

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 30, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Holy God, there is within us a deep desire to know you -- to rest in your presence, to trust in your mercy, and to feel your loving embrace. So much of the time we are hurrying and running so fast that we don't allow ourselves a moment in which you could break through to us. In this time of devotion, help me to slow down, to be still, and to listen for you. Amen.

Monday, December 31

Scripture: Philippians 3:3-9

We are the circumcision. We are the ones who serve by God's Spirit and who boast in Christ Jesus. We don't put our confidence in rituals performed on the body, though I have good reason to have this kind of confidence. If anyone else has reason to put their confidence in physical advantages, I have even more: I was circumcised on the eighth day. I am from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews. With respect to observing the Law, I'm a Pharisee. With respect to devotion to the faith, I harassed the church. With respect to righteousness under the Law, I'm blameless. These things were my assets, but I wrote them off as a loss for the sake of Christ. But even beyond that, I consider everything a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have lost everything for him, but what I lost I think of as sewer trash, so that I might gain Christ and be found in him. In Christ I have a righteousness that is not my own and that does not come from the Law but rather from the faithfulness of Christ. It is the righteousness of God that is based on faith.

Observation: As a New Year approaches, it's natural for most of us to take stock of our life, reviewing where we've been and looking ahead to where we hope to go. The apostle Paul took stock of his life in his letter to the Philippians. He said that in the past, he had human credentials that could match the best: a promising career as a member of the Jewish ruling council. But he'd written off all those assets in order to know Christ and live in his gift of righteousness.

Application: Review Paul's list of assets in verses 5 and 6. What might be some modern equivalents to which we'd be tempted to lay claim, in church, in business, in the academic world, or in any other area of activity? What heart issues could turn these outward badges of service and achievement into things we'd need to discard in order to serve Christ wholeheartedly?

Prayer: O Lord, my prayer this New Year's Eve is, as the old hymn said, "Live out thy life within me, O Jesus, king of kings." Dwell in my heart as the New Year begins. Amen.

Tuesday, January 1

Scripture: Philippians 3:10-14

The righteousness that I have comes from knowing Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the participation in his sufferings. It includes being conformed to his death so that I may perhaps reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead. It's not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus.

Observation: In these words, so fitting for New Year's Day, the apostle Paul testified about how he kept reaching to grow into all God called him to be. As The Message renders these verses, he said, "I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me....I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back."

Application: In verse 13, Paul shared an essential truth in pursuing God's goals: "I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me." The process of growing spiritually focuses on what is to come, not what lies behind. Are you letting anything from your past define you in the present? If so, ask God to help you let it go. Focus your energy on the year ahead, not the things (bad or good) in the past.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, make it more true of me this year that "the goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus." Keep my eyes on the prize of the ultimate goal of life in your kingdom. Amen.

Wednesday, January 2

Scripture: Revelation 21:1-6

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

Observation: We value the fresh start(s) each New Year brings. But even as we celebrate the New Year, we are aware that each human year brings some disappointments and pain, too. We can remember that the Bible's grand story ends in Paradise restored. Images drawn from the prophet Isaiah (especially chapters 28 and 65) pictured the world as God meant it to be, with no pain, suffering or death. There, "the one seated on the throne" made a better promise: "Look! I'm making all things new," truly new.

Application: The ancient world relied on city walls and strong gates to shut out danger. In that world, Revelation said an amazing thing about God's eternal city: "On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there" (Revelation 21:25). As 2019 begins, many of us have to deal with strong feelings of fear about events happening around us over which we have no control. What "walls and gates" are we counting on which may sometimes fail? What worries can your faith in God's eternal city soothe? How does Christ's presence today calm your fears?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I thank you for the gift of life, for the chance to start this year as your child. And I thank you for the assurance you offer me of an eternity with you, in a world where we never have to shut the gates to lock out danger. Amen.

Thursday, January 3

Scripture: Matthew 2:13-15, 19-21

When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him." Joseph got up and, during the night, took the child and his mother to Egypt. **15** He stayed there until Herod died. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: I have called my son out of Egypt.

