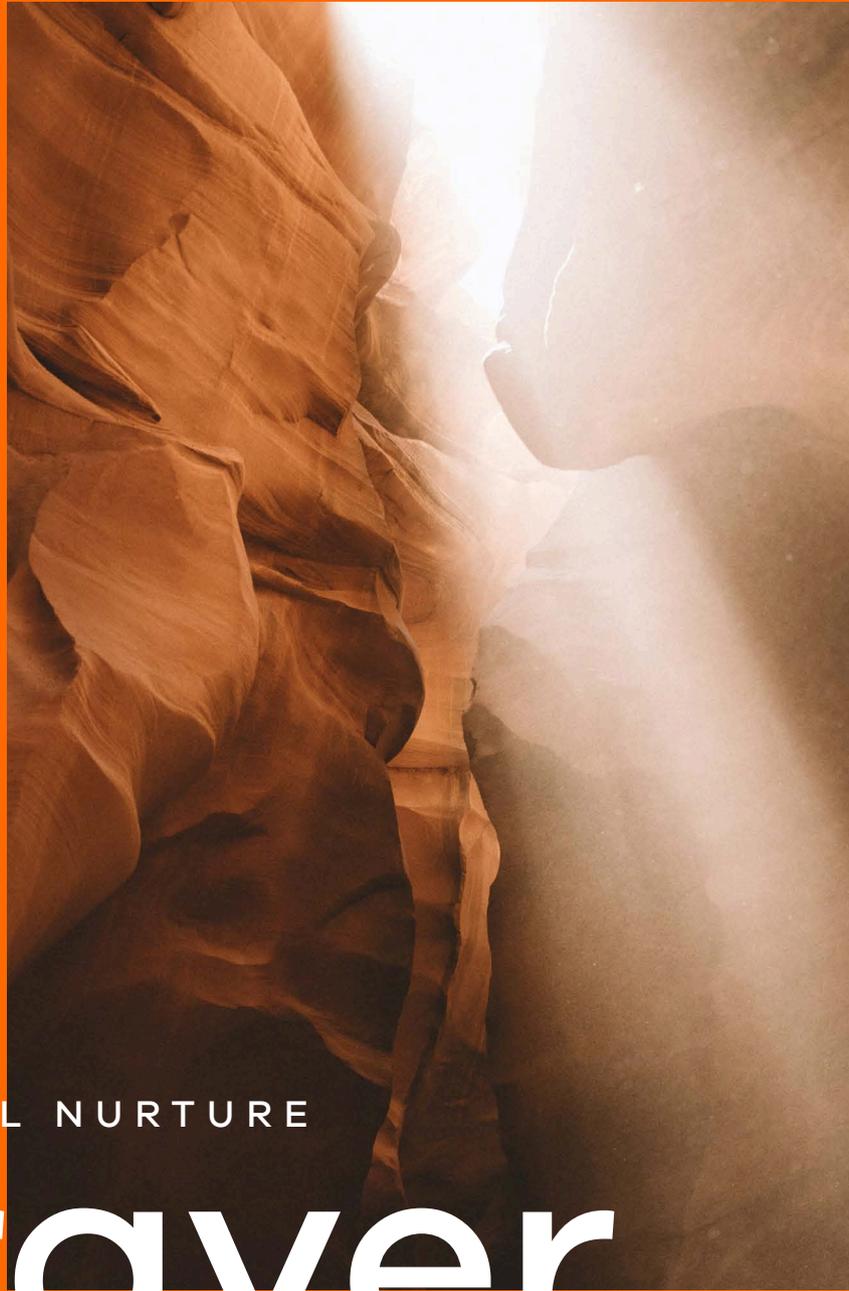


# Manna

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SPIRITUAL NURTURE

# Prayer

PART ONE OF TWO

# SPIRITUAL GROWTH THROUGH PRAYER

Shawn Chou—San Jose, California, USA

In this fast-paced era, our lives have become busier due to increasing family and work obligations and many other factors. We may come to unconsciously regard prayer as optional or secondary even though we know it is fundamental in helping our spiritual growth. Indeed, maintaining a daily prayer routine is essential for nurturing our faith.

The pace of life and stress can affect a person's faith. However, we should look to the Lord Jesus as our example. During His strenuous three-year preaching journey, His determination to pray never changed. Why did His mindset towards prayer remain unaltered despite His busy schedule and the problems He encountered in His ministry? This is a question we should ponder deeply. In fact, God has long indicated the path of life for us. Through prayer, we come to trust in Him, experience joy that satisfies, and enjoy the blessings He wants to give us (Ps 16:11). In prayer, our minds can be opened to understand many spiritual mysteries and God's word (Ps 119:18). These are key factors for our spiritual growth, enabling us to gain spiritual wisdom (Jas 1:5).

We often do not obtain God's blessings because we neglect prayer (Jas 4:2). Anxiety and burdens arise from not spending enough time in daily prayer (Phil 4:6–7; Mt 11:28). This lack of nurturing leads to a regression in our faith. Hence, we should consider allocating our time wisely amidst our busy lives rather than reducing our

spiritual practice when our time and energy feel limited. With a change in our faith mindset, our lifestyle will naturally adjust and gradually return to being God-centered.

Though we understand the necessity of daily prayer, we may not see the need for prolonged prayers. However, prayer can be considered a spiritual battle. Paul describes Epaphras as "struggling" in his prayers on behalf of the Colossian members, that they "may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God" (Col 4:12, ESV)<sup>1</sup>. The original Greek for "struggling" (ἀγωνιζόμενος) has connotations of wrestling and fighting with an enemy. Persistent and lengthy prayer is crucial for believers to overcome their spiritual enemies. Indeed, our prayer serves as a weapon of victory in the battle of faith.

These are only a few aspects of how integral prayer is to our spiritual growth. Many more are explored in the following pages.

So, let us kneel, bow our heads, and open our hearts as often as we can. Let our prayers rise like incense without ceasing or compromise, to nurture our faith and lift our hopes and longings to the heavens above.

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<sup>1</sup>The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

# CONTENTS

02

## Theme

02

Power from the Holy Spirit  
KC Tsai, Canada

06

Spiritual Health: The Role of Prayer  
Daniel Liew, UK

12

Prayer: Build Up and Be Fruitful  
Vincent Yeung, UK

16

An Unanswered Prayer  
Chang Wei Lin, Taiwan

19

Spiritual Power from Prayer (Part 1)  
Timothy Yeung, Canada

22

Lessons in Effective Prayer  
Raymond Chou, USA

40

## Christian Living Columns

40

Youth: Vessels for God's Work: Post-Pandemic Reflections on Serving God  
Elgin and Aberdeen Youths, UK

44

Family: A Blessed Family  
KC Tsai, Canada

48

## Articles of Faith

49

## Call for Articles

26

## Bible Study

26

Cities of Refuge  
KC Tsai, Canada

32

## Exhortation

32

A More Abundant Life (Part 2):  
Direction and Richness  
Raymond Chou, USA

36

## Testimony

36

We Thought We Were  
Just Passing By  
Yi Lin Wu, Taiwan

# POWER FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT

KC Tsai—Toronto, Canada

Knowledge that enables us to discern the truth is vital to our survival in the end time. The Bible repeatedly warns us that believers of the Lord Jesus will be confronted by falsehood, deception, and teachings that deviate from the truth. Some will be led astray.

*And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. (Mt 24:10-11)*

*The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie. (2 Thess 2:9-12)*

*Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. (1 Jn 2:18-21)*



The passages above, and many others in the Bible, foretell the challenges coming our way. As the Lord Jesus warns, we must take heed not to be deceived; many will come in His name, saying, "I am the Christ," to draw believers away (Mt 24:4-5).

Therefore, it is vital to pray for the wisdom

to identify any deceiving words that could harm our faith. The only way to avoid being fooled by such falsehood is to steadfastly study the Bible in depth, continually praying for the Holy Spirit's guidance to uphold the truth.

## THE PURPOSE OF THE FATHER'S PROMISE

Before His ascension, Jesus commanded the disciples

*...not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, "which," He said, "you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (Acts 1:4-5)*

First, why did they have to remain in Jerusalem?

Apart from Judas Iscariot, who betrayed the Lord Jesus, all the disciples were Galileans. After witnessing the ascension of the Lord Jesus at Mount Olivet, not far from Jerusalem, they would likely have scattered, each returning to his trade in Galilee. Now, because the Holy Spirit would descend at the place of God's choosing, Jerusalem, Jesus commanded them to gather there and wait. After all, Pentecost was at hand, and there would be tens of thousands of pilgrims in Jerusalem to celebrate the festival. Many of these would

later go back home, bearing witness to the downpouring of the Holy Spirit.

## **WHY SHOULD THEY WAIT FOR THE DOWNPOUR OF THE HOLY SPIRIT?**

Jesus continued to say, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The things He wanted them to do would have been too heavy to carry out if not by the power of the Holy Spirit. Hence, they had to wait. But what was the significance of being witnesses to the Lord? And what power would they receive after the Holy Spirit had descended upon them? Was it merely the power to cast out demons and heal the sick?

"The power they would receive was not so much about miracles, though they would indeed perform miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit later"

When Jesus was preaching the gospel, saying the kingdom of heaven was at hand, He bestowed on the disciples the authority to cast out demons and heal (Mt 10:1; Lk 10:17-20). This was before they received the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the power they would receive was not so much about miracles, though they would indeed perform miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit later. There was much more to it.

The children of Israel inherited the covenant God had established with Abraham and the blessings it entailed. Through Moses, God gave them His laws, which enabled them to be a people dwelling alone, not reckoning themselves among the nations (Num 23:9). This inevitably built a middle wall of separation between the chosen people and the uncircumcised Gentiles, forbidding the former from mingling with other peoples. When Cornelius, a Gentile, received Peter, the latter said, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (Acts 10:28).

Following the will of the Father, Jesus tore

down that separating wall and abolished the enmity by sacrificing Himself and shedding His blood (Eph 2:14). He created one new man from the two in Himself, thus making peace. Yet, the Jewish people still lived according to the Old Testament, confined by the ordinances of Mosaic Law and tradition. Learning from their ancestors' failure in faith, they had dug an uncrossable chasm between themselves and the outside world. Hence, the Lord Jesus instructed them to wait for the Holy Spirit since He would lead them through the barriers of the Jewish community to reach out to all nations.

## THE SPIRIT WILL DECLARE WHAT WAS WITHHELD

So, was the downpour of the Holy Spirit just to bring about the power to perform miracles and gospel outreach? After He washed the disciples' feet, the Lord Jesus bade farewell to His disciples and comforted them. Within His words of encouragement, He said:

"Before the disciples received the Holy Spirit, they could not bear the many things Jesus had to say to them"

*"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not*

*speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you."* (Jn 16:12-15)

What were the things Jesus wanted to say to His disciples but withheld at the time? Did He eventually divulge these? If so, how?

Before the disciples received the Holy Spirit, they could not bear the many things Jesus had to say to them. So, they had to wait for the Holy Spirit to speak to them about these things on behalf of the Lord Jesus. As Jesus said, "He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you."



Before departing to Gethsemane with the disciples, Jesus lifted His eyes to heaven and prayed, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (Jn 17:17). From this saying, we know the Father's word is truth. Previously, Jesus also said:

*"Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works."* (Jn 14:10)

Therefore, the word of Jesus is truth. The power the disciples would receive when the Holy Spirit came upon them enabled them to witness the truth. The Holy Spirit would give them an understanding of the truth and guide them to walk in the truth. Jesus sanctified these disciples, and He will sanctify those who believe in Him through the disciples' words, thereby making them one. It follows, then, that the true church must adhere to the teachings of the apostles.

After receiving the Holy Spirit, Peter stood before the multitude and declared:

*"Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."* (Acts 2:38-39)

Peter did not speak this statement of truth on his own. It is a precious salvation truth declared by the Holy Spirit.

Peter addressed this promise "to you and to your children," meaning all Jewish people from that point onward. But he also included, "all who are afar off, as many as

the Lord our God will call”—people outside the Jewish realm! Peter did not personally understand this part of the truth at the time he spoke. When he later came to the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion and Gentile, he said:

*“You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?”* (Acts 10:28–29)

“Not until he witnessed the pouring down of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius’ household did he realize that salvation is also for the Gentiles”

“For what reason have you sent for me?” Peter was unprepared. He did not know why this Gentile man had invited him to his house. He did not intend to preach the gospel here! In his mind, the Gentiles were outsiders to the grace of salvation. Not until he witnessed the pouring down of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius’ household did he realize that salvation is also for the Gentiles. The Holy Spirit caused him to understand that he had to baptize these Gentile people in the name of the Lord Jesus so their sins could be cleansed. The Holy Spirit revealed the truth that salvation is for all nations.

The Holy Spirit continued to guide the church to understand this truth. During the Jerusalem Council, He led the apostles and elders into the truth that Gentile believers were not required to be circumcised after baptism. They did not have to carry out the ordinances and judgments of Moses’ Law. Indeed, the Holy Spirit delivered the truth of the faith to them, once for all (Jude 3).

“Once for all” indicates that there will be no addition or subtraction made to the salvation truth the saints received in apostolic times. Our faith must be according to this complete truth. The Holy Spirit guided the apostles into all truth. Today, the latter rain of the Holy Spirit also leads the true church of the end time into the truth entrusted to the apostles. This is

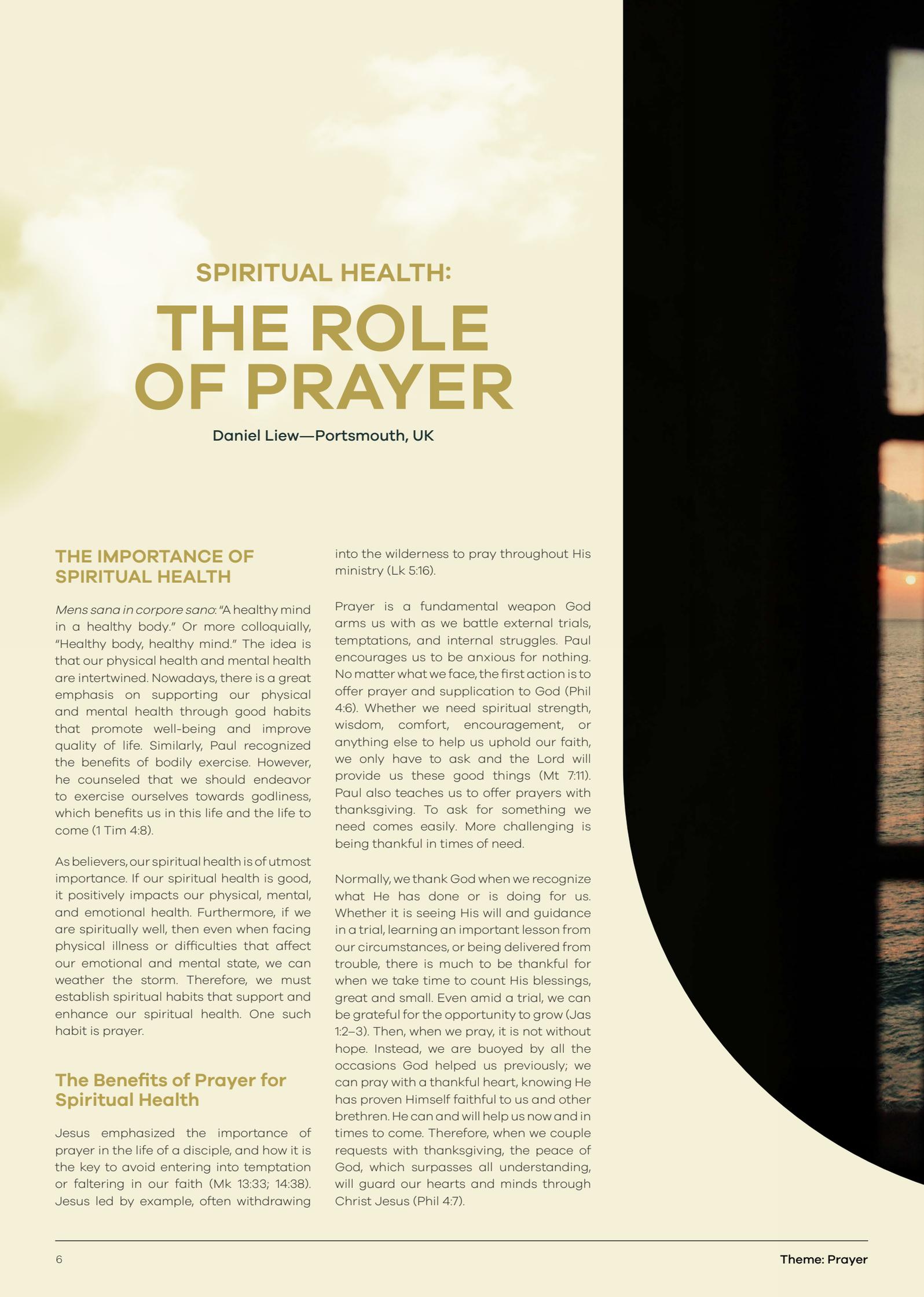


the place the Holy Spirit chooses to dwell (Eph 2:19–22).

## PRAY FOR THE SPIRIT’S DIRECTION

The Holy Spirit empowers us to perform miracles, preach the gospel, and understand God’s complete salvation truth, among other things. This is why we must pray for and receive the Holy Spirit before we devote ourselves to serving the Lord. We need His guidance; otherwise, we will walk our own way. On Paul’s second missionary trip, he and his company were vigilant enough to notice that the Holy Spirit forbade them from preaching the word in Asia as they intended. After they had come to Mysia, they realized the Spirit did not permit them to go into Bithynia. So, they went down to Troas, and a vision appeared to Paul in the night, directing them to Europe (Acts 16:6–10).

The power of the Holy Spirit allows us to walk on the right path, according to the truth. Sometimes our plans must be redefined to align with the Holy Spirit’s. True submission to His guidance will keep us from going astray. This vigilant search for the will of the Holy Spirit is of utmost importance and should always be in our prayers.



## SPIRITUAL HEALTH:

# THE ROLE OF PRAYER

Daniel Liew—Portsmouth, UK

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUAL HEALTH

*Mens sana in corpore sano.* “A healthy mind in a healthy body.” Or more colloquially, “Healthy body, healthy mind.” The idea is that our physical health and mental health are intertwined. Nowadays, there is a great emphasis on supporting our physical and mental health through good habits that promote well-being and improve quality of life. Similarly, Paul recognized the benefits of bodily exercise. However, he counseled that we should endeavor to exercise ourselves towards godliness, which benefits us in this life and the life to come (1 Tim 4:8).

