

A STUDY OF

PRAYERS

FROM THE

SCRIPTURES



A STUDY OF

PRAYERS

FROM THE

SCRIPTURES





BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

In the Bible, God reveals His truth about how to have eternal life by becoming a believer in the finished work of Jesus Christ. The believer is a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, a true child of God, and one who has been saved by God according to God's grace (undeserved favor). "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

How does one become a Christian?

- The Bible, God's word, says that eternal life (salvation) is a free gift of God which cannot be earned or deserved (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:8-9).
- However, we also find in God's word that all people are born sinners and cannot save themselves from the penalty of sin, which is eternal death and separation from God. God's requirement is perfection and no one is perfect (Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:3-23; Ephesians 2:1-4).
- God tells us in His word that He is holy, meaning that He is perfect and that He is also just, meaning that He gives to sinners what is deserved, and because of His holiness and justice He must punish sinners. But thankfully, the Bible also says that God is loving and merciful and does not take pleasure in punishing sinners (Exodus 34:6-7; Ephesians 2:4-5).
- God has mercy on sinners by not giving them what they deserve. This is only possible because He gave His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the God-man, to be the substitute for sinners bearing the penalty for their sin and satisfying God's justice (John 1:1,14; Isaiah 53:6; Romans 5:8).
- Jesus said that in order for anyone to have eternal life there must be repentance of sins and faith placed in His substitutionary death on the cross to pay for the penalty of one's sins. This faith must be in Jesus Christ alone, not depending on anything else including "good works" (Mark 1:15b; Acts 20:21; Ephesians 2:8-9).

What then is the response to these things if one desires to have eternal life and become a Christian?

1. Pray and ask God to forgive you. The Bible says that you must repent of your sins, being ashamed of them, genuinely regretting and grieving over them, and firmly deciding to make an about-face and turn away from sin and your old lifestyle (Acts 3:19-20).
2. Pray and tell God that you place your faith in Jesus Christ alone to save you. The Bible says that for you to become a Christian, you must place your faith and trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ who died on the cross to become your substitute and who took the penalty for your sin upon Himself once and for all (John 3:36).

SERIES CONTENT

JANUARY 3

Conversing with God in Prayer

8

JANUARY 10

Prayer in Times of Thanksgiving

18

JANUARY 17

Prayer in Times of Need

28

JANUARY 24

Prayer for Your Nation

38

JANUARY 31

Prayer for Eternal Things

48

FEBRUARY 7

Praying for Spiritual Growth

58



OAKWOOD

PRAYER

January 3, 2021 | *Conversing with God in Prayer*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Before your group meets, become acquainted with Abraham by reading Genesis 12 and 17. Try to relate to Abraham in these different situations.

Read Genesis 18:14–33.

Pray that God would help you struggle with the meaning of His Word until you understand it and can apply it to your life.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Prayer is rooted in the consistent character of God.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

In Genesis 18:14–33, Abraham challenged God to act in accordance with His righteous character. God never changes and always acts consistently with His righteous character. Pray with confidence, knowing that God is at work in this world to bring all things under His righteous rule.

MEDITATE

“God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” (Numbers 23:19)

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage’s main point to your own life.

Q: *Why does prayer work?*

Q: *How do you know what to pray?*

Prayer remains one of the few religious concepts that requires little explanation. Although differing in various respects, most world religions include some notion of prayer. Muslims pray to Allah. Hindus pray to their pantheon of gods. Animists pray to spirits. Thus, even in societies that are trending toward secularism, the basic concept of prayer needs little explanation.

Given such familiarity, many of the most fundamental questions about prayer often go unanswered, even within churches, because they go unasked. If, however, Christians yearn to change their lives and the world around them through prayer, a firm grasp of the foundations of prayer are essential.

The word “prayer” first occurs in the Bible at Genesis 20:7 but the concept is traceable at least as early as Genesis 4:26, “...At that time people began to call upon the name of the Lord.” Even in the garden of Eden, we see humanity communicating with God. Today we will examine an episode from the life of Abraham when he unexpectedly encountered God about to do something unexpected.

Q: *What distinguishes the prayers of a disciple of Jesus from the prayers of other religions?*

Q: *In what ways do you think prayer is misunderstood in our culture?*

APPLICATION POINT – Although prayer is not unique to Christianity and not a foreign concept in our secularized society, not everyone thinks about prayer in the same way. This week note when you see references made to prayer. Do the ways you see and hear prayer presented in society align with how it is presented in the Bible? How are they similar or dissimilar?

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

As we begin this study, we will look at an occasion in which Abraham interceded on behalf of the city of Sodom, which God was threatening to destroy.

- 
- 
1. PRAYER IS BASED UPON THE CHARACTER AND NATURE OF GOD.
 2. PRAYER IS PERSONAL INTERACTION WITH GOD.

GOING DEEPER

+ *This section will help you engage with Genesis 18:14–33 in more depth. It will also encourage you to apply what we learn from this passage to your life.*

PRAYER IS BASED UPON THE CHARACTER AND NATURE OF GOD.

■ GENESIS 18:14–15

Genesis 18 begins with Abraham encountering God with two other supernatural beings, all three appearing in the form of men. God announced that Abraham and Sarah, despite their old age, would have a son within about a year's time, something for which this couple had yearned for a very long time. Sarah, who was inside their tent, laughed at the thought of conceiving a child.

Q: *What was God's reaction to Sarah's response?*

Q: *What was the implied answer to the question God posed to Sarah?*

It is often easy even for believers in a modern secular age to adopt an outlook of “default deism” to life. (Deism is the belief that God set the universe on its current course and then withdrew from it to let things play out as they may.) Sarah seemed to think God was unable to keep this promise, but nothing is impossible for the creator of all things (Genesis 1–2).

Q: *How can “default deism” inhibit a fruitful prayer life?*

Q: *What situations in your life have you deemed to be “too hard for the Lord” to address?*

APPLICATION POINT – If you agree that nothing is too hard for the Lord, commit to bringing to Him in prayer the most enduring and most challenging situations you face. Remember that God is not obligated to answer your prayer in the manner you want, but that is no excuse for failing to bring your needs to Him in prayer.

Q: *What was God’s response to Sarah’s doubt?*

Q: *How should God’s reaffirmation of His promise to give Abraham and Sarah a son influence your prayer life?*

God is active in the world and knows all things before they happen. He knew Abraham and Sarah would have a son within a year’s time. He knows what your life will look like in a year’s time. Ten years’ time. Forty years’ time. We can pray with boldness because we know our prayers will work in conjunction with God’s providence to bring about His plan for this world.

Q: *Are you ever afraid of praying the wrong thing?*

Q: *Have you ever asked God for something (a job, a house, a relationship, etc.) and looked back with relief that He did not grant your request?*

APPLICATION POINT – God’s providence goes hand in hand with prayer. Many people struggle with anxiety in today’s world. Christians, however, can have confidence in God’s plan for the world and pray for His will to be done on earth (Matthew 6:10). Throughout this series on prayer, pray that God will give you an overwhelming sense of peace in knowing that He is at work in even the darkest and most challenging times in your life.

GENESIS 18:16–21

Q: *Why is it difficult to trust someone who is unreliable?*

Q: *Has someone ever kept valuable information from you? What does this do to your trust?*

In Genesis 18:17, we see God deliberate over whether He should reveal to Abraham His intention to destroy Sodom. God determined He would reveal His plan to Abraham because He had previously promised that Abraham would be a blessing to all nations, including Sodom (Genesis 12:1–3; This promise is ultimately fulfilled in Christ.). Thus, Abraham had a right to know what God planned to do with the city. God’s deliberation and action shows something significant about His character. God can be trusted! He does not say He will do something and then fail to keep His Word.

Q: *How does God’s trustworthiness influence your prayer life?*

Q: *What promises has God made in His Word that we can hold to as we approach Him in prayer?*

APPLICATION – Keep a list of God’s promises as you encounter them in Scripture and during sermons/Bible studies. Link your prayers to these promises. For example, if you are acquainted with someone from another country whom you are trying to share the gospel with, you could pray “God, You have said, ‘I will be exalted among the nations,’ (Psalm 46:10). Therefore, exalt yourself in the life of _____!” You can always trust God to keep His Word.

GENESIS 18:22–33

Q: *Hypocrisy is one of the most damaging accusations that can be made against someone. What does hypocrisy do to a person’s standing in a community?*

Q: *If God were shown to be a hypocrite, how would this impact your prayers?*

God is not a hypocrite! In this final section, Abraham challenged God to act in accordance with His righteous character. It would be unjust for God to condemn the righteous in Sodom to the same punishment as the wicked. When Abraham challenged God on this point, God reaffirmed His commitment to be a just judge of all the earth. God would not destroy even ten righteous people within a city as wicked as Sodom. We serve a just God who will act in perfect accordance with His own character!

Q: *What are some of the most crucial attributes or aspects of God's character?*

Q: *How should God's character shape our expectations about prayer?*

APPLICATION POINT – Make a list of God's attributes. When you pray, ground your appeals in God's unwavering character. For example, Genesis 18:14 shows God to be omnipotent (all-powerful). If you have a family member who is sick with a serious illness, you could pray, "God, nothing is too hard for you! I pray that you would heal _____ of this sickness." Remember that we cannot manipulate God or force His hand to a specific action. But we can acknowledge His character in making our request known to Him.

PRAYER IS PERSONAL INTERACTION WITH GOD

Q: *After the men left Abraham's tent, how was Abraham able to speak with God?*
[Hint: The answer is super simple!]

Q: *How do you come to be in God's presence in order to pray?*

In the Old Testament, God's presence is first associated with the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve spoke and interacted with God there. Later, in Genesis, God's presence was not closely associated with one place, and He frequently appeared suddenly like He did to Abraham in this passage. In Exodus, God's presence became associated with the tabernacle (a portable tent-like structure) and then in Kings, God's presence rested in the temple (1 Kings 8:10–11). God is never confined to these locations. He appears elsewhere at will (1 Kings 19), but His presence appears especially tied to these locations.

