

Can we say that God has called human creatures to be, through prayer, nothing less than God's fellow-workers in all that God is doing? That God has so ordered all things, that our prayers play a vital and indispensable role in the accomplishment of God's plan for the creation? That our prayers, given to God and assisted by God, actually serve to determine the course of history? That God has designed us to be His prayer-partners in this great enterprise?

This book is not just a devotional manual. Through daily Bible-readings with notes over a number of weeks, it opens up to us the vast dimensions of God's purpose for His creation, and of our participation in that with Him in prayer.

Where must we be, and what must we know, to be able to pray in this way? When we have abandoned this high calling and sought to go our own way without God, can we still pray 'out of the depths', and will God hear us? What is essential to true prayer?

Suitable for use by individual persons, or in groups, this book will help to raise up a people who rightly call on God's name, and whose prayers are powerful and effective.

Martin Bleby, ordained to the ministry of prayer and serving the word of God in the Anglican tradition, with twenty-seven years experience of parish ministry in country, outback and metropolitan South Australia, now has a teaching ministry amongst all the churches, on the team of the New Creation Teaching Ministry, based in the Adelaide Hills.



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God & PRAYER

MARTIN BLEBY

God's PRAYER

Our Participation in God's Great Enterprise

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GOD AND PRAYER

Our Participation in God's Great Enterprise

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Christ Today in Word and Action

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God of Jacob

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The Vinedresser: An Anglican Meets
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GOD AND PRAYER

Our Participation in
God's Great Enterprise

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In memory of my father
John Raymond Bleby
faithful and diligent in prayer

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Introduction

One way of learning about prayer from the Bible could be to take the prayers that people have prayed in the Bible (and there are a great many of them), and simply pray them ourselves, or use them as a model for our own praying. There would be good benefit in doing that—where would we find truer and more sublime prayers than those in the Scriptures?

Another way could be to examine these prayers, and other teachings on prayer in the Bible, and from these derive principles that we could apply to our own practice of prayer. This, too, would be soundly based.

While both these approaches are touched on in this book, it is recognised that they beg certain questions. Are we in the same position as those who prayed these prayers and taught these things? Do we know what they knew? Do we know God as they knew God? And would God hear us if we tried to pray as they did?

This book is not a devotional ‘how-to’ manual on prayer—though it is hoped that all who use it will end up being among those whose prayers are powerful and effective. Here a different approach is attempted, which it is hoped will be helpful. In a book called *Come Let Us Pray*, Geoffrey Bingham presented the thesis of ‘God calling His people to be His fellow-workers in history by worship (service) and prayer’.¹ He spoke of ‘the mystery of prayer... that God has ordered our prayers because they play a dynamic and vital part in the fulfilment of His plan’;² and claimed nothing less than that ‘by prayer we are co-workers with God’.³

This book is based on that bold premise. It is a ‘salvation history’ approach to the matter of praying. It ranges across the whole of the

¹ Geoffrey C. Bingham. *Come Let Us Pray*, NCPI, Blackwood. 1987. p. 37.

² Bingham. *Come Let Us Pray*, p. 149.

³ Bingham, *Come Let Us Pray*, p. 77.

Judeo-Christian Scriptures, and seeks to hold in view the entire action of God, and of human participation in that action, as it is presented there. It seeks to know the plan and purpose of God in creation, and how we have been made and called to participate in the fulfilment of that purpose, particularly through prayer. It shows how abysmally we have fallen from that high calling, and how our so-called 'prayers' have been rendered false and defective. We trace how, nevertheless, God has determinedly raised up for Himself, through the ages, a praying Family, and has opened a way for us to call to Him even 'out of the depths' of evil and sin. We see God's powerful intervention on our behalf in the life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension and inter-cession of God's Son, Jesus Christ. We enter into the prayer-life of the Son with the Father, particularly through the words of 'the Lord's prayer' that Jesus taught us. We learn the indispensability of the Spirit of the Father and the Son for all true prayer, and we discover the amazing privilege, and the cost, and the reward, of our participation with God in His intercession for the world He made and loves.

This book arose in a teaching setting, and it is a study book that can be used with profit by individuals or groups. It is divided into sixteen weeks, with five days allocated to each week, and a reading from the Bible with comments and questions for personal reflection provided on each day. At the end of each week there are questions for group discussion, and an opportunity for the practice of prayer together. Assignment questions are also given for any who want to use the material as a basis for further study. While there may be benefit in using the book in this way over such a period of time, that is not to say that readers may not sit down and read it right through in whatever time it takes them! Cassette tapes of the author's spoken presentation are also available from the publisher.

This book on prayer is dedicated to the memory of my father, John Raymond Bleby (1913–2001), faithful and diligent in prayer. For over sixty years he ministered as an ordained priest in the Anglican Church of Australia, bringing many, including myself, to the knowledge and love of God. The regular discipline of daily morning and evening prayer, with recitation of the Psalms, and readings from the Old and New Testaments, as enjoined on all clergy in the Book of Common Prayer, were pivotal to his whole life and ministry. Often we have sat or knelt together in quiet appreciation of this precious opportunity to

be with each other in the presence of God. My father, in prayer as in everything, was nothing if not systematic. To the time of his death, he prayed by name day by day over each month for every one of the 1,374 candidates he had prepared for Confirmation during the years 1938–1974. As a parish priest, he prayed for every child of the parish on their birthdays. Once, when an accident took the life of a young boy, he then prayed daily for the protection of all the children in the parish, and his prayers were duly heard.

While such an approach to prayer may appear to be formal, it came from a heart that had been brought by God to love God. It showed in the sincere and reverent way he celebrated the Eucharist, in his assiduous care for people, and in his preaching and teaching. It had a powerful impact on many. 'There is only one sermon that I can remember during your time here', one member of the congregation said to me where I had been ministering and preaching myself for ten years, 'and that was when your father came and preached on prayer'! I was glad of the compliment it paid him, and thankful to God for all that his praying and preaching had meant for me. We are told that the prayers of all the saints—of all those made holy by God to belong to Him—are gathered as incense in golden bowls before the throne of God, and that an angel is given 'a great quantity of incense to offer with the_ prayers of the saints', and all of this rises before God, and the censer is then filled with fire from the altar, which is thrown on the earth, with powerful effects.⁴ Who can tell what has been achieved in the eternal plan of God through the life of one such praying saint?

The translation of the Bible used here is the New Revised Standard Version, with occasional emendations.

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December 2003*

⁴ See Revelation 5:8: 8:3—5: Week 2. Day 5. pp. 17f.

The God Who Creates

Day 1: Genesis 1:1—5

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Who is this God who has created all things? What is His purpose in doing this? Who is this 'spirit of God', who sweeps through the formless void and the darkness that covers the face of the deep? What is the power of God's spoken word, that brings into being and operation what was not evident before?

In these studies on 'God and Prayer', we will see that prayer is in the context of a relationship with this God. Part of the whole matter of prayer is coming to know this God as He is. So we begin at the beginning.

We designate prayer as 'Our Participation in God's Great Enterprise'. If this is so, part of praying is coming to know what God's great enterprise is—what He is doing, where it is going, and what it is all coming to.

This is where the great enterprise begins. ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’ At that point, we human beings are not yet on the scene. There is God, and there is God’s creation.

It is too early yet to see what it is all about, and where it is heading.

Nevertheless, what we do see is very dynamic: ‘the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters.’ This was while ‘The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep’. How is this spirit of God related to the formless void and the darkness, and to what follows? We are not told. Sufficient to know that the Spirit of God is there.

No less powerful is what happens when God speaks. God’s spoken bidding brings into effect what is spoken. God said. ‘Let there be light’: and there was light. God’s spoken word brings into being and operation something that was not there before. What a powerful word is that!

Scientists are still unravelling the mystery of what light is. It is of the essence of the basic energies of the universe. We cannot imagine life without it. God here has a full appreciation of what light is. and of its good quality. ‘God saw that the light was good.’

The darkness is what was there before—an absence of light. When light comes, darkness is still there. God differentiates the two, and gives a place to each. Neither the light nor the darkness have a will of their own. God is in control of both—He gives them appropriate names, and appoints them to operate according to a certain rhythm: ‘Day’ and ‘Night’; morning, and evening.

There is more to come. Even so, this much is amazing.

Are there times in your life when you have faced something like the formless emptiness and darkness? Have you had an awareness of something or someone else present there—the spirit of God sweeping over the face of the deep? What happened after that?

Have you ever heard or sensed a ‘word’ being spoken in your life that brought into being something that was not there before? What changed for you then?

Day 1: Genesis 1:6—13

And God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And—there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.’ And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.’ And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

The creation here is being shaped up into the world as we now experience it: earth and sea and sky, and the vast variety of plant life. It is moving towards something. It is being made habitable.

Isaiah heard God speaking in this way:

**For thus says the LORD,
who created the heavens
(he is God!).
who formed the earth and made it (he established it:
he did not create it a chaos.
he formed it to he inhabited!):
‘I am the LORD, and there is no other’ (Isaiah 45:I**

It is a remarkable thing that in the vastness of this universe, so much of which is apparently inhospitable, there should exist a place where life as we know it is sustainable. For instance, that we should be within the narrow range of temperature (what we call 0–100°C) where water can exist in its liquid form. not just as either a solid or a gas.

Again, at each stage of the ordering of this creation, and of bringing it to fruition, ‘God saw that it was good’. What God has made to be so is positive and functional. Creation from God’s hand is not alien or hostile.¹ That the world should be ordered in this way has implications for how we approach God in prayer. Isaiah goes on to say:

I did not speak in secret. in a land of darkness:
I did not say to the offspring of Jacob.
‘Seek me in chaos.’
I the LORD speak the truth.
I declare what is right (Isaiah 45:19)

There is a purposeful openness and directness by which God presents Himself through what He has done. Our approach to Him can be similarly straightforward. The apostle Paul says of human beings:

what can be known about God is plain to them. because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature. invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made (Romans 1:19–20).

By virtue of this, he goes on to say, we are able to honour Him as God, and give thanks to Him.

What appreciation do we have of the amazingly functional goodness of creation?

To what extent do we see or experience it as ‘alien and hostile’?

How clearly do we understand and see God’s ‘eternal power and divine nature ... through the things that he has made’?

How open, direct and straightforward are we in our approach to God?

The God Who Creates Day 3: Genesis 1:14—19

And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.’ And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

We now become aware of the celestial bodies—the sun, the moon and the stars. These are way outside our immediate environs, and well beyond our control. Some have considered that they have power over us, and influence our lives. The names we still give to the first two days of the week—Sunday and Monday (moon–day)—originate from times when these bodies were worshipped as gods. The prevalence and popularity of horoscopes (guidance and predictions based on the position and influence of the stars) show that this mindset is still very much with us.

Here these heavenly bodies are shown to be the creation of God, set in place by God. They are not even given names—they are simply ‘the greater light . . . the lesser light . . . and the stars’—lest our attention should be drawn into fascination with them, and away from the One who brought them into being and set them in place. In Jeremiah 33:20–21, 25–26. God speaks of having made a ‘covenant’—a personal, binding commitment—‘with the day and the night and the ordinances of heaven and earth’, and bids us see His faithful commitment to His human creation in no less a light.

Given this, these lights in the sky do exercise a certain ‘rule’ or authority in the creation, to ‘rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness’, and ‘for times and seasons and for days and years’. When we consider how well we are served day and night by the sun and the moon, and how it is from the movements of the sun, the moon and the earth in relationship with each

¹ Contrast Bishop Spong, who speaks of creation as this alien and sometimes hostile universe’ (John Shelby Spong, *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus*. Harper. San Francisco. 1991 p. 158).

other that our time is ordered into days, months and years. we can see what a beneficent rule this is. No doubt this reflects and participates in God's own rule over His creation. Again, this arrangement is seen by God as 'good' and serviceable.

Time is another of those mysteries which we know by living in it, but which we cannot easily describe or identify. Here it is seen as part of the gift of creation, in the ordering of God. Jesus himself spoke of 'the times and periods that the Father has set by his own authority' (Acts 1:7). Time is encompassed by God, who is Himself the beginning and the end:

'I am the Alpha and the Omega.' says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty (Revelation 181_

If this is so, what are we implying when we say, 'Time is against me'—in connection with prayer or any other activity?

Day 4: Genesis 1:20–25

And God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.' So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.' And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

The animate creatures, with whom we share the breath of life, are now brought to be, out of the waters and the earth. This is getting very

close to us as human beings, for we will see that it is over these that we are given a certain 'dominion'.

Documentaries on the vast variety of living creatures hold an end-less fascination for us. In particular, from the beginning there have been 'cattle' or domestic animals, who are especially close to us, as distinct from 'wild animals'. See the amount of space given in any supermarket to food for pets. In this companionable creation, we are not alone.

Later scriptures, such as Isaiah 11:6–9 ('the wolf shall live with the lamb . . . and a little child shall lead them'), show that the living creatures are not just incidental to God's ultimate purpose in creation—they are integral to it. Indeed, there are times when they are used as an object lesson to us human beings (see Proverbs 6:6–11 and 30:24–31, on ants, badgers, locusts, the lizard, the lion, the rooster and the he-goat; and Isaiah 1:3, on the ox and the donkey. See also Job 38 – 41).

In what way does consideration of the living creatures help to pre-prepare us for prayer? Simply that they help us to know our place before the God who made us all.

Look up and read Proverbs 6:6–11, 30:24–31, and Isaiah 1:3, and consider how they teach us about our own approach to the Creator of us all.

Day 5: Revelation 4:8, 11

**Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come . . .
You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.**

If we come face-to-face with this God who has created all things, how are we to conduct ourselves, and what are we to say?

We can at least take a cue from what Paul says in Romans 1:21 (see Day 2, p. 3): we can honour Him as God—the God who has

done all this, the ‘one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all’ (Ephesians 4:6)—and we can give thanks to Him.

We can use these words from John’s vision of heaven in Revelation, where the four representative ‘living creatures’ head up the whole creation in acknowledgement of our Creator.

And we can marvel with Paul the apostle at the ways and purposeful actions of the living God:

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen (Romans 11:36).

For Group Discussion:

Let members of the group share answers to the questions from each day’s readings and notes, together with any other insights or questions that have come to them.

Prayer

Consider each of the ‘days’ of creation in Genesis 1:1—25. Let each member of the group chose a day around which they would like to pray. Let each pray in turn, taking care to honour God as God, and to give thanks to Him.

Assignment Question:

Choose three of the six days of creation, and show how what happened on each day impacts on your praying.

Week 2

God’s Prayer–Partners

Day 9: Genesis 1:26 – 2:3

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind [Heb. *adam*] in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth [Heb. and over all the earth], and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created man [Heb. *adam*] in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

The making of human beings comes at the culmination of this account of God's creating. Now the initial action of creation is finished. Where before, after each thing that God made came into being, 'God saw that it was good', now 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good'. There is a satisfying completeness about all that God has now done. In the light of this, God is content to rest 'from all the work that he had done in creation'.

Yet we sense that this is only a beginning—there is so much more to come. As this account of creation has unfolded, we have sensed that there is an ordered and purposeful movement about it all. For instance, it would appear that the six days are in two more or less parallel sets of three: (1) Day and Night; (2) Sky and Seas; (3) dry land called Earth, with its covering of plants—all in readiness to be inhabited and filled—then: (4) the sun and moon, with the stars, to rule the Day and Night; (5) the birds and fish to fill the Sky and Seas; and (6) the animals and human beings to people the Earth—there is a thrust here towards fullness and habitation. Nor does it stop there. In the particular mandate given to humankind, there is a further filling that is to happen. They are told to 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it'. As the initial creation is brought to completion, a new chapter is beginning. We start to see there is an ongoing purpose in the whole of creation, a goal to which it is all moving. In this purpose, the human beings are to play a key role.

Later Scriptures confirm what this goal is. God says, 'I am about to create new heavens and a new earth' which 'shall remain before me' (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22). This new creation will be full of joy and delight, with nothing untoward about it—no cause of distress or calamity, nothing evil, unclean or accursed. Yet it is not an alternative replacement of this present creation: it is all these things made new! (See Revelation 21:5.) Other undertakings on God's part fill this out, as this one from Numbers 14:21:

as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD.
Habakkuk 2:14 says:
**the earth will be filled
with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.**

It is God's clear intention to dwell in His creation, with His people, in a fitting way (see e.g. Exodus 29:46; Revelation 21:3–4). No less will the creation participate in God's own restful fullness (see Hebrews 4:9–11). Peter sums it up in this way:

in accordance with his promise. we wait for new heavens and a new earth. where righteousness is at home (2 Peter 3:13).

And we thought that we were like microbes on a speck of dust in a vast and endless universe! What difference does this make to our estimation of what a human being is?

This, then, is God's great enterprise. It is with a view to this ultimate . new creation that the present initial creation has been brought into being.

What is the part in this of the human creatures that God has made? What does it mean to 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it: and have dominion'? Does it mean just 'Have lots of children and move out and occupy the earth and take charge of it'? If so, what would be the point of that? In the light of this goal of the new creation, is there not much more to it than that?

Genesis 2:8 gives us an indication. Genesis 2:4—24 is another more detailed account of the creation of the man and the woman. It is clear that by the time they are both made, they are in the 'garden in Eden'. This is the garden that God has planted. It is the place where God dwells. In this garden, God is with the man and the woman, and they are with God. This is where God walks with them and talks with them (see particularly Genesis 3:8). From here God rules over His creation, and issues decrees and engages in actions which determine the entire course of history. It is in the context of all of this that the mandate in Genesis 1:28 is given. 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion', in this setting, means to move out into the whole of creation with all of this! Until 'all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD' (Numbers 14:21). For us to be able to do this, God creates us 'in the image of God'. We are not God, but we are like Him. Whatever else that might entail, it means at heart that we have a direct affinity with God, to be able to early out this mandate—to be with God in this great enterprise!

And we thought that we were like microbes on a speck of dust in a vast and endless universe.' What difference does this make to our estimation of what a human being is?

Day 2: Psalm 8

O LORD, our Sovereign,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth!
 You have set your glory above the heavens.
 Out of the mouths of babes and infants
 you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy
 and the avenger.
 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
 the moon and the stars that you have established;
 what are human beings that you are mindful of them, a son of man that
 you care for him?
 Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with
 glory and honour.
 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
 you have put all things under their feet,
 all sheep and oxen,
 and also the beasts of the field,
 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
 whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O LORD, our Sovereign,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth!

In the light of the vast magnificence of God's creation, how does the psalmist answer the question: What are human beings? We might expect to be overawed by it all, and so be reduced to miniscule insignificance. That is not the response of this psalm. The conclusion here is the opposite. We are just 'a little lower than God' (the translation could also be 'than the angels' or heavenly beings), and we are 'crowned' by God 'with glory and honour', with great dominion in all the creation. Far from reducing us to next to nothing, the fact that God has gone to such lengths to establish His creation makes us to be really something! Yet not of ourselves, or to our own glory—this psalm acknowledges the majesty of God's name in all the earth, on account of what He has done, and where He has placed us. He has put all things under our feet, yet we are the 'babes and infants' who

strongly acknowledge God's praise. All of it is God's glory, that this should be so.

Let us never underestimate God's esteeming of us as His creation. We are told that in the beginnings of creation:

the morning stars sang together
 and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy (Job 38:7)

No less at its completion, the wisdom of God is depicted as:

rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world
 and delighting in the human race (Proverbs 8:30–31)

Any lesser delight and joy in the human race on our part is a demeaning disservice to God's 'very good' creation, over which God rejoices. Let us not in any way seek to diminish the stature of a human being in God's creation—nor the great responsibility that goes with it.

'What are human beings?' Does the answer we give to that question make for an enhanced or diminished estimation?

After a time of quiet contemplation, pray through Psalm 8.

Day 3: Psalm 63

O God, you are my God, I seek you,
 my soul thirsts for you;
 my flesh faints for you,
 as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
 beholding your power and glory.
 Because your steadfast love is better than life,
 my lips will praise you.
 So I will bless you as long as I live;
 I will lift up my hands and call on your name.
 My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
 and my mouth praises you with joyful lips

when I think of you on my bed,
 and meditate on you in the watches of the night:
 for you have been my help,
 and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
 My soul clings to you;
 your right hand upholds me.
 But those who seek to destroy my life
 shall go down into the depths of the earth;
 they shall be given over to the power of the sword,
 they shall be prey for jackals.
 But the king shall rejoice in God;
 all who swear by him shall exult,
 for the mouths of liars will be stopped.

The opening words of this psalm—'I seek you. my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you'—could be taken by us to be a desirable devotional stance: 'If only we could long for God like that—how good that would be!' These words are not that. They are a description of the way we really are, the way we have been made by God. Human beings are creationally structured to long and thirst for God like this—and to be in desperation without Him.

'As in a dry and weary land where there is no water.' When you fly low over the outback of Australia, and when you then look at it closely on foot, you see that every square centimetre of that dry ground is shaped and grooved to receive water and to channel it in a particular direction. Much of the time it lies dry and barren. But when the rains come, immediately the rivulets flow into creeks and water-courses and on to great flooded rivers. So it is with the human spirit. We are structured to receive and flow with what God gives us from Himself. He is 'the fountain of living water' (Jeremiah 2:13), without whom we are barren and dry. Our hearts have been designed to flow with 'the springs of life' from God (Proverbs 4:23; compare John 7:37–39).

We find that it is in this total and absolute dependence on God that we have been made:

the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life: and the man became a living being (Genesis 2:7).

In the original Hebrew, the words for man (*adam*) and dust (*adamah*) are closely associated. Without this breath or spirit from God, creatures 'die and return to their dust' (Psalm 104:29). There is never a point where we become independent of this breath from God. That was tried when sin came into the world. It issued in death.

Maybe the liars' at the end of this psalm are those who have embraced this untruth of attempted independence, and so have become destructive of life. In keeping with what it says about our indispensable dependence on God for our life, this psalm rightly sees the deadly demise of these 'liars' and of their destructive deception.

We may tend to think of prayer as ourselves, on some kind of independent footing, addressing God who is apart from us in some way. How is our understanding of prayer changed by what is presented here?

Pray Psalm 63 quietly and personally.

Day 4: Acts 17:24–28

The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all people life and breath and all things. From one he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps feel after him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'

Made in the image of God, in an affinity with God, and dependent on God every moment for 'life and breath and everything', we have been made by God for relationship with God. It is not as if God has His place and we have ours, and we seek somehow to work together for some mutual benefit. This is what we are attempting to set up when we

assign God to ‘shrines’ and seek to ‘serve’ God in that setting. Our relationship is much closer than that. ‘In him we live and move and have our being.’

It is also much more personal and familial: ‘we too are his off–spring’. If we are the ‘offspring’ of God, what does that make God to us? Our Father! Paul is saying here that God’s creation of us ‘from one’ (from one common stock, of one blood) to become the nations of the world, and all that has happened and will happen in human history—the rise and fall of nations and the movements of peoples—is ordered and directed by God all to one end: that we might seek and come to find Him as our Father. To this end He is never far from any one of us.

Our relationship with God is not just so we can be intimate with Him in a cosy way. In the biblical understanding, ‘sons’ (inclusive of daughters; i.e. grown–up children) work with their Father in the family business (see Luke 2:49: ‘I must be in my Father’s house’; John 5:17: ‘My Father is still working, and I also am working’). Our relationship with God as our Father entails our participation with Him in God’s great enterprise.

This is the release that the whole creation is waiting and watching for with eager longing:

the revealing of the children [lit. sons] of God (Romans 8:19).

This is so that the whole creation can come to its intended fullness—as the new heavens and the new earth:

the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Romans 8:21).

Much needs to happen for that to occur—Paul says it will be finally when our bodies are resurrected from the dead (see Romans 8:23). But this is the hope that we, and the whole creation, already live in now.

Jesus said, ‘Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven... (Matthew 6:9). How does it change our approach to God to know that ‘we are indeed his offspring’ and ‘he is not far from each one of us’?

Day 8: Revelation 8:1-6

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earth–quake. Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them.

This part of the vision given to John has to do with actions of God that wreak great judgments on the earth. These happen as each of the ‘seven trumpets’ are blown.

In the midst of this, our attention is drawn to something else, that is not unconnected with these actions of God. The matter has been introduced earlier in the heavenly vision, in Revelation 5:8, where the twenty–four elders are each holding ‘golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints’. These are before the throne of God. ‘Saints’ means simply the ‘holy ones’, that is, those who belong to God, those whom He has brought to belong to Himself. Their prayers are before Him as incense in these ‘golden bowls’. Here in Revelation 8:5. an angel is ‘given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne’. The prayers of the saints, then, are now being brought into activation, enhanced by the great quantity of incense that has been given (presumably from God) and added to them. These prayers now come directly before God: ‘And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel’.

The effects are dramatic: ‘Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake’. The judgments of the seven trumpets then follow.

This is picture language, giving expression to what is beyond ordinary ways of speaking. We get the picture. We are being shown here something of the 'mechanics' or (better) the mystery of the operation of the prayers of God's people in His universe.

If God has no need of anything from us (as in Acts 17:25 above), why does he receive our prayers? We might equally ask: Why did God make us at all? We have seen that it is so that we can participate with God in His great enterprise. So God receives our prayers. More than that: God actually factors them into the operations of His purpose in His creation, and causes them to be mighty in their effects.

Why is that? Could it be that God does not want to do it without us, and that He wants us to be right in on what He is doing? God wants us to be a part of what He is doing. He refuses to bypass us or leave us out. He has given us prayer as a way for us to participate fully and effectively with Him in His actions. If we refuse to pray, that does not mean that God's hands are then tied. God 'accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will' (Ephesians I:11). If we refuse to pray, it does mean that we will not be in on what God is doing; we will not be living up to what God has made us for; and we will have had no personal participation in the coming of the new heavens and the new earth.

For Group Discussion:

Let each member of the group share some of their experience of praying. Let them say also how their understanding and practice of prayer might be changed by what has been studied in this week.

Prayer:

As suggested on Days 3 and 4, pause and pray Psalm 8 together aloud, and pray Psalm 63 silently and personally.

Assignment Question:

What is God's great enterprise, and how are human beings called and enabled to participate in it?

Week 3

Prayer Abandoned

Day 1 Psalm 53

Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'
 They are corrupt, they commit abominable acts;
 there is no one who does good.
 God looks down from heaven on humankind
 to see if there are any who are wise,
 who seek after God.
 They have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse;
 there is no one who does good,
 no, not one.
 Have they no knowledge, those evildoers,
 who eat up my people as they eat bread,
 and do not call upon God?
 There they shall be in great terror,
 in terror such as has not been.
 For God will scatter the bones of the ungodly;
 they will be put to shame, for God has rejected them.
 O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion!
 When God restores the fortunes of his people,
 Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.

We have been made to participate with God in His great enterprise. We are structured to flow with life from God, in close and intimate relationship with Him. God has so ordered the operations of His universe that our prayers and His actions are inextricably entwined.

What happens when we refuse all of that? Genesis 3 begins the sorry tale of our refusal as a human race to participate with God in

God's life and purpose and action. This was at the instigation of the evil one, who had taken up opposition against God in a vain attempt to usurp God's throne, as instanced in Isaiah 14:13—14:

You said in your heart.

'I will ascend to heaven:

I will raise my throne

above the stars of God;

I will sit on the mount of assembly

on the heights of Zaphon:

I will ascend to the tops of the clouds.

I will make myself like the Most High.'

The root temptation for which we fell was: 'You will be as God, knowing good and evil' (Genesis 3:5). This meant: you will not need God any longer; you will be able to decide for yourselves, without reference to God, what is right and wrong; you yourselves, without God, will be in the position of God with regard to the ruling of all things. The root evil is our renouncing of God and the way God has made us, in an attempt to arrogate to ourselves the prerogatives of God, in order to be able to do without God. The agenda still looks similar to how it was before. We will take dominion over the creation. We will build a new city in the end. But our attempted taking of this into our own hands, without God, will make it diametrically opposed to God's good purpose, and doomed to terrible failure. Our dominion will be a destructive tyranny. Our city will be the harlot Babylon (as depicted in Revelation 17—18).

Psalm 53 documents the sorry outcome:

Fools say in their hearts. 'There is no God:

Human sin is a practical rejection of God, as if God does not exist, and we have taken His place. The furthest thing from us, then, is to seek after God:

God looks down from heaven on humankind

to see if there are any who are wise.

who seek after God.

They have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse;

there is no one who does good,

no, not one.

Paul in Romans 3:11 cites this as saying:

there is no one who seeks God.

The purpose for which human beings have been made, 'that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him' (Acts 17:27, RSV), has been abandoned. Prayer, from our side, is dead. Any so-called 'seeking for God' is now in reality seeking our own ends, and the constructs of our own wrong desires. We now perpetrate evil upon one another, 'and do not call upon God'. That this then issues in the great terror, destruction and shame of God's rejection of these evildoers should hardly surprise us.

What does come as a surprise is that the final prayer for God's deliverance and restoration is expected to be heard and answered, and the result to be greeted with glad rejoicing. That such a turn-around and transformation should occur holds out hope that God's channel of prayer may still be reopened to us.

What is our basic stance before God?

Do we have our own personal agendas that we seek to implement, with or without God's help?

When we 'seek for God', is it to get this 'God' to serve our own agenda?

Or is it the heartfelt prayer for deliverance and restoration, with which this psalm ends, arising from a full recognition of our desperate situation?

