

Forty Days of Prayer
Based on
Proverbs & Ecclesiastes

Ash Wednesday, February 22 to
Saturday, April 8, 2023



40 Days of Prayer Based on Proverbs & Ecclesiastes

To be faithful is to believe in what is true. It should never threaten our faith in God, and in his love and purposes for our lives, to know and understand the reality of that Truth. John recorded this affirmation of Jesus in His Gospel: *So Jesus said to those who believed in him, "If you obey my teaching, you are really my disciples; you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* John 8:31-32

Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are part of the "Wisdom" writings that are included in the recognized books of the Old Testament Scriptures. They support and flow from the writings of the Law and the Prophets, as part of the historical perspective that led up to the fulfillment of both as recorded in the New Testament. The Gospels, the history of the Young Church, and the Letters of Instruction to the Church, frequently affirm the place of these Wisdom writings in the life of a believer.

That being said, the authorship of both Psalms and Ecclesiastes is somewhat mixed. It is accepted that many of the Proverbs were either composed or repeated by Solomon, and portions of the book designate some of these specifically. But some chapters seem to have been compiled in the "tradition" of Solomon's wisdom, and are actually credited merely as "sayings of the wise" or authored by a teacher named Agur, or the non-Israelite King Lemuel. That is the internal testimony of these writings, and in no way diminishes their worth.

Ecclesiastes is also somewhat a mystery. It is widely accepted that Solomon is the primary author, and the testimony fits his life. However, it should not threaten our faith if it turned out to have been another author. It was very much the custom of the Hebrews of the time, to honor a teacher or prophet by writing down spiritual truths, and crediting their inspiration as authorship. This troubles some people, but it should not trouble the faithful. It is the source of their inspiration, in God Himself, that we find their value.

Wisdom writings were rife throughout the cultures of that day. Every tradition had them. There was actually quite a bit of "overlap" in their messages. That is because real wisdom, which is Godly wisdom, always reaches the same conclusions. Even pagans could hit upon reliable truths while missing the main one: the Truth of the One God.

Those Wisdom Writings that were included as Canonical Books in our Old Testament (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon) were chosen because of their reliable witness, and long acceptance, as credible and inspired writings. They hold up, as Paul describes: *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.* (2 Timothy 3:16-17) I hold this same high view of Scripture and it's "God-spoken" authority, as if the very breath of God is behind it's words.

Yet, the Wisdom Writings are unique. These are not commands. They are not history, or prophecy. They are sayings. They are not authoritarian instruction, but encouraging insight. They are the testimony of human beings who are sharing their experience with God's truth in a way that we may benefit from. As such, what we glean from them may meet us in a unique way depending on our progress in the journey of life. They should be read and understood in the context of human aspiration and potential, but also in the brokenness and confusion of our fallen world. In a way, they consistently speak this truth: *If we really knew God, we wouldn't have to seek wisdom. We would already have it.*

Together, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes provide a contrast of the ideal and the real. They offer the proverbial “two sides of the same coin.” Proverbs is somewhat mathematical. Ecclesiastes is more philosophical.

In Proverbs, you get a lot of the life equations that ideally lead to a desired fulfillment. They suggest equations that essentially say, “If you do this, then you will achieve such and such result.” The prescriptions seem reliable and likely to work. Having sought wisdom, the wise should always come out on top.

But Ecclesiastes reminds us, that even the wise have to live in a broken world that throws up obstacles along the way. The wreckage of the lives of the “foolish” litter the path ahead, posing risks to everyone else. Even the faithful life remains a challenge. Proverbs describes how things *should* work. Ecclesiastes reminds us of how things often don’t work as we expect.

But Ecclesiastes is not a cynical book, nor is Proverbs futilely optimistic. Both together point to the same conclusion: *Life lived apart from God is meaningless and futile, while trusting and relying upon God provides our lives with ultimate meaning and eventual fulfillment.*

At the very heart of the matter, the natural premise from which to go deeper into our life of Prayer, is merely talking with God. Not talking at Him, but actually talking with Him. It is meant to be a two-way conversation. God both speaks and listens, and we should also try to communicate in both ways. But this conversation must be real, and not merely a polite liturgical recitation for show.

In the past, I have encouraged you all to pray from the Psalms: The portion of the Wisdom writings that were the corporate and individual prayers that the people literally sang to God. In them, the Psalmists declares before our God: “ You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.” (Psalm 51:6 NRSV) That is the purpose that Proverbs and Ecclesiastes can potentially serve for us.

Remember, as well, that we have an advantage over the pre-Gospel readers who poured over these writings. We know what they led up to. We know the fulfillment of all their questions. We know the living Word, His *Logos*. This *Word* communicates and demonstrates the wisdom of God, and we know the wisdom of God is all about Love. God has unlocked his secrets, sought in the past by the wise, now readily known to all those who know Jesus Christ.

Now, the promise is that His Holy Spirit is present and praying with us and for us. “In the same way the Spirit also comes to help us, weak as we are. For we do not know how we ought to pray; the Spirit himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express. And God, who sees into our hearts, knows what the thought of the Spirit is; because the Spirit pleads with God on behalf of his people and in accordance with his will.” (Romans 8:26-27)

As we seek Him, we are often surprised to come upon this wise and reliable truth: He is first seeking us. We best find Him, and are found by Him, in prayer. May these devotionals be a blessing to you.

