faith-walk now?

Paul's further reflections are also supremely relevant. It's not intrinsically wrong to eat food offered to idols. This is because idols are nothing: there is only one God, who is known to us by revelation. Such knowledge is important, but it doesn't trump love. So knowledgeable Corinthians will refrain from eating out of love for other believers (vv. 9–13). Christ had supreme knowledge but gave himself in sacrificial love for us (v. 11). We are back at the foot of the cross once again. One modern application of this might be not drinking alcohol if it caused another believer to struggle. Love comes first and is the authenticating hallmark of faithful Christian discipleship. How will you work this out in your life today?

**APPLY** Think about the questions asked in today's reflections and resolve to respond in concrete ways in your own life.

**PRAY** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who exist in perfect unity, give me wisdom to live with my brothers and sisters in Christ in ways that reflect who you are. Never let me impose on others the knowledge you give me at the expense of expressing love.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 16:13, 14 <sup>2</sup> Col 3:5.

## GENESIS 12–25

### ISRAEL'S HISTORY STARTS

Genesis 1–11 is often referred to as ‘prehistory’ or ‘primeval history’, and Genesis 12–50 as ‘patriarchal history’, that is, the story of Israel’s fathers, or ancestors. As Fretheim points out, though, a number of themes run throughout Genesis from the first chapter to the last.<sup>1</sup> These themes include God’s grace and blessing, his judgment and salvation, creation and redemption, and family and kinship—even though the families have strife and other problems.

Although Genesis 12 follows on from the previous chapters, there is a sense in which Abraham’s story starts a new epoch, for Abraham was the father of the Israelites and thus their story begins with him. To be precise, Abraham is introduced at the end of chapter 11. When God later reveals himself to Moses, he refers to himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob<sup>2</sup>—and, indeed, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are seen as the three great patriarchs of Israel. When the story starts in Genesis 12, Abraham is called Abram, and his wife is called Sarai—their names will be changed later. These readings take us partway through Isaac’s life and to the first stories about Jacob and his brother Esau.

Probably, the most significant element of the Genesis chapters that we will be reading is the promise that God will make Abraham’s seed into a numerous people—a nation. Much of the plot centers around this, and it is the reason that Sarah’s maid Hagar becomes involved: Sarah hopes to have the promised son through her. These chapters include accounts of various familial and household relationships. For example, Abraham passes his wife off as his sister, something that Isaac also does later; there is discord between Sarah and her maid Hagar; Ishmael mocks his infant stepbrother Isaac; Abraham and his nephew Lot negotiate; Lot’s daughters have sexual intercourse with their father; and Jacob and Esau struggle. We are also introduced to Rebekah’s shrewd brother Laban.

<sup>1</sup> Terence E Fretheim, ‘Genesis’, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol 1* (Abingdon Press, 1994), 328–330  
<sup>2</sup> Exod 3:15, 16.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 26, 2026

## TAKING THE PLUNGE

**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** **GENESIS 12:1–9**

**REFLECT** Think back on God's promises to you that you have already seen answered. Do you wait with confidence for those he has yet to fulfill?

Many see these first few verses of Chapter 12 as the key to the rest of Genesis, even the rest of the Pentateuch, for they record God's covenant with Abram. The promise involves numerous offspring and land for Abram, as well as a blessing for the rest of the earth through him. There is also God's implied protection of Abram, in that he will curse those who curse Abram. Before God promises to bless Abram, however, he tells him to leave where he is (v. 1). The command intensifies to make clear the extent of what Abram has to do. He has to leave his country, and that, of course, entails saying goodbye to his relatives and being prepared to move from his father's house. God requires him to take a step of faith that involves the most profound upheaval for him. Abram did not know any more than we do where his journey would take him. The important thing for him, and for us, is trusting God.

The promise to make Abram into a great nation would sound reasonable had we not been told in the previous chapter that Sarai was barren and had no children.<sup>1</sup> At this point in the story, however, Abram does not question God's words; he does what God has requested. He takes his household, including Lot, and everything they have, for he may never return. Following God today may mean physically leaving a place, but for most of us, the leaving is metaphorical.

When the Lord appears to Abram and promises his descendants the land of Canaan, Abram builds an altar. He builds another one later and calls on the name of the Lord. We will leave the story today on a high note, at the point where Abram's behavior has been exemplary.

**APPLY** Jim Elliot's famous quote from his diary, 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose,'<sup>2</sup> is a good reminder for us today.

**PRAY** Lord, please help me trust you enough to leave what I should and run the race before me, fixing my eyes only on Jesus, the author and finisher of faith.

<sup>1</sup> Gen 11:30 <sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Elliot (ed), *The Journals of Jim Elliot* (Revell, 2002), Oct 28, 1949.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 27, 2026

## SAVING ONE'S OWN SKIN

**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** **GENESIS 12:10–20**

**REFLECT** ‘God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.’<sup>1</sup>

It is not unusual that the faithful take a tumble when a problem arises and the going gets rough. The famine is the problem for Abram, and it causes him to go down to Egypt (v. 10)—and go down morally. Egypt does not have the negative connotations it will later, but Abram feels threatened. It seems his thinking is that the Egyptians are going to take Sarai anyway, so he might as well try to keep his own life in the process. It is easy to imagine the worst and then take steps to prevent it, even if those steps are wrong. The Egyptians notice Sarai’s beauty, as Abram predicted, but we have no idea if they would have left her alone had Abram told the truth; Pharaoh certainly implies that this would have been the case (v. 19). What we do know is that Pharaoh behaves well toward Abram throughout (and one hopes, Sarai, too) and unknowingly gives him sheep, oxen, donkeys, camels, and servants in place of his wife.

When Pharaoh discovers, by whatever means, that Sarai is Abram’s wife, he gets rid of the family. Instead of the Egyptians being a problem to Abram, Abram had been a problem to them, not to mention to his own wife. The faithful are not always the ones who bring blessing.

The word for the ‘serious diseases’ (v. 17) that come upon Pharaoh is the same word as the one used for the ‘plague’ that will come upon a different pharaoh and his country much later.<sup>2</sup> Pharaoh unwittingly curses Abram by taking Sarai for his wife, and God responds by cursing Pharaoh. It demonstrates to Pharaoh that Abram is under divine protection and to Abram that he can be a curse as well as a blessing to the nations.

**APPLY** Is fear, in some area of your life, causing you to take steps that are, at best, unwise?

**PRAY** Lord God, when I am tempted to relate to life’s challenges in ways that are not pleasing to you, help me to trust in your help to do what is right.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 10:13 <sup>2</sup> Exod 11:1.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 28, 2026

## CHANCES AND CHOICES

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

**READ** **GENESIS 13**

**REFLECT** We cannot go back, but sometimes we do have another chance. Pray to use any second chances wisely, while recognizing that you are forgiven for the bad choices.

It is almost as if Abram has another chance, or a fresh start. First, he goes up from Egypt and appears to go up morally as well. Second, his travels bring him back to Bethel, where he had previously built an altar, and where he again calls on the name of the Lord. His next problem is almost the opposite of the famine. He and Lot need to make a logistical decision because they have grown too great for the land as a group. The text does not say there is strife between Abram and Lot, but Abram sees that separating would be the next logical step if their herdsmen are quarreling. Perhaps their quarreling is the catalyst needed for Abram and Lot to go their separate ways, having been together for so long. Abram gives Lot first choice of the land, which underlines his words about not wanting trouble between them, recognizing that they are ‘close relatives’ (v. 8). Abram’s wise and selfless handling of a potentially inflammatory situation is one that we can emulate in our different contexts.

Lot says nothing, leaving the reader wondering what he is thinking. He appears to choose the most fertile land, but we learn that this is not the best choice, not the least because the men of Sodom are wicked. What criteria do we use when making decisions? There is no record that Lot constructs an altar, while Abram builds one at his new home. Might it be said of us that we have not thanked God for something? In the meantime, God has reiterated his promise of descendants and land to Abram, including the land in Lot’s direction.

**APPLY** Think again about those closest to you. Are there ways in which a few wise decisions may deflect strife? Do you offer them genuine choices?

**PRAY** Lord, forgive me for those times when I have put myself and my needs before others. Help me so that my love for others is always greater than for myself.

**SATURDAY, AUGUST 29, 2026**

## **BLESSING AND TITHE**

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

**READ** **GENESIS 14**

**REFLECT** What is your motivation for giving to your church or to other Christian ministries?

Suddenly, we are catapulted from the world of families to international politics. The rescue of Lot puts Abram on the international stage, for it means that he goes up against four kings who had already defeated five kings. These five kings include the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, who fled across the tar pits. In today's parlance, Abram is effectively running an estate or a business, with his 318 trained men. Even so, his one household is more successful than the armies of four kings, for he is able to defeat them, as well as bring back Lot and all that was his.