Day 2: Jeremiah 2:9—13

Therefore once more I accuse you, says the LORD, and I accuse your children's children. Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has ever been such a thing. Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate,

says the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

These ‘two evils’ necessarily go together. We have seen how we are structured, by the way God has created us, to receive and flow with what God gives us from Himself. He is ‘the fountain of living water’. without whom we are barren and dry. Our hearts have been designed to flow with ‘the springs of life’ from God (Proverbs 4:23).¹ When we have abandoned this proper relationship with God, in an attempt to live without Him, the very way we are made requires that we must find something else to replace Him. This ‘something else’ will not be God, so it will have to be something from the created order. It will be something of our own construction or choosing. The ‘fountain of living waters’ will be replaced with some ‘cistern’ or dam that we have dug for ourselves.

The replacement will not be able to compare with the original. The ‘fountain of living waters’, who is the constant Giver of ‘life and breath and all things’ (Acts 17:25), will never run dry. Our substitute or imitation ‘cisterns’, having no constant supply from within them—selves, will quickly empty out. They are ‘cracked cisterns that can hold no water’. We are left by them betrayed and bereft. This is no way to live.

Even though we choose this as the way to go, and think we are right in doing so, the unnaturalness of this choice is shocking. It totally goes against the way we are made, and does us grave harm. Pagan nations stick doggedly to their false gods, and will not be weaned off them. But for those who have known and related to the true and living God to then opt for this counterfeit alternative—! God calls upon His created heavens to be ‘appalled’, ‘shocked’ and ‘utterly desolate’ at this monstrous turn of events. The intimacy and all-givingness of the God they have abandoned is reflected in the description of what they have lost:

my people have changed *their glory* for something that does not profit.

That God had so invested Himself and His personal presence in them for their good that He could call Himself ‘their glory’—this is what they have now forgone. In comparison with this, ‘something that does not profit’ is putting it mildly.

Even so, the true Fountain would not cease to flow. Even in their apostasy, God could say of Israel:

She did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil, and who lavished upon her silver and gold that they used for Bad (Hosea 2:8).

No less could Paul the apostle say to pagans in the midst of their idolatrous worship:

the living God ...has not left himself without a witness i^ doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy (Acts 14:15. 17).

And when the flow of living waters came to be restored, it was to be no less intimate and glorious:

The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life (John 4:14).

As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart [tic belly] shall flow rivers of living water (John 7:38).

What is my substitute ‘glory’—the alternative I look to for supply and satisfaction rather than God?

Day 3: Exodus 32:1–6

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, ‘Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ Aaron said to them, ‘Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.’ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears,

¹ See Week 2. Day 3, p. 13.

and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.' They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

It is not just the felt inconvenience of having an invisible God, and the desire to replace Him with something that we can see, that drives people to idolatry. There is an expectation that what we fashion out of what we supply will be the way we want it to be, and will remain amenable to us. Thus idolatry seeks to secure the self more firmly at the centre. What issues from it accords with what is now in the heart of this sinful self.

This occurred in Israel shortly after God had said:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them (Exodus 20:4-5).

Aaron and all the people would have known that their action was in direct contravention of this commandment. They went ahead anyway. That is the defiant spirit in which idolatry is taken up and maintained.

There is still the desire to have it both ways, according to whatever suits the self. The Israelites wanted to see the calf as 'your gods . . . who brought you up out of the land of Egypt'. Aaron sought to capitalise on that by still designating their worship of this idol as 'a festival to the LORD'—a self-deceiving and deadly commixture.

Aaron's reprehensible complicity in all this later rendered him incapable of seeing and speaking the truth. His lame explanation to Moses gave expression to the helpless, cipher-like creature he had become. He blames the people, 'that they are bent on evil', and infers that perhaps Moses should have been there; by implication he even blames God for making it turn out that way:

I said to them. 'Whoever has gold, take it off: so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf! (Exodus 32:24).

The feral nature of the revelling was characterised by this later description: **the people were running wild (for Aaron had let them run wild. to (he derision of their enemies) (Exodus 32:25).**

It is not hard to see how, in this state, no true prayer is possible.

We have said that idolatry is carried through in an attempt to retain control, in a way that will be amenable to the sinful self. At this point, however, something even more sinister takes over. Deuteronomy 32:1-44 is a prophetic song taught by Moses to the people of Israel before they went into the promised land. It sets out some of their coming history, as God's witness to them. Speaking of the time when they have begun to prosper in the land, the song says this:

Jacob ate his fill; Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked. You grew fat, bloated, and gorged! He abandoned God who made him, and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation. They made him jealous with strange gods, with abhorrent things they provoked him. They sacrificed to demons, not God, to deities they had never known, to new ones recently arrived, whom your ancestors had not feared. You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you: you forgot the God who gave you birth (Deuteronomy 32:15-18).

Where we might expect it to say that they sacrificed to idols, the verdict is: 'They sacrificed to demons'—to personal, evil powers. Paul the apostle confirms this in I Corinthians 10:19-20:

What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No. I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons.

How is this so? We saw that the fall of the human race was at the instigation of the evil one, who has sought to usurp God's throne, and receive to himself the worship that is God's alone. (We see a blatant attempt at this in Matthew 4:8-9, where Satan seeks to draw to himself even the worship of God's own Son.) Wherever there is false worship that has renounced God and substituted a false image, the evil powers will be there to claim this worship to themselves, and take charge of the situation. Immediately, then, the supposed freedom and control that the sinful self hopes for from this exercise of idolatry has been fatally

compromised. We are now ‘partners with demons’, and under their tyrannous sway.

The God who has made us in love for something much better than that will not look on this and remain unmoved. The song in Deuteronomy 32 continues:

They made me jealous with what is no god, provoked me with their idols. So I will make them jealous with what is no people provoke them with a foolish nation. For a fire is kindled by my anger, and burns to the depths of Sheol: it devours the earth and its increase, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains (Deuteronomy 32:21—22).

At this corrupt distortion of His good creation, God’s personal wrath will burn to the heart of the earth. The song goes on to describe the disastrous judgments God will bring on this intolerable situation. The ‘foolish nation’ is an invading power that will bring down His arrogant people and consign them to exile. Nevertheless, God’s killing is with a view to making alive, His wounding is with a view to His healing, and His compassion will bring about the vindication of His people (see Deuteronomy 32:39, 36).

What examples have I seen in myself of deluded self-deception?

How has this been related to my preference for a substitute, self: serving idol?

When have I sensed things getting out of hand, and into the control of evil powers?

How have I experienced God’s fierce opposition to idolatry?

Day 4.: Isaiah 59:1—8

See, the LORD’S hand is not too short to save,
nor his ear too dull to hear.
Rather, your iniquities have been barriers
between you and your God,
and your sins have hidden his face from you
so that he does not hear.

For your hands are defiled with blood,
and your fingers with iniquity;
your lips have spoken lies,
your tongue mutters wickedness.
No one brings suit justly,
no one goes to law honestly;
they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies,
conceiving mischief and begetting iniquity.
They hatch adders’ eggs,
and weave the spider’s web;
whoever eats their eggs dies,
and the crushed egg hatches out a viper.
Their webs cannot serve as clothing;
they cannot cover themselves with what they make.
Their works are works of iniquity,
and deeds of violence are in their hands.
Their feet run to evil,
and they rush to shed innocent blood;
their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity,
desolation and destruction are in their highways.
The way of peace they do not know,
and there is no justice in their paths.
Their roads they have made crooked;
no one who walks in them knows peace.

How does this apostasy and its fearful consequences impact upon the matter of prayer? The worst feature of all, perhaps, is that the intimate communion we had with God is now broken, and the refreshing communication that was there is now sorely impeded:

The serpent brought the word—deceit—
And spoke it to the primal pair.
Another word than God’s had come:
This word was death, and death to *prayer*.²

Thus, ‘your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear’.

² Geoffrey Bingham, *We Cannot Live without His Word*, *New Creation Hymn Book*. NCPI, Blackwood, 2002, no. 250, v. 2; emphasis added.

Note how this is now a two-sided affair. We have seen that sin is the opposite of any desire on our part to seek God or to call upon His name. From our side, prayer has gone dead. We have seen, from God's side, that 'the fountain of living waters' does not cease to flow. We have also seen that God does not remain unaffected by our apostasy—it cannot but change the way He now relates to us. We may still make 'prayers' to God, by which we seek to further our own agendas; but prayers coming from an offending source cannot be anything but offensive to God, and will be treated accordingly: he does not hear'.

There are other references in Scripture to what we may call 'unanswered prayer', but which are such that they do not make it to first base:

We know that God does not listen to sinners (John 9:31).

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened (Psalm 66:18).

When one will not listen to the law, even one's prayers are an abomination (Proverbs 28:9).

We see then that something must happen from both sides for this impasse to be broken. Not only must our hearts be turned to a relationship of repentance and faith towards God, but the offence to God Himself must be removed, and God's orientation towards us be moved from wrathful opposition to favour and approval. John 9:31 continues: 'he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will'. How will that ever happen while we remain helplessly set in our opposition to God? Do we now see why it is necessary, if this is to change, that one sent from God should come and, fully one with us—totally identified with us in costly love—through the action of judgment and worshipful obedience, effect from both sides the reconciliation that is needed? Such is God's merciful and ground-shaking action in Jesus Christ.

Only so, by God's steadfast love in the face of our entrenched opposition, can the full quote from Psalm 66 read as follows:

**Come and hear, all you who fear God,
and I will tell what he has done for me.
I cried aloud to him,
and he was extolled with my tongue.**

**If I had cherished iniquity in my heart—
the Lord would not have listened.
But truly God has listened;
he has given heed to the words of my prayer.
Blessed be God.
because he has not rejected my prayer
or removed his steadfast love from me (Psalm 66:16–20).**

Read through Isaiah 59:1—8 again, and consider what the cost to God would be of engaging personally with all of that in a tray that effectively dealt with it, put it away, and replaced it with what is rightful and true.

How would it be for us if God simply let it be?

Day 5: Psalms 42, 43

**As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me continually,
'Where is your God?'**

**These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.
Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.**

My soul is cast down within me;
 therefore I remember you
 from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
 from Mount Mizar.
 Deep calls to deep
 at the thunder of your cataracts;
 all your waves and your billows have gone over me.
 By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
 and at night his song is with me,
 a prayer to the God of my life.

I say to God, my rock,
 'Why have you forgotten me?
 Why must I walk about mournfully
 because the enemy oppresses me?'
 As with a deadly wound in my body,
 my adversaries taunt me,
 while they say to me continually,
 'Where is your God?'
 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
 and why are you disquieted within me?
 Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
 my help and my God.

Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
 against an ungodly people;
 from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me!
 For you are the God in whom I take refuge;
 why have you cast me off?
 Why must I walk about mournfully
 because of the oppression of the enemy?
 O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me;
 Prayer Abandoned

let them bring me to your holy hill
 and to your dwelling.
 Then I will go to the altar of God,
 to God my exceeding joy;
 and I will praise you with the harp,
 O God, my God.
 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
 and why are you disquieted within me?
 Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
 my help and my God.

These two psalms are the one prayer. With the repeated refrain, 'Why are you cast down, O my soul . . . Hope in God', this psalm is the prayer of one who has known intimate fellowship with God amongst God's people, is now suffering in the separation from all of that, and desires so much, by confident faith in God's steadfast love, to know it once more. As such, it could be the prayer of the whole human race. It could be the prayer of the Son of God in human flesh.

The opening words remind us of Psalm 63 (Week 2, Day 3, p. 13), how we have been structured to thirst for the living God. Yet now the psalmist is in a sorrowful situation, surrounded by those foolish sinners who are scornful of any real existence of God (compare Psalm 53; Week 3, Day 1, p. 19).

The psalmist recalls from former days the glad fellowship of communal worship in the sanctuary of God. This is what sustains hope, in this disquieted and downcast situation far from the comforts of home. Even the 'waves' and 'billows' of these overwhelming adverse circumstances are seen as God's action in the depths. No less is the prayer that emerges day and night from this, called forth by God's commanded steadfast love—'his song is with me'.

In the strength of this conviction that God has wrought, the psalmist is able to remonstrate with God in no uncertain terms about this desperate situation, and to ask for vindication and deliverance. There is a clear expectation that it is God's light and truth that will bring about a return to dwell with 'God my exceeding joy', and to sing in praise: 'O God, my God'.

What has been my experience of being cast down and disquieted, and far from God?

In what ways has God made His presence felt in that situation? What is it that enables prayer in this apparently hopeless condition?

For Group Discussion:

Let members of the group who are willing to do so speak of times when they have experienced separation from God, and an inability or unwillingness to pray. How did this situation change or turn out? What light has been thrown on these experiences by any of the Scripture passages studied this week?

What substitute false images have preoccupied members of the group at times, in place of the true and living God? How have these proved false or deficient, or damaging? How has deliverance come?

Prayer:

Let each member of the group pray in turn a verse from Psalms 42 and 43 (Day 5, p. 29), with a pause after each.

Assignment Question:

How does idolatry occur? What does it arise from, and what are its objectives? What complications and difficulties arise? How does God address and deal with an idolatrous situation?

Week 4

False Prayer

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, 'I have produced a man with the help of the LORD.' Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.' Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.' And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' And the LORD said, 'What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.' Cain said to the LORD, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away

from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face: I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.’ Then the LORD said to him. ‘Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.’ And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

In our God-refusing state, we may still practice what we call prayer. From the outside, it may look little different from true prayer. However, the LORD looks on the heart’ (1 Samuel 16:7). From the inside, this God-refusing ‘prayer’ will be seen for the false thing it is.

From the outside, there is nothing to choose between Cain’s offering and Abel’s offering to God. Some surmise that it was the content of the offering that counted: Abel’s animal blood-sacrifice was preferable to Cain’s offering of agricultural produce. Both, however, are acceptable to God, and are enjoined in later regulations (e.g. Leviticus 1 and 2). That Abel brought ‘of the firstlings’ and their ‘fat portions’ may imply that Abel went to more costly trouble for his offering than Cain did. If so, this would indicate the inner attitude of each.

We are told: ‘the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard’. This is no arbitrary preference on God’s part. It is in accordance with what God sees in the heart of each. It is the person, as well as the offering, that God is concerned with: ‘Abel and his offering ... *Cain* and his offering’.

What was in the heart of Cain is shown by what comes out when his offering is not accepted. He is angry and petulant. This is after sin has come into the world (as in Genesis 3), and Cain is fully a part of it. God’s words, ‘If you do well, will you not be accepted?’ (‘accepted’ can have the sense of ‘forgiven’ or ‘lifted up’¹) show that, in God’s mercy, forgiveness is there to be received rightly by all. It is not that Abel needed forgiveness any less than Cain did. We may suppose that ‘the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering’ precisely because Abel accepted the forgiveness that was there, that Cain

was still refusing. Abel received this forgiveness in the only way that it can be received—through a faith-relationship with God:

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable [Greek: greater] sacrifice than Cain’s. Through this he received approval as righteous. God himself giving approval to his gifts (Hebrews 11:4)_

Thus Abel had come into God’s justification. and Cain had not—even though the offer was still there. Their actions corresponded accordingly: Cain’s ‘own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous’, and that is why Cain murdered his brother. He was still of the evil one’:

We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous (1 John 3:12)

Jesus also nominated Abel as a prophet (Luke 11:50–51), that is, one who speaks the word of God. Given the unchanged state of Cain’s heart, this would have exacerbated Cain’s hatred of his brother.

The remarkable thing is that, despite Cain’s false and deficient approach to God, God is still speaking with Cain, and Cain is still able to respond. God’s words encourage Cain to do well and be accepted, and warn him of the danger in which he stands. Cain remains set in his anger, and his hatred issues in the deliberate and calculated murder of his brother. Even then, the dialogue between God and Cain continues. Cain refuses to acknowledge his responsibility, when given opportunity to do so by God, and complains when God’s sentence is imposed. Interestingly, part of his complaint to God is ‘I shall be hid-den from your face’. Even in our sin, we would still like to have that access to God. Cain does end up ‘away from the presence of the LORD’. Despite Cain’s misgivings, God’s care and protection still goes with him there. The ‘mark on Cain’ is given by God, not to parade Cain’s guilt, but to prevent anyone from doing to Cain what he has done to his brother.

If we are intent on evil, and resist the grace of forgiveness, our prayer, however it appears on the surface, will be at heart ill-founded, perverse, deficient and defiant. That will have its dire consequences for us. Nevertheless, we still will not be able to deny our creational need for a prayer-relationship with God, nor God’s ongoing concern for us.

¹ Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*. Word Biblical Commentary. col. Word Books. Waco. 1987. pp. 93. 105.

What examples can we think of, in the experience of ourselves or others, of prayer that may appear OK on the outside, but disguises the perverse inner workings of our hearts?

How has God's word still come to us in that condition? How does that relate to what we have been made for?

Day 2: Isaiah 1:9—20

If the LORD of hosts
had not left us a few survivors,
we would have been like Sodom,
and become like Gomorrah.
Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!
What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the LORD;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.

When you come to appear before me, [or see my face]
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them.

When you stretch out your hands.
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes; cease to do evil,
learn to do good; seek justice,
rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.
Come now, let us argue it out,
says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.
If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be devoured by the sword;
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

These words are addressed to God's people in Judah and Jerusalem, characterised here (in the 700s BC) as the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (as in Genesis 13:13; 18:16 — 19:29), destined for destruction. The sacrifices, offerings, incense, festivals and solemn assemblies are all those that have been specified by God Himself in the law of Moses. They are not wrong in themselves, and God has not changed His mind regarding their appropriateness. Yet God 'cannot endure' them. Why not? Because of what the people are doing in their lives. It is evident that there is murder, evildoing, social injustice, and oppression of the poor and needy. Solemn assembly 'with iniquity' is a hateful and intolerable burden to God. For this reason:

even though you make many prayers. I will not listen.

Psalm 40:6–8 sets out what is to be at the heart of any true approach to God in prayer and religious observance: an open ear to hear what God is saying, and a heart to do God’s will, in keeping His commandments:

Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,
but you have given me an open ear
Burnt offering and sin offering
you have not required.
Then I said, ‘Here I am;
in the scroll of the book it is written of me.
I delight to do your will. O my God:
your law is within my heart.’

Accordingly, in Isaiah 1:16–17 God requires of those who come a transformation of life and action:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean:
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes:
cease to do evil.
learn to do good;
seek justice.
rescue the oppressed.
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.

Amos 5:21–24 makes a similar point:

I hate. I despise your festivals.
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings.
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs:
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

How can this come to be so for those, like Cain, who are set on injustice and unrighteousness? Further sin and resistance to God’s

word compounds the guilt and digs a person deeper into iniquity. For the necessary change to be effected, this backlog must first be cleared away, with all its ill effects.

Note that this justice is to ‘roll down like waters’. Where from? From above—from God. It is God from whom this justice and righteousness will flow in human lives, and it is God who will clear the way for this to happen. At the end of this passage from Isaiah I. God puts to His rebellious people the matter of His forgiveness of sins, that Abel had received, and that Cain had refused:

Come now, let us argue it out,
says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow:
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool (Isaiah 1:18).

Why does God want us to ‘argue it out’ with Him? Forgiveness of sins is not something that God wants us to take lying down, enfeebled by some kind of false humility. God does not want supine prayer-partners. He wants us to engage with Him at His own level. We are to rise up to the full measure of God’s own righteousness. Nothing less than this is what God is holding out to us.

We can receive this great forgiveness, and so be willing and obedient, or we can refuse and rebel, and be devoured.

What is it that will prevent God from listening to our ‘many prayers’?

Why is it necessary to ‘argue it out’ with God concerning the matter of our forgiveness?

How might we go about doing that?

Day 3: 1 Kings 18:21-29

Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, ‘How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.’ The

people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets number four hundred fifty. Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God.' All the people answered, 'Well spoken!' Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, 'Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it.' So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, 'O Baal, answer us!' But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, 'Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.' Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

If we refuse to accept the forgiveness of God, and insist on remaining in our sin, our so-called 'prayer' will take on grossly distorted forms. The 'god' we pray to will not be God as He really is. It will be some idolatrous figment of our own imagination, or construct of our own fashioning. The grim rigour of our guilt, and the exacting tyranny of the demonic powers that cluster around our idol (see Week 3, Day 3, p. 23) will drive us to extreme measures in our attempts to alleviate or pay off our guilt, and to exert some leverage on the deity to make it serve our will.

Here we see it in the mutilation and self-abuse that the prophets of Baal indulge in, to impress their god with their devotion in order to stir it into action on their behalf. But to no avail. Could it be that this is what Paul the apostle is referring to when he says:

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts or their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever' (Romans 1:24–25).²

Forms of prayer do not have to adopt these extreme measures to still participate in this false and wrongful approach to God. Any form of prayer that considers the human activity of itself to put pressure on the deity to elicit a desired response is part of this deluded deception. Paul puts paid to all forms of false asceticism (severe self-discipline) with these words from Colossians 2:20–23:

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe [or the rudiments of the world!], why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations. 'Do not handle. Do not taste. Do not touch'? All these regulations refer to things that perish with use: they are simply human commands and teachings. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety—humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence [or are of no value. serving only to indulge the flesh].

While we may think we are being very pious and spiritual, and so think we are making a favourable impression on God, in reality we are still only feeding our own egos at the expense of a true relationship with God as He really is.

Of the same order is the thinking that an impression can be made on God by the duration of prayers and the repetition of religious exercises. This no less is a prideful indulgence of the flesh in its attempts to control and manipulate God to its own predilections, and a denial of the Father's goodness and love. As Jesus warned:

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do: for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him (Matthew 6:7–K).

² Both 'impurity' and 'degrading' are general terms and while they ins: generally taken to refer to sexual immorality or ritual prostitution (see Leon Morris. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Eerdmans. Grand Rapids, 1992. pp. 88–891. it could be that they also have the reference made here.

Coupled with this is often a people-pleasing, rather than God-fearing, spirit. We are aware deep down that, whatever we do, we are still somehow not pleasing to God. We still resist coming to God and engaging with Him in His forgiveness. We still very much feel the need for approbation, and we look for it in the approval of others. We seek to impress them by what we do, religiously and otherwise. Any gaining of human approval in this way then reinforces us in our resistance to engaging with God in His forgiveness. Jesus reprimanded his Judean opponents:

How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? (John 5:44).

Jesus warned against the exercise of prayer for this misdirected purpose:

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward (Matthew 6:5).

Jesus' antidote to this was for us in our personal prayers to pray in a way that is not obvious to others, but seeks the Father's face in secret:

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:6).

What lengths have we gone to in order to impress or put pressure on God through our devotion?

In what ways have we sought to impress other people in order to gain their approval and so continue in our resistance to God and His great forgiveness?

Day 4: Psalm 106:34—48

They did not destroy the peoples,
as the LORD commanded them,
but they mingled with the nations
and learned to do as they did.

They served their idols,
which became a snare to them.
They sacrificed their sons
and their daughters to the demons;
they poured out innocent blood,
the blood of their sons and daughters,
whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan;
and the land was polluted with blood.
Thus they became unclean by their acts,
and prostituted themselves in their doings.
Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people,
and he abhorred his heritage; he gave them into the hand of the nations,
so that those who hated them ruled over them.
Their enemies oppressed them,
and they were brought into subjection under their power.
Many times he delivered them,
but they were rebellious in their purposes,
and were brought low through their iniquity.
Nevertheless he regarded their distress when he heard their cry.
For their sake he remembered his covenant,
and showed compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast
love.
He caused them to be pitied
by all who held them captive.
Save us, O LORD our God,
and gather us from among the nations,
that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise.
Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting.
And let all the people say, 'Amen.'
Praise the LORD!

To do despite to yourself in your false approach to God is bad enough, but to bring harm to others, even to your own children, in this quest is damnable. Child sacrifice, however desperate, costly and potent it might be as an expression of devotion (see 2 Kings 3:26–27), is the deepest pit of human degradation. When Israel practiced this, they came to the point of no return as far as God’s destruction and exile of them as a nation was concerned (see 2 Kings 16:2–3; 21:1–16).

God called upon Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. In the event, God made it clear that Isaac was to be spared, and that God would provide a sacrifice in his place. Ever thereafter in Israel, child sacrifice was prohibited (see e.g. Exodus 13:13). We are not to offer to God what God Himself has undertaken to provide. In the end, God has given His own Son as the ultimate sacrifice to take away sin and bring us to Himself:

[John] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared. ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’ (John 1:29).

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3:16).

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18).

He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? (Romans 8:32).

It is against this total giving of God, and the relationship with God that this brings us into, that all false religion and all false prayer is expended. How pitiful, and how despicable, are all such attempts! How wonderful is God’s compassion and steadfast covenant–love in the face of them!

Quietly ponder each of the Scriptures quoted in the last paragraph.

How do our attempts to curry God’s favour appear in the light of them?

Day 5: Luke 18:9–14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’

The contrast here is between one who trusted in himself that he was righteous and regarded others with contempt, and one who knew that he had no righteousness of his own that he could count on, and so looked entirely to God for mercy and favourable acceptance. The tax collector knows what he deserves. The verb ‘be merciful’ is in the Greek *hilastheti*, which means ‘be propitiated’, ‘let your anger be removed’.³ He looks to God to do all that is necessary to remove God’s anger from him and bring him into a favourable relationship with God. God’s total gift of forgiveness is what he seeks and asks for.

Jesus declares that the tax collector is well–founded in doing so: ‘this man went down to his home justified’. Jesus himself, and what God will do in him, is the grounds for his affirmation. The Pharisee, still locked into his own false self–exalting prayer, is the one who will be brought low.

Have I come to God in this way, without a leg to stand on, trusting entirely in God’s justification of me in Christ?

Or have I still come, asserting that I stand on my own two feet, and commending some merit of my own for God’s acceptance?

³ Leon Morris. *The Gospel According to St. Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, IVP/Eerdmanns, Grand Rapids. 1983. p. 265.

For Group Discussion:

Let members of the group share with each other their responses to the questions at the end of each day's readings and notes.

Discuss what further questions or issues arise for members of the group.

Prayer:

Read aloud each of the Scriptures in the final paragraph in Day 4, p. 44, with a pause between each.

Allow silence for reflection on the prayer of the tax collector on Day 5, p. 45.

Let there be time for members of the group to silently 'argue it out' with God concerning His forgiveness (see Day 2, p. 36).

Let members of the group pray aloud in response and thanksgiving.

Assignment Question:

Describe the various forms of false prayer, and show the defects of each. What is God's action in the face of false prayer? How will what you have studied here change the way you pray?

Week 5

God and His Praying Family

Day 1: Genesis 4:17—26

Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and named it Enoch after his son Enoch. To Enoch was born Irad; and Irad was the father of Mehujael, and Mehujael the father of Methushael, and Methushael the father of Lamech. Lamech took two wives; the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. Adah bore Jabal; he was the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock. His brother's name was Jubal; he was the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe. Zillah bore Tubal-cain, who made all kinds of bronze and iron tools. The sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah. Lamech said to his wives: 'Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.'

Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, for she said, 'God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, because Cain killed him.' To Seth also a son was born, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD.

We have seen the high calling for which we have been made as human beings: to be prayer-partners with God in God's great enterprise of bringing this creation to its goal of the new heavens and the new earth,

and all that will follow from that. We have also seen how we have abandoned that calling, in a doomed attempt to achieve it all ourselves without God, and we have seen the damaging false ‘prayer’ that results.

This reading takes us back into that grim scene. It follows the family of Cain the murderer of his brother. There is the building of a city, which embodies Cain’s hopes for his succeeding generation. There is the development of a range of human activities: keeping livestock, playing music, making metal tools. Also, the thread of violence continues, and is compounded. God’s mercy to Cain required that he was not to be killed, and ‘whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance’ (Genesis 4:15). Lamech takes God’s matters very much into his own hands: he reverses the mercy shown to his ancestor Cain, and brutal revenge far exceeds any limits that God has set in place.

We saw that at the heart of false prayer, from Cain through to the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable, lies the refusal to accept the forgiveness that is from God. We see here that with the refusal to accept forgiveness comes the refusal to forgive. Mercy and forgiveness are unknown, and do not come into the reckoning at all. They have been replaced with violent revenge.

This is the significance of the exchange between Peter and the Lord Jesus in Matthew 18:21–22:

Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy–seven times’.

Note how the numbers here correspond exactly with those in Genesis 4:24—but in the opposite direction. Jesus came to roll back the vengeance that had grown, and to replace it with what we saw is at the heart of all true prayer: total forgiveness from God, which flows over into unmitigated forgiveness of each other.

Back in Lamech’s time, however, the culture of violence and vengeance was thoroughly entrenched. No less in our own day, we can name situations of hatred that appear to be intractable, and gloom that is virtually unrelieved.

It is into these most unpromising circumstances that Genesis 4:25 announces the birth of another child to Eve and Adam. His name ‘Seth’ indicates that he is one ‘appointed’ by God to replace Abel,

whom Cain had killed. So begins a new family of generations, along—those descended from Cain—the true line of the descendants of dam and Eve, that is traced in the next chapter.

In the first generation of this line, it is made clear what will characterise this family: they are those who, unlike Cain and his kind, will call upon the name of the LORD’:

To Seth also a son was born, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD.

This family will be a people of true prayer. Like Abel, they will be sinners who know and accept the grace and forgiveness and justification of God. Thus they will know sweet fellowship with God, as Enoch did:

Enoch walked with God after the birth of Methuselah three hundred years. and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were three hundred sixty–five years. Enoch walked with God: then he was no more, because God took him (Genesis 5:22–24).

