



WHERE LIFE & PURPOSE CONNECT

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 7, 2024

Weekly Prayer

God of unity and love, enter once again into my heart and world, that I might be joined to you and to others. From the beginning of time, your wisdom has been at work, giving beauty and meaning to all of creation, rejoicing in all living creatures. Grant me the wisdom to do your will, that I might share your love with all, working towards the community you long to fashion, in the name of Christ Jesus, my Lord. Amen.

Monday, January 8

Scripture: Hebrews 11:1, 8, 39

Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance. He went out without knowing where he was going.

All these people didn't receive what was promised, though they were given approval for their faith.

Observation

"Faith" does not mean never having doubts. Over 90% of people report facing times of doubt. Hebrews 11 defined "faith" as trusting despite causes for doubt, saying, "Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see." It described the patriarch Abraham's great faith. But Genesis said his next act was a deceitful act born of fear (Genesis 12:1-4, 10-13). Trusting "what we don't see" can never totally exclude doubt.

Application

What are some of the most beautiful sights you've seen, or deepest loving relationships you've had? Was their beauty or love something you could "prove" with abstract logic, or did you need to take the risk of experiencing and trusting them? Scholar Leon Morris noted, "There are realities for which we have no material evidence, though they are not less real for that. Faith enables us to know that they exist." What are one or two realities beyond "proof" that make your life better?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you call me to trust that your spiritual world truly is more real, joyful and free than the material world that's always tugging at my heart. Keep growing that faith deep within me. Amen.

Tuesday, January 9

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-24

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved. It is written in scripture: *I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will reject the intelligence of the intelligent.* Where are the wise? Where are the legal experts? Where are today's debaters? Hasn't God made the wisdom of the world foolish? In God's wisdom, he determined that the world wouldn't come to know him through its wisdom. Instead, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of preaching. Jews ask for signs, and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, which is a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those who are called—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God's power and God's wisdom.

Observation

The apostle Paul knew his central message was "foolish" to some and "scandal" to others. He knew no PR person or mythmaker would try to impress Greeks, Romans, or Hebrews with a crucified savior. Yet he preached Christ crucified as a life-changing physical and spiritual fact with utter conviction. He relied on God's power, not sheer human logic, to change people's lives and thinking. He trusted that God's wisdom and strength were greater than this world's and found that they were.

Application

Paul knew his message was "foolishness" to the Greeks and "scandal" to the Jews (verse 23). Just telling the story seemed to invite people to mock. The message sounded "weak," yet it carried God's power. Verse 18 stated Paul's conclusion: God's weakness is greater than human strength; God's foolishness is greater than human wisdom. In what part(s) of your life today do you need to trust that God's saving wisdom is wiser than any other kind of wisdom you might rely on?

Prayer

Dear God, I am grateful that your strength and wisdom are greater than the world's! I need that—I can't save myself. Help me to trust and depend on you for what I need most. Amen.

Wednesday, January 10

Scripture: Mark 9:14-27

When Jesus, Peter, James, and John approached the other disciples, they saw a large crowd surrounding them and legal experts arguing with them. Suddenly the whole crowd caught sight of Jesus. They ran to greet him, overcome with excitement. Jesus asked them, "What are you arguing about?" Someone from the crowd responded, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, since he has a spirit that doesn't allow him to speak. Wherever it overpowers him, it throws him into a fit. He foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and stiffens up. So I spoke to your disciples to see if they could throw it out, but they couldn't." Jesus answered them, "You faithless generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I put up with you? Bring him to me." They brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a fit. He fell on the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been going on?" He said, "Since he was a child. It has often thrown him into a fire or into water trying to kill him. If you can do anything, help us! Show us compassion!" Jesus said to him, "'If you can do anything'? All things are possible for the one who has faith." At that the boy's father cried out, "I have faith; help my lack of faith!" Noticing that the crowd had surged together, Jesus spoke harshly to the unclean spirit, "Mute and deaf spirit, I command you to come out of him and never enter him again." After screaming and shaking the boy horribly, the spirit came out. The boy seemed to be dead; in fact, several people said that he had died. But Jesus took his hand, lifted him up, and he arose.

Observation

In Jesus' day, most of today's medical and psychological insights didn't exist. People called nearly all inexplicable ills, like the probable case of epilepsy reported in today's reading, "demon possession." The father's plea in verse 24 feels familiar to most Christ-followers at times. He sounded like Donald Miller's friend in the book *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality*, who said, "There is this part of me that wants to believe.... I feel as though I need to believe.... But it is all so completely stupid."

