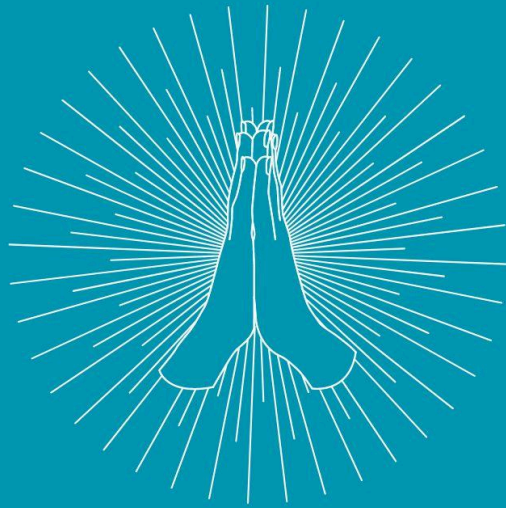


21 Days of
Prayer



J o u r n a l

March 11: What is Prayer?

JAMES 5:16B-18

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

CONSIDER THIS

What is prayer?

Sometimes the more we think we know about something the more difficult it is to grow in our understanding. I think this is how it is with prayer.

There are so many ways to go about defining it and various angles of approach. How about we begin with a story?

I grew up on a farm. Here I watched my father and his men tirelessly and endlessly labor to raise those crops only to see them come to the brink of the disaster a drought can bring. If you know anything about farming or have ever been around it, you know the terrible feeling of that kind of injustice—putting everything on the line in faith and facing the real prospect of losing it all.

One of my most treasured memories happened in the hottest and most drought-stricken summers on the farm. I remember in those days how he would load my two younger sisters, Missie and Erica, and me into the truck on some of those hot afternoons and drive us around the farm, field to field. As we circled each field he would lead us in prayer. It was a way of prayer characterized by loud singing, in a faith-filled way of pleading for rain. Here is our song:

We need a rain. We need a rain. We need a rain. Have faith it will.

When it really got desperate, Dad would interject in the midst of our song something like this: We need a rain (about an inch and a half). We need a rain (about an inch and a half). We need a rain. Have faith it will.

I think I learned more about prayer from the farm than I did the church. Maybe it's because the church taught prayer more from a place of religious duty and devotion. On the farm, we learned prayer from a place of dirt and desperation; not of the anxiety-ridden variety but a confident desperation—yes, even a holy desperation. My Dad was (and remains) a humble farmer and a holy man.

So what is prayer?

Over time, this way of holy desperation teaches us prayer is not so much a disciplined duty or fervent activity as it is a comprehensive way of walking and working with God. Prayer is neither preparation for the work, nor something we tack on after the work is done for good measure. Prayer becomes the very character and nature of the work itself.

Prayer was the arc of the song to the sound of the thunder. And my when it rained—and sooner or later it always did—we elevated Dad to the rank of Elijah. Maybe that's what I'm reaching to say here, that prayer can't be reduced to a technique or a formula or a getting of the words and practice right. Prayer is the life-long process of becoming a peculiar kind of person who learns to exercise a particular kind of power. Prayer begins at the place of our personhood. Isn't that what James was getting at when he said this:

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. (James 5:16b)

Remember, though, this righteousness doesn't come from prayer as a form of religious behavior. This is the righteousness that comes—first to last—by faith. It is the righteousness of Jesus Messiah, imputed to us as we believe him and imparted to us as we behold him—who alone can teach us to pray. And there is much to learn. But this learning does not come by information through the endless reading of

endless books. It comes by revelation through the very reality he teaches which is prayer itself. This lengthy and challenging process, which is nothing more or less than the way of holiness, leads to a particular kind of power scarcely known in our age. It's why James called his star witness to make his case:

Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. (James 5:17-18)

Summarizing now: Prayer is the lifelong process of becoming a peculiar kind of person who learns to exercise a particular kind of power for other's gain, our good, and God's glory.

Are you ready to sing? We need a rain! We need a rain! We need a rain! Have faith it will.

THE PRAYER OF TRANSFORMATION

Lord Jesus, teach us to pray.

I receive your righteousness and release my sinfulness.

I receive your wholeness and release my brokenness.

I receive your fullness and release my emptiness.

I receive your peace and release my anxiety.

I receive your joy and release my despair.

I receive your healing and release my sickness.

I receive your love and release my selfishness.

I receive your given life of prayer and release my striving after a better prayer life.

Come, Holy Spirit, transform my heart, mind, soul, and strength so that my consecration becomes your demonstration; that our lives become your sanctuary. For the glory of God our Father, amen.

THE QUESTION

How does this definition resonate (or not) with you? Prayer is the lifelong process of becoming a peculiar kind of person who learns to exercise a particular kind of power for other's gain, our good, and God's glory. What confirmation does it bring to your spirit? What surprise might it bring to your prior understanding?

March 12: What is Prayer II

MATTHEW 20:29–34

As Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. Two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”

The crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet, but they shouted all the louder, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”

Jesus stopped and called them. “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.

“Lord,” they answered, “we want our sight.”

Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.

CONSIDER THIS

Today we continue with our question, “What is prayer?”

Remember now our working definition: Prayer is the lifelong process of becoming a peculiar kind of person who learns to exercise a particular kind of power for the good of the world and the glory of God.

Yesterday I told you a story. Today, permit me to offer a poem of sorts—in the spirit of the tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers.

So much of what passes for prayer
is really just inner dialogue, or performative monologue,

or consternated cogitation; even emotional constipation;
and really just a more meditative way of thinking about things—
a kind of internal churning in spiritual circles.

But real prayer is of another order of magnitude.

It's like waiting in a long line for your turn
to speak to the King of the realm.
At the back of the line you had so much to say,
but as the line progressed it mostly fell away.
All that internal wrangling you used to think was prayer
evaporates like mist in the face of a furnace
when your turn comes to meet the King.

Now you finally pray.

As Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. Two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

The crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet, but they shouted all the louder, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

Jesus stopped and called them. "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

"Lord," they answered, "we want our sight."

Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.

Lots of onlookers that day; only two could see him.

They were the ones praying.

THE PRAYER OF HUMBLE APPROACH

Lord Jesus, teach us to pray.

Let's locate ourselves with those two blind men sitting by the side of the road. We heard Jesus of Nazareth was coming this way. We are waiting for him. It is hot. We are weary. And we can see nothing. So close your eyes.

Now begin to whisper his name. "Jesus . . . Jesus . . . Jesus . . ."

As you continue saying his name, increase the volume level until you are uncomfortable with the volume.

Go back to whispering now and add these words: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on me."

Continue with these words now, speaking them several times—increasing the volume level until you are louder than you think appropriate.

When you think you are finally praying these words to Jesus, come to silence. He stands before you now, and he asks:

What do you want me to do for you?

Go ahead and tell him now, out loud: "I want . . ."

Return to this way of prayer throughout the day as prompted.

THE QUESTION

Were you able to connect with the poem? How about the exercise of prayer? What did you experience? How did Jesus encounter you? How did you experience Jesus?

March 13: The Prayer of Attention

LUKE 10:38–42

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

CONSIDER THIS

Have you noticed how sometimes all we have learned about a particular subject can get in the way of what we most need to know about it? I find prayer can be this way. The many things so easily get in the way of the only necessary thing. All the stuff about how to do something right or better so readily gets in the way of what the thing even is. I sketched out another free-verse desert wisdom poem the other day that gets at what I am trying to say here.

In sports, as in life,
there is the game, and
then there is all the stuff.
Take baseball for instance.
There's the ball and
then there's the bat.

So easy to put all the focus on the bat
what it is made of, or worse, its brand;

its length, handle, grip, balance, swing-ability, breakability,
and then there's the matter of
what famous player uses the bat and
what about their batting average or home run count,
and we haven't even gotten into the myriad nuances of
how to swing this bat like Babe Ruth or Austin Riley.

That's how it so readily goes with
faith and prayer and the whole
religious industrial complex.

It's funny though;
"Keep your eye on the bat,"
said no one ever.

That's why I will keep bringing back our working definition of prayer.

Prayer is the lifelong process of becoming a peculiar kind of person who learns to
exercise a particular kind of power for the good of the world and the glory of God.

Yesterday we sat in the seats of two blind men by the side of the road on the outskirts
of Jericho. In all of the throngs of people they were singled out as peculiar kind of
people. Today we go to Bethany with our prayer teacher to visit two sisters.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman
named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the
Lord's feet listening to what he said.

One of these sisters is not like the other. Mary is a peculiar kind of person. Mary had
her eye on the ball. Martha—not so much.

But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.

And before anyone starts defending Martha and reminding us Jesus brought twelve uninvited guests for dinner and the food was not going to cook itself, let's remember the real issue.