Like Abel, they will speak out the prophetic word of God into the most grievous of circumstances:

It was also about these that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, ‘See, the Lord is coming with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all, and to convict everyone of all the deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him’ (Jude 14–15).

Into this family will be born those who are destined by God to bring some relief from the curse that people suffer under as a result of human sin (see Genesis 3:17). To a different Lamech, this time descended from Seth and not Cain, a son is born:

When Lamech had lived one hundred eighty–two years, he became the father of a son; he named him Noah, saying, ‘Out of the ground that the LORD has cursed this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands’ (Genesis 5:28–29).

This appears to be a reference to the beginnings of agriculture (see Genesis 9:20).

Genesis 6:1—2 speaks of marriages between people's daughters and those who are called 'the sons of God'. While it is not easy to know who these 'sons of God' are,¹ one interpretation is that these are intermarriages between the line of Cain and the 'sons of God' who are the godly line of Seth, and that, with the breakdown of that distinction, this is when 'the wickedness of humankind' became universally prevalent (see Genesis 6:5, II). Even in this desperate situation, we are told that there is one who has come into justification, as Abel had, and who is thereby righteous and has close fellowship with God:

Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD ... Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God (Genesis 6:8–9).

The miracle is that, in the midst of this darkness, God should ensure that there was still a people who, for all their sinfulness (see Genesis 9:20—27), knew God in this way as the God who had brought them into His own righteousness, to whom they could pray in a way that is pleasing to God:

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD said in his heart. 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease' (Genesis 8:20–22).

This is before God called Abraham, and set Israel apart as His special people for this role among all the nations. Even after God did that, there were still those of the other nations who called upon the name of the LORD, such as Melchizedek, 'priest of God Most High' (see Genesis 14:17—24). Such a one also was Job, renowned for his prayer as a righteous man before God (see Job 1:1, 5, 8, 21—22; 2:3; 42:7—9; Ezekiel 14:14, 20). Indeed, even when Israel proved itself

¹ Commonly they are taken to be angelic beings, as in Job 1:6; 38:7. However, Jesus said that angels do not marry (Matthew 22:30). Jesus also took 'sons of the Most High' (Psalm 82:6, RSV) to apply to human beings (John 10:35), just as the people of Israel were also referred to as 'the sons of the LORD your God' (Deuteronomy 14:1, RSV). See further Matthew 5:9; Luke 20:36; Romans 8:14, 19; Galatians 3:26.

unfaithful, it seems God never left Himself without such a praying people among the nations of the world:

For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts (Malachi 1:11).

God has seen to it that the persistence of His faithful praying people through the generations more than matches the opposition that threaten to undo or overwhelm them.

What is the connection between being a justified person acceptable to and being one who 'calls upon the name of the LORD'?

What difference does it make to us to know that we are part of a praying people that God has raised up for Himself?

How does it change the way we view the evil we find around us, and ourselves?

Day 2: Genesis 9:8—17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the

clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

On what basis can God maintain a praying people, even in the midst of their own and others' sin and faithlessness? It can only ever be on the basis of His own righteousness and faithfulness. This God does in His covenant. God's covenant is that by which He ensures that His own righteousness and faithfulness will prevail for His people, despite their own failings, with a view to redeeming and restoring the damaged creation.

Before the flood, the human situation was a desperate one, and the judgment of the flood was justly deserved:

The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually ... Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt: for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth (Genesis 6:5, 11–12).

After the flood, the condition of the human heart was no further improved:

the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth (Genesis 8:21).

The judgment of another flood now is no less justly deserved. Nevertheless, God undertakes not to bring another such judgment on the earth. On what basis does God do this? On the basis of His covenant, by which God makes His own righteousness and faithfulness to secure and preserve those with whom His covenant is established.

The word 'establish' is different from the word that was used to initiate such a covenant.² What is established in Genesis 9:11, 17 is a binding relationship God has already with the whole of creation. This is there because God Himself is relational, and as such has brought

whole creation into being in a way that is inescapably relational, the apostle tells us, 'God is love' (1 John 4:8, 16). God designates Himself as 'a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (Exodus 34:6). It is out these resources that God will do everything that is necessary to e propitiation for all sin (1 John 4:9–10), in the sending of His 'to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins'. All of these resources dedicated wholly to the securing of God's people and, ultimately, the whole creation, as 'new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (2 Peter 3:13, RSV). This is what God has purposed m before the foundation of the world. This is what God establishes personally with Noah and all who were with him on the ark, and with I who will follow from them, ourselves included.

That is what makes acceptable prayer possible, even for sinners.

What difference does it make to know that our prayer-relationship with God is secured by God's righteousness and faithfulness, and not by our own?

How will that affect now our approach to God in prayer?

Day 3: Genesis 18:17-33

The LORD said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? No, for I have chosen [Heb. known] him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.' Then the LORD said, 'How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.'

So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Then

² William J. Dumbrell. *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology*. Paternoster. Exeter. 1984. pp. 24—6

Abraham came near and said, 'Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?' And the LORD said, 'If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.' Abraham answered, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?' And he said, 'I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.' Again he spoke to him, 'Suppose forty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of forty I will not do it.' Then he said, 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.' He answered, 'I will not do it, if I find thirty there.' He said, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.' Then he said, 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.' And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

On the face of it, this looks to our veiled eyes as if Abraham is bargaining with God, and beating him down. There is a sense in which this is true. But look at where the initiative comes from, and at who sets the terms. The whole interchange is made possible because God in the first place makes known to Abraham what He intends to do with regard to the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah. God wants to do this because He has 'chosen' Abraham—the Hebrew 'known' is an intimately relational term—to become the nation through which God's purposed blessing will come to all the nations, and as those whom God has brought into a position of being able to do righteousness and justice, for God to bring about what He has promised to Abraham. The issue of the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the judgment that

God must bring to it, is germane to this purpose for the nations, and God brings Abraham in on it. What else would we expect, if God is ermined to have us as His prayer-partners in all that He is doing? Thus it is by God's appointment and revelation that Abraham now stands before the Lord, and is able to come near. This is just what God ants him to do. Abraham, for his part, is rightly humble and deferential towards God, but does not draw back. He begins from the position of what he already knows of God, as God has revealed that to him:

Far he it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far he that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?

Abraham presses in to know God's heart in this matter. Yet it is as if Abraham is being drawn in by God to know God's heart, so that God can reveal it to him. God is not sitting back, teasing Abraham as he comes in closer. Nor is God reluctantly giving in, as Abraham progressively beats Him down. God is urging Abraham to come right on in, actively willing Abraham to prevail upon God. Whatever God is going to do to Sodom and Gomorrah, He is not going to do it without Abraham being a significant part of the action, as a man after God's own heart.

Abraham has a personal vested interest in the outcome—his nephew Lot lives in Sodom. God is no less committed by covenant to Abraham and, through Abraham, to Lot, and to the saving of Lot and his family.

Abraham stops at ten. We are not told what would have happened if he had pressed on down to one. But we can guess. There was only one righteous (that is, justified) person in the whole of Sodom and Gomorrah, and that was Lot (see 2 Peter 2:7–8). God made sure that He did not destroy the cities until not only Lot but also his family were out of the way.

Even so, it was in God's heart, had Abraham pressed through to know it, that God would save the whole wicked world through the one truly righteous person that would ever live—God's own Son. But then maybe Abraham did know that, before he died (see John 8:56–58).

How have we understood this incident before? How do we see it now?

What difference does it make to see prayer as something by which God wills and enables us to prevail upon Him, according to what He has shown us, and wants to show us, of Himself?

How might this change the way we pray?

Day 4: Genesis 32:9–12, 22—31

And Jacob said, 'O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, "Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good," I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said, "I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number."'

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, [that is, The one who strives with God or God strives] for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my

name?' And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place peniel [*that is, The face of God*], saying, 'For I have seen God ace to face, and yet my life is preserved.' The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Jacob, the father of the tribes of Israel, was another person whom God d laid hold of through covenant. Before Jacob was even born, the d made it clear what His purpose for Jacob was (see Genesis 21–26). Jacob was to be the heir of the covenant promises made by to his forebears Abraham and Isaac. The trouble was, Jacob sought to effect these promises himself, by his own devices, as we all while seeking to keep God at arm's length. He spent his life wrestling against God, trying to secure for himself what God had undertaken to give him.

It looks like Jacob is doing the same thing here: seeking to hold to ransom in order to get out of God what Jacob wants for him–f. But now, for the first time in his life, Jacob has a very different sit before God. Faced with the overwhelming threat of his brother Esau's likely enmity, Jacob prays quite straightforwardly from the heart. He articulates simply his true position with regard to God and Cod's promise and faithfulness. Without any hint of bargaining, Jacob asks God directly for deliverance, purely on the basis of God's own promise and faithfulness—the only thing by which we can be secured.

The wrestling with God follows, but it is wrestling with God for all that God has for Jacob, not wrestling against God to snatch it to him–self. God commends Jacob for this striving, and gives him the new name 'Israel', on account of it. 'Israel' can mean one of two things. It can mean 'the one who strives with God', and this is just what Jacob had been doing. Or else it can mean 'God strives'. This is when we know God's striving on our behalf, and strive with God for that. In these two meanings is encapsulated the whole story of Jacob, and the whole history of the nation of Israel. Perhaps it denotes our own story as well: as those prayer–partners whom God has called up to Himself, to engage with Him in all He has for us, and for His world.

Jacob goes on from that engagement humbled and ennobled in the utter security of God's righteous faithfulness in relationship with Him.

In our prayer and relationship with God, have we been wrestling with God or against God? Or have we been too timid, or lethargic, to do either?

Day 5: Daniel 9:1–19, 24

In the first year of Darius son of Ahasuerus, by birth a Mede, who became king over the realm of the Chaldeans—in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to the prophet Jeremiah, must be fulfilled for the devastation of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.

Then I turned to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the LORD My God and made confession, saying,

Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land.

‘Righteousness is on your side, O Lord, but open shame [or, confusion of face], as at this day, falls on us, the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you. Open shame, O LORD, falls on us, our kings, our officials, and our ancestors, because we have sinned against you. To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him, and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by following his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets.

‘All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice. So the curse and the oath written

in the law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against you. He has confirmed his words, which he spoke against us and against our rulers, by bringing upon us a calamity so great that what has been done against Jerusalem has never before been done under the whole heaven. Just as it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us. We did not entreat the favour of the LORD our God, turning from our iniquities and reflecting on [your] fidelity. So the LORD kept watch over this calamity until he brought it upon us. Indeed, the LORD our God is right in all that he has done; for we have disobeyed his voice.

‘And now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and made your name renowned even to this day—we have sinned, we have done wickedly. O Lord, in view of all your righteous acts, let your anger and wrath, we pray, turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy mountain; because of our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors, Jerusalem and your people have become a disgrace among all our neighbours. Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his supplication, and for your own sake, Lord, let your face shine upon your desolated sanctuary. Incline your ear, O my God, and hear. Open your eyes and look at our desolation and the city that bears your name. We do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of your great mercies. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, listen and act and do not delay! For your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people bear your name!’

‘Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city: to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place.’

A number of aspects to this prayer of Daniel summarise what we have found in this week’s readings.

First of all, the initiative for this prayer comes from God. Daniel's prayer begins from a revelation that is given to him by God through His word. Daniel has been reading the prophecy given to Jeremiah concerning Jerusalem, which at this time has lain devastated for many years. It is this revelation from God that drives and emboldens Daniel to pray as he does, in confession, and with great hope that Jerusalem will be restored at the end of this time, as God has shown him.

Daniel's prayer is also grounded in what he knows of the covenant of God:

Ah. Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments ... To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness.

Daniel has taken to his own heart the revelation of Himself that God gave to Moses in Exodus 34:6–7. In the midst of our own and others' sin and faithlessness, how can we ever come to God in prayer? It can only ever be on the basis of God's own righteousness and faithfulness, secured by God in His covenant, by which He ensures that His own righteousness and faithfulness will prevail for His people, despite their own failings, with a view to redeeming and restoring the damaged creation—in this instance, the devastated city of Jerusalem. Daniel acknowledges:

Righteousness is on your side. O Lord ... but open shame [*or*, confusion of face], as at this day. falls on us.

So Daniel is able to pray:

We do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of your great mercies.

Knowing that this ground is secure, Daniel can freely confess all the sins of his people without hesitation or reserve. Because he knows from God the curse and the oath written in the law of Moses', he also can readily acknowledge God's good hand in all that has happened to them:

Just as it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us. We did not entreat the favour of the LORD our God, turning from our iniquities and reflecting on your fidelity. So the LORD kept watch over this calamity

until he brought it upon us. Indeed, the LORD our God is right in all that he has done; for we have disobeyed his voice.

Because he knows from God His covenant mercy and the promise of restoration, Daniel can also pray with boldness and insistence:

O Lord. in view of all your righteous acts, let your anger and wrath, we pray, turn away from your city Jerusalem ... O Lord, hear: O Lord, forgive; O Lord, listen and act and do not delay!

From beginning to end, it is God in His relationship with His people that is the basis and substance of Daniel's prayer:

For your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people bear your name!

Here is true prayer—partnership in action.

Daniel is earnestly asking God for the promised restoration of Jerusalem, and that will now happen. Further, in response to Daniel's prayer, another unasked—for word is given, that relates to so much more:

Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city: to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in ever-lasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place (Daniel 9:24).

This is given in veiled terms, but it is not difficult for us to see what it is referring to: the fulfilment of all prophecy in the complete atonement and taking away of all sin, for the bringing in of the new sanctuary—the new heavens and earth—where righteousness is permanently in place. This will happen not at the end of the seventy years that Jeremiah was referring to. This will happen after 'seventy weeks' (of years—490 years in total): the fullness of time when Jesus will come. What a wonderful answer to prayer that is!

How bold are we to take God at His word in prayer?

For Group Discussion:

Let members of the group articulate how the Bible passages, notes and questions from this week will now make a difference to the way they go about praying.

Get two people to read the words of God and Abraham in Genesis 18:17—33 (Day 3, p. 53), to reflect the way this prayer-exchange is presented there, and let members of the group comment on what is happening between them.

Prayer:

Following the prayer of Daniel in Daniel 9:1—19, let members of the group choose a revelation or promise of God in the Scriptures that speaks to them, and put together a prayer front that which addresses issues that face us in our own day.

Assignment Question:

Write on the marvel of God having a people who call upon His name in prayer in the midst of the darkness of evil and sin. On what basis can God maintain a praying people, even in the midst of their own and others' sin and faithlessness? What can we learn from the examples of Abraham, Jacob and Daniel about how God wants us to approach Him as His prayer-partners?

Week 6

Israel: God's Prayer Community

Day 9: Isaiah 43:15—21

I am the LORD, your Holy One,
the Creator of Israel, your King.
Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
The wild animals will honour me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

God's great enterprise is all that God is doing and saying with regard to His creation, its purpose and its goal. God has made human beings, in His own image. God is determined to have us with Him as His prayer-partners in all that He is saying and doing.

The nations as a whole have rejected this high calling and God-given role, to venture out on their own without God. God has seen to it nonetheless that among all the sinful nations He has a people who know His grace and forgiveness and so call upon His name. We have traced this praying family from the time of Abel and Seth onwards.

In furtherance of this process, God's intention was to set up a particular nation whose whole life would be to know Him in this way. and so be those through whom God's blessing would come to people of all nations. This week we look at Israel as God's prayer-community. What does it mean for a nation of people to belong to God in this way?

God calls Himself here, 'the LORD, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King'. Each of those names tells us something about God in relation to Israel. God calls Israel, 'my chosen people'. Israel has been brought into being as a nation by God. Israel has been redeemed by God from all that would make them captive or enslave them. God is always, in old and new ways, bringing blessing to His chosen people, in the midst of their trouble and deprivations. Israel is dependent for its very life day by day on God and His saving rule over them.

It began with God's call of Abraham, to whom God said:

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you. and make your name great. so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you. and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:2-3).

They are a people who, first of all, will know God's blessing. This is quite gratuitous on God's part—it is simply because He has set His love on them (see Deuteronomy 7:7-8). This people will be the touchstone of God's action towards all the nations: their blessing or cursing will depend on how they relate to Israel and to what God is doing with Israel. Israel will be God's chosen means by which God's blessing is to come on 'all the families of the earth'.

What is God's purpose for Israel in all this? God calls them:

**the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise (Isaiah 43:21r**

They are 'formed for myself': Israel is to know intimate relationship with God, in all that God is doing in His creation. Also, they are to 'declare my praise': out of this intimate knowledge of God in all that He is saying and doing with them—by who they are in God's hands, in what they do and say, and by what happens to them—Israel is to testify to the glory of God's being and action. This they will do to God first of all: they will praise God with the thanksgiving and honour that is due to Him, that has been denied to Him by the sinful nations (see Romans 1:21). Israel will acknowledge to God all that He has done and said in their midst. They will also make God's praise known in all the world:

**Declare his glory among the nations.
his marvelous works among all the peoples (Psalm 96:3).**

This is not just with a view to the destiny of Israel. or even just the destiny of all the nations. The goal is a renewed creation, in which 'the wolf shall live with the lamb . . . for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea' (Isaiah 11:6, 9; see Week 2, Day 1, p. 9). The mention here of 'the wild animals ... the jackals and the ostriches', who will honour God when he gives 'water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people', makes it clear that a transformation of the whole created order hangs on what God will do with and through this 'people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise' (compare Romans 8:19-23).

What did God mean when He spoke of Israel as 'the people whom I formed for myself'?

What does it mean for Israel that God formed them 'so that they might declare my praise'?

How are these two parts related to each other?

What does this tell us about the nature and dynamic of prayer?

Day 2: Exodus 19:3—19

Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples; for the whole earth is mine, and you shall be to me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.'

So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. The people all answered as one: 'Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do.' Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD. Then the LORD said to Moses, 'I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.' When Moses had told the words of the people to the LORD, the LORD said to Moses: 'Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the LORD will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, "Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot with arrows; whether animal or human being, they shall not live." When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain.' So Moses went down from the mountain to the people. He consecrated the people, and they washed their clothes. And he said to the people, 'Pre-prepare for the third day; do not go near a woman.'

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to

meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently.

As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder.

If Israel is to be to God 'the people whom I formed for myself', then God will bring them to Himself. This we see God doing at Mount Sinai:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

God's intention for the people is, 'you shall be my treasured possession'.

For this to be so, the whole people of Israel must come to a place of meeting with God:

Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God.

When this meeting is between the holy God and a sinful people, it is not an easy thing to set up. There is a danger that the people could be consumed by the burning fiery furnace that is the holiness of God's love. Nevertheless, God is intent on having the people meet with Him, and God goes to some lengths to ensure that the necessary pre-cautions are in place. The people are to consecrate themselves over a period of two days, and wash their clothes, in readiness for the third day. For their own protection, no person or animal is to touch the mountain, on pain of death. Sexual relationships are to be abstained from for this time, in readiness for a meeting that is even more important, more intimate and more lasting.

Even so, the encounter is a frightening one for the people—though it need not be so:

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses. 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.' Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin' (Exodus 20:18–20).

It is the people's sin that makes them afraid to be in the presence of God, even though God has made it clear that His heart is for them to be with Him in order that they may live and not die. It is an expression of their sinfulness that they prefer to keep their distance from God, and to draw back from a true fear of God, in close relationship with Him. Nevertheless, God has been intent on bringing the people to meet Him, and the encounter happens. If the people are to meet God as He really is, then God must give them a revelation of Himself. This He does in speaking directly to them the 'ten words' in Exodus 20:1–17.¹ In these 'ten words' God communicates to His people:

- who He is in Himself:
- who He is in relationship with them:
- how they are to be accordingly in relationship with God and with each other.²

This sets out the nature and content of this meeting of God with His people, and the order of their ongoing relationship. It is the blueprint of the great enterprise. It spells out the terms of their prayer–partnership.

Once again, this is not just for the sake of Israel. God has in view what He is going to do with 'the whole earth', and how what He will do with and through Israel to impact the entire creation:

for the whole earth is mine, and you shall be to the a priestly kingdom and a holy nation,

The 'priestly' role is to lead the community in prayer and the worship of God. The worship and prayer of the whole world will be headed up in and through Israel. It is significant that 1 Peter 2:9 applies these words to those who believe in Jesus Christ:

¹ Usually translated 'the ten commandments', the literal Hebrew of Deuteronomy 4:13 is 'the ten words'. As such, they are a total communication from God, not just a list of requirements.

² For a further development of this understanding of the 'ten words', see Martin Bleby. *God's Holy Love: For Newcomers to Christian Faith* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2001). pp. 15–34. See also Geoffrey C Bingham. *The Law of Eternal Delight* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2001).

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

What difficulty and danger is there in bringing sinful people to 'meet God'?

What does God do in the face of that difficulty and danger to enable the meeting to take place?

Look at each of the 'ten words' in Exodus 20:1–17, and say how each one communicates:

- who God is in Himself,
- who God is in relationship with His people;
- how we are to be accordingly in relationship with God and with each other.

How are the people who are God's 'treasured possession out of all the peoples' to impact 'the whole world' as 'a priestly kingdom and a holy nation'?

Day 3: Exodus 24:9—11

Then he said to Moses, 'Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship at a distance. Moses alone shall come near the LORD; but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.'

Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, 'All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.' And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as

offerings of well-being to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.' Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, 'See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.'

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank.

Here again we see God determined to have His people as near to Him as possible. This time, it is at a meal with Moses, Aaron and his sons, and the elders of Israel. A meal is a sign and an experience of close fellowship. This meal, still with its built-in safeguards, foreshadows the intimacy that God intends us to have with Him as the outcome of God's great enterprise (see Isaiah 25:6—9; Matthew 22:2; 26:26—29; Revelation 19:9).

What makes this fellowship possible is a covenant, sealed in blood. We have seen how the covenant, by which God binds Himself in love to all that He has made, was established with Noah and 'all flesh' in Genesis 8:20 — 9:17 (see Week 5, Day 2, p. 51). What are the elements of the covenant made here? 'All the words that the LORD has spoken' are put in written form; the people undertake to do all these words, and to be obedient; animals are offered; and 'the blood of the covenant' links the altar and the people—the people with God. These are the elements of God's making of this covenant with His people. These, too, are a foreshadowing of the real thing. They will be taken up into the obedience and costly sacrifice of Christ (see Hebrews 10:1—25), through whom we will be able to 'approach the throne of God with boldness' (see Hebrews 4:14—16).

What impact do the elements of this covenant-making ceremony have on us?

Are they impressive drama, designed to make a point; or do they represent something real that is necessary to enable this fellowship of God with His people to occur?

Day 4: Exodus 29:38—46

Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two lambs a year old regularly each day. One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer in the evening; and with the first lamb one-tenth of a measure of choice flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of beaten oil, and one-fourth of a hin of wine for a drink offering. And the other lamb you shall offer in the evening, and shall offer with it a grain offering and its drink offering, as in the morning, for a pleasing odour, an offering by fire to the LORD. It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there. I will meet with the Israelites there, and it shall be sanctified by my glory; I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar; Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate, to serve me as priests. I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them; I am the LORD their God.

What was the reason that God brought His people Israel out of Egypt? We might say: To free them from slavery, and to bring them into the promised land (see Exodus 3:7—9). We might say that God remembered the covenant He had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and heard the cry of His oppressed people (see Exodus 2:23—25). We might go further and say that Israel was God's firstborn son, and God wanted Israel to worship Him (see Exodus 4:22—23). All of these would be true.

What is the reason, according to this passage, that God brought His people Israel out of Egypt? It was: 'that I might dwell among them'.

This perhaps lies at the heart of all the other reasons. This key outcome of God's great enterprise is spelled out in Revelation 21:3 (RSV):

Behold, the dwelling of God is with human beings. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them.

God is intent on being with His people.

The word for 'dwell' here is literally 'tabernacle'—the word used for the 'tent of meeting' that God instructed Moses to make in the wilderness. Of this tent God says:

I will meet with you, to speak to you there. I will meet with the Israelites there, and it shall be sanctified by my glory: I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar; Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate, to serve me as priests. I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God.

The whole purpose and construction of the tent, along with the ceremonies by which it was kept holy, was for it to be a place where God could dwell with His people in an ongoing way. Here God spoke with them:

When Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with the LORD, he would hear the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the covenant from between the two cherubim: thus it spoke to him (Numbers 7:89).

Once the people were settled in the promised land, God directed the tent to be replaced with the temple in Jerusalem. Its function remained the same. Solomon truly prayed at the dedication of the temple:

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have build (I Kings 8:271).

Nevertheless, even before Solomon prayed, God had already moved in!

And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud: for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD (I Kings 8:10–11).

This was the temple of which God said:

my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples (Isaiah 56:7)

—not for Israel only, but for all the nations. Jesus affirmed this in Mark 11:17. He himself is the one who came to replace the temple (see John 2:21, RSV: 'he spoke of the temple of his own body'), as the one in whom truly 'God is with us' (Matthew 1:23). Ephesians 2:13—22 speaks of the nations, together with the people of Israel, 'brought near by the blood of Christ', having 'access in one Spirit to the Father', being built into 'a holy temple in the Lord ... for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit'. This truly is God dwelling with His people.

Returning now to the tent of meeting in the wilderness, with all of this in mind, we see in this passage from Exodus 29 one instance of what went on there—the daily morning and evening sacrifice. Whatever else was happening, every morning and every evening, in this 'house of prayer' there was this regular intercourse with God. This was something God specified and Himself provided, that He wanted from Israel each day. For it was His deliberate intention 'that I might dwell among them'.³

What is our practice with regard to morning and evening prayer?

How do we see it: as a discipline? as a duty? as an obligation? as a joy?

What difference does it make to our practice of prayer to know God's determination and delight to dwell with us?

Day 5: Psalm 81

**Sing aloud to God our strength;
shout for joy to the God of Jacob.
Raise a song, sound the tambourine,
the sweet lyre with the harp.**

³ See further in Geoffrey Bingham. *The Everlasting Presence* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1990)

Blow the trumpet at the new moon,
 at the full moon, on our festal day.
 For it is a statute for Israel,
 an ordinance of the God of Jacob.
 He made it a decree in Joseph,
 when he went out over the land of Egypt.
 I hear a voice I had not known:
 'I relieved your shoulder of the burden;
 your hands were freed from the basket.
 In distress you called, and I rescued you;
 I answered you in the secret place of thunder;
 I tested you at the waters of Meribah.
 Hear, O my people, while I admonish you;
 O Israel, if you would but listen to me!
 There shall be no strange god among you;
 you shall not bow down to a foreign god.
 I am the LORD your God,
 who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.
 Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.
 'But my people did not listen to my voice;
 Israel would not submit to me.
 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts,
 to follow their own counsels.
 O that my people would listen to me,
 that Israel would walk in my ways!
 Then I would quickly subdue their enemies,
 and turn my hand against their foes.
 Those who hate the LORD would cringe before him,
 and their doom would last forever.
 I would feed you with the finest of the wheat,
 and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.'

What is it like to belong to the people God has chosen, to dwell with them?
 It is to belong to a people who are commanded to joy:

Sing aloud to God our strength: shout for joy to the God of Jacob.

Raise a song, sound the tambourine.
 the sweet lyre with the harp.
 Blow the trumpet at the new moon.
 at the full moon, on our festal day.
 For it is a statute for Israel,
 an ordinance of the God of Jacob.

The command has come with a good reason to celebrate:
 I am the LORD your God.
 who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.
 Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.

It comes also with an admonishment:
 Hear, O my people, while I admonish you:
 O Israel, if you would but listen to me!
 There shall be no strange god among you.

It is evident from this psalm that the admonition was not heeded, and that the joy was absent:

But my people did not listen to my voice;
 Israel would not submit to me.
 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts,
 to follow their own counsels.

Nevertheless, in the psalm, is there not a promise, and an appeal, that the One who relieved our shoulder of the burden, and rescued when we called, will answer us again from the secret place of His thunder?

What will it take for us as God's people to obey the command to 'Sing aloud to God our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob'?

For Group Discussion:

Let members of the group say what it means to them to belong to 'the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise'.

Among the group, or in smaller groups, do this exercise from Day 2, p. 66:

Look at each of the 'ten words' in Exodus 20:1-17, and say how each one communicates:

- who God is in Himself,
- who God is in relationship with His people;
- how we are to be accordingly in relationship with God and with each other.

Discuss the significance of blood in the making of the covenant (Day 3, p. 69).

Why should blood be necessary?

Let members of the group share with one another their answers to these questions from Day 4, p. 71:

What is our practice with regard to morning and evening prayer?

How do we see it: as a discipline? as a duty? as an obligation? as a joy?

What difference does it make to our practice of prayer to know God's determination and delight to dwell with us?

Prayer:

Pray aloud together in the words of Psalm 81 (Day 5, p. 73).

Assignment Question:

Trace in the Scriptures the people of God as those among whom God is determined to dwell. Say what effect this has had on your own approach to prayer.

Week 7

Out of the Depths

Look down from heaven and see,
 from your holy and glorious habitation.
 Where are your zeal and your might?
 The yearning of your heart and your compassion?
 They are withheld from me.
 For you are our father,
 though Abraham does not know us
 and Israel does not acknowledge us;
 you, O LORD, are our father;
 our Redeemer from of old is your name.
 Why, O LORD, do you make us stray from your ways
 and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?
 Turn back for the sake of your servants,
 for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage.
 Your holy people took possession for a little while;
 but now our adversaries have trampled down your
 sanctuary.
 We have long been like those whom you do not rule,
 like those not called by your name.
 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
 so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
 as when fire kindles brushwood
 and the fire causes water to boil
 to make your name known to your adversaries,
 so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

God's determination is to dwell with His people 'whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise'. There is a necessity then for His people that they should be fitted, in their lives and conduct, to be those among whom God dwells.