Melchizedek has no problem recognizing that God was responsible for Abram's success (v. 20), and one may think of Paul's 'If God is for us, who can be against us?'<sup>1</sup> It is sometimes hard to remember just how powerful the hands that hold us are.

Melchizedek, the priest-king, realizes that our God Most High has blessed Abram and adds further blessing. Abram responds by giving willingly and generously a tenth of what he has. The tradition (including in the New Testament) is that Abram tithes and becomes the first person in the Bible to do so.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, his gift is not dependent on need, but he simply wants to bless the other. The king of Sodom speaks after Melchizedek but does not mention God, a noticeable difference. It is ironic that the first cities Abram aids include the wicked Sodom and Gomorrah, yet Abram keeps his distance from Sodom. It would have been easy to accept the deal, but Abram does not want to risk Sodom taking credit for making him rich. It would detract from God's honor. All things come from God.

**APPLY** God loves a generous giver, yet many people in the church do not tithe. The church does an enormous amount on inadequate income. Should you rethink your giving?

**PRAY** Please help me, God, to remember that all I have is from you, whether material possessions or successes. Help me give you glory with all I have.

<sup>1</sup> Rom 8:31 <sup>2</sup> See Heb 7:2.

**SUNDAY, AUGUST 30, 2026**

## CALLING ON GOD'S NAME

**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** What is your habit of prayer? Do you have an established time and place or are you spontaneous, no matter the time or place? Perhaps both?

We have seen that Abraham called on the name of the Lord. Today's psalm talks about those who do not call on his name. The fools of verse 1 act as if there is no God. The word 'fool' in the Old Testament does not refer to people who do silly things but to people who deliberately choose the wrong path, away from God's precepts. These fools do not equate with today's atheists: atheism is a concept that was virtually unknown in the ancient world.

The evildoers here, who destroy God's people easily and thoughtlessly, are powerful and possibly fearless. It might be surprising to hear, therefore, that they are overwhelmed with dread (v. 5). It is not clear who they are afraid of, but apart from a few differences, Psalm 53 is the same as Psalm 14, and it is clearer in Psalm 14 that the evildoers are afraid because they know that God is with the righteous. Those who know the Lord as their Shepherd may fear no evil,<sup>1</sup> partly because the Lord often protects them from those who attack them (v. 5); there is no such peace for the wicked.

One might expect fools to be corrupt and evildoers to know nothing, but in between discussing these two groups, the psalm says that no one is good. These words occur not only in Psalms 14 and 53 but also in Romans, where Paul declares that everyone is under sin;<sup>2</sup> he reiterates this point a few verses later in a text that many have memorized, 'all have sinned.'<sup>3</sup> Reading Psalm 53 with an acknowledgement that it talks about us might lead to a deeper appreciation of the cry for salvation in verse 6 and the subsequent rejoicing and gladness with which the psalm ends.

**APPLY** Rejoice and be glad, for salvation has come out of Zion! Rejoice, for we 'are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.'<sup>4</sup>

**PRAY** Heavenly Father, may my calling on you be my habit, not only in times of trouble, but at all times throughout the day. You deserve my constant praise and thanksgiving.

1 Ps 23:4 2 Rom 3:9–11 3 Rom 3:23 4 Rom 3:24.

MONDAY, AUGUST 31, 2026

## KNOWING WITH CERTAINTY

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

**READ** **GENESIS 15**

**REFLECT** Is there a particular story or passage in Scripture that has impacted you like no other? What did it teach you?

Abram has everything, it seems, except an heir. Many childless couples today may resonate with Abram and Sarai's pain, even if their reasons for wanting children differ. The stories in Genesis of barren mothers conceiving make it clear that children are a gift of God, which is possibly sometimes more recognized by those without children.

When God promises Abram many descendants, he believes, but when God promises land, Abram wants more proof. In the ensuing dream, he learns that his descendants will become oppressed, enslaved people for four hundred years, after which they will come out with possessions and take the land that God has promised. His emotions must have taken a battering that day, from the joy of an expected child to the horror of his family's future, yet with the hope that they would eventually inherit the land.

Abram performs a ritual at God's instructions, but it is not a typical sacrifice, and its form, purpose, and symbolism raise more questions for contemporary readers than they answer. It does, however, act as a sign, particularly when the smoking oven and the flaming torch pass between the pieces. Abram asks to 'know' (v. 8), and in the midst of the terror and darkness in his dream, God exhorts him to 'Know for certain' (v. 13). God's response does not directly answer Abram's question, and the negative aspect of the answer may surprise Abram, though God assures Abram that he himself will die in peace. While we do not hear Abram's response, he appears to be satisfied because the text continues with a reiteration of the covenant. Our lives will not mirror Abram's, but one thing we can know with certainty is that God hears us and knows our situations.

**APPLY** God reveals himself to us through Scripture—books that Abram obviously did not have. One way to hear God's voice is to immerse ourselves in the Bible.

**PRAY** Merciful God, thank you for the gift of your Word, for speaking to me and teaching me through it. Because of your gift, I know, in increasing measure, who you are and how much you love and care for me.

## MEMORY VERSES FOR THE MONTH

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WEEK 1: Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me.

– **Psalm 54:4**

WEEK 2: Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken.

– **Psalm 55:22**

WEEK 3: There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.

– **1 Corinthians 12:4,5**

WEEK 4: Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

– **1 Corinthians 13:6, 7**



TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2026

## THE LORD WHO SEES

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

**READ** **GENESIS 16**

**REFLECT** Has there been a time when you took matters into your own hands rather than trusting God? How did things turn out? In what ways did God redeem the situation?

It seems that Abram and Sarai have presumed until now that their heir will be Eliezer,<sup>1</sup> but now Sarai gives up and offers her maid, Hagar, to Abram. In the previous chapter, Abram receives the covenant anew and believes that he will have a son,<sup>2</sup> but there is no record of his imparting this faith to Sarai or encouraging her when she comes to him with her scheme (vv. 1, 2). If we are married, do we encourage our spouse in the Lord? Whether married or not, it is a lesson not to give up trusting God's words. Abram is in his mid-eighties when he listens to Sarai; they have gone a long way in life before stumbling in this way. People in their mid-eighties still need our prayers to be faithful; temptations do not reduce with age.

Hagar, the slave given to Abram as a means to an heir, has no power or agency in this story—until she gets pregnant. Making it obvious that Sarai is lowered in her eyes is dangerous, given her position. Sarai and Abram have referred to Hagar by her household position as 'slave,' but the angel of the Lord addresses her by name. He sends her back to Sarai, maybe because she and the unborn baby will be safer there. Sarai was harsh because of Hagar's attitude, so if Hagar submits, then hopefully Sarai will treat her better.

Hagar is the only one to name God, and the name recognizes that God sees slave girls who are used sexually and harshly treated. His promise to her is akin to his promise to Abram: her offspring will be numerous. Hagar's hope for the future includes knowledge that her son will live.

**APPLY** Our choices and behavior may bring misery upon ourselves and others. Have your decisions ever damaged others? Can you do something to make amends?

**PRAY** Lord, you are the One who sees. You see my own distress and that of others. Please help me see my troubles and those of others through your eyes.

<sup>1</sup> Gen 15:2 <sup>2</sup> Gen 15:4, 6.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 2026

## NEW NAMES

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

**READ** **GENESIS 17**

**REFLECT** What is the meaning of your name, or why were you given the name you have?

Abram (which means ‘exalted father’) becomes Abraham (‘father of a multitude’), and Sarai becomes Sarah (both names probably mean ‘princess’). With slightly altered names, Abraham and Sarah begin a new life as a covenant family, about to conceive the promised son, Isaac. On this occasion, when God repeats the covenant to Abraham, he adds that kings will come from him. Circumcision is Abraham’s part in the covenant, and he and the men in his household are all circumcised, including Ishmael.

The implication so far has been that Sarah will have a son, but now God explicitly tells Abraham that his wife, Sarah, will bear a child. This is about 13 or 14 years after Sarah hoped to have surrogate children through Hagar. Sarah has not had much of a part to play before now, but here she is explicitly blessed and declared to be the mother of nations from whom kings will come. Instead of rejoicing that Sarah will finally have a son, however, Abraham requests that Ishmael—his son, but not Sarah’s—be under God’s blessing. God always intended Isaac to be born to Sarah, and he makes this clear to Abraham. God who saw Hagar also sees Sarah.

In a patriarchal society, God does not overlook or undervalue women. There is not a woman (or man) on earth whom God has not seen, regardless of culture, and however others may overlook or overrule them. Sarah has been passed off as Abraham’s sister and given to a strange man, and she has been childless and despised for it, but she is as much part of the covenant as Abraham is. God’s people are diverse. He does not refuse anyone on the grounds of gender, age, disability, etc. In New Testament language, whoever believes in him shall have eternal life.<sup>1</sup>

**APPLY** It is a huge privilege to be adopted into God’s family. May we live up to our covenant calling, and may we never overlook others, no matter who they are.