Pastor Dan Sewell

Suggestions for Using This Guide

The following Prayer Guide begins on Ash Wednesday, February 22, and concludes on Saturday, April 8, the day before Easter Sunday. The guide offers some type of reflection upon the Wisdom Writings and prayer for 6 days of the week, allowing a Sabbath for each Lord's Day. You can, of course, fill in your own devotional by Scripture reading and offering prayers as you are led. And of course, we all have the opportunity to worship and pray in corporate fellowship among the Body of Believers that is His Church.

Suggestions for using this Guide:

- Ask God to speak to you through each day's devotion *before you begin*. Precede everything in life with prayer; in this case, even prayer itself.
- Each day's meditation lists a passage from the Wisdom Writings, a brief introduction, and a prayer that has been inspired by that passage. I recommend some time of silent personal prayer and reflection before closure as well.
- As an option, you may look up and read the passage in context, or in an alternate translation of your choice. While God's Word is perfect and powerful, human words and language are often confusing. We trust the Holy Spirit to break through confusion and reveal the Truth God has prepared for us.
- Take your time as much as possible and allow the Holy Spirit ample opportunity to speak to you through each passage and each prayer. Don't hesitate to come back to it later and read it again.
- Don't be limited by the instructions. Allow your heart to be led beyond the prescribed prayers or suggestions here, to a more personal experience with the Lord.
- Don't become discouraged if you miss or get behind. Get back to it and catch up at your own pace. God is gracious, and invites us to pray for our own refreshment. Prayer in any form is not meant as a burden, it lifts burdens.
- Enjoy!

Day 1 Wednesday, February 22, 2023

Focus of the Day:

The Proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

**for gaining wisdom and instruction;
for understanding words of insight;
for receiving instruction in prudent behavior,
doing what is right and just and fair;
for giving prudence to those who are simple,
knowledge and discretion to the young—
let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance—
for understanding proverbs and parables,
the sayings and riddles of the wise. Proverbs 1:1-6**

The Worth of Wisdom: What, after all is wisdom? What is it for? Why is it so valued? Proverbs begins by laying out this framework of explanation.

Wisdom is the path to understanding and insight. Wisdom helps us listen and absorb knowledge, providing the foundation for choosing right behaviors.

Wisdom should not be confused with knowledge. They may be good partners, but how much you know will not insure wisdom. Wisdom is the critical interpreter of knowledge, allowing us to put what we know to proper use. The writer makes clear that even the simple and the young can pursue and achieve wisdom, and that those who are truly wise can and will seek more of it.

I have known many intelligent, educated, talented, and articulate people, who were not wise. I have also know many who were relatively simple, uneducated, and less articulate folks who proved exceedingly wise. The proof is always in the way they choose to live and use what they have been given. Jesus himself said, “ *But wisdom is proved right by her actions.*” **Matt. 11:19b**

God’s Word is not merely to teach us theory. It is beyond a mere intellectual exercise. It is instruction as to how we live up to the image of God we were created in. The wise person does not sit around, being wise. The wise person is the one who applies God’s truth to every aspect of life. It was the wisdom of James that caused him to exhort us, “But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. “ James 1:22 NRSV

Suggested Prayer: Oh Lord, grant me the wisdom to seek more of it. May the wisdom I attain be an inner guide that helps me to choose your way over the ways of the world. May I be known as wise by my actions, and not some self satisfied aura of introspection. In fact, it would be better if the world thought me foolish or simple, if my actions actually reveal a devotion and faith that reflects your truth, which is the only true wisdom.

(Spend some time in silent prayer, acknowledging your personal need for God’s wisdom.)

Amen.

Day 2 Thursday, February 23, 2023

Focus of the Day:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life.

Proverbs 9:10-11

Yes, I know, you have heard that before. But let's be wise enough to break it down into its parts, and rebuild it for greater understanding.

Fear of the Lord? Surely, we don't ever relish the thought of being afraid. And being afraid of God seems like a formula for creating an even greater distance between He and us. Wisdom suggests there must be a deeper meaning.

Let us take what we know, and piece it together. We know God made us and loves us with a love so powerful that we can scarcely take it all in. He desires us to enjoy restored relationship with Him so much, that he offered multiple covenants leading to the perfect one that we access by faith and receive by grace. We need not be afraid of a Lord who died in our place. In fact, because of Him, we need not fear anything else.

This "fear" is not about terror. Hebrew is a pictorial language. The word here literally means "to buckle at the knees". It is more than just to "bow at the knees", it is to be essentially knocked down by the awe of Him. Once we begin to perceive his overwhelming majesty, and are indeed overwhelmed, we have begun to see the truth. We gain insight: the insight that he is the Great God of all, and we are not. That, is the beginning of wisdom.

Such internalized humility plants seeds a wisdom that will blossom to better and more days of a life lived in and with Him. And as we grow in knowledge of Him, that insight gives us insight towards all of that life.

Suggested Prayer: *Oh Lord, grant me the clarity of thought to recognize just how awesome you are. In seeing how great and vast your glory is, helps me to see myself as I am, humble before you, and yet graced by your love and attention to my prayers and my needs. Knowing that you love me, great as you are and small as I am, fills me with gratitude, which is the root of insight and wisdom for me.*

(Spend some time in silent prayer, regarding our God with proper awe.)

Amen.