What happens when the people refuse to be fitted in their lives and conduct to be those among whom God dwells? God does not move away. Rather, God's dwelling among them then becomes a torment for them, and a judgment:

But my people did not listen to my voice;

Israel would not submit to me.

So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels

(Psalm 81:11—12; see Week 6, Day 5, p. 73).

This judgment is with a view to their calling again on God's name, to return to God and His ways. In our sin and lostness, God brings us to a point where we are constrained to call to Him 'out of the depths'.

This part of Isaiah's prophecy refers to the time in Israel's history (586 BC) when, in judgment upon their persistent faithlessness, Jerusalem and its temple would be destroyed, and the people taken into exile in Babylon:

Your holy people took possession for a little while;
but now our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. We have long been like those whom you do not rule. like those not called by your name.

It is in times of such deep trouble that we necessarily can—learn the most about ourselves, and God, and prayer. The time of the exile in Israel's history is fundamental and formative in our experience and understanding of God's relationship with us in the saving judgments of His love.

The people come to a point where they acknowledge that they have nothing of their own that can commend them to God, nothing that could qualify them to be God's people. Even Israel's founding patriarchs Abraham and Jacob would disown them:

Abraham does not know us
and Israel does not acknowledge us.

Their hope lies only in God's continuing relationship with them:

you, O LORD, are our father;

our Redeemer from of old is your name.

Their hope is that, built into God's Fathering of them from before the beginning, there is that which would not let His suffering children remain unredeemed, but would move out to them in saving action for their good. It is to this alone that appeal is made.

Jesus encouraged us to know that our Father in heaven will give good things, even to 'you ... who are evil', and urged us to act on it:

Ask, and it will be given you: search, and you will find: knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks. the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:7–11).

Part of this returning to God under judgment is to acknowledge the true mystery of God's sovereign action in and through and over all things. This is what has been denied by the rebellious heart, that has sought to replace God's sovereignty with its own. This is what now must be reinstated. The judgments that have come—even the fearful judgment of our departure from God's ways and our being hardened against God—must be seen as coming from no other hand but His:

Why, O LORD, do you make us stray from your ways
and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?

Not that our turning away and hardening ourselves have originated from God. It is from our own hearts that these things have come, for no good reason. God's judgment on hearts that persistently turn away and harden themselves against Him will be to press them through in that process to the point of no return—the point from which we cannot bring ourselves back (see Isaiah 6:9–10; compare Romans 9:15–18). The end point of our defiance is out of our hands. It is God Himself

who withholds from us His own intention and ability to carry through His promises. It is nothing in us that finally prevents God's compassion and yearning heart from coming into operation. It is by God's choice that these are withheld, in accordance with the way He has chosen to operate:

Where are your zeal and your might?

The yearning of your heart and your compassion?

They are withheld from me.

If it is God who has withheld these things, then it is God who can be appealed to for a change of action. Only if God changes and relents can our situation be reversed. The wondrous thing is that not only has God shown Himself ardently willing to change, but that He makes it so that we, in our bleak and disinclined condition, actually play a part in His change of course through our prayer. Even in this, God will not bypass us or leave us out. Even in this, God will have us as His intended prayer-partners, no matter what.

So we pray, with good grounds, 'out of the depths':

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!*

We can pray with confidence in God that He will do what He has done for His people so often before, in new ways. That God can act to bring us back, even from beyond 'the point of no return'.

We are told that a better translation would be: 'O that you had torn open the heavens ...'¹—as if to say: 'What has taken You so long? How have You let the situation become as desperate as this?' Does this sound presumptuous? Only if we hold back from a true acknowledgement of the full and free sovereignty of God. There are times when we cannot see why things should have been allowed to get as bad as they have. It is to God that these issues must be urgently

directed. If God is our Father, 'our Redeemer from of old'—even from before the foundation of the world²—then we may be confident

that, whatever His reasons for things coming to be as they are, yet it was ever God's determined intention to act in this saving way.

What has been our exile-like experience?

How have we prayed?

How would we pray now?

Day 2: Psalm 88

*O LORD, God of my salvation,
when, at night, I cry out in your presence,
let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry.
For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol.
I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.
You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all your waves.
You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a thing of horror to them.
I am shut in so that I cannot escape;
my eye grows dim through sorrow.
Every day I call on you, O LORD;
I spread out my hands to you.*

¹ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1994. p. 518.

² See Ephesians 1:4–5; I Peter 1:17–21; Revelation 13:8.

Do you work wonders for the dead?
 Do the shades rise up to praise you?
 Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,
 or your faithfulness in Abaddon?
 Are your wonders known in the darkness,
 or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?
 But I, O LORD, cry out to you;
 in the morning my prayer comes before you.
 O LORD, why do you cast me off?
 Why do you hide your face from me?
 Wretched and close to death from my youth up,
 I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.
 Your wrath has swept over me;
 your dread assaults destroy me.
 They surround me like a flood all day long;
 from all sides they close in on me.
 You have caused friend and neighbour to shun me;
 my companions are in darkness.

Psalm 88 is the one psalm that has no expression of hope in what it says. Every other psalm, no matter how grim the situation, has some positive affirmation of God's saving goodness, and gives expression to some expectation that He will act accordingly. This psalm is unrelieved suffering, gloom and confinement:

Wretched and close to death from my youth up .
 my soul is full of troubles . . .
 in the regions dark and deep ..
 my eye grows dim through sorrow . .
 I am like those who have no help
 I am shut in so that I cannot escape.

As long as we have some glimmer of hope, we may be able to fool ourselves that somehow all will be well for us, without our having to come to the end. It could be said that until we have prayed a prayer like Psalm 88, with no easy answers—with no answers at all—we have not prayed 'out of the depths'.

We know of seven words that Jesus spoke from the cross. The only one recorded in Mark's gospel is: 'My God, my God, why have

you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34). There is a place for looking just at Mark's account of the crucifixion, and sensing for a time what that meant, without the relief and promise of the other words.

The amazing thing about Psalm 88 is simply that it is prayed. That someone in this situation should be praying, and praying in this way, in itself speaks volumes for God's mercy in our misery; God's gift of faith in our faithlessness. Why would anyone in this situation pray at all, let alone to God in this way, if some revelation and conviction had not come to that person from God Himself? Especially as this person prays in this way, every day, night and morning, to the 'God of my salvation':

O LORD. God of my salvation,
 when, at night. I cry out in your presence,
 let my prayer come before you:
 incline your ear to my cry . . .
 Every day I call on you. O LORD;
 I spread out my hands to you ..
 But I, O LORD, cry out to you:
 in the morning my prayer comes before you.

This one also knows, without retort, the One from whose hands these things have come:

You have put me in the depths of the Pit ..
 Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
 and you overwhelm me with all your waves.
 You have caused my companions to shun me:
 you have made me a thing of horror to them ..
 O LORD, why do you cast me off?
 Why do you hide your face from me?
 I suffer your terrors; I am desperate .. .
 Your wrath has swept over me;
 your dread assaults destroy me .. .
 You have caused friend and neighbour to shun me.

God is the One who has done all this, and so God is the One to whom appeal is made to save from it. While no answers are given to this one's questions about the prevalence of God's 'wonders', 'steadfast love', 'faithfulness' and 'saving help' in the realm of death—are these things known there?—their very mention here indicates that these things, also, are known to be in God's hands.

Have we ever drawn back from saying before God how things really are for us?

Could that be because we suspect that God is not equal to them?

Day 3: Psalm 139

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
 You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O LORD, you know it completely.
 You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is so high that I cannot attain it.
 Where can I go from your spirit?
 Or where can I flee from your presence?
 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
 if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
 If I take the wings of the morning
 and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
 even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.
 If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light around me become night,'
 even the darkness is not dark to you;
 the night is as bright as the day,
 for darkness is as light to you.
 For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;
 that I know very well.
 My frame was not hidden from you,
 when I was being made in secret,

intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
 In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed.
 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
 How vast is the sum of them!
 I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
 I come to the end—I am still with you.
 O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
 and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—
 those who speak of you maliciously,
 and lift themselves up against you for evil!
 Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?
 And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
 I hate them with perfect hatred;
 I count them my enemies.
 Search me, O God, and know my heart;
 test me and know my thoughts.
 See if there is any wicked way in me,
 and lead me in the way everlasting.

This psalm gives the simultaneous other side to Psalm 88—from God's point of view. It comes from one who readily knows God's inescapable presence in every situation.

Before Jesus went to the cross to cry that terrible cry of Mark 15:34: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' he also said these words:

The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me (John 16:32).

'Forsaken', yet 'not alone'—even in the depths of the suffering and abandonment of the cross? How can we understand this? Yet unless we see the Father fully present in the action of that cross, bringing to bear on the Son, through the eternal Spirit, the forsakenness of every lost sinner, to bring them to salvation, we will not know God as He really is. It is by virtue of this that this prayer of the presence—Psalm 139—can be prayed by us.

Lest we take these words to some kind of pious and sentimental comfort to us, let us be aware that it is a prayer of one who has tried to get away from God (we are reminded of the prophet Jonah) and has failed in the attempt, hemmed in by God:

Where can I go from your spirit?
 Or where can I flee from your presence?
 If I ascend to heaven, you are there:
 if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
 If I take the wings of the morning
 and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
 even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.
 If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light around me become night?
 even the darkness is not dark to you;
 the night is as bright as the day,
 for darkness is as light to you.

It is the prayer of one who has found that even our inner thoughts and actions are exposed to God's scrutiny:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up:
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
 You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O LORD, you know it completely.
 You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me:
 it is so high that I cannot attain it.

None of this is necessarily very comfortable.

It is the prayer of one who, through all this, has come to know the reality and wonder and purpose of God's creation of us:

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;
 that I know very well.
 My frame was not hidden from you,

when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
 In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed.

The purpose of God is that we should be those to whom God is directly present, and that there should be direct thought—communication—prayer—between us, in both directions. How wonderful is that!

How weighty to me are your thoughts.
 O God! How vast is the sum of them!
 I try to count them—they are more than the sand:
 I come to the end—I am still with you . . .
 Search me. O God, and know my heart:
 test me and know my thoughts.

This psalm is also the prayer of a person who has come to be one with God in God's 'perfect hatred' of all evil:

O that you would kill the wicked. O God,
 and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—
 those who speak of you maliciously,
 and lift themselves up against you for evil!
 Do I not hate those who hate you. O LORD?
 And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
 I hate them with perfect hatred;
 I count them my enemies.

This 'perfect hatred' no doubt includes the evil that this one has only too readily participated in, before being rescued from it by God. God's help must still be sought against the evil that, even now, lies all too readily to hand (compare Romans 7:21–25):

See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

How have we tried to get away from God?

How have we known God's presence with us nonetheless? How does Psalm 139 sit with Psalm 88?

How does John 16:32 sit with Mark 15:34?

Day 4: Jeremiah 15:15—21

O LORD, you know;
 remember me and visit me,
 and bring down retribution for me on my persecutors.
 In your forbearance do not take me away;
 know that on your account I suffer insult.
 Your words were found, and I ate them,
 and your words became to me a joy
 and the delight of my heart;
 for I am called by your name,
 O LORD, God of hosts.
 I did not sit in the company of merry-makers, nor did I rejoice;
 under the weight of your hand I sat alone,
 for you had filled me with indignation.
 Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable,
 refusing to be healed?
 Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, I
 like waters that fail.
 Therefore thus says the LORD:
 If you turn back, I will take you back,
 and you shall stand before me.
 If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless,
 you shall serve as my mouth.
 It is they who will turn to you,
 not you who will turn to them.
 And I will make you to this people
 a fortified wall of bronze;
 they will fight against you,
 but they shall not prevail over you,
 for I am with you to save you and deliver you,
 says the LORD.
 I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked,
 and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.

Jeremiah was the prophet who, for the forty years leading up to the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of its people, was

appointed by God to prophesy and warn of these events—to tell the people the one thing they did not want to hear. They gave him a hard time for it, and sometimes it got the better of him—as we see here.

Jeremiah is on close speaking terms with the Lord, and he tells Him all about it. He is one who delights in God's word, because he delights in God ('I am called by your name, O LORD'). He has been faithful in speaking it out—unpalatable as it has been—and he has been content to suffer the isolation and marginalisation that have come as a consequence.

The 'pain unceasing' and the 'wound incurable' are probably more than just the suffering brought on him by others. It is an inner thing that he is unable to shake off. It may have to do with the impending fate of Jerusalem, which Jeremiah cannot help but feel deeply and personally. It could be that he is experiencing something of God's own grief and pain regarding His beloved city, that the Lord has laid on His prophet to bear with Him. Such can be the case for those whom God calls to prayer-partnership with Himself.

It is under the burden of this pain that Jeremiah breaks, and utters these words to God:

Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook,
 like waters that fail.

It is at this point that the Lord breaks into Jeremiah's prayer. For all that Jeremiah has said that is commendable and true, this falsehood must be rebuked. In uttering these words, Jeremiah has effectively turned his back on God, and disqualified himself for any further prophetic service. He is immediately called to account:

Therefore thus says the LORD:
 If you turn back, I will take you back,
 and you shall stand before me.

God both rebukes Jeremiah, and offers him immediate reinstatement as a prophet:

If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless,
 you shall serve as my mouth.

Only then does the Lord answer Jeremiah's prayer with regard to those who persecute him.

Jesus once said of such words that denigrate God and His saving work, ‘You will have to give an account for every careless word you utter’ (Matthew 12:36)—notwithstanding the pressure under which we may utter them. The closer we are to God, the sooner He is on the spot to set the record straight, and keep us on track. That, too, is His great mercy.

What experiences have we had of God making clear to us that we have spoken out of turn?

Days: Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
 Lord, hear my voice!
 Let your ears be attentive
 to the voice of my supplications!
 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
 Lord, who could stand?
 But there is forgiveness with you,
 so that you may be revered.
 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
 and in his word I hope;
 my soul waits for the Lord
 more than those who watch for the morning,
 more than those who watch for the morning.
 O Israel, hope in the LORD!
 For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
 and with him is great power to redeem.
 It is he who will redeem Israel
 from all its iniquities.

The mystery and miracle of God’s grace is that we are enabled to pray ‘out of the depths’ to which we have been brought by our God—renouncing sin and by God’s judgment upon us in it. Even more, it is that God should hear and answer this prayer with such overwhelmingly total forgiveness, that He has prepared and held in readiness from before the foundation of the world—the forgiveness that is secured to us in the death of Jesus on the cross. Without this, and the

grace that enables it, we would never come out of the pit. As Corrie ten Boom discovered in a Nazi concentration camp where her sister died, ‘There is no pit so deep, that God is not deeper’.

‘There is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.’ The word is ‘feared’. This sounds like being afraid of God. That is certainly part of it: we know that God’s judgments are real, and we rightly fear them. Especially once we know that God’s forgiveness has come to us through the fearful judgment of the cross. The rightful outcome of this is glad obedience to all the good will and purpose and commandment of God. The ‘fear of the Lord’ almost invariably in the Bible is linked with obeying the great and wonderful law of God—being with God in all that He is and all that He does.

Once the assurance of such a redemption, of such a redeeming God, has reached us in the darkness, through His word, then this God and His action is vastly worth waiting for—even through the time when nothing outwardly appears to have changed. This is not a resigned waiting and hoping for the best. It is an eager expectation:

**my soul waits for the Lord
 more than those who watch for the morning,
 more than those who watch for the morning.**

Even through the darkness of the dead of night, in full expectation of the coming day, such watchers will cry out to all who will hear:

**O Israel, hope in the LORD!
 For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
 and with him is great power to redeem.
 It is he who will redeem Israel
 from all its iniquities.**

‘There is no pit so deep, that God is not deeper’. What can you think of in the Bible, and in your own experience, that bears out this truth?

For Group Discussion:

Go back over the reading and notes for Day I: Isaiah 63:15—64:3 (pp. 77f) and trace the following elements:

the judgment of God on people’s faithlessness and refusal of God and His ways;

- people's acknowledgement that they have nothing of their own that
Assignment Question: can commend them to God:

- the relationship between God being Father and Redeemer:
- the mystery of God's sovereign action in and through and over all things;
- God's part in our going astray and our being hardened:
- God's willingness to change His course of action:
- the place of our prayer in this change, and God's action in that.

What aspects of this resonate with our own experience and understanding of life?

Which aspects appear strange to us?

'Until we have prayed a prayer like Psalm 88, with no easy answers—with no answers at all—we have not prayed "out of the depths" ' (Day 2, pp. 81ff.). Why should it come to this? Is there a way around it?

Let members of the group discuss their answers to these questions from Day 3 (p. 84):

- How have we tried to get away from God?
- How have we known God's presence with us nonetheless!
- How does Psalm 139 sit with Psalm 88?
- How does John 16:32 sit with Mark 15:34?

In what ways do we identify with Jeremiah in Jeremiah 15:15–21 (Day 4, p. 88)?

Prayer:

Give members of the group opportunity to pray in their own words from some aspect of what has been covered this week that has impacted them.

Assignment Question:

Identify and comment upon the elements of God's being and action that are evident in Isaiah 63:15 – 64:3

Week 8

God the Intervener

Day 1: Isaiah 59:14—21

Justice is turned back,
 and righteousness stands at a distance;
 for truth stumbles in the public square,
 and uprightness cannot enter.
 Truth is lacking,
 and whoever turns from evil is despoiled.
 The LORD saw it,
 and it displeased him that there was no justice.
 He saw that there was no one,
 and was appalled that there was no one to intervene;
 so his own arm brought him victory,
 and his righteousness upheld him.
 He put on righteousness like a breastplate,
 and a helmet of salvation on his head;
 he put on garments of vengeance for clothing,
 and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle.
 According to their deeds, so will he repay;
 wrath to his adversaries, requital to his enemies;
 to the coastlands he will render requital.
 So those in the west shall fear the name of the LORD,
 and those in the east, his glory;
 for he will come like a pent-up stream
 that the wind of the LORD drives on.
 God the Intervener

And he will come to Zion as Redeemer,
 to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the LORD.

And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the LORD: my spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouths of your children, or out of the mouths of your children's children, says the LORD, from now on and forever.

What is God to do when we are so far gone that we are unable to help ourselves? When it is the very notion that we can 'help ourselves' without God that has brought us to this impasse?

The Lord is facing here the complete moral collapse of justice and truth in public and private life, which leaves no quarter for those who are upright, but rather endangers them:

Justice is turned back,
 and righteousness stands at a distance;
 for truth stumbles in the public square,
 and uprightness cannot enter.
 Truth is lacking,
 and whoever turns from evil is despoiled.

This situation is displeasing to God. The evil of sin is personally abhorrent to Him. Even more devastating to God is the recognition of our total helplessness in it—so far degraded from the stature He made us for; that is, to be those who are with Him in all that He is doing:

The LORD saw it,
 and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one,
 and was appalled that there was no one to intervene.

'To *intervene*'/'interpose' means to stand between people and the consequences of their moral collapse.'¹ It is the word translated

¹ Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, p. 491.

elsewhere as ‘intercede’ (Isaiah 53:12; see Day 2, p. 97). It has connotations of making contact with something, or engaging with some person or activity; to be on the spot. This helps us to understand what ‘intercession’ means, on God’s part and on ours, when we use that word in connection with prayer.

This action of intervention God now takes upon Himself:

so his own arm brought him victory. and his righteousness upheld him.

God’s saving action here, as is to be expected, is entirely consistent with His righteous nature as ‘our father; our Redeemer from of old’ (Isaiah 63:16; see Week 7, Day 1, p. 77). This is depicted by the armour in which He clothes Himself—all elements of God’s inner being and outward action. ‘Righteousness like a breastplate’ means that all that God does to save us will satisfy the demands of His holy righteousness. ‘A helmet of salvation’ indicates God’s determination to act for our good. ‘Garments of vengeance’ means that evil opposition will be fully requited—it will get away with nothing. ‘Fury [zeal] as in a mantle’ means that this action will be carried through, no matter what. God’s saving action will include a final reckoning with all that remain opposed to Him—the burning hostility of His wrath against all evil will be applied in exact and just measure.

The outcome is a wonderful fear of the Lord and His glory; that is, the honouring of God as He really is, in glad obedience and participation in His great enterprise (see Week 7, Day 5, p. 90). The protective and saving presence of the Lord is with all who turn to Him from their transgression.

How is this to come about? In the final part of this passage, the Lord speaks of His covenant with His people (see Week 5, Day 2, p. 51; Week 6, Day 3, p. 69). This covenant here is identified with a person, whom the Lord addresses directly. This person is one upon whom God has put His Spirit, and to whom God has given His word. God undertakes that these will abide with this one, and with His ‘children’, forever. This introduces in Isaiah’s prophecy the figure of the anointed conqueror, through whom God intervenes to save His people from their horrible plight; just as earlier the prophet has shown one identified as the Lord’s ‘servant’, to whom the Spirit has been

given (Isaiah 42:1—4; 49:1—2; 50:4), through whom many ‘offspring’ are made righteous (Isaiah 53:10—11; see Day 2).

What is entailed in God’s ‘intervention’?

How does that enlighten us as to the true nature of ‘intercession’?

Day 2: Isaiah 53:3—12

*He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised,
and we held him of no account.
Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,*

and there was no deceit in his mouth.
 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.
 When you make his life an offering for sin,
 he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
 through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.
 Out of his anguish he shall see light;
 he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
 The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
 and he shall bear their iniquities.
 Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
 and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
 because he poured out himself to death,
 and was numbered with the transgressors;
 yet he bore the sin of many,
 and made intercession for the transgressors.

Why is it that God's intervention/intercession should take this so very personal form, and involve such deep suffering, on behalf of so wide a constituency?

We can know and accept it as the intervening action of God only when 'the arm of the LORD' is revealed to us in this happening (see Isaiah 53:1). It is not recognised or acknowledged by us otherwise: 'we held him of no account . . . we accounted him . . . [deservedly] struck down by God'. So lost and perverted are we in our sin that we cannot even see the one who has come to save us, without this revelation from God.

The revelation comes that it is 'our transgressions . . . our iniquities . . . punishment' that are being atoned for here: 'the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all'. The word for 'laid' here is the same word as that for 'intercession/intervention' in the last line of the passage.² Here is the engagement; here is the meeting-point. God causes all the converging lines of our iniquity to meet in this one, and there He engages with all that limits and deforms our lives, with all that prevents us from fulfilling what He has made us to be. Here God engages with us, to make full and right reckoning and satisfaction.

Only in this way, it would seem, in this one, in our flesh, could God confront our wilful rebellion, in all its perversion of justice, in all its physical brutality, even to ignominious death, and completely turn us around. Only in this one who, without violence or deceit, without refusal, willingly consents to bear purely and in love this necessary infliction on behalf of the many, can the human race be restored and taken on to its true dignity and place in God's purpose.

Thus 'intercession' was made for us as transgressors, by the one who, at the behest of God, numbered himself with us, and poured out himself to death. He shouldered our sin and its terrible judgment in his own body. He interposed himself to become the meeting-point between sinful offenders and the offended God. From both sides of that meeting, the righteousness of God prevailed, and was fulfilled. The intimate presence of God with His people was established and secured forever, with no barrier remaining. The one who 'poured out himself to death' will now 'prolong his days'—death has been over-come. 'He shall see his offspring'—the many children who have been made righteous by the righteous one. 'Through him the will of the LORD shall prosper'—God's purposes for his creation, in partnership with his redeemed people, can now be carried through.

Has 'the arm of the LORD been revealed' to us in the action of the Cross?

Are we willing to admit that 'he was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities'?

Do we acknowledge that 'it was the will of the LORD' to bring him to this weakness and crushing in his identification with us?

Do we know that his death was our (deserved) death, and that we are now apportioned to him in his prolonged days?

What more do we now understand about God's 'intercession', and ours?

Day 3: Luke 22:28—34

'You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a

² Motyer. P. 431

kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded [or has obtained permission] to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.' And he said to him, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!' Jesus said, 'I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.'

Here we see one practical outcome of God's intervention for us in Jesus. Simon (Peter) and the other disciples have been brought by Jesus into God's kingdom—action. By his calling, and their response to it, they stand with Jesus in what he is undergoing. Through him it is given to them to participate significantly in God's great enterprise, even in a ruling capacity. This does not mean that they have thereby any inherent resistance to evil or any capability of right action of themselves—they stand only ever by faith in the one who has placed them there, in union with him. They are powerless before Satan and whatever is given to Satan to attempt with regard to them. Jesus' intercession for Peter is what upholds them: 'I have prayed for you that your own faith will not fail'.

Did Peter's faith fail? His almost immediate denial of Jesus, on the heels of his avid profession of loyalty, brought him great shame. To Peter, and to us, it would appear that his faith was not worth a cracker. That is, if we see faith as dependent on our own faithfulness. True faith is a gift that is grounded in God's own covenant—faithfulness to us, secured forever in God's intervention on our behalf in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. It is proof against all sin and evil: this intervention brings about the forgiveness of sin and the defeat of the evil powers. That is what Jesus prayed would not fail for Peter, and it did not fail. God's gift of this faith to Peter held against the attack of Satan, and against Peter's own shameful sin, and secured Peter to be able, after Jesus' resurrection, to strengthen his brothers in this faith—in the ongoing action of the great enterprise of God's kingdom.

How do we stand with Jesus in God's kingdom?

What moral or devotional capability do we have of ourselves?

What is the faith by which we are secured against evil and sin?

What is the power of Jesus' intercession for us?

Day 4: Mark 15:33—38

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.' Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

In the darkness and confusion that surrounds Jesus' death on a cross, a terrible cry rings out from the crucified one, that tells something of the fearful cost of what was happening there. A human being, identified in love and suffering with the whole human race, has entered into the unthinkable and unbearable total separation from God that must be the ultimate judgment on us who have attempted to live without God. That, we would think, is the end.

Shortly before he went to go to that desolated place, Jesus said to his disciples:

The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me (John 16:32).

The Father was with the Son in that fearful action of the cross—even in the bringing to bear of that terrifying abandonment. The cost borne by the Son was borne no less by the Father, and also by the Spirit (see Hebrews 9:14).

What was happening in God at the time of that terrible cry of Jesus, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me’? One bold attempt to describe it is in Geoffrey Bingham’s *Bright Bird and Shining Sails*.³ God and His people are seen in vision form as a ship, with the Father as the centre sail, the Son as the rear sail, and the Spirit as the forward sail, doubling as a bright bird. The ‘great suffering’ of the cross is being depicted:

It was then I looked at the ship. Stark steady it was, and no movement. What I had not seen was the white centre sail move backwards until it covered the rear sail. I cannot deny that it bent down and covered and sheltered and protected and hid the smaller sail within its great self. But then I must say that at the moment of highest anguish—that moment of suffering—a terrible thing happened. It was as though the sail sprang apart in horror, and down through the body of the vessel the great rift suddenly appeared. In my horror I thought the vessel was divided and one part falling away from another. I screamed within and looked away.

There was a sound like a mighty rending, and when I looked back, fearful, I saw high flames shooting up, and a stupendous roar, and a ripping and cracking and the sound of terrible tearing, and all the sky grew black, and the flames leapt high, and the ship swirled and swirled and swirled, turning on its keel like a mad thing, until I was giddy with the swirling, turning movement of it. and my heart was so sick with pain that I was nigh to a mortal retching.

I turned away, breathing with a hot, dry breathing and sobbing so that there was a tearing sound in my own chest. I had to turn and look again, and when I did I could not believe what I saw.

The white vessel was riding on the waters with a serenity I had never seen surpassed. Its white shining flowed out beyond itself, flowing out to all the creation. When I looked for where the crack and the rift had been there was no sign that it had ever been, and I felt like a man in a dream, when the dream has passed and the terror has gone, and unexpected joy presents itself . . .

One thing I did know. Love was pouring out from where he had been, out of the place of the deep sorrow, and the great suffering. It was also pouring into me. until I was filled. It kept pouring, spilling out of me, and across the land, even into the ocean. It kept overflowing, and I thought that the supply of it would be enough for the whole world, and even beyond it and in that I was correct. It was enough for then, and for the coming-time, and for the time-yet to-be. In fact that love must surely be for ever.

Such vision-language may not be everyone’s cup-of-tea. It may be misleading even to print it. Suffice it to say that the entire resources of

the Godhead were expended in that action for us. Nothing was held back. The Father gave until He had nothing more that He could give. The Son gave his all, until he had nothing left. The Spirit’s resources were strained to the uttermost to carry through what happened there. This was God’s intervention/intercession for us.

In the end, there was nothing left to separate us from God and the action of His great purposes: ‘the curtain of the temple’, which had separated the innermost sanctuary of God from the people, ‘was torn in two, from top to bottom’.

As the apostle Paul said, ‘If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold His own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?’ (Romans 8:31–32)—now, and on to the age to come.

Why was the abandonment necessary?

What are the implications of Jesus saying both, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ and, ‘I am not alone, because the Father is with me’?

What was the cost to God of God’s intercession/intervention for us?

Days.: Psalm 18:1—19

I love you, O LORD, my strength.

The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,

my God, my rock in whom I take refuge,

my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised,

so I shall be saved from my enemies.

The cords of death encompassed me;

the torrents of perdition assailed me;

the cords of Sheol entangled me;

the snares of death confronted me.