After King Herod died, an angel from the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. "Get up," the angel said, "and take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel. Those who were trying to kill the child are dead." Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

Observation: Israel's history was intertwined with Egypt's at many points, starting with the patriarchs Jacob and Joseph finding food and shelter there. After Egypt made Jacob's descendants slaves, God's power leading them out of Egypt became Israel's defining Passover story. Matthew, whose gospel showed that Jesus embodied Israel's hopes and destiny, showed that Jesus' life history echoed Israel's.

Application: God usually works through people who are willing, like Jesus' earthly father Joseph, to move as God leads them. You are God's son or daughter. Has God ever called you "out of Egypt" in some part of your life? In what ways, if any, is God calling you "out of" certain lifestyle choices or ways of thinking that hold you back from the freedom God offers you in Christ? In what ways has God guided and protected you?

Prayer: Lord God, keep my heart open to your leading and direction in my life. Give me the courage and the wisdom to follow you even if your calling feels challenging or difficult. Amen.

Friday, January 4

Scripture: Hosea 11:1-8

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the further they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and they burned incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with bands of human kindness, with cords of love. I treated them like those who lift infants to their cheeks; I bent down to them and fed them.

They will return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria will be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword will strike wildly in their cities; it will consume the bars of their gates and will take everything because of their schemes. My people are bent on turning away from me; and though they cry out to the Most High, he will not raise them up.

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart winces within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

Observation: Matthew's gospel, describing Joseph, Mary and Jesus returning from Egypt, quoted part of this passage from the prophet Hosea. We might find that puzzling, since Hosea's words were history, not a prediction of the future. But the prophet described God as Israel's parent—stymied, hurt, yet always loving his children. Matthew quoted Hosea because Jesus was the ultimate expression of God's willingness to go to any length to try to reach people.

Application: As we listen in on Hosea's picture of God's conversation with himself, we hear the rising frustration and determined compassion of a loving parent. Israel was the child God had fed, clothed, taught to walk, healed and held gently in his arms. You're God's child, too. In what ways have you experienced God doing any of these things for you?

Prayer: Lord of all, I'm so thankful that, even when I'm at my worst, you look at me and your "compassion grows warm and tender." I want to respond to that compassion, and not be a rebellious child who breaks your heart. Amen.

Saturday, January 5

Scripture: John 1:19-34

This is John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, "Who are you?" John confessed (he didn't deny but confessed), "I'm not the Christ." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" John said, "I'm not." "Are you the prophet?" John answered, "No." They asked, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John replied, "I am a voice crying out in the wilderness, Make the Lord's path straight, just as the prophet Isaiah said." Those sent by the Pharisees asked, "Why do you baptize if you aren't the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered, "I baptize with water. Someone greater stands among you, whom you don't recognize. He comes after me, but I'm not worthy to untie his sandal straps." This encounter took place across the Jordan in Bethany where John was baptizing. The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one about whom I said, 'He who comes after me is really greater than me because he existed before me.' Even I didn't recognize him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be made known to Israel." John testified, "I saw the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove, and it rested on him. Even I didn't recognize him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'The one on whom you see the Spirit coming down and resting is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and testified that this one is God's Son."

Observation: At Christmas we celebrate God coming into our world as a tiny infant, that "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14). It was a wonderful story, but just the beginning of a much larger story. Jesus grew to adulthood, and in today's reading he began his public ministry. John the Baptist was his herald, declaring, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (verse 29).

Application: "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" was an image from Israel's sacrifices for sin, but with one crucial difference. Although Hebrews 10:4 later said bluntly, "It's impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins," Jesus' sacrifice could, did, and does actually give the opportunity to be set right with God. Have you claimed Jesus' gift of freedom from guilt and destructive ways of life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you not just for the story of your birth, but for the whole story of your life, death and resurrection. Thank you for giving me the privilege of being part of your ongoing mission and story, bringing restoration to our broken world. Amen.