**PRAY** Thank you, Lord, for the great blessing of being part of your family. Thank you for seeing us and not seeing age, gender, and disability as barriers to you.

<sup>1</sup> John 3:16.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 2026

## AN OLD, LAUGHING PRINCESS

**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** **GENESIS 18:1–15**

**REFLECT** Have you ever found any of God's promises to be unbelievable? How did you respond?

The references to the Lord and to the three men seem to be used interchangeably. In the previous chapter, Abraham fell on his face and laughed,<sup>1</sup> but God did not comment. Sarah laughs to herself in private (v. 12), and the Lord does not ignore it. On the face of it, this seems unfair to Sarah, but a closer look might suggest that it is a means of including Sarah in the conversation and engaging with her.

The Lord's focus turns to Sarah when he asks Abraham where she is. He then gives a message about Sarah ostensibly to Abraham, though obviously within earshot of Sarah. His next comment is also made to Abraham, though in answer to Sarah's (understandable) laugh, and she knows he is talking to her. After all these decades, she has heard from God herself that she is going to have a son the following year, and that nothing is too difficult for God. After her initial reaction of disbelief, however, Sarah is too afraid that her silent laugh has been overheard to respond to the news with joy and instead denies her laughter. How many of us deny ourselves joy or good news because of disbelief, fear, or worry?

At this point, the Lord addresses Sarah directly and confirms that she did laugh. The Lord who sees also hears laughs of the heart. He acknowledges and probes Sarah's doubts and disbelief with his question, 'Why...?' (v. 13) and even accepts them. Sarah fears condemnation, it seems, but there is none; laugh or no laugh, she will have a son. We, too, sometimes fear condemnation or judgment, perhaps forgetting that all our sins have been forgiven and we do not stand under condemnation. The Lord is more merciful and gracious than we may recognize.

**APPLY** Think for a few minutes (not seconds) about how wide and long and high and deep is the love of God.<sup>2</sup> His mercy stems from that love.

**PRAY** Lord Jesus, thank you for offering me grace and mercy so that I do not stand under condemnation. Please help me to understand that fully as I continue to grasp the depth of your love.

<sup>1</sup> Gen 17:17 <sup>2</sup> Eph 3:18.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2026

## ABRAHAM, GOD'S FRIEND

**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** **GENESIS 18:16–33**

**REFLECT** Intercession is part of the Christian's prayer life. Take time to intercede for people you know, particularly family members and/or those who are not following the Lord.

The Lord has chosen Abraham, and thus, he decides to consult him about his plans. God does not just inform Abraham of his intentions and then carry them out, though. In fact, he leaves his statement open-ended, thus giving Abraham the opportunity to respond. Abraham understands without being told what God will do if he finds the cities are wicked, and he intercedes for the people. His intercession takes the form of questions, rather than direct requests. Abraham asks humbly with a recognition that he is 'but dust and ashes' (v. 27), but he is persistent in bringing the number down to ten. He is not described here as God's friend,<sup>1</sup> but God has treated him as such, for God listens to and acts on Abraham's requests.

The passage is important for establishing that the relationship between God and humans is mutual and responsive. Humans are not puppets, and thus, they have a responsibility. Abraham is the first intercessor in the Bible, but intercession becomes an important role for God's people. In fact, intercessory prayer is so valuable that Jeremiah is told not to pray for the people whom God had decided to punish.<sup>2</sup> Many people have stories of answered intercessory prayer, which encourage us. However, we know that God does not always answer in the affirmative, and that we may have to wait for a long time—as Abraham and Sarah waited for their promised son. We can be assured, nevertheless, that the intercessory prayer of the righteous person is powerful and effective.<sup>3</sup>

**APPLY** Do not grow weary of intercession, even if you do not see answers to your prayers. The Lord who saw Hagar, heard Sarah, and responded to Abraham is our Lord.

**PRAY** Thank you, Jesus, for the privilege of praying for others, and thank you for your constant intercession for me.

<sup>1</sup> James 2:23 <sup>2</sup> e.g., Jer 7:16 <sup>3</sup> James 5:16.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 2026

## LOT AND SODOM REVEALED

**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** **GENESIS 19:1–14**

**REFLECT** ‘Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me ... I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you.’<sup>1</sup>

Lot receives visitors as Abraham did in the previous chapter and, like Abraham, is hospitable. The scene seems ideal, but then we get a picture of the wickedness of this city, Sodom, for which Abraham interceded. All the men in the city are implicated—young and old from every part—no one is exempt. Lot reasons with them, calling them (literally) ‘my brothers’ (v. 7; ‘friends’ in NIV) but, as part of the plea for them to refrain from wickedness, offers his virgin daughters for violent gang rape in place of his guests. This is well beyond his uncle Abraham putting his wife in danger by passing her off as his sister. Lot’s behavior has been exemplary, but now his righteousness is seriously called into question. It is difficult to live in a wicked environment and not be influenced by it. There are sins in every culture that become normalized. Are there evils that we normalize?

Lot has done all he can to protect his guests, but the angel guests ultimately protect Lot and his family. If Lot is naive about the place where he is living, his eyes should be opened, even while the men of Sodom are outside, blindly looking for his door. Lot strongly insists that the two men stay with him (v. 3), but he does not insist that his future sons-in-law leave Sodom. He speaks to them in a way that makes them think he was joking. Abraham laughed,<sup>2</sup> Sarah laughed<sup>3</sup> and now Lot’s sons-in-law think he is joking (v. 14)—the same word in each instance. Perhaps Lot laughs off an embarrassing, extreme, and barely believable message, or maybe Lot is not at fault. It is easy for us to see the seriousness of Lot’s situation, but perhaps not our own.

**APPLY** What are the prevailing norms in your culture that are incompatible with a faithful life? Do you need to do something to keep yourself from them? If so, do it.

**PRAY** Father, I ask for wisdom as I relate to the culture around me, not only in my community but in my church. Help me to be a witness for what pleases and glorifies you.

<sup>1</sup> Ps 51:10, <sup>13</sup> Gen 17:17 <sup>3</sup> Gen 18:12.



**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2026**

## LOT'S PSALM

**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** Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me' (v 4).

This is a psalm that would have been appropriate for Lot to utter. It is a prayer for deliverance from godless, violent strangers who rise against the psalmist, which would have applied extremely well to Lot as he stood trapped outside his door before the men of Sodom. There is an acknowledgement that God is his helper, which for Lot was demonstrated physically when the angels pulled him inside. There is a call for the wicked to be destroyed, which would have been particularly pertinent regarding Sodom. There is also a willingness to make sacrifices, which should be the attitude of anyone who has been delivered.

It is, of course, a psalm of David as the superscription tells us, but as with so many psalms, it is general enough to be applied in different situations. A traditional way of using the Old Testament has been to treat it metaphorically, where, for instance, one's sins are the arrogant foes. Although one might be 'saved' in terms of having accepted the gift of salvation, there are countless ways believers may call on God to be saved. It might be a call to be saved from the viciousness of a jealous work colleague, or a plea to be saved from temptation or an entrapping sin. It might be a cry for physical saving from threat, disaster, or illness. When praying a psalm, it might be that not all parts are appropriate—there might be no need for vindication, for example. On the other hand, all of us, in any situation, can say, 'Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me' (v. 4). Praying the psalms is sometimes helpful for giving us words and keeping us within the framework of the faithful.

**APPLY** Pray this for yourself. If there are no specific circumstances from which you need saving, pray it with regard to any sins that trouble you—jealousy, anger, cynicism...

**PRAY** Lord God, you deserve my praise, for indeed you are mighty. You are my salvation and help, my sustainer and faithful deliverer. Hallelujah!

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2026

## RESCUE AND DESTRUCTION

**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** **GENESIS 19:15–38**

**REFLECT** Has there been a time when God’s path seemed too hard, and you were reluctant to go where he would lead you?

The morning begins with the angels having to urge Lot to leave a second time. Despite all that had happened the previous night, however, Lot hesitates. The angels have to take him and his family physically out of the city—one family member per angel’s hand—so that they can escape destruction. Lot, who has so much that the land cannot contain both him and Abraham, now leaves with nothing other than his wife and two daughters, which is perhaps why he hesitates to leave—or possibly he does not quite believe that the city will be destroyed. We may speak about leaving all for the Lord, but there are things we want to cling to—material possessions, relationships, places—even if it would be wiser to let go.

Lot’s first recorded words since he offered his daughters are thankful and deferential to the angels, but he pleads not to go as far as they have asked. Spiritually, he speaks for many—we want to do as little as possible to be on the right side of judgment. We do not want the difficult walk to the mountains. Perhaps the town is not quite far enough for Lot’s wife, for she looks back. We soon learn that Lot has been saved for Abraham’s sake.