Day 3 Friday, February 24, 2023

Focus of the Day:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching; for they are a fair garland for your head, and pendants for your neck. Proverbs 1:7-9 (NRSV)

While knowledge itself is not wisdom, the wise will seek knowledge as a foundational tool to choose right paths and better exercise wisdom. Such is the mark of the wise.

The writings of Proverbs, and Scripture in general, offers a contrast. The wise are seeking knowledge and understanding, but the "fool" rejects the those things.

Why? I think we return to the valuable by-products of the appropriate fear of the Lord, the most immediate of which is humility. Humility is a prerequisite for learning. You have to be willing to admit there are things you do not know, and should, before you will submit to instruction.

It is a misconception to think the foolish are simple or stupid. More often than not, they will seem educated and sophisticated. They might be both up to a certain point. But they are invariably proud and arrogant. The fool is not the one who knows nothing, but the one who assumes they know it all.

Paul spoke of such people in saying " Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ..." Romans 1:22.(NIV). I love the rendering of this verse in the J.B. Philips paraphrase: "Behind a facade of "wisdom" they became just fools...". The real problem, stated in both Proverbs and Romans, is that they refuse to regard God as God.

The wise learn from fathers and mothers. They make it a habit to become life long learners, and respect the wisdom of those who posses it. It becomes like an *adornment* , the radiant nature of wisdom.

Over my lifetime, I have had many "fathers and mothers" in the faith: Mentors who I have looked up to and humbly soaked in their instruction. I still do today. I never hesitate to draw near to those who radiate wisdom and add to that number. Occasionally, I am tempted to think I know a lot, but the reminder to regard myself in the context of the all powerful Father will snap me back on track. That too is learning.

Suggested Prayer: Oh Father, help me remain humble before you, and recognize others that you send to teach me valuable truths. Help me to measure what I know, not against others, but rather your inestimable knowledge that will keep me humble. Reassure me in the rightness of being a life long learner, and encourage me through those you send to fill me with knowledge and wisdom.

(Time of silent prayer as we ask help in avoiding foolish pride in favor of humble wisdom.)

Amen

Day 4 Saturday, February 25, 2023

Focus of the Day:

Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, in the gateways of the city she makes her speech: “How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge? “ Proverbs 1:20-22

In this passage, Wisdom is personified, and for those who track with such things, personified as “she”. Throughout Proverbs, “she” is a many faceted personality. She is a “sister” (7:4), a “tree of life “ (3:18), and a pure woman who is worthy to be courted in the appropriate context. She is a mother, a sister, a sweetheart, and a caregiver.

However, passages in Proverbs 8, “she” is also identified as eternal, and having been involved in creation. It is accepted that these references either refer to or foreshadow the “Logos”: the Word of God that we have experienced as Jesus Christ himself.

God is not as concerned as we are with mortal gender differences or confusions about it. His image is built into men and women both, and each expresse attributes of his image in complementary ways. It serves the truth about wisdom, to personify “her” this way. If you are keeping score, it is still a tie, because foolishness is also often referred to as a “seductress”. That is also a ‘she”, but certainly no *Lady!*

But Wisdom? This *Lady* cares. She cares enough to stand up in the public space, exhorting the ignorant and the scornful to listen. She does not merely speak, she speaks up. She is impassioned and expresses her pleas in excited exhortation. It is like our mothers calling out the door, imploring us to return to the safety, shelter, and provision of our home. Wisdom, is calling out to all.

Suggested Prayer: Lord, thank you that you love us. You love us enough to send us your Wisdom, and your Word. More so than the most caring mother, your Wisdom calls to us and warns us of danger. It is one thing to seek Wisdom, and another entirely to be comforted that Wisdom seeks us, and call out to us in the voice of caring, and nurture, and even love.

Help us Lord, to hear her voice, and respond.

(Spend some time in silent prayer, reflecting on the personality of Wisdom, as we listen for her voice.)

Amen

Day 5 Monday, February 27, 2023

Focus of the Day:

Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, in the gateways of the city she makes her speech: “How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge? If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you.” Proverbs 1:20-23

Perhaps the biggest two letter word of all, is “if”. “If you had responded...” I could go on and list the calamities that befall those who reject or ignore wisdom, but I am sure you get the picture. We might revisit some of those later. Just know it isn’t a pretty picture. But these had a juncture of time to consider the “if”. They could have listened. If only.

If. If we do listen, and will heed the warnings, we connect with the heart and mind of wisdom. Not just at an arms length level, but a personal one. Wisdom does not merely provide a list of cold facts. She pours out her heart. She shares her thoughts.

Perhaps that is a wonderful differentiation between mere knowledge and the embrace of wisdom. Wisdom is a visceral, whole hearted virtue. Wisdom encompasses both principle and compassion. Wisdom is not just a thinking activity, but a feeling one as well. Not *unreasoned* feelings, that overwhelm and lead us astray, but reason and emotion in perfect balance.

“If”. If we will listen and respond, our head and our heart become synchronized with the will and the Spirit of the Lord.

Suggested Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to choose the right “if”. I know “if” I set aside my pride and my stubbornness, you will pour your Holy Spirit into the void of my heart. I know that “if” I keep my mind open to your will, you will provide me better understanding of your ways, and to gain insight towards your thoughts. “If” I listen to the voice of wisdom raised above the noise and confusion of the world, and answer it’s call, I will have more of it’s fulness.