In my distress I called upon the LORD;

to my God I cried for help.

From his temple he heard my voice,

and my cry to him reached his ears.

³ NCPI, Blackwood. 1981, p. 48

Then the earth reeled and rocked;
 the foundations also of the mountains trembled
 and quaked, because he was angry.
 Smoke went up from his nostrils,
 and devouring fire from his mouth;
 glowing coals flamed forth from him.
 He bowed the heavens, and came down;
 thick darkness was under his feet.
 He rode on a cherub, and flew;
 he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.
 He made darkness his covering around him,
 his canopy thick clouds dark with water.
 Out of the brightness before him
 there broke through his clouds
 hailstones and coals of fire.
 The LORD also thundered in the heavens,
 and the Most High uttered his voice.
 And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them;
 he flashed forth lightnings, and routed them.
 Then the channels of the sea were seen,
 and the foundations of the world were laid bare
 at your rebuke, O LORD,
 at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.

He reached down from on high, he took me;
 he drew me out of mighty waters.
 He delivered me from my strong enemy,
 and from those who hated me;
 for they were too mighty for me.
 They confronted me in the day of my calamity;
 but the LORD was my support.
 He brought me out into a broad place;
 he delivered me, because he delighted in me.

From what we have seen in this week's readings of God as Intervener, David had good grounds to 'call upon the LORD' as 'my rock, my fortress . . . my shield, and the horn of my salvation'. We recognise his situation, entangled in 'the cords of Sheol' and confronted by 'the

snares of death', as the deep troubles of his sin. His calling upon the Lord in his distress is the cry for help 'out of the depths'—depths from which he cannot extricate himself.

God's answer to this prayer seems beyond all proportion to the prayer itself: 'the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled . . . Smoke . . . from his nostrils . . . devouring fire from his mouth . . . glowing coals . . . He bowed the heavens . . .

darkness . . . thick clouds . . . hailstones and coals of fire . . . The LORD also thundered in the heavens . . . uttered his voice . . . arrows . . . lightnings . . . the channels of the sea . . . the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, O LORD'. We can imagine David saying: It was only a little prayer, Lord—you didn't need to go to all that trouble!

God answers: I know the trouble I must go to; and I will move heaven and earth—even to the foundations of my own being—to raise you up and bring you to Myself.

God's decisive action here, 'in the day of my calamity', is in keeping with what He has done in the death and resurrection of his Son. It also matches what happens to us when we hear the gospel and are saved by God through repentance, faith and baptism into Christ:

He reached down from on high, he took me;
 he drew me out of mighty waters.
 He delivered me from my strong enemy . . .
 He brought me out into a broad place;
 he delivered me, because he delighted in me.

What we are talking about here is what is called in the New Testament being born again, from above, by the Spirit of God, through believing in the one who was lifted up to die on the cross, and was raised from death (see John 1:12—13; 3:1—21; James 1:18; I Peter 1:3). It is when we have come into that position that we can truly begin the work of prayer, for which we have been made. Geoffrey Bingham says in his book *Come Let Us Pray*:

We can see, now, that the only one who can have true dialogue with God is the one who has been redeemed from his fallen state, has a new heart and mind, an understanding of God, one whose sins have been forgiven and whose person has been justified, and who lives in the context of the Father and God's people

in faith, hope and love, under the Lordship of Christ, and led by the Holy Spirit.

Let us not hold ourselves back from that, or do anything that will withhold it from others! ‘One whose sins have been forgiven and whose person has been justified’—this is the person who prays truly, rather than those who trust in themselves that they are righteous (see Week 4 on ‘False Prayer’, pp. 33ff.). This justified person is the ‘righteous’ one whose prayer is ‘powerful and effective’ (James 5:16). Geoffrey Bingham goes on to say:

We do not mean that the ungodly cannot have dialogue with God, but it will be a hostile, accusing and complaining dialogue because all meditation has not been upon His true nature and wisdom. Because guilt always brings a sense of alienation from God—as though He does not love the person—the one conversing with God cannot utter true prayer, and so cannot expect answers from God, although God as Creator–Father–King may well answer prayer, even if not in the way the petitioner demands.

And he concludes:

true prayer is that dialogue we have with God when in union with Him.⁴

Have we been born again forgiven and justified by God?

Do we know the trouble God has gone to in order to raise us up and bring us to Himself?

Do we know that God loves us, or do we still have a sense of alienation from God?

Are we in union with God?

For Group Discussion:

Begin by asking each person to say one thing that struck them in a new way in this week’s materials, and follow where this leads. Let members of the group reflect on each day’s readings and notes by sharing their answers to the questions asked for each day.

Prayer:

Pray aloud Psalm 18:1—19 (Day 5, p. 103).

All read together to 7 shall be saved from my enemies’ (vv. 1—3). One person read to ‘my cry to him reached his ears’ (vv. 4—6). All read to ‘at the blast of the breath of your nostrils’ (vv. 7—15). One person read to ‘because he delighted in me’ (vv. 16—19).

Then, after some silence, let members of the group pray aloud in their own words.

Assignment Question:

Make a study of the word ‘intercession/intervention’ in the Scriptures.

Relate it to the action of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and to the outcome of that in your own life.

⁴ Bingham, *Come Let Us Pray*, pp. 62–3.

Week 9

The Prayer of the Son-1

Day I: Psalm 2

Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and his anointed, saying,
'Let us burst their bonds asunder,
and cast their cords from us.'

He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the LORD has them in derision.
Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
'I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.'

I will tell of the decree of the LORD:
He said to me, 'You are my son;
today I have begotten you.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
You shall break them with a rod of iron,
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.'

Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
Serve the LORD with fear,

with trembling kiss his feet,
or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way;
for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Happy are all who take refuge in him.

What we are calling 'God's great enterprise' is described by Paul the apostle as 'to win obedience from the nations' (Romans 15:18). Grace and apostleship were given to Paul and others 'to bring about the obedience of faith among all the nations for the sake of his name'; that is, for the sake of 'Jesus Christ [Messiah] our Lord' who was 'declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead' (Romans 1:4—5). This is 'the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith' (Romans 16:25—26).

This outworking of God's purpose is in keeping with God's intention in calling Abraham as the one in whom, through his off-spring, 'all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Genesis 12:2—3, 7; 17:5—7; compare Galatians 3:8, 16, 14). It goes back even further, to the original blessing of the human race to 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth' (Genesis 1:28); that is, to take what they had in Eden, the blessings of being with God in His presence and action, to the ends of the earth, so that 'the earth will be filled with the know-ledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea' (Habakkuk 2:14; compare Numbers 14:21).

This plan and purpose of God is centred on an 'offspring', a Son, anointed by God as king ('Messiah') over all the nations. This is the specific thrust of the promise made by God to David in 2 Samuel 7:12—14:

I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and t will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

Most important will be the relationship of this person with God Him-self:

I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

This is the one through whom God's purpose will be established in all the earth.

At the beginning of Psalm 2, we see the nations in concerted opposition to God and His anointed Messiah. In keeping with our defiant rebellion in the beginning, determined to make ourselves as the Most High (see Genesis 3:1—6; compare Isaiah 14:13—14), the nations refuse this great commission from God, and set themselves against it.

The reality that God is God, and we are not, and that God's purposes of blessing and love will not be deterred, render this opposition ridiculous, offensive, and doomed to failure. The Son himself speaks of his relationship with the Father God, and all that the Father will place in his hands. The nations are urged to find their true exaltation and happiness in wise and loving submission to the Father and his Son, or else 'perish in the way'.

Of particular interest to us at this point is the prayer-relationship between the Father and his Son. The Father says to the one who is in relationship with Him as Son:

*Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
You shall break them with a rod of iron,
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.*

The Son is bidden by the Father to make no small request, which the Father is more than willing to grant—the power to bring about the faithful obedience of the nations and, where this is refused, to administer the fearful alternative.

Nor is this restricted to this one alone. In Revelation 2:26—28, a similar undertaking is given by the Son to those who belong with him:

*To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end,
I will give authority over the nations;
to rule [or to shepherd] them with an iron rod,
as when clay pots are shattered
even as I also received authority from my Father.*

As we come now to consider Jesus and his prayer in this great enterprise of God, we thus see both what the Father has promised to the Son, and what the Son has come to bring us into with him.

What is to be the prayer of the Son in Psalm 2?

What does this tell us about the Father's purpose and love?

How does it come to be that we are bidden to pray a similar prayer?
What might that mean for us?

Day 2: John 5:15—30

The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath. But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is still working, and I also am working.' For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.

Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, so that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Anyone who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.

'Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in him-self; and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be astonished at this;

for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

‘I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.’

Jesus’ statement, ‘My Father is still working, and I also am working’, sets the context for Jesus’ prayer–relationship with the Father. The Son is truly in partnership with the Father in this great enterprise. Yet he is never there as an independent player. He seeks always to do ‘the will of him who sent me’—to do ‘only what he sees the Father doing’, to judge only as he hears from the Father, with the authority that the Father has given him, in all the life that the Father ‘has granted the Son’ to have. By the same token, ‘the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing’, holding nothing back. Jesus has already said in John 3:35: ‘The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands’.

All this is given to the Son ‘because he is the Son of Man’; that is, the true human being. Hence this also delineates the pattern of true humanity in prayer–partnership with God in this great enterprise. The partnership with God that Jesus brings us into will have all of these marks about it. It will never be an independent action: ‘I can do nothing on my own’. It will be the Father’s initiative, in accordance with the Father’s will. It will be in a way that honours the Son, and honours the Father.

It will be with a view to the hearing of the Son’s word that brings faith and eternal life for all who willingly hear. It will be a participation in the ‘greater works’—the ultimate resurrection of all, and the final judgment. With respect to these ‘greater works’, Jesus says in John 14:10–14:

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will

do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask (me) for anything, I will do it.

We are to do the works of the Father, that are done in the Son! This puts our prayer in a very broad context indeed.

I will do whatever you ask in my name, **so that the Father may be glorified in the Son**’ (John 14:13). What constraint, and what enabling, does that place on ‘whatever you ask’?

Day3: Luke 6:12–20

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said: ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.’

Now that we have identified the context of Jesus’ prayer, in terms of his relationship with the Father in all the purposes of God, we can look at his actual practice of prayer. It would be a mistake to look just at Jesus’ practice of prayer and to think that, by imitating that, we would be truly praying. Nevertheless, even though we are given only a small number of privileged glimpses into Jesus’ practice of prayer, we cannot help but be impressed.

We read that ‘he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God’. It seems that this was a constant practice of Jesus, especially before times of significant decision and ministry. Mark 1:35 tells us:

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

On that occasion, Jesus had begun an extensive ministry of healing in one place, which we might expect should have continued there. His prayer gave rise to the decision: ‘Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do’. Note how this time spent in prayer with the Father issued in action that furthered God’s great enterprise: ‘he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons’.

The significant action that arose from Jesus’ prayer here in Luke 6 was the choosing of the twelve apostles. Few things could have been more germane to the purposes of God with His people. Not least because these twelve are some of those poor and needy for whom God had anointed him with the Spirit of the Lord:

to bring good news to the poor. .. to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour (Luke 4:16–21).

For Jesus goes on to look up at his disciples and say to them: ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God’. Poor, captive, blind and oppressed as they were, these were the ones who would have particular responsibility to proclaim in deed and word the sovereign rule of God over the nations. Jesus needed to be clear as to who were the ones that the Father had chosen to bring his kingdom to in this way—the people who sat in darkness’ who, according to the prophecy, were to see ‘a great light’ (see Matthew 4:12–22; quoting Isaiah 9:1–2).

Complicating this was the inclusion of Judas Iscariot, designated here already as the one ‘who became a traitor’. Whether this was known to Jesus at this time or not, Jesus could not have been unaware of Psalm 41:9 that said: ‘Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted,

who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me’ (compare John 13:18). Jesus had to leave himself open to that risk; and the Father’s purpose would need to be fulfilled ‘as it is written of him’ (Mark 14:21). A whole night spent in prayer to God would not be too much, considering the import of these matters.

Not only does this prayer issue in the choosing of the twelve, but also in the curing of ‘those who were troubled with unclean spirits’ and all in the crowd that were trying to touch him, ‘for power came out from him and healed all of them’. It also gave rise to the profound teaching of Luke 6:20–49, known as ‘the sermon on the plain’.

We notice generally that when Jesus was faced with the need for healing he rarely, if ever, prayed on the spot. He simply went ahead and healed:

Jesus did not pray at the time of his miracles. If we trace the miracles and work that he did, we must conclude that he prayed at times other than the healing event. That is, he lived constantly in holy dialogue with his Father so that he knew the mind of God and was strengthened and sustained by this habitual converse. Doubtless, too, he had special seasons of prayer by which he kept understanding the will of God, and so was not caught in surprise or bewilderment when confronted by unusual events.¹

An instance of this is given in Jesus’ healing of a boy with a disabling unclean spirit that his disciples had been unable to cast out (Matthew 17:14–21; Mark 9:14–21; Luke 9:37–43). When his disciples asked why they could not cast the demon out, Jesus emphasised the importance of faith and of prayer. Geoffrey Bingham comments:

An old manuscript of Matthew 17:21 has. ‘But this kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting’. It is obvious that when confronted with a difficult case for exorcism and healing, one would not then commence prayer and fasting. Jesus must have meant, ‘If you pray and fast regularly and habitually, then your faith will be strong and you will be prepared to meet any difficult situation or contingency’, for this was how it was with him.²

This tells us something we need to know about the nature of a prayer-partner’s relationship with God. It is more than an intermittent

¹ Bingham, *Come Let Us Pray*, p. 71

² Bingham. *Come Let Us Pray*, p. 72

‘checking-in’, though times and seasons of prayer are obviously necessary. It is a whole way of living or, virtually, of breathing.

How does Jesus’ practice of prayer relate to our own practice of prayer?

Day 4--: Luke 90:1324

‘Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sack-cloth and ashes. But at the judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

And you, Capernaum,
will you be exalted to heaven?

No, you will be brought down to Hades.

‘Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.’

The seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!’ He said to them, ‘I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.’

At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.’ Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, ‘Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and

kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.’

Here we see Jesus praying through the highs and lows of ministry. In the opening words of this passage, Jesus upbraids the towns of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum for rejecting his ministry. Capernaum— was his home base in Galilee, where he had made his headquarters. To be rejected there and in the towns of the nearby region would have been a severe blow and disappointment for him—an apparent failure in ministry. Even so, Jesus’ concern is not for himself, but for the judgment they are bringing upon themselves for their rejection of him and his disciples—which is ultimately their fearful rejection of God the Father who sent him.

Alongside this is the return of the seventy or so of his followers whom he has sent on ahead of himself to the towns and places where he is about to go. Their mission has been a wonderful success. They are greatly heartened by the power of Jesus’ name that they have exercised over evil spirits. Jesus affirms for them this victory over Satan. Even so, his chief concern is for the disciples to know and rejoice in the Father’s choosing and securing of them: ‘that your names are written in heaven’.

Both of these—the adversity and the triumph—Jesus brings to the Father in prayer. The tone of his praying is set by the words, ‘Father, Lord of heaven and earth’ and ‘Father . . . such was your gracious will’. The Father is the ‘Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them’ (Acts 4:24), the one who ‘accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will’ (Ephesians I: 11). Good or ill, prosperity and adversity—all are part of the workings of God in His great enterprise for the bringing of the creation to its good goal. As God had spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

I am the LORD, and there is no other.
I form light and create darkness,
I make weal and create woe;
I the LORD do all these things (Isaiah 45:6–7).

Knowing this, Jesus’ prayer is one of joy and thanksgiving for both the adversity and the triumph:

Jesus rejoiced ... and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will'.

Then comes in Jesus' own words a privileged glimpse into the heart and dynamic of the Son's prayer-relationship with the Father:

All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son [Matthew 11:27 has at this point: 'no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son] and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

This is not just a cosy, face-to-face mutual adoration society. As we have seen, it is shot through with the whole thrust of God's great enterprise: the Father giving all things into the hands of the Son, the Father loving the Son, and the Son loving the Father, with a view to the revealing in the creation of all the Father's glory, in those to whom He is revealed.

It is significant that Jesus:

rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father.'

No doubt all of his prayer—as all of his life and words and actions³—was of this order, as should ours be also (see Week 15: 'Pray in the Spirit', p. 189). Jesus' prayer is a thoroughgoing Trinitarian activity.

After imparting such a revelation of the heart of the Godhead in action, no wonder Jesus pronounces the disciples blessed above prophets and kings!

How are our experiences of well-being or of hardship reflected in our prayer to God?

How are each of these related to our participation in God's great enterprise?

What difference does it make to our own prayer to see here into the heart of the prayer-relationship of the Father and the Son?

Day 5: John 11:38-44

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

The raising of Lazarus is a significant anticipation in the present of the eventual outcome of God's great enterprise, spoken of by Jesus in John 5:25—29 (see above, Day 2, p. 111): 'the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out'.

Here we find one instance of Jesus praying immediately before a miracle takes place. Not that it expresses any personal need that Jesus had at this point. His purpose in praying aloud on the spot is 'for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me'—in other words, that they might have this measure of participation with him in God's great enterprise.

Further, Jesus' prayer here is a reference to a prayer that has already taken place some time beforehand: 'Father, I thank you for having heard me'. So assured is Jesus in his prayer-relationship with the Father that he thanks the Father for having heard his earlier prayer even before the full answer to the prayer is given in the actual raising of Lazarus. It is in the strength of this already-held assurance from the Father that he calls Lazarus out from the grave.

Of particular interest to us here are Jesus' words: 'I knew that you always hear me'. Jesus has come to do the Father's will (see Hebrews 10:5—10). He always prays in accordance with his Father's will. Every prayer of Jesus, then, is always heard and answered by the Father.

³ See further: 'The Spirit and Jesus' in Martin Bleby. *God's Holy Love*, NCPI Blackwood, 2001, pp. 133–8.

This has important consequences for us. If Jesus has come to bring us into the same prayer–relationship that he has with the Father, then herein lies the assurance that our prayers in him—in his name—will also be heard and answered by our Father in heaven:

truly (tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask. it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them (Matthew 18:19–20).

What grounds of assurance do we have that our prayers will be heard and answered by our heavenly Father?

For Group Discussion:

Choose for discussion, from the questions following each day’s readings and notes, particular questions which struck, or puzzled, members of the group.

What is it about Jesus’ prayer that was striking or new to members of the group?

What is it about Jesus’ prayer that informs and helps our own praying?

Prayer:

Pray together Psalm 2.

Assignment Question:

Show from what we know of the praying of Jesus how it relates to the carrying through of God’s great enterprise. How do you see yourself relating to the praying of Jesus?

Week 10

The Prayer of the Son –2

Day 1: John 12:27—33

‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—’Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Here we see Jesus beginning to enter into the great intercessory action that he has come for—God’s intervention on our behalf (see Week 8: ‘God the Intervener’, p. 94). Characteristically, he is in profound dialogue with the Father concerning this. We are able to observe it because, as at the grave of Lazarus in John 11:41–42 (see Week 9, Day 5, p. 118), this is an open exchange, for the sake of those who will hear.

Jesus’ soul is ‘troubled’. It is the same word as is used for when Jesus was ‘deeply moved’¹ in John 11:33 when confronted with human death, and with the slavish and demeaning fear of death, by which Satan holds human beings in lifelong bondage on account of the guilt of our sin (see Hebrews 2:14–15). The burden of this comes

¹ Also for the stirring up of the water in John 5:[4]. 7: compare Isaiah 57:19–21, about the restlessness of the wicked.

upon Jesus, and he receives it into himself, with all its attendant anguish of spirit, for the whole human race ('all people', v. 32; compare 2 Corinthians 5:14: 'one has died for all; therefore all have died').

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke show this happening to Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane on the night before he died. Mark describes it in this way:

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them. 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake' (Mark 14:32–34).

Such is the intense pressure of this burden that it seems as if it is going to crush him to death there and then in the garden. Especially when we consider what Luke says about it:

In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground (Luke 22:44).

We can see that it is against having to die in this way, there and then in the garden rather than on the cross, that Jesus prayed there:

he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want' (Mark 14:35–36).

Some see Jesus as praying here that he might not have to go through with the suffering and death of the cross. They take some sort of comfort from the notion that accordingly Jesus was 'weak and human, just like us'—for we fear suffering and death, and seek to evade it. As if we could ever know what Jesus was going through here, and how he would react to it! Jesus had repeatedly predicted his suffering and death, in some detail (e.g. Matthew 16:21; 17:22–23; 20:17–19; 26:1–2). He had 'set his face to go to Jerusalem' (Luke 9:51), knowing what would happen to him there. This was the 'baptism' with which he was to be baptised, of which he said, 'what stress I am under until it is completed!' (Luke 12:50). He was not going to back out of it now. As Jesus says here in John 12:27: 'it is for this reason that I have come to this hour'.

It seems that what Jesus was praying for in the garden was that he might not die in the garden, but be able to press on through to the cross. Whichever it might be, in the garden or on the cross—and it could be that under the pressure of what was happening to him, Jesus no longer had any way of knowing—he wanted what the Father wanted:

My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done (Matthew 26:42).

Luke tells us how this prayer was answered:

Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength (Luke 22:43).

This comports with the report in Hebrews 5:7:

In the days of his flesh. Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Thus, from the garden, sustained in this way, as one translation of 1 Peter 2:24 puts it: 'He himself carried up our sins in his body to the tree'.

John 12:27–33 displays the inner heart of what was happening here, and the undergirding relationship in prayer and life between the Father and the Son that it gives full expression to:

Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.

Jesus is intent on the setting–forth of all the glory of the Father in this action. The Father is no less determined that this should be so:

Then a voice came from heaven. 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'

It is not certain what the 'I have glorified it' refers to. From John 17:5 (see below, Day 2, p. 125), it could be a reference to the glory the Son had with the Father 'before the world existed'. The 'I will glorify it again' clearly refers to the coming action of the cross (compare the

‘now’ in John 13:31—32: ‘Now is the Son of Man glorified’; also 17:5 below). This will be nothing less than the judgment of the world. In the crucifixion of the Son, the world’s evil will be laid bare and condemned. Yet, for those who see and believe who this one is, and what God is doing in him for them, it will be their saving judgment. With their sin borne out to extinction and death, and they themselves embraced in the sinless one, Satan the accuser of guilt is left with nothing to bring accusation against, and is rendered powerless: ‘now the ruler of this world will be driven out’.² All this will be effected in the drawing of all people into himself, as he is lifted up to die, in a vast, incomparable mystery of identificatory love.

‘Now my soul is troubled’. Jesus uses the same word again when he later says to his disciples, ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled’ (John 14:1). The ‘trouble’ he has taken upon himself, in putting him–self in their place, in the garden and on the cross, is the ‘trouble’ he has come to free them from, that they might rise up as the grown–up children of God they were made to be. Bearing the ‘trouble’ of us and all our sins in his own body, Jesus prayed: ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’ (Luke 23:34).³ In this way is the Father’s will for His children done, and His name as Father vindicated and glorified.

What is the nature of the ‘trouble’ that came upon Jesus’ soul in John 12:27?

What are the implications of this for all who have been drawn in to him (John 12:32)?

What is the function in this of the prayer–dialogue here between the Son and the Father?

Day 2: John 171—5

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

John 17 is the pinnacle of the Son’s prayer with the Father. As Jesus goes to the cross, the very heart of the Father and the Son in this action of the cross, with regard to those who will benefit from it, is exposed in all the glory of the Father’s love.

These first five verses have to do with the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son, with a view to this action of the cross. Here, surely, is the heart of all that we call ‘prayer’. Eternal life—life as it really is, and as it has always been in God—is ours as it is given to us to ‘know’, that is, to be in intimate relationship with, the Father as the only true God, and Jesus Christ as the one whom the Father has sent; sent, that is, to bear us and all our trouble, as the Son of the Father and the Saviour of the world, in love (compare 1 John 4:13—16).

As we relate with the Father and the Son in their eternal relationship with each other, we see that the Son, particularly for the purpose of this ‘hour’, asks the Father to give him all his glory as Son of the Father, so that, in this action, the Son may give the Father all His glory as Father. This will happen as, by this action, fully resourced and authorised by the Father, the Son brings with him all whom the Father gives him to participate with the Father and the Son in their eternal life—in–action (compare Hebrews 2:10: ‘in bringing many children [literally “sons”, inclusive] to glory’).

It is this glory of the Father that Jesus has been fully intent on revealing by word and action all his life right up to this point:

I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.

² See further. Revelation 12:7–12.

³ The words, ‘they do not know what they are doing’, are not given, as an ameliorating excuse. Rather, they delineate the horror of our sinful condition, and the corresponding magnificence of God’s mercy: we are so far gone we don’t even recognise the appalling nature of what we are perpetrating (compare Hebrews 3:13: Romans 1:32: 1 Corinthians 2:6–8).

Now, for this culminating work of the cross, Jesus is asking for all the resources of their divine eternal relationship—in-action, as he has known this in the Father's presence from 'before the world existed', to be able to carry it through. All of this, without remainder, will be required, and will be expended to the uttermost, in this momentous saving action of the cross: So now. Father. glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

What is being asked for here?

On what grounds?

To what end?

Day3: John 17:6—19

I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that every-thing you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Jesus' immediate concern is for those disciples who have been with him, to whom he has revealed the Father's glory as 'Holy Father' in all his words and actions. Jesus acknowledges that they are the ones who have been given to him by the Father. These are the ones of whom he has said earlier:

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one (John 10:27-30).

Jesus knows that he has good grounds to pray that they will be kept by the Father.

Jesus at this point is 'not asking on behalf of the world'. As far as the world goes, much will hinge on these chosen ones, and their keeping of his word that he has imparted to them from the Father (see also John 14:22-24: 'how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?'). As they now belong to the Father and the Son, they no longer belong in the world that remains opposed to God and is 'under the power of the evil one' (1 John 5:19). He acknowledges that they are in this world—the world that the Father loves so as to save it (as in John 3:16-17)—and he does not ask that they be taken out of it. Indeed, he has sent them into this world, just as the Father had sent him. But he does pray that they be protected from the evil one, in the context of the world's hatred of them on account of the Father's word that he has given them, and their belonging to Him rather than to the God-opposing world.

Jesus asks the Father to protect these disciples in the Father's name that the Father has given to the Son. To have someone's name on a person or object means that person or object belongs to the one with that name. Jesus is asking that the disciples may belong to the

Father as the Son belongs to the Father. The outcome of this is to be, 'so that they may be one, as we are one'. The Son and the Father are one in their active concern to give eternal life to the lost and perishing sheep (see John 10:16, 27–30). Jesus wants the disciples to be in on the action of this oneness. Their oneness is to be their active participation in the love–relationship that is between the Father and the Son, in the Father's redeeming love for the world. This is something Jesus will pray also for the wider company of followers.

The heart of the prayer is in Jesus' words:

for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

'Sanctify' means to set apart as holy to God. In the Old Testament it was used of both priests and sacred offerings.⁴ Jesus here is laying himself on the line before the Father as both a sacrifice and the one who will offer it—he is committing himself totally to the action of the cross. This is the heart of the Son's intercession as, in the living image of the Father, he holds back nothing of himself for their sakes, just as the Father has held nothing back of His own—His Son included—for their sakes. This offering 'without blemish to God' will be enabled by the Holy Spirit, who participates no less than the Father and the Son in the eternal life of God (see 1 Corinthians 2:10–11; Hebrews 9:14). This offering is both exemplified and sealed in the final words of Jesus on the cross before he died, which met with the Father's full acceptance: 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit'.⁵ This is for the sake of these disciples, that they may be themselves set apart as holy to God, secured in the truth of the Father's saving word and action.

What do we know of the later lives of these disciples that demonstrates the Father's answer to this prayer?

Day 4: John 17:20–26

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

In this final part of Jesus' great prayer, we find that those who come to believe in Jesus through the word of these disciples—ourselves included—are to be no less participators in the eternal, active, living relationship of the Father and the Son. We are, no less than these disciples, recipients of the glory of Sonship that Jesus has been given by the Father, and that he has passed on to us. Nor are we any less participants in the oneness of the love–in–action relationship between the Father and the Son. It is by this oneness that the world will finally come to know that the Father has sent the Son and has loved the world no less than He has loved His own Son.

This is the ground–desire of the Son, that comes to such full and overpowering expression at the climax of this prayer. He wants them to be with him where he is, that they may know and experience in themselves the Father's love as he always has done. This prayer will be answered on the cross, as the Father does not withhold His only Son, but gives him up for all of us (see Romans 8:32). If the Father loved His Son more than He loved us, He would have held His Son back from the cross, and let us go. As His love for us, in a sense,

⁴ See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1981), p. 731.

⁵ For a thorough and depthful explication of this, and of its implications for us, I commend 'The Moral Meaning of the Blood of Christ' in P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1984), pp. 175–218, especially pp. 191–6.

overreaches His Son to come to us, we then will know and experience that this Father loves us, in the fullness of His love, no less than He loves His own Son.

Day 5: John 16:20–30

‘Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

‘I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father. On that day you will ask in my name. I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father.’

His disciples said, ‘Yes, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure of speech! Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you came from God.’

Jesus had just told his disciples: ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’ (John 16:16). This had perplexed and disturbed them. Here Jesus prepares them for that time of separation, when he goes to the cross, and the time that will follow it, when he comes to them risen from death, with the power of the Holy Spirit, in a joy that is undying:

So you have pain now; but I will see you again. and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

This is the time when the disciples will know that ‘the Father him–self loves you’. The work of the cross will have been done: the love with which the Father has loved the Son will be in those who have received the gospel–word, and they will know it (see John 17:24, 26; Day 4, p. 129).