Fear of Zoar eventually drives Lot to the mountains, where he settles in a cave with his two daughters. Like Sarah, Lot’s two daughters take matters into their own hands to preserve the family line. The offspring of each—Moab and Ammon—are Israel’s enemies for centuries afterwards. On the other hand, Ruth is a Moabite: both David and Jesus come from her.

**APPLY** If family life is particularly messy, do not despair. God does not give up on families, and there may be blessings on their way that are not yet visible.

**PRAY** Father, regardless of how hard I might find my circumstances, help me to trust you. Help me to sense your presence with me and be confident in your faithfulness to carry out your purposes.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2026

## LYING BY OMISSION

**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** **GENESIS 20**

**REFLECT** Omissions are not accidents.<sup>1</sup>

It has happened again! Abraham has passed off Sarah as his sister. The accounts might not be chronological, but in the story's sequence, Sarah is now ninety years old. As the passage unfolds, we discover that this may not be the second time that Abraham has passed Sarah off as his sister, for this is his habitual practice. We also learn (and there is no reason to suppose at this point that Abraham is lying) that Abraham and Sarah are half-siblings, so Abraham has only told a half-lie, or lied by omission. Lying by omission is something we all need to be on our guard against, because it is something we can justify and thus hide behind.

When God speaks to Abimelek, he calls Abraham a prophet who will pray for him. This is the first time Abraham has been called a prophet, and the title is linked to intercessory prayer. There was no talk of intercessory prayer when Pharaoh took Sarah to be his wife,<sup>2</sup> perhaps because Abraham has grown into his role as a prophet and intercessor. Unlike Pharaoh, who sent Abraham from Egypt, Abimelek welcomes him to his land. Both men, however, have done nothing wrong and handled it well, proving that Abraham was prejudiced in assuming they would be godless. Although Abimelek has not touched Sarah, he gives silver 'to cover the offense against you' (v. 16). Abimelek realizes, even if Abraham does not, that it is an offense to Sarah. The Bible sets up a precedent for situations in which the outsider shames the insider for their behavior. It is no different today—on occasions, unbelievers put believers to shame. When Abimelek talks to Sarah, he wryly refers to Abraham as 'your brother' (v. 16).

**APPLY** Is there an area of your life in which non-believers put you to shame? Commit it to God and ask for his strength to help you improve.

**PRAY** Heavenly Father, please give me the courage to never be deceptive, especially when it involves hurting others. Help me to act with integrity in everything I do.

<sup>1</sup> Marianne Moore, poet, 1887–1972 <sup>2</sup> Gen 12.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2026

## ISAAC, LAUGHING, MOCKING

**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** **GENESIS 21:1–21**

**REFLECT** Think of a time when you were amazed by God's goodness to you. What was your response?

At last, the promised son is born! The name Isaac means 'he laughs,' hence the wordplay between Sarah's laughter in the tent and 'Isaac.' Sarah no longer denies her laughter but joyfully proclaims that God has brought her laughter. Touchingly, she still can't quite believe it has happened (v. 7).

It is not clear what Ishmael is doing, but 'mocking' shares the same root word as 'laughing' and 'Isaac.' Ishmael was fourteen when Isaac was born, so he is probably an older teenager by now. Sarah originally wanted to have children through Hagar, but Ishmael has never been described as Sarah's son. He has previously been described as Abraham's son,<sup>1</sup> as here (v. 11), but Sarah now calls him the son of the slave (v. 10), as does God (v. 13). Interestingly, once Hagar and Ishmael leave, the narrator, Hagar, and the angel of the Lord only refer to Ishmael as 'the boy.'

This time, God supports Hagar and Ishmael's leaving, maybe because Ishmael is old enough to survive, or because he is reaching an age when he will be able to support his mother, thus making it a good opportunity for Hagar to leave her place of service. Hagar is naturally concerned for Ishmael, but appears to have forgotten the promise that God previously made to her. We may all forget God's promises. The God who saw her when she was pregnant is the One who now hears the lad, or young man, crying, although the text had told us that it was Hagar who cried. He revisits her and assures her of the future. We are unlikely to have assurance of the future, but we know that God sees and hears, and that our lives are in his hands.

**APPLY** Think of things God has brought to your life which make your heart glad—even if you do not laugh for joy over them—and thank him for them.

**PRAY** Thank you, Father, for the stories of families and their problems you included in your Word. Thank you for the ways they show me that nothing is ever too difficult for you.

<sup>1</sup> Gen 17.

## DOING WELL BUSINESS WELL

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

**READ** **GENESIS 21:22–34**

**REFLECT** What is your communication style when you experience conflict? How helpful is it?

Abimelek has already seen the importance of Abraham to God.<sup>1</sup> Now he recognizes that God is blessing Abraham. It was Abimelek's land in which Abraham had settled. Now Abraham is growing strong enough to be a threat, so Abimelek asks that Abraham treat him well. Abraham swears to protect Abimelek's offspring. This is a model treaty between two groups of people in the same land, in stark contrast to Pharaoh's later treatment of the Hebrews in Egypt.

There is the matter of Abraham's well, which Abimelek's servants seized, however. Abimelek has seen the resulting trouble when he unintentionally took Abraham's wife, so he knows that deliberately stealing Abraham's well can have serious ramifications. However, Abraham does not use it as a cause to go against him, which implies that Abraham wants to live peacefully with the Philistines. Making the covenant nevertheless formalizes Abraham's ownership of the well. Two potentially inflammatory situations have been handled amicably and formally.

Once again, Abraham calls on the name of the Lord. There was not the differentiation between spiritual and secular in Abraham's world that there is perceived to be in ours. Sometimes there is an explicit merging of the secular and the spiritual in Christian businesses, mission organizations, churches, etc., where secular matters are brought to God in prayer. When Abraham plants the tamarisk tree and calls on the name of the Lord, Abimelek and Phicol have already left. Most people today do not work in Christian organizations, but that does not mean that God cannot be brought into the workplace.

**APPLY** What are the secular environments in your life? Do you take their issues to God in the same way you would church matters? If not, how can you rectify this?

**PRAY** Lord, please help me learn to de-escalate potentially inflammatory situations or conflicts. Give me wisdom for when I need to speak out and in what I should say.

<sup>1</sup> Gen 20.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2026

## THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

**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** **GENESIS 22**

**REFLECT** Think back to the greatest sacrifice you have ever made. For what did you make it? Was it worth it?

When Abraham was called to leave Harran, each part of the command became more intimate in terms of the cost involved.<sup>1</sup> The command here to sacrifice Isaac does the same. Abraham is left in no doubt of the cost of the sacrifice: ‘Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac’ (v. 2). Some writers have condemned this passage as condoning child sacrifice, but this is not about child sacrifice, which is prohibited in the Old Testament, but a test (v. 1) to see how willingly Abraham will give God everything, including what he holds most dear.

Abraham himself seems to know that the ending will not be Isaac’s death, for he tells the servants waiting for them that he and Isaac will return. The writer of Hebrews perceives Abraham as thinking that God can raise the dead.<sup>2</sup> It appears that Abraham may have given a half-truth of assurance to Isaac, who seems to accept the explanation. In the event, God prevents Abraham from going through with the sacrifice.

When viewed through the lens of the cross and resurrection, Abraham plays out the role of God when he gives his one and only Son, Jesus Christ. It is as if God says to himself, ‘Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Jesus, and go—offer him there as a burnt offering.’ Jesus, like Isaac, went willingly. His life, however, was not spared. Abraham was prepared to give up what he held most dear for God. God was prepared to give up what he held most dear, for us—‘For God so loved the world.’<sup>3</sup>

**APPLY** Might there be sacrifices you have been called to make for the sake of the gospel and your love for Jesus?

**PRAY** Thank you, Father, for the greatest sacrifice of all—your only Son, the One whom you loved, Jesus, who enabled me to be reconciled with you.

<sup>1</sup> Gen 12:1 <sup>2</sup> Heb 11:19 <sup>3</sup> John 3:16.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2026

## REMEMBERING THE LAUGHTER

**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** **GENESIS 23**

**REFLECT** Who are the people you cherish most in your life?

We do not have the full story of Abraham and Sarah by any means, of course. We have snapshots that may well give us an incomplete impression of both. From what we do have, however, it seems that Abraham takes greater care of Sarah in her death than in her life. She was a rich woman and Abraham provided for her materially, but to our minds, passing his wife off as his sister to save his own life is not the most respectful thing Abraham could do. When it comes to her burial place, however, although the site is also used for graves other than Sarah's, we have the most extensive narrative there is of them as husband and wife. Abraham has chosen a specific place and he declines all offers of gifts of graves (if the offer was not a formal part of the negotiating process), including the one he wants (v. 13). It is important to Abraham that he pays.