(Time of silent prayer, expressing a willingness to hear and respond.)

Amen

Day 6 Tuesday, February 28, 2023

Focus of the Day:

My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; if you indeed cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding; if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures— then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. Proverbs 2:1-5

Here is the mention of not just instruction, but commands. Wisdom is speaking, and offers the choice to, “accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you...”. Accept the words, but “treasure” the commands.

For as long as God has offered us Covenant, we have been confused. In plain terms, a covenant is a mutual agreement between parties by which each makes certain promises to live in harmony and peace with the other. God offered us one Covenant after another , as we unwisely broke each one. We live in the blessed age when the perfect Covenant of Christ has come to pass, He keeping the tenets of it on our behalf, and offering us it’s peace by grace through faith.

Along the way, the early Covenants included laws and commands. These were guidelines as to how to live in that state of harmony with one another as well as with God. There were religious laws, social laws, and moral laws. Obedience was the path to light and life, and disobedience led to darkness and death.

The confusion comes in, that people thought that as they obeyed these commands, they racked up brownie points. All the *do’s* and *don’ts* were supposedly scored, to make us bad or good; saved or condemned. Not so much.

The commands were actually valuable and life giving because they were the right way to live. They made life here on earth better and more like the heavenly Kingdom. By obeying them, we gain insight into God’s will, leading to wise living. I will quote Jesus again as saying, “ *But wisdom is proved right by her actions.*” **Matt. 11:19b**

The only way to truly understand the commands, and their value, is by obeying them. Not to win points with God, but to benefit from the fruit of right living. That is wise living in a nutshell.

The Good News, on this side of the resurrection, is that the law has become ever clear and to the point. Jesus said, My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you John 15:12. Paul affirmed , Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law Romans 13:10.

Suggested Prayer: *Dear God, I have somewhat understood I have often tried to keep your laws thinking I did it because I was good. The truth is, I should value and pursue them because they are good, and good for me. Help me to obey the first law of Love: To love you above all, and others as myself. There is the heart of wisdom itself.*

(Time of silent prayer, asking God to teach us his law of Love.)

Amen

Day 7 Wednesday, March 1 , 2023

Focus of the Day:

My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; if you indeed cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding; if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures— then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. Proverbs 2:1-5

Continuing on these verses, we are to make our “**ear attentive to wisdom**”, and incline our “**heart to understanding**”. It is our cue to cry out and ask for insight.

But how much? How much do we, or should we, want this wisdom and understanding? The answer is dramatic. As much as we could ever desire any riches and treasure. As much as we could want anything, and more.

And why not? There is nothing more valuable for this life, or in the eternal context.

If you get earthy riches, fame, and even power and influence, it will all come to ruin without the wisdom and understanding necessary to order these things around God’s will. Without wisdom and understanding, relationships will sour and go bitter. We will lose all most dear to us without those qualities that allow us to appreciate and prioritize all we have.

Of course, all earthly things are only temporary. Even our lives and the lives of others don’t last forever in this world. The proper understanding of God’s provision and eternal relationship are also absolutely necessary to deal with life’s eventual losses, by putting them in the perspective of his everlasting promises.

I often say, that I don’t know how those who do not know Christ get through a single day. The uncertainty of life can be terrifying without an eternal perspective. This is a firm truth, that if we fear God, we need fear nothing else.

Suggested Prayer: Dear Father, I have spent much of my time trying to acquire things that will not last. I have often tried to manage my life and relationships on my own terms, and allowed the world to influence my priorities. All of this was unwise. Help me to seek the riches and the treasure that comes from knowing and understanding your Word, even the Living Word that is Christ himself. For that treasure will increase the value of what I have, and open the floodgates for more.

(A time of silent prayer, asking that God would open up the treasure of understanding for you.)

Amen

Day 8 Thursday, March 2 , 2023

Focus of the Day:

For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

**He holds victory in store for the upright,
he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,
for he guards the course of the just
and protects the way of his faithful ones.**

Then you will understand what is right and just and fair—every good path.

**For wisdom will enter your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.**

**Discretion will protect you,
and understanding will guard you.**

Proverbs 2:6-11

Mediate on this truth, and remember his promises.

Suggested Prayer:

*That you might do what pleases God, and share in His victory
That you can stay close to Christ in such a way
that he shields you from disaster.
That you would follow him on right paths.
And that you would be found faithful, discovering the only safe place to be,
which is in the center of His will.
Ask for an understanding of what is right for you before God
and in relationship towards others,
so that you may chose good paths and avoid bad ones.
Ask for the good and pleasing knowledge of God to fill your heart and mind,
equipping your soul to guide you in worthy ways .*

In all this, may God's wisdom be your guard and shield. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:7)

(Time of silent prayer, asking the encouragement that comes from the Lord.)

Amen

Day 9 Friday, March 3 , 2023

Focus of the day:

I said to myself, “Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.” Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

Ecclesiastes 1:16-18

Here is a sudden splash of icy water to the soul. The teacher, clearly identified as Solomon, both gets a shock, and then passes it on to us.

After achieving “much” wisdom and knowledge, a wave of disappointment and frustration follow. This seems to contradict what we have been looking at, but that is not the case.