She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

The problem was not Martha's attention to preparing the meal. She was not even paying attention to the meal. She was distracted. Martha had her eyes on Mary. Said another way—she was focused on the bat. Keep your eye on the ball now as the master pitcher winds up:

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Like us, Martha was worried and upset about many things. I'm sure Mary was too. Mary was becoming a peculiar kind of person, though. She had found her way to the feet of Jesus and taken her seat there. Mary was not paying attention. She had become attention.

THE PRAYER OF ATTENTION

Lord Jesus, teach us to pray. I am worried and upset about many things. I want to learn to pray but I tend to focus on all the wrong things. In fact, even focusing on prayer is the wrong thing. I see you pointing to a spot on the floor—down on the front row—right in front of you. Surely that can't be my seat. I'm more comfortable in the back row, where I have easy access to the door, and can keep an eye on my phone. Wait! You want me to check my phone at the door? Okay, I get it. You aren't inviting me into a school of prayer. You are calling me into the house of prayer. You are welcoming me into the house of love, where you become life and prayer becomes breath. All of this feels uncomfortable to me, so I am prone to consider it wrong. But I will come to you, Jesus. I will come. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

THE QUESTION

Does this feel uncomfortable to you? Would you like it to be more straightforward; maybe with an outline and some blanks to fill in with answers? So what are you worried and upset about? Are you ready to leave distractions behind and become attention? Are you ready to become one of these peculiar kinds of people; even a righteous person; the kind of person whose prayers are powerful and effective?

March 14: The Prayer of Consecration

LUKE 1:34–38 ESV

And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

CONSIDER THIS

Let’s begin today with our working definition of prayer.

Prayer is the life-long process of becoming a peculiar kind of person who learns to exercise a particular kind of power for the good of the world and the glory of God.

About this word, peculiar. When we hear the word we associate it with synonyms like different or odd or strange. That is the more modern meaning of the word peculiar. We are interested in the older meaning. It comes from the Latin word, *peculiaris*, which means private property and more specifically the ownership or possession of private property. And you see where this is headed. Prayer is the lifelong process of becoming a peculiar kind of person—which is to say the private, personal, and exclusively possessed property of almighty God.

Years ago there was a movie I never saw but I never forgot the title: *There’s Something About Mary*. I don’t imagine it had anything to do with the Mary of our text today but that title immediately drew my attention to her. Did you catch how Mary responded to the angel’s announcement she would give birth to the Messiah?

Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.

Indeed, there's something about Mary. That prayer reveals the "something." Her response reveals her peculiarity. She belongs to God. She welcomes the Son of God into the depths of her being—into her very womb. Mary's response reveals her righteousness. It is not a righteousness that comes from her behavior but from her believing. Mary believed God. Remember this clarion word from our season back in Romans?

Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. (see Romans 4:3)

There is a difference between believing in God and believing God. Believing in God, well . . . is belief. Believing God is faith. Now recall the other clarion word from Romans:

For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."(Rom. 1:17)

This is the "something" about Mary we need to grasp. Righteousness is the gift of God to all who will believe God. It shows up in the prayer of faith. Prayer is not the path to righteousness but rather the power of it because prayer is the native language of faith. This is why "The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."

Now if it is true, that "the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective," our chief question is not how do my prayers become powerful and effective? Our chief question must be: How do I become a righteous person? We will turn there tomorrow. Here's the short answer:

Belong to Jesus—personally, exclusively, wholeheartedly.

Mary had become a peculiar kind of person—a righteous person—which is another way of saying a consecrated person. Mary said it this way:

Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.

It's why we begin every day on the Wake-Up Call with the prayer of consecration. Let's pray it again now.

THE PRAYER OF CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

Jesus, I belong to you.

I lift up my heart to you.

I set my mind on you.

I fix my eyes on you.

I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.

Jesus, we belong to you.

Praying in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

THE QUESTION

Are you coming to a deeper and richer understanding of the interconnectivity between righteousness, prayer, faith, and personhood? How do you articulate this? Any epiphanies to share?

March 15: The Prayer of Transformation

MATTHEW 6:33

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

CONSIDER THIS

Reviewing:

1. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.
2. Prayer is the lifelong process of becoming a peculiar kind of person who learns to exercise a particular kind of power for the good of the world and the glory of God.

Now to today's text: But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Like so many of you, I have read, highlighted, underlined, and focused on Matthew 6:33 as long as I can remember. If I'm honest, though, I have mostly focused on part of it. I have put the emphasis on seeking "his kingdom." Sure, I salute the part about seeking "his righteousness" but I have given little attention to this. Seeking "his kingdom" just feels more tangible and action-oriented and otherwise doable. Seeking "his righteousness" feels fuzzy and unquantifiable and otherwise aspirational but not really practical.

Notice how Jesus says, "Seek first," and then he seems to name two things.

Why would he do this? What if I told you "his kingdom" and "his righteousness" are all at once one thing and yet not the same thing? What if they are two inseparable

dimensions of the same whole? It's kind of like when someone says, "brush your teeth," they assume you understand you will need both a toothbrush and toothpaste. I know . . . that's deep, but that's why you pay me the big bucks. LOL. Seriously, though, think about it. Trying to brush your teeth without any toothpaste is akin to seeking his kingdom and not seeking his righteousness. Trying to brush your teeth with toothpaste and no toothbrush is akin to seeking his righteousness and not seeking his kingdom. And I'll stop there before this analogy runs out of gas—I mean toothpaste.

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

What if we thought of "his kingdom" as the will of God and "his righteousness" as the way of God? We either get both or we get neither. Watch this. The right thing done in the wrong way becomes the wrong thing. Jesus says as much earlier in the chapter when he teaches on giving, prayer, and fasting. But watch how it works in the opposite direction: The wrong thing done in the right way becomes the right thing. (i.e., see the story of the prodigal son and the story of the generous land owner, the whole approach to sabbath keeping, etc.)

The righteousness of God is the very nature of Jesus and there is only one way to get it—receive Jesus. To receive Jesus is to receive his kingdom and his righteousness. It is why we will never behave our way into either. We must receive. It's why Jesus says, "Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened."

And this is the secret of transformation. As we receive his righteousness by faith we can by faith release our sinfulness. As we receive his wholeness we can release our brokenness. This is the miracle of grace. God is not holding back waiting on us to get rid of our sinfulness so he can come in and replace it with his righteousness. He stands at the door and knocks. He comes to give us his righteousness which displaces our sinfulness, empowering us to then release it.

This is why the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. A righteous person's sinful nature is being displaced by the very righteousness of God. It's why we call it transformation.

This is how prayer is the lifelong process of becoming a peculiar kind of person who learns to exercise a particular kind of power for the good of the world and the glory of God.

THE PRAYER OF TRANSFORMATION

Lord Jesus, teach us to pray.

I receive your righteousness and release my sinfulness.

I receive your wholeness and release my brokenness.

I receive your fullness and release my emptiness.

I receive your peace and release my anxiety.

I receive your joy and release my despair.

I receive your healing and release my sickness.

I receive your love and release my selfishness.

Come, Holy Spirit, transform my heart, mind, soul, and strength so that my consecration becomes your demonstration; that our lives become your sanctuary. For the glory of God our Father, amen.

THE QUESTION

On days like this, I wish we could discuss this over coffee because I'm not sure I am getting through. Am I getting through? I'm sorry if I am frustrating you. Am I frustrating you?

March 16: On Praying for Results

MATTHEW 6:5-8

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

CONSIDER THIS

Reviewing:

1. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.
2. Prayer is the lifelong process of becoming a peculiar kind of person who learns to exercise a particular kind of power for the good of the world and the glory of God.

In today's text we have the straight teaching of the Son of God on the matter we most need to understand. There is more wisdom in this single paragraph and the one to follow than in all of the books written on prayer over all the centuries combined. And yet, if I am honest, over all these years I have scarcely paid attention to his guidance or his prayer.

Notice how he begins by talking about becoming a peculiar kind of person. He does so with one of his favorite teaching tools: contrast. Notice as you read Jesus how often he, in effect, says, “Be like this person, not that person.”

In today's text, Jesus tells us two kinds of people we don't want to be like. Did you spot them? They are Pharisees (of the hypocrite variety) and Pagans. One group makes prayer a demonstration for other people. The other makes prayer a demonstration for God.

In the process, he points out how both of these groups are using prayer as a kind of tool to produce a certain result. Keeping it real here—over the years, my framework for thinking about prayer has largely been constructed around results. Remember from last week—prayer is about asking God to do things and then hoping he will do them. That is about results. My impulse has been to call for and participate in more prayer meetings with more intensity and earnestness. And it has been for good ends, like a great awakening for crying out loud (no pun intended)!

I will so readily take a text like 2 Chronicles 7:14 to make the case.