The transaction is also a public one, ensuring that there are witnesses to the weighing of the money and the official transfer of the property. The burial cave faces Mamre (v. 19, NRSV), which is where Abraham and Sarah were when Sarah finally heard for herself that she would bear Abraham a son, and she laughed.<sup>1</sup> It is a pity that Sarah cannot see the care Abraham takes to make sure that she is buried properly, with respect and even love.

It is a lesson to us, though, not to let the opportunities in life pass us by when it comes to showing care for our spouse (or other dear one—child, parent, sibling...). It would be a travesty if we showed more care for our loved ones in death than in life.

**APPLY** Abraham mourned Sarah. If there is someone whom you have not properly mourned, think about them, allowing yourself to grieve. Thank God for what they meant to you.

**PRAY** Thank you, God, for the gift of life. Thank you for those I love and for the gift of their lives— both those with me to enjoy, and the dear ones who have departed.

<sup>1</sup> Prov18:10.

**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2026**

## AS FOR ME, I TRUST IN YOU

**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** ‘The name of the Lord is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.’<sup>1</sup>

If Psalm 54 was a prayer that Lot might have prayed that awful night in Sodom, Psalm 55 is certainly not a prayer that Abraham’s servant would have needed to pray beyond the first few lines. He had seen a wonderful answer to prayer on a potentially devastating occasion.

For David in this psalm, however, life is very different. The psalm’s text is difficult, which has led to numerous translations. The content is also difficult, because it is disorganized and jumps from topic to topic. Nevertheless, it is possible to see that David is oppressed by his enemy and dismayed by the violence and wickedness that he sees in the city. The worst, however, is being betrayed by his friend, someone with whom he had sweet fellowship in God. It is not hard to resonate with that—one of the deepest hurts comes from the betrayal of someone loved and trusted. Jesus himself experienced that with Judas.

The second part of the psalm expresses confidence in God, ending with the simple declaration, ‘as for me, I trust in you’ (v. 23). One reason that it is good to pray the psalms when in trouble is that they keep the one praying within the realm of faith. The psalmists almost always express thanks, praise, or confidence in God. Trusting in God does not mean that we will be spared mental anguish when threatened, any more than we could escape a bruise when kicked. David suffers extreme emotional and physical responses—his thoughts trouble him, his heart is in anguish, and fear and trembling beset him. He wants to fly away from his overwhelming troubles, a feeling that has been echoed by many over the centuries. Still, he can affirm, ‘as for me, I trust in you.’ May we also.

**APPLY** Perhaps memorize a verse of this psalm (verse 16 or 22, for example) so that you can repeat it to yourself when faced with danger, threats, or anxieties.

**PRAY** I trust in you, O Lord; please help me cast all my cares on you, knowing that you will sustain me. I can offer no cry of distress that you will not hear, and you will always come to my rescue.

<sup>1</sup> Prov 18:10.

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2026

## THE CAMEL TEST

**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** **GENESIS 24:1–33**

**REFLECT** 'I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.'<sup>1</sup>

Isaac's betrothal is a long account. At the end of Chapter 22, Abraham is informed about his brother Nahor's descendants. When Abraham left them, they were in Harran, but Nahor has his own town now, which is close to Harran. Abraham does not want a Canaanite wife for Isaac, but he is equally sure that Isaac is not to return to Harran. God has called him from Harran and promised him and his offspring a new land, so Isaac needs to follow the same path. Children do not always follow the way that their parents would like, but it is always a blessing when children follow in the path of the Lord.

Abraham entrusts the task of finding a wife for Isaac to his senior servant, who already oversees everything else. Both Abraham and his servant speak of the servant finding one woman (vv. 8, 14). When he gets to Nahor, the servant prays; the whole venture is now given to God in a quite specific request (vv. 12–14). How familiar the servant is with direct answers to prayer, we do not know, but the detail with which he repeats his prayer and its answer might suggest that he is amazed by how exact and precise the answer is. He notices Rebekah before he asks his test question. The narrator has called him 'the servant' (e.g., v. 17), but Rebekah calls him 'my lord' (v. 18).

If Rebekah draws enough water for his ten camels to be satisfied, then she is working hard, displaying an attribute the servant would notice. So far, she seems ideal, so the servant probes further and, on hearing who she is, worships God. Nothing is yet official, but the servant knows that God has answered his prayer: Rebekah is the one.

**APPLY** When was the last time you got excited about answered prayer? You might not be the excitable sort, but think about some of the bigger answers you have had.

**PRAY** Father, I lift up to you the children and young adults in my family or circle of friends, that they will follow a path of faith in you as they make key life decisions.

<sup>1</sup> 3 John 4.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2026

## A CARAVAN OF CAMELS

**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** **GENESIS 24:34–67**

**REFLECT** When you have gone the extra mile for someone, what was the result? More than expected?

The servant repeats to Rebekah's family what we already know. The Bible usually uses few words to say much, so when the narrative slows down, we are made to focus on what is happening or has happened. It is like a stately procession. We are witnessing for the first time an engagement of an Israelite patriarch—the wedding of the promised son—so this significant union is paraded before us. Sarah has died, and the second matriarch is about to take her role—the baton of Abraham and Sarah is being passed to the next generation. What is most ostentatiously paraded past us in all its glory, however, is the servant's answered prayer.

A royal procession of horses could not have a higher profile than the camels in this chapter. Camels are mentioned 18 times in the chapter (the English does not render them all), and most of the references are to the ten camels laden with gifts, which have a comfortable lodging with plenty to drink and eat. In one sense, my reference to the camels is flippant, but whether Rebekah's concern is for the animals or the servant (v. 46), or she is pragmatically meeting an evident need, she goes the second mile.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps the second mile that the servant wants to test. Doing more than the minimum that is required takes effort and even sacrifice. One way Christians can reflect Jesus is by doing more than has been asked, especially when the need is obvious.

Isaac finally comes into the picture at the end of the story—he has been a passive bridegroom-to-be. Isaac does not simply lie with Rebekah, who comforts him—he loves her. The servant's choice has been the right one for Isaac, and the marriage begins well.

**APPLY** Is there someone who has gone the extra mile for you? Do they know you appreciate them?

**PRAY** O Lord, help me to be obedient to your calling, ready to generously help others, even beyond what their needs might be. Give me your vision for blessing others—not just freely, but abundantly.

<sup>1</sup> Matt 5:39–42.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2026

## ISAAC AND ISHMAEL BOTH

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

**READ** **GENESIS 25:1–18**

**REFLECT** ‘For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.’<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not this chapter follows chronologically from what has preceded, the picture of Abraham’s family in the first few verses is quite different from the earlier picture. Abraham has had one wife, Sarah, plus Hagar on the occasion Sarah gave her to him. He has had one son with each of those women, and there has been considerable angst associated with both. The previous chapter started with Abraham being very old<sup>2</sup> and we expect to be coming to the end of his story and generation, especially as Isaac is now married. Instead, Abraham takes another wife (presumably after Sarah’s death), who bears him six sons, and he also has concubines, though these might refer to Hagar and Keturah. In one sense, these new sons detract from Isaac (and Ishmael), but in another, they barely get a mention.

As Abraham learned with Lot, people can become too numerous for the land, so Abraham prudently sends his younger sons away from Isaac. Giving gifts to these younger sons is also a wise move, helping to undermine any resentment they might have. Managing expectations in families is never easy and requires wisdom. Some cultures try to treat siblings equally, while in others, the eldest sibling or son has more benefits but more responsibilities. Wisdom is needed either way.

Another twist is that after Abraham’s death, Isaac and Ishmael are together with no apparent disharmony. The last we heard of Ishmael was when he was driven away after mocking the infant Isaac. Who knows how family rifts may end? Burying Abraham (in the cave with Sarah) brings Isaac and Ishmael into the foreground, despite the backdrop being the other sons. Finally, at verse 11, we have the ending that we might have expected earlier—God blesses Isaac as he blessed Abraham.

**APPLY** If you know about family rifts or tensions, either in your own family or a friend’s, bring them to the Lord, asking that there might be a resolution.

**PRAY** Thank you, God, for the many blessings you give us—as individuals, as families, as nations. Please help us to stay thankful and to use our blessings wisely.

<sup>1</sup> Psalm 100:5 <sup>2</sup> Gen 24:1.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 2026

## RED STEW FOR A BIRTHRIGHT

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

**READ** **GENESIS 25:19–34**

**REFLECT** Have there been blessings from God that you did not value as you should?

Like Sarah, Rebekah cannot conceive. Isaac's answered prayer emphasizes that God gives children. In the previous generation, the two mothers, Sarah and Hagar, struggled together; in this one, it is the two brothers. There is the added complication that Isaac loves one while Rebekah favors the other—though Isaac's choice is dubiously based on his palate. We do not know the reason for Rebekah's preference. We also do not know about Jacob and Esau's childhood, for the account skips from birth to adulthood.

