



WHERE LIFE & PURPOSE CONNECT

## **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of September 3, 2023**

### **Weekly Prayer**

God of all creation, my deepest desire is to glorify you. My deep delight is in your presence, my fondest thoughts are of you, my strongest longing is for your house. This week, help me to remember who I was created to be -- part of a community that breathes thankfulness and follows your call to share the good news of Jesus Christ with all the world. Amen.

### **Monday, September 4**

#### **Scripture: Matthew 28:19-20; Revelation 21:1-5**

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age."

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look! I'm making all things new." He also said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

### **Observation**

Jesus wasn't "God with us" for just a few first-century years. He pledged to remain with us in the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-18). In Matthew 28 he made the crucial promise that "I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age." The Holy Spirit is not a spooky, ghostly vapor, but the personal spiritual presence of Jesus with each of us every day, all the way to the end of the age. Beyond that, Revelation's amazing symbolic visions said that by his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus made God's presence with us a reality for all eternity. No matter what life throws at us, we, like those first Christians, can trust

that THIS is where history is going: "He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

### **Application**

Jesus' followers, led by the apostle Paul, set out in the hostile Roman Empire to carry out Jesus' commission to "go and make disciples of all nations." To some of his first European converts, Paul wrote that even in mourning Christians live very differently from those "who don't have any hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Rome hated (and sometimes executed) Christians, yet from exile on the island of Patmos, John wrote of a vision that promised God's people a splendid future, using images of the garden of Paradise from Genesis 2. The exiled seer invited everyone to choose that future: "Let the one who is thirsty come! Let the one who wishes receive life-giving water as a gift" (Revelation 22:17). Have you said yes to that invitation? Do you believe (in the words of the Apostles' Creed) in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting with God?

### **Prayer**

Jesus, God with us, you are already making me new. I can hardly wait for you to complete that work, for me and for our world. Fill me with your hope and energy this day and every day. Amen.

### **Tuesday, September 5**

#### **Scripture: Romans 8:35-39; 1 John 4:7-8, 16**

Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

*We are being put to death all day long for your sake.  
We are treated like sheep for slaughter.*

But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love.

We have known and have believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them.

### **Observation**

The apostle Paul sent the Romans quite a list of things that might separate them from God's love: "trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or

sword.” He’d faced all of those, but he wrote the list to say, “In all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us” (vs 37). That sweeping victory empowers us to love other people with the same tireless love which John said is God’s very essence. John didn’t say just that God loves us—God IS love. If our life and love ultimately reflect our creator’s love, then there’s power in love to help and heal when nothing else can. There’s power in love to lift up and liberate when nothing else will. There’s power in love to show us the way to live.

### **Application**

The Greek *agape* was not emotional pop culture “luv,” which can shift quickly. It was a chosen attitude. Believers are not to think love automatically goes on and on. It must also be supported by the exercise of the will. Love makes allowances. Love tries to help. Love looks at the good people do in preference to dwelling on their defects. How can you choose to love in that robust, tough-minded way? Paul asked, “If God is for us, who is against us?” and “Who will separate us from Christ’s love?” His phrasing assumed the answer was “Nobody and nothing!” Your grace-filled promises can win a sweeping victory over all life’s challenges. Ask God to shape you into the kind of person able to live that way.

### **Prayer**

All powerful God, whatever comes my way, keep me in the shelter of your love. Thank you that, through you, I can win a sweeping, loving victory in “all these things.” Amen.

## **Wednesday, September 6**

### **Scripture: Philippians 3:20 – 4:8**

Our citizenship is in heaven. We look forward to a savior that comes from there—the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform our humble bodies so that they are like his glorious body, by the power that also makes him able to subject all things to himself.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters whom I love and miss, who are my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord. Loved ones, I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to come to an agreement in the Lord. Yes, and I’m also asking you, loyal friend, to help these women who have struggled together with me in the ministry of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in the scroll of life. Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. Don’t be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise.

## **Observation**

At times we may think our faith is just about the future (“Someday—if I’m good enough—I’ll be with my Savior in heaven”). In today’s reading, the apostle Paul clearly brought the future and present parts of our faith together. Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, “We naturally suppose he means ‘and so we’re waiting until we can go and live in heaven where we belong.’ But that’s not what he says, and it’s certainly not what he means. If someone in Philippi said, ‘We are citizens of Rome,’ they certainly wouldn’t mean ‘so we’re looking forward to going to live there.’ Being a colony works the other way round. The task of the Roman citizen in a place like Philippi was to bring Roman culture and rule to northern Greece, to expand Roman influence there. The church is at present a colony of heaven, with the responsibility (as we say in the Lord’s Prayer) for bringing the life and rule of heaven to bear on earth. Chapter 4 called (and calls) Christians to live as citizens of heaven right now.

## **Application**

Being “citizens of heaven” doesn’t mean we don’t care what happens to this deeply troubled world we live in. Jesus didn’t shrug off people’s needs, saying, “Someday I’ll make them all better” (Matthew 4:23-24). Paul, Jesus’ committed follower, was in prison because he didn’t retreat to a quiet spot but traveled constantly, calling often-hostile citizens of the Roman Empire to the better life they’d have by making Jesus, not Caesar, their true Lord. Echoing the image of citizenship he used to the Philippians (who lived in a Roman colony city), he told another group of Christians, “We are ambassadors who represent Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:20). In what ways are you living as an ambassador, a colonist seeking to bring the life and rule of heaven to bear on earth? How can you join with others in your congregation to carry out that mission?