“if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

Over the years my broken tendency has been to start with the results (i.e., forgive their sin and heal their land) and then work backward in a highly functional and even strategic fashion until we have football stadiums across the land filled with people crying out in enormous public demonstration with an infinity of words, in the presence of God and in clear view of the watching world.

Contrast this with Jesus's guidance:

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.

I am becoming less sure Jesus is on board with my results orientation and football stadium approach.

Now, notice in today's text how Jesus frames prayer not around results but something else.

Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

He repeats it three times within the span of eighteen verses.

Prayer is not a functional activity exercised in order to get something done. Prayer is a transcendent reality. It is not transactional in nature. It is relational. Prayer is not for the sake of something else. It is the means and the end.

I think I spent too long trying to figure out how to develop a results-oriented prayer life when all the while it wasn't about results but a reward. So what do you think the reward is?

I think I have been trying to figure out the secrets of prayer when all the while prayer is the secret.

THE PRAYER OF TRANSFORMATION

Lord Jesus, teach us to pray. I receive your righteousness and release my sinfulness. I receive your wholeness and release my brokenness. I receive your fullness and release my emptiness. I receive your peace and release my anxiety. I receive your joy and release my despair. I receive your healing and release my sickness. I receive your love and release my selfishness.

Come, Holy Spirit, transform my heart, mind, soul, and strength so that my consecration becomes your demonstration; that our lives become your sanctuary. For the glory of God our Father, amen.

THE QUESTION

Asking again . . . what do you think the reward is?

March 17: The Two Paths - Psalm 1

Today's post is from A Meditative Journey Through the Psalms by Timothy and Julie Tennent. He serves as the president of Asbury Theological Seminary among other posts he holds across the global church. She is a gifted musician and was one of the driving forces that helped bring to fruition the Seedbed hymnal, Our Great Redeemer's Praise. Note: There will be no questions for today.

PSALM 1 (NIV)

Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.
Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

CONSIDER THIS

Psalm 1 is the doorway into the entire Psalter. In this first psalm, the grand theme of the Psalms is revealed: the two paths—the path of the righteous and the path of the wicked. This psalm marks the beginning of the greatest journey of life. Even in this first psalm, we begin to see why the Psalms are known as the Sung Torah because all the great themes of the Old Testament find their way into this book of worship. The Torah set forth the way of life and the way of death. The psalm sings of these two ways. Likewise, the book of Proverbs is the wisdom of the Torah, setting forth the way of the wise and the way of the foolish. Psalm 1 sets forth the basic worldview of worship, which reminds us that the way of the wicked is filled with the ungodly, who scoff at God’s law and if followed, will lead us astray. The psalm shows us, in advance, what the final end or trajectory of the wicked will be; namely, they will be like chaff that the wind drives away, and they will not be able to stand in the day of judgment (vv. 4–5). In contrast, the righteous are like a fruitful tree, which prospers and is steadfast (vv. 1–3).

Hymns and choruses frequently celebrate the way of the righteous, but a proper understanding of the way of the wicked has been lost. As Christians, we need to understand both trajectories. We must see the final end of the wicked. We must also recognize that only Jesus has steadfastly walked in the way of the righteous. The two paths of righteousness and wickedness remain far apart except for the one point in history where they converge: namely, at the cross of Jesus Christ. It is there that Jesus took upon himself all the shame, guilt, and judgment of wickedness. Yet, he remained the Righteous One. It is at the cross that we who have traveled the way of wickedness can finally cross over through grace to the path of righteousness. It is, therefore, by grace that we are found in him and we are enabled to sit, walk, and stand on the narrow way, which leads to life, not the broad way, which leads to destruction (see Matt. 7:13–14).

March 18: Prayer and Knowing that God Knows You

MATTHEW 6:5-8

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

CONSIDER THIS

The year was 1988. The place was Memphis, Tennessee, and the surrounding nine state region. We were about to witness the advent of an amazing technological advance we take for granted today. I remember my first encounter of it like it was yesterday. I was in college at the time at the University of Arkansas (aka the Harvard of the Ozarks). On that day I made a routine telephone call to my father, who was in his home in Dumas. As he answered the phone he didn't say hello. His first words, spoken immediately and in a loud and excited voice: “Hey John David!”

I was dumbstruck. How on earth did he know it was me?

I asked him how he knew. In pure amazement, he said, “It says your name on the screen of the phone.”

Yes, this was the first day of the release of the technology we know as “caller ID.”

I remember thinking in those early days of the advent of caller ID—this must be what prayer is like.

The second I say, “Our Father,” he doesn’t say, “My son.” He says, “John David!”

The great miracle of miracles is not that we know God. It is that God knows us. And the more I live the more I think this is what salvation by grace through faith actually is in its deepest essence—knowing God knows me—and knowing because God knows me that God loves me. And knowing God loves me not because he has to love me, which is only tolerance, but because he made me. Indeed, fearfully and wonderfully he made me; a little lower than the angels he made me. God doesn’t love me in spite of me or despite me but because of me and because of him. God loves me like a Father because I belong to him as a son. And yes, I do not deny that I am a child of wrath deserving of hell because of my membership and participation in the rebellious human race who turned and turns away from God because of its self-inflicted broken nature. This only makes the love of God more amazing and gracious and profound and a pure gift.

And how do I know this? Well, I don’t know it because of cosmology, theology, philosophy, or mythology. I know it because of history. I know it because it happened.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

He sent his one and only Son to seek me out and find me; to forgive all my sin, to pay my debt, to reconcile me to God, to cleanse me of every spot and stain of sin, to robe me in his righteousness, to crown me with his glory and splendor, to put the ring of his seal of favor on my finger, to hold and behold and desire and delight in and over and through me—to stand in the water so I could hear the words spoken over him into the deepest place in me; in my name, “John David, you are my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

As I say, “Our Father,” the caller ID turns into an extravagant embrace. I hear those words every single day as I meet with God and every single time it changes me. As that water seeps through my skin it changes me. As I know God knows me completely and accepts me profoundly just as I am, then I can completely and profoundly accept myself just as I am. And I have discovered along the way this is the only way I can change—not so I will be known and loved but because I am known and loved. The magic is the way this compels me to know, love, and completely accept other people, without conditions

or caveats. Because if this is true for me it is true for them too. This, my friends, is a supremely powerful reality that can change everything for a person.

Now, here's the best part. All I have just said is true for you.

All of this is what it means to become and be a righteous person whose prayers are powerful and effective.

This is why I say prayer is the lifelong process of becoming a peculiar kind of person who learns to exercise a particular kind of power for the good of the world and the glory of God.

THE PRAYER OF TRANSFORMATION

Lord Jesus, teach us to pray.

I receive your righteousness and release my sinfulness. I receive your wholeness and release my brokenness. I receive your fullness and release my emptiness. I receive your peace and release my anxiety. I receive your joy and release my despair. I receive your healing and release my sickness. I receive your love and release my selfishness.

Come, Holy Spirit, transform my heart, mind, soul, and strength so that my consecration becomes your demonstration; that our lives become your sanctuary. For the glory of God our Father, amen.

THE QUESTION

Our Father has caller ID. How does that encourage you? Do you know God knows you? Are you growing deeper in this gifted awareness?

March 19: A Prayer to Create Space for Prayer

MATTHEW 6:6

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

CONSIDER THIS

I have heard Jesus say this at least a hundred times. It can hardly be more explicit and specific.

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

It's like he's giving us the step by step instructions, isn't he?

1. Go into your room.
2. Close the door.
3. Pray to your Father who is unseen.

One day back in the late 1900s I served as a pastor at a large church in Texas. I got so busy I met myself coming and going. I tried my best to spend some quality time with Jesus every day but it was hit or miss at best and obligatory at worst. In my experience (and I am being confessional here) pastors can be some of the most prayer-less people on the planet. Anyhow, one morning I was rushing out the door to get to my first meeting when I sensed the voice of the Lord speaking to me, deep in my spirit. This brought me to a screeching halt. Four simple words pierced my soul. They weren't audible and yet they were crystal clear.

CREATE SPACE FOR PRAYER.

I walked back over into the living room, knelt down by the couch, and prayed. Somehow I knew deep down this was my calling within my calling; my Mother Teresa moment that would lead to the awakening of the world. So I grabbed my laptop and typed out an email to my boss at the church, telling him about the experience and how we needed to “Create Space for Prayer” as a church staff. My boss promptly reversed my attempt at reverse delegation, assigning the initiative back to me. I put something together. The staff gladly participated, and after a series of faithful efforts, my “Create Space for Prayer” initiative drifted off into the heavens from whence it came.