As believers, our spiritual health is of utmost importance. If our spiritual health is good, it positively impacts our physical, mental, and emotional health. Furthermore, if we are spiritually well, then even when facing physical illness or difficulties that affect our emotional and mental state, we can weather the storm. Therefore, we must establish spiritual habits that support and enhance our spiritual health. One such habit is prayer.

### The Benefits of Prayer for Spiritual Health

Jesus emphasized the importance of prayer in the life of a disciple, and how it is the key to avoid entering into temptation or faltering in our faith (Mk 13:33; 14:38). Jesus led by example, often withdrawing

into the wilderness to pray throughout His ministry (Lk 5:16).

Prayer is a fundamental weapon God arms us with as we battle external trials, temptations, and internal struggles. Paul encourages us to be anxious for nothing. No matter what we face, the first action is to offer prayer and supplication to God (Phil 4:6). Whether we need spiritual strength, wisdom, comfort, encouragement, or anything else to help us uphold our faith, we only have to ask and the Lord will provide us these good things (Mt 7:11). Paul also teaches us to offer prayers with thanksgiving. To ask for something we need comes easily. More challenging is being thankful in times of need.

Normally, we thank God when we recognize what He has done or is doing for us. Whether it is seeing His will and guidance in a trial, learning an important lesson from our circumstances, or being delivered from trouble, there is much to be thankful for when we take time to count His blessings, great and small. Even amid a trial, we can be grateful for the opportunity to grow (Jas 1:2–3). Then, when we pray, it is not without hope. Instead, we are buoyed by all the occasions God helped us previously; we can pray with a thankful heart, knowing He has proven Himself faithful to us and other brethren. He can and will help us now and in times to come. Therefore, when we couple requests with thanksgiving, the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (Phil 4:7).



## ESTABLISHING A LIFE OF PRAYER

Having considered some of the benefits of prayer, we know we must strive to establish a life of prayer. It only takes one prayer to start a prayer habit, but maintaining a regular habit is fundamental to establishing a life of prayer. Without consistency, we will have multiple “false starts” and fail to make prayer a natural part of our lives.

“When I moved away to university, I had to take responsibility for my own prayer life”

Thank God, my parents established a regular family altar when I was young. They set the time and led the way. However, when I moved away to university, I had to take responsibility for my own prayer life. I resolved to pray first thing in the morning and last thing at night. The question was how long my prayer should be. When praying with others, we can unconsciously pray longer, spurred on by the other voices lifted in prayer. However, praying alone can feel difficult. I decided to set a timer: three minutes. It seems almost laughable now, but this felt like an immense task to someone without an independent prayer habit. These days, a three-minute video on social media can seem relatively quick—we barely pause before scrolling to another. In contrast, the first few prayers felt like an eternity. I kept checking the timer to ensure I had set it or to see how much time had elapsed. I was easily distracted by the sound of people passing by my dormitory room, afraid that someone might knock on my door to ask what I was doing—upon reflection, an unlikely scenario. Not being fully engaged made praying harder. But I struggled through the first few days, persevering for the sake of my spiritual health. Over the next couple of weeks, I got into a routine, and prayer became a more normal part of my life.

Looking back, God helped me realize a few things:

**1. If we perceive something as difficult or burdensome, we naturally become disinclined to do it.**

When we feel this way, even the shortest time spent on the task can seem challenging. However, adjusting our mentality and viewing it more positively helps it to become as natural as breathing.

## 2. The more we focus on the time when praying, the slower time passes.

This is not the manifestation of a superpower but rather a human weakness. The idiom “a watched pot never boils,” or in this case, “a watched timer never goes off,” sums it up. In contrast, the time flies by when we focus on drawing nearer to God and the subject of our prayer.

## 3. We need to focus on the bigger picture.

It is unnecessary to berate ourselves if we miss a prayer or feel guilty if we cannot pray for as long as we would like. Life can be hectic, so at times we may offer a quick prayer before we set about the day's

business, or only have the energy to say a brief prayer before bed. This should be the exception and not the norm. The point is to make prayer an integral part of our life.

Looking back, I see how God encouraged me as I started my life of prayer. A couple of weeks in, I attended an evening service, and during the concluding prayer, I was suddenly filled with the Spirit. I felt a firm yet gentle force bringing my hands up to clap and praise the Lord. I had never experienced anything like this before, and I wondered why this had happened. Then I realized it was a signpost that said, “Keep going this way.” Establishing a prayer habit was the right thing to do. Thank God for His love and encouragement! God sees and knows when we are striving to grow in our faith, and He is willing to support us every step of the way!

## Daniel's Example

Daniel left behind a good example for us to learn from:

*Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days. (Dan 6:10)*

### 1. He set a time to pray.

Daniel prayed three times that day, as was his custom since the early days. Whether “early days” refers to his pre-exile childhood or the start of his captivity is unclear. However, it is clear that it was a well-established habit from young, maintained throughout his life. Three times a day could have been evening, morning, and noon (Ps 55:17). That is not to say we must rigidly follow Daniel's schedule. Some pray in the morning and at night, while others pick one or the other. Some may even pray more than three times a day. The principle is that we should make time to pray. The frequency and length of our prayers are parameters we decide for ourselves. We know our routine, the best time to pray,



and how long we can pray. Establishing such a routine may even involve changing our lifestyle to accommodate slots for prayers. It may mean waking up a little earlier or being more organized to save time and make time to pray. It may mean less screen time—be it phone scrolling, streaming platforms, or gaming—so we can have more “face time” with God.

### 2. He set a place to pray.

Daniel went to the privacy of his upper room, where he would be undisturbed, able to focus, and free to pray for as long as he wished. Jesus taught us to go into our room and shut the door when we pray to our Father (Mt 6:6). The private space indicated here was “a room in the interior of a house, normally without windows opening to the outside.”<sup>1</sup> While we may not be able to follow this literally, the principle is that we must pick an environment conducive for prayer. If we pray in a distracting environment or allow our mind to wander, we cannot reap the benefits of setting aside time to pray.

### 3. He set a direction to pray.

Daniel prayed towards Jerusalem through the open windows in his upper room. This was likely by design, not coincidence. When King Solomon dedicated the temple, he prayed that if God’s people sinned and were delivered into exile, and when the people realized their sin, repented, and prayed towards the promised land, Jerusalem, and the temple, God would hear their prayers and forgive the people (1 Kgs 8:46–53). Daniel evidently had a direction in his prayer. Perhaps he prayed for himself or for God’s people to receive God’s mercy and deliverance. In any case, he had various matters to pray for, just as we do. We need to be clear who or what we are praying for. Ultimately, we pray for God’s will to be realized in our lives.

This depiction of Daniel’s life of prayer was against the backdrop of a decree that no one should petition any god or man, other than the king, within thirty days. Anyone found guilty of this crime would be cast into the lion’s den. Daniel knew this decree tested his faith and obedience to God. However, he did not give up his habit but continued to trust in God through prayer. In fact, his prayerful nature and faithfulness to God were why he was delivered from the lions’ mouths. His example is one of many showing that

prayer is the key to forging a way onward with God’s help.

## PRAYER AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Spiritual growth is the aim of spiritual cultivation and cannot be achieved without prayer.

*Show me Your ways, O LORD;  
Teach me Your paths.  
Lead me in Your truth and teach me,  
For You are the God of my salvation;  
On You I wait all the day.* (Ps 25:4–5)

We desire for the Lord to teach us and



lead us on His paths so we can receive His salvation. Part of how God saves us is through the renewing of the Holy Spirit (Tit 3:5). Jesus teaches us to pray for the Helper, the Holy Spirit, who will guide us into all truth, teaching and helping us to remember God’s word to aid our spiritual growth (Jn 16:13; 14:26). Prayer is how we become filled with the Spirit, who strengthens and renews us to be more spiritually minded. The more time we spend with God, the closer we draw to Him and the more sensitive we become to His words and His will.

As we seek to put God’s word into practice and align ourselves with His will, we will invariably encounter external and internal challenges. Sometimes, we are plagued

with doubts over whether we can change, grow spiritually, or overcome obstacles on the way to heaven; such doubts weaken our resolve. Prayer enables us to put those fears to rest and gain strength to carry on. When Paul was undergoing tribulations in the ministry, he knew the believers might lose heart to keep progressing in their faith. So he prayed that they would “be strengthened with might through the Spirit in the inner man” (Eph 3:16). The “inner man” could refer to the heart or the spiritual self, but the sentiment is clear: we need the Holy Spirit’s help to strengthen our resolve. As we continue in our prayer life, God’s love is poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). Being filled and moved by His love, we become more confident in the heavenly hope we have been given. It becomes an anchor. Being filled with the Spirit confirms that Jesus wants to save us and bring us to our heavenly home. This motivates and strengthens us to draw closer to God and obey His words.

“He is the victor leading us to victory over sin and doubt, and the path is paved with prayer”

It can be discouraging when we are overcome by our weaknesses. But, again, prayer is the answer:

*For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* (Heb 4:15–16)

Jesus knows and understands our weaknesses and faith struggles. He manifested in the flesh and faced the same kinds of temptations we do. The only difference is that He was without sin, which is why He is best placed to support us. He is the victor leading us to victory over sin and doubt, and the path to victory is paved with prayer. So, we must come before the throne of grace to obtain mercy and grace to help us in our time of need.

After we receive the Holy Spirit, the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses (Rom 8:26). Even when we do not know what we need, the Spirit intercedes according to the will of God for us (Rom 8:27). As we pray in tongues, we speak mysteries relating to the things of God and His kingdom (Mt 13:11), which in turn edify us (1 Cor 14:4). This is part of the renewal process of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit brings God’s word to our mind and teaches us what to do.

<sup>1</sup> JP Louw, and EA Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains, Volume 1* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 84.

# FASTING PRAYERS



## WHAT?

When pursuing spiritual growth, it is sometimes beneficial to engage in fasting prayers, which allow us to humble or afflict ourselves before God, prioritizing our relationship with Him over physical sustenance. We can fast and pray when we need spiritual power and guidance to overcome a great difficulty or to show remorse when repenting and seeking forgiveness. We can also fast and pray to understand God's words better or receive spiritual strength and wisdom to serve the Lord (Mt 17:21).



## METHOD

The primary fasting method is to abstain from food or drink for a pre-determined period and dedicate that extra time and focus to prayer.



## THE BIBLE DEPICTS TWO "LEVELS" OF FASTING

### 1. FULL FASTING: No food and drink for a period (Est 4:16)

Rinsing the mouth with water or taking little sips may be permissible for longer durations, but not to fill the stomach with water.

### 2. SEMI-FASTING: Simple food and drink for a period (Dan 10:2-3)

This is to deprive ourselves of pleasure and enjoyment to engage in a more ascetic (i.e., more disciplined, less indulgent) lifestyle for spiritual cultivation.



**WHATEVER LEVEL OF RESTRICTION WE SELF-IMPOSE, THE ULTIMATE AIM IS TO PRAY AND SPEND MORE TIME WITH GOD**

# NO MATTER WHO OR WHAT WE FAST AND PRAY FOR, THERE ARE A FEW PRINCIPLES WE SHOULD BEAR IN MIND:



## ALWAYS FAST FOR A PURPOSE



When a local church organizes a group fasting prayer for members to join, some may participate because it is a scheduled activity or because others are doing it. However, we must understand why we are fasting and what we are praying for. If we lack focus, then we are just going through the motions. Biblical examples of those who practiced fasting prayer, such as Esther, Daniel, and Jesus, all did so with a purpose.



## DEDICATE MORE TIME TO PRAY

Fasting prayers are when we forego eating and drinking to make more time to pray. Fasting without praying is just not eating. Practically, it is better to pick occasions when we can realistically fast and make more time to pray.



## DO NOT LEAD A DOUBLE LIFE

Committing to a fasting prayer means devoting time to God and our faith. Therefore, we should not behave in a manner contrary to our faith. God rebuked the Israelites because He saw through their superficial piety of making sacrifices and fasting and perceived their underlying iniquity and wickedness towards God and man (Isa 1:13; 58:3-7). This kind of fasting prayer does not please God.



## DO NOT DO IT FOR SHOW

In Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus teaches us not to be gloomy-faced and draw attention to the fact that we are fasting. Some may enjoy the esteem that comes with such sacrifice or become proud that they can do what others cannot. This mentality is not in line with the spirit of fasting prayer. Rather, we should make ourselves presentable so others are none the wiser.



## CONCLUSION

Even if we take perfect care of our physical health, it will invariably decline one day. That is undesirable and unavoidable. Paul encourages us that while outwardly we are perishing, the inward man should be renewed daily (2 Cor 4:16). Therefore, allowing our spiritual health to decline is undesirable *but* avoidable. One way to nurture and support our spiritual health is to establish a prayerful life, draw closer to our God, and draw from God's help. Though the path to life is narrow and difficult (Lk

13:24; Mt 7:13-14), Jesus is willing and able to guide and strengthen us throughout this journey. So let us remember the words of Elder Peter:

*But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers.*  
(1 Pet 4:7)

Prayer is something we need to prioritize and take seriously. It is a time for communing with God and for reflection and self-evaluation, preventing a decline into spiritual infirmity. This is how a healthy life of prayer leads to a healthy spiritual life.



# PRAYER: BUILD UP AND BE FRUITFUL

Vincent Yeung—Cambridge, UK

Prayer, together with the word of God, is an integral pillar of the Christian faith. Be it in tongues or in words of understanding, prayer enables Christian growth. The apostle Paul explains that we edify<sup>1</sup> ourselves when we speak in a tongue, as the Spirit prays, and prayers with understanding make our mind fruitful (1 Cor 14:4, 14–15).

A typical prayer comprises praising God, petition, and intercession. Before each prayer session in church, we receive regular reminders to pray for the church ministry locally, nationally, and abroad, as well as for those who are weaker physically or spiritually. Over time, given such standard prayer “formulae,” we no longer think deliberately and precisely about the focus of our prayers, nor do we reflect on

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<sup>1</sup>Greek: οἰκοδομέω, “to build.”

the outcomes achieved. If this persists, our prayers will become stale, repetitive chants.

Some of us have been Christians for years, meaning we have spent many cumulative hours praying. And while we have heard testimonies, many of us have had no personal numinous experiences in prayer. More worryingly, God may appear remote and non-responsive to our supplications. In contrast to Paul’s experience, we do not seem to be edified or fruitful after each prayer. Wherein lies the problem? How can we improve our prayers?

For a start, we should consider the following:

- Are we approaching God in the right way?
- Are we asking for the right things?

- Are we praying about the matters that concern us most? Do we mean what we say?

## IN SEARCH OF GOD

Our email inboxes and social media channels are bombarded with all sorts of spam and advertisements. Even on platforms such as LinkedIn,<sup>2</sup> which was developed to connect professionals, a significant number of contact requests turn out to be formulaic sales messages. Consequently, we have learned to identify and ignore such “junk mail” based on its content or title.

The obverse is that if we are in the sender’s

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<sup>2</sup>An online and app-based business and employment-focused social media platform.



position and need to get the attention of someone important, our message must be succinct and sufficiently intriguing. To achieve the latter, we must be familiar with this person's interests and priorities. Similarly, if we want God's attention, we must know His priorities. We cannot expect a response from God by simply babbling half-hearted prayers or praying for things not aligned with His teachings and will.

Prayer is a discovery of God and oneself. Exemplary prayers in the Bible reiterate God's character, deeds, and nature.

*"The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression."* (Num 14:18a)

*"Yours, O LORD, is the greatness, The power and the glory, The victory and the majesty; For all that is in heaven and in earth is Yours."* (1 Chr 29:11a)

It is not that God needs us to remind Him of who He is and what He is like. Instead, prayer allows us to discover or rediscover God's nature and what He is willing and able to do for us today. As longtime Christians who have heard many sermons and attended many classes and seminars, we have an intellectual knowledge of who God is. But deep within us, do we really trust what we know? Prayer enables us to truly understand and experience God's power and mercy.

In her desperation, Hannah discovered and reaffirmed what God could do for her:

*"The LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and brings up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich; He brings low and lifts up."* (1 Sam 2:6-7)

Her prayer set out a picture of who God is, what He is like, and what He had done in the past. God can change things. If

God has done marvelous and miraculous deeds in history, how much more can He do for her in her hour of need. Indeed, God did more than she expected. Hannah asked for one child, but she received more than requested (1 Sam 2:21), and her prayer brought national deliverance.

Jonah landed in the pit of a fish's belly when he attempted to flee from God. In his guilt and near-hopelessness, he had a wonderful realization: God was still there (Jon 2:2)! His prayer was, thus, not a futile supplication in the dark emptiness but a rediscovery of God and a renewed awareness that He is the source of true hope, making possible new beginnings. Jonah realized God's mercy was still available to him after his repentance,



despite his past rebellion. In his repentance, Jonah recognized, "Salvation is of the LORD" (Jon 2:9).

**"To reach God, we must first have worthy goals; second, we need to have the urge to achieve these goals; and third, we must believe God can deliver"**

By knowing God, we can evaluate whether what we pray for is worthy of His attention. God is just and righteous, so the top priority in our prayers should be learning to be equally just and righteous.

Do we have a valid reason for expecting God to help us? James told us that the double-minded and those asking for unworthy matters would not receive anything (Jas 1:7-8; 4:3). To reach God, we must first have worthy goals; second, we need to have the urge to achieve these goals; and third, we must believe God can deliver. God could see Hannah and Jonah's determination and yearning for His deliverance. Have we got the same eagerness towards what we are praying for? We pray for the evangelism and prosperity of the church, but do we have any interest or eagerness to accomplish what we pray for? Intercession is the first step; participation is the next critical step. We must not just talk and pray and not do anything else. Divine grace works through human beings, and the word of God has to be realized and fulfilled by fallible individuals. In Paul's doxology, he reminds us of the grace and love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14). To make an effective prayer, our will, actions, and goals must be consistent with God's.



## IN SEARCH OF OURSELVES

*"God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." (Jn 4:24)*

Are we truthful to ourselves and to God? Our petition to God may be worthy, but are these requests truly the goal we want? Repeating the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:8–13) must not simply be a habitual chant of a model prayer. Every time we recite the Lord's Prayer, we have the opportunity to re-examine whether we honor God's name, carry out His will on earth, and forgive our debtors.