Even as Jesus spoke of these things before they happened, and of his direct relationship with the Father out of which all of it flowed, something of this reality broke through to them with a clarity they had never known before:

Yes, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure of speech! Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you: by this we believe that you came from God.

This did not stop them later from running away in confusion (see what Jesus went on to say in John 16:31–32), but in this moment they saw something there of Jesus’ relationship with the Father, of his coming from and going to the Father, in his carrying through of the Father’s purpose of love for them.

Someone in a group once asked me, ‘Who do we pray to? Do we pray to Jesus? Or do we pray to the Father? Or do we pray to the Father through the Son—and what does that mean?’ It is interesting to listen to people when they pray aloud, to see to whom they are praying. People who pray consistently only to Jesus (such as, ‘Thank you, Jesus, for this food’—when Jesus himself said in Matthew 6:25–33 that all these things come from the Father!) perhaps need to pay closer attention to this passage:

I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.

I pointed out to the group that what Jesus was saying here was not: ‘Pray to me and I will pass the message on to the Father’. No—Jesus is saying, ‘I am bringing you right into the presence of the Father, so that you can stand with me as Son and say “Father!”—direct!’ No wonder this had an impact on the disciples—Jesus is the one who has

come from God, and is going to God, and is taking us with him! We now have direct access to the Father:

On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.

Jesus encouraged them, with him, to go directly to the Father:

Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

A thrill went round the group as we looked at those words. The person who had asked me about it suddenly saw what the disciples saw in that moment, and was struck by the reality that the Father Himself loved her, and she could speak directly with Him.

That is where all of this is bringing us—to the throne of the Father. The time of which Jesus spoke in John 16 has now come. Paul says in Ephesians 2:18 that in Christ, both Jews and Gentiles, divided as we have been, now can come together to the Father's throne:

for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

The curtain in the temple 'was torn in two, from the top to the bottom' (Mark 15:38) as Jesus hung on the cross, and the way was wide open to the Holy of Holies. Jesus stands before the Father and says, 'Here am I and the children whom God has given me' (Hebrews 2:13). With him we now can come in prayer directly to the Father for full participation in His saving Kingdom-action.

For Group Discussion:

Let members of the group say how they have understood Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Day 1, p. 121). Is it different from the view presented here? What was the 'trouble' that came on Jesus before he went to die? What was in Jesus' heart and will with regard to it?

What was Jesus asking for in John 17:1-5, and why was it necessary for what Jesus was facing?

What does it mean for the disciples to have the Father's 'name' given to them, and to be one as Jesus and the Father are one?

Why does Jesus need to 'sanctify' himself? What does that mean, and how does this sanctify the disciples?

Where does Jesus want us to be in John 17:24 and 26? How do we come to be there?

Let members of the group say who they have been praying to, and why. How will they pray now?

Prayer:

'Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you ... Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.'

Assignment Question:

What does Jesus' intercession for us require of him? How does that bring us into the saving kingdom-action of the Father?

Week 11

The Lord's Prayer—1

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name

Day 1: Matthew 6:9—13

Pray then in this way:
 Our Father in heaven,
 hallowed be your name.
 Your kingdom come.
 Your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
 And do not bring us to the the time of trial,
 but rescue us from the evil one.

We find versions of what we call 'the Lord's prayer' in Matthew 6:9–13 and in Luke 11:2–4. It is called this because it is the prayer given to us by our Lord Jesus. This is the longer form, given in Matthew 6, as part of Jesus' teaching on prayer in the 'sermon on the mount'.

Luke tells us of the occasion on which it was given, in response to a request to Jesus from his disciples. For comparison, the shorter version in Luke is given here:

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.
 Your kingdom come.
 Give us each day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our sins,
 for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
 And do not bring us to the time of trial' (Luke 11:1–4).

Note that it was Jesus' own praying that stimulated the disciples to ask Jesus to teach them to pray. It could be that there was something about Jesus' prayer-relationship with the Father that they wanted to have from him. Jesus was glad to give it. Indeed, as we have seen from John 17 (see Week 10, Days 2–4, pp. 125–30), Jesus' purpose in coming was to bring his disciples, and those who believe in Jesus through their word, into the position he is in with regard to the Father—to 'bring us to God' (1 Peter 3:18)—to 'be with me where I am' in the love of the Father.

In this prayer, then, Jesus is inducting his disciples into his own prayer as Son of the Father. He gets them to address God as '[Our] Father'. While the Greek word we have for this is pater, it is likely that the Aramaic word that Jesus used here was abba, the very word that he used in his own personal address to the Father (as in Mark 14:36; see Week 10, Day 1, p. 121). The use of this domestic and familiar form of address, without pretension, as a way of speaking directly to God in love and respect, was unprecedented at this time. Jesus was bringing the disciples into his own unique prayer-relationship with the heavenly Father.

It is clear from what we have already looked at that the disciples were not able to enter into this relationship with our Father simply by reciting this prayer. It is not by reciting prayers, long or short, that we come into the Father's presence (see Matthew 6:7–8, Week 4, Day 3, p. 35ff.). Jesus gave them this prayer in the context of his whole life and ministry. It took the whole of Jesus' death and resurrection and exaltation to break down the barrier imposed by sin and God's wrath against evil, and to give us direct access to the Father as beloved holy and righteous children.

Nevertheless, when all this was done, the way was open. After he rose from death, Jesus was able to say:

I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God (John 20:17).

What is his has now been made to be ours. Jesus comes before the Father saying, ‘Here am I, and the children. whom God has given me’ (Hebrews 2:13). When we pray in the name of Jesus, that is, with the authority and position we have through belonging to him by faith, he is present with us, our prayers are as his, and the Father hears and answers us (see Matthew 18:19–20; John 11:41–42; Week 9, Day 5, p. 119).

Jesus did not give us this prayer so that it could be recited as a religious exercise to bring us into the Father’s presence. It is what we say when he has already brought us there. It gives true expression to all that pertains to that relationship of children, young or old, with the heavenly Father. As such, it is not necessarily to be adhered to as a form of words. It is more in the order of headings or indicators that direct and inform our dialogue with God. Nevertheless, since these are the words that Jesus himself gave us, it is good at times simply to say them as such, slowly and thoughtfully.

We have been saying that in this prayer Jesus inducts us into his own praying. Can we say that this is the prayer that Jesus himself prays to the Father? We have seen Jesus praying for the hallowing of the Father’s name (John 12:28) and the doing of His will (Matthew 26:42; Hebrews 10:5, 7). We have seen his concern for the coming of the Father’s kingdom, and the Father’s provision in that (Matthew 6:33). We have seen him even crying out for deliverance (Hebrews 5:7). But can we say that Jesus ever prayed to be forgiven? What did he have that ever needed forgiveness?

Here we must understand the place from which Jesus gave us this prayer. It was not handed down on golden tablets from heaven. It was delivered in our flesh—the flesh in which he would suffer the condemnation of our sin (see Romans 8:3). Jesus prayed for our forgiveness as he was nailed to the cross (see Luke 23:34), from a position of total identification with us—identification with enemies who are deeply loved (Romans 5:10). Jesus is true to the Father from whom he has come, of whom it is said:

**Blessed be the Lord day by day,
who bears us as his burden:
he is the God of our deliverance (Psalm 68:19).¹**

Sinless himself, Jesus bore the terrible burden of our sins as if they were his own, out into the region of death, and he prayed for us from there. Such is his identification with us that he could pray, in effect, ‘Father ... forgive *us*’. Every word of this prayer is what Jesus him–self has prayed in us. If this were not so, we could not pray it our–selves.

What is the relationship between ‘the Lord’s prayer’ and Jesus’ own praying to his Father?

Day 2: Romans 8:14–17

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

This bears out what we have just been saying. We will come back later to the role of the Spirit in our praying (see Week 15, p. 189). The upshot is: God has made us His children. We are joint–heirs with Christ—we stand with the Messiah in the position he has as the Son of God, in his suffering and in his glory. In the Spirit that we have received from Jesus, we pray using the same form of address to God that he did: ‘Abba! Father!’ This is the ‘one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all’ (Ephesians 4:6), the one of whom it is said ‘from him and through him and to him are all things’ (Romans 11:36), to whom we are speaking in respectful fear and great love in this intimate and familiar way. Jesus has said, ‘no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him’ (Matthew 11:27). We are those given to the Son by the

¹ The Psalms, The Liturgical Psalter. © English text 1976, 1977. © ‘inclusive language’ version 1995. David L. Frost, John A. Emerton. Andrew A. Macintosh. in The Anglican Church of Australia. *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Shorter Edition, Broughton Books. 1995, p. 289.

Father (as in John 6:44, 65; 10:27—28), to whom the Son has chosen to reveal the Father. ‘On that day’, he said, ‘you will ask in my name. I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God’ (John 16:26—27; see Week 10, Day 5, p. 130).

That this is a work of the Spirit of God in our depths, and not something of ourselves, or learned by rote, is demonstrated by this beautiful story. I once went to see a woman who was in deep distress. As she spoke of it, she related how her father had died when she was young, and ever since then she had found it very difficult to relate to her mother. Her mother was now nearing the end of her life, and this woman wanted to be a good daughter to her mother, but she could not. In the course of our conversation, we prayed that she would be filled with the Holy Spirit—and she was. A couple of days later, she saw me down the street. ‘I woke up last night’, she said, ‘saying a strange word that I had never heard before’. ‘What was it?’ I asked. She replied, ‘It was “Abba! Abba!”’ I showed her where it came from in the Bible, and she was thrilled—she was a daughter of God our heavenly Father! And, of course, her relationship with her mother was fully healed.

What is the difference between learning the Lord’s prayer off by heart, and knowing God as Father in a relational way?

Day3: 1 Peter 1:3–9

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to

result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

When we say, ‘Our Father in heaven’, we are doing this not simply to spell out the location of God. True, ‘God is in heaven, and you upon earth’ (Ecclesiastes 5:2: the conclusion is, ‘therefore let your words be few’ and do not be hasty to make any rash promises!). Nor is it just to distinguish this Father from our earthly fathers. God is indeed ‘the Father, from whom every family [literally, fatherhood] in heaven and on earth takes its name’. ‘Heaven’ also designates our own true home, now that we belong to God and not to this world order:

our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior. the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory. by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself (Philippians 3:20–21).

We are to be resurrected! From the foundation of the world, it has ever been God’s intention that we should live and not die, and come to be ‘holy and blameless before him in love . . . as his children through Jesus Christ’ (Ephesians 1:4—5).

Heaven, then, is where our inheritance is kept for us by God, ‘imperishable, undefiled, and unfading’, as we make our way through ‘various trials’ here in this life. In anticipation of the revealing of our inheritance in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, we even now love, believe and rejoice in him, and we know, even now, the salvation of our souls which will be the outcome of the faith that we have.

Here at the beginning of the Lord’s prayer, then, we acknowledge not only the Father who has saved us to Himself, but also the outcome of His great enterprise that we are participating in as we pray, that He is taking us to.

How have we understood ‘heaven’? How do we see it now?

What difference does this make to the way we pray?

Day 4: Ezekiel 36:19—32

I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries; in accordance with their conduct and their deeds I judged them. But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that it was said of them, 'These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land.' But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds. It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and dismayed for your ways, O house of Israel.

When we pray to our Father, 'hallowed be your name', what do we think of? Do we interpret this as, 'May your name be made holy'? This is hardly necessary—indeed it is impossible. God's 'name', which signifies His person and being and action, is already holy:

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory (Isaiah 6:3).

For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite (Isaiah 57:15).

How can that be improved on? Why would we pray that what is already holy be made holy?

Another way we may think of it is this: 'May we hallow your name', possibly by the way we acknowledge God's glory, maybe through our prayer, worship, praise, reverence, churchgoing, and religious actions, and perhaps also by the way we reflect God's holiness in our own behaviour. This may have some point, since God says in Leviticus 19:2, 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy', and then goes on to spell out many practical ways of true worship and action. This, however, is still a rather self-centred way of thinking—that somehow we enhance the holiness of God's name by what we do. It begs the question, 'Who is it that hallows God's name?'

The answer given in this astounding passage is that God hallows His own name, for His own sake, and that no one else can do it. To hallow God's name is to show forth the holiness that is there. Only God can do that—by what He does:

I will sanctify my great name.

That is why, in this prayer, we are asking God to do it. We are not offering to do it ourselves.

God says in Ezekiel 39:7:

My holy name I will make known among my people Israel.

In 39:21, He puts it in a slightly different way: I will display my glory among the nations.

God's holiness and God's glory go together. 'Holiness is God's hidden glory; glory is God's all-present holiness',² To hallow God's name is to glorify it—to show forth God's innate glory. This is what Jesus was asking the Father to do when he prayed: 'Father, glorify your name' (John 12:28; see Week 10, Day 1, p. 121).

God's name is Himself, His very being. What is God's name? (What have we just called Him?) God's name is 'Father'. How is God glorified as Father? By having many children—what the Bible usually calls (literally) 'sons'.³ If we are God's children, then that is His glory as Father—this is what glorifies His name 'Father'.

It is not just a case of having children. They must be of a particular kind. If God's name as Father is to be hallowed, then His children will need to be holy. If a man's children are undisciplined and badly behaved, we could say, 'He is not much of a father'. That man could say, 'My children are giving me a bad name'. As long as the unholy behaviour of those who are to be God's children continues, it is not evident that God is truly a holy Father—which He is.

That is why God says, 'You shall be holy as I am holy' (Leviticus 19:2; or, Matthew 5:48, 'perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect!'). This is the way you will be, because this is how I am. We have seen that God is intent on having a whole family of His children who will be 'holy and blameless before him in love'. This is His great enterprise. For this we pray. God's name as Father is defiled by the unholy behaviour of His children, and even by the action of His judgment that He must bring upon them:

I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries; in accordance with their conduct and their deeds I judged them. But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that it was said of them, 'These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land.' But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.

Thus God undertakes to vindicate the holiness of His great name as, out of His Fatherly goodness, He gathers, cleanses and restores His people, and as the horror and shame of what they have done comes home to them, in the face of God's kindness and great mercy to them as Father.

What, then, are we asking for when we pray, 'Father ... hallowed be your name'?

Day 5: I Peter 1:13—25

Therefore prepare your minds for action [Gk. gird up the loins of your mind]; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.' If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply [or constantly] from the heart. You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.

For

'All flesh is like grass

and all its glory like the flower of grass.

² J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah*. p. 77 (on Isaiah 6:3).

³ The use of the terms 'father' and 'son' in the Bible does not denote male sex or gender exclusively. They relate to authority and relationships. The word 'father' is inclusive of father and mother; 'son' is inclusive of son and daughter.

The grass withers,
and the flower falls,
but the word of the Lord endures forever.’

That word is the good news that was announced to you.

We have looked at the earlier verses (see Day 3, p. 138), concerning our salvation and the sure and solid hope that it has brought us into. These verses speak of the outcome as this is manifested in our lives day by day. It is this hope that determines our present action. We are to gear ourselves wholly towards ‘the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed’. What is that ‘grace’? It is ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’ (a quote from Leviticus 19:2). Note that God says, ‘You shall be holy’; not ‘you must be holy’. ‘You must be’ is implicit in this, but you must be because ‘You shall be’. That is the salvation that is coming to us when Jesus Christ is revealed—the grace of that God-like holiness in all our conduct. So we are to be holy now, as God is holy, because that is what we have been brought into, and that is how we ‘shall be’.

How do we do that? We invoke as ‘Father’—‘Our Father’—‘the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds’. As we wait expectantly for that day, during the time of our ‘exile’, we ‘live in reverent fear’ of Him. We know the judgment that needed to come on ‘the futile ways’ inherited from our ancestors—the judgment of the cross that ransomed us from these futile ways. A ‘ransom’ is usually paid in money—‘silver and gold’. Our ransom is paid, wholly and purely, with all that God had to give of Himself: ‘the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish’. This action has come from God, determined ‘before the foundation of the world’ —‘Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake ... that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name’ (Ezekiel 36:22; Day 4, p. 140). Thank God for that, for without it we would be lost for-ever.

Through this one who for our sake has now been revealed ‘at the end of the ages’, we ‘have come to trust in God’. We have come into the Father’s presence, and now relate with Him by faith. This faith and hope is grounded surely in the action by which God ‘raised him from the dead and gave him glory’. So our faith and hope are now set on God.

A purification of our souls has already taken place through our bedience to the truth—the truth of the gospel, ‘that Christ died for r sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and t he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared’ (I Corinthians 15:3–5). We obey the reality that are forgiven and justified—we repent and believe the gospel, as this been brought to us by the Holy Spirit. Thus our purification has en place, according to what God has done in keeping with the holiness of His great name. ‘Genuine mutual love . . . from the heart’ how God is in Himself, and towards us. That is the relationship that we are in now with each other.

As this is the work of God, undertaken for His own sake not ours, through the living and enduring word of God’, then it is a dependable and ‘imperishable’ reality in us. We call upon the One who is the holy Father, and we live in holiness. We can ask for nothing surer than that.

How do we see this high calling: as a struggle, or as a gift and a liberation?

For Group Discussion:

Go back over the readings, continents and questions from this week with this question in mind: What is the difference between the Lord’s prayer as a prayer that we pray on our own, and as a prayer that is prayed in us by the Lord Jesus Christ?

Prayer:

Let one person pray the Lord’s prayer aloud, one line at a time, with a pause after each to allow members of the group, silently or aloud, to expand on that part of the prayer in their own words.

Assignment Question:

How does God hallow His name?

Week 12

The Lord's Prayer—2

Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Day 1: Psalm 115

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness. Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?'

Our God is in the heavens;
he does whatever he pleases.
Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands.
They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell.
They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk;
they make no sound in their throats.
Those who make them are like them;
so are all who trust in them.

Israel, trust in the LORD!
He is their help and their shield.

O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD!
He is their help and their shield.
You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD!
He is their help and their shield.
The LORD has been mindful of us;
he will bless us; he will bless the house of Israel;
he will bless the house of Aaron;
he will bless those who fear the LORD,
both small and great.
May the LORD give you increase,
both you and your children.
May you be blessed by the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.
The heavens are the LORD's heavens,
but the earth he has given to human beings.
The dead do not praise the LORD,
nor do any that go down into silence. But we will bless the LORD
from this time on and forevermore.
Praise the LORD!

We come this week to the petitions in the Lord's prayer: 'Your kingdom come. Your will be done.' These two are very much related to each other. Our Father's kingdom is His good rule and authority over all things. Wherever our Father's rule and authority are in place, this is where His will is obeyed, and His purpose is being carried through. In Luke 11:2, both these petitions are encompassed in the words, 'Your kingdom come'.

The Father's kingdom is the rule He exercises over all He has made. This is already in place. Why, then, do we pray for it to 'come', if it is here already? God is the Author of all things. As Author, God has 'authority' over all He has authored. This is true, whether the authority is accepted or not. A kingdom may have rebellious elements within it and still be no less a kingdom. Indeed, a crucial role of any government is to subdue rebellious elements and bring them to justice.

God faces evil enemies within His creation. Part of His kingdom—action is to bring them, willingly or unwillingly, into subjection—for them to recognise the true authority that is God’s. This is what we see happening in] Corinthians 15:24—28:

Then comes the end, when he [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For ‘God has put all things in subjection under his feet’ ... When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.

The action of God’s kingdom is not just to subdue the enemies. It is primarily to bring the whole of His creation to the good goal He has purposed for it. This is what we are asking to be so when we pray: ‘Your kingdom come’.

The question we ask here (as we did with ‘hallowed be your name’; Week 11, Day 4, p. 140), is: Who is it who does God’s will? Again, we have a fallen tendency to think that we are praying here that we will do God’s will: ‘Your will be done by us, on earth as it is in heaven’. This, again, is jumping the gun. In God’s kingdom, it is God who is operative. Psalm 115:3 says:

Our God is in the heavens;
he does whatever he pleases

An alternative translation is: ‘He does whatever he wills’.¹ God is the one who does His will. That is why we are coming to Him in prayer to ask that His will be done.

Given our normal mindset, ‘he does whatever he pleases’ is an offence to us. When said of one of us, we take it to mean, ‘without consideration of anyone else’. That is not God’s mode of operating. God works for the good of those over whom He rules:

We know that in all things God works for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

God’s will is our sanctification (see 1 Thessalonians 4:3). His delight is that we should be holy and blameless before Him in love as His children (see Ephesians 1:4—5). So God does what He wills, what it pleases Him to do. This is what we pray for.

Psalm 115:4—8 says that we become like what we worship:

Their idols are silver and gold.
the work of human hands.
They have mouths, but do not speak:
eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear;
noses, but do not smell.
They have hands, but do not feel;
feet, but do not walk;
they make no sound in their throats.
Those who make them are like them:
so are all who trust in them.

We are made to be the vital, dynamic image of the living God. In transferring our allegiance and worship from the living God to the lifeless idols, we are unconsciously remaking ourselves in their image. Idols are blind, deaf, senseless, mute and immobile. God does not want us to become like these false idols, or to become demeaned as human beings in our worship of them (see Week 4, Day 3, p. 39). Truly, God’s will and good pleasure for us is for something much better than that.

In contrast to the deadness and dullness of the idols is throbbing, vibrant, life-giving kingdom—authority of the Father in action towards us for our good in verses 9—15:

O Israel, trust in the LORD!
He is their help and their shield.
O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD!
He is their help and their shield.
You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD!
He is their help and their shield.

The LORD has been mindful of us:
he will bless us; he will bless the house of Israel:
he will bless the house of Aaron;
he will bless those who fear the LORD.
both small and great.

¹ *A Prayer Book for Australia*, p. 345.

The whole of Israel, in particular the priestly house of Aaron, and also the ‘God-fearers’ from other nations, are urged to trust in the Lord, to know His protection and help, and His blessing that comes with it. The creational blessing from the hand of the Creator (with a view to the goal of God’s great enterprise—see Week 2, pp. 9ff.) is reiterated:

May the LORD give you increase,
both you and your children.
May you be blessed by the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

No wonder that Jesus wants us to pray with him that the Father’s will be done!

In verses 14—15, a distinction is made between ‘the heavens’ and ‘the earth’:

The heavens are the LORD’s heavens,
but the earth he has given to human beings.

This is in accord with the ‘creational mandate’, by which human beings have been given dominion over the earth and all its creatures. Made in the image of God, and integral for the purpose He has for His whole creation, we are to rule over the earth for its good, in the way that God rules over us and the whole of His creation from heaven. Thus we pray: ‘Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’ (see further: Day 3, p. 152).

That this great purpose of God is for life and not for death, and is for eternity, is made clear in verses 17—18:

The dead do not praise the LORD.
nor do any that go down into silence. But we will bless the LORD
from this time on and forevermore. Praise the LORD!

What does Psalm 115 tell us about God’s will, and how it comes into effect?

Day 2: Ephesians 1:8b—14

With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.

Jesus is able to tell us to pray for the doing of the Father’s will particularly because he is the one in whom this will has been fully made known. The ‘mystery of his will’ is ‘according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ’.

All things in heaven and on earth are to be gathered up in Christ. God’s love in him, by which on the cross he drew all people to him—self, is the power that will unite all things.

Our inheritance is with and in Christ, as with him we are destined to ‘live for the praise of his glory’—to be those through whom this purpose is accomplished.

Consistent with Psalm 115:3 (‘He does whatever he wills’), it is the Father ‘who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will’. Whether we belong to the people of Israel (‘we, who were the first’) or to the other nations (‘you also’), God has done in Christ all that is necessary for us to be redeemed and saved from all that is contrary to the effecting of this glorious purpose. He has given us His Holy Spirit to guarantee the outcome.

For all of this we pray when we say: ‘Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’

How is the will of God made known to us in Christ?

Day 3: Psalm 40:1–10

I waited patiently for the LORD;
 he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate
 pit,
 out of the miry bog,
 and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.
 He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will
 see and fear,
 and put their trust in the LORD.

Happy are those who make
 the LORD their trust,
 who do not turn to the proud,
 to those who go astray after false gods.
 You have multiplied, O LORD my God,
 your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us;
 none can compare with you.
 Were I to proclaim and tell of them,
 they would be more than can be counted.

Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,
 but you have given me an open ear.
 Burnt offering and sin offering
 you have not required.
 Then I said, 'Here I am;
 in the scroll of the book it is written of me.
 I delight to do your will, O my God;
 your law is within my heart.'

I have told the glad news of deliverance
 in the great congregation;
 see, I have not restrained my lips,
 as you know, O LORD.
 I have not hidden your saving help within my heart,
 I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;

I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the
 great congregation.

This is the song of one who knows God as both help and shield (as in Psalm
 115:9—11; see Day 1, p. 146)—one who has been rescued from going
 under and is being held in a place of security by God:

He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog,
 and set my feet upon a rock,
 making my steps secure.

This one knows and appreciates the goodness of God, in contrast to the
 delusions of idols:

He put a new song in my mouth,
 a song of praise to our God.

This one is happy to urge trust in the Lord before many. Indeed, so
 overwhelming and incomparable are 'your wondrous deeds and your
 thoughts towards us' that one could never come to the end of telling them.

Here is one, then, who knows and delights in the whole will of God.
 'An open ear' has been given (the literal Hebrew is: 'ears you have dug for
 me') to hear and obey God's will and God's law that is lodged in the heart.
 The doing of this will and commandment will entail the announcing of
 God's steadfast love, salvation and faithfulness to a great congregation of
 people.

These words are aptly applied in the New Testament to our Lord Jesus
 Christ:

when Christ came into the world, he said,
 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
 but a body you have prepared for me;
 in burnt offerings and sin offerings
 you have taken no pleasure.

Then I said. 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll
 of the book it is written of me).

When he said above, 'You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in
 sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings' (these are
 offered according to the law), then he added. 'See, I have come to do
 your will.' He abolishes the

first in order to establish the second. And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Hebrews 10:5—10).

At the heart of the sacrificial system given in the law of Moses lies obedience to the will of God. Sacrifices offered without this obedient heart were not acceptable to God.

The sacrifices also pointed towards one who would come and establish that obedience for all in his own person. In the Hebrews quote from Psalm 40, the obedient ears have become a whole body that replaces the sacrifices themselves, and effects the making-holy of all who believe in him.

If we ask again, 'Who does the Father's will?' we find our answer here in the Son. Here are some of the things Jesus said with regard to himself and the Father's will:

I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.

I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.

the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him (John 6:38; 5:30; 4:34; 8:29).

Jesus makes clear in this that at no time is he doing his own thing, but it is the Father who is speaking His words and doing His works:

Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.

My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own.

'I have much to say about you and much to condemn; but the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.' They did not understand that he was speaking to them about the Father.

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works (John 5:19—20; 7:16—17; 8:26—27; 14:10).

Jesus is not acting here as a puppet, but together with the Father as a free agent with a will of his own—a will that is entirely at one with the great will of the Father:

My Father is still working, and I also am working (John 5:17).

The response to this of those still opposed to the Father's will was to want to kill Jesus (see John 5:18). Does this mean that the kingdom has failed? We have already said (see Day 1, p. 146) that the presence of rebellious elements in a kingdom does not negate the kingdom. Rather, the kingdom is asserted and established in the act of the authority dealing with this opposition. Jesus hinted at this in John 8:28—29:

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me: he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.

(According to John 12:33, this 'lifting up' refers to Jesus' death on the cross.) Thus the apostles were able to proclaim that this terrible event, condemnable as it is for all of us who perpetrated it, was indeed 'according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God' (Acts 2:23). The cross is where the Father's will is done, as written beforehand 'in the scroll of the book', the Old Testament scriptures (see e.g. John 19:24, 36—37; Mark 14:49; Luke 24:44—47). In the very act of rebellion, the kingdom is established. The Father's will is done (as Jesus himself prayed in Matthew 26:42, using these very words: 'Your will be done')—not in resignation, but in delight. In this comes our forgiveness and freedom from condemnation (Matthew 26:28), the destruction of the works of the devil (1 John 3:8), and the transferring of the children of God into the kingdom of the Son of His love (Colossians 1:13—14).

No less than all of this, Jesus was getting us to pray for in the words, 'Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'

The words ‘as it is in heaven’ are sometimes taken as a reference to the angels who do God’s will. There are, however, angelic beings who are part of the rebellion. It is the Father and the Son together, as we shall see, with the Holy Spirit, by whom the will of God is done in heaven without demur. We are praying that it will be done no less on earth.

What is the heart and mindset of the Son with regard to the Father’s will?

How does that contrast with our own heart and mindset?

What must happen in us for the Father’s will to come into its own with regard to us?

Day 4: Galatians 4:1–7

My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir of God through Christ.

If the will of God is to have us holy and blameless before Him in love as His children (see Ephesians 1.4–5), then we will not be unaffected by the doing of His will—indeed we will become participants in its action. As we saw with the Son (Day 3, p. 152), we will not be independent agents; yet we will not lose our freedom. Rather, we will come out of servitude and into our full freedom as the children of God, our wills and actions at one with the Father in love.

This heart and mindset of the Son is brought to bear in us through the Spirit. It is by the Spirit, of the Son, sent from the Father, that we are enabled as God’s children, to pray and address our Father as ‘Abba’. This is where all that happened on the cross, and all the will of the Father for our glory ‘hits’ us, and is seated home in us. The Spirit, with the Father and the Son, sees to it that the Father’s will is done. This, too, is included in our prayer.