CREATE SPACE FOR PRAYER

These four words never left me. Over the ensuing decades, I made many attempts and efforts to design initiatives, each similar to the ones before and yet with increasing sophistication. I launched prayer vigils, started prayer houses, created prayer watches, wrote prayer guides, and hosted more prayer meetings than I can remember. All of this was good and needful and helped people and I’m sure contributed to the expansion of God’s kingdom. However, today, a quarter century later, it is dawning on me that I may have missed the point of the personal revelation on that early morning in Texas.

CREATE SPACE FOR PRAYER

That was not a word for the staff, or the church, or to start a corporate practice or to build a house of prayer or launch a vigil or watch—good and needful as all those things are. It was a word spoken to me and for me. It was a personal admonition crying out for personal attention. Now here I am a quarter century later, hearing this word again, as though for the very first time.

CREATE SPACE FOR PRAYER

And it is finally dawning on me that that word is nothing more and nothing less than this word:

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

THE PRAYER TO CREATE SPACE FOR PRAYER

Father, thank you for the simple clarity of Jesus who plainly tells us to “go into your room, close the door, and pray to our Father who is unseen.” I hear you, Lord, you are telling me to create space for prayer. This was and is and ever shall be a word to me and for me. And though it is a word for so many others, would you grace me with the humility to heed it myself? Would you help me to create space for prayer—for me? That seems like enough to ask today. Thank you, Father, for this simple clarity and this gracious invitation. Praying in Jesus’s name, amen.

THE QUESTION

Do you identify with this calling to “Create Space for Prayer”? I wonder if anyone out there identifies with the way I missed the point of this calling and launched into an enterprising grandiosity to fulfill it?

March 20: The Prayer to Crush Casual Prayer

EXODUS 33:7-11

Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the “tent of meeting.” Anyone inquiring of the Lord would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the Lord spoke with Moses. Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to their tent. The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.

CONSIDER THIS

Isn't it interesting how this text and story about Moses sounds remarkably similar to this word from Jesus:

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matt. 6:6)

You would think they knew each other. You would be right. In that “tent of meeting” on the far side of the Red Sea; somewhere between the land of slavery and the land of promise, Moses met with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who with him and the Holy Spirit reign as one God forever and ever, amen.

Now, compare these two texts:

Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the “tent of meeting.”

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. (Mark 1:35)

Are you seeing a theme developing. We might call it . . . wait for it . . .

CREATE SPACE FOR PRAYER.

So how do we create space for prayer? There’s clearly no magic formula here, and yet the Scriptures offer us clear and directional wisdom. It strikes me that there are at least three critical elements at play here. First, there is time. Second, there is place. Third, there is the substance of prayer itself. On the one hand, we don’t tend to think of getting prayer wrong, on the other hand, it can be easy to get off track. Here’s what I have learned about myself: If I do not have a set time and a specific place I will tend to fool myself into thinking I a) kind of pray all the time, and b) sort of pray everywhere I am. And that, my friends, is the essence of self-deception and the recipe for the malaise-ical enemy of the kingdom of God we call “casual prayer.”

Remember, Jesus was very specific:

1. Go to your room.
2. Close the door.
3. Pray to your Father who is unseen.

If you were to look at my practice over the years my interpretation of the text would appear to be as follows:

1. Go into the living room or den.
2. Sit in your chair or on the couch you always sit in no matter the occasion and no matter what you are doing.
3. Read the Bible and maybe some devotions and then prayerfully think about God and meditate in silence, doing your best to remember your family and friends with care.
4. And I almost forgot—try not to check your phone when it beeps and buzzes.

There is something about a specific kind of set-apart place for the specific kind of set-apart activity of prayer. Moses had a “tent of meeting.” Jesus had a “solitary place” outside Capernaum, (and the garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem). Many people have a prayer closet or specific room in their home. You get the point. With something as intangible as prayer, Moses and Jesus reveal to us ways of putting handles on it. They tangibilitate prayer, if you will.

There’s a favorite movie line from the old movie, Field of Dreams. You may remember it. “If you build it, he will come.” That is exactly the wrong way to think about a time and place as it comes to prayer. This is not a trick or formula or some kind of magic lever to move God. The secret is more like this: If you build it, you will come. We aren’t creating a space so God can show up. We are creating a space so we can show up. That’s the ticket.

THE PRAYER TO CRUSH CASUAL PRAYER

Abba Father, thank you for sending us your Son, Jesus. Lord Jesus, thank you for getting down on the level with us. Thank you for being so clear, specific, and practical. And thank you for not just telling us how but showing us in your own life. Forgive me for neglecting your specific instructions. Forgive me for assuming I sort of pray without ceasing when the truth is my prayer life is casual. Save me from getting caught up in creating the perfect prayer room. Help me to do this simply, to create time and place for prayer and even more to show up. Thank you that you are already there, even before I create it, waiting for me. Praying in Jesus’s name, amen.

THE QUESTION

Do you have a specific time and place for prayer? Do you show up there? How has and is God meeting you there? If not, are you ready to move in this direction? If not, why not?

March 21: Why a Prayer Room Matters

JOHN 14:2-4

My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going."

CONSIDER THIS

If ever there were a text where I think we modern-day readers of the Scriptures have missed the point it is this one. Think about when you have most heard this Scripture read. I'd be willing to bet it was at funerals. I know that's where I have heard it a hundred times, and also read it myself. "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me." And in good King James fashion, "In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so I would not have told you so. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."

Maybe I am in the minority report on this, but as I read it, Jesus is not here talking to his disciples about going to heaven when they die. Now, before someone picks up something to throw at me, hear me out. I am not raining on the parade of going to heaven when we die. Scripture clearly establishes this truth. It just doesn't do that in John 14. So if John 14 is not about a mansion in the sky, what is it about? Thanks for asking.

I am admittedly taking on too difficult a subject in such a short space, so I'll do my best. The context here is not a funeral but final preparations for a sequence of cataclysmic events—namely Jesus's death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Holy Spirit. Jesus clearly addresses the living not about their death but his death and not

about “some sweet morning when this life is over,” but right here and right now. He is talking to them and us about our relationship with himself during his physical absence.

I am going there to prepare a place for you

This is not a distant future place but a right here and right now place. He is creating a “room,” a meeting place; might I suggest, a prayer room, and in Heaven no less.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back

He is not here referring to his “second coming” but rather to the coming of the Holy Spirit. Hear what he says a few verses later in chapter 14:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. (John 14:16–18)

Stay with me. By the Holy Spirit, the presence of Jesus is with us on Earth. This is how he comes to us and is “with us always even to the end of the age.” Now, here’s the part that flies right over our heads:

and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

Did you catch the operative word, also? Jesus will be with us now on earth. We will also be with Jesus now in Heaven. Jesus makes clear he will be with us here on Earth, despite his physical bodily absence. He makes equally clear that we will also be with him in Heaven, despite our physical bodily absence there.

Paul makes this crystal clear in his letter to the Ephesians:

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:6)

and again to the Colossians:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. (Col. 3:1-3)

Closing the loop now:

My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?

Jesus has prepared a place for us in Heaven. When he says, "Go into your room. Close the door, and pray to your Father who is unseen," might he be instructing us to go into that room he has prepared for us in Heaven and as a means of doing so to prepare our own prayer room for him on Earth?

And might this room be the very go-between, the vestibule between Heaven and Earth? That's it! A prayer room is an antechamber between Heaven and Earth; a kind of new room for Heaven to break in on Earth. After all, the core prayer Jesus teaches us to pray, just after sending us to "our room" is,

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

THE QUESTION

How do you resonate (or not) with this reading of Jesus's teaching in John 14 and its connection back to Matthew 6:6 (i.e., go into your room, close the door, etc.)? Do you think creating a room for prayer matters? Why or why not?

March 22: When Fasting is an Adventure in Missing the Point

MATTHEW 6:16–18

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

CONSIDER THIS

I hate fasting. I always have. I have tried to fast for the better part of the last forty years and I have failed over and over again. Why? Well, I have fasted because Jesus assumes I am fasting. After all, he didn't say, “If you fast,” he said, “When you fast.” Jesus assumes his followers fast. I began my effort at fasting because I believed it was not an optional activity. Obedience required it. Well, that didn't last long. It's one thing to put a tip in the offering plate at church because God expects us to give, but it's next level to pass up lunch at Chick-Fil-A with friends. And friends seemed to always be around at mealtimes. I mean, who wants to be “that guy” who sits at the feast and doesn't eat because “I'm fasting.” Didn't Jesus say that was a foul?

I needed a better motivation than simple obedience. What would be the purpose of fasting? They told me it would make me a better person or a better Christian. You know the drill, fasting brings out the worst in us, and this is so we can confess it as sin and be cleansed and purified. In other words, I tried to practice fasting as a method of sanctification. I failed at that too.