With our flesh warring against our spirituality, establishing our spiritual priorities is difficult (Rom 7:14–23). Solomon asked for wisdom and a heart of understanding when God appeared to him in Gibeon (1 Kg 3:9–10). It was an exemplary request. However, what he did not ask for (but probably desired) could be seen from his subsequent behavior (Eccl 2:3–9). He acquired horses and chariots (1 Kg 4:26; 10:26), took thirteen years to build a magnificent palace (1 Kg 7:1–12), and gratified every wish of his heart (Eccl 2:10). Even his fabulous wealth could not satisfy his material desires and extravagance, becoming a "heavy yoke" on the people (1 Kg 12:4).

In contrast, God called David, Solomon's father, a man after His own heart (1 Sam 13:14). David's prayer reflected how well he knew God and the right attitude and actions men must have to please Him. God tests the heart and takes pleasure in uprightness (1 Chr 29:17). David knew his place on earth—"who am I, and who are my people?"—and recognized that his days on earth were as a shadow (1 Chr 29:14–15). The Israelites offered willingly to the Lord because they knew that all possessions ultimately come from Him (1 Chr 29:12, 14, 17). Building a temple for the Lord in Jerusalem was an opportunity for men and women to show the genuineness of their worship—both physical and spiritual.

Returning to Jonah's prayer in this light, we can see his newfound understanding of God in the time of adversity was valuable but facile and limited. He had discovered that God is merciful and forbearing, yet he did not reflect on his inner self against God's attributes. His supercilious attitude toward the Assyrians became apparent—it was fine for him to receive God's mercy, but not the 120,000 Ninevites who could not even discern their right hand from their left (Jon 4:11). It is a missed opportunity if we only pray for and appreciate God's deliverance of ourselves, but not pray to have the heart of God. God makes "His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust"; we need

to pursue perfection just as the Father in heaven is perfect (Mt 5:45, 48). Luke puts it in practical terms: "Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful" (Lk 6:36).

Prayer is a path of self-discovery that can lead us to a healthy self-awareness and, through this, to proper self-discipline. It is often difficult to admit to the common human weaknesses of pride, conceit, and self-interest. So we keep these hidden, even from ourselves—a sure path to self-destruction. To build ourselves up, we must discover ourselves and make the necessary adjustments and reorientation to render ourselves and our prayers worthy of the Lord.



## IN SEARCH OF OTHERS

If intercession is a deepened awareness of how we place other people in our lives and in our world, then we need to intentionally explore and learn more about the people around us—to understand their needs, shortcomings, and obstacles. Do we know what our friends and brethren need the most? Have we spent enough time finding out what concerns them or in what areas we should pray for them? Or are they mere names or broad categories that we label as "truth-seekers" or "sick members"?

Jacob knew his children well—Reuben was unstable as water, Simeon and Levi were violent, Dan was like a serpent, and Benjamin a ravenous wolf (Gen 49:3–6, 17,

27). Moses was also well aware of the strengths and challenges of the different tribes. Dan and Naphtali were "full of the blessing of the Lord" and were doing well, whereas Reuben struggled to survive (Deut 33:22–23, 6). Similarly, the church today comprises members from all walks of life, backgrounds, and cultures. We may find some characters more difficult to get along with. Most of us choose to avoid such members and are rarely prepared to show them true forbearance and lovingkindness. This is why Paul reminds us to bear with one another and keep the unity of the Spirit (Eph 4:1–2).

*"We must first have the faith and courage to forgive and accept their undesirable behaviors and character and be reconciled with them"*

When we think that God's heart is closed to our requests, we must ask ourselves whether it is because our eyes are closed to those for whom we are interceding. We must first have the faith and courage to forgive and accept their undesirable behaviors and character and be reconciled with them.

For Moses to pray for the people (Num 14:18–19), he first needed to reconcile with them after they rejected him (Num 14:2, 4). What enabled him to overlook and forgive their rejection, hurtful words, and perpetual ingratitude?

Daniel's prayer for the people reminds us that God grants our supplications because of His forgiveness and gracious mercy rather than our righteousness (Dan



9:9, 18). We, who are called by God's name, have hope because of His gracious mercy (Dan 9:19). And the petition for forgiveness—"forgive us...as we forgive" (Mt 6:12)—emphasizes that Christian life is one of reconciliation, both within and outside the community.

Forgiveness may be the hardest of all gifts to offer others. Had it been easy, it would not have been included in the Lord's Prayer. But nothing is impossible for God. If we are open, He will be the source and ground of an unlimited range of new possibilities that can transform our relationship with one another in exceptional ways.

Paul prayed for the believers to be grounded in love and to experience the "width and length and depth and height" of the boundless love of Christ (Eph 3:14–19). Prayers enable us to search for this divine love, so we can mature, grow, and reciprocate God's love through intercession for others and acts of forgiveness.

### **IN SEARCH OF OBEDIENCE: LEARNING OUR HIGHER PURPOSE**

As the pandemic has shown so dramatically, life is fragile. We, or our friends and relatives, can be suddenly struck by inexplicable illnesses. At the onset, we may be able to pray for healing with faith. But when a complete cure does not present itself, our faith wavers. What can we learn from biblical role models who had similar experiences?

When an incurable illness struck Hezekiah, his royal lifestyle did not give him much peace. Instead, he spoke of the bitterness of his soul (Isa 38:15). Nevertheless, this unexpected illness enhanced his appreciation of life. At that juncture, he had not yet received his deliverance, yet he realized that his illness, and the bitterness that came with it, was for his own peace (Isa 38:17). His anguish enabled him to draw near to God and saved him from the pit of destruction.

When life is smooth and prosperous, the enjoyment accompanying worldly success diminishes our need for God; He is no longer at the forefront of our minds. In contrast, pain and suffering amplify our yearning for God and His comfort. God has His plan for us when He does not grant our prayers immediately. He has a better solution for us when He does not give us the solution we ask for. Ultimately, when we pray and trust Him, we are being built up.

Paul celebrated his weakness and the non-fulfillment of his prayer because he realized that, through suffering, the power of Christ rested on him (2 Cor 12:8–9). Christ was perfected, not by superhuman endowment, but because He learned obedience through the things He suffered (Heb 5:8). Paul also declared that tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword could not separate him from the love of Christ (Rom 8:35). The clear and simple reason was that God was "in" the suffering with him, and God inspired him through prayer.

### **CONCLUSION**

Prayer requires a proper understanding of the nature and purpose of God. In turn, prayer deepens such an understanding by establishing certain behaviors relevant to our experience. We do not merely pray to know God's will, or ask and expect Him to give and act, while we sit back and do nothing. The knowledge of His will enables us to walk worthy of Him. By knowing, doing, and learning, this practical—rather than theoretical—knowledge is augmented and abounds (Col 1:9–10).

It is not God's reluctance that makes prayer difficult, but rather our inability to seek the things God desires to give. Prayer should not be an impersonal and mindless repetition but a time for us to think deeply and reflect. Prayer uncovers the awareness of ultimate meaning and purpose. It allows us to discover ourselves, the people around us, their needs and ours, and the changes we should make. Critically, prayer facilitates a new discovery of the right priorities, the acceptance of our path, and the unexpected possibilities God can achieve for us.

We must lift our eyes to see a little farther and try to learn more of what God has made possible for us through the transforming power of Jesus. Prayer opens up a whole new vista for growth in Christian experience and understanding. With such understanding, we can be built up, grow, and finally realize the God-given possibilities before us.



# AN UNANSWERED PRAYER

Based on a sermon by Chang Wei Lin—Taiwan

Each of us prays to God with the hope that He will hear us and answer. Granted requests assure us that our prayers are effective and our faith is strengthened. Unanswered prayers, on the other hand, spark doubt and make us wonder: *If God loves me, why has He withheld His blessings? If God cares, why does He allow us to suffer? If God is with me, why does He feel so distant?*

Prayers that seems unanswered do not indicate the withholding of God's love or His absence. The following biblical examples provide reasons why some prayers go unanswered, or appear so, and teach us how to move on in our faith and relationship with God.

## INTERCEDING FOR OTHERS

### Do They Meet God's Requirements?

Most churches encourage members to intercede for those in need by displaying a prayer list before prayer sessions. Seeing names that remain on the list for a long time may make us wonder why our intercession has been ineffectual, and even whether we should continue praying for them.

In Genesis 18:20–21, God shared with Abraham His plan to visit Sodom and examine the extent of its evil. After Abraham interceded six times for the city, God promised to spare Sodom if

ten righteous people could be found. God heard and agreed to Abraham's prayers. Yet, despite Abraham's sincere intercession, God ultimately destroyed the city because His requirements were not met. Not even ten righteous people could be found there.

Similarly, when our continuous and loving intercessions leave circumstance unchanged, it may be that those for whom we pray have fallen short of God's grace (Heb 12:15). Though God has heard our prayer, His conditions for bestowing His grace have not been met.

### Do We Have Sin?

*And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he*

has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. (Jas 5:15–16)

We are familiar with the requirement that intercessions be made with faith. However, we often neglect the second condition affecting the prayer's effectiveness: the intercessor must be righteous. If sin remains in us, God will not grant our request. Sin is the biggest hindrance between man and God, which is why James tells us to confess our sins and pray for one another so that we can be forgiven. Then, God will hear our prayers.

## Breaking Down the Wall

A situation that has not improved despite a long period of intercession may warrant a deeper discussion by ministers with the individual to help break down any barriers separating the person from God. Without removing the wall of sin hindering our prayers, God will not hear our supplications, no matter how earnest.

*Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened,  
That it cannot save;  
Nor His ear heavy,  
That it cannot hear.  
But your iniquities have separated  
you from your God;  
And your sins have hidden His  
face from you,  
So that He will not hear.* (Isa 59:1–2)

God is a merciful and loving Father who desires to give grace (2 Cor 9:8). But as a just God, He does not remain impervious to sin. When God appears deaf to our intercessions, we ought to examine whether sin is in us or those we pray for, or whether God's conditions for dispensing His grace have been met. We must encourage one another with the truth to remove sin from our lives and demolish the wall of separation between man and God. Only then can we receive God's grace.

## PRAYING FOR OUR OWN NEEDS

### Paul's Thorn in the Flesh

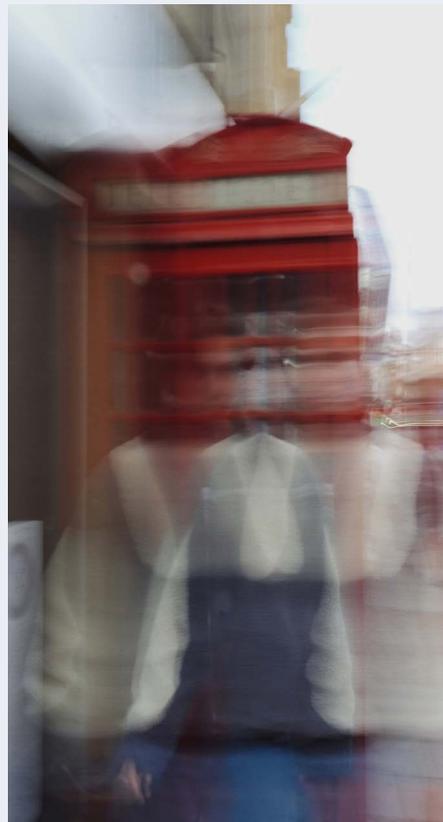
Some of us have the experience of praying for a long time over a personal matter with no resolution. At best, we wonder what God wants us to learn in such situations. At worst, we conclude that the cruel God who

remains silent without intervening in our suffering is not worth worshipping.

Consider Paul's experience:

*And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.* (2 Cor 12:7)

The thorn in Paul's flesh brought great pain and inconvenience. In the original Greek text of the New Testament, this "thorn"<sup>1</sup> refers to a sharpened piece of wood, such as a stake one would drive into the ground when building a fence. The image of such a thorn impaling Paul's flesh illustrates his immense suffering.



What could this thorn represent? Paul mentioned that the Galatian members, witnessing his suffering, would have plucked out their own eyes to give to him (Gal 4:15). He also wrote with large letters (Gal 6:11). These suggest that Paul may have had eye problems. If this was the case, it would have been very arduous for Paul to travel and pioneer the Gentile regions.

Regardless of what the thorn was, Paul had asked God to remove it out of a genuine need related to the critical holy work he was doing. He pleaded three times, fervently beseeching the Lord. But God's answer was a gentle—albeit unequivocal—"No"!

*And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient*

*for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."* (2 Cor 12:9)

## Suffering Brings Spiritual Edification

When we are sick or suffering, we often pray as Paul did, asking God to take away the source of our pain. But similarly, God's answer to us may not be what we expect. Thus, when we encounter these challenging situations, we must consider what spiritual lessons we should learn. If we trust that God's grace is sufficient for us to overcome the challenge, it does not matter if the thorn remains.

Jesus mentioned that people would say, "Physician, heal yourself!" (Lk 4:23). Many came to Paul with ailments, and some were healed even without the laying of his hands (Acts 19:11–12). God's healing power worked mightily through him, even through his handkerchiefs and aprons. Because "God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul," many deemed him to be a god (Acts 14:11–15). But Paul's inability to remove his own thorn—to heal himself—was a reminder of his very human frailties, keeping him humble. Paul even took the pre-emptive step of boasting in his infirmities, not his flesh, so that others would not esteem him too highly (2 Cor 12:6).

"The thorn in Paul's flesh reminded him that he was a mere man, not God, lest he 'be exalted above measure by the abundance of revelations' "

In addition, Paul's theological insights were direct revelations from God (Gal 1:12). The recipient of so many revelations would surely have been in danger of becoming proud, even to the extent of expecting special treatment from others. Again, the thorn in Paul's flesh reminded him that he was a mere man, not God, lest he "be exalted above measure by the abundance of revelations" (2 Cor 12:7). He came to understand the spiritual cultivation the thorn brought him. With this heart, he could accept God's will—whether or not the thorn was taken away, God's grace sufficed.

Today, prayer is the first port of call when we experience suffering. But if the source of our suffering is not removed, we should then ask God what He wants us to learn. Edification in and through trials reinforces our faith and relationship with God.

<sup>1</sup> Greek: *skolops*, σκόλοψ.

## PRAYING FOR THE HOLY WORK

### Receive Strength to Face Difficulties Ahead

*Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil. (Heb 2:14)*

When Jesus came into the world in the flesh, He experienced the physical and emotional challenges common to all humankind. His impending suffering on the cross brought such great distress and sorrow that He offered up “prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears” (Heb 5:7; Mk 14:33–34). He prayed, “Take this cup away from Me,” requesting that the hour might pass from Him—to transcend time and avoid the pain and suffering to come (Mk 14:35–36).

Since God did not remove the cup, some may infer that Jesus’ prayer was denied. However, Jesus had also prayed, “[N]evertheless, not what I will, but what You will” (Mk 14:35–36). The Father indeed heard and answered Jesus’ prayer (Heb 5:7).

*“Then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him.” (Lk 22:43)*

Instead of changing His will, the Father gave Jesus spiritual strength and courage, empowering Him to carry out the Father’s will.

### Wait for God’s Time

Interceding for the holy work in church is

aligned with God’s will. Yet, we may see little progress in certain ministries even after many years of prayer. For example, we pray unceasingly for the evangelism work but see few souls added to the fold. We must avoid measuring the efficacy of our prayers by specific results. What is more important is for us, through prayer and intercession, to gain spiritual strength to continue to do God’s work and trust in His timing. We should not think our petitions are ineffective and give up.

“God intended to resurrect Lazarus for His own glory and give the disciples a fuller understanding of the Son of God”

When Lazarus fell ill, his sisters, Mary and Martha, quickly sent word to Jesus (Jn 11:1–3). They expected Him to come and resolve this problem. At the time, Jesus was beyond the Jordan, many miles from Bethany. On receiving the message, He said, “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (Jn 11:4). He then waited two more days before setting off. Imagine Mary and Martha’s anxiety as the hours ticked by. By the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Martha told Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died” (Lk 11:21).

Why did Jesus not act quickly to prevent Lazarus’ death and the sisters’ sorrow? God’s time and purpose were revealed when Jesus finally raised Lazarus from the

dead. God intended to resurrect Lazarus for His own glory and give the disciples a fuller understanding of the Son of God (Jn 11:4, 15, 40, 42). Had Jesus healed Lazarus straight away, they would not have experienced the fullness of God’s power and grace; their knowledge of Christ—the resurrection and the life—would have been incomplete (Jn 11:25–26).

We may not always understand God’s plan and timing, but we can trust in His good will for us:

*“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD.  
“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.”  
(Isa 55:8–9)*

## CONCLUSION

In our faith, as in life, we are often too anxious and impatient; we desire immediate results. We pray today and expect God’s answer tomorrow. If our prayers are sincere, but God appears silent or slow to respond, we should not doubt that He has heard or that He cares. Instead, we should reflect on whether God’s conditions have been met or if there is sin within us or the person we are interceding for. If the situation does not change, perhaps God wants to teach us a particular lesson or provide us with spiritual edification. As we pray persistently for ourselves, others, and the church work, we can entrust all to God’s good will and timing. Even in the face of seemingly insurmountable trials, God will grant us peace. In turn, we will grow in our spiritual understanding and strength to continue our work. Importantly, we will bring all glory to God.





# SPIRITUAL POWER FROM PRAYER (PART 1)

Based on sermons by Timothy Yeung—Calgary, Canada

## INTRODUCTION

We pray for different reasons: to seek help in times of need, make requests, and intercede for others. On reflection, our prayers may become transactional—we petition God only when we need something from Him. Is this the sole purpose of prayer? If so, why is it necessary to pray in the Spirit, as the Bible implores (Jude 1:20)?

God wants us to pray in the Spirit not only to make requests but also to gain spiritual power.

*“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8)

This spiritual power can transform our lives, granting us the ability to make wise, life-enhancing choices, and the resolve to keep to those decisions. How does this spiritual empowerment occur, and how should we reset our view on prayer to enable this transformation?

## THE POWER TO CHANGE

*Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.* (Jas 5:16, ESV)<sup>1</sup>

We use electricity to power our lights and heat our water. But electricity does not come from thin air—it must be generated by converting energy from various sources. Similarly, spiritual power is generated through prayer. Critically, according to Elder James, it is the prayer of a righteous



person that generates such great power. Imagine, then, how powerful the prayers of a church full of righteous members, praying with one accord, can be.

However, there are times when our prayers seem weak and ineffective—when we cannot even muster the strength to continue praying. Since God, our source of power, is perfect, the problem must lie with us. Elder James has also explained why our prayers—our power generator—have become defective.