In the New Testament, God's presence is first associated with the God-man, Jesus Christ, but then a major redemptive shift occurs. When God's Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, believers were said to be indwelt by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16). They no longer needed to go to the temple to be in God's presence. Although Abraham had to go to God to speak with Him, Christians can speak with God at any time or any place. This does not mean going to a special place to pray is wrong. We are spatial creatures. But we do not have to go anywhere in order to gain an audience with God.

Q: *How is it beneficial to be able to approach God in prayer at any time?*

Q: *Are there any negative habits or thoughts that can develop from having immediate access to God in prayer? How can these be avoided?*

APPLICATION POINT – Having immediate access to God in prayer is a wonderful blessing for the believer. As various needs or situations occur throughout the day, we may address them in prayer. Paul even commanded the Thessalonian Christians to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This week consider trying to address God with a short prayer at a specific point every hour. Quickly reflect on the needs that have arisen, on the ways in which God's goodness has been made apparent, and/or on goals for the coming hour, and then quickly voice these matters to God.

Q: *What is the normal structure of your prayers? Do you make statements to God? Ask Him questions? Make requests?*

Q: *How would you describe Abraham's interaction with God in Genesis 18:22-33?*

It is common for people to describe Abraham as bargaining with God in these verses, but that is not precisely what is going on. When bargaining, both parties hold something of value (whether physical goods or services) that the counterpart wants, and the dispute is over how the values of these goods align. In these verses, however, Abraham was not offering God anything, but challenging Him. Aware of God's pending judgment on Sodom, Abraham made an assertion concerning God's justice. Abraham claimed that God's justice would not allow Him to indiscriminately judge Sodom if it meant the righteous people in the city would suffer the same fate as the wicked. Abraham then

pressed God on how far His obligation to justice would extend in the case of Sodom. Abraham was arguing with God concerning the nature of justice and the future of Sodom.

Q: *Have you ever argued with God in prayer?*

Q: *How could you use God's nature when making an argument in prayer?*

APPLICATION POINT – The Puritans (a group of 16th- and 17th-century Christians in Britain) often conceived of their prayers as arguments with God. Stephen Charnock, for example, states, “Arguments may be fetched from those topics so far as will suit us to plead with God in our case, and there is scarce any of these considerations which have been delivered but may be turned into an argument in prayer.” Above, you were asked to consider spontaneous prayer. Now consider deliberate prayer. Chose one pressing issue you or someone you know is facing and write out an argument challenging God to act on that issue. Begin by writing the issue at the top of a piece of paper. Then write out what you feel would be the most God-glorifying resolution to the situation at the bottom of the page. Then fill up the middle of the page with an argument that leads from the issue stated at the top to the resolution you seek at the bottom. Even the most logically nuanced arguments will not automatically assure you of the result that you want. God will always know better than you how to best display His character in the world, no matter the situation. Abraham was unsuccessful in his intercession for Sodom! But making your prayers with arguments acknowledging God's character and how He has acted in the past will draw you closer to the One who works all things for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28).

Q: *How would you describe Abraham's temperament during his intercession for Sodom?*

Q: *Why does Abraham adopt this attitude when making his plea with God?*

Although Abraham was challenging God to act in a manner consistent with His righteous character, Abraham did not do so with audacity, but with humility. Abraham did not back God into a corner. He was eminently aware of his audience, and he seemed to assume a certain risk in his interaction with God.

Q: *How can you express humility when in prayer, both verbally and physically?*

APPLICATION POINT – It is very common for people to pray with their heads bowed and eyes closed. This is due to the idea that prayer brings us into the presence of God. In the Old Testament, to see God often incurred deadly consequences (Exodus 33:20). Thus, those praying took precautions against seeing God when they were in His presence. It is also common to pray with both hands clasped flatly together. In the middle ages, this was a sign of submission. An overlord would place his hands over the person showing this sign of submission, indicating his authority. This week consider how you might physically display your humility and submission toward God in prayer. These physical depictions may not always be appropriate. (Don't bow your head and close your eyes if you're praying on the freeway!) But using your body to signify your submission to God in prayer will help you remember that you are conversing with the God of the universe.

NEXT STEPS

For the next five weeks, keep a prayer journal. Make notes of specific prayer requests and when you prayed for them. Keep a record of how God responds to your prayers. Write your arguments to take to God in prayer. After two weeks, re-read your first entries and note if and how God has continued working in each situation.

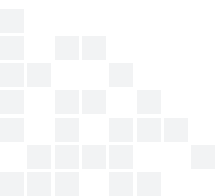
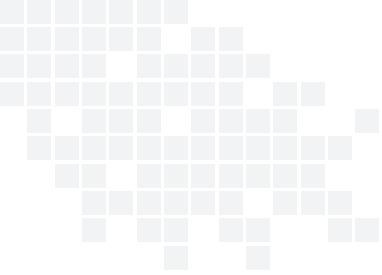
PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, I thank you for always acting consistently with your righteous character. You will always act faithfully to your servants. Make me faithful to you!

God, forgive me for the times when I have functioned with "default deism." You are at work in this world and in my life, even when I cannot see your hands moving. Help me to trust you.

God, instill in me a captivating awe of you that will express itself in humility. Never allow me to approach you lackadaisically or from mere obligation.



PRAYER

January 10, 2021 | Prayer in Times of Thanksgiving

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Before your group meets, think of a time when you felt an overwhelming sense of thankfulness for what God had accomplished in your life or in some organization to which you are connected. What was your response? How was your response both like and unlike what we read in 1 Chronicles 29:9–20?

Read 1 Chronicles 29:9–20.

Pray that God would help you struggle with the meaning of His Word until you understand it and can apply it to your life.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Everything good in our lives comes from God's grace, not through our own efforts.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

God's goodness demands our thanksgiving.

MEDITATE

"I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving" (Psalm 69:30).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage's main point to your own life.

Q: *How would you define thankfulness?*

Q: *How does thankfulness differ from appreciation?*

We live in a society that promotes self-reliance. Scrolling through the “desired qualities” section of a job posting will inevitably turn up the words “able to work independently,” “is a self-starter,” or “needs little supervision.” For things we cannot accomplish ourselves, we most often attempt to contract out the work rather than merely asking a friend for help. That way, at least we can claim that it was our own money and therefore our own work that eventually got the job done. Tasks we cannot do ourselves or cannot pay to have someone else do for us may remain undone for weeks or months before we figure out how best to address them ourselves.

Self-reliance is part of living in a modernizing, secularizing culture. The old structures that established communities and secured relationships are ebbing away. Apart from community, mutual trust and dependence give way to “I’ll do it myself.” The attitude most easily sacrificed in this is gratitude or thanksgiving. There is no longer a need for thankfulness when we perceive ourselves to be the ultimate source of fulfillment for all our needs.

No matter how successful we are at being self-reliant within the context of our modern lives, the Bible firmly establishes our need for God. One of the central tenants of the gospel is that our salvation is accomplished by Christ alone and through faith alone, not through any self-reliant good works we may produce (Ephesians 2:8–9). Even beyond salvation, the Bible teaches us that every good thing we have or experience comes from God (James 1:17), even to the point of His upholding the molecules of the universe! Such goodness demands our thanksgiving. 1 Chronicles 29:9–20 provides for us a model for expressing thanksgiving to God, even in a self-reliant age like ours.

Q: *What God has provided this week that you have taken for granted?*

Q: *How can you combat the growing demand for self-reliance in our culture? Do you see less thankfulness around you than you did five, ten, twenty years ago?*

APPLICATION POINT – Fostering a culture of thanksgiving can begin by noticing acts of service that often go unrecognized. For example, a lot more goes into a worship service than music and preaching, but it is difficult to see these acts of service done “behind the scenes.” Spend a few minutes this Sunday looking for acts of service that

may be going unnoticed at your church and express your gratitude for them. What else happens at your church during the week that goes un-thanked? Where else in your community or workplace can you look for unnoticed acts of service (even if they are being compensated)?

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1 Chronicles 29:9–20 contains a prayer of thanksgiving. Examining this prayer reveals three essentials for expressing our thanksgiving to God.

1. ACKNOWLEDGE OUR NEED
2. ASCRIBE MAJESTY TO GOD
3. ACCESS YOUR HEART

GOING DEEPER

+This section will examine each essential element from 1 Chronicles 29:9–20 regarding thanksgiving expressed to God in prayer and help you see how to practice these elements in your own prayer life.

1. ACKNOWLEDGING OUR NEED

■ 1 CHRONICLES 29:12–16

Q: What was the occasion for David's prayer of thanksgiving?

Q: What statements within David's prayer show a bit of irony given this context?

David's prayer may have caused some confusion among his listeners. David was incited to prayer and thanksgiving because of the people's generosity. The people willingly gave of their own resources to build God's temple. Since the temple was not built until David's son, Solomon, ruled over Israel, many, if not most, of the people never saw the fruit of their generosity. Since their gifts would have been kept in the king's storehouses, there would have been every reason to wonder if their contributions to God's temple had perhaps been misappropriated. Nevertheless, the

people gave of their own possessions to meet the need. Imagine their surprise when David gave thanks not to them, but to God. The people, however, seemed fully aware of the appropriateness of David's actions (v. 20–21). They must have understood the truth behind David's claim that they had not given anything that did not belong to God to begin with. David made this claim on two occasions in this prayer (v. 12, 16). In expressing thanksgiving to God, he and the people acknowledged their need before God. They may have been in temporary possession of this wealth, but only because God had given them prosperity despite all of the difficulties of David's reign (two national scandals, a civil war, a rebellion . . .). When we come to grips with the true nature of God's generosity, we must also come to grips with the fact that God will never be indebted to us. We are merely stewards of all we have, because all that we have comes from Him. This does not mean it is always inappropriate to speak of "sacrificial giving" on our part. The Bible is equally clear that we are to enjoy the blessings God has provided us. But David's statements in verses 12 and 16 make clear that our role toward God is always one of thankfulness.

Q: *What do you have to thank God for this day?*

Q: *What does your church body have to thank God for this day?*

APPLICATION POINT – For one week, try to incorporate the principle David acknowledged in this prayer. That is, deliberately describe your wealth, your devotional practices, your work, your family, and so on in a manner that recognizes these things as gifts God has given you to steward rather than things over which you take direct ownership. If you do this, you will probably receive some rather strange looks because this is not the way our culture thinks. Be prepared to give a brief explanation of the lessons learned from this week's study as an explanation for why you are presenting the things you steward in the manner you are.