Application

Scholar N. T. Wright said Jesus came to rescue people "from the destructive forces that enslaved them. So, whether it was shrieking demons, a woman with a fever, or simply whatever diseases people happened to suffer from, Jesus dealt with them all... Jesus had joined in a struggle against the forces of evil." Are you ever tempted to shrug off the forces that cause suffering as just "the way things are"? In what ways have you (or will you) joined in Jesus' struggle against those forces?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you did not stay comfortable and safe while destructive forces were loose in your world. Give me the caring and courage to enlist, working with you to help all those who are hurt. Amen.

Thursday, January 11

Scripture: Jude 1:20-22

But you, dear friends: build each other up on the foundation of your most holy faith, pray in the Holy Spirit, keep each other in the love of God, wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will give you eternal life. Have mercy on those who doubt.

Observation

We seldom read the little one-chapter letter of Jude. Most scholars are virtually certain the writer was the “Judas” named as one of Jesus’ brothers in Mark 6:3 and Matthew 13:55. In the letter he called himself “brother of James,” Jesus’ brother who led the Jerusalem church. His letter mainly warned against false teachers, but in verse 22 he carefully distinguished the false teachers from those who had questions or doubts due to the influence of those who held erroneous beliefs.

Application

Jude’s and Jesus’ better-known brother, James wrote about the need for belief to go beyond intellectual assent and become life-shaping faith (James 2:18-20). That’s why facing doubts honestly is so vital. If we hide them, they can get us stuck in our head without ever involving our heart and hands. What helps you move from the intellectual aspect of most doubts to a level of trust that shapes your whole life while you keep wrestling with the mysteries of God?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I take comfort from the mercy you showed the father who wasn’t sure you could help his son, and Thomas who resisted believing you’d risen. Thank you for showing me mercy when I struggle with doubt. Amen.

Friday, January 12

Scripture: Romans 8:22-25

We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it’s not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn’t hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don’t see, we wait for it with patience.

Observation

The apostle Paul faced many tests of his faith (2 Corinthians 11:22-28). Today’s passage showed that he had moments of doubt as the apparently indestructible Roman Empire opposed the message of Jesus. Clearly, he couldn’t “see” the Roman emperor accepting Christianity 300 years later, much less today when over 1 billion people identify in some way as Christian. But he chose to live “with patience” in his hope for God’s invisible better world that he (and we) cannot yet see fully realized.

Application

What was the favorite gift you received this Christmas? Would you tell anyone you're still hoping for that gift you received? Of course not—you have it. In a much bigger way, that was what Paul meant when he asked, "Who hopes for what they already see?" But there is still brokenness and pain in our world. What helps you, like Paul, to anchor your spiritual hope in God, and live with patience and trust for God's full restoration of our broken world to its intended wholeness?

Prayer

Loving Lord, I want to trust you. I need to live in your hope. Go with me into this new year, that I may face none of its days entirely in my own strength. Amen.

Saturday, January 13

Scripture: Matthew 3:17, 4:1-11

A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him."

Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread." Jesus replied, "It's written, *People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God.*" After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, *I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone.*" Jesus replied, "Again it's written, *Don't test the Lord your God.*" Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me." Jesus responded, "Go away, Satan, because it's written, *You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*" The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

Observation

The letter to the Hebrews said Jesus "was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). The temptations Matthew (and Luke 4:1-13) reported involved doubt about whether he really was God's beloved son, and if so, what that meant. Could/should he use his powers for his own benefit or stay on a path of service and self-giving? The temptations tugged Jesus to do things that would make his life easier by matching popular hopes about what the Messiah would do. Jesus, loyal to God's way, didn't "play to the crowd," even though that deprived him of applause that might help push away questions or doubts about whether this was truly what God's Son should be doing. Nor should we think this was a one-time test. Luke ended his account by saying, "The devil departed from him *until the next opportunity*" (Luke 4:13). With Scripture's principles

shaping his response, Jesus overcame the questions and doubts that might have derailed his ministry.

Application

You never have to choose not to turn stones to bread or avoid throwing yourself off the highest point of Messiah Church. How are you tempted to use your unique abilities solely for your own benefit, instead of building God's kingdom by blessing others? How successful are you at resisting temptation and self-doubt? If you don't like your answer, know that facing inner struggles head-on can defuse them. Ask a gifted counselor or pastor for help. Scholar and pastor N. T. Wright said of the temptations we all face, "They are not simply trying to entice us into committing this or that sin. They are trying to distract us, to turn us aside, from the path of servanthood to which our baptism has commissioned us....as God's children, we are entitled to use the same defense as the son of God himself. Store scripture in your heart and know how to use it." How do you intend to deepen your inner supply of biblical understanding in 2024?

Prayer

Jesus, son of God, I face temptations every day. Plant the principles of your word firmly in my heart, that, like you, I might stay on God's path and resist the lure of going my own way. Amen.