For our prayers to be powerful, we must first confess our trespasses. Then when we pray for ourselves or others, great transformational power will come upon us. Unfortunately, our prayers are often

so focused on changing a situation or solving a problem that we forget the most important part of prayer is our own change from within. When we are transformed, our problems often resolve themselves: God’s work prospers, our relationships improve, and harmony comes to our family. Conversely, persistently asking for God’s help without the willingness to change is the reason our prayers often go unanswered. So it is crucial to pray for the power to transform ourselves.

## Consider Your Ways

As long-time believers, how often do we truly reflect on ourselves and repent from the bottom of our hearts? A common “malady” afflicting those of us who faithfully attend services and participate in holy work is our sense of self-righteousness before God. We are ticking the right “faith action checklist” boxes and, hence, we neglect to look inward. Worse, some of us have stopped looking at Jesus and trying to be more like Him; instead our gaze is fixed on the glittering distractions of the world. This is similar to the attitude of God’s people in the time of Haggai:

*“Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?” Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: “Consider your ways!”* (Hag 1:4–5)

This warning from God came more than ten years after the Israelites returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. After laying the foundation, they encountered challenges that brought the work to a standstill. As the years passed, instead of keeping the rebuilding work in their hearts, these Israelites channeled their energies into establishing their own lives—tending fields, doing business, and improving their homes—all while the temple lay in ruins. Their heart for God had grown cold. So God commanded them to consider their

<sup>1</sup>The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

ways—to look beyond the surface and examine their current state.

*“You have sown much, and bring in little;  
You eat, but do not have enough;  
You drink, but you are not filled with drink;  
You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm;  
And he who earns wages,  
Earns wages to put into a bag with holes.”*  
(Hag 1:6)

Similarly, we must deeply consider our ways. We enjoy many material blessings but are we satisfied? We believe in God but do we have true joy in our hearts? We serve God but do we feel God drawing closer and working with us? If not, let us identify and overcome those weaknesses hindering us from a life of true faith.

## God Reveals Our Shortcomings

*Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified.*  
(2 Cor 13:5)

Self-examination precipitates change, but we cannot rely on our own methods and reasoning during this process. Doing so often makes matters worse. Instead, we should come before God and ask, “Lord, in what ways am I lacking?” Such reflection invites God to act in our lives.

“Filled with the Holy Spirit, she started to reflect on herself instead. Then she heard God’s voice: ‘Your love is not enough’ ”

There was a sister who was blessed in many ways, but she was troubled by her relationship with her daughter-in-law. Though she loved her daughter-in-law very much, the latter seemed disrespectful and disobedient in return. During a church seminar, the sister prayed and poured out her troubles tearfully to God—how she was the most pitiful mother-in-law and how she had lost many nights of sleep. After praying in this way for a few days, her prayers changed. Filled with the Holy Spirit, she started to reflect on herself instead. Then she heard God’s voice: “Your love is not enough.” He said this three times. Puzzled by this message, she asked the Holy Spirit to reveal her weaknesses. Eventually, God helped her to understand that although she thought she was expressing her love for her daughter-in-law, she was in effect using her own thinking and force of will to compel her daughter-in-law. As a

result, the latter did not feel loved and the distance between them grew. Introspecting in prayer, this sister recognized that she had to become more understanding, reasonable, and approachable. With this insight, the Holy Spirit filled her and gave her the power to transform herself.

## Transformed by God’s Grace

One of the greatest works of the indwelling Holy Spirit is to help us introspect and transform. Even when others tell us our shortcomings, we may not have the will or strength to change. But when we humble ourselves in prayer, our merciful Father lifts us and gives us grace to help us take the first steps towards transformation.



*“And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*  
(Lk 18:13)

In this parable, Jesus compared the prayers of the sinful tax collector and the self-righteous Pharisee. The Lord concluded that the tax collector was more justified than the Pharisee, who had proclaimed himself better than others.

It is discomfiting to think that our attitude may be like the Pharisee’s. But have we

not occasionally comforted ourselves that our transgressions, if any, are minor; and that we are better than others? If we embark on genuine and deep reflection, we would unearth the weaknesses we have been unable to overcome even after believing for so long. We would feel as wretched as the tax collector, and realize how desperately we need God’s mercy and power to change.

## THE POWER TO SOFTEN OUR HEARTS

God created us as flesh and blood. Healthy organs are soft. If they harden, they lose their ability to function well. Blood circulation is impaired when the heart muscle calcifies through old age, disease, or trauma. These hardened arteries will then bring about coronary artery disease, angina, heart attack, or heart failure. Taking steps to prevent our hearts from hardening can help us live a long and healthy life.

Spiritually, it is no different. Our inner hearts must remain soft and sensitive to God’s word. What could cause our hearts to harden?

*[B]ut exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.*  
(Heb 3:13)

There are sins we would never dream of committing, such as adultery, murder, and theft. But, living amidst a sinful generation, our hearts are easily influenced by the trends of the world. Unwittingly, our hearts become hardened over time, developing into a wicked heart of unbelief (Heb 3:12). Such a hardened heart has lost all feeling and is no longer touched by God’s love. Our attitude toward God changes: we are indifferent and no longer care.

## A Change of Heart

It is obvious when a person’s heart changes within a relationship. For example, a once-devoted father can change completely under the influence of a gambling addiction. He no longer has patience with his children and avoids coming home so that he can spend time gambling. His heart has been captured by the addiction and no longer belongs to his family.

This is how sin can deceive and harden our hearts. When our heart changes, our attitude follows. This process can be seen even from the first sin. When God created Eve, Adam spoke most eloquently.

*And Adam said:  
“This is now bone of my bones  
And flesh of my flesh;*

*She shall be called Woman,  
Because she was taken out of Man.”*  
(Gen 2:23)

Men are stereotyped as inexpressive, but Adam spouted such romantic poetry! His first statement was an ode to his wife—expressed in a poetic structure using comparison and wordplay—conveying how precious she was and how intimate their relationship. And these were the first words Eve heard.

Today, the first words many husbands utter when they return home are, “Is dinner ready?”—much to their wives’ chagrin. However, man was once eloquent, speaking words pleasing to his wife. Man could do this because he was created with a soft heart. After he sinned, his attitude and tone changed.

*Then the man said, “The woman whom  
You gave to be with me, she gave me of  
the tree, and I ate.”* (Gen 3:12)

Adam’s endearment for Eve as the “bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh” was now an accusatory or defensive “the woman whom You gave me.” His tone and demeanor changed from intimacy to disaffection as his heart was hardened by sin. From them on, not only would woman suffer in childbirth, but she would be dominated by her husband (Gen 3:16).

A similar thing can happen in our faith and relationship with God. When we first believed, every little thing touched our heart. We were motivated to attend every church service and activity, and singing hymns moved us to tears. Our tender hearts needed no material blessings or awesome miracles to feel the great love of Jesus.

But after some time, the busyness and stress of life calcify our hearts. Discontentment reigns; our desire to attend services and draw closer to God wanes. When we lose this loving feeling towards God, we must examine whether our heart has changed towards God. A proxy indicator of this is how we treat our family, because our relationship with God is the foundation of all our relationships. God is love (1 Jn 4:8). If we are close to God, our hearts will be filled with love. We will be more forgiving and patient with others; our family life will be loving and peaceful. But if our heart has hardened, we will become neglectful and uninvolved; we would care only about matters that directly impact us. If our hearts reach such a state, what should we do?

## A New Heart

Just as a heart can harden, the inverse is also true. A truth-seeker can gradually

go from disbelief to belief to accepting baptism because God’s grace moves him. This is the softening process—receiving a heart of flesh.

*“I will give you a new heart and put a new  
spirit within you; I will take the heart of  
stone out of your flesh and give you a  
heart of flesh.”* (Ezek 36:26)

This is the work the Lord will do in the New Testament era. The Israelites in the Old Testament often rebelled and murmured against God even though they had the law to follow. Despite their best efforts, they were unable to change or fully obey. Today, relying on our own willpower to change is also hopeless. Though we know we must love and forgive others, we cannot. We



thus need to pray for the Holy Spirit to perform a heart transplant on us.

Receiving a physical heart transplant not only restores health to a once-critically ill patient, but often gives them a more positive outlook and a new lease of life. In recent decades, there have even been rare cases of heart transplants causing a complete personality change, where patients believe they have inherited characteristics and memories from their heart donor.

When our heart changes, our attitudes and thinking change. It is not difficult to modify our appearance cosmetically, or transform our physique through exercise. But changing our mindset is a

Herculean task. We need God’s help and the willingness to undergo spiritual heart surgery.

There was a sister whose life was full of great hardships because of complicated family issues. She knew she should forgive but could not overcome the hurt she felt. Her pain was compounded because she knew the truth and could not live it out, despite her efforts. So, this sister fervently prayed for God’s help, telling Him she had no strength to move forward. In her prayer, she sensed God’s hand reach into her, removing her heart like a stone and throwing it into a lake. The heart sank into the depths, leaving ripples on the surface. Then God’s hand reached back in, placing a tender heart within her. From that moment on, she felt different. Her emotional pain had disappeared and she was released from the grip of her unpleasant memories. Even though she could still see the same problems, she no longer harbored hatred. Her changed heart was filled with God’s love and strength. Our efforts cannot attain such a change; it is possible only through the power of Jesus Christ.

*“I will put My Spirit within you and cause  
you to walk in My statutes, and you will  
keep My judgments and do them.”*  
(Ezek 36:27)

Those who believe in God’s word but cannot exercise it, struggling daily with their conscience, are the ones who suffer most pain. Unlike recalcitrant sinners, such believers are aware of God’s judgement but lack the strength to change. However, with a tender heart given by the Lord, we will no longer struggle to do as Jesus commands. We gain the power to soften our hearts through the Holy Spirit. So, we must pray in the Holy Spirit daily to remove our human will and replace it with God’s.

## CONCLUSION

In our lives of faith, we seek to be transformed by the Spirit and regain the image of God. Prayer gives us the spiritual power to undergo such a transformation, but we must first know where we fall short. We must humble ourselves before God and ask, “Lord, reveal my weaknesses. Please give me the power to change. Remove the hard spots in my heart, and give me a tender heart of flesh.” Let us enter into deep prayer, sincerely reflect and repent, and open ourselves unreservedly to God. Then, God will raise us up and shower us with His grace and spiritual power, enabling us to submit to His will and change our lives for the better.

# LESSONS IN EFFECTIVE PRAYER

Raymond Chou—San Jose, California, USA

Prayer is an integral part of being a Christian. Most of us understand how important prayer is for ourselves and as intercession for others and the work of the church. But we may have, on occasion, asked ourselves—whether we are new or “veteran” Christians—“How do I know if God has heard my prayer?” Some have prayed for a long time but have found no resolution to their problems. So we cannot help wondering why God

seems so responsive to others but aloof and uncaring about our concerns and prayers.

The Scriptures assure us that God heeds prayers (Jer 29:12–13). Like any loving parent, our heavenly Father wants to grant us the good things we ask Him for (Mt 7:9–11). The reason for unanswered supplication must thus lie with us. We should ask ourselves, “How can I make my prayer more effective?” Jesus Himself teaches us four essential lessons.

## DO NOT BE HYPOCRITES

*“And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.”* (Mt 6:5)

The first lesson Jesus taught His disciples was not to be hypocrites in prayer. He pointed out that the Pharisees stood in prominent places and offered loud prayers because they enjoyed being seen. A hasty conclusion from this negative example is that we should not pray in locations where

others can see us. Some Christians further suggest that people should not even pray together in the chapel. However, this extreme stance is *not* the Lord's intent.

When Jesus lambasted the Pharisees as hypocrites, He wanted to highlight the divergence between the Pharisees' inner and outer selves. What lay within their hearts and minds was far from what their reverent actions suggested. Their communication with God through prayer did not spring from an inner piety but had become just another way to garner the praise of others. Jesus emphatically warned His disciples against such hypocritical prayers. For His true followers, any external manifestation of devotion must spring from and be consistent with an inner sincerity and faith.

Hence, regardless of where we pray today, we must do so sincerely. If we attend prayer sessions as though they are tasks to check off the to-do list or pray routinely but without the heart to draw closer to God, then our actions lack the sincerity that Jesus demands.

**Reminder 1: Prayer is not just a physical action and outward display of devotion to Jesus; it must reflect our inner sincerity.**

## PRAY WITH A HEART CENTERED ON GOD

*"But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."* (Mt 6:6)

Secondly, Jesus taught His disciples to go to a secret place, close the door, and pray. But Jesus was not speaking of a physical space. Locking ourselves in a physical room will not cut us off from the world's distractions. Our thoughts and emotions

may still dwell on all manner of things lying on the other side of the door. Perhaps it is the news we were reading, the errands we were supposed to run, or the work we must do.

In a world where our computers, smartphones, and smarter watches handcuff us to the world 24/7, Jesus wants us to consciously and consistently close the door of our hearts when we pray. Switch off the troubling panoply of daily anxieties and the tempting notification alerts so that we have a quiet place to meditate on our faith and commune with God in prayer. Only through such quiet contemplation can we reflect on our relationship with God and think about the path He wants us to take.



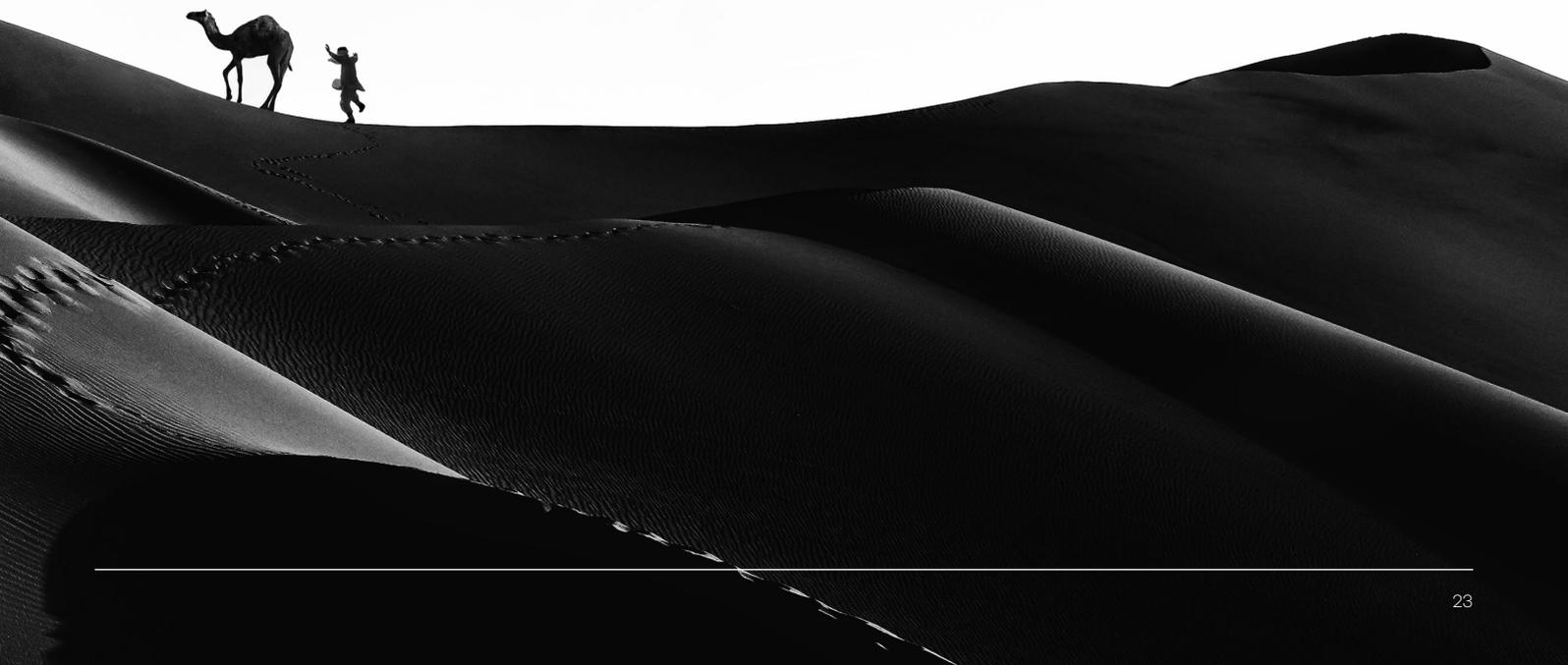
## A Grave Misfortune

*There is one alone,  
without companion:  
He has neither son nor brother.  
Yet there is no end to all his labors,  
Nor is his eye satisfied with riches.  
But he never asks,  
"For whom do I toil and  
deprive myself of good?"  
This also is vanity and a grave  
misfortune. (Eccl 4:8)*

The protagonist of this passage is very pitiful. He toils ceaselessly but does not know why and for whom he is suffering. Today, our busyness may hinder us from progressing along our path of faith. Worse, we are so distracted that we may unknowingly stumble onto the wrong path and lose our salvation. This would be a grave misfortune indeed.

Jesus' lesson in prayer highlights the need to set aside a time and place to calm our hearts so that we can seek after God in quietude. Perhaps we have judiciously set aside time to pray each day, yet feel no improvement in our faith and attitude towards God. If so, consider finding a better time and place to pray. Subsequently, when we start praying, we must consciously pull our minds away from the shows we were watching, the games we were playing, and the work we were doing. Turn off our phone notifications, and turn our hearts towards our Father in heaven.

**Reminder 2: Shut down and shut out all distractions around us to draw closer to God in prayer.**



## PRAY WITH SINCERITY

*"And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words"* (Mt 6:7)

Continuing His teaching, Jesus reminded His disciples not to use vain repetitions in prayer. Is the True Jesus Church guilty of this error of mindless repetition, since we teach believers praying for the Holy Spirit to say "Hallelujah, praise the Lord"?

The correct understanding of Jesus' reminder lies in these phrases: "vain" and "many words." The heathen supplicated their deities with repetitive phrases. But to our Lord, these were empty and vain words chanted without much thought and commitment. We will be guilty if we repeat our prayers without any consideration of the words we mouth and fail to carry out the actions of repentance we promised.

*"The Lord Jesus focuses on the sincerity underlying our words and our resolve to carry out what we have said in prayer"*

Prayers are not granted simply because of the volume of words and promises or how long we kneel. The Lord Jesus focuses on the sincerity underlying our words and our resolve to carry out what we have said in prayer. Critically, we must pray in spirit and truth (Jn 4:24). The Bible records examples of both long and short prayers that God has answered. What did these have in common? They were sincere and heartfelt. Elijah prayed seven times for rain with unwavering faith (1 Kgs 18:41–45). In contrast, Abraham's servant made a quick, silent prayer when seeking a wife for Isaac. After he finished his short prayer, God immediately showed him the way (Gen 24:12–15).