Without the Spirit, we might be tempted to think that it is up to us of ourselves to respond. The coming of the Spirit clears us of that. At the bottom of the ‘miry hog’ (Psalm 40:2; see Day 3, p. 152), we are in no position to be able to respond—we need to be hauled out. Yet, in that great rescue action, how does the Spirit make it so that the response he incites in us is nevertheless truly our response (as in Romans 8:16; see Week 11 Day 2, p. 137)?

Day 5 John 14:8–14

Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.’

Here is what will be the outcome of our praying, ‘Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’ We will indeed be doing the will of the Father, but not in the way we may have started

out thinking it might be. Back then, it was not in our hearts to be doing anything but our own will, so far were we apart from our Father. Now we end up doing the Father's will, but never apart from the Father and the Son—and doing 'greater works' such as we had never dreamed of.

So much are we now never apart from the Father and the Son just as the Son has always been 'in the Father' and the Father 'in' the Son—that what we do will be not to any glory that is our own, but 'that the Father may be glorified in the Son'.

Nor are we to cease praying for these things constantly, now that we are never apart from the Father and the Son. Indeed, as we have been saying, this is where true prayer, in the sense of constant con-verse, really begins. Also, when we ask in the context of this relation-ship, nothing we ask for will be withheld. For in praying in the Son's name—as fully belonging to him—we will be praying 'according to his will' (1 John 5:14). All things in heaven and on earth are united in the Son. The Father's will is done on earth—in us!—as it is in heaven.

Philip requested, 'show us the Father'—still trying to look in from outside. What was distinctive about Jesus' answer to that request that would have taken Philip on from where he started from?

For Group Discussion:

Let members say how they understood this petition before, and how they understand it now.

What have we discovered about the will of God and how it comes to be done?

What have we learned about our own attitude to the will and reign of God, and how has this changed?

Together go through particular points in the week's readings, notes and questions that were significant for members of the group.

Prayer:

Let one person pray aloud Psalm 40:1–10 (Day 3, p. 152) as the prayer of one who has been rescued by God.

Let another person pray it as the prayer of the Son (as in Hebrews 0:5–10).

Then all pray it together as those who are in the Son, and in the will of the Father (as in John 14:12–14f)

Assignment Question:

How is the will of God done on earth as it is in heaven, and what is the place of prayer in this action?

Week 13

The Lord's Prayer—3

Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Day 1: Psalm 104

Bless the LORD, O my soul.
O LORD my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honour and majesty,
wrapped in light as with a garment.
You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,
you make the clouds your chariot,
you ride on the wings of the wind,
you make the winds your messengers,
fire and flame your ministers.

You set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken.
You cover it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
At your rebuke they flee;
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.
They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys
to the place that you appointed for them.
You set a boundary that they may not pass,

so that they might not again cover the earth.
You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,
giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild asses quench their thirst.
By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;
they sing among the branches.
From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to use,
to bring forth food from the earth,
and wine to gladden the human heart,
oil to make the face shine,
and bread to strengthen the human heart.
The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has its home in the fir trees.
The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for the coney.
You have made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows its time for setting.
You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.
When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens.
People go out to their work
and to their labour until the evening.

O LORD, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,

living things both small and great.
 There go the ships,
 and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.
 These all look to you
 to give them their food in due season;
 when you give to them, they gather it up;
 when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
 When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
 when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.
 When you send forth your spirit, [or your breath] they are created;
 and you renew the face of the ground.
 May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
 may the LORD rejoice in his works—
 who looks on the earth and it trembles,
 who touches the mountains and they smoke.
 I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
 I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
 May my meditation be pleasing to him,
 for I rejoice in the LORD.
 Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
 and let the wicked be no more.
 Bless the LORD, O my soul.
 Praise the LORD!

In this meditation, the psalmist rejoices in Yahweh, the Creator. (In this translation, ‘the LORD’ stands for God’s personal name ‘YAHWEH’, linked in Exodus 3:13—15 with ‘I AM WHO I AM’.) The works of the Lord in creation are rehearsed, much as they are in Genesis I (see Weeks 1 and 2, pp. 1—9): the appearance of light; the establishing of the heavens, with clouds, winds and lightning, over the waters; the earth, and the separation of the seas and the dry land; the vegetation, the land and sea creatures; the actions of human beings.

All these are seen to be the manifold works of God, all made by God in wisdom, and wholly dependent upon God:

These all look to you
 to give them their food in due season; when you give to them,
 they gather it up;
 when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
 When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
 when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.
 When you send forth your spirit, [or your breath] they are created;
 and you renew the face of the ground.

The revelation must come to us that ‘all things are from God’ (1 Corinthians 11:12). Although this would appear to be patently obvious, this is the one thing we have denied, when we refused to ‘honour him as God or give thanks to him’ (Romans 1:21). John the Baptist said:

No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven
 (John 3:27).

This is a very inclusive and exclusive statement: inclusive of all things, and exclusive in terms of where all things have come from, and how they have come. ‘No one’—without exception—‘can receive anything’—at all—‘except what has been given’—and only what is given as a gift—‘from heaven’—that is, from God. Everything we are, and everything we have, and everything we make out of what we are and what we have, is gift from God. That is why Jesus tells us to come to the Father to ask for it. Paul writes to some who were under the delusion that their gifts were their own self-generated property:

What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift? (1 Corinthians 4:7).

We read in James 1:17:

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

The Father’s giving is always good, consistent, and faithful, according to the way God Himself is.

It is important to see the purpose in all of this. The creation is not there just because it is there, so it can be there. The psalmist goes on to say:

**May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works.**

The purpose with which all things have come to be is that the glory of the Lord endure in them forever, as God rejoices, with good reason, in all that He has done. In this there will be no room for anything that does not match with the righteous, holy and loving character and action of God:

Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more.

There will be a relational fullness of response to God that will rejoice His Father—Creator—Redeemer’s heart:

**I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
May my meditation be pleasing to him.
for I rejoice in the LORD . . .
Bless the LORD, O my soul.
Praise the LORD!**

When Jesus told us to pray, ‘Give us this day our daily bread’, all of this is where he was coming from. He was not getting us to ask just for our own immediate needs—though these are included. He was telling us to look to and ask our Father for everything in His creation. This will include asking for its fulfilment, ultimately, in God’s purpose. Thus ‘daily’ (Gk. *epiousios*) could be a reference to the coming (eschatological or end-time) day: ‘Give us today all that we need for that great day’. But it may mean nothing more than trusting the Father for tomorrow’s provisions (as in Matthew 6:34: ‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today’): ‘We trust You today for all that we will need tomorrow’. As we are told to be ready for the last day at any time, these two understandings of this petition may end up not being all that different.

How does Psalm 104 give us confidence to pray: ‘Give us this day our daily bread’?

What does Psalm 104 tell us of the purpose of God’s creation, and how is that included in this petition?

Day 2: Matthew 6:25—33

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Jesus spoke these words to those who were to ‘serve God’ rather than wealth (Matthew 6:24); whose hearts were set on God’s provision for them out of His treasure-store in heaven (Matthew 6:19—21). He is instilling in us trustful faith and hope in the place of worry, anxiety and fear. In this he draws attention to our Father’s bestowal of care and glory upon all that He has made—in this instance, the birds and the wildflowers. For those who have a heart to recognise it, time given in attention to these things can elicit great wonder and praise—‘Someone’s gone to a lot of trouble!’ It may also draw us away from striving for what is given to us anyway, and into working for the

purpose for which it has been given: the Father's kingdom (rule and authority over all in love) and His (saving) righteousness.

'Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?' To look at some magazines, one would hardly think so. What is this 'more than'? Could Jesus here be referring to our destiny as resurrected bodies?

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you ... We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we our-selves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved (Romans :11.22-24).

Jesus now is the one 'who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father' (Revelation 1:5—6). We are to lead the whole of creation into the freedom of the full worship of God. Could it be that, in telling us to seek first the Father's kingdom and righteousness, he is directing us to the outcome of God's great enterprise, in the light and truth of which we live even now? Once again, Jesus here is taking us beyond preoccupation with our immediate concerns. God is even now working to bring us with His creation to its great goal. Worry, fear and anxiety are the antithesis of this faith and hope.

This petition, then, is to be prayed with confident trust by those who know and have received the great salvation that has been wrought for them in the Father's giving of His Son to the death of the cross:

He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? (Romans 8:32).

How do we seek by worrying to add a single hour to our span of life?

In what ways do we worry and strive over what we shall eat, drink, and wear?

How is life 'more than food, and the body more than clothing'? How can we know that, and be sure of it?

What are we praying for in the words, 'Give us this day our daily bread'?

Day3: Matthew 77—11

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there any-one among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

God says, in Isaiah 49:15:

Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.

Child neglect and abuse is a sorry and reprehensible happening among sinful humanity. Yet we are made in the image of God. He is 'the Father, from whom every family [lit fatherhood] in heaven and on earth takes its name' (Ephesians 3:14—15)—the one from whom all true parenthood and family relationship is derived. That image remains present and potent, even in us who are 'evil'. When, in spite of our sinful condition, we still do good rather than bad things for our children, this testifies to the 'how much more' of the original Father who is present and active in saving love and reigning in our midst.

Thus Jesus encourages us to 'ask', 'search', and 'knock', in no timid fashion, and to know that the Father's answers will be readily to hand. A picture that comes to mind is of persistently beating and hacking our way through an overgrown garden and hammering on the door—which is readily opened.

In Matthew 7:11, Jesus says: 'how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!' In Luke 11:13, it is: 'how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' Whatever may be our immediate needs, these are subsumed under the greatest gift of all—the Holy Spirit—by whom God gives us Himself in all His saving kingdom-action—'for he gives the Spirit without measure' (John 3:34). With this comes our access to

everything that is needful for our participation in this righteous, saving kingdom—action of God.

Is there that in us which still expects something less than good from the heavenly Father in answer to prayer?

What is to be our mindset regarding our heavenly Father if we are to keep on asking, seeking and knocking?

Day4: Psalm 32

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.
Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,'
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.

You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

Do not be like a horse or a mule,
without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.

Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.
Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

We come now to Jesus' words: 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors' (Matthew 6:12). In Luke 11:4 it reads: 'And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us'.

Psalm 32 speaks of this experience of God's forgiveness. The blessedness of transgression forgiven, sin covered, iniquity not imputed, and a spirit cleansed of deceit, is contrasted with the debilitating agony of being in the unrepentant state and under the heavy hand of God's displeasure. Forgiveness and release from guilt comes with straightforward acknowledgement of sin before God, such that those to whom this forgiveness has come can now be called 'righteous' and 'upright in heart' at the end of the Psalm.

Through further prayer they now know God's protection, preservation and deliverance in the face of distress and trouble: They also know God's leading of them in His ways of life—gently, if they are willing; with necessary force, as 'with bit and bridle', if they are not. Steadfast love for those who trust the Lord in this way is much to be preferred to the many torments of the wicked.

We know what God has done to bring about this great forgiveness. Characteristically, it was by giving—to the end:

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3:16).

If you knew the gift of God, and who it is (John 4:10).

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (2 Corinthians 9:15).

No less was Jesus the Son giving his all:

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (John 13:1).

For you know the generous act [lit. the grace] of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9).

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us (I John 3:16).

God's giving, and God's for-giving, are both of a piece.

The Spirit's means for bringing us to this forgiveness are no less sheer gift on the part of God. What we might regard as our own actions—which indeed they must be—of repentance, faith and obedience, nevertheless are gifts bestowed on us by God:

God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him (Acts 5:31–32).

God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life (Acts 11:18).

by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life (Ephesians 2:8–10).

And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well (Philippians 1:28–29).

Because it all is the gift of God, Jesus gets us to pray to the Father, to ask for it: 'Forgive us our sins'.

It figures that if we are to be involved in this reality of God's forgiveness, then we too, no less, will be engaged in the actions of giving ourselves—as we shall see.

Day 5: Luke 6:27–38

I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those, who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.

When we hear Jesus telling us to pray, 'forgive us our debts, *as we also have forgiven our debtors*', we may mistake that for some kind of condition we must fulfil before we can be forgiven. Especially when we also hear him say:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also for-give you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matthew 6:14–15).

Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses (Mark 11:25).

We need to be clear as to which comes first: God's forgiveness of us, or our forgiveness of others? If we look back to Psalm 32 (see Day 4, p. 168), we will see that before we receive forgiveness from God, we are in no position to forgive anyone. It would be the furthest thing from our mind—we are still entirely taken up in denying our need for forgiveness, and in the torment that brings.

Certain parables of Jesus confirm that the forgiveness of God comes to us before we exercise love and forgiveness ourselves. In Luke 7:36–50, a woman who was a sinner is told that her sins are forgiven. She is showing great love and devotion to Jesus. The parable Jesus tells in verses 41–42 makes it clear that her love is the result

of the forgiveness she has already received, not the precondition for it:

A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?

The love follows the cancelling of the debt. The parable of the unforgiving slave in Matthew 18:23—35 makes it clear that we are expected to forgive others as an outcome of the forgiveness we have received:

Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you? (Matthew 18:33).

Hence Ephesians 4:32 tells us:

be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

How, then, are we to understand this petition? More importantly, how are we to be in the action of it? When we have been forgiven (the extent of the debt that the slave was released from in Matthew 18:24 and 27—'ten thousand talents'—was the equivalent of an unrepayable 150,000 years of labour), how can we ever withhold forgiveness from any other person? If we should even consider doing so, how could it be said that we have any appreciation whatsoever of what forgiveness really is? Or that we had received it?

As if we had any inherent right to withhold forgiveness anyway, once God has brought His forgiveness to bear! Joseph knew the great mercy of God to his family—even to his brothers who had sought to dispose of him. When his brothers came to wheedle forgiveness out of him, Joseph wept:

Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them (Genesis 50:19–21).

If we are in receipt of God's forgiveness, we cannot but be in the flow of it towards others. If we are not, then we cannot say that we have

received it at all. Any forgiveness that there is for us then is not yet ours—our Father will see to that.

In this passage from Luke 6, Jesus makes it clear that the flow is to be full and free, without impedance:

Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.

When we pray, 'forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors', we are participating well and truly in God's great enterprise.

Is there any person from whom we are withholding love and forgiveness? If so, can we truly say that we have received forgiveness our-selves? Would our Father let us have it if this were still the case?

For Group Discussion:

Let members of the group speak of what they have received from God; their experience of being forgiven, and of being in forgiveness towards others.

Prayer:

Thanksgiving for the above. Psalms 104 and 32.

Assignment Question:

Trace the connection between God's giving and for-giving.

Week 14

The Lord's Prayer—4

And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

Day I: Deuteronomy 8:120

This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors. Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the LORD your God disciplines you. Therefore keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land

where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you.

Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the LORD is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God.

An influential recent translation of these lines in the Lord's prayer is:

Save us from the time of trial, And deliver us from evil ¹

This is a version governed, not by strict translation principles, but by the (questionable) theological conviction that God does not bring us into a time of trial. The literal translation is 'lead us not into' or 'do not bring us to the time of trial'. It is better to let what the Scripture actually says govern our theological convictions, rather than to let our

¹ *A Prayer Book for Australia*. p. 13 and throughout.

theological preferences determine our translation of the Scripture. It is because God is quite capable of leading us into a time of trial that we ask Him not to do that.

Does God, then, bring us into testing or lead us into temptation (the Greek word *peirasmos* means both)? James 1:12–16 warns us as to where temptation to sin comes from:

Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God': for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. Do not be deceived, my beloved.

Evil is no part of God, and temptation to evil does not come from God. We are tempted, lured and enticed by our own sinful desire (which is played upon by the evil one, as in Genesis 3:1–6). Nevertheless, God, in accordance with His sovereign good purpose, does take us into situations where we will be tested, and even tempted to do wrong. As we shall see, Jesus himself was 'led up by the Spirit . . . to be tempted by the devil' (Matthew 4:1). If we are going to be in those situations, it is better to be taken there by God than in any other way.

We see in this passage from Deuteronomy 8 that it was God who led the people of Israel through a time of testing in the wilderness, after He had rescued them from slavery in Egypt:

Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments (Deuteronomy 8:2).

This testing on God's part was for the good purpose of bringing the people of Israel to the point of humble and heart-felt obedience. It was their God YAHWEH who led them into this time of trial, and who cared for and sustained them in it:

who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an and wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good (Deuteronomy 8:15–16).

Under the circumstances, this testing was necessary. But it need not have been. The people of Israel could have gone directly from Sinai into the promised land. Indeed, the Lord commanded them to do this. But they were fearful and unwilling. They rebelled and grumbled against God. This is why God in His wrath sent them back into the wilderness. It was then that some of them presumptuously tried, with-out success, to go into the promised land, even though God had told them now not to do that (see Numbers 13 — 14: Moses retells these happenings in Deuteronomy 1:19–45). It was this rebellious spirit of the people that needed to be corrected, and that made this testing necessary. They could have been obedient to God's goodness towards them. They could, in a true prayer-relationship with God, have asked not to be taken into this time of trial. As it was, there was an evil in their midst from which they needed to be delivered.

It could be that when we pray, 'Do not bring us to the time of trial', we are asking God for humble obedience on our part so that such times of trial might not be necessary. Or we may be asking that we be brought to such times of trial only in order to be delivered from the perilous evil in which we stand: 'do not bring us to the time of trial, but to rescue us from evil'. Either way, we are saying that both the bringing to trial and the rescuing from trial are the action of God. That is why we petition Him with regard to both.

What 'times of trial' can we identify in our own experience?

What difference does it make to know that we have been brought to them by God?

What, then, is the significance of the prayer, 'do not bring us to the time of trial'?

Day 2: Job 2:1–10

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan² also came among them to present himself before the LORD. The LORD said to Satan,

² Or 'the Accuser': Hebrew: *ha-satan*.

‘Where have you come from?’ Satan answered the LORD, ‘From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.’ The LORD said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.’ Then Satan answered the LORD, ‘Skin for skin! All that the man has he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.’ The LORD said to Satan, ‘Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.’

So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes. Then his wife said to him, ‘Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.’ But he said to her, ‘You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?’ In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

The final petition in the Lord’s prayer can be translated either, ‘deliver us from evil’, or ‘deliver us from the evil one’, that is, from Satan. In this passage we see Satan at work as the accuser (that is the meaning of his name) of God’s people.

Job is ‘a blameless and upright man’. This does not mean that Job is sinless. In Job 7:20, he freely admits, ‘I sin’ (there is no ‘if in the original Hebrew). In 10:15 he says, ‘I am filled with disgrace’, and in 13:26 he refers to ‘the iniquities of my youth’. How then is Job ‘a blameless and upright man’? It is because he ‘fears God and turns away from evil’. Job looks to God completely for his forgiveness and justification—for the taking-away of his iniquity and the pardoning of his transgression (as he prays in 7:21: ‘Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity?’). Job has always looked to God in this way, for himself and also for his family (as we see in 1:4–5, where he would ‘sanctify’ his children and offer burnt offerings to God for them). Job continues to look to God for his vindication, right

through the book. Job is trusting God for his redemption and justification: ‘I know that my Redeemer lives . . . I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side’ (19:25–27). Job is a justified person, through his faith in God (this is a key to right understanding of the whole book). This issues in the catalogue of righteous actions that we find in chapter 31.

Satan, one of the created ‘heavenly beings’, seeks to impugn God in order to justify his own rebellion against God. He does this by attempting to show that Job’s righteousness is nothing more than a sham, and a self-interested one at that. If he can bring Job, through severe deprivation and suffering, to end up cursing God, then God’s justification of Job will be shown to be an empty failure.

God is prepared for this to happen, because He is confident in His own capacity to sustain Job in faith and righteousness—in an unbreakable relationship with Himself—through the worst suffering that Satan can come up with. This proves to be the case at the end of the book (see 42:7). Note that Satan, as a creature, can do only what he is permitted to do by God. It is God who authorises these trials in Job’s life. Job recognises God’s own action and sovereignty in all this. Job never mentions Satan. Throughout the book, Job acknowledges only the direct hand of God in all these things: ‘Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?’—that is, at the hand of God.

As it turns out, there is further refining that needs to happen to Job. Like every other sinful human being, Job has the proud propensity to want to clothe himself with dignity and honour (see 40:10)—even while believing that this must come to us from God alone. God deals with this and releases Job from it in the closing chapters of the book. Job anticipated this, even though he did not know at that point the full manner and necessity of it, when he said in 23:10:

**But he knows the way that I take;
when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold.**

Other faithful souls have recognised the same thing. The writer of Psalm 119 speaks of the humbling affliction that is brought to us by the law of God:

Before I was humbled [or afflicted] I went astray, but now I keep your word ...

It is good for me that I was humbled,
so that I might learn your statutes (Psalm 119:67, 71).

Thus James also writes:

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2–4).

In praying as Jesus taught us concerning these testing trials and our deliverance from evil, we are expressing our confidence in God's sovereign purpose and action to do us good in the end, all sin and evil powers notwithstanding.

For this good we are entirely dependent on the saving action of God in Christ on the cross. In Revelation 12:9–11 we see the sanctified and justified people of God under attack from the accusations of Satan. Their sole defence and victory lies in their witness to Christ's saving death:

The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,

'Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Messiah,
for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,
who accuses them day and night before our God.
But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.'

In this way God is faithful in leading us through and out of such times of trial, into total deliverance from the evil one. That is why we pray to our Father concerning these things. We will make no deals with Satan, as the pagans might attempt to do. To succumb to that is to play Satan at his own game on his own terms—and he will have won already. We place all our trust in the Father, at whose beck and call even Satan must run. That way, even Satan's worst efforts will succeed only in driving us more securely into the arms of our heavenly Father.³

What are the grounds of our assurance in praying to our Father: 'do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one'?

Day 3: Luke 4:1—14

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."' Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

The one who has told us to pray, 'do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one', is the one who himself has been through this experience. We read in Hebrews 4:15 that Jesus is 'one

³ It is in the light of this that some of the Puritan divines dubbed Satan 'Gods sheepdog'—his barking and nipping at our heels only serves to drive us more closely towards the good Shepherd, to take us where He wants us to go.

who in every respect has been tested [or tempted] as we are, yet with-out sin'. In this passage from Luke 4, we see Jesus confronting the evil one in person. As the one who in his identificatory love for us all will 'draw all people' to himself on the cross (see John 12:32–33), Jesus faces here the same testing temptations that we faced in the gar-den of Eden. Where we failed, he holds firm. Jesus, in his forty days in the wilderness, fares better than Israel did in its forty years in the wilderness.

Note that it is by the Spirit of God that Jesus is led into this whole experience. It is by that Spirit that he is upheld in it. and it is 'with the power of the Spirit' that he returns from it. While the devil is doing his darnedest, the initiative and the outcome are determined by the action of God.

As the man 'without sin' (Hebrews 4:15; compare I John 3:5). by virtue of his victory over Satan in this temptation, Jesus is able to say that Satan, even as the so-called 'ruler of this world', 'has no power over me' (John 14:30–31). Jesus does as the Father has commanded. There is nothing false or sinful that Satan can accuse him of. As Jesus approaches the cross, he says, 'the ruler of this world is coming'. Jesus says to his enemies as they come to arrest him, 'this is your hour, and the power of darkness!' (Luke 22:53). The devil and all his minions at this time are to be given unrestrained access to try their worst against the Son of God. The final battle is joined.

Jesus in that time took into himself the guilt of the whole human race. He 'carried up our sins in his body to the tree' (I Peter 2:24)—'the tree' being the place of God's curse (see Deuteronomy 21:22–23; Galatians 3:13). There in his flesh God carried through the condemnation of all of our sin, and of us as sinners (Romans 8:3). The guilt was removed; the sin was taken away (John 1:29). There is nothing left for Satan to accuse us of. The bondage he has held us under, through our fear of death and judgment, is now broken (Hebrews 2:14–15; 9:27). The demonic rulers and authorities were disarmed in his triumph there (Colossians 2:13–15), as Jesus loved us to the end without flinching (John 13:1), and fully obeyed the command of his Father to lay down his life in order to take it up again (John 10:17–18).⁴

⁴ In this paragraph we are rehearsing once more the deep significance of what happened for us and to us in the cross of Christ. We cannot do this too often. Each of the Scriptures cited here will richly repay prayerful meditation.

It is by this we know that 'the one who is in you [Christ] is greater than the one who is in the world [the devil]' (1 John 4:4). It is by this we know that, submitted to God, we can 'Resist the devil, and he will flee from you' (James 4:7)—even though he is 'Like a roaring lion ... looking for someone to devour' (1 Peter 5:8). It is by virtue of this mighty action of the cross that Jesus is able to say to his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane, and to us in this prayer: 'Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial [or into temptation]'—as we pray for ourselves and for others (Mark 14:38).

What is the connection between this prayer, 'do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one', and the one who is teaching us to pray it?

Day 4: 1Corinthians 10:1—13

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.' We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put the Lord to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if

you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

There is no point at which we can become complacent regarding our need to pray this prayer, and no point where our absolute dependence on the saving and protective power of Christ can be withdrawn.

These words are addressed to those who are well and truly within the fellowship of God's people—those who have been joined to Christ in baptism, and who feed on him in the Lord's supper. We can never stop praying, 'Do not bring us into hard testing'. We are to know at all times our frailty and dependence, and the Lord's good purpose and faithfulness towards us.

The testing of Israel in the wilderness (see Day 1, p. 174) is given as an example to us. Idolatry, sexual immorality, questioning God's faithfulness, and complaining are no less prevalent in the Christian church today than they were among Israel in the wilderness. None of us can get cocky about any of these things. 'So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.'

None of us are to think that we are a special case. The trials that come to us are the common experience of all humanity: 'No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone'. What each of us must come to know and be assured of is the faithfulness and good intention of God. 'God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength'—that is, beyond the strength that God gives. We are not to think that any of our own (so-called) strength, that we think we have of ourselves, will be equal to the trials that come. Trials often come to disabuse us of that false notion and bring us to true reliance on God and what He gives. Thus, 'with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it'. Note that the 'way out' does not necessarily lift us miraculously out of the middle of a time of trial. The words 'that you may be able to endure it' indicate that the way out is more likely to be an ability to go right through with it and come out intact at the other end.

If anything, the issues are more serious for us now than they were for the people of Israel in the wilderness. We are those 'on whom the

ends of the ages have come'. It is the ultimate 'time of trial'—the final judgment—that we now face. We carry with us the gospel that saves people in that critical test. As we pray, 'Your kingdom come', so we must pray with corresponding great urgency, 'And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one'.

What are the dangers of complacency? What is the urgency of prayer?

Day 5: Psalm 40:11-17

Do not, O LORD, withhold
your mercy from me;
let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever.
For evils have encompassed me
without number;
my iniquities have overtaken me,
until I cannot see;
they are more than the hairs of my head,
and my heart fails me.
Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me;
O LORD, make haste to help me.
Let all those be put to shame and confusion
who seek to snatch away my life;
let those be turned back and brought to dishonour
who desire my hurt.
Let those be appalled because of their shame
who say to me, 'Aha, Aha!'
But may all who seek you
rejoice and be glad in you;
may those who love your salvation
say continually, 'Great is the LORD!'
As for me, I am poor and needy,
but the Lord takes thought for me.

You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God.

We looked at the first ten verses of this Psalm in considering the petition ‘Your will be done’ (Week 12, Day 3, p.152). ‘all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted’ (2 Timothy 3:12). All who desire to do the will of God will come under fierce attack from earthly and heavenly powers: ‘evils have encompassed me without number’. The weakness of our flesh and the issues of our own sinfulness will no less beset us: ‘my iniquities have overtaken me, until I cannot see’. It behoves us to know and admit that ‘my heart fails me’, and ‘I am poor and needy’.

Then we know what we are saying when we ask the Lord to ‘Be pleased ... to deliver me . . . make haste to help me’. We know there is no other way, and the need is urgent. We pray in the assurance that ‘Great is the LORD!’ who takes thought for the poor and the needy, whose beloved salvation causes all who see Him to rejoice and be glad.

It was in such extremes that Paul came to know and trust the deliverance of God:

We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again, as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many (2 Corinthians 1:8–11).

Knowing that God ‘will rescue us again’ never made Paul complacent. Because he knew it was a sure thing, this redoubled his requests for ‘the prayers of many’. The more we know the reality of God’s great enterprise, in its day-to-day operations, the more we know the fierceness of the battle, and the more we know God’s urging for us to participate in it through prayer.

Hence the more we know that the resources we have from God in the battle are undefeatable:

the weapons of our warfare are not merely human [Gk. fleshly], but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud

obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4–5).

The more we pray, ‘do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from evil’, the more we will know the truth and reality of the Lord’s deliverance—now, and on the last day:

At my first defence no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion’s mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen (2 Timothy 4:16–18).

What has been our experience of the Lord’s deliverance, in our own lives or in the lives of others?

How have we been encouraged by that to pray even more earnestly?

Note

Some ancient textual authorities add to Matthew 6:13, in some form: ‘For the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours forever. Amen.’ This is picked up in many liturgical uses of the Lord’s prayer. It was common for Jewish prayers to end with such an ascription. This one shares many elements with this part of David’s great prayer in. I Chronicles 29:11–13:

Yours, O LORD, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Riches and honour come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might: and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all. And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name.

For Group Discussion:

Go through the questions following the notes on each day’s reading, and let members of the group share any responses they have to each question.

