



WHERE LIFE & PURPOSE CONNECT

## **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 14, 2024**

### **Weekly Prayer**

Most Loving and Gracious God, I praise you and thank you for the guidance that you give me in your Word and by your Spirit. I thank you for choosing to dwell within me, and I praise you for calling me to be your faithful servant. As I study your Word today, if I am in need of comfort, may I be comforted; if I need to be challenged, may I be challenged. And through it all, may I grow closer to you. Amen.

### **Monday, January 15**

#### **Scripture: Jeremiah 1:1-3, 2 Peter 1:16-21**

These are the words of Jeremiah, Hilkiah's son, who was one of the priests from Anathoth in the land of Benjamin. The Lord's word came to Jeremiah in the thirteenth year of Judah's King Josiah, Amon's son, and throughout the rule of Judah's King Jehoiakim, Josiah's son, until the fifth month of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah, Josiah's son, when the people of Jerusalem were taken into exile.

We didn't repeat crafty myths when we told you about the powerful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Quite the contrary, we witnessed his majesty with our own eyes. He received honor and glory from God the Father when a voice came to him from the magnificent glory, saying, "This is my dearly loved Son, with whom I am well-pleased." We ourselves heard this voice from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain. In addition, we have a most reliable prophetic word, and you would do well to pay attention to it, just as you would to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Most important, you must know that no prophecy of scripture represents the prophet's own understanding of things, because no prophecy ever came by human will. Instead, men and women led by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

### **Observation**

Bible doubters (like some Christians) assume God could only speak through a fully correct, consistent Bible. But the prophet Jeremiah said his "words" bore God's "word" or message. The apostle Peter said the Holy Spirit led, but men and women did the actual speaking. Many Christians today believe that God influenced the choice of every word and

every idea, so that the words written were literally the words of God. However, that is not taught in the Bible, and it was not taught in the creeds of the early church.

### **Application**

Peter compared the prophetic writing to “a lamp shining in a dark place.” He drew on images from his Bible—the Hebrew Scriptures or “Old Testament” (Psalm 84:11, 119:105, Malachi 4:2). As you have read the Bible, asking God’s help (Psalm 119:9-18 models a lovely prayer to pray as you read the Bible), have you ever had this sense of a lamp shining on some dark question you faced?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, as I read my Bible, shine into my heart through its message so that your kingdom life of love, joy and peace will shine out of me. Amen.

## **Tuesday, January 16**

### **Scripture: Leviticus 24:18-20, Matthew 5:38-45**

Someone who kills an animal may make amends for it: a life for a life. If someone injures a fellow citizen, they will suffer the same injury they inflicted: broken bone for broken bone, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The same injury the person inflicted on the other will be inflicted on them.

“You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well. When they wish to haul you to court and take your shirt, let them have your coat too. When they force you to go one mile, go with them two. Give to those who ask, and don’t refuse those who wish to borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous.

### **Observation**

Students of ancient history see a world in which revenge often went beyond the original injury (e.g. “you hurt me; I’ll kill your whole family”). The law in Leviticus 24 (and Exodus 21, Deuteronomy 19) made revenge proportional — “an eye for an eye” — and averted massive retaliation. Israel’s law of proportional revenge was more merciful than most. But Jesus didn’t feel bound to be “consistent” with that. He said his kingdom led his followers into more radical, difficult territory: “Love your enemies.”

## **Application**

We think of ourselves as more enlightened than the ancient world. But we still sell T-shirts and bumper stickers saying things like “I don’t get mad — I get even.” How does replacing a wish for revenge with an ideal of mutual love and service alter human relationships for the better? In what ways does Jesus’ teaching speak to the spirit in which you deal with others?

## **Prayer**

Lord God, phrases like “massive retaliation” and “force is the only language they understand” still tempt me. Please keep leading me into the quality of love that Jesus taught. Amen.

## **Wednesday, January 17**

### **Scripture: Genesis 17:9-14, Acts 15:4-19, Galatians 5:1-6**

God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants in every generation. This is my covenant that you and your descendants must keep: Circumcise every male. You must circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it will be a symbol of the covenant between us. On the eighth day after birth, every male in every generation must be circumcised, including those who are not your own children: those born in your household and those purchased with silver from foreigners. Be sure you circumcise those born in your household and those purchased with your silver. Your flesh will embody my covenant as an enduring covenant. Any uncircumcised male whose flesh of his foreskin remains uncircumcised will be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant.”