### Reminder 3: Pray what we mean, and mean what we pray.

Another important aspect is that these sincere prayers were made by faithful and upright people. Today, for our prayers to be answered, we must walk according to the Holy Spirit's bidding and the truth. An effective prayer does not start when we kneel. The outcome of our prayer is predetermined by our spiritual actions in our daily life.

*"For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,  
And his ears are attentive to their prayers;  
But the face of the LORD is against those  
who do evil."* (1 Pet 3:12)



*One who turns away his ear  
from hearing the law,  
Even his prayer is an abomination.* (Prov 28:9)

The Bible is unequivocal. Our prayer is detestable to God if we do not obey His commandments. We may be sincere and fervent in prayer to Him. We may have wept in repentance. But if we get up from prayer and go forth to sin, how can we expect Him to take our repentance seriously? So, the Bible teaches us to worship in spirit and truth to seek God's pleasure. It is not just about how loud or long we pray; we must live out the image of Christ.

### Reminder 4: Pray like Christ; pray to be like Christ.

## DO NOT BE SWAYED BY OTHERS AROUND US

*"Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him."* (Mt 6:8)

Concluding His lessons to the disciples, Jesus warned them not to be like the Pharisees or the heathens they saw daily. Jesus knows that we are easily influenced by our environment and what we see the people around us say and do. We mimic their behaviors and adopt their values to fit in.

Some societal norms that we conform to make us better neighbors or citizens. But we must be discerning and avoid those that affect our spirituality. In his letter to young Timothy, the apostle Paul warned him—and warns us today—that in the last days:



*[M]en will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away.*

*(2 Tim 3:2–5)*

Do not allow these people and such attitudes to affect our hearts when we pray.

“We should not become less fervent when we see other members being less fervent or grow cold in faith when we see others backsliding”

Besides desisting from wrong, “do not be like them” means uncompromisingly doing what is right, such as praying and attending services. We should not become less fervent when we see other members being less fervent or grow cold in faith when we see others backsliding. Some people may hinder or taunt us when we try to maintain our spirituality or uphold our Christian principles. Do not let their mockery deter us. Instead, we should continue to “put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another”

(Col 3:12–13). Hold fast to the pattern of sound words that our Father has given us because this makes us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim 3:15–17). When our thoughts and ways are right in the eyes of God, He hears our prayers (Prov 15:29).

**Reminder 5: In our prayers, do not let others affect our faith, peace and sincerity.**

### A Timely Reminder

God puts people in our lives to encourage us. And they can be the most unlikely people. In college, I had a roommate who bugged me every day. Like clockwork, he would ask me: “Have you done your homework? Have you prayed today? Have you read the Bible?” He was not even Christian! One day, I irritably told him that he nagged me more than my mom did! “What does this have to do with you? You are an atheist,” I said. He nodded and replied, “I am not a Christian, but you are.” Suitably humbled, I obediently went to pray.

## CONCLUSION

Besides teaching us how to pray (Mt 6:9–13), the Lord Jesus also teaches us how to pray effectively. Prayer is an outward manifestation of our inward sincerity and faith in God. It should not be an empty, superficial display. Prayer is a time that has to be set aside for God, and we ought not to be distracted by the things around us. Moreover, the words we utter in prayer must be sincere, with a genuine desire to act on the resolutions we make in prayer. Finally, our prayer and attitude towards prayer should not be influenced by others, nor should we be discouraged by those around us.

May the Lord Jesus give us the wisdom to understand His lessons in prayer, and the strength to persist with what we have learned, so that we may continue to offer effective and edifying prayers for our church, our family, and our faith.



# CITIES OF REFUGE

KC Tsai—Toronto, Canada

*Editor's note: The cities of refuge foreshadowed the protection of Christ for sinners (see Manna 69, "The Christ in the Book of Numbers—Part 7: Cities of Refuge"). This article looks at the lessons we can draw for the true church today from these cities and the process in which they were established.*

## THE NEED FOR THE CITIES

### Retribution: Blood for Blood

After the flood, Noah and his family of eight left the ark. Thus began a fresh, new era in the history of humankind. At that point, God wanted to establish a covenant that would include everyone who disembarked from the ark: humans, birds, cattle, and beasts. The rainbow would be the sign of this everlasting covenant. God said, "Thus I establish My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen 9:11). Under the protection of God's covenant, human life would never again face the threat of total annihilation by floodwaters.

At the same time, God conferred the blessing of protection on Noah and his sons (Gen 9:1), as well as all humankind, saying:

*"Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I*

*will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man's brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man."* (Gen 9:5–6)

Before the flood, such retaliatory punishment for murder was not evident. When Cain—the first offspring born to man—killed his brother, Abel, God told him:

*"So now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth."* (Gen 4:11–12)

But God put a mark on Cain lest anyone finding him should kill him. In other words, Cain did not have to pay for his murderous act with his life (Gen 4:8–15). Subsequently, an even more violent man named Lamech emerged. Worse, he had the temerity to brag, "For I have killed a man for wounding me, even a young man for hurting me" (Gen 4:23b).

With successive generations, the violence worsened in intensity and pervasiveness. The earth was corrupt before God and filled with violence; all flesh had corrupted their way (Gen 6:11–12). So egregious was the state of the world that God finally declared to Noah—the sole righteous man left—that because the earth was filled

with violence, He would destroy humankind and the earth (Gen 6:13).

Man was originally created according to God's image of true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:24). Killing another person when not in a time of war (1 Kgs 2:5) would be contrary to such holiness and righteousness. Respect for life—whether of our own or others—is a paramount manifestation of our reverence and fear toward God. But after the fall of our first ancestors, man, with his sinful nature, had shown that he was unlikely to refrain from violence without a severe deterrent. Therefore, in the post-flood world and world order, God decreed that it would be blood for blood, and a life for a life. However, the holy and just God is careful to differentiate between deliberate and accidental killing.

### Refuge: Flee to Safety

Three months after leaving Egypt, the Israelites arrived at the Wilderness of Sinai. Here, God gave them the Ten Commandments so that they would be His people among the nations, a holy nation of priests. Included in the laws and ordinances given to them was the instruction:

*"He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death. However, if he did not lie in wait, but God delivered him into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place where he may flee. But if a man acts*



*with premeditation against his neighbour, to kill him by treachery, you shall take him from My altar, that he may die.” (Ex 21:12–14)*

God’s clarification to Moses specified that manslaughter (accidental killing) would be treated differently from murder (premeditated killing). Those guilty of the former and fearing retribution could seek sanctuary.

While Moses was the physical leader of the people, God said that He bore them on eagles’ wings and brought them to Himself (Ex 19:4). Similarly, in the true church of God today, while God’s ministers are the ones who physically pastor and guide His people, in the Spirit, it is God who removes all the obstacles in the believers’ way and guides them back to Him.

In the era of the kings, God’s altar was the ultimate refuge for those fleeing for their lives. But not everyone who fled there was spared. Adonijah, the fourth

son of King David, born through Haggith, plotted to usurp the throne when David was old and in failing health (1 Kgs 1:5–9). However, honoring an earlier promise, David made Solomon the king instead. When Adonijah realized that his plan had failed, and his life was in danger, he fled to God’s tabernacle and took hold of the horns of the altar. King Solomon sent men to bring him down from the altar and spared his life on this occasion (1 Kgs 1:50–53).

Joab was the commander who sided with Adonijah in the latter’s failed attempt to usurp the throne. When Joab learned that King Solomon had stripped Abiathar, the priest, of his priestly duty for supporting Adonijah, he fled to the tabernacle of God and took hold of the horns of the altar. This did not save him. King Solomon sent men to kill Joab because the latter had murdered Abner (commander of the army of Israel) and Amasa (commander of the army of Judah). Since these killings were not done on a battlefield but during peacetime, they were cold-blooded murders—the shedding of innocent blood (1 Kgs 2:5, 28–35). And thus, Joab had to repay with his blood.

The example of Joab demonstrates God’s righteous will. There is no refuge for premeditated killing. The murderer would still be seized and put to death even if he were to run to God’s altar. Not only would he be without God’s protection, but he would be condemned to death by God’s commandment (Num 35:30–31). This was necessary because the land would be defiled when one killed and shed the blood of another; only the punitive shedding of the murderer’s blood could redeem and cleanse the land. God said:

*“So you shall not pollute the land where you are; for blood defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it except by the blood of him who shed it. Therefore do not defile the land which you inhabit, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the LORD dwell among the children of Israel.” (Num 35:33–34)*

*“God desires to save man from punishment and inevitable spiritual death, but man must flee according to the way God provided”*

Knowing that accidental killing could and would occur, God appointed a place for those who committed manslaughter to flee to save their lives (Ex 21:13). Although killing was a direct violation of the Ten Commandments, the all-righteous God mercifully provided a way of escape for those who accidentally committed such a serious sin. In our context today, God desires to save man from punishment and inevitable spiritual death, but man must flee according to the way God provided.

## **THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CITIES**

After wandering in the wilderness for thirty-nine years, the Israelites arrived at the plains of Moab, east of the Jordan, in the fifth month of the fortieth year (Num 33:38, 48). The Lord God told Moses:

*“Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall appoint cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person accidentally may flee there. They shall be cities of refuge for you from the*

*avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation in judgment. And of the cities which you give, you shall have six cities of refuge. You shall appoint three cities on this side of the Jordan, and three cities you shall appoint in the land of Canaan, which will be cities of refuge. These six cities shall be for refuge for the children of Israel, for the stranger, and for the sojourner among them, that anyone who kills a person accidentally may flee there.”*

*(Num 35:10–15)*

The steadfast God had promised them the institution of the cities of refuge at the beginning of their journey in the wilderness (Ex 21:12–14). At the end of the forty-year journey, God did not forget to instruct them on where to set the cities up, for whom to set these up, and how man could preserve his life through the cities of refuge.

## Location of the Cities of Refuge

After the Israelites entered the land of Canaan, they were led by the Commander of God’s army (Josh 5:13–15) to defeat thirty-one kings in that land (Josh 12:24). They took over their land and besieged their cities. God’s army was the people of Israel (Ex 12:41), and the Commander was God Himself. When Joshua was advanced in years, the Lord said to him:

*“You are old, advanced in years, and there remains very much land yet to be possessed. ...them I will drive out from before the children of Israel; only divide it by lot to Israel as an inheritance, as I have commanded you.”*

*(Josh 13:1b, 6b)*

At this point, the Israelites had not yet taken over all the cities and land God had promised to give them. But God’s specific instructions on the division of the land indicate His expectation that they should have absolute faith in His words. As His church and army today, we should similarly have this absolute belief and trust in God’s words and go forth to proclaim His faithfulness (Rom 3:3).

Eleazer the priest, Joshua, and the leaders of the Israelite tribes gathered before the Lord in front of the tabernacle at Shiloh to cast lots to divide the land among the twelve tribes of Israel. Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph’s two sons, were considered separate tribes and were thus each allotted a portion of the land. The Levites received no land. Instead, God would be the Levites’ inheritance, and He allocated the heave offerings from the Israelites to the Levites (Deut 10:9; Num 18:23–24). The Levites could dwell in cities given by the rest of the children of Israel, and the latter would also give the Levites common land for their cattle, herds, and all their animals (Num 35:1–5). The Lord also said:

*“Now among the cities which you will give to the Levites you shall appoint six cities of refuge, to which a manslayer may flee. And to these you shall add forty-two cities. So all the cities you will give to the Levites shall be forty-eight; these you shall give with their common-land. And the cities which you will give shall be from the possession of the children of Israel; from the larger tribe you shall give many, from the smaller you shall give few. Each shall give some of its cities to the Levites, in proportion to the inheritance that each receives.”*

*(Num 35:6–8)*

Among the Levitical cities were six special cities that would function as a place of refuge where those who were eligible would be safe from harm. Today, God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble (Ps 46:1).

God bestows true peace to man through the church. The city of refuge prefigures the spiritual true church mentioned in the Bible. The True Jesus Church—the dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Eph 2:22)—is the place where man’s life can be protected from sure death (Rom 6:23).

*Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned—(For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.)*

*(Rom 5:12–14)*

“But Adam’s sin also put a barrier between man and God, rendering man unable to turn to the holy and Almighty God without fear”

Although humankind—Adam’s race—did not eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, all fell under the sin Adam committed and were doomed to destruction (Rom 5:15–21). The only way to survive is to seek and enter the city of refuge. But Adam’s sin also put a barrier between man and God, rendering man unable to turn to the holy and Almighty God without fear. Thus, God became flesh (1 Tim 3:16), bore man’s sins, and was crucified on the cross for these sins. This is how Jesus fulfilled the work of salvation.

The church is the body of Christ (Eph 1:22–23); it is the stairway leading to heaven (Gen 28:12–19; Jn 1:51). Through the church, man can be reborn through water and the Spirit (Jn 3:3–5), enabling man to return to the heavenly Father. So the true church is the city of refuge for man before man’s body is redeemed and returns to the heavenly Father (Rom 8:18–23).

## Distribution of the Cities of Refuge

The Levites lived in forty-eight cities across the territories allocated to the twelve tribes of Israel. As the cities designated

for the Levites' dwellings were distributed throughout the land, the Israelites could set up the cities of refuge in strategic locations. This meant that any person—no matter where they hailed from—could flee quickly to a city of refuge.

*"You shall prepare roads for yourself, and divide into three parts the territory of your land which the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, that any manslayer may flee there. ...and if you keep all these commandments and do them, which I command you today, to love the LORD your God and to walk always in His ways, then you shall add three more cities for yourself besides these three, lest innocent blood be shed in the midst of your land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and thus guilt of bloodshed be upon you."* (Deut 19:3, 9–10)

Moses specifically told the Israelites to prepare roads towards the cities of refuge and add more cities of refuge to facilitate access for manslaughterers. Preparing roads involves clearing away all obstacles on the way and setting up road signs and milestones so that those fleeing for their lives may run on the right path, in the right direction, and eventually enter the city of refuge. In the same way, the true church today must have pure doctrines according to the Holy Bible, the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and the spiritual virtues of believers as clear road signs for those seeking salvation, so that those who seek God and God's house may walk on the right path, recognize the true church, and yearn to enter it.

*So they appointed Kedesh in Galilee, in the mountains of Naphtali, Shechem in the mountains of Ephraim, and Kirjath Arba (which is Hebron) in the mountains of Judah. And on the other side of the Jordan, by Jericho eastward, they assigned Bezer in the wilderness on the plain, from the tribe of Rueben, Ramoth in Gilead, from the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan, from the tribe of Manasseh. These were the cities appointed for all the children of Israel and for the stranger who dwelt among them, that whoever killed a person accidentally might flee there, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood until he stood before the congregation.* (Josh 20:7–9)

In obedience to God's instruction given through Moses, the Israelites divided the land to the east of Jordan and the west of Jordan into three parts, namely north, central, and south. A city of refuge was established at the center of each part, such that the distance between any point in the entire land of Israel from a city of refuge was less than fifty kilometers, which was a day's journey, "lest the avenger of

blood, while his anger is hot, pursue the manslayer and overtake him, because the way is long, and kill him, though he was not deserving of death, since he had not hated the victim in time past" (Deut 19:6).

We can imagine the ensuing chaos and panic at the scene when a man is accidentally killed. The avenger of blood (e.g., the victim's relatives) may be so furious that they want to pursue the manslayer and kill him on the spot. The congregation must then adjudicate. If the congregation judges the killing to be accidental, the congregation is responsible for delivering the manslayer to the city of refuge (Num 35:24–25). While delivering the manslayer from the hand of the avenger, the congregation would



have to protect him, provide him with food and water, direct his path, and even accompany the fugitive on his journey.

Besides the children of Israel, the cities were also meant to provide refuge for the strangers and the sojourners among them—anyone who has accidentally killed a person may flee there (Num 35:15). In today's context, the church is a place of refuge for believers. However, we should also extend our hospitality to truth-seekers (strangers and sojourners). We, as God's chosen congregation, should be sincere and keen to share information on our faith and provide care and help for daily and spiritual needs. Critically, walk with such "refugees" on their journey of belief so that

they can enter into the Lord's salvation.

**"Christ is our refuge, and the church is His body.**

**Today, the true church is the city of refuge that protects life. Once a person enters the true church, he must not turn apostate"**

Some people believe that magnificent church buildings are necessary to glorify God and attract people. They thus invest vast sums of money in grand church-building projects. However, it is often difficult to disentangle our motivations: are we really doing this to glorify God or ourselves? In fact, there is a very thin line between such thinking ("big is better," "beautiful churches show that God blesses and abides with us") and the goals of the people building the tower of Babel. While there is nothing wrong in providing good facilities and amenities for people to come together to worship the Lord, let us always examine our personal motivations (Prov 21:2–3) and strive to let our beautiful deeds of love glorify God and edify man (Jn 13:35).

God divided the land into six parts, setting up six cities of refuge. This indicates His desire for the gospel to be preached to all the world and for His church to be easily accessible. If our "cities of refuge" are few and far apart, those seeking peace and eternal life may be dampened in their determination to draw close to God and eventually may give up because the journey is too far.

## Outside the Cities of Refuge

In the city of refuge, the manslayer is safe from being killed by the avenger of blood. To stay safe, he must not leave the city of refuge.

*"But if the manslayer at any time goes outside the limits of the city of refuge where he fled, and the avenger of blood finds him outside the limits of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood"* (Num 35:26–27)

Christ is our refuge, and the church is His body (Heb 6:18; Eph 1:22–23). Today, the true church is the city of refuge that protects life. Once a person enters the true church, he must not turn apostate and leave the church. If a believer leaves the church, it is usually because his faith is immature (Eph 4:14), his faith has yet to be rooted (Col 2:6–7), he loves the world (2 Tim 4:10), or he has some disagreement with or bitterness

towards other believers. Should we find ourselves in similar unhappy situations, we should not be quick to blame ministers and other believers or label the church as “cold and lacking love.” Introspect to see how we ourselves may have contributed to the problems. Most importantly, do not allow these grievances to cause us to leave our city of refuge.

“God’s true church takes an essential place in the history of salvation—she is the bride waiting for the Lamb to come and take her as His wife”

From the time of creation, the mystery of God was hidden in Himself. But the mystery and wisdom of God have been made known to all through His true church (Eph 3:9–10). God’s true church takes an essential place in the history of salvation—she is the bride waiting for the Lamb to come and take her as His wife. She is worthy of honor and submission from all man. Sadly, some believers overlook the honor and sanctity of the church. They regard the church as a platform to realize their personal ideals, demanding compromise from the church. By doing so, they are exalting themselves above the church. Little wonder then that some such believers eventually choose to leave the church.