What difference have these four sessions (Weeks 11–14, pp. 134ff) made to members' understanding and use of the Lord's prayer?

Prayer:

Let members of the group tell others, if appropriate, perhaps in small groups, any trials or temptations they may be currently facing. Pray regarding these. Then all pray aloud together Psalm 40:11–17 (Day 5, p. 185).

Assignment Question:

Trace in the Scriptures some instances of God bringing or not bringing people into a time of trial and delivering them from evil:

Week I5

Pray in the Spirit

Day 1: 9 Corinthians 2:1–16

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come pro-claiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him' —
these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have

received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.

'For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?'

But we have the mind of Christ.

For us to participate with God in God's great enterprise, we need to share in God's heart-knowledge of the plan and action of that great enterprise. We need to know the cross that is at the centre of that plan and action, in its depthful dimensions. We need to have a sense and assurance of the outcome of that great enterprise. We will have none of these things unless God Himself imparts them to us, and includes us in on His action. Without these things we will be unable to pray and act in the way God has purposed for us.

It is by His Spirit that the Father brings these things through to us. The Spirit is indispensable for our participation in prayer and action. The communication of these things at depth, in the measure and with the thrust that is required for our full participation, is brought to us by God's own Spirit.

In terms of participation in God's action, we see practical instances of this in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. In Acts 8:29:

Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it:

Philip brought 'the good news about Jesus' to the Ethiopian official, who was returning home from Jerusalem reading Isaiah 53, and baptised him on the way. It was a significant and strategic moment in the action of God's kingdom, and it was brought about entirely by the Spirit of God. The Spirit did not leave Philip with the Ethiopian one moment longer than he needed to be:

the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away... Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea (Acts 8:39-40).

Paul (Saul of Tarsus) and his companions also knew this initiative of the Spirit directing operations:

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia (Acts 13: 1-4).

They were not left alone in this. The Spirit directed their day-by-day movements:

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them (Acts 16:6-10).

Their speaking also was not without the Spirit of God:

But Saul, also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, 'You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?' (Acts 13:9-10).

As with action and speaking, so with worship and prayer. We know that Jesus, whose every action and word was directed and energised by the Spirit of God, 'rejoiced in the Holy Spirit' when he prayed to the Father (Luke 10:21; see Week 9, Day 4, p. 116). He told the woman of Samaria:

the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24).

To worship God ‘in spirit and truth’ must mean to worship God in all the truth of God, imparted to our spirit or inner being by the Spirit that is from God. How can we know the truth of God? It is when we are ‘in the Spirit’, as John was on the island of Patmos (Revelation 1:10), that the word of the Lord comes to us. This is how it was when all the Scriptures were written, as it is when the good news is now proclaimed (see I Peter 1:10—12: ‘the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance . . . those who brought you the good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven’). This is how it is when we read those same Scriptures today (see 2 Peter 1:20: ‘no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation . . . men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God’).

In writing this passage to the Corinthians in I Corinthians 2, Paul makes clear that the central reality of ‘Jesus Christ, and him crucified’ came to them ‘with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power’—that is, by God’s power, and not by human wisdom. Equally, the outcome of God’s great enterprise, ‘which God decreed before the ages for our glory’, even though these things are beyond human sight, hearing or imagination, ‘God has revealed to us through the Spirit’. It is by the Spirit that we have ‘the mind of Christ’, with regard to all these ‘gifts bestowed on us by God’. Who knows what is there in our innermost depths? Proverbs 20:27 says:

The human spirit is the lamp of the LORD, searching every inmost part.

So Paul asks, ‘what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within?’ There are things within us that we can know only at the level of spirit. ‘So also’, Paul goes on, ‘no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God’. This is the Spirit who ‘searches everything, even the depths of God’. This Spirit links our depths with God’s depths, and we receive, at every level, all that we need to be about God’s business.

Part of this relating with God ‘at every level’ is the matter of praying ‘in tongues’. There are levels of our consciousness that are rational, and there are levels deeper than that, which need just as much all that the Spirit has to communicate with us. One way this happens is through the gift of ‘tongues’—sounds or languages unknown to the

speaker. This gift is manifested on occasions when the Spirit of God is poured out:

they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God (Acts 10:46; see also 2:4; 19:6).

When this gift is used in prayer, Paul says, there is a communication with God in the depths, that bypasses the rational mind:

For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit . . .

if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unproductive (1 Corinthians 14:2. 14).

This can be unnerving for some of us, for we use our rational mind to control and process all that happens in our life. In a proud or sinful person, that can be used as a barrier against God. God may use such a gift as this to undermine and disarm that false sense of security. No way of true prayer is to be despised:

What should I do then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also (I Corinthians 14:15).

This way God, in the communication of His life and action with us, is leaving no part of us untouched or unclaimed by His love.

Did we receive the Holy Spirit when we believed? (see Acts 19:2). Has he communicated to us the work of the cross?

Has he revealed to us ‘what God has prepared for those who love him’?

What does it mean to ‘have the mind of Christ’?

What is the difference between praying ‘with the mind’ and praying ‘with the spirit’?

Day 2 John 16:7–15

I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate [or Helper] will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes,

he will prove the world wrong about [or convict the world of] sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

We have our own notions of what sin and righteousness and judgment are, formed in the mindset of our self-regarding independence. Sin, according to this mindset, is what we do wrong—but it is not too bad. Sin is also what others do wrong—that they most definitely must answer for. Righteousness is what we consider right—always according to the measurement of our own standards, of course, which can be adjusted to suit us. Judgment is that which we exercise mostly towards others, rarely towards ourselves, again according to our own self-concocted standards.

The cross of Christ fiercely dismantles all of that. There we see our sin for the ugly thing it is—our concerted and spiteful crucifixion of the Son of God, in final and absolute defiance of God and His Messiah—our refusal to believe in the Son given by God. Here we come up against a righteousness of God that puts ours to terrible shame—in a human being who alone in all his ways and actions and words is pleasing to the Father, who is loved and accepted by the Father especially in the laying down of his life—a righteousness which in love takes all the sin of others into itself, to bring them into conformity with the righteousness of God. On this cross we are amazed to find that there is a judgment of God, not our own, in which Satan, who has sought to hold this world in thrall through all his accusations against God's human creatures, is expelled and condemned.

Apart from this there can be no true prayer. Geoffrey Bingham says:

If we fail to see the vast love of the Godhead in the act of the Cross—the act of Father, Son and Spirit—then we will always be defective in our knowledge of God, our relationship with Him, and so our dialogue of prayer... if we do not see that love at full blaze in the Cross, then our prayer will always be deficient.¹

This work of the cross the Spirit brings home to each of us in the act of believing. Thus the Spirit guides us into all the truth of the reality of God, and declares to us the things that are to come. All of this is in Christ—the eternal Son, incarnate, crucified, risen, ascended, glorified—in whom the Father has invested all that He has, on our behalf. The Spirit takes all of this, and declares it to us.

This is what makes prayer possible—indeed, unavoidable. True prayer takes place in the fullness of all that God has given us of Him—self. Geoffrey Bingham also says:

authentic prayer can only be that prayer which is in the Spirit—whatever various forms it may take. It is the 'fruit of the Spirit' (Gal. 5:22—23)—'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, [faithfulness], gentleness [and self control]', which are the foundation and only true aid of proper prayer. This fruit (or, harvest) is given by God, and not attained by human endeavour. The Spirit's indwelling is the assurance that we may now pray without ceasing. The given fruit of the Spirit ensures us that we may have Christ's mind and pray to the Father in and through both the Son and the Spirit of the Son.²

How have we been convicted by the Spirit of sin, righteousness and judgment?

How does this relate to believing in Jesus, his going to the Father, and Satan being condemned, and how do these relate to the action of the cross?

How does this issue in prayer?

¹ Bingham, *Come Let Us Pray*, pp. 65—6.

² Bingham, *Come Let Us Pray*, pp. 23—4.

Day 3: Ephesians 2:11—22

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by those who are called ‘the circumcision’—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in him–self one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility in him. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit.

The dimensions of what was achieved on the cross are here displayed: the forging and minting of ‘one new humanity’ in Jesus Christ. The entire human race was in hostile rebellion against God. To one part of this humanity—‘the commonwealth of Israel’—God came in His covenant and gave His law. For those who were still in sinfulness, this glorious law of God merely exacerbated our sins and catalogued our faults as ‘the record that stood against us with its legal demands’ (Colossians 2:14). It also built an effective separation between those who were at that time in the covenant with God, and those who were still outside it. All this was in preparation for what God would do in

Christ. On the cross, the law’s record of our sins was erased, set aside, and nailed to the cross in the condemnation of death. Both Israel and the other sinful nations were cleansed, brought near and reconciled to God. So, too, the distinctions involved in the commandments and ordinances of the law that kept Israel and the other sinful nations apart from each other were done away with—for the covenant now extended to all who believed: ‘you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace’.

The access we now have together in Jesus Christ to the Father—for prayer as for everything else—is by the Spirit:

through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

We have seen before (Week 11, Day 2, p. 137) how ‘God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”’ (Galatians 4:6; compare Romans 8:14–17). Here we see it happening, in the context of the whole plan and purpose of God.

Our participation in God’s great enterprise is then pictured as the building of a ‘holy temple’ structure—a family household of living people—in whom God dwells ‘in the Spirit’.

What, then, is the dynamic nature of this ‘one Spirit’, who brings us to the place where our hostility has been broken down, who ushers us directly into the Father’s presence, who is himself the dwelling of God amongst us? The Spirit is no appendage to the work of creation and the redeeming of this creation to bring it to its God–intended goal. The Spirit is intimate in every action of the Father and the Son. How could we ever pray—how could we ever have any engagement in God’s great enterprise—apart from the Spirit?

**How much does the Spirit feature in our approach to God in prayer?
How widely do we see the Spirit engaged in all the work of God?**

Day 4: Ephesians 6:10—20

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle

is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

One of the things that happened on the cross was the disarming and defeat of the evil ‘rulers and authorities’ (Colossians 2:15). One effect of this in the present age is that ‘the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short’ (Revelation 12:12). He is depicted in powerful form as ‘a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads’ (Revelation 12:3)—more than a match for any of us, outside of Christ’s justifying us from all our sin. His hatred and determination is not to be underestimated: ‘Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour’ (1 Peter 5:8).

Faced with this deadly opposition, we need to know where we stand: ‘in the Lord and in the strength of his power’. The ‘armour of God’ is the ‘armour’ with which God clothes Himself in His battle on our behalf (see Isaiah 59:17). As participants now in His battle against evil, we wear it with Him and in Him, as we bind His truth about us, stand in the righteousness He has brought us into, announce His deep peace, know ourselves to be justified by His grace through faith as,

sure of His salvation, we speak His word which is wielded by the Spirit to great effect.

We could say that all of this is summed up in the words, ‘Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication’. To pray in any other way, if that were possible, would be to expose ourselves to the rabid hordes of evil without the saving protection of God. We are to ‘keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints’, and especially for those to whom the message of the gospel is entrusted.

Faced with similar opposition from human beings who are worldly, pleasure-lusting, scornful and divisive, Jude similarly enjoins:

But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on some who are wavering; save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen (Jude 20–25).

What does it mean to ‘pray in the Holy Spirit’?

How does this relate to the (human and demonic) opposition we face?

Day 5: Romans 8:18—27

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the

redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

As participants in God's great enterprise, we are not only faced with the opposition of the human and demonic powers. God also gives us to carry within ourselves in some measure the agonised longing for the glorious outcome in a world where that outcome is not yet evident. He has put eternal glory in our hearts in a creation that is still 'subjected to futility' and in 'bondage to decay'.

Nowhere is this more evidenced than in our own lives. The Spirit testifies in our hearts that we have been made the sons and daughters of God, destined for resurrection life in the new heavens and the new earth. We know that the destiny of the whole creation is contingent upon us coming into our own as its rightful God-given servant-rulers. But we are painfully aware, in our perishable frailty, and in our 'body of sin' or 'body of death' (Romans 6:6; 7:24) that we are still to be delivered from, that we are not there yet. The hope that is real and sure and certain is not yet seen. Filled with the Spirit we groan, with the whole despoiled creation, through these birth-pangs of the new age.

In such a condition, how can we ever be God's participant partners in His great enterprise? How can we pray, when we can scarcely breathe? Here the miracle of God's love in the Spirit is present to our aid. We are not there—we cannot even know how to pray and what to pray for. But 'the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God' (I Corinthians 2:10; see Day I, p. 189). God knows the end from the beginning. God knows us better than we know ourselves, and He knows where He is taking us. He knows what He has placed within us. The Spirit comes and articulates our incoherent groanings as living prayers that match the will of God—still incomprehensible to us, but highly pleasing and acceptable to the Father.

That we should be caught up in such an enterprise, by such unrestrained loving identification, is of the essence of our Father's purposeful dealings with us.

Have we ever been in a situation of deep suffering on the part of ourselves and others, when we have been constrained to pray, but have not known how or what to pray for?

How has the Spirit come to our aid?

For Group Discussion:

Work through the questions following each day's readings and notes.

Prayer

After considering the questions for Day 5, allow times of quiet for praying in the Spirit.

Assignment Question:

What is the role of the Spirit of God in true prayer?

Week 16

Intercession

Day 1: Ephesians 3:14—21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Paul the apostle prayed for the people in the churches he wrote to. Many of them he knew personally. He had been instrumental in the conversion of many of them, and he was like a spiritual father—or even a mother and nursemaid—towards them (see I Corinthians 4:14–16; I Thessalonians 2:11–12, 5–8; Galatians 4:19). Paul's praying for them was out of a relationship with them that was bonded and open—and so vulnerable. At one point he wrote, out of great anguish of spirit (see 2 Corinthians 2:4):

our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections ... you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together (2 Corinthians 6:11–12: 7:3).

We can never pray in a detached way when we intercede for others from a relationship like that. Our very lives are caught up with theirs—in both suffering and joy.

Paul's earnest desire, whether praying for individual persons or for whole churches, was for their maturity in Christ. His desire for each person was:

that we may present everyone mature in Christ (Colossians 1:28).

His longing for the whole church together was the same:

until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ (Ephesians 4:13).

Thus Paul prayed for his fellow-believers, even when they were well advanced in faith and hope and love, that they go on and grow into the fullness of all that God has for them. See, for instance, the unceasing way Paul prayed for the people in Thessalonica:

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (I Thessalonians 1:2–3).

However satisfactory their condition may have been, still Paul asked and urged them 'in the Lord Jesus':

that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more (1 Thessalonians 4:1).

Paul's urging and praying were rewarded, for we read later:

We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing (2 Thessalonians 1:3).

We see a similar thing happening in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, where he says:

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers (Ephesians 1:15–16).

Not content to leave it there, Paul goes on:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power (Ephesians 1:17–19).

Always in view is the ‘glorious inheritance’—our full participation with God in His great enterprise. Paul will never go back or let up on that, for anyone. His prayer in this passage from Ephesians 3:14–21 is one of the fullest expressions of this that can be prayed for any persons. He prays that they may be filled with nothing less than ‘all the fullness of God’. The knowledge of the immeasurable dimensions of Christ’s love, that he prays for them to know, is not just intellectual comprehension but, as always in the Bible, heart-knowledge and experience through active participation. To this end, Paul prays for them to be indwelt by Christ himself and inwardly strengthened through the Spirit. It is to Father of the Family, from whom all relationships are derived, that he prays for them. This is glorious intercession.

Paul was not alone in such praying. In writing to the Colossians, Paul speaks of Epaphras, who had first brought the gospel to them, with whom he now shared a prison cell (see Colossians 1:3–8; Philemon 23). Living together with him at such close quarters, Paul knew a lot about Epaphras’s practice of prayer. Paul tells the Colossians:

Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis (Colossians 4:12–13).

Clearly, the prayers of Epaphras arose from and were accompanied by a sizeable emotional and physical investment in the lives of his fellow Colossians.

Paul similarly joined his prayers to those of Epaphras:

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all

spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light (Colossians 1:9–12).

What is the goal and longing of Paul’s prayers for others?

How does that compare with our prayers for others, and for our-selves?

What is the significance of the relationship we have with those for whom we pray?

Day 2: Acts 7:S4—60

When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he died.

Stephen’s dying prayer is a remarkable one: ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’. To pray for your enemies, even as they are stoning you to death, must be one of the highest forms of loving intercession. Where did this come from?

Stephen had just been given to see ‘the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’. This is the one who has said to us:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you (Luke 6:27–28).

This is the one who himself, as he was being crucified, prayed:

Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34).

It was into the hands of this Lord Jesus that Stephen had just committed his spirit. Hardly surprising is it then to hear him praying as he dies a prayer that is very much the prayer of the Son of God.

In Week 8, Day I, p. 95, on ‘God the Intervener’, we said this:

To intervene/“interpose” means to stand between people and the consequences of their moral collapse.¹ It is the word translated elsewhere as ‘intercede’ (Isaiah 53:12; see Day 2, p. 97). It has connotations of making contact with something, or engaging with some person or activity: to be on the spot. This helps us to understand what ‘intercession’ means, on God’s part and on ours, when we use that word in connection with prayer.

There we were looking at the nature of God’s intercession or intervention. Here we are looking at ours. Our intercession, as God’s appointed ‘prayer-partners’ in His great enterprise, is grounded in God’s own intervention on behalf of His creation, to bring it to the goal He has purposed for it. For us to be able to intercede with Him, God gives us something of His own heart for those whom He loves (see Week 15: ‘Pray in the Spirit’, p. 189). We then pray accordingly.

Jesus, in getting us to pray for our enemies, was telling us to be like God our heavenly Father:

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven: for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous (Matthew 5:44–45).

Jesus is saying here that the Father loves and intercedes/intervenes *for His enemies*. No one would know this better than Jesus—for he knew personally the lengths that the Father would go to redeem His rebellious human creatures:

while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son (Romans 5:10).

To join God in that kind of intercession will be no less costly for us than it was for Him. It will engage all our resources. That is what makes intercession for others the highest form of praying: it is the most God-like. Knowing that we do it with Him, with the heart that He has given us of His own self-giving, encourages us to know that such intercession will be effective.

Why should we pray for our enemies?

How are we able to pray for our enemies?

What does this teach us about the nature of intercession?

Day 3: Exodus 32:7—14, 30—35

The LORD said to Moses, ‘Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”’ The LORD said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.’ But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, ‘O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, “It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth”? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, “I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall

¹ Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, p. 491.

inherit it forever.”“ And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

On the next day Moses said to the people, ‘You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.’ So Moses returned to the LORD and said, ‘Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written.’ But the LORD said to Moses, ‘Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; see, my angel shall go in front of you. Nevertheless, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin.’ Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf—the one that Aaron made.

This comes after the incident of Aaron and the people of Israel at Mount Sinai worshipping the golden calf. The seriousness of their sin is not underestimated, nor its consequences for them. Moses senses and acknowledges that it could result in the people being blotted out of God’s ‘book’—the record of the living. God agrees: ‘Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book’. It is a fearful prospect. Even though he has not participated in their sin, Moses offers himself to be blotted out of God’s book, so that the people may be forgiven. God does not take up Moses’ offer. No doubt Moses, being a sinner himself in other respects, would not be able rightly to bear such a burden. Besides, God has reserved that position for someone else—the only one who will rightly be able to bear it—His own Son. Nevertheless, Moses is on the right track, and God hears and answers his prayer and spares the people, albeit subjecting them to necessary and appropriate chastisement.

Moses, interceding before God for the people, identified himself with them in their sin. In the love that he had for them, he refused to dissociate himself from them—sinful as they were—even if it meant that he would die with them, or in their place. Moses did not need to do that. God had already given him another option: ‘Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them;

and of you I will make a great nation’. Moses would not stand aside. Not that he had any virtue of his own by which he could plead for the people. He appealed fully and only to God’s own nature, and to the saving promise of blessing that God had made to the forefathers regarding this people. This appeal to the nature of God, made after the fashion of God’s own self-giving heart, prevailed with God.

This is true intercession. God Himself is the One who bears us as His burden, day after day:

Blessed be the Lord,
who daily bears us up;
God is our salvation.
Our God is a God of salvation,
and to GOD, the Lord, belongs escape from death (Psalm 68:19)

He gives us something of His own heart—and of His own suffering—to bear His people with Him in intercession.

This was symbolised in the high priest’s breastpiece (see Exodus 28:6—31):

There shall be twelve stones with names corresponding to the names of the sons of Israel; they shall be like signets, each engraved with its name, for the twelve tribes ... So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart when he goes into the holy place, for a continual remembrance before the LORD. In the breastpiece of judgment you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron’s heart when he goes in before the LORD; thus Aaron shall bear the judgment . of the Israelites on his heart before the LORD continually (Exodus 28:21, 29–30).

Remember how we said that it was by loving identification that Jesus could pray with us, ‘Forgive us our sins’, even though he had no sins of his own (see Week II, Day I, p. 134). True to form, Ezra the priest similarly prayed for back-slidden Israel. Though he himself had remained faithful, his prayer spoke only of ‘our iniquities . . . our guilt ... our evil deeds’, and his own shame with regard to them. As with God and those He has come to save, the true intercessor is one with those who are interceded for. This akin to the intercession of Christ, our great High Priest, who bears us on his heart, and who ‘ever lives to make intercession’ for us (see Hebrews 7:25).

What could Moses have done, to dissociate himself from the state and the fate of the people?

Why did Moses not do that?

What does that teach us about the nature of intercession?

Day 4: Romans 9:1–5, 10:1

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my con-science confirms it by the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.

Again we see Paul at prayer. Here we see something of the place he was prepared to go to as he interceded for others. On this occasion he is not praying for people who had been his converts, or for fellow believers. This time Paul is praying for the unsaved, and particularly for the unsaved of his own people, the Israelites.

His introduction tells us that there is no small thing happening here. He is 'speaking the truth in Christ'—he is fully in Christ, and so all that he says is as true as if Christ himself were speaking it. He is not lying—he is perfectly clear in the truth of what he is saying, and the Spirit himself is bearing witness to it. Paul wants his readers to take careful note of what he says—not to miss it—and to take it to heart.

'I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.' What is the cause of this? Paul goes on to say:

For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.

These 'kindred' are the ones that are causing him this 'great sorrow and unceasing anguish' in his heart. They are his fellow-Israelites who have rejected the word that he has tried to bring to them. Wherever Paul went, he would go first to the synagogue, to tell his fellow-Jews the good news. Many of them believed, and followed him and asked for more. But invariably there was a groundswell of opposition, which extended out into the wider community, and gathered forces which removed him out of the synagogue, or stoned him, or put him in prison, or beat him, or arrested him, or drove him right out of the community.

It is not what they have done to him, however, that has caused him this 'great sorrow and unceasing anguish'. It is what they are themselves missing out on, which is their heritage. The 'glorious inheritance among the saints' is all theirs—it has been theirs from the start, from the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Theirs is 'the adoption'. God has said. 'Israel is my firstborn son' (Exodus 4:22). Right back there they had that relationship with God that Christ has now brought to them in fullness. They have seen 'the glory'.. 'The God of glory appeared to . . . Abraham' (Acts 7:2). Moses said, 'Show me your glory', and God revealed Himself to Israel as 'a God merciful and gracious' (Exodus 33:18; 34:6–7). These Israelites have been party to 'the covenants', by which God has bonded Himself with His people in close relationship. They have received 'the giving of the law'. In giving them that law of His own being and action, God has unfolded to them what is in His own heart, and how they are to be in relation-ship with Him, and with each other. They have had 'the worship'—the true response to God, as set out by Him—and 'the promises', which show the way forward to the glorious inheritance. Theirs were 'the patriarchs', to whom the promises had been made. God said to Abraham. 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Genesis 12:3)—the blessing of the Spirit for all the nations (see Galatians 3:14). And now, above all, 'from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah' —the one who 'will save his people from their sins' as 'God with us' (Matthew 1:21, 23). All of this is theirs, and all of this is what they are throwing back in God's face when they reject Paul's gospel. That is what causes Paul 'great sorrow and unceasing anguish' in his heart.

It is on account of this that Paul says, 'I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own

people'. There was nothing that was more important to Paul than his relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. 'For his sake', Paul said, 'I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish ...because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord' (Philippians 3:8). Yet, Paul is saying: I would forgo even that for myself, if only my people could come into their inheritance. This was his 'heart's desire and prayer to God for them'—'that they may be saved'.

We are given an insight into Paul's praying here that is deeper than all that we saw with regard to the Ephesians and the Colossians and others. Could such a thing as being 'cut off from Christ' in this way ever be possible? Could we ever get our heads around what Paul was saying here, or what it might have meant for him to be able and willing to say it? It is not something that he would have said in any way lightly. The way he prayed was not reckless or foolish, but deeply considered and intentional. Where would he have got such a mindset from—to be willing to forgo all that was most precious to him for the good of the ones for whom he prayed? What—or who—did he know, that led him to pray like this? We remember what Moses said: 'blot me out of the book that you have written'—if that is what it will take to bring these people to forgiveness (Exodus 32:32; see Day 3, p. 207). It is like Jesus himself putting on the line all that was most precious to him—his intimate relationship as a human being with God ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?')—to bring us, his enemies, back to the Father.

It is an amazing mystery, but it takes us to the heart of intercession. We cannot imagine God ever making Paul 'accursed and cut off from Christ' on this account. Did Paul even think that God would ever do that? Yet that is really what the Father did with His only Son. Every-thing that was most precious and important to Him—all that He had, without remainder—He gave, that we might be forgiven and live. That is the same heart that has now come to His apostle Paul, with regard to these Jewish people.

If we could pray like that, for all Israel—or all Australia or any-where else—how powerfully would that avail before the throne of our heavenly Father! To pray in that way can come to us, as it must have come to Paul, only as a gift from God's own heart. God's intervention/intercession in the action of the cross is what has saved the world.

Paul is simply being given here a measure of participation in God's own heart and action in that cross. We have been given no less. That is true intercession. What a gift of love is that! Who can ever understand it? Yet, by God's grace, we can be in it. To be in this powerful prayer-action in these days is to participate fully with God in God's own great enterprise.

How is Paul's intercession here related to the intervention/intercession of God in Christ?

What is its focus or intention?

What does this tell us about where we stand as intercessors?

Day 5: Isaiah 62:1—7

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch.
The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory;
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will give.
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land Married;
for the LORD delights in you,
and your land shall be married.
For as a young man marries a young woman,
so shall your builder marry you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you.
Upon your walls, O Jerusalem,
I have posted sentinels;

all day and all night
 they shall never be silent.
 You who remind the LORD, take no rest,
 and give him no rest
 until he establishes Jerusalem
 and makes it renowned throughout the earth.

We have had before us all along the goal of God's great enterprise, that He is taking us to. Here it is depicted as a wedding:

you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
 and your land Married;
 for the LORD delights in you,
 and your land shall be married.
 For as a young man marries a young woman,
 so shall your builder marry you,
 and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
 so shall your God rejoice over you.

The dimensions of this great culmination are spelled out in Revelation chapters 19 – 22. Here they are summarised: vindication, salvation, and glory from God for 'Jerusalem'—God's holy people—before all the nations; a new identity from God, of great beauty and regality: never alone any more, and no longer subject to destruction; now in a union with God that is full of joy and delight, that can never be broken.

God declares that He will not rest from His saving action, and will not cease speaking His saving, creative word, until this goal is accomplished:

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
 and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
 until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
 and her salvation like a burning torch.

This is God's purpose, on which He has set His heart, on which He has staked His whole being, in which He has invested His entire resources, and which He will never give up on until it has been brought to fulfilment.

While it will be God Himself who accomplishes this, yet He has appointed that it will not be achieved without our full participation with Him, not only in its glorious outcome, but also, no less, in the process of bringing it to pass. We are to be God's prayer-partners in His great enterprise. We are the 'sentinels' that God has given, for the people that will be God's own precious possession:

Upon your walls. O Jerusalem.
 I have posted sentinels:
 all day and all night
 they shall never be silent.

These are the intercessors. Just as God Himself 'will not keep silent', so our voice of prayer must never be stilled. These sentinels are appointed by God to be no less in earnest about the accomplishment of God's purpose than He is Himself. He wants us even to badger Him constantly into bringing it to its full and glorious completion. Just as God Himself 'will not rest', so we also are to 'take no rest' on this score, Not only that, but we are to 'give him no rest' until all is accomplished:

You who remind the LORD,
 take no rest,
 and give him no rest
 until he establishes Jerusalem
 and makes it renowned throughout the earth.

There can be no higher or more privileged calling than this—to be in the place where we know God's heart, and are with Him in His action.

Why does God want us praying?

Who does God want us to pray for now?

For Group Discussion:

We have seen that, for the apostle Paul and others, the goal and longing of their prayer for other people is for their full maturity in Christ (see Day I, p. 202). How does that compare with how we intercede for others?

Is intercession for others, especially for any who are opposed to us, ‘the highest form of praying’ (Day 2, p. 205)? What is it that would make it so? ‘The true intercessor is one with those who are interceded for’ (Day 3, p. 207). What part does identification with those prayed for play in the action of intercession? How possible is it to intercede truly without it?

Let members of the group tell of those whom the Lord has laid on their hearts to pray for, and the experiences they have had in praying for them (Day 4, p. 210). How has this been related to the intervention/intercession of God in Christ?

Prayer.

You who remind the LORD,
take no rest,
and give him no rest
until he establishes Jerusalem
and makes it renowned throughout the earth.

Assignment Question:

What is it that makes intercession the highest, most demanding and most rewarding form of prayer?