Q: *What is a "stranger" or "sojourner" in the context of David's prayer?*

Q: *Why was it odd for David to describe himself as a "stranger" and "sojourner"?*

The words "stranger" and "sojourner" in this prayer are used much like we would use the word "alien" in an immigration context today. It was a way to refer to non-citizens and temporary residents within a nation. At the time of David's prayer, the Israelites had dwelt in the land for either 290 or 475 years. They were no sojourners! Furthermore, David was the king of Israel. He was not a stranger!

Although David and the people were not technically sojourners in their own land, David's prayer shows the danger of complacency. In David's mind, he and the Israelites were always sojourners because they were only in the land because God allowed them to be. Thus, David refused to become complacent in times of prosperity. David recognized that complacency is the greatest enemy of thanksgiving. Complacency leads to entitlement, which never allows for thanksgiving.

Q: *How has complacency crept into your life?*

Q: *What would be the evidence of complacency in a Christian's life?*

APPLICATION POINT – One of the clearest indications of the rapid rise of entitlement in our culture is the swelling average of personal debt. Do an assessment of your personal finances. Has complacency led you to a sense of entitlement that is revealed in irresponsible spending? There is such a thing as responsible debt, but responsible debt will still allow you to be generous with your possessions, especially for the sake of the gospel.

Q: *What is the meaning of the comparison David made between our days and a shadow?*

Q: *Why was David making this comparison?*

Shadows are ephemeral. They constantly shift and fade. In David's time, once the sun set, shadows disappeared altogether save for the few that remained from candlelight. David recognized that his life was finite, and no matter how much he gave to God, he would never compare to the infinite goodness God was capable of showing him. This mindset led David to thanksgiving and praise (v. 13). He could not out give God!

David lived about three thousand years ago. If he was able to appreciate his own finiteness, how much more should we? Since David's death, countless empires have risen and fallen. More wars have been fought than the history books can contain. Plague after plague, disaster after disaster, atrocity after atrocity have swept relentlessly through humanity. When we compare our lives against the vastness of human history, we must admit that we are utterly finite. And yet, God reigns sovereignly over all of it! Our only response to our finiteness and God's

immensity must be to question, with David, who we are that God would be willing to count us as His children. Every good gift from God warrants our infinite thankfulness, which we are unable to give Him in this life.

❓: *How can you, as a finite creature, adequately express thanksgiving to an infinite God?*

❓: *How does our finiteness confirm David's claim that everything we have ultimately belongs to God?*

APPLICATION – Since finite creatures (us) can never adequately express thanksgiving to an infinite God, perhaps the best we can do is adopt a deliberate pattern of thanksgiving as an expression or sign of the infinite thanksgiving God is due. Set aside some intentional, regular moments to express thanksgiving to God during the day, week, month, and year. For example, many Christians habitually thank God before eating family meals (daily). Perhaps you could set aside five minutes at the close of every work week to thank God for your accomplishments on the job or at home to thank Him for faithfulness to your family. Perhaps you could set aside five minutes after your last bill for the month has been paid to thank God for His provision.

2. ASCRIBE MAJESTY TO GOD

❏ 1 CHRONICLES 29:10–13

❓: *How many ways does David express God's majesty in 1 Chronicles 29:10–12?*

❓: *What is the relationship between giving thanks to God and ascribing majesty to Him?*

God's generosity to David and the Israelites spurred David to proclaim God's greatness. David's proclamation was expansive. He racked up adjective after adjective to describe God's majesty. Noting just one description of God's character was not enough. Furthermore, the extent of God's might stretches from heaven to earth. God's generosity to us shows that His majesty is not limited by either space or time. God is not confined to a far corner of heaven. Nor is He unconcerned with the actions and struggles of humanity.

Q: *David's prayer devotes as much, if not more, space to proclaiming God's glory as it does anything else, including giving thanks or making requests. How does this compare to your own prayers?*

Q: *Why is it important to acknowledge God's majesty?*

APPLICATION POINT – Proclaiming God's majesty is difficult in the get-to-the-point world in which we live. How quickly we adapt our prayer life to match the way we interact with our kids or co-workers. But God is not our co-worker. He is the God of the entire universe! He deserves more than just our thanks and requests. He deserves our praise. This week, challenge yourself to devote as much time acknowledging God's majesty in your prayers as you do thanking Him for something or asking Him for something. At first, you may find yourself given to repetitiveness. That is okay. Even David's prayer cycled through some adjectives and descriptors more than once. But thinking about God's majesty will help open your eyes to all the ways His glory is on display in our world.

Q: *How would you define "blessing"?*

Q: *How does your definition of blessing fit with David blessing God?*

The word "blessing" often conjures up thoughts of material gains received through a benefactor. Since, however, David noted twice in this prayer that we cannot give God anything that is not His already (v. 12, 16), that idea is unlikely to be what David had in mind. Instead, David probably meant something akin to the idea of "favor." In blessing God, David was recognizing that God must be favored in the presence of the Israelite assembly. They showed allegiance to God and would ascribe majesty to Him and no other.

Q: *How is God blessed in your commitments to Him, His church, and His Word?*

Q: *What keeps you from blessing or showing favor to God?*

APPLICATION POINT – As the God of our salvation, God deserves to be blessed by us. One way we can bless God is through the practice of spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines include things like prayer, Scripture reading, and worship within an assembly. We do not practice these things to earn our salvation but to express our favor toward God.

Q: *Did David always live consistently with his claim to bless God?*

Although David blessed God within this prayer, at times his actions did not match his confession. David struggled with unchecked sin in his life (2 Samuel 5:13; cf. Deuteronomy 17:17; 2 Samuel 11) that appeared, at times, to undermine his desire to bless God. The same could be said for the nation of Israel. On this occasion, they contributed generously to God's temple, but they eventually succumbed to idolatry and were exiled from the land.

Q: *What unchecked sin in your life undermines your desire to bless God?*

Q: *How is your church body undermining its blessing of God through neglect?*

APPLICATION POINT – One sin that plagues western culture is materialism, the love of things (boats, cars, cell phones, wardrobe, vacation houses). Materialism is so prevalent that it often extends its reach into our churches and to us without our noticing. There are many other possible sins that can creep unchecked within the life of a believer. As you consider blessing God, consider also if there is unchecked sin in your life that must be confessed.

3. ACCESS YOUR HEART

■ **1 CHRONICLES 29:17–20**

Q: *In the last several verses of 1 Chronicles 29:9–20, David shifted his attention to his heart and the heart of the nation. What does the word “heart” mean in these instances?*

Q: *Why do you think David addressed the heart in a prayer of thanksgiving?*

In the Bible, the heart is often used as a metaphor for a person’s volitional will. This includes a person’s thoughts, emotions, and desires. The heart of David, his son Solomon, and the people became the key issue at the conclusion of David’s prayer.

David claimed his own heart to be upright, at least in the matter of the temple project. He also saw the same upright heart in the people because of their generosity. Thanksgiving is founded upon a heart that is focused on God and His kingdom. Apart from a Godward directed heart, it is impossible to see your indebtedness to God.

David also brought his son, Solomon, into view. Solomon would be the one to complete the temple project for which David was preparing (2 Chronicles 3). David’s only request in this prayer of thanksgiving was for God to cultivate an upright heart within the people and within Solomon. He prayed for Solomon and the people to retain their faith so the next generation might also praise God with a heart of thanksgiving.

Q: *How would you evaluate your heart concerning God? Is your evaluation verified by a heart of thanksgiving?*

Q: *How can you support the next generation in their faithfulness to God?*

APPLICATION POINT – If prayers of thanksgiving spring from hearts that are devoted to God, then your prayer life is a barometer of sorts for your soul. Hearts that have been renewed by the gospel of Jesus Christ cannot help but express themselves in thanksgiving. Pray for your heart to extend thanksgiving for the grace of God in your life. Also pray for the hearts of the next generation. Pray that God would keep them. Pray that they would overflow with prayers of thanksgiving.

NEXT STEPS

In your prayer journal, make a list of five things for which you are thankful. For the next five days, offer prayers of thanksgiving to God for what he has done in your life. Acknowledge how God's majesty manifests itself in His desire to respond to our prayers. Consider writing one of your prayers out completely in your journal.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, thank you for the goodness you have shown me in your Son, Christ Jesus. I am completely undeserving.

God, help me to remember the kindness you have brought into my life. My life is fragile, yet you hold the entire universe together.

Father, help the next generation to cultivate their hearts. Open their eyes to your majesty. Let thanksgiving flow from their hearts.

PRAYER

January 17, 2021 | Prayer in Times of Need

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Read 2 Chronicles 17:1–6; 18:1–3; and 19:1–7 to become acquainted with Jehoshaphat.

Read 2 Chronicles 20:1–12.

Pray that God would give you insight into Scripture and help you apply it to your life.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Our ultimate hope is not in military might or economic prosperity but in God's gracious provision. This is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Since God's gracious provision is needed to meet our greatest needs, our first priority in times of need is to go before God in prayer.

MEDITATE

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage's main point to your own life.

Q: *What do you consider to be your greatest need?*

Q: *What steps do you take to fill this need?*

Humanity's greatest physical and psychological needs can basically be summed up as acceptance, security, and value. Although some may think being an uncaring outcast has a certain appeal, society has a way of restraining certain behaviors and promoting certain norms because we feel an innate need to be accepted by others. People also demand security. This includes necessities such as food, water, and shelter but also protection from those who would cause us harm. Value, or significance, is perhaps our most essential need. If life is devoid of significance, the human soul slowly begins to shut down and even ceases to care about acceptance and security.

All humans feel these needs and instinctively attempt to meet them. But we are poor judges of what will bring lasting fulfillment to our needs. For example, in affluent western culture, we tend to look for value within ourselves. Most self-help books will even tell us that's what we are supposed to do. The best way to find value is to live for your own satisfaction and joy. The problem is that the things we believe will bring us the most joy inevitably fail us! Our material possessions can be lost or stolen. Our health inevitably declines. Our influence over others eventually wanes. And when joy escapes us, our value, what makes life worth living, is threatened.

