

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of July 14, 2024

Weekly Prayer

Gracious God, you welcome me, joyfully, into Your presence. Make me to recognize and celebrate your goodness and grace present in my life, and may my words and actions be shaped by your love. Amen.

Monday, July 15

Scripture: Ezekiel 34:1-10

The LORD's word came to me: Human one, prophesy against Israel's shepherds. Prophesy and say to them, The LORD God proclaims to the shepherds: Doom to Israel's shepherds who tended themselves! Shouldn't shepherds tend the flock? You drink the milk, you wear the wool, and you slaughter the fat animals, but you don't tend the flock. You don't strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strays, or seek out the lost; but instead you use force to rule them with injustice. Without a shepherd, my flock was scattered; and when it was scattered, it became food for all the wild animals. My flock strayed on all the mountains and on every high hill throughout all the earth. My flock was scattered, and there was no one to look for them or find them. So now shepherds, hear the LORD's word! This is what the LORD God says: As surely as I live, without a shepherd, my flock became prey. My flock became food for all the wild animals. My shepherds didn't seek out my flock. They tended themselves, but they didn't tend my flock. So, shepherds, hear the LORD's word! The LORD God proclaims: I'm against the shepherds! I will hold them accountable for my flock, and I will put an end to their tending the flock. The shepherds will no longer tend them, because I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and they will no longer be their food.

Observation

God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel to warn Israel that their leaders had failed, and they had become a self-absorbed people, indifferent to the pains of their people. In this passage, we hear God compare Godself to a shepherd who cares for their flock. But these words go beyond simply caring and protecting; they make clear that we're to care for the sick, the lost, the disenfranchised. Just as God cares for us in this way, so too are we meant to care for one another.

Application

The warning given to the people Israel mirrored the warning Jesus gave people during his time and remains a challenge for us as well. How might God be calling you to care more deeply for others? How might God's mercy and love be made known through you?

Prayer

Great Shepherd, you have promised to care for me and guide me. But you've also called me to care for others in the same way. Forgive me for the times when I have failed or been too self-absorbed to notice the needs of those around me. Renew your Spirit within me, and set me again on the path of justice, mercy, and grace. Amen.

Tuesday, July 16

Scripture: Luke 15:1-2

All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Observation

The Pharisees grumbled, saying “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (v2) They believed God looked down upon “those people” who didn’t act just right, and thought the “righteous” thing was to snub them. But Jesus called them to live another way. He acted as though God deeply loved *all* people and called us to behave the same.

Application

Reflecting on your early years, what did you learn about God? Was it a God (or church) that agreed more with the Pharisees or with Jesus? When you give an honest reflection on your behaviors and actions today, with whom do you align? Jesus teaches us that the kingdom of God is for all people, and that to experience the fullness of God’s love, we must be a people who work for justice, act with mercy, and care for the disenfranchised and marginalized among us. In what ways do you actively support and work for justice today?

Prayer

Jesus, thank you for those who’ve planted the seed of your kingdom in my life. Teach me how to discern when to speak, and when to silently let your love shine through me to others. Amen.

Wednesday, July 17

Scripture: Luke 15:3-7

Jesus told them this parable: “Suppose someone among you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them. Wouldn’t he leave the other ninety-nine in the pasture and search for the lost one until he finds it? And when he finds it, he is thrilled and places it on his shoulders. When he arrives home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Celebrate with me because I’ve found my lost sheep.’ In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives.

Observation

Jesus told three stories to the Pharisees and legal experts who grumbled about him mingling with “tax collectors and sinners.” Probably echoing the image from Ezekiel 34, the first story was about a shepherd who lost one sheep from his flock. This shepherd, though, was not at all indifferent to the loss. He dropped everything, searched everywhere until he found the lost sheep—and then threw a party to celebrate finding it.

Application

I heard once that sheep can “nibble their way into lostness.” They move from one tuft of grass to another, sometimes continuing so far that they’ve lost their way. Do you know what it is to “nibble yourself to lostness”? When have you felt like the sheep, unsure how to find your way home? What has God used to find and bring you home?