So why have I failed? If I'm honest, I have found that trying to white-knuckle hunger just makes me hangry—the place where hunger unveils hidden anger. In my experience, though, hanger does not lead to holiness. In fact, more often than not it leads straight to a hamburger or at least a big bag of chips. Fasting became an obstacle to endure to

make it back to food. This approach didn't make me feel particularly close to Jesus, because most of the time it led to a splitting headache. And of course, it led to a hundred ridiculous questions like can I drink orange juice? What about orange juice with pulp? Can I put flavoring in my water? How long does it have to be to count, and do I need to skip three consecutive meals for it to be a real 24-hour fast or can I just skip two? And would it work to eat something I don't particularly care for, like say dry broccoli, just so I'll have something on my stomach? All of that is just another name for legalism. All of this made fasting, for me, an adventure in missing the point. So I took a break.

Along the way, I discovered a new motivation to fast—to motivate God to answer my prayers or at least to demonstrate to God I was really serious about them. I ran into a brand of almost militantly activist Jesus freaks (whom I loved and still love dearly) who took fasting to a whole new level. I would hear people say they were fasting for this outcome or that cause; and they were very good causes, like for someone's wayward children to return to the Lord or for someone's mom or dad to be delivered from cancer. After all, remember the time Jesus's disciples couldn't deliver a man's son from demon possession? Jesus said later that kind only comes out by prayer AND FASTING (all caps my emphasis). If I were serious about my prayers, I would supercharge them with fasting to show God I was serious which would hopefully warrant a demonstration of his power on our behalf. And when it came to great awakening, I was all in. So I fasted, but if I'm honest, I talked a lot more about fasting than I actually fasted. And truthfully, in time, it began to feel more akin to some form of spiritual technology on one hand or a hunger strike on the other than the love of God and neighbor. And surely God is not holding back on answering prayer because people are praying but not fasting? So I took another break.

I guess you could say I have been fasting in a way. I've been fasting from fasting—at least I have been fasting from the kind of fasting that has proven for me to be an adventure in missing the point. A little over a year ago I began to discover fasting in a whole new light—the light of Jesus. The Son of God, by the power of the Spirit, through the gift of his witnesses—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—has been teaching me to fast in a way like I never understood it before. It is a quite different approach. And it is changing me. For the next several days, I'll be sharing this journey and these learnings.

My prayer is it will help us leave behind fasting as an adventure in missing the point and lead us into a way of fasting as an adventure which is the point.

THE PRAYER OF TRANSFORMATION

Lord Jesus, teach us to fast.

I receive your righteousness and release my sinfulness.

I receive your wholeness and release my brokenness.

I receive your fullness and release my emptiness.

I receive your peace and release my anxiety.

I receive your joy and release my despair.

I receive your healing and release my sickness.

I receive your love and release my selfishness.

Come, Holy Spirit, transform my heart, mind, soul, and strength so that my consecration becomes your demonstration; that our lives become your sanctuary. For the glory of God our Father, amen.

THE QUESTION

Do you fast? Have you ever consistently fasted? What was your experience? How have you experienced fasting as an adventure in missing the point?

March 23: According to His Power that is at Work in Us

EPHESIANS 3:20-21

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

CONSIDER THIS

So what is fasting?

The dictionary defines it as abstaining from all or some kinds of food or drink, especially as a religious observance.

Here's how I define it. Fasting is the lifelong process of becoming a peculiar kind of person who learns to exercise a particular kind of power for the good of the world and the glory of God.

Sound familiar? Yep, it sounds like the same definition I offered for prayer. And to prayer and fasting I would offer a third element: giving. Jesus singled out these three ancient works for special focus. I believe they are three parts of an indivisible whole. Through them, God mysteriously works in us to receive and impart the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Think of them as the three legs of the stool whose seat enthrones the righteousness of God. We must understand, however, that righteousness is God's gift of himself to us. This is how he rewards us. We grow in this righteousness through secret devotion to God through giving, prayer, and fasting.

I have mostly thought of prayer and fasting and for that matter giving as means by which we get God to do things on our and others' behalf. Certainly, this is a key dimension of prayer. I would call it the dimension of delegation. I think there is a more critical dimension of prayer that receives far less emphasis and yet I believe it is far

more important. I would call it agency. In prayer as delegation, we are a participant in a limited fashion. In prayer as agency, we are a direct actor; moving through the world as the agents of Jesus Messiah. As agents of Jesus, we live and act and have our being in the seamless movement of prayer and action. Agents abide in Jesus in the real world and in real time with ever-increasing levels of attention and attunement to his voice. As Jesus demonstrated, “I only say what I hear my Father saying,” and “I only do what I see my Father doing,” we follow suit. As we will see, this is why fasting plays such a key role as a means of physically embodied abiding.

When a participant says, “I will pray for you,” they mean I will go somewhere else, and at another time I will lift your need to God in an act of delegation. An agent says rather, “I am praying for you.” It is not a mere shift of words but signifies they are living and walking in union with Jesus and carrying his authority in such a way that Jesus is actively demonstrating his power in and through them for their good. Just as with Jesus so with his agents—it is an active encounter with the living God. An agent moves with given authority in gifted activity. Giving, praying, and fasting forge the holy habitat in which divine agency and activity flow in and through a human person. Read the text today in this light:

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,

We are quite comfortable with prayer as delegation while reminding God—in our prayers no less—that he is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. For some reason, we seem to forget the next ten words—the clarion call of divine agency: according to his power that is at work within us.

May I be bold? Jesus is not looking for more people to delegate divine activity back to him. He is looking for more people who will receive delegated authority to move with divine initiative in the abiding exercise of divine power. That is what according to his power that is at work within us means.

As we will soon see, this is why giving, prayer, and fasting is the lifelong process of becoming a righteous person who learns to effectively exercise divine power for the good of the world and the glory of God.

to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

THE PRAYER OF TRANSFORMATION

Lord Jesus, teach us to pray.

I receive your righteousness and release my sinfulness.

I receive your wholeness and release my brokenness.

I receive your fullness and release my emptiness.

I receive your peace and release my anxiety.

I receive your joy and release my despair.

I receive your healing and release my sickness.

I receive your love and release my selfishness.

Come, Holy Spirit, transform my heart, mind, soul, and strength so that my consecration becomes your demonstration; that our lives become your sanctuary. For the glory of God our Father, amen.

THE QUESTION

Are you seeing the difference between prayer as delegating responsibility back to God and prayer as moving with divine authority to exercise human response-ability?

March 24: The Anointed One Is Lord Of History (Psalm 2)

Today's post is from *A Meditative Journey Through the Psalms* by Timothy and Julie Tennent. He serves as the president of Asbury Theological Seminary among other posts he holds across the global church. She is a gifted musician and was one of the driving forces that helped bring to fruition the Seedbed hymnal, *Our Great Redeemer's Praise*. We will share some of their writing on the Psalms over the next few Sundays. NOTE: there are no questions today.

PSALM 2 (NIV)

Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the LORD and against his anointed, saying,
“Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles.”

The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
“I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain.”

I will proclaim the LORD's decree:

He said to me, “You are my son;
today I have become your father.
Ask me,

and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.
You will break them with a rod of iron;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”

Therefore, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.
Serve the LORD with fear
and celebrate his rule with trembling.
Kiss his son, or he will be angry
and your way will lead to your destruction,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

CONSIDER THIS

Psalm 1 showed us the two themes of the Psalms, the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. If Psalm 1 cast the two paths or journeys in personal terms, Psalm 2 demonstrates that the struggle between righteousness and wickedness is not merely personal, it is also cosmic; it involves not just individuals, but entire nations plotting and scheming against the Lord and against his Anointed One. This is precisely what the apostle Paul refers to in Ephesians 6:12 when he declares that our struggle is not against “flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” In Psalm 2 we learn that righteousness is more than personal piety, it is engaging all of these forces arrayed against the Lord and his people. Just as Psalm 1 showed the final end or trajectory of our personal journey, so Psalm 2 demonstrates the final verdict of human history.

Psalm 2 gives us a rare glimpse into the inner counsels of those who oppose God’s rule and reign. Human history is replete with dozens of movements that conspire and plot against God and against his Messiah. The world plots and schemes to thwart God’s Word, God’s plans, and God’s rule. They see God’s rule as nothing more than chains and fetters, which restrict our freedom, rather than the true source of joy and freedom. Psalm 2 shows God laughing at the futility of the world’s rebellion. God alone is the

Lord of history. Through the incarnation, the Lord has set another historical trajectory into motion. Through God's Anointed One, Jesus Christ, the rule and reign of God has broken into our history: "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" (v. 7). (We, of course, know that the second person of the Trinity is eternal, but the "today I have become" refers to him at a specific point in human history taking up the office as Redeemer of the world.) The final end of all history is that every nation will tremble before his divine majesty. No nation can thwart his plan, which is unfolding in human history. "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession" (v. 8).