Our passage this week focuses on a king named Jehoshaphat. He experienced both highs and lows during his reign over Judah. In 2 Chronicles 20, the nation's security was at risk from a coalition of foreign forces. Many kings would have placed their faith in their own military or in foreign alliances. Jehoshaphat had done so in the past, but this time, he sought his security from the source that will never falter, God Himself. Jehoshaphat's prayer is a model for us when our acceptance, security, and value are endangered. Rather than attempting to meet our needs with solutions that will never last, we can look to Jehoshaphat's prayer as an example of how to turn to a never-failing God who is our very present help in times of need.

Q: *How do you meet your need for acceptance? Security? Value?*

Q: *What is the greatest threat to our acceptance, security, and value?*

APPLICATION POINT – Our ideas about the solutions to our problems are necessarily tied to how we conceive of our problems. As Christians, we must always understand that the greatest threat to our acceptance, security,

and value is our own sin. Because of our sin, we deserve God's judgment and wrath, which will obliterate any false hope we look to for acceptance, security, and value. If our sin is our greatest threat, we can see why the gospel is our greatest hope! The gospel of Jesus Christ is that our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled with God. That is, we find our acceptance in God. We find our security in God. We find our value in God. Do not settle for anything less than the blood of Jesus to take away your sins! Everything else is a false gospel.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

As we go through this text, we examine Jehoshaphat's prayer for lessons to apply during our own time of needs.

1. PRIORITIZE PRAYER
2. ARGUE FOR JUSTICE
3. LOOK FOR GOD TO WORK

GOING DEEPER

+This section will examine each essential lesson from 2 Chronicles 20:1–12 and show how these lessons can be utilized by modern believers seeking to meet their needs with the gospel.

1. THE PRIORITY OF PRAYER

■ 2 CHRONICLES 20:1–4

Q: *What was the need confronting Jehoshaphat and Judah?*

Q: *How did they prepare to meet this need?*

The nation of Judah consisted of only two of the initial twelve tribes that left Egypt with Moses and conquered the promised land with Joshua. Thus, this coalition of enemies vastly outnumbered what was just a fraction of the original nation of Israel. In the face of such opposition, Jehoshaphat immediately summoned all his available warriors to . . . wait! Facing such immediate danger, Jehoshaphat did not begin by summoning his army or by making military plans. Instead, Jehoshaphat sought God in prayer.

What makes this all the more amazing is that time was of the essence. Hazazon-tamar (the location of the enemy coalition) was on the west bank of the Dead Sea, the same side of the sea as Jerusalem, which was located in Judah's territory. The enemy was approaching Jerusalem's doorstep, and time was running out for Jehoshaphat to send the call to his cities to raise an army. Jehoshaphat was afraid! And yet he set his face to seek the Lord in prayer.

Q: *Why do you think even Christians struggle to prioritize prayer in times of need?*

Q: *Who is more capable of meeting your needs, you or God?*

APPLICATION POINT – Our unwillingness to go to God in prayer when a need arises suggests a lack of faith on our part. It is as if we are assuming God cannot or will not act. Since we cannot “practice” going to God immediately in times of need, our best strategy is to be faithful in prayer before urgent needs arise. Pray regularly that God will keep your faith in Him and in prayer during times of need.

Q: *What is fasting?*

Q: *How can fasting help during a time of need?*

After turning to God in personal prayer, Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast in all of Judah. This would have also been counterintuitive for kings at that time. When facing a military invasion, the army should be at peak condition. A fast would put them in a weakened state, leaving them more vulnerable to the enemy's attacks. Furthermore, the people were facing the prospects of a long siege. Food and water resources would become scarce (2 Kings 6:24–30). It would be tactically unwise to call a fast before such an onslaught began.

Jehoshaphat, however, prioritized prayer during his hour of need. The purpose of a fast is to devote extra time to prayer. This fast also functioned as a sign for the people. Nothing, not even food or water, was more important than seeking God's favor in prayer during a time of great need. Although the surrounding nations would have considered Jehoshaphat's actions unorthodox, his desire was to fling himself at the mercy and providence of God.

Q: *How is fasting perceived in modern society?*

Q: *What challenges keep you from fasting?*

APPLICATION POINT – These days, fasting is often associated with fad diets and other weight loss measures, but these merely repurpose the original spiritual nature of fasting for outward physical gains. This week consider fasting during one time when you would normally have a meal. Spend this time praying over a specific need of your own or the need of someone close to you. Depending on your fasting tolerances, it may be wiser to eat a smaller portion during a meal rather than jumping straight into a fast.

Q: *Why would Jehoshaphat have called an assembly of Judah?*

Q: *What were the risks in calling such an assembly?*

Jehoshaphat's reaction to the invasion of his land deviated from expected norms in at least one other way. He called an assembly of his people. During an invasion, people often rushed to protect their livelihoods and their property. They typically made such preparations before taking refuge within the walls of a city in their vicinity. Jehoshaphat, however, called them to stop making preparations for war in order to attend an assembly for communal prayer.

Q: *Why is communal prayer important? In what ways is communal prayer different from personal prayer?*

Q: *How can you keep yourself engaged during communal prayer?*

APPLICATION – Many people find it difficult to remain engaged during communal prayer. Listening is simply not as active as speaking, and our minds tend to drift to other matters while we subconsciously listen for an “amen.”

During your next communal prayer time, consider jotting down a few notes during the prayer. Who was praying? What were the main things prayed for? Efforts to transform communal prayer from a passive to an active exercise may help make these occasions more meaningful to you.

2. ARGUE FOR JUSTICE

■ 2 CHRONICLES 20:5–12

Q: *What statements show Jehoshaphat's confidence in God's ability to save his kingdom?*

Q: *What was the basis of Jehoshaphat's confidence?*

Jehoshaphat's prayer is quite remarkable. It is no wonder that he was so committed to the primacy of prayer. He began his prayer by acknowledging God's rule over the nations, including the very nations that were gathered against Judah. God was not surprised that they were conspiring against Judah, and if He were determined to act in Judah's favor, He would easily bring the efforts of this coalition to nothing.

God's rule over the nations is founded upon His irresistible power and might. Jehoshaphat knew his God is able to save. In fact, Judah's presence in this land was a testimony to God's work and rule in the nations. God is the one who drove out the inhabitants of Judah's land and gave it to the Israelites. Unless it was God's decree, this coalition of enemy forces would never be able to dislodge Jehoshaphat and his people from the land God had given them.

Q: *How does God's ability to work in any situation in heaven or on earth influence your prayer life?*

Q: *Given God's ability to act, what keeps you from prioritizing prayer like Jehoshaphat?*

APPLICATION POINT – There is no situation, in Jehoshaphat's day or in ours, that is beyond God's reach. No matter what pressing need you have, no matter how dire things have become, God has all power and might in His

hands, and He can move to bring about any resolution He decrees in your life. Since this is the case, why wouldn't you bring every need to Him in prayer first? All our best laid plans and most elaborate schemes are subject to failure, but God never fails! Commit yourself to bringing everything to Him in prayer.

Q: *What is "justice"?*

Q: *How should justice factor into your prayer life?*

In his prayer, Jehoshaphat referenced Israel's past dealings with the nations making up this coalition against Judah. This may at first seem irrelevant to us. What difference does the interaction between these nations nearly four hundred years prior make in Jehoshaphat's time of need? Jehoshaphat's remarks were an appeal to God's sense of justice. On the way to the promised land, the Israelites conquered several nations and took possession of their land (Numbers 21:21–35). God, however, instructed the Israelites to forego military action against these nations because their land had been given to them by God (Deuteronomy 2:16–22). Now, these nations were acting with hostility against Judah. Jehoshaphat's prayer is aimed at God's justice.

The actions of these nations were unjust. They were attacking during a vulnerable time even when Israel had previously acted in kindness toward them. Jehoshaphat was appealing to God's justice to act in his favor.

Q: *How can you appeal to God's justice (or another attribute) during a time of need?*

Q: *How is God's consistent character a comfort to those in need?*

APPLICATION POINT – God never acts capriciously or arbitrarily. Just as we should never fear that a set of circumstances is beyond His control, we should never fear that God's actions in our lives are without purpose. Our first lesson suggested that we should consider prayer as an argument for God to act in a certain way. This week choose a current need in your life and argue for God to address it through His commitment to justice. Again, we should never consider our prayers to be foolproof mechanisms that force God to act. Nevertheless, if we base our request on God's justice, we can have confidence in God as the great arbitrator of His creation.

3. LOOK FOR GOD TO WORK

2 CHRONICLES 20:12

Q: *How did Jehoshaphat describe Judah's situation at the conclusion of his prayer?*

Q: *How was their situation like our need to be forgiven of sin?*

A clear parallel to the gospel of Jesus Christ shines forth from the end of Jehoshaphat's prayer. Jehoshaphat acknowledged that his people were powerless to save themselves from this enemy coalition. They had no choice but to throw themselves at the mercy of God. In the same way, we are powerless to overcome the stain of guilt and sin in our lives. We have no choice but to throw ourselves at the foot of the cross. Our salvation rests in Jesus Christ alone.

Q: *How can you incorporate the truths of the gospel into your prayers during times of need?*

Q: *Why is it important to remember the gospel during times of need?*

APPLICATION POINT – The gospel gives needed perspective to the other situations and needs we face. This week commit to beginning and ending every prayer with reflection on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Q: *What was Jehoshaphat's final resolution in his prayer?*

Q: *How was this resolution fitting with the rest of his prayer?*

Jehoshaphat resolved to look for God to act on his behalf. This demonstrated tremendous faith in the power of prayer and tremendous confidence in God's ability to bring about His purposes on the earth.

It is rare that things turn out precisely the way we envision when we pray. We simply cannot see all the ways the scenarios in our lives can play out. That is why it often appears as though God is not responsive to our prayers. We cannot foresee how He will act, and we miss it when He does act or we don't understand what He is doing. Like Jehoshaphat, we need to set our eyes on God to see how He will respond to prayer.