It is easy to think that Esau is being flippant in selling his birthright, but he is weary and faint from hunger and exertion, and probably feeling unwell. He may not feel it is much of an exaggeration to say that he is about to die. Jacob takes advantage of his brother's weakness. Humans are quick to exploit a situation for their own ends. Once he has extracted the oath from Esau, Jacob gives him some bread as well as the requested stew. Unlike Rebekah,<sup>1</sup> however, Jacob is far from going the extra mile.

The focus stays on Esau until after he has eaten and drunk, possibly in case he will change his mind about his birthright once his hunger is satisfied, but he does not, which shows that Esau despises his birthright. It is unfortunate for Esau that his nickname 'Edom' ('red') harks back to this episode. It will be a reminder to him throughout his life and down through the generations—for the nation that stems from him is Edom—that he sold his precious birthright for a bowl of red stew. Many people are haunted throughout life by a rash decision or sin, even if it was forgiven years ago.

**APPLY** If there is a previous sin that haunts you, remember that it is forgiven and is as far as the east is from the west—even if others know about it.

**PRAY** Father God, please help me not to waste the blessings that are mine, nor want what belongs to another, far less struggle with someone to get what isn't mine.

<sup>1</sup> Gen 24.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 9–13

### CHURCH CRISES UNRAVELED

Sometimes people say, ‘We want to be a New Testament church.’ My response is to ask which one they would choose, suggesting that perhaps Corinth should not be their first pick! From Paul’s letters, we see that there were lots of problems in the church there. In the first part of this letter Paul mainly deals with issues of personal morality, but Chapters 9–16 address the life of the whole congregation: issues of finance, reading the Old Testament, idolatry, the role of spiritual gifts, how to behave at Holy Communion, the role of women, and how to understand the resurrection are some of the topics covered. These are still relevant topics in the church today, and there is an ongoing debate among Christians about how we should apply Paul’s teaching.

Before we write off the Corinthian church as one we don’t want to join, however, we need to note that Paul hopes his letter will recall the members to a faithful following of Christ Jesus. He believes that the Holy Spirit has not abandoned the church but is working within it. He accepts that this church is a work in progress. He can still say that when someone from outside the church sees them in worship and hears the word of God proclaimed, they confess that God is in their midst (14:25).

In Chapter 10, Paul says that the Old Testament should be read as warnings for the Corinthian believers. He writes that the Israelites had spiritual experiences just like the Corinthians, but their failures of discipleship can serve as warnings to Christians. In the same way, this letter is written for us so that we do not fall into the same errors as the Corinthians. Sadly, despite this text being available for nearly two thousand years, there are still churches that resemble the worst aspects of the Corinthian church. May this study help protect us.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2026

## PREACHING FEES?

**PRAY** Thank you, Father, that, no matter how long my walk of faith, 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** **1 CORINTHIANS 9:1–18**

**REFLECT** Give us today our daily bread and forgive us our sins.

How do we provide for those who deliver God's Word to us? The Korean church believes that there is no more valuable work than Christian ministry; therefore, those who engage in it should be financially rewarded. Some British churches seem to act on the principle that gospel ministers should be kept poor to keep them humble servants of the congregation. Sadly, some manipulate congregations to enrich themselves. Paul speaks into all of these situations.

He first defends the right of ministers of the gospel to receive financial support from those to whom they minister. With, perhaps, a twinkle in his eye, he gives a proof text about an ox treading out the grain being allowed to eat some of it (v. 9). Your minister may not be happy to be compared to an ox when you are discussing his salary—they might be happier with the analogy of a soldier, a farmer, or a shepherd! Paul then speaks of his own practice in Corinth. He didn't exercise his right to remuneration. He did not want it to appear that he was making money out of preaching the gospel. He didn't want to be trapped within the patronage system of Corinth. He believed that, for him, the gospel should be freely given. He made tents.

There are three things that we might consider from today's reading. First, we should ask whether we and our church value those who minister to us so that they are suitably rewarded. Second, we should ask ourselves whether we are too keen to defend our rights. Do we have Paul's attitude, ensuring that our rights never get in the way of gospel proclamation? Third, there are many examples in Christian history of those who have given up all right to a comfortable life and personal and family security, so that others might hear the gospel. Is God asking us to make a similar sacrifice?

**APPLY** Think about what you see as your rights and ask God whether any should be given up for the gospel.

**PRAY** In whatever way you call me to, Lord, help me to generously support those you have called to minister to your church and those who faithfully spread the gospel.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2026

## CULTURAL ADAPTATION

**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 bring you glory today.

**READ** **1 CORINTHIANS 9:19–27**

**REFLECT** How prepared are you to share your faith with others who may be different from you?

Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission in 1865, insisted that all missionaries should wear Chinese dress so that their foreignness would not be an obstacle to the Chinese hearing the Christian message. Paul had the same attitude. Living in the hinterland between Judaism and the Graeco-Roman world, he realized that to gain a hearing, he had to adapt his cultural practices to his hearers. When he was with Jews, he would live as a Torah-keeping Jew, but in gentile circles, he would happily eat food that was not kosher. Jesus set this pattern of ministry, not only in becoming human that he might save us, but also in associating with sinful people in their daily pursuits, because it is the sick that need a doctor, and he must be where they are.<sup>1</sup>

Missionaries know the principle of cultural identification with those they would evangelize. However, many local churches don't recognize the need to adapt their lifestyles to minister effectively in their neighborhoods. Are there cultural characteristics of your church that create barriers between it and the surrounding community? Are there things we do that might offend our neighbors, with whom we want to share the gospel? Do we expect that members of different cultures will immediately adopt the majority's example in a local church? These are questions to ask ourselves.

In the context of cultural adjustment, there is always a danger that we step over a boundary into unbelievers' sinful activities and attitudes. We are not sinless like Christ, nor was Paul, so he says he keeps his body under control so that he might complete the race and win the prize. Adapting our lifestyle to reach others with the gospel is good, but it must not mean we forsake a life of holiness and biblical discipleship.

**APPLY** Review your own lifestyle and ask yourself whether it is a hindrance to evangelism and holiness.

**PRAY** Holy Spirit, please help me to be all that Christ calls me to be. Continue to transform me into his image and give me wisdom on how to share who he is with those around me.

<sup>1</sup> Mark 2:17.

**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2026**

## AFRAID

**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** ‘Cast all your cares on him, because he cares for you.’<sup>1</sup>

This is one psalm that we can relate directly to accounts of David’s life in 1 Samuel 21. Fleeing from Saul, he has entered Philistine territory, but his identity is quickly discovered. He feigns madness as a way of escape, and at the same time, he prays this psalm. A tune was later set to it, ‘A Dove on Distant Oaks’—stimulated, perhaps, by verses 6–8 of the previous psalm. David shares his fears with God and affirms his trust in God’s word, which may have been the word he had received at his anointing as king:<sup>2</sup> the promise that one day he would replace Saul as king. Things look bad for him now, but the promise could be relied on.

David’s distress is manifested by his tears. It is a comforting thought that God would have a bottle in which to store his tears and record what is happening to him in his book.<sup>3</sup> This is the God who will wipe away all our tears. God’s anointed, Jesus, knows what it is to cry. Three times we read of his tears and distress: at the grave of Lazarus, over Jerusalem, and in the Garden of Gethsemane. He weeps for man’s mortality, he weeps for Israel’s obduracy in rejecting him, and his ‘soul is overwhelmed with sorrow’<sup>4</sup> before he takes our sin upon himself as our Redeemer. These tears give us further encouragement to trust him and his Word.

David often ends a psalm with thanks to God. Here, he makes a vow to bring offerings because he has been delivered from death. He also asks God (v. 13, KJV) to keep him walking in his light. Crises are a time to come to God with our fears and tears, but it is even more important to walk steadily in obedience in normal times, keeping God before our eyes and rejoicing in the light he gives. Walk well.

**APPLY** Is there pain, sorrow, or fear that God is waiting for you to bring to him?

**PRAY** Compassionate God, your Word tells me you never forget me; indeed, you keep a record of my every tear. In my times of sorrow and pain, when I am afraid, thank you that I can trust you, knowing you not only care about my tears but will ultimately redeem all my suffering.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Pet 5:7 ESV <sup>2</sup> 1 Sam 16:13 <sup>3</sup> Ps 56:8 KJV <sup>4</sup> Mark 14:34.

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2026

## HISTORY IS NOT BUNK

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

**READ** **1 CORINTHIANS 10:1–13**

**REFLECT** What things have you been able to apply to your faith walk because you have the Old Testament to read?

Many Christians struggle to understand the relevance of the Old Testament today. Paul sees a true continuity from the Old Testament into the New, from the Jewish people to the Christian church. He wants us to understand that the Israelites' experiences and sins are warnings to us not to follow their footsteps into sin. We cannot dismiss them as lacking the spiritual experiences we have. If we think of baptism and the Lord's Supper as marks of security, then they had a form of them as well, but they died in the wilderness because of their sins. Paul has plenty of examples from the stories of the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness in their journey to Canaan.