This is the final trajectory of human history—"every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:10–11). All nations will "kiss the son" (Ps. 2:12). This is why Psalm 2 is the fourth most-quoted psalm in the New Testament (only Psalms 22, 110, and 118 are quoted more). The early church clearly understood Psalm 2 as the backdrop to the passion and the final vindication of his Anointed One through the resurrection. It also demonstrates that the work of preaching and healing by the church is clearly seen as the natural outgrowth and extension of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus is broken on the cross, and through the power of that brokenness, he breaks the power of his foes. We are now engaged in a global proclamation of Jesus Christ to all nations, proclaiming that all nations are his "inheritance" and "the ends of the earth" his possession (v. 8). In light of these great truths, how blessed "are all who take refuge in him" (v. 12).

March 25: The Fasting of the Friends of the Bridegroom

LUKE 5:33-39

They said to him, “John’s disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.”

Jesus answered, “Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast.”

He told them this parable: “No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better.’”

CONSIDER THIS

Here we have a remarkable text that flew right over my head for most of my Bible-reading life. We are getting an inside look at one of the significant contrasts between the Pharisees, the disciples of John the Baptist, and Jesus and his disciples. Interestingly enough, it is on the matter of fasting.

They said to him, “John’s disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.”

It carries a hint of judgment as though they were saying, “You guys aren’t doing it right.” Now, watch Jesus’s reply:

Jesus answered, "Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast."

My translation: "It's obvious to me you don't understand what fasting is." More generously: "I see fasting very differently than you do."

Question: How did the Pharisees see and practice fasting? Answer: Very religiously. The Pharisees were known for their meticulously fastidious and quite legalistic observance of every jot and tittle of every law in the Torah. The law required fasting but the Pharisees took this to the next level. You will perhaps remember the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector wherein the Pharisee boasts, "I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." (Luke 18:12).

The Pharisees believed Messiah would come in response to the people of God perfectly observing the Law of God and it was therefore their mission to spread this version of scriptural holiness across the land in preparation for Messiah to come and establish his kingdom. Their goal was to get the people of God to comply with the whole Law. Fasting was a part of this religious performance. It was quite burdensome on people, which brings to mind Jesus's celebrated words, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matt. 11:28-30).

Question: So how did John and his disciples see and practice fasting? Answer: Very rigorously. While I can't verify this, I associate John and his movement with a first-century sect known as the Essenes. They had withdrawn from the society and set up shop in the wilderness. Scholars think the Essenes lived in Qumran, which is the site of the famous discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. John and his disciples were super serious about their mission and intense in their practice of faith. I suspect they fasted not so much out of legalistic obedience to the Law but out of activist faithfulness. They wanted to hasten the coming of the Messiah and the ouster of their Roman oppressors and they believed their fasting and prayer would serve this end. I would characterize the fasting of John and his disciples as living on the functional end of the spectrum (i.e., spiritual technology). Theirs strikes me as a kind of militant spirituality.

Now, back to the presenting question and Jesus's response:

They said to him, "John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking."

Jesus answered, "Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast."

Fasting is not legalistic obedience. Fasting is not spiritual activism. Fasting is about abiding friendship.

Jesus's brand of discipleship is about abiding friendship. Jesus decries performative religion (i.e., legalistic Pharisaism). I believe he denies transactional functional religion (i.e., if we can get enough people fasting and praying we can move the hand of God). For Jesus, it is all about relationships.

But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast."

Fasting is about sustaining and deepening friendship with Jesus during his physical, bodily absence. Can we cut back to John 14:

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. (John 14:3)

Fasting is about cultivating relational presence during physical absence. Fasting is a primary, and physically embodied means of attention and attunement to the abiding presence of Jesus in his physical absence. Fasting is not about food and set periods of not eating followed by binge eating. It is about hunger and learning to carry hunger in love for God and others. Fasting is not about the religious presence or absence of food. It is about the real presence of Jesus. Physical hunger cultivates the bodily conditioning for spiritual attunement—that where I am you may also be and where you are I may also be.

Fasting is learning to carry hunger and thirst as a way of love for Jesus, his kingdom, and his righteousness. It is becoming the peculiar kind of person (i.e., a righteous person) who learns to exercise a particular kind of power for the good of the world and the glory of God—“according to his power that is at work within us.”

And all of this leads us to the revelatory gemstone of wineskins to which we will turn tomorrow.

THE PRAYER OF TRANSFORMATION

Lord Jesus, teach us to fast.

I want to be faithful. I am willing to fast because you tell me to fast and yet I believe you want more for me than this. I want to be powerful and effective too and somehow I think fasting will make me such. I somehow think it will supercharge my prayers and make them work better. Something tells me, though this is not your way. I think you are training me to fast as a dimension of belonging to you, as a way of training my hunger to seek a higher form of food. I hear you whispering, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” Yes! I think that’s it and yet I still struggle to grasp righteousness. I think it is associated with my behavior or my faithfulness to duty. I do seek for your kingdom and your righteousness. Touch my seeking and transform it to hunger and thirst and lead me to fast from this kind of place. Let legalism be burned up by holy longing. Come, Holy Spirit, transform my heart, mind, soul, and strength so that my consecration becomes your demonstration; that our lives become your sanctuary. For the glory of God our Father, amen.

THE QUESTION

Are you seeing how Jesus’s way of fasting is different from the usual modes of fasting we see in the Pharisees and in John’s disciples? What differences do you note? What resonates with you in today’s post?

March 26: New Wineskins, New Wine, and a New Kind of Fasting

LUKE 5:36–39

He told them this parable: “No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better.’”

CONSIDER THIS

I have heard church leaders utilize this metaphor of wineskins to advocate for new systems and structures and all manner of new methodologies when it comes to making change in the church. I have never once heard anyone talk about new wineskins as it relates to the one subject Jesus utilized the metaphor to talk about—fasting. Jesus was not talking about new ways of doing church. He was talking about the new way of relationship with him in the midst of his physically embodied absence.

“If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”
(John 14:15–18)

The old wineskins were the Torah (aka the Law) and the temple. These gifts of God mediated the ways and means of a human relationship with the living God. Jesus Messiah, the one greater than the temple, actually replaces the temple with his physical body. Upon his ascension into Heaven, he will send the new wine—the Holy Spirit. This

new wine will not be poured into the old wineskin of the temple, but into the body of Christ which is his people on Earth.

Jesus has come to establish a new covenant with a new temple which is the new wineskin—the body of Christ, which is literally our physical bodies consecrated in holiness unto the Lord as a living sacrifice—Jesus Christ as our living head.

Remember this? But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Now, remember this: But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast. (Luke 5:35). That time is now. Why?

Fasting is not pious legalism. Fasting is not spiritual technology. Fasting is a means of grace, a primary way of abiding in the Vine who is Jesus Christ and walking in the power of the Holy Spirit as his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth. In order to contain and carry the new wine, a new mindset and lifestyle of fasting is in order. This is fasting as an ongoing way of maintaining the temple of the human body as a house of prayer; breaking the soul's idolatrous bond with food as comfort and restoring food to its place of physical nourishment. (Consider the implications of "soul" food and "comfort" food. The Holy Spirit is the "comforter" not the buffet). And friends, let's call it—we are living in the midst of a culture one of whose primary idols is food and whose god is its gut.

Fasting is about appetite displacement. Fasting is about learning to carry emptiness as the means to moving in the fullness of the Spirit of Jesus. Fasting is about learning to carry weakness as the means to moving in the fullness of the power of Jesus. Fasting is about learning to carry hunger as the means to moving in the sanctified flesh of Jesus, who said, "People do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Fasting is about learning to carry hunger as the means to moving in the love of Jesus for others—who said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish the work he has given me to do."

As a result of all of this, I believe fasting is one of the main battlefields in the kingdom of Jesus. Why? Jesus said it plainly:

“And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better.’”

THE PRAYER OF TRANSFORMATION

Lord Jesus, teach us to fast.

Something in all of us is good with the old wine, the old more familiar ways. You said it clearly that the time would come for the friends of the bridegroom to fast. We know that time is now—the age of the new wine of the Holy Spirit. Some of us are feeling really burdened because we aren’t fasting. We renounce that burden as not from you. Your yoke is easy and your burden is light. The fact that it feels burdensome to us is the sign it is not from you but from our own broken ways. I refuse to take fasting on as another burdensome requirement. I will instead simply and constantly consecrate myself to you, Jesus, and welcome the indwelling Holy Spirit to fill me. I receive your gentle leadership and guidance in a new way of fasting. We know we have problems with food and all manner of disordered eating. We know the solution is not a better diet and more ordered eating. It is the ever-deepening abiding presence of Jesus Christ in our physical bodies.