Q: *Have you ever prayed for God to act in a certain way only to realize that God had an entirely different plan in mind?*

Q: *Have you ever been able to see in hindsight how God had worked in your life?*

APPLICATION POINT – Make a list of some of your most urgent prayers during times of need. Write out what you prayed for God to do and how God responded. Keep this list where you will encounter it during times of prayer and devotion as a reminder to look for God to act in response to your prayers, even if it is not how you anticipated.

NEXT STEPS

Look at the first week that you kept your prayer journal. How has God responded to your needs during this time? Continue to write down your requests to God and routinely review them to see what your main prayer needs were and how God responded. It may be helpful to set an electronic reminder (such as your phone) to review your prayers at specific times.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, I thank you for always acting consistently with your righteous character. You will always act faithfully to your servants. Make me faithful to you!

God, forgive me for the times when I have functioned with "default deism." You are at work in this world and in my life, even when I cannot see your hands moving. Help me to trust you.

God, instill in me a captivating awe of you that will express itself in humility. Never allow me to approach you lackadaisically or from mere obligation.



PRAYER

January 24, 2021 | Prayer for Your Nation

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Read Leviticus 26:14–46 (esp. 27–42); 2 Kings 17:7–20; 2 Kings 25; and Jeremiah 29:10 to become acquainted with some of the biblical references mentioned in this chapter.

Read Daniel 9:1–19.

Pray that God would give you insight into the message of this text and into the shortcomings of our nation.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Christians should pray for our nation to restrain evil rather than promote it and foster a context in which citizens can flourish in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Confess the sins of our nation and pray that God would work to reform it for His purposes.

MEDITATE

“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:7).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week’s lesson.

Q: *What are the differences between the nation of Israel in the Old Testament and modern nations?*

Q: *How should Christians intercede on behalf of our nation?*

The nation of Israel in the Old Testament was truly unique. They were God's chosen people and the conduit through which He planned to bless all other nations (Genesis 12:3). Israel was also the nation with whom God entered a special covenant (Exodus 24:7). This covenant was intended to direct Israel to follow God's ways so they could fulfill their role as a blessing to the other nations. Israel ultimately failed in their responsibility to keep God's covenant and were exiled from their land. In the passage this week, Daniel prayed on behalf of his nation so God would once again work among them.

Modern nations, no matter their origins, should never be confused for Old Testament Israel. Israel was a unique nation in that God established a covenant with them for the purpose of exemplifying His glory to the world. Although modern nations are not to be confused with Old Testament Israel, the Bible is abundantly clear that God has ordained for this world to be governed by nations for the time being. Although no nation has ever perfectly encompassed God's will, the Bible still commands believers to live under the subjection of their authorities (Romans 13:1) and seek the prosperity of their nation (Jeremiah 29:7).

Q: *Why do you think God has ordained for this world to be governed by nation-states?*

Q: *Although the Bible demands that Christians subject themselves to every proper authority, sometimes modern nations adopt policies and create laws that are contrary to God's will as revealed in Scripture. How should Christians adjudicate their responsibility to obey the authorities over them while remaining faithful to Christian convictions?*

APPLICATION POINT – Nations should promote the well-being of their citizens. This truth is most important in terms of the gospel. Unfortunately, in many nations throughout the world, the gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be freely proclaimed. Pray for Christians who suffer under this oppression. Since we live in a country that allows us to share our faith with others, commit yourself to making Christ known in your community and around the world.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

As we go through this text, we will examine Daniel's prayer for his nation and draw conclusions for how we should pray for our own nation.

1. NATIONS NEED SCRIPTURE-SATURATED PRAYER
2. NATIONS NEED CLARIFYING CONFESSIONS OF SIN
3. NATIONS NEED GOD-GLORIFYING FORGIVENESS

GOING DEEPER

+ This section will help you engage with Genesis 18:14–33 in more depth. It will also encourage you to apply what we learn from this passage to your life.

1. NATIONS NEED SCRIPTURE-SATURATED PRAYER

■ DANIEL 9:1–3

Q: *What is the most frequent impetus for your prayers, for your nation or otherwise?*

Q: *What is the impetus for Daniel's prayer in this instance?*

Daniel, a Jewish exile, lived in Babylon, a pagan and oppressive culture that had uprooted him from his homeland and forced him to settle in an unfamiliar land. Worse, the Babylonians sought to undermine his faith on multiple occasions. He and his friends were among a select few elite captives whom the Babylonians attempted to indoctrinate with their pagan ideology and customs (Daniel 1:3–6). Can you imagine the temptation? “Just redirect your prayers from your God to ours, and you will live a life of luxury and social influence.” Furthermore, the Jewish exiles had hardly considered the implications of their hardships. Rather than acknowledging that it was their sin that had led to their hardships in Babylon, many had lost faith in God altogether. Why serve a God who could not protect them from their enemies? Others were in continual denial over the reality of their sin and exile. They expected God to intervene in a miraculous way to take them back to their homeland.

Daniel experienced great hardships in Babylon, yet his hardships, the circumstances of his life, were not the impetus for his prayer on behalf of his people in this instance. It was his Scriptures that led him to prayer. On encountering a prophecy in the book of Jeremiah concerning how long the exile would last, he was driven to pray on behalf of his people. It would not be inappropriate for the circumstances of Daniel's life to drive him to prayer, but in this case, it was what he encountered in God's Word that led him to prayer.

Q: *Why do you think the Bible would lead God's followers to prayer?*

Q: *How can you incorporate the Bible into your prayer life?*

APPLICATION POINT – Many Christians practice what is called “praying through Scripture.” This is a spiritual exercise in which the Bible serves as a catalyst and guide for prayer. This week try adopting this spiritual exercise during one of your devotional and prayer times. Choose a passage that is significant for you or relevant for a current situation in your life. As you read, stop when you come across something that prompts you to pray. Once you have spoken to God concerning whatever has prompted you to pray, begin reading again until you are prompted to pray again. In this way, the Bible acts as a guide for your prayer. This can also breathe new life into your prayers. Do you ever feel like your prayers are repetitious and monotonous? Praying through Scripture gives you a different prompt and a different place to start from.

Q: *What allusions to other Old Testament texts do you see in Daniel's prayer?*

Q: *How have Israel's Scriptures [the Old Testament] shaped Daniel's outlook?*

Daniel's prayer reveals a worldview that is thoroughly shaped by Scripture. It was the Scriptures that guided his understanding of God's character (v. 4; Deuteronomy 7:9). The Scriptures formed Daniel's view of his nation's beginnings (v. 15; Exodus 6:1) and its fall into sin (v. 5; Lamentations 3:42). He saw the exile as a fulfillment of Israel's Scripture (v. 11, 13; Leviticus 26:14–45; Deuteronomy 28:15–68). The Scriptures also formed Daniel's hope for his nation's recovery (v. 17–19; Deuteronomy 4:27–31).

Daniel's nation needed Scripture-saturated citizens to pray Scripture-saturated prayers on its behalf, just like Daniel was doing. This is precisely what our nation needs, at all times. The Bible provides us with clarity concerning how God is working in the world and how we should pray on behalf of our nation. Our prayers should never be

based merely on our own opinions and desires for our country. Instead, like Daniel, we must pray that our nation would be swept up into the big picture of what God is doing in this world through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Q: *How should Scripture shape your prayers for our nation?*

Q: *What keeps you from praying Scripture-saturated prayers on behalf of our nation?*

APPLICATION POINT – Scripture-saturated prayers require Scripture-saturated Christians. Part of praying on behalf of our nation is having a Scripture-informed vision of what our nation needs to be. All Christians should practice regular Bible intake through personal devotions as well as the church’s ministry of the Word. This week evaluate the state of your Bible intake. Are you taking in enough of God’s Word to transform your prayers on behalf of our nation? If so, write down some strategies and prayer points from your time spent in Scripture that will inform your prayers for our nation. If not, write down a plan to take in more of God’s Word. Make sure you start with attainable goals. For example, you may want to begin by committing to read a chapter of the Bible a day and prioritizing at least one weekly sermon or Bible study at your church.

2. NATIONS NEED CLARIFYING CONFESSIONS OF SIN

■ DANIEL 9:4–15

Q: *How many sins does Daniel confess on behalf of his nation?*

Q: *How is it helpful for individuals to confess the sins of a nation?*

Daniel’s first priority in his prayer on behalf of his nation was to confess the nation’s sin. The nation of Israel was called by God to be faithful to the covenant He had established with them. Through their faithfulness, God’s glorious presence and grace would be made known on the earth. Israel, however, continually failed to live in faithfulness to God’s covenant. Thus, rather than being a conduit for God’s glory, the nation became a symbol of His wrath. Daniel, having seen God’s wrath poured out upon his nation, identified what he saw as the nation’s

problem and confessed those sins to God. It can be difficult for modern people to relate to Daniel's confession because we live in a culture that easily separates individual identity from corporate identity. Daniel himself did not commit these sins, so why was he confessing them? But Daniel saw himself as caught up in the identity of his nation. Thus, he was able to confess the sins in the first person.

Although no modern nation may be understood to be God's nation in the way Israel was in the Old Testament, all governments and rulers are placed on this earth for the purposes of restraining evil and promoting human flourishing. Yet, no modern nation does this perfectly. Even the best nations that protect liberty and seek justice do so imperfectly. In one sense, just as all people have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, all nations also sin and fall short of what God intends them to be. Thus, every citizen can and should confess the sins of their nation in the way Daniel did.

Q: *What are the major sins of our nation?*

Q: *How can imperfect nations best reflect the purpose for which God ordained them?*

APPLICATION – The greatest blessing God has given any nation toward the fulfillment of their God-given role is the church. Unlike modern nations, the church can be understood as the people of God. The church is the primary means by which God's blessings are mediated to a lost and dying world. Although citizens living within a free society can and should exercise their right to vote, most citizens have minimal control of the major policies of a nation. Every Christian, however, can and must seek to engage the world around them as a part of God's church. As the church seeks to promote justice and restrain evil, so do its members. Investigate ways your church is seeking to influence your community for the sake of the gospel and commit to serving alongside your brothers and sisters in Christ. If the church is successful in its role, the nation that church operates in will be a better reflection of what God intended it to be.