Wisdom really is all the good we have discovered in our study, but it comes with a certain weight. Our eyes are opened. We are no longer blissfully unaware of the conditions of this broken world. The wise become cognizant of the mistakes they have made, and aware that they are not perfect nor immune to more. They also grieve over the pain and suffering of others, either by their own folly or the “radiation” caused by the willful foolishness of others.

Jesus said, “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:32) That is true. But while we are free from the bonds of ignorance, we want to emulate the compassion of the Lord for others. It was he who also said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” Matthew 5:4. In context, we are most blessed when we identify with the needs of others, and seek to comfort them.

If you would seek to understand the wisdom and the ways of our loving God, be prepared to share his compassion, and even his grief, over the fallen world that has foolishly turned away from him.

But do not despair in it. He has opened the Kingdom of Heaven for us and for them. If we are wise, we are not paralyzed by sorrow for others, but participate in identifying with their grief and leading them towards His Joy of Salvation.

Suggested prayer: *Oh Lord, I see now that I live in a fallen and hurting world. What passes for wisdom in it is often just designed to numb the heart and avoid the truth. Let the Wisdom of Your Word move my heart to caring action. Let my sorrow lead to joy for those whom you would touch through my life and example, as you provide me the means to make a difference, no matter how small, by the knowledge of your Son.*

(Spend some time in silent prayer, thanking God for His insight, and asking that he would make you an agent of Reconciliation, Restoration, and Joy in a grief stricken world.)

Amen

Day 10 Saturday, March 4 , 2023

Focus of the Day:

I said to myself, “Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.” Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

Ecclesiastes 1:16-18

**Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Proverbs 3:5-6**

Let's follow up the sobering verses from yesterday with additional perspective and hopefulness.

I believe that if you studied and picked apart Ecclesiastes, you would gain some insight into its seeming cynicism. It actually does summarize its own counterpoint in the concluding chapters. It charts a journey from immature wisdom to maturing wisdom.

It took the teacher a lifetime to get to that point, and we have the advantage of being able to flip ahead to “ **the conclusion of the matter**” (Ecclesiastes 12:13.) It is more clearly and less poetically stated in **Proverbs 3:5-6: Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight**

The teacher's journey was more difficult than it might have been, as is ours, by the mistake of “**leaning on your (our) own understanding.**” Knowledge, intelligence, learning, and the appliance of wisdom do no good, without trusting the Lord of all Truth.

What may appear wise will turn out to be foolish, unless it flows from the source. If we really exercise faith, and trust God in all things, the worldly won't get it. They will try to convince us that their way is smarter than ours, and even that we are gullible and stupid. As Paul said, “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.” 1 Corinthians 1:25

Solomon seems to have become frustrated, because he mistakenly thought wisdom would allow him to see the conclusion in advance. It does not work that way. Wisdom helps us to stay on the straight path *where we are* and *in this day*. And the wise learn to trust God for what comes next, all the way to the end of the story. We need to “learn to lean” on Him alone.

Suggested prayer: Reflect before the Lord the many times and ways you have leaned on your own understanding, and expected God to do what you thought he should. Then, consider how God repeatedly has done more or better, and certainly different than you imagined. Ponder how the circumstances of your journey have brought you to this place, this level of understanding, your growing attitude of faith. Then pray for an even greater trust, that you may strengthen your faith and rely on him for what comes next.

Amen

Day 11 Monday, March 6, 2023

Focus of the Day:

Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding,
for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.
She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.
Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor.
Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her;
those who hold her fast will be blessed.

By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations,
by understanding he set the heavens in place;
by his knowledge the watery depths were divided,
and the clouds let drop the dew. Proverbs 3:13-20

We will spend some time to unhurriedly soak in the beauty and power of these words.

These are Old Testament *Beatitudes*. Just like the *Beatitudes* that Jesus spoke during his Sermon on the Mount, they are *beautiful sayings*. They bring Good News and Glad Tidings to the faithful. They emphasize the means by which we become Blessed.

Simply read this passage again. Consider the means by which God Blesses. We return to these echoing words: Wisdom is itself the "net" to gather blessings. Of all we might want, She is better.

Better than wealth. Better than honor. Better than long life. She is better, because She is the one who provides us those very things. She blesses us with them.

We can become distracted and unsure of our blessings, and lose sight of them. But they are there, and more precious than all else, And they are not finite. They are infinite when we trust him.

Suggested Time of Prayer: Consider the ways in which God has blessed you in the past, and how he may be blessing you today. The exercise of counting your blessings is always revealing. We can become discouraged thinking we don't have enough, while acknowledging how God has blessed us invariably encourages us.

Thank God for blessings past, present, and still to come.

Amen

Day 12 Tuesday, March 7, 2023

Focus of the Day:

Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding,
for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.
She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.
Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor.
Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her;
those who hold her fast will be blessed.

By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations,
by understanding he set the heavens in place;
by his knowledge the watery depths were divided,
and the clouds let drop the dew. Proverbs 3:13-20

Continuing our look at this passage, we are reminded of the ways of wisdom. Her ways are pleasing to us, and bring peace with others.

Temporary pleasures are fleeting. They excite our senses for mere moments. In the right context, these are little perks along the path. Even the pleasures of friends and family, fellowship and intimacy, quickly become memories. We may carry them and recall them fondly, but they become all the more distant with time.

But Wisdom offers more than a fleeting pleasure. "Her ways are pleasant ways,...". She offers not just points of pleasure on a timeline, her path itself is pleasing.