Come, Holy Spirit, transform my heart, mind, soul, and strength so that my consecration becomes your demonstration; that our lives become your sanctuary. For the glory of God our Father, amen.

THE QUESTION

How are you processing these thoughts? Are you leaning in or opting out? Where do you want to push back? What resonates with you in this teaching on fasting?

March 27: Walking the Fasting Road from Judea to Galilee

JOHN 4:4-7

Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

CONSIDER THIS

Why did Jesus have to go through Samaria?

Let's back the text up a few verses.

Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John—although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. (John 4:1-2)

Jesus was going back to Galilee. Apparently, he wants nothing to do with the church industrial complex—ancient or present-day—which seems to be a competition between the Pharisees and the disciples of John primarily concerned with whose movement is growing the fastest and reaching the most people. Jesus is about a different kind of movement altogether. He calls it "The kingdom of God and his righteousness," "My church," and "My Father's house."

The text tells us this is why Jesus was going to Galilee, but not why "he had to go through Samaria." Jews didn't go through the defiled land of Samaria. They had a well-worn path around Samaria to get back and forth between Judea and Galilee.

Despite this, the text clearly tells us, “Now he had to go through Samaria.” Jesus was doing something clearly off the map here, but why? It’s the same reason he did everything else he did. Jesus was working off a completely different map than the Pharisees and the disciples of John or anyone else for that matter. Let’s jump forward to the next chapter of John’s gospel where we will get a picture of what the map of Jesus looked like.

Jesus gave them this answer: “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. (John 5:19–20a)

Look now a few chapters ahead and behold this:

So Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man on the cross, then you will understand that I am he. I do nothing on my own but say only what the Father taught me. (John 8:28 NLT)

Look yet a few chapters further and behold this:

I don’t speak on my own authority. The Father who sent me has commanded me what to say and how to say it. And I know his commands lead to eternal life; so I say whatever the Father tells me to say.” (John 12:49–50)

These are extraordinary glimpses into how the secret life of Jesus’s relationship with his Father leads to demonstrations of public love (which is power) of extravagant consequence. If we would follow Jesus we must pay close attention to how this secret life is cultivated and carried out. It comes through a hidden life of fasting and prayer humbly lived out in plain view.

Why did Jesus have to go through Samaria? Because his Father told him to go through Samaria. He had a divine appointment with a woman at a well. It turns out he carried hunger all morning and he would carry it right through lunch. How do we know?

Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

Jesus was fasting as a means of staying deeply attuned to what his Father was doing and saying. He had a different GPS than everyone else. He was carrying hunger as an intercessory act of love for a woman the rules said he shouldn't even talk to. It would turn out to be one of the most consequential conversations in world history with a woman who would turn out to be one of the most consequential figures in the New Testament church—all of this because he was paying attention; because he was fasting and praying as he walked the long road from Judea to Galilee and he heard the voice of his Father say words like, “Samaria, woman, well, go.”

Meanwhile, back at the grocery store, his disciples were getting lunch. Look what transpired upon their return:

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”

Look what they said instead:

Meanwhile his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.”

But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.”

Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?”

“My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.”

Let this last exchange settle over us now as we prepare to embark on our path today between the Judea and Galilee of our world. We might find Samaria is just around every corner.

THE PRAYER OF TRANSFORMATION

Lord Jesus, teach us to fast and pray.

I confess you have food that I know nothing about. I want to know that food. I want to learn to savor and eat that food. I long to hunger and thirst for righteousness in the way I hunger for food and thirst for drink. Train my spirit to embrace hunger as a gift of divine attunement and not treat it as a problem that must be solved. Holy Spirit, would you displace my appetite? Would you disconnect my hunger from the never-ending eating of more food for my stomach and connect my hunger to enjoying more and more of your presence in my soul? I believe this is possible. Show me the next step on this path; even a baby step. I want to take it. What could be better than walking in this world as Jesus walks, doing the things he is doing, saying the things he is saying, talking to the people he is talking to, and loving my family the way he is loving them? Praying in Jesus's name, amen.

THE QUESTION

Have you ever made this connection to fasting in this story of Jesus with the woman at the well? What do you see and hear in it? Do you ever find yourself thinking things like, "Well that's Jesus and I'm me, so this doesn't really apply." Hint: That's bad thinking. ;0) Do you want to know about the food Jesus says we know nothing about?

March 28: On Fasting Feasting, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit

2 PETER 1:3-4

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

CONSIDER THIS

Let's remember yet again our working definition of prayer and fasting:

Prayer and fasting is the lifelong process of becoming a peculiar kind of person (i.e., a righteous person) who learns to exercise a particular kind of power (i.e., the supernatural love of God) for the good of the world and the glory of God.

I like how Peter describes such a life as “participating in the divine nature.” The English Standard Version of the Bible translates it as being “partakers of the divine nature.” The Greek term behind the translation is *koinonos*. You may recognize the connection to *koinonia*. It means fellowship. It is a word the New Testament uses to describe the presence and effect of the Holy Spirit in a human community. Fasting is one of the primary means of living and moving and having our being in this fellowship. Remember again Jesus's word about how his way of fasting differed from the Pharisees and the disciples of John.

Jesus answered, “Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast.” (Luke 5:34-35)

Fasting is about feasting on friendship with Jesus through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and all this leads to as his agent in the world. Remember again Jesus's word about his food.

But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." . . .

"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. (John 4:32, 34)

A few years back I found myself at Jacob's Well with Jesus and his disciples. Upon hearing these words again I said to him, "Jesus, I don't know about this food either. I want to know about this food." I want to go to the place where my food is to do the will of God. I want to come to this place of appetite displacement; where my experience of doing the will of God displaces my hunger for food. I want to learn to do the will of God in the way of God such that it actually nourishes my physical body.

Sure, I enjoy food, but I don't revolve my life around food like I did before. I used to think fasting was about changing my relationship with food. I am learning that fasting—in what I believe is the way of Jesus and the friends of the bridegroom—is about changing my relationship with hunger. I am finding hunger is changing my relationship with God. Fasting in this way means carrying hunger in love for Jesus and those he loves. It means befriending hunger. I have primarily understood hunger as a problem to be solved; as a craving to be satiated. I am coming to understand hunger as the gifted path to the deeper presence of Jesus; as the activation of the new wineskin, the awakening of the temple of the human body, the primary sanctuary of the Holy Spirit—the new wine of the kingdom.

Here's what else I'm learning. Our human bodies were not made to be sated with food. They were meant to be sustained by food. Because of my anemic practice of fasting, I had a wrong understanding of feasting. Feasting is a biblical dimension of Sabbath keeping. It is one day a week in which we can live to eat. Fasting is the way of life for the other six days when we eat to live. Because my prior practice of fasting was underdeveloped, my practice of feasting was an expression of overindulgence. An almost constant focus during the six days was what or where am I going to eat next. Any notion of a feast became about eating more than usual.

The human body and particularly what the Bible calls our “inmost being” is a finely tuned instrument designed to commune with and carry the very presence of God, to bear witness to the holy love of God which becomes manifest through demonstrations of his power in the manifold expressions of his inbreaking kingdom. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. This prayer, when uttered in the context of a fasted lifestyle, ever increasingly opens the way to the supernatural life of a human being who is fully participating in the divine nature.

THE PRAYER OF TRANSFORMATION

Lord Jesus, teach us to pray and fast and so fellowship with you as participants and partakers of your very nature—which is righteousness itself. To that end, . . .

I receive your righteousness and release my sinfulness.

I receive your wholeness and release my brokenness.

I receive your fullness and release my emptiness.

I receive your peace and release my anxiety.

I receive your joy and release my despair.

I receive your healing and release my sickness.

I receive your love and release my selfishness.

Come, Holy Spirit, transform my heart, mind, soul, and strength so that my consecration becomes your demonstration; that our lives become your sanctuary. For the glory of God our Father, amen.

THE QUESTION

What do you make of this notion of being a participant or partaker in the very nature of God? Are you seeing the fasting connection here? Are you grasping how hunger can increase attunement to the presence of God?

March 29: Remember the Game!

ISAIAH 58:6–9

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.
Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

CONSIDER THIS

As we come to the close of this short season of reflection on prayer and fasting we come to the profound text of Isaiah 58. Honestly, the best thing we could do today would be to slow down our reading speed to about half time, read every word out loud, and simply feast on the Word of God.