When they arrived in Jerusalem, the church, the apostles, and the elders all welcomed them. They gave a full report of what God had accomplished through their activity. Some believers from among the Pharisees stood up and claimed, “The Gentiles must be circumcised. They must be required to keep the Law from Moses.” The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter. After much debate, Peter stood and addressed them, “Fellow believers, you know that, early on, God chose me from among you as the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and come to believe. God, who knows people’s deepest thoughts and desires, confirmed this by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, but purified their deepest thoughts and desires through faith. Why then are you now challenging God by placing a burden on the shoulders of these disciples that neither we nor our ancestors could bear? On the contrary, we believe that we and they are saved in the same way, by the grace of the Lord Jesus.”

The entire assembly fell quiet as they listened to Barnabas and Paul describe all the signs and wonders God did among the Gentiles through their activity. When Barnabas and Paul also fell silent, James responded, “Fellow believers, listen to me. Simon reported how, in

his kindness, God came to the Gentiles in the first place, to raise up from them a people of God. The prophets' words agree with this; as it is written,

After this I will return,  
and I will rebuild David's fallen tent;  
I will rebuild what has been torn down.  
I will restore it  
so that the rest of humanity will seek the Lord,  
even all the Gentiles who belong to me.  
The Lord says this, the one who does these things[a]  
known from earliest times.

Therefore, I conclude that we shouldn't create problems for Gentiles who turn to God."

Christ has set us free for freedom. Therefore, stand firm and don't submit to the bondage of slavery again.

Look, I, Paul, am telling you that if you have yourselves circumcised, having Christ won't help you. Again I swear to every man who has himself circumcised that he is required to do the whole Law. You people who are trying to be made righteous by the Law have been estranged from Christ. You have fallen away from grace! We eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness through the Spirit by faith. Being circumcised or not being circumcised doesn't matter in Christ Jesus, but faith working through love does matter.

### **Observation**

Christians have wrestled with parts of the Bible throughout history. In the first century, some thought it was wrong to accept uncircumcised Gentile men into the faith. They could quote Genesis 17:9-14 to say any uncircumcised male was outside God's covenant. But Peter, Paul and James didn't believe that settled the matter. God, they said (based on other texts like Amos 9:11-12, and Jesus' example), was leading differently in their day, pouring out the Holy Spirit on all who showed faith in Jesus.

### **Application**

These readings are a useful case study because few Christians today demand circumcision. After the Christian Pharisees (Acts 15:5) urged a circumcision requirement, James quoted the prophet Amos, who'd said God aimed to reach all nations. Based on the apostles' evidence that God accepted Gentiles who had faith, the apostles agreed it was better to follow Amos than Genesis in this case. What can we learn from their example about how to apply the Bible?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, like all your children, I miss the mark at times. I'm so thankful you died to set me free from guilt, and that you empower me to keep living into your love in the freedom you offer. Amen.

**Thursday, January 18**

**Scripture: John 5:35-40, Hebrews 1:1-4**

John was a burning and shining lamp, and, at least for a while, you were willing to celebrate in his light.

“I have a witness greater than John’s testimony. The Father has given me works to do so that I might complete them. These works I do testify about me that the Father sent me. And the Father who sent me testifies about me. You have never even heard his voice or seen his form, and you don’t have his word dwelling with you because you don’t believe the one whom he has sent. Examine the scriptures, since you think that in them you have eternal life. They also testify about me, yet you don’t want to come to me so that you can have life.

In the past, God spoke through the prophets to our ancestors in many times and many ways. In these final days, though, he spoke to us through a Son. God made his Son the heir of everything and created the world through him. The Son is the light of God’s glory and the imprint of God’s being. He maintains everything with his powerful message. After he carried out the cleansing of people from their sins, he sat down at the right side of the highest majesty. And the Son became so much greater than the other messengers, such as angels, that he received a more important title than theirs.

**Observation**

A fancy word for one Christian attitude is “Bibliolatry.” That means worshiping the Bible more than the God of the Bible. Jesus challenged the “bibliolatry” of some Hebrew Scripture experts. Many of them memorized huge sections of the Bible. Yet Jesus said they missed the focal point of the Bible’s story — they wouldn’t recognize him as God among them. They “knew” their Bible (at least their view of it) so well they couldn’t accept God in the flesh.

**Application**

Scholar Scot McKnight said some Christians “read the Bible as a collection of...sanctified morsels of truth.” But the Bible isn’t just a set of short verses, all equally true and making the same point. That’s why the writer of Hebrews said although God had spoken through the prophets “in many times and many ways,” God’s ultimate word was not a book, but a person: the Son, Jesus. How has (or can) the Bible, above all else, draw you to know and love Jesus?