In fact, by the exercise of her way, even temporary pleasures may be *sanctified and blessed*.

To be *sanctified* basically means the same thing as being *holy*. It means to be set apart to serve God's purpose. This isn't a religious mystery, it is a relational reality. God had a purpose for creating us, and we will be happiest, and most pleased, when we fulfill that purpose. Everything from enjoying a meal to pursuing a hobby to a loving embrace, become part of God's plan for us, when we exercise them in Godly wisdom.

The world think Christians deny themselves pleasure. That is silly. The world does not know true pleasure. Paul said, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. " Romans. 12:2

Suggested Prayer: *Lord, help me to choose the pleasing paths of your Wisdom. Allow me the gift of discretion to choose those pleasures that fit your will for my life, and the recognition that all I do can be a testimony to your blessings in my life. Help me to enjoy life to the full, not merely because of what I do, but because I do all ; mindful of the indwelling Spirit that is always with me.*

(Time of silent prayer, reflecting on the true happiness that comes from a right relationship with the Lord) Amen

Day 13 Wednesday, March 8 , 2023

Focus of the Day:

**Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding,
for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.
She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.
Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor.
Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her;
those who hold her fast will be blessed.**

**By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations,
by understanding he set the heavens in place;
by his knowledge the watery depths were divided,
and the clouds let drop the dew. Proverbs 3:13-20**

Still squeezing out more truth from these verses, we complete this thought: Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. These two thoughts compliment and blend with one another. How pleasing, when all paths produce peace.

We live in a world that suffers from the lack of peace. We lack peace between nations and even within nations. Peace is lacking between races, religions, and various peoples. Peace is even lacking within the families of humankind. That is because we lack peace with God.

This is all the fruit of choosing the wrong path. Rather than choose the pleasant and peace producing way of wisdom, the world has chosen darkness and division. But for us, we may choose the wisdom of mind and heart to be different. Paul said, "Now that we have been put right with God through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1 TEV) Faith is of course, the whole hearted trusting in God, the proper fear of the Lord. Christ offers us perfect peace by faith in Him. The Prophet Isaiah put it this way: You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. (Isaiah 26:3)

Suggested Prayer: Take some time reviewing the different conflicts you are aware of in your own life, or the lives of others. Consider how they spring from a deviation from God's will, God's way, and God's wisdom.

Think also of how faith, trust, and obedience to Christ have created reconciliation and renewal in instances you are aware of. Be reassured that it is an ever present promise. Then pray for the wisdom to overcome any conflicts in your own life, or for those who you might need help in this way. Pray first for His peace, and then be open to being an agent of His peace as well.

(Time of silent prayer, affirming the way of Peace as the set of your heart)

Amen

Day 14 Thursday, March 9 , 2023

Focus of the Day:

**Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding,
for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.
She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.
Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor.
Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her;
those who hold her fast will be blessed.**

**By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations,
by understanding he set the heavens in place;
by his knowledge the watery depths were divided,
and the clouds let drop the dew. Proverbs 3:13-20**

Yep! Not quite done yet. Wisdom has more to offer here.

Wisdom? “She is a tree of life...”. This is not hyperbole, or a coincidence that it refers to the very thing we lost by our disobedience towards God.

Let me remind you, the “Tree of Life” was readily available to those created in God’s image. It was the “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil” that was out of bounds. Why?

Let me briefly offer some insight in simple terms:

You can’t “know” both good and evil. Like light and darkness, they are diametrically opposed and cannot ultimately co-exist. Genesis emphasizes that everything God made was “good.” All that His children saw and touched was made that way. They already knew “good”, and it merely poisoned the well to add the knowledge of “evil”: The dark force that has no business intruding on creation and human beings relationship with the God of all good. Becoming willfully acquainted with evil, cost us free access to the Tree of Life.

A faith that gives birth to true Wisdom, calls us back to the Source of Life. An alternate translation goes this way: She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed. (Proverbs 3:18) Wisdom calls us to embrace her life giving fruit, which is accessed by proper fear of and trust in the Lord: The recipe of faith.

Suggested Prayer: *Lord, help me to grasp the wisdom and knowledge of what is good, and be ignorant of evil. Not to be ignorant about evil, but rather unacquainted with it. May my knowledge about what is dark keep me from falling in to its trap, while my heart and my thoughts fill all the more with Light and Life, the very things that your Son has brought to me.*

(Time of silent prayer, thanking him that we can know so much of the good, that we crowd out any space for evil in our lives.)

Amen

Day 15 Friday, March 10 , 2023

Focus of the Day:

Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding,
for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.
She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.
Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor.
Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her;
those who hold her fast will be blessed.

By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations,
by understanding he set the heavens in place;
by his knowledge the watery depths were divided,
and the clouds let drop the dew. Proverbs 3:13-20

One more thing, and it is a big one. Maybe the big one:

Wisdom, understanding, and knowledge are described as the motive force by which He created the universe and everything in it. That is an enormous revelation for us, for we can and do know that Wisdom.

John began his Gospel about Jesus Christ by stating, “ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. “ (John 1:1-4) That Word, His *Logos*, is the full expression of God. He is God's own Wisdom.

This is a clear reference to God in such a way that foreshadows our understanding of Him as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Proverbs is constant in informing us of this truth. Before the Incarnation of Christ, he was proclaiming through these words “The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began. (Proverbs 8:22-23) people who think the New Testament is about Jesus Christ, and the Old Testament is not, do not know who Wisdom personified is.