Here Isaiah takes a massive swing of the axe at the tree of dead religion—more specifically, he decries what I have called fasting (and prayer) as an adventure in missing the point. Take a look at the prior verses:

For day after day they seek me out;
they seem eager to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that does what is right
and has not forsaken the commands of its God.
They ask me for just decisions
and seem eager for God to come near them.
'Why have we fasted,' they say,
'and you have not seen it?
Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you have not noticed?' (vv.2-3)

You may remember my analogy early in the series where I talked about the bat and the ball and how we so easily get our eyes off the ball of Jesus and his kingdom and onto the bat of prayer and fasting and all the ways of religious practice. I think Isaiah's big point to Israel (and by proxy to us) is this: Remember the game!

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?"

Remember the game!

Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Fasting and prayer are not the game. God's in-breaking kingdom is the game! This is fasting and prayer—not as the motions of religious practices but as the movement of the authorized, empowered, agents of Jesus Messiah. This is fasting and prayer as the seamless movement from sanctuary to streets which becomes the transformation of the streets into sanctuaries. Remember the game! Isn't that exactly what he is saying here?

Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings. (v. 12)

Don't misinterpret the point though. Isaiah is not saying to do mission work instead of fasting and prayer. No, he is saying if you are all about fasting and prayer and these things of the kingdom of God are not beginning to break forth in your midst then you are doing it wrong. You are missing the point. You have created an alternative game—called dead religion. You are losing the real game. Further, there is a way of being all about the mission work that is disconnected from the presence of God. The game is not us praying and fasting as an act of religious obedience or as a function of delegation to God. Nor is the game God expecting us to go out and do it ourselves as good citizens. Here's the playbook of God's kingdom and his righteousness:

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Eph. 3:20–21, bold is my emphasis)

Remember the game! It is the great story of the victory of light defeating darkness, of life defeating death, of wholeness defeating brokenness, and on the transformational movement of the kingdom of Jesus goes. And you, my friend, are a player. It's why every day, at the end of the podcast recording of the Wake-Up Call I say these words:

I'll see you on the field!

THE PRAYER OF TRANSFORMATION

Lord Jesus, teach us to fast and pray that we might become real players in the real game, which is not a game but a matter of life and death. As a means to that end,

I receive your righteousness and release my sinfulness.

I receive your wholeness and release my brokenness.

I receive your fullness and release my emptiness.

I receive your peace and release my anxiety.

I receive your joy and release my despair.

I receive your healing and release my sickness.

I receive your love and release my selfishness.

Come, Holy Spirit, transform my heart, mind, soul, and strength so that my consecration becomes your demonstration; that our lives become your sanctuary. For the glory of God our Father, amen.

THE QUESTION

What do you see in Isaiah's celebrated text today? Are you seeing the seamless connection between sanctuary and streets? Are you grasping how fasting and prayer blur the lines between worship and mission? Are you seeing the deep wisdom in Ephesians 3:20-21?

March 30: On The Statistics and the Score

JOHN 15:5-8

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you [abide] in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not [abide] in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you [abide] in me and my words [abide] in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

CONSIDER THIS

As we bring this series to a close let’s remember where we began—with me and my sisters and my farmer father in the drought-stricken fields praying for rain—singing no less:

“We need a rain (about an inch and a half)! We need a rain (about an inch and a half)! We need a rain. Have faith it will.”

The New Testament prophet of an apostle, James, reminded us of our great uncle, the prophet Elijah as he said,

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. (James 5:16b)

This gave rise to our working definition of prayer, which we should also remember as we close the series:

“Prayer and fasting is the lifelong process of becoming a peculiar kind of person (i.e., righteous) who learns to exercise a particular kind of power (i.e., divine love) for the good of the world and the glory of God.”

I know of nowhere in the Bible where all of this comes together more potently than in today's text: John 15. If you are still searching for a verse from the Bible to raise as a banner over 2024, look no further than verse 5.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you [abide] in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

You will remember yesterday I lifted up the notion of “the game.”

“Fasting and prayer are not the game. God's in-breaking kingdom is the game! This is fasting and prayer—not as the motions of religious practices but as the movement of the authorized, empowered, agents of Jesus Messiah. This is fasting and prayer as the seamless movement from sanctuary to streets which becomes the transformation of the streets into sanctuaries. Remember the game!”

I love the little word we see over and over in John 15. It is the quintessential watchword, and this word tells us how the game is played: abide. Notice how Jesus speaks of prayer.

If you [abide] in me and my words [abide] in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

Abide—I think it just may be my favorite word of all time; if it weren't for the other word in the chapter. Did you catch it? It appears nine times over the seventeen verses. It is fruit.

So if “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” is the game, and abiding is how the game is played, how does fruit figure into this analogy? Fruit, my friends, is the score. Do you know what winners focus on? The score. Do you know what losers focus on? Statistics.

Israel, in the time of Isaiah, was losing. They had lost sight of the score. They had drifted back into collecting their statistics.

‘Why have we fasted,’ they say,
‘and you have not seen it?’

Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you have not noticed?' (Isa. 58:3)

It's like a losing football team that wants to point out how they led the league in yards gained. It's the team that scores the most touchdowns that wins the game.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you [abide] in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

Notice how Jesus didn't say you will "produce" but you will "bear" much fruit. See the difference. As we abide, Jesus bears fruit in and through us. In other words, we do it "according to his power that is at work within us." I love the way Eugene Peterson translates Galatians 5:22-23 on the fruit of the Spirit.

But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. (Gal. 5:22-23 The Message)

How's that for a scoreboard for God's kingdom and his righteousness? And Jesus doesn't want us to bear a little fruit. Twice in the span of four verses, we see the term "much fruit."

This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Let's give Jesus the last words on this matter of prayer and fasting:

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other. (John 15:16-17)

THE PRAYER OF TRANSFORMATION

Lord Jesus, teach us to abide in you, the True Vine. Show us your way of powerful prayer and effective fasting and lead us into all righteousness—into a life of bearing much fruit, bringing great glory to the Father and showing ourselves to be your disciples. We ask in your name, Jesus, amen.

THE QUESTION

What has Jesus revealed to you through this brief series on prayer and fasting? How are you putting this revealed learning into practice? What questions still linger? Are you seeing any first fruits from this journey?

March 31: God's Mighty Warrior (Psalm 3)

Today's post is from *A Meditative Journey Through the Psalms* by Timothy and Julie Tennent. He serves as the president of Asbury Theological Seminary among other posts he holds across the global church. She is a gifted musician and was one of the driving forces that helped bring to fruition the Seedbed hymnal, *Our Great Redeemer's Praise*. NOTE: there will be no questions today.

PSALM 3 (NIV)

Lord, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!
Many are saying of me,
"God will not deliver him."

But you, Lord, are a shield around me,
my glory, the One who lifts my head high.
I call out to the Lord,
and he answers me from his holy mountain.

I lie down and sleep;
I wake again, because the Lord sustains me.
I will not fear though tens of thousands
assail me on every side.

Arise, Lord!
Deliver me, my God!
Strike all my enemies on the jaw;
break the teeth of the wicked.

From the Lord comes deliverance.
May your blessing be on your people.

CONSIDER THIS

It is a rare experience in the contemporary church to hear any mention of the enemies of righteousness. Yet Psalm 3 is the prayer of a believer involved in a real conflict. The psalmist is acutely aware of the foes arrayed against him: “O Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!” (v. 1). He is aware that the world is convinced that “God will not deliver him” (v. 2). But despite his circumstances, with ten thousand drawn up against him, the psalmist rests in the sure confidence that the Lord is “a shield around [him]” (v. 3) and the glory and lifter of his head.

As Christians, we must ask ourselves if we can rightly pray verse 7, which boldly asks God to smite our enemies on the jaw. Aren't we supposed to pray for our enemies, not against them? Should we quietly skip over verse 7 as a pre-Christian prayer that has been superseded by the coming of Christ? As Christians we recognize that our struggle is “not against flesh and blood” (see Eph. 6:12). The forces arrayed against us should not be confused with the person opposing us or persecuting us. The power of evil is the enemy, even though we recognize that Satan's diabolical rule is extended through flesh and blood. The New Testament does not ignore our earthly enemies. Rather, it calls us to recognize the deeper spiritual conflict that is arrayed against us. We pray this prayer through the lens of that deeper spiritual conflict. We must never forget that we are engaged in a spiritual conflict that is cosmic in scale. Behind every human enemy who embodies opposition to God's rule, behind every terminal illness or debilitating depression, stands the enemy of our souls. We can earnestly pray that God intervene on our behalf against those forces arrayed against us. To ask God to strike against the jaw is a way of asking God to bring to an end all opposition to his rule. We should never forget, after all, that this is a prayer to God, directed to God for his divine action and his final vindication. We pray for our enemies, even as we ask God to put an end to all the schemes of wickedness, which are expressions of that great spiritual conflict. Sometimes praying against our enemies is, in a deeper sense, the greatest expression of praying for our enemies, since turning our enemy from opposition to God to submission to his rule is a great gift and an even greater mercy.