## **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, you’re not going to be my Savior and Lord “someday.” You save me today, with work for me to do for your kingdom. Give me your heart for this hurting world. Amen.

## **Thursday, September 7**

### **Scripture: Hebrews 12:1-3**

So then, with endurance, let’s also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let’s throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up, and fix our eyes on Jesus, faith’s pioneer and perfecter. He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right side of God’s throne.

Think about the one who endured such opposition from sinners so that you won’t be discouraged and you won’t give up.

## **Observation**

If you’ve ever been in US Bank Stadium or any college football stadium on game day, then you know just how loud a football crowd can be. The players know that the fans in the

stadium can alter the outcome of a game so much that people often call them “the twelfth man.” At its best, the Christian family is awesome, too. We have the privilege of encouraging each other, bringing out the best in one another.

### **Application**

In Hebrews 12:1 we read that “a great cloud of witnesses” surrounds us. This crowd is much more than just spectators making noise. Some consider this a reference to saints and angels observing us, as the crowd in a great stadium cheers on those on the playing field. Others see us observing the saints of ages past, taking heart from their consistent testimony (witness) to God’s faithfulness. How does the image of this great crowd of witnesses shape your daily behavior and speech?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, I’m thankful I don’t have to do this “faith” thing all alone. Thank you for the people, in history and in my day-to-day life, who encourage and cheer me on. Amen.

## **Friday, September 8**

### **Scripture: 1 John 4:7-12**

Dear friends, let’s love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who doesn’t love does not know God, because God is love. This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us.

### **Observation**

As John wrote about the relationships God wants Christians to have with one another, he likely remembered where he and Jesus’ other disciples began. They competed with one another for position and recognition and got angry with each other if one person’s efforts seemed to be gaining the upper hand (Mark 10:35-45). John knew from his own experience that loving others with Jesus’ love doesn’t just spring naturally from warm human feelings. It goes much deeper than just being “Minnesota nice.” The ultimate source of this kind of active *agape* love is not us at all, but the eternally loving heart of God. The God of the universe loves us, and that is the reason we are committed to living with one another in love.

### **Application**

An unknown humorist wrote, “To live above with saints we love—ah, that will be glory! To live below with saints we know—well, that’s another story.” But John said that, in Christ, we need to grow beyond that very human kind of skepticism toward others. Which people, inside or beyond the church, do you find it hardest to love? Read and pray through this passage, plugging in their names and faces. Ask God to help you live out God’s love even

toward them. Then as your capacity grows, take in God's love to see yourself as loveable in God's sight. How is this changing the way you see and relate to others?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, let the people with whom I come in contact—yes, even the bored store clerk, the annoying neighbor or classmate—see you and your love in me. Amen.

## **Saturday, September 9**

### **Scripture: Ecclesiastes 12:1-8**

Remember your creator in your prime,  
before the days of trouble arrive,  
and those years, about which you'll say, "I take no pleasure in these"—  
before the sun and the light grow dark, the moon and the stars too,  
before the clouds return after the rain;  
on the day when the housekeepers tremble and the strong men stoop;  
when the women who grind stop working because they're so few,  
and those who look through the windows grow dim;  
when the doors to the street are shut,  
when the sound of the mill fades,  
the sound of the bird rises,  
and all the singers come down low;  
when people are afraid of things above  
and of terrors along the way;  
when the almond tree blanches, the locust droops,  
and the caper-berry comes to nothing;<sup>[a]</sup>  
when the human goes to the eternal abode,  
with mourners all around in the street;  
before the silver cord snaps and the gold bowl shatters;  
the jar is broken at the spring and the wheel is crushed at the pit;  
before dust returns to the earth as it was before  
and the life-breath returns to God who gave it.

Perfectly pointless, says the Teacher, everything is pointless.

### **Observation**

Ecclesiastes is narrated by a Hebrew known as *Qoheleth* (Hebrew "teacher"—maybe King Solomon, maybe not). If anything, the well-known King James version's rendering of 1:2 ("vanity of vanities; all is vanity") is too mild. Why should we spend any time with a book that feels like a cynical downer? As part of Israel's "wisdom" literature, most of the book reminds us (often bluntly) of realities we'd rather ignore, like the fact that in this world everyone dies in the end, no matter how accomplished or notable. But even more important, while it begins with "perfectly pointless," the book ends by affirming the one

reality that is NOT pointless. The closing verses advise, don't lose track of the basics ... of the faith expressed in Proverbs and Job. Be in awe of God. Express that commitment by doing what God says.

### **Application**

Ecclesiastes refused to look at life in this world through "rose-colored glasses." That may bother some of us; for others it offers refreshing honesty about life. And few of us get through life without having at least some moments when everything we work so hard for feels pointless. The Teacher is sometimes skeptical; but God is real to him, and he believes that God has revealed his will to humankind. If God had not done so, we could not be held accountable for our actions. Thus, although we may like to know more of the total plan of God, we know enough to be held responsible for what we do or fail to do. Our lives day by day must be lived as in the sight of God, who has given us the opportunity to fulfill his purpose for that day. How can you minimize your investment of yourself in activities Ecclesiastes called pointless? How can you apply Ecclesiastes' insight about living each day to fulfill God's purposes more fully in and through your life that day?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, so many things seem so important until something happens that shows me they are hollow and temporary. Keep my life rooted in worshiping and serving you, the one reality that lasts. Amen.