

## Grow, Pray, Study Guide for the Week of April 25, 2021

**Weekly Prayer:** Lord, thank you so much for your faithfulness to me in the difficult times. Help me to run with perseverance the race that you set before me and to finish that race well with your help. I know you will be with me to the end. I know that your grace is sufficient. Amen.

### Monday, April 26

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

So then, with endurance, let's also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let's throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up, and fix our eyes on Jesus, faith's pioneer and perfecter. He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right side of God's throne. Think about the one who endured such opposition from sinners so that you won't be discouraged and you won't give up.

**Observation:** In Hebrews 10:24, the writer urged his readers to motivate (or "provoke") one another to love and good works. In this passage, he did that himself. Using images from the Greek Olympic games, he urged believers to run the entire race set before them with determination, setting aside anything that hindered them and keeping their inner focus always on Jesus, who endured even the cross for our sake.

**Application:** Is it possible for even good activities to become so numerous and demanding in your life that you end up running your race in a distracted, scattered fashion? Faced with a calendar that can easily overflow with good things, how do you choose priorities and keep your life focused, rather than randomly overwhelmed even with good things?

**Prayer:** Lord God, you've called me, not to one quick dash, but to what one writer called "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction." As I keep assessing my life priorities, change my heart to focus more and more on you. Amen.

### Tuesday, April 27

#### **Scripture: Exodus 3:9-4:17**

"Now the Israelites' cries of injustice have reached me. I've seen just how much the Egyptians have oppressed them. So, get going. I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" God said, "I'll be with you. And this will show you that I'm the one who sent you. After you bring the people out of Egypt, you will come back here and worship God on this mountain."

But Moses said to God, "If I now come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' they are going to ask me, 'What's this God's name?' What am I supposed to say to them?" God said to Moses, "I Am Who I Am. So say to the Israelites, 'I Am has sent me to you.'" God continued, "Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, and Jacob's God, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever; this is how all generations will remember me. "Go and get Israel's elders together and say to them, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me. The Lord said, "I've been paying close attention to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt. I've decided to take you away from the harassment in Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land full of milk and honey.'" They will accept what you say to them. Then you and

Israel's elders will go to Egypt's king and say to him, 'The Lord, the Hebrews' God, has met with us. So now let us go on a three-day journey into the desert so that we can offer sacrifices to the Lord our God.' However, I know that Egypt's king won't let you go unless he's forced to do it. So I'll use my strength and hit Egypt with dramatic displays of my power. After that, he'll let you go. "I'll make it so that when you leave Egypt, the Egyptians will be kind to you and you won't go away empty-handed. Every woman will ask her neighbor along with the immigrant in her household for their silver and their gold jewelry as well as their clothing. Then you will put it on your sons and daughters, and you will rob the Egyptians."

Then Moses replied, "But what if they don't believe me or pay attention to me? They might say to me, 'The Lord didn't appear to you!'" The Lord said to him, "What's that in your hand?" Moses replied, "A shepherd's rod." The Lord said, "Throw it down on the ground." So Moses threw it on the ground, and it turned into a snake. Moses jumped back from it. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Reach out and grab the snake by the tail." So Moses reached out and grabbed it, and it turned back into a rod in his hand. "Do this so that they will believe that the Lord, the God of their ancestors, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, and Jacob's God has in fact appeared to you." Again, the Lord said to Moses, "Put your hand inside your coat." So Moses put his hand inside his coat. When he took his hand out, his hand had a skin disease flaky like snow. Then God said, "Put your hand back inside your coat." So Moses put his hand back inside his coat. When he took it back out again, the skin of his hand had returned to normal. "If they won't believe you or pay attention to the first sign, they may believe the second sign. If they won't believe even these two signs or pay attention to you, then take some water from the Nile River and pour it out on dry ground. The water that you take from the Nile will turn into blood on the dry ground." But Moses said to the Lord, "My Lord, I've never been able to speak well, not yesterday, not the day before, and certainly not now since you've been talking to your servant. I have a slow mouth and a thick tongue." Then the Lord said to him, "Who gives people the ability to speak? Who's responsible for making them unable to speak or hard of hearing, sighted or blind? Isn't it I, the Lord? Now go! I'll help you speak, and I'll teach you what you should say." But Moses said, "Please, my Lord, just send someone else." Then the Lord got angry at Moses and said, "What about your brother Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak very well. He's on his way out to meet you now, and he's looking forward to seeing you. Speak to him and tell him what he's supposed to say. I'll help both of you speak, and I'll teach both of you what to do. Aaron will speak for you to the people. He'll be a spokesperson for you, and you will be like God for him. Take this shepherd's rod with you too so that you can do the signs."