Suggested Prayer: *Oh Lord, it is too deep and awesome for me to comprehend. To consider that you created all things from before time , and yet you still came to earth to love and save me. The best understanding of the Gospel leads us to enter a personal relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. How awe inspiring is it to envision Him as the Wisdom that created the universe. Such proper fear of the Lord, triggers deeper wisdom in my head and heart.*

(Time of silent prayer, reflecting on your connection to Christ who made all things.)

Amen

Day 16 Saturday, March 11 , 2023

Focus of the Day:

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.

**Do not be quick with your mouth,
do not be hasty in your heart
to utter anything before God.
God is in heaven
and you are on earth,
so let your words be few.**

Ecclesiastes 5:1-2

These wise admonitions certainly turn the concepts commonly attached to worship and prayer upside down.

We tend to relate to “Go near to listen...” as if it refers to a sermon. But this phrase is connected to the offering of sacrifice, which is always to God himself. I am certainly not opposed to a good sermon, but we draw near to God and listen to Him. There may be words and teachings of others that will help, but the heart of true sacrifice is as David described: “My sacrifice is a humble spirit, O God; you will not reject a humble and repentant heart.” (Psalm 51:17TEV) As we have learned, a humble spirit always seeks God’s wisdom and understanding.

So how about our concept of prayer? Perhaps we need further wisdom and greater understanding. We tend to think of prayer as words. Perhaps the right words and phrases, in just the right posture. That has been a common misconception for ages on end. Prayer begins in the attitude of the heart, not the words of our mouths.

“Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.”

Let’s reason this out. God already knows our hearts, what we want and need, and everything else about us. He actually knows us better than we know ourselves. Jesus therefore taught, 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. Matthew 6:7-8

Prayer, as well as worship, is better exercised with a humble and open heart that is willing to listen. God is speaking to us all the time, in action, in creation, and sometimes the “still small voice” that we can hear when our souls are quiet enough. And He is always speaking through the Living Word written by authors inspired to listen to and relate His Truth.

(Time of silent prayer, quieting the soul and listening for His voice. If it seems you are not hearing, practice by reading what he has said in an attitude of prayer.)

Amen

Day 17 Monday, March 13 , 2023

Focus of the Day:

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

This is my favorite passage from these writings, and the one I find most meaningful. We will take a few segments to soak up the richness of these passages.

Two really are better than one. What one can do, two can do more of and better. While one is likely to stumble, a companion is there to help. One of the richest treasures in life is a friend, and one of life's great maladies is loneliness.

There is a difference between being alone, and being lonely. There are times when it is healthy to retreat and be alone, We know that we are actually never truly alone, for the indwelling Holy Spirit is there. Being alone allows us time to reflect and pour out our heart to God. It is a healthy thing to spend some contemplative time alone by choice, which makes us better able to relate to and connect with others day by day.

But we can also be surrounded by people, and still be lonely. Even as a king among subjects and courtiers, David found himself isolated and cried out to God, "Turn to me, and have pity on me. I am lonely and oppressed. (Psalm. 25:16) We were created for fellowship, for relationship with God and with others, and we will never be emotionally and spiritually healthy when this is lacking.

When God created human beings, He created us in a way suited to pursue our relationship with Him, and needing relationship with others. It is built in to us. When *Adam (man)* was created, The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." (Genesis. 2:18) Most conventional interpretations account this towards the relationship between men and women in the marriage and family context. I agree, but truly believe there is more said here. While Genesis gives accounts of the creation of males and females, this passage also stands alone between them. I believe it holds a truth that transcends just the marriage relationship, and offers the truth, that it is not good for human beings to be alone.

Suggested Prayer: Take some time to list those whom God has placed in your life, preventing you from loneliness. (Write them down if it helps.) As you ponder that list, think of the times when you have been blessed by your work together. Recall the times they have lifted you up, and the times you have been privileged to have lifted them as well. Give thanks.

If you feel lonely and isolated, pray God would send others into your life who would bless you with more. Always remember that you must be a friend to have a friend.

Amen

Day 18 Tuesday. March 14 2023

Focus of the Day:

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? This passage speaks to our humanity, and tends to reveal our narrow view of God's truth. Certain concerns have caused many scholars not to comment on this one. I will take a shot anyway.

Let's be frank, This sounds romantic or sexual to us. Too bad, That is our broken nature that robs true intimacy of any innocence. This is about friends. This isn't referring to husbands and wives, or dating couples. It *is* true that spouses can be best friends. I know , because I am so blessed. This passage is about deep friendship without the cultural or sexual hang ups.

Our best understanding of human psychology is that we have some natural barriers to interpersonal intimacy. We have what is called "personal space", which is about an 18 inch face to face difference that we hold as sort of scared. We tend to only allow a certain number of close people into that space. Anyone we do not invite in but enters anyway, is "invading our personal space." But we need to let some people in, or we grow cold in this life. We need the warmth of relationship.

In the time of the Old Testament writings, there was not a Holiday Inn Express at every cross road. Journeys were taken on foot by individuals and armies, and traveling light was crucial. When it came time to lie down, the cold ground and the cold night sky pressed upon you. For a friend to "have your back" was literal. Shared bodily warmth was a means of survival. This is an analogy for the interpersonal warmth. With or without the physical contact, our souls crave to keep warm.