Q: *What would you consider to be the most significant sin of Daniel's nation?*

Q: *What kept the nation of Israel from recognizing and repenting of their sin?*

At multiple points, Daniel indicted Israel for ignoring God's revealed Word. They had neglected God's written Word, which they received from Moses (Daniel 9:5, 11, 13). They had also ignored God's spoken word proclaimed through the various prophets God had sent them (Daniel 9:6, 10). Since Israel had ignored God's written and spoken Word, they were unable to recognize their sin and repent from their wrongdoing. Daniel confessed that if the people had received God's Word, their mission would have been clear and the warnings they were given would have been acted upon.

This same indictment could be made against every nation. God's Word is rarely acknowledged as His authoritative revealed will. God's standards for holiness are routinely mocked as archaic and obsolete. Again, God's Word should not function for modern nations as it did for the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. No nation should claim to be a theocracy. The Bible should not function as a nation's constitution. But the Bible is God's revelation of what is good and evil, just and unjust. The Bible is the standard by which we know right and wrong, and when its precepts are ignored, the nation will be unable to fulfill its God-given role.

Q: *How is our nation ignoring God's Word?*

Q: *What would be an appropriate view of the Bible for a modern nation?*

APPLICATION POINT – A nation's neglect of God's Word may seem too large a problem for any one person to address, especially within a society that is increasingly secular. What can we do to build more respect for God's Word? One way to address our nation's diminishing respect for the Bible is to demonstrate our commitment to it. Are there employee-led lunch Bible studies at your work? Attending them sends a clear signal that God's Word is important to you and for society as a whole. Are you prioritizing God's Word in your home? Far too many Christians set their Bibles down after church on Sunday and do not move them again until the next Sunday. Such habits are detrimental not only for yourself but for your spouse and children. Commit to doing short devotions with your family to instill the importance of God's Word in your family.

3. NATIONS NEED GOD-GLORIFYING FORGIVENESS

■ DANIEL 9:16-19

Q: *What request did Daniel make on behalf of his nation at the conclusion of his*

prayer? (Hint: The answer is super simple!)

Q: *Why was Daniel's request audacious?*

Daniel concluded his prayer by entreating God to act on Israel's behalf. He wanted God to forgive the nation of its past transgressions so that they might return to their land. But Daniel was not requesting merely the end of the exile. Notice his frequent references to Jerusalem and the temple. The temple was the center of Israel's worship. Daniel was not just asking for an end to the nation's suffering in exile but also for a restoration to their role as God's people. He based this request solely on God's mercy. The people were no more righteous at the time of Daniel's prayer than they were when God had exiled them. Daniel was pleading for mercy, not fairness.

Daniel's prayer is an important reminder of the gospel. Israel did not deserve God's forgiveness. They were in no way righteous. Daniel's only choice was to appeal to God's great mercy. In the same way, Christians cannot claim to deserve God's forgiveness because of any righteousness of our own. The only righteousness we have a claim to belongs to Jesus Christ, who died for us. It is only through faith in Him that we can receive God's forgiveness and renewed fellowship with Him.

Q: *Why does our nation need the message of the gospel?*

Q: *How can you make the wonders of the gospel known within our nation?*

APPLICATION POINT – No matter how efficiently the government of a nation works, it will never be able to fulfill its God-given role to the degree that it should. Thus, just like individuals, governments can only hope in the mercy of God. Pray for God's mercy to be shown in our government. Pray that God would convict our government of sin at that level. Pray that God would use our government to fulfill His purposes.

Q: *How did Daniel formulate the purpose of his request?*

Q: *Why was it important for the nation's forgiveness to be based in something greater than its own appeasement?*

Although Daniel was concerned with the suffering of his people in exile, their relief from suffering was not the greatest good that would come from God's forgiveness and their restoration. Daniel prayed for God to show mercy on them for His own sake. God would be glorified through Judah's return to Jerusalem and the temple's restoration. He would be glorified among the nations who would see His hand at work in His people. Daniel grounded his request for God to act in something far greater than his own desires or even the good of the nation.

Christians must remember this principle when seeking the good of our own nation. It is not enough if our government alleviates poverty and promotes wide-spread education. It is not enough if the evils of human and drug trafficking are brought to a halt. It is not enough if abortion is banned and crime is thwarted. If these things merely make life easier for us, then God has not been glorified, and people have not been saved from sin. Christians should take an active interest in political and civic concerns, but we must always remember that our goal is to glorify God through the proliferation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Q: *What is the proper relationship between social ministry and evangelism?*

Q: *How can you ensure that the gospel remains at the center of your ministry within your local church?*

APPLICATION POINT – Evaluate the ministries you are involved with through your church. Is the primary goal of these ministries to bring glory to God? If not, what steps can you take to make sure that the gospel remains at the heart of the ministry? Beware that this can be a rather challenging subject to broach with the ministry's leadership team. Though their heart is in the right place, many Christians have settled for ministries that are not directly tied to the gospel.

NEXT STEPS

In your prayer journal, keep a list of the major sins of your nation and pray for God to intervene in them. Ask God to show you how a gospel-centered ministry may coincide with various social ministries you could participate in. Finally, write a prayer on behalf of our nation.



PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, thank you for the mercy you have shown to my country despite our rampant sin and disregard for your Word.

Lord, help make me a conduit for your blessing to those around me.

Father, may you be glorified in the work of the church within and on behalf of our nation.

PRAYER

January 31, 2021 | *Prayer for Eternal Things*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Read John 16 to become acquainted with the context of this week's passage.

Read John 17:1–26.

Pray that God would give you insight into Scripture and help you apply it to your life.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

On the night of His betrayal, Jesus's prayer focused on eternal matters.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Christians should avoid becoming overly consumed with temporary concerns in their prayer lives. God cares about the most minute matters of our lives, and we should pray over these things. But we should always remember to pray for God to be at work in this world in ways that will have an eternal influence.

MEDITATE

"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Colossians 3:1–4).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

Q: *Why does God choose to interact with His followers through prayer?*

Q: *What would you consider to be “the things above” that Paul mentions in Colossians 3:2?*

It is easy for Christians in Western culture to become complacent. We seldom encounter significant persecution for our Christian beliefs. Widespread access to the gospel creates apathy towards missions. We are, perhaps, often too eager to conform to the changing conventions and new pressures of society. When conflicts among Christians arise, we are good at separating and moving forward in different directions. For us, eternal life is a comfort in the face of death, not in the face of daily struggles.

This complacency often stunts our growth as faithful followers of Christ, and this stunted growth is perhaps most apparent in our prayer lives. Many Christians would have to confess that they do not even have a significant prayer life. There could be no greater signal of complacency in the Christian life. Even Christians who do maintain regular times in prayer, however, often prioritize matters that are of rather fleeting significance in the face of eternity. If God were to grant every request made, the short-term implications would far outweigh the differences their prayers would make for eternity. Complacent Christians tend to be insubstantial pray-ers.

Make no mistake—God has providential control over every aspect of His creation, and thus, there is nothing that is unimportant to Him. God cares about the little challenges you encounter on a daily basis as well as the major obstacles you face. You should bring these matters to Him in prayer! But if our prayers encompass nothing of eternal significance, we have only slightly tapped into the enormous power and privilege of prayer. In Jesus’s High Priestly Prayer, He modeled for His followers what it looks like to pray for eternal matters.

Q: *What requests do you regularly make to God that have eternal implications?*

Q: *Do you believe you have a good balance between prayers that will have a temporary significance and prayers that have an eternal significance?*

APPLICATION POINT – Choose several of your most recent requests made to God in prayer. Project how far the implications would extend into the future if God granted your request. Project how far the implications would extend if God did not grant your request to Him. As finite creatures, we cannot complete this exercise with any amount of real certainty, but perhaps it can help us evaluate the implications of our prayers for eternity.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

As we go through this text, we will examine requests Jesus made and consider how He focused on matters that had an eternal significance.

1. PRAYING FOR GOD'S GLORY
2. PRAYING FOR ETERNAL LIFE
3. PRAYING FOR FAITHFULNESS TO GOD'S WORD
4. PRAYING FOR UNITY AMONG BELIEVERS
5. PRAYING FOR THE GOSPEL TO BE MADE KNOWN

GOING DEEPER

+ *This section will examine each lesson from John 17:1–26 and show how these lessons can be utilized by modern believers seeking to address eternal matters more frequently in their prayers.*

1. PRAYING FOR GOD'S GLORY

■ JOHN 17:1–3

Q: *What was Jesus's first request?*

Q: *Why was this the most important thing for which Jesus could pray?*

Jesus began His prayer by requesting that He and God the Father reciprocate each other's glory. To "glorify" someone or something means to ascribe exuberant worth and value to them. Jesus's request was for their glory to be made clear as the Father glorified the Son and the Son glorified the Father. This is the gospel! We typically speak of the gospel in terms of our sins being forgiven by God through our faith in the Lord Jesus. It is not wrong to speak in this way, but why is it good news for our sins to be forgiven? It is because we get to behold the glory of God for all eternity. We will spend eternity examining God's worth and value from every angle, and Jesus's request inaugurates this process on the eve of His crucifixion.

Jesus also prayed that He would be glorified by saving lost sinners (John 17:10). Jesus's death on a Roman cross on behalf of those who would believe in Him is the preeminent act of love that will ever be done on this globe, and it is a testimony to His glory. As believers come to know Him as Savior, Jesus's glory is made known in the world even after His ascension to the Father.

Q: *How should God's glory influence your prayer life?*

Q: *How can you use your prayers to reflect God's glory?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jesus's priority in His prayer was to acknowledge God's glory. This should be our priority too because we will spend eternity glorifying God in heaven. Since this is the case, how can an adequate prayer life omit ascribing glory to God? This week begin each prayer by acknowledging God's glory. Recall how God has made His glory known through Scripture. Describe how God has made all the difference in your life.