**Observation:** God gave Moses a tough, scary mission. Egypt was the "superpower" in Moses' day. He was to confront the Pharaoh in God's name and demand freedom for a group of productive, useful slaves. So Moses argued with God, seeking a way out of this difficult mission. God listened and addressed many of the needs Moses raised. In the end, Moses and God both "won"!

**Application:** Moses argued with God about the limitations that he feared might make his mission fail. Talk with God about what you believe limits you. Ask God to help you shift your focus from your limitations to your strengths, and to the fact that God will be with you.

**Prayer:** Patient and strong God, pour your love into my heart with all its power and energy. Empower me to see through my limitations and embrace opportunities to grow, giving me the resilience of hope. Amen.

## Wednesday, April 28

### **Scripture: James 1:2-13**

My brothers and sisters, think of the various tests you encounter as occasions for joy. After all, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking in nothing. But anyone who needs wisdom should ask God, whose very nature is to give to everyone without a second thought, without keeping score. Wisdom will certainly be given to those who ask. Whoever asks shouldn't hesitate. They should ask in faith, without doubting. Whoever doubts is like the surf of the sea, tossed and turned by the wind. People like that should never imagine that they will receive anything from the Lord. They are double-minded, unstable in all their ways. Brothers and sisters who are poor should find satisfaction in their high status. Those who are wealthy should find satisfaction in their low status, because they will die off like wildflowers. The sun rises with its scorching heat and dries up the grass so that its flowers fall and its beauty is lost. Just like that, in the midst of their daily lives, the wealthy will waste away. Those who stand firm during testing are blessed. They are tried and true. They will receive the life God has promised to those who love him as their reward.

No one who is tested should say, "God is tempting me!" This is because God is not tempted by any form of evil, nor does he tempt anyone.

**Observation:** James, the leader of the early church in Jerusalem, also encouraged believers to develop and practice the spiritual quality of endurance. It's likely that James was Jesus' half-brother (see Matthew 13:55, 1 Corinthians 15:7). His experience leading the Christians in Jerusalem showed him first-hand that Jesus was serious when he said, "In the world you have distress. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world" (John 16:33).

**Application:** James addressed a hurtful error (then and now) when he wrote, "No one who is tested should say, 'God is tempting me!'" In a painful or difficult situation, have you ever asked, "Why is God doing this to me?" What makes it healthier to adopt James' view—that when bad things happen in this broken world, God is with us to offer wisdom and strength to press on?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, thank you for promising to give me wisdom to understand, and strength to endure. Thank you for promising to use trials to grow my character ever stronger and more enduring. Amen.

## Thursday, April 29

### **Scripture: Jonah 4:1-11**

But Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord, "Come on, Lord! Wasn't this precisely my point when I was back in my own land? This is why I fled to Tarshish earlier! I know that you are a merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy. At this point, Lord, you may as well take my life from me, because it would be better for me to die than to live." The Lord responded, "Is your anger a good thing?" But Jonah went out from the city and sat down east of the city. There he made himself a hut and sat under it, in the shade, to see what would happen to the city. Then the Lord God provided a shrub, and it grew up over Jonah, providing shade for his head and saving him from his misery. Jonah was very happy about the shrub. But God provided a worm the next day at dawn, and it attacked the shrub so that it died. Then as the sun rose God provided a dry east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint. He begged that he might die, saying, "It's better for me to die than to live." God said to Jonah, "Is your anger about the shrub a good thing?" Jonah said, "Yes, my anger is good—even to the point of death!" But the

Lord said, “You ‘pitied’ the shrub, for which you didn’t work and which you didn’t raise; it grew in a night and perished in a night. Yet for my part, can’t I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can’t tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

**Observation:** Jonah 3:10 said, “God stopped planning to destroy [the people of Nineveh], and he didn’t do it.” The story said when Jonah grudgingly went to Nineveh, his entire message was, “Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!” (Jonah 3:4). He wanted to see Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, flattened! This story was in the Bible, not to endorse Jonah’s spirit, but rather, through God’s challenge to the sulking prophet, to show that God’s love truly extended to the whole world.