There were Israelite temptations that were faced by the Corinthians and also by us: idolatry, sexual immorality, testing God, and grumbling (vv. 7–10). Many will be surprised to see grumbling making the list. However, it was at the root of so much sinning, complaining about God, his providence and provision, that made the Israelites want to return to Egypt or become like the pagan nations around them. Paul warns us not to be complacent about our own position. There is nothing unusual in our temptations. Satan isn't original. He succeeds in seducing us into the same sins repeatedly. Too many Christians have ignored Paul's warnings.

Paul gives his readers not just warnings but also promises of God's care for them, so that they will not be destroyed as those in the wilderness were. God is faithful to those who are in Christ Jesus. He not only limits our testing but also provides escape routes that we may not sin. The challenge to us is to recognize this gracious provision to overcome temptation and to live holy lives. For the Corinthians, idolatry was a potent temptation. What is yours?

**APPLY** Examine your own life to discover what are your greatest temptations.

**PRAY** Thank you, Father, for the lives of those who have taught me to follow Christ and for those who continue to encourage me as I follow him.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2026

## TABLE CHOICES

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

**READ** **1 CORINTHIANS 10:14–22**

**REFLECT** In what ways does taking Communion impact you?

Paul's discussion of the idolatry of Israel is very pertinent to the Corinthians' situation as a minority in a pagan, idolatrous city. He wants them to think through clearly the incompatibility of being in communion with Christ and also participating in feasts where the food is offered to idols. Paul wants the church members to come to their own firm conclusion rather than just obey what Paul says. There is a combination of logic and spiritual experience. Holy Communion is central to the Christian experience. In it, we affirm that our standing before God is only based on the death of Christ. As we eat bread, we affirm that we are united with Christ in his sufferings. As we drink wine, we see the saving blood of Christ applied to our lives.

It was in the second century that Holy Communion began to be called a sacrament, using a Latin word familiar to Roman soldiers as the oath of loyalty (*sacramentum*). Sacraments are marks of our identity with Christ and his people. To participate, then, in pagan feasts is to cast doubts on our identity as Christians. In the Old Testament, idolatry is often depicted as spiritual adultery, and Paul picks up on the message of the Ten Commandments that the Lord is jealous for his relationship with his people and that there are consequences from unfaithfulness.

He has earlier said that idols are not real gods,<sup>1</sup> but he does see that there are evil spiritual realities in pagan activities. Most majority world Christians know this, but many Western Christians regard such statements as not applicable to the context in which they are living. That, however, is to ignore the fact that demons are active in a variety of forms in every society, and we all need to avoid their destructive influence.

**APPLY** Identify where there is demonic activity to avoid in your society.

**PRAY** Lord Jesus, thank you for instituting the sacrament of Communion. Whenever I celebrate it, help me to remember afresh the grace that is mine because you suffered the cross.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 8:4.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 2026

## FREEDOM

**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** **1 CORINTHIANS 10:23–11:1**

**REFLECT** ‘A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject of all, subject to all.’ Martin Luther

‘... give me liberty or give me death’ was said by Patrick Henry in a speech that brought Virginia into the American War of Independence.<sup>1</sup> We may not be so dramatic in our desire for freedom, but it is a desire deep within us from the first moment we struggle to get out of our mother’s arms. The Corinthians have discovered a new freedom in Christ. When Jesus said, ‘if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed,’<sup>2</sup> he meant freedom from sin and Satan. In the reality of the first century, life for Christian Jews would be an escape from regulations that had bound them. For former pagans, there was no longer the fear of hostile spiritual forces that they needed to appease. Newly discovered freedom, however, can go to your head.

The issue in Corinth was how you used your freedom with respect to food that had been offered to idols. There was a division in the congregation. Some would happily eat anything anywhere, but others were more cautious. Paul asserts the Christian liberty to eat any food, but then argues that we must put limits on our freedom if it would adversely affect our fellow believers. This is very similar to what we saw in his discussion of rights in Chapter 9. We have rights and freedoms which we voluntarily limit for the benefit of others.

Meat offered in the marketplace can be bought, whatever religious process it might have gone through, but for Paul, there is an exception. If an unbeliever with whom we are eating warns us that the meat has been offered to idols, then we should abstain for their sake. It is important that we know what our principles of action are and that we do not judge another believer who makes a different choice in matters indifferent to saving faith.

**APPLY** Are there areas of your liberty to be reviewed in light of this passage?

**PRAY** Father, thank you for the liberty that is mine in Christ. Give me wisdom to use it in ways that glorify you.

<sup>1</sup> March 1775, Second Virginia Convention, St John’s Church, Richmond <sup>2</sup> John 8:36.

## HAIR AND HATS

**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** **1 CORINTHIANS 11:2–16**

**REFLECT** If you have been a church-goer for some time, what changes, if any, have you noticed in its culture over the years?

In the 1970s, a church leader once told me that a recent convert was growing spiritually because she now wore a hat to church. It seemed strange then; now it would be astonishing! Cultural change in Western countries has made this passage controversial. Many would now say that we should not distinguish between the roles of men and women in churches. However, Paul asserts that there are differences between men and women that go back to creation and are paralleled by the relationship between Jesus and his Father. We know that they are both divine, just as men and women have equal status in salvation, but Jesus accepts the Father's headship and is obedient to him. Paul argues that the relationship of wives to husbands reflects this.

These verses mark the beginning of a passage, covering the next four chapters, in which Paul corrects things that were wrong in the worship life of the Corinthians. Paul expected women's hair in church to conform to cultural standards of modesty and dignity. Loose hair was often identified with loose women and pagan orgiastic worship. One commentator suggests that a modern cultural equivalent would be women coming to church topless!

Trying to unravel Paul's argument and explain what women are not to do may make us miss the important messages: that women should be praying and prophesying alongside men, that there is a symbiotic relationship between men and women, and that members of the congregation are meant to be participants, not an audience. Passages like this should make us examine our own church services. Is our clothing appropriate for joining others in the worship of God? Do both men and women have the opportunity to participate in exercising the gifts God has given them?

**APPLY** Prayerfully consider whether your worship services are to please you or to honor God.

**PRAY** Thank you, Father, for the ministry of women in my church and my community. Thank you for their gifting and for their commitment to serve you.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2026

## FRACTURED COMMUNION

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

**READ** **1 CORINTHIANS 11:17–34**

**REFLECT** Pray for people in the congregation of which you are a member.

Factionalism was an issue Paul addressed in the early chapters of this letter. There were choices of teachers that divided the congregation. Here, it seems to be social status. It appears that the Corinthians celebrated Holy Communion as part of a normal meal—maybe some form of bring-and-share. Those who had nothing to bring seemed to lose out on the sharing. For some, it was a party rather than a sacred gathering, and drunkenness was not unknown. Instead of it being a meal to unite, it marked their differences, not just socially, as they thought, but spiritually.

Paul takes his hearers back to the origin of the Lord's Supper in the words that had been 'handed over' to him about Jesus' instructing us to remember him in this special way. Richard Hays<sup>1</sup> notes that the same verb is used of Jesus being 'handed over' by God (translated as 'betrayed' in many versions) as Paul uses in Romans.<sup>2</sup> On the night God gave Christ over to death for our salvation, Jesus handed us a piece of bread that we might recapture the significance of that moment. We should know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified.<sup>3</sup>

Not discerning the Lord's body (v. 29) has everything to do with the communal nature of the meal. In 2022, when churches in the UK were closed because of COVID, attempts to reproduce Holy Communion online missed something important: we come to the Lord's table as part of his covenant people, not as separated individuals.

**APPLY** Confess any lack of discerning the Lord's body in your participation in the Lord's Supper.

**PRAY** Holy Spirit, whenever I participate in Communion, guard my thoughts and actions and help me to rightfully focus on the significance of this gift.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Hays, *First Corinthians* (John Knox Press, 1997), 198 <sup>2</sup> Rom 4:25; 8:32, reflecting Isa 53:6, 12 <sup>3</sup> 1 Cor 2:2.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2026

## SPIRITUAL OR GIFTED

**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** **1 CORINTHIANS 12:1–11**

**REFLECT** What gifts did you see used in the last worship service you attended?

We sometimes hear people say: 'I am not religious, but I am spiritual.' Paul is addressing that sort of person in Corinth. He starts by talking about 'spiritualities' (translated as 'gifts of the Spirit', v. 1) and points out that such phenomena are known in paganism and only lead to idolatry. The work of the Holy Spirit will be declaring Jesus as Lord and giving us gifts of ministry for the benefit of the whole church. We shouldn't be deceived by any other spirituality, however spectacular that might be or however well it feeds our self-esteem.