2. PRAYING FOR ETERNAL LIFE

Q: *Where does eternal life come from?*

Q: *How did Jesus describe eternal life?*

After ascribing glory to God, Jesus's first priority was to identify how He would glorify God. He glorified God by giving eternal life to His followers. What does Jesus mean by the phrase "eternal life"? Since all of Jesus's immediate followers (and every follower since) died, He was not saying they would avoid physical death. Rather, Jesus was referring to eternal life that will begin at the resurrection of the dead at the end of the age. Jesus's emphasis on eternal life at the beginning of His prayer shows the primacy He gives it over believers' earthly lives. It is in eternal life that believers will know God's true glory.

Later in this prayer, Jesus discussed the earthly lives of His followers. It is quite remarkable, however, that Jesus's first concern was not with this life but the next. This is a difficult concept for modern believers to understand, yet it has crucial implications for the focus and content of our prayers. Like Jesus, it is appropriate for us, as His followers, to focus our prayers on issues that pertain to eternal life.

Q: *How many of your requests to God in prayer are focused on this life rather than the life to come?*

Q: *Why do you think it is challenging for Christians to prioritize eternal life in our prayers even when we readily admit that this is our great hope?*

APPLICATION POINT – No one likes to think of death. We don't like to think of the death of our loved ones and the pain of their loss. We don't like to think of our own deaths. With good reason. According to the apostle Paul, death is an enemy to all humankind and will ultimately be defeated by Christ (1 Corinthians 15:26). But for now, death is a sad reality that all people, Christians and non-Christians alike, must face. It is always appropriate for us to pray for the healing of the sick, but even if a person is healed from sickness, it is only for a time. Do not stop praying for the sick to be healed but add to these prayers for healing a concern for the sick to remain faithful to God even in the face of death. A believer's faithfulness to God, in life and in death, is a sure sign of the eternal life that is to come to the believer.

3. PRAYING FOR FAITHFULNESS TO GOD'S WORD

■ JOHN 17:6–19

Q: *Why was it important for Jesus's followers to keep His Word?*

Q: *What are the implications of following Jesus's word for modern believers who did not walk with Him on the earth?*

An essential characteristic of being a disciple of Jesus is holding close to His teachings. Jesus's word is an identifying mark of Christians (John 17:6). Jesus's words also serve as a witness for who He is and what He came into the world to do (John 17:8). Thus, for the community of Christ-followers to endure in this world, they must remain faithful to following His Word.

But remaining faithful to the words of Christ has never been easy in a world that has been hostile to them from the beginning. Faithfulness to the message of Jesus inherently puts Christians at odds with the world (John 17:13–14). In saying, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John

14:6), Jesus established the exclusivity of His message, and the world will always rebel against this exclusivity. But for Christians, there is no choice but to remain faithful to Jesus's message, the exclusivity it claims, and the hostility it invites from the world.

The truth of Jesus's message also sanctifies believers (John 17:17–19). Although Christ would ascend to the Father shortly after His resurrection (Acts 1:9), His followers would remain upon the earth (John 17:15). If they would avoid being deceived by the evil one (John 17:15) or succumbing to the pressures of a suffocating culture of unbelief (John 17:14), believers must be continually sanctified by the truth of God's Word. Thus, the message of Jesus and the Word of God are of eternal significance, and Jesus returns to this point over and over in His prayer.

❖: *How can you encourage fellow believers to remain faithful to God's Word?*

❖: *Are any of the prayer requests you encounter traceable to a need to be faithful to God's Word?*

APPLICATION – In order to remain salt and light in the world, the church must remain faithful to the Word of God and the message of Jesus. Thus, faithfulness to God's Word must remain a frequent topic in our prayers. Everything depends on this! In a previous lesson, you were challenged to pray through God's Word. Take some time to pray through the message of John 17:1–26. Emphasize to yourself the importance of God's Word and our faithfulness to it.

4. PRAYING FOR UNITY AMONG BELIEVERS

❑ JOHN 17:20–23

❖: *Why is the unity of the church important to the enduring message of Jesus Christ?*

❖: *What is the basis of the unity among Jesus's followers?*

Christians often get a bad rap for being divisive. Countless denominations all claim to be Christian. And often, the denominations themselves are divided. Narrowing our focus to individual local churches does not diminish the

problem of unity but exacerbates it. It seems there is a never-ending list of possibilities to disrupt the unity among followers of Jesus Christ.

Jesus's prayer, however, emphasizes the importance of unity among believers. Jesus circled back to this theme at several points in His prayer. In the first instance, unity is a sign that they have been kept by the Father (John 17:11). The emphasis here is a unified confession of faith. Although there will inevitably be differences in some theological issues (sometimes these claims of disunity can be a bit misleading and overblown), if there is disagreement or even a lack of clarity concerning what the gospel is and what it actually means to be a Christian, then this disunity is a clear indication that some (or even all) involved have not been kept by the Father.

Jesus's prayer also shows that the unity among believers reflects the unity between the Father and Son in eternity past, present, and future (John 17:22–23). This is a truly remarkable claim, and one that undoubtedly has eternal implications. The unity of the church is a testimony to the triune nature of our God. A failure in church unity is not only disruptive to the body, it's a misrepresentation of our God. Clearly Jesus was concerned that if His followers proved to be divisive among one another and schismatic, there would be eternal damage done to how His community will represent Him.

Q: *What do you think is the most divisive aspect of your church?*

Q: *How can your church retain theological integrity while emphasizing its unity with other churches in the broad stream of Christianity?*

APPLICATION POINT – Are there fellow believers in Christ at your workplace who belong to a different strand of Christianity or a different denomination? At your school? In your neighborhood? Consider approaching them to form a monthly inter-denominational prayer group. What could you pray for? You may be surprised to discover that you hold many of the same concerns in common. Interacting with Christians from outside of your own tradition may help strengthen your belief in your own traditions. More importantly, your communion will demonstrate the unity of Christ's followers to those who witness it, and it will point to the unity that has existed within the Trinity for all eternity.

5. PRAYING FOR THE GOSPEL TO BE MADE KNOWN

■ JOHN 17:18–26

Q: *What was Jesus sent by the Father to do?*

Q: *What are the eternal implications of Jesus's work?*

As Jesus concluded His prayer, His attention shifted from His relationship with the Father and with believers to His mission among those who would believe in Him. When Jesus ascended to the Father, His followers would be the ones carrying His message throughout the earth (John 17:18). It is no wonder that their faithfulness to God's Word and to unity would be so essential. Although Jesus saw the world as hostile to Him, His followers, and their mission, some people who were previously of the world would come to identify with His followers through their mission (John 17:20). Jesus also prayed that all would know the meaning of His earthbound mission (John 17:21, 23). Jesus's mission was an unmatched expression of love (John 15:13) that demonstrates the glory He and the Father share (John 17:1–3).

Q: *How does Jesus's mission influence your prayer life?*

Q: *How can you incorporate a wider concern for the mission of Jesus into your personal prayer life? Your church's corporate prayer life?*

APPLICATION POINT – What one unbeliever in your life is God leading you to share your faith with over the next several months? Commit to praying for this person. Ask God to do whatever it takes to show them the importance of the gospel. Let them know you are praying for them and ask if there are any specific things you can pray for. Be ready for God to act in an eternally significant way.

NEXT STEPS

This week, in your prayer journal, draw a line across the middle of a page. In the top half, write out a prayer that focuses on matters having implications directly tied to eternity. In the bottom half, write out a prayer focused on more short-term matters related to your life. If you need more than half a page for either, move on to the next page but fill each page equally. The goal is to encourage you to pray for eternal things in the manner of Jesus in John 17.



PRAY

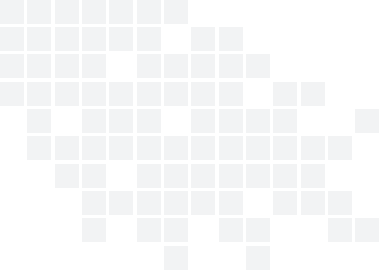
+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, may you be glorified in my prayers, by my life, and from my witness.

Father, keep me close to you by keeping me faithful to your Word. Help me read and study it. Help me apply it to my life. When the time comes for me to choose between what your Word teaches and what this world commands, help me be ready to stand on the unshakable foundation of your Word.

Father, help me to put the needs of others in my church body above my own for the sake of the gospel. Help our unity reflect the unity shared by you and the Son for all eternity.

Father, I pray that you will be at work in the life of _____. You have put _____ on my heart because _____ needs the gospel.



PRAYER

February 7, 2021 | Praying for Spiritual Growth

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Write down your understanding of spiritual growth. What does it mean to grow spiritually?

Read Ephesians 3:14–21.

Pray that God would give you insight into the message of this text.

THIS WEEK

■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Paul prayed the Ephesian Christians would grow in their faith through meditating on the gospel.

■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

This week, you will be challenged to pray for your own spiritual growth.

■ MEDITATE

“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32)

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage’s main point to your own life.

Q: *What was your spiritual life like before you came to know Christ?*

Q: *What has changed since you came to know Christ as Savior?*

Newborn babies normally begin growing quickly after birth. They are no longer directly dependent on their mother for nourishment and are fed regularly. Often, within a month, the baby is barely recognizable when compared to the first few hours after birth. Occasionally, however, some newborns fail to achieve this growth due to eating problems or some other developmental factor. Such a condition is known by physicians as failure to thrive syndrome.

In the Christian life, we encounter a similar phenomenon. Many Christians, after confessing their belief in the gospel, fail to grow much in their faith. There may be some superficial changes to their behavior or perhaps even to their appearance, but they are not accompanied by any enduring significant growth in their faith. Such Christians suffer from a failure to thrive in their walk with Christ.

Q: *How would you like to see your faith in Christ grow over the next year? Five years? Ten years?*

Q: *What steps do you need to take to see this growth occur?*

APPLICATION POINT – Are you struggling with a failure to thrive in your Christian life? The difficulty in this question is that we are often poor judges of our own spiritual condition. When hikers become lost in the wilderness, they are usually lost long before they realize it. The same concept applies to us as Christians. As you read through the lesson this week, try to adopt the mentality that you are far more in need of spiritual growth than you realize.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Ephesians 3:14–21 is a prayer for the Ephesian Christians to grow in the gospel. In this text Paul included three emphases he hoped would lead to spiritual growth on the part of those who were listening.