*“For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.”*  
(Heb 6:4–6, ESV)<sup>1</sup>

Just like the manslayers who must not leave the cities of refuge, once a person has believed in the Lord, received the truth of salvation, and entered into the true church, it would be impossible for him to be restored to repentance if he forsakes the truth, falls away, or even attacks the church (Heb 6:4–8).

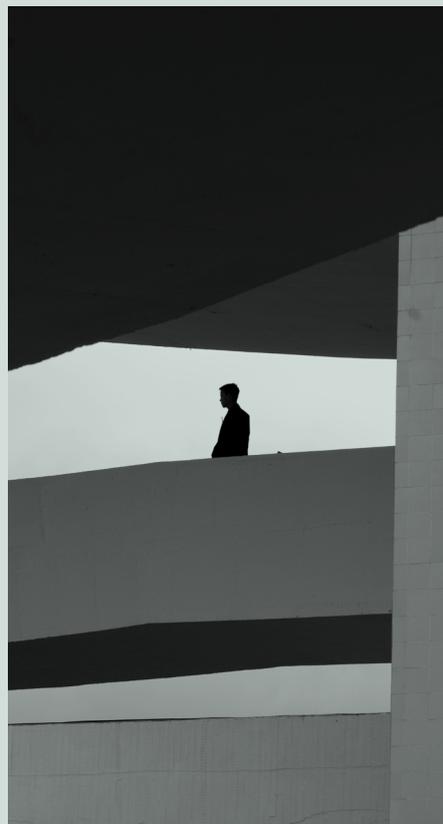
*If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not*

*say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.*  
(1 Jn 5:16–17)

## What is sin leading to death?

*Now behold, one came and said to Him, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” So He said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.”*  
(Mt 19:16–17)

Since one has to keep the commandments to enter into life, it implies that by intentionally violating the commandments, one would be committing sin, leading



to death. If we are unable to enter into everlasting life, the only place we are heading towards is eternal death. When the young man asked Jesus which commandments he had to keep, Jesus answered:

*“‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”*  
(Mt 19:18–19)

These commandments are none other than the Ten Commandments God gave to His people on Mount Sinai. The Lord is not teaching the people to keep half or

part of the commandments. James, the brother of the Lord, warns us, “For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all” (Jas 2:10). Therefore, not serving the only true God, worshipping idols, taking the name of God in vain (including using God’s name to achieve our personal agenda), not keeping the Sabbath (despising the Sabbath and consistently refusing to observe it), or intentionally going against the other commandments are all sins leading to death. The true church that is saved highly esteems the Ten Commandments and leads her members in striving to keep them.

The Lord Jesus said:

*“Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.”*  
(Mt 12:31–32)

Blasphemy against the Spirit is also a sin leading to death. Such sins will not be forgiven, be it in this life or the life to come. Blasphemy against the Spirit is the act of intentionally defaming the Holy Spirit, such as claiming that the work of the Holy Spirit is the manifestation of the evil spirit (cf. Mt 12:24). As the true church has the abidance of the Holy Spirit, her believers speak in tongues when praying, and there are wonders and miracles as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit. These must not be carelessly vilified.

“Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit also includes the act of sinning intentionally, sinning against one’s own body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit”

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit also includes the act of sinning intentionally, sinning against one’s own body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:18–19). He who wilfully sins after receiving the knowledge of the truth has “trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace” (Heb 10:26–29). For such a person, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins. One who has already entered the true church but wilfully sins and remains in sin will lose the chance of salvation.

<sup>1</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

## LEAVING THE CITIES OF REFUGE

### Death of the High Priest

*So the congregation shall deliver the manslayer from the hand of the avenger of blood, and the congregation shall return him to the city of refuge where he had fled, and he shall remain there until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil. ...But after the death of the high priest the manslayer may return to the land of his possession.*  
(Num 35:25, 28b)

The avenger of blood shall not kill the manslayer after the death of the high priest; otherwise, he will be guilty of the sin of shedding another man's blood. God redeemed the lives of the manslayers with the death of the high priest, so that they may return to the land of their possession to start a new life, free from anyone seeking revenge. In effect, they were free from the threat of death because of the death of the high priest (Josh 20:6).

God appointed the Old Testament high priests without an oath (Heb 7:21). If the death of a human high priest was able to redeem the lives of those deserving death, what more the eternal high priest who was made priest with an oath by God (Ps 110:4; Heb 7:22).

### Jesus, our Eternal High Priest

The Lord Jesus has entered the Presence behind the veil, having become high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb 6:19–20); He is the minister of the true tabernacle in heaven erected by God (Heb 8:2). The tabernacle on earth erected by man was imperfect and impermanent. The high priest entered the holy of holies once a year, bringing with him blood to offer sacrifices for the sins of the people and himself. However, the sacrifices offered could not make him who performed the service perfect with regard to the conscience (Heb 9:9).

In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus offered His own body as the sacrifice. He entered the true tabernacle in heaven and fulfilled in Himself, the eternal high priest, all the burnt and sin offerings offered up in the tabernacle on earth. "Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His

own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (Heb 9:12). Jesus Christ, the high priest, offered up one sacrifice for sins, and perfected forever those who are being sanctified (Heb 10:12–14).

*Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly await Him for He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.*  
(Heb 9:28)

Jesus will come again and receive us to the place He prepared, which is the everlasting inheritance in heaven (Jn 14:1–4). Therefore, the apostle Peter writes:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you. (1 Pet 1:3–4)*

Just as those who were in the city of refuge received grace, those who are in the true church today have a living hope and are waiting for the redemption of their bodies (Rom 8:18–23; 1 Cor 15:35–54). We are going to receive an inheritance among all those who are sanctified (Acts 20:32). This inheritance is reserved in the spirit, in heaven, for those who have repented, believed in the Lord, and been baptized; and receiving the Holy Spirit is the guarantee of their future inheritance (Eph 1:14). May we always treasure and preserve this blessing.



## A MORE ABUNDANT LIFE (PART 2):

# DIRECTION AND RICHNESS

Based on sermons by Raymond Chou—San Jose, California, USA

*Editor's note: In the first part of this series (Manna 95), we learned how pursuing true peace and hope in Christ leads to a more meaningful and abundant life. This concluding article examines how our direction and attitude to riches can affect our earthly lives and our destination hereafter.*

We all hope to live a rich and abundant life. Many in the world pursue physical riches and work to build up their wealth and possessions, believing these will bring joy, satisfaction, and meaning to their time on earth. With these goals in mind, their direction in life is set. But where does such a path lead?

As Christians, we understand that our time on earth will determine our destination beyond this life. So it is important for us to consider the trajectory of our lives. How do we choose the right direction? Where are our hopes and dreams leading us? How can we gain true richness and abundance in this life and beyond?

### CHOOSE THE RIGHT DIRECTION

We are told that hard work, sacrifice, and perseverance make the recipe for success. But this is not always the case. If we work towards the wrong goal, we will have regrets no matter how hard we work. If we set off in the wrong direction, we will end up at the wrong destination, regardless of how fast we run or how arduous the journey.

So, choosing the right direction is important. If we have a clear direction, each step will bring us closer to our goals. Our values and goals influence the decisions we make, both big and small, each day. These choices, in turn, determine the



quality and outcomes of our life. Choosing the right direction could lead us to untold joys; the wrong direction, or the lack of one, will lead to deep regret.

This is why it is essential to ask God for wisdom to make the right decisions and for guidance in the right direction.

### A Life-Changing Decision

Simon Peter was one of Jesus' closest disciples and witnessed Jesus' transfiguration. He became an important worker and a pillar of the apostolic church. Thousands of years later, we are still learning from his example. But he could only walk such an illustrious path because he made a series of life-changing

decisions, putting his life on a course that diverged drastically from that of a typical Galilean fisherman.

Luke 5:1–8 describes one of Peter's early encounters with Jesus. Many people had gathered by the lake to hear Jesus teach, but Peter and the other fishermen were washing their nets after a night of fishing. Nets would become damaged and tangled during regular use, so repairing and keeping them in good condition were essential for a good catch. Suddenly, Jesus climbed into Peter's boat and asked him to put out the boat a little distance from the land so that Jesus could speak to the whole crowd.

If we were Peter, how would we respond? Peter was in the middle of an important task, essential to his livelihood, when a stranger asked to use his boat. At this point, he had to make a deceptively simple decision. He could have told Jesus, "Don't you see that I am busy with something important?" Or, more politely, "Could I help you after I have finished my task?" But he did not.

Today, we face a similar decision. Jesus has come into our lives, and we have the opportunity to get to know Him and the gospel of salvation. How will we answer His invitation?

We could say that we are too busy or that following Jesus would be inconvenient. We could choose to focus on our livelihood or careers—to ignore Jesus' request and keep repairing our net. Or we could acknowledge Jesus but tell Him that it is not a good time. Some people see faith in Jesus as good and meaningful—they believe in the soul and in judgement after death—but they say, "I will come back later."

However, there is no certainty in life.

Accidents can happen at any time. If we delay and continue to decline Jesus' invitation, the door of salvation may close to us. When we decide it is time to accept Jesus, He may no longer be in the boat. We will wonder how things could have turned out if we had welcomed Jesus into our lives.

But Simon Peter chose differently. He accepted Jesus onto his boat and obeyed His instruction to put it out from the shore.

## When I Am Retired

There was once a truth-seeker who came to church for a long time but declined baptism. He had received the Holy Spirit and had even brought others to believe and be baptized. He explained: "When you are baptized, you must give up your whole life to God. But I am too busy right now. And as a businessman, I wouldn't be able to lie or bend the rules to gain more profit. I will get baptized after I retire; then, I will work hard for God." This truth-seeker did not consider the fact that he might not live long enough to see retirement.

## First, Listen to God's Word

In Luke 5:4–7, Jesus told Simon Peter, "Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." After doing so, Peter and the other fishermen gathered two boatloads of fish. In our astonishment, we often overlook the sequence of events: only after Jesus had finished teaching the multitudes did he tell Peter to let down his net.

Some people come to church to seek miracles or help from God. They want physical or material blessings—health and wealth—and believe in Jesus as a method to solve their problems. They commit to Christianity for as long as they are blessed, or leave to seek out other religions for the same purpose. But this is not pursuing religion; this is pursuing a trade.

Of course, everyone comes to Jesus for different reasons. Some have health problems, family issues, or the feeling of emptiness. Our loving heavenly Father wants to help and heal us, and He is willing to bless us. However, we must learn to grow in our faith and progress from simply seeking physical help to walking in the right spiritual direction. We believe in Jesus not just so we can have a smooth life but so that our soul can gain eternal

salvation. We must listen to the teachings of Jesus and strive to know Him and His word before going out to fish. Jesus reminds us:

*"Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."*

(Mt 6:31–33)

After listening to Jesus speak, we will receive blessings and help from God. God knows what we need, and when we seek Him and His righteousness first, He will provide for us.



We often focus on the consequences of the fisherman's actions—the fact that he cast his net and caught an abundance of fish, demonstrating the benefits of believing and trusting in Jesus. But we forget Peter's initial response to Jesus' instruction, "Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing" (Lk 5:5b). As an experienced fisherman, Peter informed Jesus that the likelihood of catching any fish was slim. However, Peter went against his own judgment and said,

"[N]evertheless at Your word I will let down the net" (Lk 5:5c).

What was going through Peter's mind when he cast his net? Likely, he did not believe Jesus would help him catch much fish, based on his experience. And Jesus did not promise him a great catch or any other blessings. So, Peter did not cast his net because he was expecting a positive outcome. He simply decided to do as Jesus asked. His mindset was: *Because You spoke, I will obey.* He found value in following Jesus' direction. It did not matter if he caught two or two boatloads of fish—he had found something more valuable than any of these.

## Readjusting Our Values and Direction

*When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish which they had taken; and so also were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men."*

(Lk 5:8–10)

While most fishermen would be overjoyed at such a miraculous blessing of abundant fish, Peter's reaction was curious. When everyone else rejoiced over the amazing catch, Peter saw the Savior amidst the miracle. When everyone else was busy counting the fish, he bowed before Jesus and proclaimed himself a sinner. He did not bask in the wealth and benefits the fish brought but realized that a relationship with Jesus was the most valuable thing he could gain. The miracle was no longer important to Peter because its purpose was to lead him to believe in Jesus and experience spiritual abundance.

Many fishermen were by the sea of Galilee that day, but most are no longer remembered by history or by God. On the other hand, Simon Peter made a series of decisions that changed his life and values, altering his direction. He forsook all and followed Jesus. May Jesus give us wisdom, like Peter, to understand the decisions we must make and the direction we should take to live a more abundant life.

## RICHNESS

### The Deceptiveness of Wealth

Society teaches us that to gain an abundant life, we must go in a particular direction and hit certain milestones. We study hard for exams so that we can enter a prestigious school, attain a good degree, and launch a lucrative career that will fund a comfortable lifestyle and prosperous future. Other paths can lead in this direction, but the underlying belief is the same: pursuing wealth brings joy, security, and value to our lives. But the Bible tells us that those who love silver will not be satisfied with silver (Eccl 5:10). Many rich people understand how to preserve and grow their wealth, but the greedy will never be satisfied no matter how much money they have.

#### My Work Is Done— Why Wait?

George Eastman was the founder of Kodak, which, a hundred years ago, was the equivalent of Apple. He grew up in a low-income family but became one of the wealthiest men in the world because of his innovations in film photography and his business acumen. He built Kodak into a world-leading photography brand and achieved all his ambitions. However, such success does not protect against all the ills that life could bring. After developing a debilitating and painful spinal condition, he took his own life. In the note he left behind, he wrote: *My work is done—why wait?* He felt he had nothing to look forward to—that life was not worth living. Even vast wealth pales into insignificance in the face of great suffering.

As a preacher, I have the opportunity to visit many places, including countries where the members are poor. I once visited a family in the Dominican Republic who lived in a slum and saw a group of children

playing baseball. They had no shoes or baseball gloves; they used a rock as their ball and a stick as their bat. I was initially troubled and shocked, but the joy in their faces and the sound of their laughter struck me. I thought, *They don't have anything, but their lives are full of joy; yet in such a prosperous nation as the US, where we and our children have many things, such laughter is rare.*

### The Parable of the Rich Fool

The parable of the rich fool tells of a hard-working and successful man who yielded plentifully and devised a plan to pull down his barns and build larger ones to store his crops and goods for years to come (Lk 12:16–21). We can learn from his virtues. Firstly, he yielded plentifully



without resorting to devious means. We can assume that he labored honestly to grow and harvest his crop, and his efforts were aptly rewarded. He was also forward-thinking, making plans to prepare for the

future. He had the skill, ability, talent, and foresight to grow his wealth. Not only that, he knew that there was more to life than working hard, and he planned to enjoy the fruit of his labors.

Some people operate with a scarcity mentality—the feeling and anxiety of having insufficient time, money, and other resources, even when this is not the case. They may be affluent, but they are obsessively frugal with their money, preferring to build up their bank balance over spending on perceived indulgences, to the point of self-neglect. A member once shared with me that he could not bring himself to go on vacation despite working hard six days a week. He had thought about it for years, but in the end, he could not bear the double loss—first, losing the opportunity to make money, and second, having to pay for the vacation.

The rich man in the parable not only knew how to make money but also how to enjoy it. So why did God consider him to be a fool?

#### The False Promise of Materialism

*And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry."*

(Lk 12:19)

The first reason God considered the man foolish was that he sought to use material possessions to satisfy the emptiness of his heart. Individuals in this generation often feel something is missing in their lives. Young people will usually say they are bored. As they grow older, they learn to conceal their restlessness and spiritual emptiness with other things—ambitions, passions, amusements, addictions. If they do not know the meaning of life, then they are free to pursue their heart's desire. And yet, the emptiness in their hearts is never filled.

Some people attempt to satisfy this emptiness by accumulating wealth. They indulge in luxurious purchases and novel experiences to stimulate their emotions. However, they often still feel a void because the heart's desires cannot be satisfied with

such things. This is the sad story of today's consumerist world. Like the rich fool who said to himself, "Take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry," we try to fill our emptiness by consuming endless streams of goods and entertainment. But like the rich man, we often do not realize that these things will not bring us true and lasting joy.

## Yearning For the Simple Life

In a previous job, I had an assistant. We were roughly the same age, but on his first day, he arrived driving a Mercedes-Benz S-Class—a car I had never seen before in the flesh. I gradually discovered that he lived with his high-flying executive mother and a butler in a mansion, and they owned six cars in total. One day, I stopped by his house, and I was awestruck. At the time, twenty years ago, this property was worth four million US dollars and had a golf driving range on the grounds. There was a part of the house that no one could enter, not even my assistant, because it had been custom-designed and built by a famous designer and had cost USD \$280,000. I had only seen such lavishness on TV; it was hard to process. I told him he was blessed to live in such luxury. But my assistant hated it. To him, it was like living in a cold and lifeless museum. His mother was never home, and he was lonely. He yearned to return to his childhood when his mother did not work and his father was a teacher. They lived in a small house and were together all the time. He missed gathering around the small table with his family for hotpot and would have traded everything—the fancy house, the cars, the watches—for that simple life again.

If we feel that our life is meaningless, we need to seek a new direction. Matters of the heart can only be solved by focusing on the soul. And the emptiness of life can

only be satisfied by Jesus Christ. If we know the true gospel of salvation, we will realize there is more to life. If we change the direction of our life, we will discover what is truly valuable and gain satisfaction.

## Life Is in God's Hands

*"But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?'"* (Lk 12:20)

The second reason God called the rich man a fool was that he failed to understand that life was not within his control. None of us knows what will happen in the next moment. We make plans spanning ten or twenty years, which is not wrong, but have we considered that we may not live to reach



those years? Humans think that life is in their hands—that they control their future. The reality is that there are no guarantees; life is fragile, and circumstances are often beyond our control.

So when the rich man assumes he will have time to enjoy life, God deems him a fool. If the Lord decides to take away our life today, what good would all our wealth and success be?

*"So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."* (Lk 12:21)

Wealth is not a problem in itself, and being rich is not a sin. There is no issue with working hard and seeking financial security to improve the quality of our lives. But the question is whether we are rich or poor before God. We may eat, drink, and be merry, but when the time comes for us to meet our Maker, if we stand before Him empty-handed, He will deem us a fool.