Paul speaks of these true spiritualities in three ways. They are gifts (*charismata*), various kinds of service (*diakoniai*), and working (*energumata*). They are given by one Spirit, one Lord, and one God. The triune giving results in a trinity of ministries for the common good.<sup>1</sup> He then lists some of the gifts given to members of the church. It is not an exhaustive list, and Paul gives us other lists later in this chapter and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> He seems to put them in three groups: first, wisdom and knowledge; then faith, healings, miracles, prophecy, and discernment of spirits; finally, tongues and their interpretation, which he is going to discuss in more detail later.

There is no indication whether all these gifts were displayed during the congregation's worship services, but clearly, there was an expectation that a variety of members would participate. There is no room here for an overactive minister and a passive congregation. We may want to ask ourselves whether we have gifts that we are not using or, perhaps more importantly, whether we have observed gifts in our brothers and sisters that should be released for the blessing of our whole congregation. Or are we so satisfied with the status quo that we stifle the Spirit's activity?

**APPLY** Has God given you gifts you can be using to better serve your church?

**PRAY** Thank you, Lord, for the gifts you have given my brothers and sisters in Christ and for the ways they benefit the ministry of the church.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Hays, *First Corinthians* (John Knox Press, 1997), 210 <sup>2</sup> Rom 12; Eph 4.

**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2026**

## CAVING

**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** ‘Give thanks to the God of heaven, His love endures forever.’<sup>1</sup>

This psalm follows directly from the one we read last Sunday. David escapes from the Philistines in Gath and hides in a cave to escape from Saul.<sup>2</sup> There, he is joined by his family and other people opposed to Saul. He seeks physical refuge in the cave, but the real place of refuge for him is in the shadow of God’s wings—a much more secure place than the wings of the dove with which he might have flown away!<sup>3</sup> At the center of the psalm (vv. 5, 11) is David’s praise for God as the Ruler of the universe. As he pleads for personal help, he has a vision of God’s greatness. From the darkness of the cave, his mind’s eye goes to the heavens and the nations of the world.

Here we are presented with the twin truths of our relationship with God. He is the great God of the universe, and yet he is concerned for us in our situation. The latter gives us confidence that we can come to him in prayer, but the former helps us move from absorption in ourselves to contemplation and worship of God. It puts our situation in perspective while also assuring us of God’s faithfulness and the fulfillment of his promises. For David, this was at the center of his confidence that he would one day replace Saul as king.

We may not personally be in such an immediate threat of death as David was, nor have stated enemies pursuing us, but we know, as Christians, that there are many elements of society that do attack gospel witness. It is against these that we pray. We pray for the salvation of individual people who are caught up in such opposition, and we look to God to deal with all Satan’s machinations.

**APPLY** In difficult situations, does your focus tend to be more on the problem than on the One who loves you and is faithful?

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

1 Ps 136:26 2 1 Sam 22:1 3 Ps 55:6.

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2026

## HEALTHY BODIES

**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** **1 CORINTHIANS 12:12–31**

**REFLECT** In the metaphor of the body being the church, what part(s) do you see as yourself?

The metaphor of the body for an organization was common in the ancient world. It was often used to keep people in their place, doing the role they had been born to or given. Paul uses it differently. For him, Christians are formed into a body by the Holy Spirit, and it is the body of Christ. This means that we are given abilities to serve one another. Hierarchy is not promoted, but rather the weaker or less presentable parts are to be accorded the greater honor. Paul continues his theme of unity with this picture of a body functioning properly, with each part contributing to the whole.

For many of us today, our experience of church life does not reflect this picture. Many are passive members, thinking they have nothing to do and no part to play. Others have little sense of permanent commitment and act like detachable artificial limbs. Meanwhile, there are the loyal souls who are trying to play every part possible to keep the body functioning even when they do not have the required gifts. And then there are the bloated bodies with too many gifted people, while others perish for lack of members.

Paul envisages the growing life of the local church, beginning with the role of apostles as church planters, followed by prophets who bring new, relevant messages from God, and finally teachers who continue to give the instruction needed to build up the body. Each has their own appropriate role at the specific time. Then Paul speaks of the other gifts for the congregation's continued health and well-being. Among them are 'tongues' (vv. 28, 30) and their interpretation, which will occupy Chapter 14. Meanwhile, we are to aspire to greater gifts: not for status, but to be as useful as possible for the benefit of the body.

**APPLY** Are you a good and useful body member?

**PRAY** Thank you, Jesus, for the body of believers of which I am a part. Help me to use the gifts you have given me to serve in the ministry we share.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2026

## ABUNDANT LOVE

**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** **1 CORINTHIANS 13:1–17**

**REFLECT** Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.<sup>1</sup>

Few couples choosing this passage for their wedding reading will realize its original role in this letter. Paul is not saying that ‘all you need is love’ as if advocating a romantic haze, but rather that without practical love, all the professed spirituality of the Corinthians is worthless. He uses vivid metaphors to convey the valuelessness of exercising spiritual gifts or of religious commitment without love. It is not just the deeds that have no value, but the persons themselves become, as one Yorkshire commentator puts it, ‘now’t but wind and rattle.’<sup>2</sup> While all our actions should be seen as a response to the love of God to us in Christ, in the current context, it is our love for our fellow believers that is in view. Paul would certainly endorse what John says: that no claim to love God is valid unless we love our brothers and sisters.<sup>3</sup>

The second section of our reading designates the character of love in both positive and negative terms. Our translations do not capture the dynamic verbs that Paul uses. This is not some academic definition of love but rather a call for us to examine the practice of our love. Are we waiting patiently, showing kindness, etc.? Love is not a disposition but the continual giving of ourselves in serving others, always putting them, their needs, and interests ahead of our own. In writing this, Paul also addresses the situation in Corinth, and he picks up on things he has mentioned earlier: ‘not proud’ (v. 4), for example, echoes 4:6, 18, 19; 5:2.

Jesus is not mentioned in this passage, but if we look for an example of someone who is truly loving, our eyes will go to him, not just in his dying for us, but in his whole character revealed in the Gospels.

**APPLY** Find ways today to show your love to your brothers and sisters.

**PRAY** Please accept my gratitude, Father, for the love I receive, not just from you, but from others in my family and household of faith.

<sup>1</sup> Eph 5:2, ERV <sup>2</sup> Anthony C Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Eerdmans, 2000), 1039 <sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:20.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2026

## ENDURING LOVE

**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** **1 CORINTHIANS 13:8–13**

**REFLECT** In what ways has your understanding of Christ's love grown since you came to faith in him?

Spiritual gifts are wonderful and of great value to the church if used rightly, but they are not a permanent part of our spiritual lives. When we share in God's eternity, the gifts will have no value. It is hard to picture what eternal life will be like. We are given only a few biblical clues about things that will not be present, like marriage<sup>1</sup>, and the things mentioned here. We do learn, however, that there will be a fullness of knowledge in resurrection life, that we shall see the whole of God's revelation rather than just a part, and that we shall enter a spiritual adulthood. Faith will be replaced by sight, and all hopes will be fulfilled.

The one great carry-over from this life to the next will be love. This can be interpreted broadly. God's love for us will then be fully revealed, and we can pour out our love for him. The love that we have had for others, and they for us, will pass through the veil. We are told that our deeds will follow us through death<sup>2</sup> and we can construe that as meaning all that we have done in love during our lifetime. Loving deeds have eternal value.

A passage like this invites us to review how much of our life is driven and constrained by love. It reminds us of how often in Scripture our response to God is described in terms of love. Our love as Christians has always been before us as the picture of the great love of Christ for us. That is the standard to which we aspire. All our love is a response to his love for us. The one thing that we can say with certainty about eternal life is that we will be overwhelmed by his love.

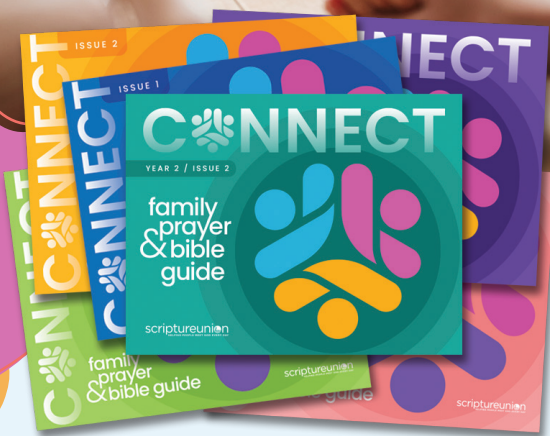
**APPLY** Might there have been a time when you did not love someone with Christ's love?

**PRAY** Lord Jesus, I confess that I have not always loved others with the love you call me to. I ask for your forgiveness and for your help to commit myself to loving others as you would.

<sup>1</sup> Luke 20:35 <sup>2</sup> Rev 14:13



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