Prayer

O Jesus, thank you for seeking and finding me, and for rejoicing once you do. Give me eyes to see others who want to be found and drawn into your great heart of steadfast love. Amen,

Thursday, July 18

Scripture: Luke 15:8-10

“Or what woman, if she owns ten silver coins and loses one of them, won’t light a lamp and sweep the house, searching her home carefully until she finds it? When she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Celebrate with me because I’ve found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, joy breaks out in the presence of God’s angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life.”

Observation

Immediately after the story of the lost sheep, Jesus tells another -- this time, the story of a woman with a lost coin. Her coins were probably worth about a day’s wages. In her dimly lit home, she looked tirelessly for that lost coin. Again, Jesus reminds us that “In the same way, I tell you, joy breaks out in the presence of God’s angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life.” (v10).

Application

Who are your “coins,” the people you value enough to go out of your way to reach out and touch? Is there someone in life you particularly sense Jesus calling you to “seek and find”? Ask God to give you a heart that sees the world as God does, that refuses a limited love.

Prayer

Gracious God, you came in the person of Jesus to seek and save the lost. Continue your redeeming work within me: forgiving, calling, and sustaining me by your love. Amen.

Friday, July 19

Scripture: Ezekiel 34:11-16

The LORD God proclaims: I myself will search for my flock and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out the flock when some in the flock have been scattered, so will I seek out my flock. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered during the time of clouds and thick darkness. I will gather and lead them out from the countries and peoples, and I will bring them to their own fertile land. I will feed them on Israel’s highlands, along the riverbeds, and in all the inhabited places. I will feed them in good pasture, and their sheepfold will be there, on Israel’s lofty highlands. On Israel’s highlands, they will lie down in a secure fold and feed on green pastures. I myself will feed my flock and make them lie down. This is what the LORD God says. I will seek out the lost, bring back the strays, bind up the wounded, and strengthen the weak. But the fat and the strong I will destroy, because I will tend my sheep with justice.

Observation

Ezekiel portrayed God as a good shepherd who would “seek out the lost, bring back the strays, bind up the wounded, and strengthen the weak.” John’s gospel completed the circle, saying that God came to earth in the person of Jesus, reached out to the lost and the strays, bound up our wounds and took special interest in the weak. He was the Good Shepherd, and in the end, he did indeed give up his life for the sheep—us.

Application

Think once more about the stories Jesus told—the shepherd seeking the lost sheep and the woman searching for her lost coin. In what ways can these stories deepen and enrich your understanding of how much God loves you? Had you ever pictured that every time you move closer to God, joy breaks out in heaven—that you are that important to God?

Prayer

God, your love is great! Thank you for giving your life for me. I open my heart to you. Transform my inner life, broaden my horizons, and shine out of me as I enter into your joy. Amen.

Saturday, July 20**Scripture: John 10:1-11**

I assure you that whoever doesn't enter into the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw. The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The guard at the gate opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. Whenever he has gathered all of his sheep, he goes before them and they follow him, because they know his voice. They won't follow a stranger but will run away because they don't know the stranger's voice." Those who heard Jesus use this analogy didn't understand what he was saying.

So Jesus spoke again, "I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Observation

Here we read of Jesus commissioning 72 people, sending them out in pairs to various cities where Jesus would soon go. They went, knowing Christ's commitment to share the reckless love of God with all people. It is a noble and important calling to be ones whom Christ uses to share and proclaim God's love.

Application

Jesus instructs them to enter the city, heal the sick, and say, "God's kingdom has come upon you." How is Jesus sending you out – into the city, your work, school, or neighborhood? How is God calling you to proclaim the kingdom of God among us?

Prayer

God of love, God of life, guide me today that my words, actions, and behaviors align with your desire to love all people and build your kingdom here. Give me confidence and joy as I share your love. Amen.