## CONCLUSION

We all have hopes for the future but should acknowledge that anything could happen. In the time we have left—however much time God allows us—let us consider the meaning of life and reflect on what is truly valuable. This is how we gain wisdom to understand the direction we should take in life, and live accordingly (Ps 90:12).

Make the life-changing decision to accept Jesus into our lives, heed His words, and follow His direction. Resist the worldly influence of materialism, which sells us the lie that earning and consuming more will fill the void that only Jesus can fill. Do not trust in riches, but trust in God, who holds our life in His hand. Let us redirect our focus towards our heavenly goal, for where our heart lies, so does our treasure (Lk 12:33–34; Mt 6:19–21). Then, when we meet our Lord, He will truly be pleased with us.

May we live a valuable and meaningful life in God's eyes so we can have abundance in this life and gloriously enter the next.



# WE THOUGHT WE WERE JUST PASSING BY

Yi Lin Wu—Taichung, Taiwan

*Editor's note: On June 30, 2021, a fire broke out in the fifteen-story Chiao Yu Building in Changhua City. Three floors of the building housed the Passion Fruit Hotel, which was designated as a quarantine hotel—part of Taiwan's strategy to control the spread of COVID-19. Preacher Chien Kuang Chen was one of four people who passed away in the fire. Here, his widow recounts the terrifying experience, her last moments with her beloved husband, and how, despite it all, God has granted her peace, a resolute faith, and a renewed sense of purpose in life.*

In the face of the inexplicable calamity that befell Job, Job's friends could only rationalize it as divine punishment for Job's hidden sins. However, the Bible reveals that mistaking this calamity for divine punishment was not only a misconception, but a sin. Yet, such thinking is not only characteristic of Job's friends but something we could be guilty of ourselves. It is bewildering to think that such violence could befall a just man, one who was blameless and upright, who feared God and shunned evil (Job 1:1). Similarly, we may expect God to protect His workers today and make their way as smooth-sailing as possible. We are surprised when tragedy strikes His faithful servants.

## HE LEADS ME BESIDE THE STILL WATERS

The preacher and I were sent to Thailand to support the church and missionary work. During the years we served in Thailand, we regularly returned to Taiwan during our vacations. This time, as we were returning to Taiwan during the ongoing pandemic, we had to stay at a quarantine hotel for two weeks. We took an anti-epidemic taxi from Taoyuan Airport directly to the Passion Fruit Hotel, which was a relatively new hotel in Changhua.

As part of the quarantine procedure, the preacher and I were assigned individual rooms, even though we were husband and wife, and we could only leave our rooms to collect our meals. Hence, we would communicate via Line<sup>1</sup> and plan our meal times so we could meet each other outside. We were content just to be able to see each other.

On the fourth night, after 7 P.M., a fire broke out in the hotel. Initially, I noticed a faint smell of smoke in the air but thought it could not be a fire. Nevertheless, I left my room and knocked on the preacher's door. As he exited his room, it slipped his mind to

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<sup>1</sup> An instant communications and social networking service app.



keep the door from closing. The hotel did not provide quarantine guests with keys, so he was now locked out of his room.

We did not think much of it at the time, and since others were also coming out of their rooms, we took the opportunity to walk to Preacher Yao's room. Preacher Yao had arrived at the quarantine hotel four days before us. While we were chatting with Preacher Yao, the firefighters arrived. The firefighters instructed us to return to our rooms, following the quarantine procedure. As the preacher's room was locked, we entered my room. The smoke followed soon after.

### **YEA, THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH**

The smoke came thick and fast, and in a matter of minutes, it filled the room such that we could not even see our own hands. Breathing was almost impossible, and I had to stand on a small table to reach the open window. Out of the window, I could see the thick plumes of smoke and the fire rising from the lower levels of the building.

Throughout this time, I frequently called out to the preacher to ask if he was feeling okay, and he would reply that he was fine. After about half an hour, I could hear the preacher praying. My first thought was that the preacher was not feeling well and he was calling out to God for help. He prayed for a few minutes before his voice stopped.

When he went quiet, I cried out, "Are you okay? Are you okay?" But he did not respond. Fearing that he fainted, I quickly got off the table and blindly groped around to find him. Thankfully, the preacher was sitting next to the table where I was standing.

**"I could only call on God, clinging to the window, crying and praying. I said, 'God, if there was anything that we lacked or failed to do as husband and wife, please forgive us' "**

When I found him, I told him, "Get up quickly. Don't sleep. You can't sleep like this." He looked very calm, almost like he was resting, just breathing normally. However, the reality was that he was too weak to get up or even utter a response.

I told him I would help him to the window where he could breathe better.

But I soon realized I did not have the strength to move him, let alone lift him, and I had no choice but to lay him on the ground where I thought the air would be better. I started CPR on him and kept telling him not to sleep, but I, too, was finding it difficult to breathe and feeling faint. I had to climb quickly to the window to catch my breath before returning to the preacher to continue CPR. This went on for some time until I had no energy left to climb down from the window. The last thing I recall saying to the preacher was, "Are you leaving me?"

It was at this point when I felt the most helpless and could only focus on God. When the fire started, and the smoke filled the room, I was anxious and full of adrenaline, going back and forth between the window and the preacher, until finally, I could not even do that. I could only call on God, clinging to the window, crying and praying. I said, "God, if there was anything that we lacked or failed to do as husband and wife, please forgive us and have mercy on us. No matter if we live or die, we will follow Your will. May the Lord's will be done."

At that time, I felt peace at the thought that we might die.

Suddenly, I heard the firefighters coming into the room. I quickly flashed my phone's torchlight toward the ground so they could see the preacher lying there first. I watched them try to save him, but they signaled that his heart and lungs had stopped functioning. Then, the firefighter turned to me and told me to come down. He escorted me out of the building and into an ambulance to be sent to Changhua Xiuchuan Hospital.

### **FOR YOU ARE WITH ME; YOUR ROD AND YOUR STAFF, THEY COMFORT ME**

I broke down when I arrived at the emergency room at around 1 A.M., six hours after the fire had started. My emotions and thoughts overwhelmed me, and I could not stop crying. The preacher was still at the hotel, and I did not know when he would be rescued. I could only pray to God that the preacher would be sent to the same hospital emergency room so we could at least be together. Should he be sent to another hospital, I did not know how I would even be able to find him.

After an hour, I saw the paramedics wheeling another patient to the bed diagonally across from mine. I recognized that it was the preacher by his clothes.

As I gathered myself to walk over to him, the doctor came and told me to prepare myself mentally as the preacher's condition was not good. With that, I walked over to see the preacher. Even though we had just come from the scene of a fire, from a smoke and soot-filled room, I saw the preacher's face as like that of a bride adorned to be taken to meet her groom in her new heavenly home. The preacher was smiling and more beautiful than I had ever seen him in our thirty years of marriage. I was deeply comforted by this vision of the preacher's radiant face. I thanked God for allowing the preacher to be sent to the same hospital so I could see him one last time, and even more so that He showed me the preacher beautifully adorned and prepared to return to his heavenly home.

**“A preacher reminded me that when we encounter disasters, we should quieten our thoughts and trust in God”**

I was kept in the ward for further treatment, and although brothers and sisters were not allowed to visit me, many of them sent words of comfort and encouragement. In one of the messages I received, a preacher reminded me that when we encounter disasters, we should quieten our thoughts and trust in God. Only with a quiet heart can we reflect on our circumstances. The preacher's words resonated with me as I was mostly left alone with my thoughts during my time in the hospital. I was able to reflect on why God let this happen to my family and what His will was in all of this. And despite all that happened, even though my husband was taken away from me, even though I went through great tribulation and faced the fragility of life, I survived. I still endured great discomfort as I recovered, but I felt the peace and comfort of God, as He was personally with me each step of the way.

**YOU ANOINT MY HEAD WITH OIL; MY CUP RUNS OVER**

I believe that, in the midst of adversity, God personally comforted me. Reflecting on all that happened on our return to Taiwan: first, God had given the preacher and me the wonderful opportunity to work together as husband and wife in Thailand, and those years were the best period of my life thus far. Second, just before the fire spread, the preacher was locked out of his room, which meant that we could face death together. Third, the preacher was praying even as his life was ending, and it greatly comforted me to know that he was entering paradise in communion with God in prayer. Fourth, we were able to meet again in the emergency room of the hospital, and God showed me that the preacher was radiantly prepared to be received into His paradise. Finally, my fellow brothers and sisters continued to provide me with care and comfort after the preacher's passing. May the Lord remember their love and prayers!

After all this, I feel as though I have already died and God has redeemed my life again. This redemption strongly compels me to share about the grace of God. I have been keenly reminded that everything we hold dear in this world will one day pass away, so there is no value in comparing



ourselves with others and what they may have. There is only one thing of value that we have to do with our time on earth: seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Mt 6:33–34). Hence, we ought to persevere in our faith and love for God, and whether it is doing His work or attending services to worship Him, we ought to do more and love Him more.

**“I have been keenly reminded that everything we hold dear in this world will one day pass away, so there is no value in comparing ourselves with others and what they may have”**

We never know when we will be taken away or if we will have a “next time” to attend service or serve God. There is no better occasion to do what we need to do. Seize the opportunity and accept the holy work we have been asked to do. Simply thank God and say, “I will do my best.” If we are given the most delicious food or most beautiful clothes, we would not wait till we are old, weary, and unable to enjoy them; we would

take the opportunity to eat or wear them immediately. It ought to be the same with our faith.

## **AND I WILL DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD FOREVER**

In my journey of faith, I am truly grateful that God gave me a husband who doted on me throughout our thirty-five years of marriage. While it is commonly said that absence makes the heart grow fonder, I sincerely hope that those blessed with a spouse do not wait till death has separated them before they begin to cherish and grow in their love for the other.

Too often, we hear of spouses bickering and calling each other the most unpleasant names—things we would not even say to strangers or acquaintances. Perhaps some things irk us about our spouses, or worse still, others are influencing us to believe our spouses have certain shortcomings. But we have all taken our vows to walk this path together with them till death do us part. Do not wait till you have lost your partner like I have before you realize what you have lost.

Finally, despite everything we may go through in life, we have already been given the greatest treasure—we have been baptized into the only church that is saved, the True Jesus Church. We have been baptized with water and Spirit and have received the certain promise of eternal life with our heavenly Father. Having faced death, standing helpless before God, I am now more confident than ever that our faith is the only thing that matters in this world. I am sure that this path leads towards my heavenly home, where I will meet our heavenly Father and my husband once again. The Lord is coming soon, and dearest brothers and sisters, when He comes, I sincerely hope we have all remained on the right path.

Man is nothing; we only have strength through God’s help. As vessels of God, we are to carry out His will to manifest His glory, and rely on His guidance to show us what we should do. May all glory and praise be unto God of heaven. Amen!

# VESSELS FOR GOD'S WORK: POST-PANDEMIC REFLECTIONS ON SERVING GOD

Elgin and Aberdeen Youths—Northern Scotland, UK

## INTRODUCTION

*"Now therefore, fear the LORD, serve Him in sincerity and truth."  
(Josh 24:14a)*

Towards the end of his life, Joshua gathered the people of Israel to relay God's word and recount their history—how God chose their ancestor, Abraham, and made his descendants a great nation; how they were delivered out of Egypt and brought into the land they now occupied. He reinforced the message that they should choose the Lord as their God and serve Him as they came to rest in the different parts of the land. Being God's people meant serving and obeying Him alone. Knowing the good works that God had done for Israel, Joshua resolved to commit his life to this.

In his letters, Peter described such a life as a holy priesthood, a precious status made possible through Jesus Christ, where we serve and offer our lives to God.

*Coming to Him as to a living stone,  
rejected indeed by men, but chosen  
by God and precious, you  
also, as living stones,  
are being built  
up a*

*spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer  
up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God  
through Jesus Christ. (1 Pet 2:4–5)*

Careful reflection is needed to cherish the grace God has bestowed upon us and ensure that what we offer is acceptable to Him. God intended the priesthood to be a gift (Num 18:7), so it befits us to consider how we receive it.

We thank God that, although the COVID-19 pandemic presented obstacles to the ministry, we have seen His guidance and providence in how various holy works continued in different formats and via alternative channels. Some workers found their areas of service put on hold, unless they adapted. Either way, the pandemic presented a time of change. It provided points of reflection on our service, even after restrictions were lifted in Scotland in the spring of 2022. What have we learned about our heart to serve during this time of upheaval, and how can we move forward to renew our zeal as vessels of God? In this article, brethren from the church in Elgin and the place of worship in Aberdeen share some of their reflections.



## PERSPECTIVE

Carol Ly

*"Serving is a burden"*

So for me, I don't feel that  
I have the strength to continue  
For God  
Because the underlying fact is  
I don't know if God is there  
He isn't listening to my prayers and  
I'm not going to pretend that  
God wants me to serve so I can be blessed  
That He cares when I am burnt out  
But instead, I will keep reminding myself  
That I am a useless, failed servant  
And nothing I hear will make me believe  
God still loves me  
Because I know no matter how I feel  
I am not gifted enough for Him to love me  
Other people can serve in place of me  
And I should not then think that  
I must help to do my share of the church work  
Because whenever I hear God's commission, I think  
Should we really be doing our part to serve God?

*Now read the same lines in reverse, from the bottom to the top.*

## BE WILLING, BE PATIENT AND OPEN TO GOD'S PLAN FOR US

Terie Chan

Many look back at the COVID period with mixed emotions. It was a time of much uncertainty, fear, sorrow, loss, and grief. However, some view the lockdown with fondness—perhaps they were living in a bubble with family or friends and were able to reassess and realign their priorities and mindset. It was a wake-up call from the monotony of life. Each of us has our own pandemic experiences and stories to share—a testament to God's guidance and timely reminders.

I was born into a True Jesus Church (TJC) family, and we emigrated from Taiwan to Brisbane, Australia, when I was young. Having spent most of my life in Brisbane, I relocated to work in London in 2018. Even though my initial intention was to stay for only a year, God had other plans for me. A year became two, and just as my life was

becoming more settled in London, the world as we knew it turned upside down.

In the short space of twelve months, between December 2019 and December 2020, my life changed dramatically against the backdrop of COVID-19 and the uncertainty it brought. During this time, I got engaged to a brother from Scotland, whom I had met a few years before in Taiwan; my work contract ended because of the pandemic, and I returned to Brisbane as borders were closing—blissfully unaware of the risks and challenges to come. I found myself navigating a period of unemployment before eventually starting a new role. But after only four months, I resigned to relocate again—this time to Elgin, Scotland, to get married.

My life during that year felt like an interminable period of waiting and change. Our wedding planning was delayed as I waited for my UK spouse visa to be approved and for the ever-changing government guidance on gatherings to be confirmed. I spent nine months in Australia before the international border restrictions

eased and I could return to the UK. God was moving me from place to place, and although I sometimes felt confused, lost, or lonely, I knew I was never truly alone. Throughout it all, returning “home”—both physically (to my family) and spiritually (to the church)—was a source of solace, peace, and comfort. It was a constant reminder not to worry and to be patient, for God is in control and holds our future in His very hands.

*“Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”* (Mt 6:34)

A key lesson I learned during this time was to be always willing and open to serve and take hold of every opportunity. Often, we make excuses for ourselves: we are too busy, not gifted enough, other people are more fitting, or we do not know what to do—the list goes on! However, as vessels for God, we need to cleanse and empty ourselves so God can fill us and use us. *If we are willing, God will do the rest.* We should not let these opportunities simply pass us by.

This firm belief that service is integral to our faith—that they go hand in hand—was instilled in me from a young age. The Bible tells us that faith without deeds is dead (Jas 2:17). So, both in returning to Brisbane and after moving to Elgin, I found myself wanting to serve as a way of contributing—to feel like part of the family of faith, and to repay God’s love.

Despite knowing what I *should* do and feeling the *urge* to do it, I sometimes found myself lacking in many aspects—unmotivated, without the drive, and conflicted about whether to participate in specific divine works. Other times, certain works I had previously participated in (such as interpreting and teaching religious education classes) were no longer possible due to differences in language or services being held online.

While I was in Brisbane, uncertain of how long I would remain there, I selfishly did not want to commit in case I disappointed others and failed to fulfill the works entrusted to me wholeheartedly.

However, through encouragement and prayer, I was reminded that we must be willing and ready as God’s vessel. We should not wait until we think everything is perfect, as we will be waiting forever and fail to act. Patience is also an important quality for us as children and servants of God. Sometimes, God does not give us opportunities immediately, so we must wait. In such times, God may be testing our patience by giving us time to prepare better, cultivate ourselves spiritually, and undergo the necessary training to mold and equip us for His good works. Everything happens in God’s time.

*But now, O LORD,  
You are our Father;  
We are the clay, and You our potter;  
And all we are the work of Your hand.* (Isa 64:8)

As God is the potter, we are the clay; we must be submissive to how God wishes to use and mold us. It takes time and work to be refined—to be equipped, ready, or worthy to serve God. Our service is not limited to “official assignments” or specific divine works. We should be open to serving God in other ways, such as reaching out to lost sheep and the overlooked brothers and sisters, praying for others, working on our faith, and better equipping ourselves with the resources to serve when the time comes.

**“This has taught me that the only constant in life is change—we make plans, but plans change—and only God remains unchanging”**

In recent years, my life has been a series of unfathomable and unexpected changes: moving countries, changing jobs, having a COVID wedding, and much more. This has taught me that the only constant in life is change—we make plans, but plans change—and only God remains unchanging. Only He knows what tomorrow may bring (Prov 27:1; 16:9).

Our faith in God grounds us and is the thread that binds together the various aspects of our lives. It must be the anchor of our existence. Our service to God demonstrates and manifests our love and gratitude to Him. So, let us be vessels for our Master’s good use, always ready to say, *“Here, am I, send Me!”*

*Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying:  
“Whom shall I send,*

*And who will go for Us?”  
Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.”* (Isa 6:8)

## WORK APPROVED BY GOD

Sean Ho

Everyone aims for success in their endeavors. Whether in work, study, or personal pursuits, we all desire that our time and energy will lead somewhere and not be spent in vain. We typically gauge our success by examining the results: Is the outcome favorable? Does it meet our expectations? The answers to these questions help us to determine whether we did enough to achieve what we wanted in the first place. If our goals were met, we have done enough; if not, we have fallen short in some way.