1. PRAY FOR THE STRENGTH TO GROW IN THE GOSPEL.

2. PRAY TO UNDERSTAND THE LOVE OF CHRIST.

3. PRAY AUDACIOUSLY.

GOING DEEPER

+ This section will investigate *Ephesians 3:14–21* to see how the three emphases Paul includes will help us grow spiritually.

1. PRAY FOR THE STRENGTH TO GROW IN THE GOSPEL.

■ EPHESIANS 3:14–19

Q: *How is the word “strengthened” used in these verses?*

Q: *What was Paul wanting to be strengthened?*

“Strength” literally refers to the muscular capabilities of our physical bodies. Strength allows us to move about and accomplish our daily tasks. It helps us move objects. Today, we have developed the metaphor of a “strong mind,” which usually refers to mental toughness or the ability to endure both mental and physical hardships.

Paul used “strength” to create a different metaphor—to refer to our growing understanding and confidence in the Christian faith. Just like our bodies are capable of growing stronger through exercise, Paul was showing us that our faith in Christ is also capable of growing.

Q: *How do you think spiritual strength is exercised?*

Q: *What do you think would be the challenge of growing stronger in faith? What “resistance” must be overcome to gain strength?*

APPLICATION POINT – The term “discipline” often carries negative connotations in our culture. It is used synonymously with “punishment.” But the word can also carry a very positive meaning. A disciplined person is someone who is able to withstand negative impulses and act on positive virtues. This is how the term is used in “spiritual disciplines.” We can think of spiritual disciplines as spiritual exercises to strengthen our faith. Some spiritual exercises include Bible intake, prayer, serving, giving, and fasting. There are many more. This week consider what part of your faith may need some spiritual exercise and commit to “working out” your spiritual strength.

Q: *How did Paul say we should grow in our faith?*

Q: *Why is it counter-intuitive for strengthening to be a passive activity?*

The oddity of the metaphor Paul created is that we are strengthened “passively.” Physical exercise demands physical effort, but spiritual exercise demands that we acknowledge our inability to make ourselves grow. Paul told the Ephesians that they must be strengthened with power through the Spirit. They are passive in their own strengthening.

This paradox rests at the heart of the gospel. Just as there was never any hope of saving ourselves through good works, there is never any hope of strengthening ourselves by our own spiritual fortitude. We needed Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and resurrection from the grave to be saved from our sins, and we need the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit to strengthen our faith. The gospel is about what God has accomplished on our behalf, not about what we do for Him or ourselves.

Q: *How does the gospel provide us the freedom we need to grow in our faith?*

Q: *How can you avoid the urge to depend upon your own efforts to grow spiritually?*

APPLICATION POINT – We need to be reminded of our need for the gospel every day. One of the best ways to remind ourselves of that truth is to apply the gospel principle to specific situations in life. How good are you at being gracious to others? If your spouse has wronged you, are you able to let it go without matters combusting into flames? Have you ever sacrificed your time to help a coworker? Can someone cut you off in traffic without unleashing the full measure of your wrath? None of these things compares with the grace God has shown you in the gospel, but these actions or something similar may help you remember and appreciate more deeply the love Jesus Christ displayed for you.

2. PRAY TO UNDERSTAND THE LOVE OF CHRIST.

Q: *What is the source of love mentioned in Ephesians 3:17?*

Q: *What is the role of this love in our spiritual strengthening?*

Imagine lifting weights on a freshly greased and waxed floor. You would probably not be very successful lifting, and you would risk hurting yourself. Weightlifting demands a strong foundation. In the same way, spiritual growth demands a strong foundation. That foundation is the love of Christ. It is as if Paul were saying, “If you want to grow in your faith, dive more into the love God has shown you in His Son, Jesus Christ.” In fact, Paul recommended that you, with all the saints (corporately!), investigate the love of Christ from every conceivable angle. Strengthening our faith demands that we comprehend the love of Christ shown to us in the gospel.

Q: *What steps can you take to ensure that you never get over the gospel?*

Q: *Why is it important for you to seek spiritual growth alongside other believers?*

APPLICATION – This study has encouraged you to keep a journal of your prayers and to go back through your journal periodically to see how God has been at work in your life through prayer. It is great to do this on an individual basis, but in this passage, Paul encouraged the Ephesian believers to seek spiritual strength within community. Christian community exists at several different levels. There is a sense in which every Christian belongs to a universal Christian community. No matter where you live or what denomination you are, all Christians form a community around the gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps a more relevant community for most Christians is their local church body, and within this local church body, there may be various smaller groups. Each of these is essential to spiritual growth. Many Christians, however, have a hard time forming community, even within these smaller contexts. This week consider if God may be calling you to partner with one or two other members of your local church community to encourage one another in prayer and fellowship.

Q: *How has Christ shown His love for you?*

Q: *What is the goal of knowing the love of Christ?*

On the one hand, Paul wanted the Ephesians to be grounded in love so they might comprehend the wonders of the gospel, but on the other hand, he claimed that the love of Christ surpasses all knowledge. It does not matter how many angles from which the Ephesians peer into the marvelous love Christ displayed in the gospel. They will never be able to exhaust the wonders of His love. And yet, it is by staring deeply into the love of Christ on display in the gospel that Christians will be filled with the fullness of God. That is, thinking deeply about the gospel initiates the spiritual growth for which true followers of Christ yearn.

By basing spiritual growth in love, Paul freed the Ephesians and all Christians to seek God out of delight rather than duty. Unlike the ancient myths in which humans had to bear the burdens of the gods to gain their approval, Paul encouraged Christians to pursue what should captivate them most. By pursuing the knowledge of God's love shown for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christians find a sure path to spiritual growth.

Q: *Do you ever find the concept of free grace to be difficult to understand or accept?*

Q: *Do you ever find that the patterns of thought in your mind are at odds with the gospel? For example, do you still hold on to beliefs that God's acceptance of you depends upon your achievements or your spiritual growth rather than what Christ has done for you?*

APPLICATION POINT – This week, challenge yourself to consider the gospel from different angles. For example, spend one day considering all the gospel implications of Jesus's incarnation (becoming a man and being born to a woman). On the next day, you could consider the implications of Jesus's ministry or His death. Toward the end of the week, think about what Jesus's ascension and return say about who Christ is and what He has done for us. After pondering these implications each day, spend some time in prayer praising God for the goodness He has shown you in His Son.

3. PRAY AUDACIOUSLY.

■ ■ **EPHESIANS 3:20–21**

Q: *What is the power at work within Christians?*

Q: *Why was Paul confident that God is able to do far more than we can even imagine?*

God's ability to give good gifts to believers stretches as far as His love. The greatest gift God could ever give is the gift of His Son for the forgiveness of our sins. Therefore, there is nothing we could ask for or even imagine asking for that would exceed the love God has for His people. There is no end to God's goodness and the delight He desires for His redeemed creatures to have in Him.

Since this is the case, Christ followers should be eager to bring their most audacious request to God. There is no sin beyond His forgiveness, if His people would merely ask. There is no person too far lost that they cannot be welcomed into the body of Christ. There is no illness God is unable to heal. God is able to do all of this and more because He already has, in the salvation of lost sinners through the death of His son.

Q: *Do you need to repent of limiting God in your prayers?*

Q: *What does failing to bring matters before God in prayer say about our understanding of the gospel?*

APPLICATION POINT – In making this point, we should never think God is obligated to act on our behalf. Although nothing prevents Him from acting, He is not at the mercy of those who pray to Him. It is rather we who must learn to adapt ourselves to what He is doing on this earth. Nevertheless, we should not be shy in making our requests known to Him, and we should never consider holding back out of a concern that God will be overwhelmed by our prayers. This week pick one or two common issues you frequently pray over. What would be the most rudimentary way for God to act on your request? What would be the most audacious way for God to respond to you? Offer these audacious requests to God.

Q: *How is God glorified through prayer?*

Q: *How does prayer link Christian generations past, present, and future?*

Prayer is a wonderful gift God has given to Christians. We do not serve an isolated God who is unconcerned with His creation. In fact, He seeks to be glorified within His creation, specifically through the prayers of His people. The willingness of Christians to go to God in prayer shows remarkable consistency in their belief in who God is and how He works within His creation.

Q: *How has God been glorified in your prayers over the past week?*

Q: *What can you do to appreciate God's faithfulness to answer prayer throughout many Christian generations?*

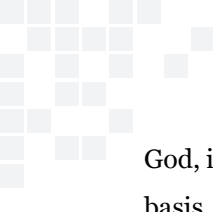
APPLICATION POINT – This week consider reading some prayers from historic Christians. Praise God that the same power behind their prayers is also behind your prayers. Praise God that He has continued to be glorified through prayer through the centuries.

NEXT STEPS

In your prayer journal, write out some ways you want to strengthen your faith over the course of the next year. What are some practical steps (such as time management) you need to take to pursue them? These steps may need to include elements of subtraction as well as addition. That is, spiritual growth will take time from your day. You may have to consider backing away from some current commitments and interests. Make sure your plan is attainable. If you are working sixty hours a week, it is unlikely that you will be able to pray for an hour every day. Nevertheless, remember that you are praying to the God “who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.”

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

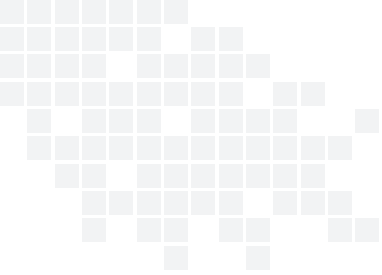


God, in a world that often fails to regard who you are, I confess that I need you. I need to grow in my faith on a daily basis. I am completely dependent upon your grace.

Lord Jesus, may I be overcome by the love you have shown me in the gospel. May I be driven to fervent prayer out of my love for you.

Father, forgive me for ever placing limits on the goodness you are willing to show your children. Your mercy is extravagant. You desire my good and the good of all those who love you. Help me to pray like it.

Father, help me to gaze ever deeper into the wonders of the gospel. Christ Jesus died for me even though He knew no sin of His own. He was raised by the power of God to inaugurate a new kingdom characterized by His glory and grace.







OAKWOODNB.COM | FOLLOW @OAKWOODNB