**Prayer**

Lord Jesus, lead my mind and heart beyond theories, abstractions, and rigid ideas. Meet me as I come to the Bible and speak your life-giving word into my heart. Amen.

**Friday, January 19**

**Scripture: Matthew 7:1-5, Romans 2:11-16**

“Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged. You’ll receive the same judgment you give. Whatever you deal out will be dealt out to you. Why do you see the splinter that’s in your brother’s or sister’s eye, but don’t notice the log in your own eye? How can you say to your brother or sister, ‘Let me take the splinter out of your eye,’ when there’s a log in your eye? You deceive yourself! First take the log out of your eye, and then you’ll see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother’s or sister’s eye.

God does not have favorites.

Those who have sinned outside the Law will also die outside the Law, and those who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law. It isn’t the ones who hear the Law who are righteous in God’s eyes. It is the ones who do what the Law says who will be treated as righteous. Gentiles don’t have the Law. But when they instinctively do what the Law requires they are a Law in themselves, though they don’t have the Law. They show the proof of the Law written on their hearts, and their consciences affirm it. Their conflicting thoughts will accuse them, or even make a defense for them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the hidden truth about human beings through Christ Jesus.

**Observation**

Some Christians sow doubt about their faith by saying God only saves those whose faith is just like theirs. In his book, *Making Sense of the Bible*, Pastor Adam Hamilton says, “Most mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, and a sizable number of evangelicals reject...*Christian exclusivism* in favor of...*Christian inclusivism*. This view [says] Jesus is the only Savior of the world...[but] insists that Jesus’ saving grace can be given to whomever God chooses based upon the criteria God chooses....this does not mean everyone will be ‘saved.’ But it appears in Scripture that many who sought to know and love God, but did not know Christ, will in the end...receive the gift of his saving grace.”

**Application**

Many “religious” people condemned Jesus for befriending “tax collectors” (who collected taxes for the occupying Romans) and “sinners” (who did not fully follow the many laws or customs religious leaders demanded). Who in your world might be classed as “tax collectors and sinners” in 2024? How do you believe Jesus would treat such people? Do you agree with Paul that only God (not us) can “judge the hidden truth about human beings”?

**Prayer**

Creator God, you came to save every member of your human family who is willing to trust you. Give me a heart that knows you yearn to redeem everyone and rejoices in all who respond. Amen.

**Saturday, January 20**

**Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:10-17**

But you have paid attention to my teaching, conduct, purpose, faithfulness, patience, love, and endurance. You have seen me experience physical abuse and ordeals in places such as Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. I put up with all sorts of abuse, and the Lord rescued me from it all! In fact, anyone who wants to live a holy life in Christ Jesus will be harassed. But evil people and swindlers will grow even worse, as they deceive others while being deceived themselves.

But you must continue with the things you have learned and found convincing. You know who taught you. Since childhood you have known the holy scriptures that help you to be wise in a way that leads to salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus. Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good.

**Observation**

United Methodists believe “that God speaks to us through the Bible and that it contains all things necessary for salvation. This authority derives from three sources:

- We hold that the writers of the Bible were inspired by God, that they were filled with God's Spirit as they wrote the truth to the best of their knowledge.
- We hold that God was at work in the process of canonization, during which only the most faithful and useful books were adopted as Scripture.
- We hold that the Holy Spirit works today in our thoughtful study of the Scriptures, especially as we study them together, seeking to relate the old words to life's present realities. The Bible's authority is, therefore, nothing magical. For example, we do not open the text at random to discover God's will. The authority of Scripture derives from the movement of God's Spirit in times past and in our reading of it today.” \*

\*<https://www.umc.org/en/content/our-christian-roots-the-bible>

**Application**

Some details, facts and even ideas in the Bible don't match each other perfectly. But the point of the Bible's deep story is God's loving work to redeem lost humanity. Every inspired Scripture is part of a story aimed at bringing people into a vibrant, life-changing relationship with God. The Bible shows people who want to respond to God how to live a life reflecting God's redemption and love. When you read the Bible, how often do some of the details distract you from the larger story? How can the GPS, sermons and other times of personal Bible reading and study help you view each individual section in the framework of the larger story, the “meta-narrative,” the Bible has told God's people for centuries? How do you open your heart and mind to let God's Spirit, who guided the Bible's writers, also guide you to let the Bible authoritatively shape your life?

**Prayer**

O God, master and guide, I need your help and wisdom today and every day. As I read the Bible, use it to equip me more and more to daily be your physical presence in my world.  
Amen.