**Application:** The writer of Jonah had a superb touch with irony. The book described an astounding preaching success—a whole city repenting and turning to God. And the preacher’s attitude? “Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry.” (Jonah 4:1) What made Jonah so angry? Is it possible for God to care about people without endorsing violent or other hurtful actions, like Assyria’s violence toward Israel?

**Prayer:** Lord God, sometimes, like Jonah, I wish you’d hate people I hate. But you call me to change my attitude, not yours. Guide and lead me as I wrestle with that change of spirit. Amen.

**Friday, April 30**

**Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:1-10**

So, my child, draw your strength from the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Take the things you heard me say in front of many other witnesses and pass them on to faithful people who are also capable of teaching others. Accept your share of suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. Nobody who serves in the military gets tied up with civilian matters, so that they can please the one who recruited them. Also in the same way, athletes don’t win unless they follow the rules. A hardworking farmer should get the first share of the crop. Think about what I’m saying; the Lord will give you understanding about everything. Remember Jesus Christ, who was raised from the dead and descended from David. This is my good news. This is the reason I’m suffering to the point that I’m in prison like a common criminal. But God’s word cannot be imprisoned. This is why I endure everything for the sake of those who are chosen by God so that they too may experience salvation in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

**Observation:** All this talk about training and persevering might discourage us if we began to think that it depends solely on our own mental and physical strength. But Paul reminded his young co-worker Timothy that, in the Christian race, we have a greater source of endurance than our own toughness: “draw your strength from the grace that is in Christ Jesus,” he wrote.

**Application:** In verses 3-6, Paul compared the Christian life to being a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer. In what ways does each of those images point toward the kind of focused dedication and perseverance needed for following Christ? Which of the three images connects best with the “growing edge” in your Christian life right now?

**Prayer:** Lord, I want the shackles in my life to fall away! I ask that your word will not be imprisoned by any interior barriers I put up against it. Transform me into a winner in life’s race. Amen.

**Saturday, May 1**

**Scripture: 2 Timothy 4:1-8**

I'm giving you this commission in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is coming to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearance and his kingdom. Preach the word. Be ready to do it whether it is convenient or inconvenient. Correct, confront, and encourage with patience and instruction. There will come a time when people will not tolerate sound teaching. They will collect teachers who say what they want to hear because they are self-centered. They will turn their back on the truth and turn to myths. But you must keep control of yourself in all circumstances. Endure suffering, do the work of a preacher of the good news, and carry out your service fully. I'm already being poured out like a sacrifice to God, and the time of my death is near. I have fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. At last the champion's wreath that is awarded for righteousness is waiting for me. The Lord, who is the righteous judge, is going to give it to me on that day. He's giving it not only to me but also to all those who have set their heart on waiting for his appearance.

**Observation:** As Paul wrote this letter, he was on the Roman equivalent of death row (verse 6), but was confident that his death would not stop the Christian faith from growing. He "passed the baton" to Timothy. He was sure that the day of his death would not be a day of defeat, but rather like a runner triumphantly reaching the end of a tough race. At the end of his life, he felt like a gold medal winner: "I have fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. At last the champion's wreath that is awarded for righteousness is waiting for me."

**Application:** There are many runners in the Messiah Church family. Some run competitively but most have no illusions of ever winning a race. Joy is found in simply finishing the race. Christian life and ministry is not a contest to run better than others. It's a commitment to run all the way to the finish. Paul finished his race. Verse 5, written to Timothy, speaks to us, too: "Keep control of yourself in all circumstances. Endure suffering ... and carry out your service fully." Will you? Evaluate (in your head, on your computer, or with paper and pencil) your journey so far, and what you aim for from now to the end. How will you go about finishing the race and, like Paul, running triumphantly into Jesus' arms?

**Prayer:** Lord of all, thank you for promising that I (along with all my brothers and sisters in the faith) can win the champion's wreath in your kingdom. Help me to never, ever give up. Amen.