Often, we take the same approach towards God’s ministry. In wanting to serve well, we may look for tangible results, such as members’ feedback. While seeking improvement in our holy work is not wrong, such a results-driven mentality can lead us to focus solely on ourselves and our actions. We end up thinking that the outcome, whether positive or negative, depends on what we have or have not done, thus becoming a form of pride. However, when it comes to working for God, we cannot forget that this work is not our own.

*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.* (1 Cor 3:6–7)

This verse reminds me that the workers of God are only servants through whom He does His work; all glory belongs to Him. When I evaluated my service according to the outcome, it produced a self-centered mentality about serving God. I had overlooked an important question: *does God accept my service?* This is the metric we should consider when it comes to holy work.

*“Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”* (Mt 7:22–23)

Jesus teaches that He looks at the person rather than what he has done. If I want to be truly accepted by Him and, by extension, my service, too, then I must first make sure that I live a life obedient to His word.

During the lockdown, I was reminded that I should still maintain a God-fearing attitude even though I was observing the Sabbath

in my home. It led me to examine and test the kind of heart I had toward worship. The same can be said about serving God; He is looking at our heart towards Him, reflected in the life we lead.

The opportunity to do church work is a gift from God, giving us the chance to be used as vessels for His wonderful works. Therefore, we should allow Him to work on us and strive to be sanctified and perfected by His truth.

*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.* (Eph 2:10)

May all glory be unto the Lord Jesus Christ!

## REVERENCE IN SERVING

Chloe Chan

Though the pandemic caused many aspects of our lives to grind to a halt, I am thankful that I could continue serving God in various capacities since most of my duties smoothly transitioned to being done virtually. However, one area that I was no longer serving in was hymnal leading. A year passed, and my local church asked for volunteers to lead hymns for the Northern Region online services, jointly hosted by the three churches in Scotland. The number of members attending would be quadruple the congregation of my local church. At first, I was hesitant; even though there was no physical congregation, the thought of leading hymns with so many online members was daunting. After some consideration and time spent in prayer, I decided that if I were given the opportunity, and I am able, I should take up the work. In the lead-up to my first session, I was extremely anxious. I spent much time singing over the chosen hymns and praying for everything to go smoothly.

Despite having led hymnal sessions in my local church for many years, I felt the same as when I was being trained to lead for the first time. This made me reflect on my attitude towards the work over the

previous years. *Why was there a difference in the time I spent preparing? Should it not have been the same as before?* I started hymn leading at a young age, around eighteen years ago, and it was one of the first church works I participated in. As the years passed and I picked up other duties, my focus shifted towards these tasks. Upon reflection, I was reminded that any work done for God is holy work, and we must always have a reverent heart and correct mindset, regardless of how big or small the task.

*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.* (Rom 12:1)

We may have served for many years, and some tasks can become routine. Perhaps we have done something so often that we can even do it without thinking. We rely on our abilities, and rather than turning to God for guidance, we use our knowledge and experience. However, we must remember that we are merely vessels for God. We can only serve because God has given us the opportunity, and we can carry it out as God has given us the ability. Perhaps the pandemic has reduced our workload, or we may have been blessed with more opportunities. No matter how much we do, let us take the time to reflect on our heart and mind, making sure that these are acceptable to God. Coupled with prayer, we will be mindful to remove any impurities, ensuring we are sanctified for God. In doing so, we can be vessels fit for use and bring glory to His name. Therefore, no matter what holy work we are called to do, let each time we serve be as though it is the first—seeing it not as routine but as God's grace towards us.

*Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we*

*may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.* (Heb 12:28)

## CONCLUSION

*As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.* (1 Pet 4:10)

To be able to serve is a blessing, a grace of God. It is an opportunity to be used for His will—to manifest our love and to glorify His name. Doing work for the church allows us to become a part of God's great work of salvation.

*For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building.* (1 Cor 3:9)

We thank God for allowing us to reflect and realize that what we offer is not the work itself but ourselves as vessels and living sacrifices (Rom 12:1). It is not only about the efforts we put into our given tasks but the life we lead and our attitude towards service. These allow us to be servants acceptable to God.

Therefore, motivated by the wonderful grace and love of our Savior Jesus Christ, let us be zealous for His work, continually sanctifying and perfecting ourselves with His word so that we can be called good and faithful servants when we joyfully meet our Lord (Mt 25:21, 23).

May we continue to strive and become living sacrifices pleasing to God. Amen!



# A BLESSED FAMILY

KC Tsai—Toronto, Canada

*Blessed is every one who fears the LORD,  
Who walks in His ways.*

*When you eat the labor of your hands,  
You shall be happy, and it shall be well  
with you.*

*Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine  
In the very heart of your house,  
Your children like olive plants  
All around your table.*

*Behold, thus shall the man be blessed  
Who fears the LORD. (Ps 128:1–4)*

With references to “your wife” and “your children,” this psalm is addressed to husbands and fathers. In it, we see the promise of a household blessed by God, but it will be blessed only if the head of the house—the husband—fears God. If he fears God with a sincere and upright heart, obeying God’s instructions, he

can enjoy the fruits of his labor. All that he plants, he shall harvest. There will be no lack of sunshine or rain, no natural or man-made disasters, and no enemies to come and plunder his crops. He will work hard and enjoy the anticipated fruits of his labor. Hence, the duty of a husband and father is not only to work diligently but, more importantly, to fear God and keep His commandments, which is man’s all (Eccl 12:13).

The wife’s role in this blessed household is to be like a fruitful vine at the very heart of the house. A vine is not strong enough to be used in construction. It is a climbing plant whose purpose is to bear grapes abundantly. To do so, it needs support. One aspect of a wife being a fruitful vine is giving birth to children. But it can also refer

to the wife bearing the fruit of the Spirit and fruits of love at home. This fills the home with love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22–23). These spiritual virtues can support a family, allowing her husband and children to enjoy the love and warmth of home life. If a wife is like a fruitful vine, it means there is support. She can rely on the support of her husband and, more importantly, by faith, she relies on God to bear these fruits of righteousness.

Finally, the children in this family will be like olive plants all around the table. This means having many children by our side. Being like olive plants means that these children are young, full of vigor and vitality, and will grow up to be mature adults. The

future of this family is bright and full of hope. As the Scriptures say:

*Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD,  
The fruit of the womb is a reward.  
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,  
So are the children of one's youth.  
Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them;  
They shall not be ashamed,  
But shall speak with their enemies  
in the gate.* (Ps 127:3–5)

## A BLESSED MARRIAGE

A blessed family begins with a husband-wife relationship that aligns with the will of God. Such a marriage is built on selfless love for each other and a sense of shared goals and values. They honor their parents according to the teachings of the Bible, obeying and encouraging them, comforting and caring for them. They raise their children in the Lord, nurturing their physical and mental health so they can mature spiritually and resolve to serve the Lord and His church all their lives.

Husbands and wives are heirs together of the grace of life, as Peter says:

*Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.* (1 Pet 3:7)

In the original text, the possessive pronoun “your” in “your prayers” is plural, addressing both husband and wife—that

their united prayers may be unhindered and can directly reach God. Spouses are heirs together of the grace of life, which refers to eternal life. Receiving eternal life is a great grace and a common goal the couple should pursue. They need to strive together, constantly reminding and exhorting each other to grow in faith together toward maturity.

## THOSE WHO ARE HUSBANDS

In the above verse, Peter tells husbands to dwell with their wives with understanding. This message is echoed in Ephesians:

*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her. ...So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.* (Eph 5:25, 28)

For husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church, for whom He gave up His own life, considerable effort is required. They must always be aware of the need to sacrifice, starting from the daily chores. Only when husbands respect and honor their wives as the weaker vessels can the husband-wife relationship begin to glorify the Lord.

In today's self-centered and selfish society, it is not easy to constantly love one's other half

with selfless love. It begins with simple, considerate actions such as squeezing the toothpaste from the end of the tube, dividing the housework fairly, throwing dirty socks into the laundry basket instead of leaving them lying around, considering the other's preferences when cooking, dealing with feelings of jealousy, and so on. Some couples treat these as major issues and argue incessantly, while those with wisdom see these as trivial daily matters and handle them calmly. To give a few simple and subtle examples: During meals, does the husband subconsciously take the less desirable pieces of food for himself and give the better portion to his wife? When the wife is feeling down or in a bad mood, can he see her as the more fragile vessel and accompany her through these low points with compassion?



Essentially, husbands gradually learn and understand how to love their wives with Christ-like love and how to love her as his own body through the experience of dwelling together with her daily.

## THOSE WHO ARE WIVES

In the same passage, there are also teachings for wives:

*Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.* (Eph 5:22–24)

The church's submission to Christ is natural and unconditional. However, it is not easy for wives to submit to husbands in this manner because, unlike Christ, no husband is perfect. They all have flaws and make mistakes. However, the biblical teaching is for wives to submit to their husbands (1 Pet 3:1–6). If a wife is submissive to her husband in all things, she is a woman who can submit to the Lord and will be blessed as a result. Through her, the Lord will bestow blessings upon the whole family.

God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him" (Gen 2:18). God's will when creating a woman was so man would not be alone and would have a "helper." Having a companion to walk with and carry out our

plans with in life alleviates the burden of dealing with everything alone. Indeed, even cooking a solo meal when living alone can be challenging, and what makes it worse is not experiencing the joy and warmth that comes from sharing the meal with others.

The principle behind the wife's submission to her husband is to help him. This help goes beyond being supportive of his career and at home. It involves giving guidance when her husband deviates in faith or character, providing positive biblical advice when important decisions arise, working together to carry out those decisions, and making adjustments when necessary.

## THOSE WHO ARE CHILDREN

Today, our children are easily ensnared by secular trends, just as we are. They find it difficult to escape the influence of popular social media movements and extreme ideologies. The morality and value systems of today's society are constantly changing: marriage is being redefined, gender identity has become negotiable, violent protests have become tools for expressing personal grievances, and so on. The pressure to adopt secular values is similar to the time when God's people were taken captive to Babylon:

*And the king appointed for them a daily provision of the king's delicacies and of the wine which he drank, and three years of training for them, so that at the end*

*of that time they might serve before the king. Now from among those of the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. To them the chief of the eunuchs gave names: he gave Daniel the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abed-Nego.* (Dan 1:5–7)

When Daniel and his three friends were captured, they found themselves in an environment full of evil. Their names were changed, they had to learn and use the language of the Chaldeans, and they were tempted with the king's food and wine daily. Their original names, which were related to God and their faith, were replaced with names associated with Babylonian idols or customs. They faced the crisis of being assimilated and losing their identity as the chosen people.

They were overseen by the chief eunuch for three years, during which they had no choice but to undergo training in the language and literature of the Chaldeans. However, to maintain their purity before God, they refused the temptation of the king's food and resisted the erosion of their identity by these foreign customs. They gave up their daily diet and chose to eat vegetables and drink water instead. As a result, God was with them, preserving their lives and strengthening their faith.

God wants those who belong to Him to preserve their holiness. In His law, He says:

*"And you shall be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should*

be Mine.”

(Lev 20:26)

To be God’s people, we must be sanctified by God’s truth (Jn 17:17) and be separated from the world:

*“Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren, especially concerning the day you stood before the LORD your God in Horeb, when the LORD said to me, ‘Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.’”*

(Deut 4:9–10)

God commands His people to teach His word to their children and grandchildren so they may fear God “all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.” The Bible conveys God’s will: the knowledge and fear of God should not only be kept within one’s own heart but also passed on to one’s children.

Many youths today are almost bound by their smartphones, unable to detach themselves from social media, online games, and endless information streams. Some are even misled to the point of self-harm, troublemaking, or falling into despair and depression. They need someone to guide them out of the virtual world, to learn how to discern between authenticity and self-promotion, and to socialize with friends who have spiritual integrity and wisdom within the Christian community.

They need to break free from the bondage of the internet, learn to fear God, and stay away from evil.

## **“In this generation where we are all captive, parents cannot compromise in this battle to rescue our children”**

What brings parents the greatest comfort is seeing their children fear God. Many parents, in their pursuit of success and personal fulfillment, labor tirelessly throughout their lives, dedicating themselves to work and careers. However, when they look back in old age, they realize that a lack of guidance from God’s divine word has led their children to focus solely on academic and professional pursuits, neglecting the grace and teachings of the Lord. As a result, their children stumble on their faith journey and leave the church. It is with the most heart-wrenching regret that parents see their children lose their salvation and stray from the path that leads to eternal life. In this generation where we are all captive, parents cannot compromise in this battle to rescue our children. We must not delay in preparing a solid environment of faith for them, just as the Lord instructed the people through Moses:

*“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God*

*with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”* (Deut 6:4–9)

God required His people to create a complete environment of faith, where they would constantly engage with God’s word, provide a solid religious education, and pass on the faith to their children. The word of God is settled in heaven forever and never changes. We can be certain that He still requires believers today to:

- Love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength.
- Write the words of the Bible on our hearts and teach them diligently to our children.
- Discuss the word of God when we are at home and when we are outside.
- Remind our children about the grace and promises of the Lord at all times so that they can recall God’s word and God’s will no matter what situation they are in.

This is how we can enjoy the blessings of a Christ-centered family.



# ARTICLES OF FAITH

## JESUS CHRIST

Jesus Christ, the Word who became flesh, died on the cross for the redemption of sinners, resurrected on the third day, and ascended to heaven. He is the only Savior of mankind, the Creator of the heavens and earth, and the only true God.

## HOLY BIBLE

The Holy Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, is inspired by God, the only scriptural truth, and the standard for Christian living.

## TRUE JESUS CHURCH

The True Jesus Church, established by our Lord Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit during the time of the "latter rain," is the restored true church of the apostolic time.

## WATER BAPTISM

Water baptism is the sacrament for the remission of sins for regeneration. The baptism must take place in natural living water, such as the river, sea, or spring. The Baptist, who already has had received baptism of water and the Holy Spirit, conducts the baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the person receiving the baptism must be completely immersed in water with head bowed and face downward.

## HOLY SPIRIT

Receiving the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues, is the guarantee of our inheritance of the kingdom of heaven.

## FOOTWASHING

The sacrament of footwashing enables one to have a part with the Lord Jesus. It also serves as a constant reminder that one should have love, holiness, humility, forgiveness, and service. Every person who has received water baptism must have his/her feet washed in the name of Jesus Christ. Mutual footwashing may be practiced whenever is appropriate.

## HOLY COMMUNION

The Holy Communion is the sacrament to commemorate the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. It enables us to partake of the flesh and blood of our Lord and to be in communion with Him so that we can have eternal life and be raised on the last day. This sacrament shall be held as often as possible. Only one unleavened bread and grape juice shall be used.

## SABBATH DAY

The Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week (Saturday), is a holy day, blessed and sanctified by God. It is to be observed under the Lord's grace for the commemoration of God's creation and salvation, and with the hope of eternal rest in the life to come.

## SALVATION

Salvation is given by the grace of God through faith. Believers must rely on the Holy Spirit to pursue holiness, to honor God, and to love humanity.

## LORD'S SECOND COMING

The Lord's Second Coming will take place on the last day when He descends from heaven to judge the world: the righteous will receive eternal life, while the wicked will be eternally condemned.

# CALL FOR ARTICLES

Issue #98: Cast Our Nets  
Articles due: July 31, 2024

*When He had stopped speaking, He said to Simon, "Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." (Lk 5:4)*

*And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men." (Lk 5:10b)*

In this early encounter with His disciples, Jesus used a miraculous haul of abundant fish and familiar nautical language to introduce the disciples to their ultimate calling. They were to become fishers of men (Mk 1:16–17).

As His time on earth with His disciples drew to a close, Jesus reiterated this idea in His commission to the church:

*"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. (Mt 28:19–20)*

Our mission to spread the truth to every corner of the world, to bring the hope of salvation to all, and gather souls into the

heavenly kingdom continues until the Lord comes again.

Knowing our commission, do we preach with courage and resilience, trusting that the Lord will provide a good catch? Have we launched out upon uncharted depths, boldly breaking through cultural, socioeconomic, and racial barriers to reach out to all nations? How can the church cast the net of evangelism further and wider upon the dynamic and tumultuous seascape of the internet, navigating the challenges that may arise?

## GENERAL WRITING GUIDELINES

### Content

- Content should be biblically sound and adhere to biblical principles.
- The article should be organized and have a logical flow of thought.
- The main point or teaching of the article should be clear to the reader.
- Readers should be able to apply what they have read to their daily lives.
- Do not plagiarize the work of other writers or institutions, published either in print or online. Any quotations, ideas, or concepts taken from other sources must be properly referenced.

### Grammar/Style

- Use active instead of passive voice.
- Write concisely.
- Use concrete words and ideas instead of abstract concepts.
- Use "plain English" instead of obscure, academic language.
- Use the NKJV version when quoting Bible verses.
- Use American spelling, if possible.

*Manna* only accepts submissions written by True Jesus Church members. If you are planning to write an article (regardless of topic), please try to adhere to one of the genres below.

### Christian Living

A Christian Living article gives practical biblical guidance on real-life issues and how to use Jesus' teachings in our daily lives.  
Article length: 1500–2000 words.

### Bible Study

A Bible Study explores a passage or character from the Bible and draws out the teachings for readers to apply to their lives.  
Article length: 2500–3000 words.

### Doctrinal Study

A Doctrinal Study examines an aspect of True Jesus Church beliefs and may present it in comparison to other beliefs.  
Article length: 2500–3000 words.

### Exhortation

An Exhortation encourages and admonishes the reader in different aspects of the Christian faith.  
Article length: 2000–2500 words.

### Testimony

A Testimony recounts an experience in the Lord that will encourage and edify the reader.  
Article length: 1500–2000 words.

### Creative

Creative pieces include poems, parables, or short stories that illustrate a biblical teaching or idea. Keep in mind as you are writing: how will this edify the reader?

### Submission Information

Please email articles as Microsoft Word documents to [manna@tjc.org](mailto:manna@tjc.org), including your name, mailing address, email address, and telephone number. By submitting an article, you consent to it being edited and published in *Manna*, in print and online, distributed globally and promoted on social media. If accepted for publication, your article may also be edited and/or translated for other True Jesus Church publications and websites.

Issue 96 Vol. 48 No. 1  
Publication date: May 2024  
Spiritual Nurture: Prayer



## CONTACT INFORMATION

For additional information on the True Jesus Church, contact us or visit our website. We look forward to hearing from you!

True Jesus Church, 21217 Bloomfield Ave, Lakewood, CA 90715 USA

Phone: +1-714-533-8889 | Fax: +1-562-402-3190 | Email: [info@tjc.org](mailto:info@tjc.org) | Website: [www.tjc.org](http://www.tjc.org)