Some people are huggers. Others, not so much. The physical posture, attitude, or contact are secondary, but we still need interpersonal intimacy to be healthy. We need to share the warmth of true fellowship.

We need others who we can talk to, and be heard. We need others to talk to us, and fill the empty strongboxes in our relational bank. We need trust, and need to be trusting, even when it is a risk, We need warmth in a cold world. A personal space that allows entry to no persons, is a living tomb, void of the warmth God intends for our lives.

Suggested Prayer: Picture those whom you love in this Christ like sense of relationship, and how you have either allowed them in, or perhaps kept them away. Remember the warmth of the best kind of trusting relationships, and ask God how to build them deeper, and grow more of them for your walk of faith. Take your time, and don't forget to thank God for those others who have also let you in.
Amen

Day 19 Wednesday, March 15 , 2023

Focus of the Day:

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Allow me to share this. I am blessed. I have friends who I would die for. I also believe, that if called upon, they would do the same for me. Most people would give anything to have one friend like that. I have a rich number of them. Some of them, I have known for over 4 decades, and remain as the Proverbs says , “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” (Proverbs 18:24) I am more blessed, because I have many friends who are closer than brothers to me.

These friends were born and went to school in many various cities. A number of them live far away now, even across oceans. Only a few are ever able to hit a round of golf or go fishing with me. On fleeting occasions, we might play some music together, but less as time goes by. For most, when we get together it involves intentional planning and extensive travel. But that does not weaken our bond. That is because our bond is eternal. We are bound together in Christ. In Colossians 1, Paul describes Christ as the visible expression of the invisible God, and the One by which the world was created, and created for. He says, “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. “ (Colossians 1:17) This is true of all created things, as well as created people.

A rope is actually merely threads woven together to add strength. When making a rope, the master strand holds the others in place, as they strengthen one another.

When two people are woven together in relationship, the strands of their lives are intertwined. That is, as the wise man said, “better”. But what is best, is when Christ is that third strand, the master strand, that strengthens and hold them together. Such a rope, is not easily broken. It holds together.

What I have in common with these deep friends, is that we’re bound together by our love of Christ. But what is more, we were forged together in service to Him. Christ used our lives as a lifeline, again and again, let down to rescue others from darkness. We have labored and toiled, laughed and cried, and shared life together in ministry. Our memories and experiences are eternal, because they are sealed in Him. If we never spent another day together in this life, we would still have eternity to look forward to together. These are the true treasures of the Kingdom: Fellowship made real in His name and service,

Suggested Prayer: If you are walking with Christ, consider those who walk with you. There is no shortcut to build such friendships, but they are worth it. Ask the Lord to provide you partners and opportunities for ministry together, so that you can build eternal friends in this same way.

Amen

Day 20 Thursday, March 16 , 2023

Focus of the Day:

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

This is, after all, my favorite. You didn't expect me to leave it so quickly, did you?

Let's take a quick review. Two are better than one alone, because we were created to be in relationship with God and one another. God does not intend for us to become lonely, but to have others to help us, as we help others. We need deep, intimate friendships to fulfill the purposes of our heart placed there by God. These relationships bound together by Christ, are pleasing and eternal.

“But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.”

1 Kings tells us the story of Elijah, who was considered the preeminent prophet among many. After the Lord gave him great victory over the prophets of Baal, it seems he became deeply discouraged. Perhaps he thought the demonstration of God's power would convince the unfaithful king and his people to repent. But they did not, and they sought Elijah's very life.

God provided him a solitary audience in the desert, and strengthened him with food and encouraged him with a renewed calling. But he did more. He gave him Elisha, who became a friend and companion and partner in ministry. He also gave him a royal ally, and pointed out 7,000 faithful others who would stand with him. Elijah became discouraged thinking himself alone, but became refreshed and renewed in fellowship with others God gave him.

When Jesus sent his first missionaries recorded in Luke 10, he sent them two by two. He sent 72 people out in 36 teams, so that they would have the blessings described in the verses above.

When Paul was out on the edge, at risk day and night from those who opposed him, he was not alone. He was always in “continual prayer” (1 Thessalonians 5:17) as he walked close to the Lord. But he also had companions who shared his faith, his calling, and his mission, willing to die for or with him for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Christ did not give us the Church with the thought that we would be divided, but rather, that we be One in the Living Body that is His Church. This is an unbreakable cord of many strands, when it is woven together in Him.

Suggested Time of Prayer: Thank God for His Church. Thank Him for your place in it. Consider the encouragement, that you are never alone, both by the presence of His Holy Spirit, and the Living Body that is His Church today. Pray for yourself, and for others, that our relationships might themselves be a testimony to His Wisdom and Word of Truth.

Amen

Day 21 Friday, March 17 , 2023

Focus of the Day:

My child, do not despise the LORD'S discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights. Proverbs 3:11-12

Well. How are you doing? Have you reached perfection yet? If you answered "Yes", I could probably produce a number of witnesses to offer a counter-opinion. If you answered "No," you are on the right path to wisdom.

Most people of faith admit that they are not perfect. Some even believe it. We usually identify the ones who secretly doubt this as "pharisees." They may seem smart, but not so wise. If you are a fairly healthy Christian, you know you have a way to go.

So why, pray tell, do we get so resentful when God corrects us?

Those of us who are parents should get this right away. We love our kids, so we try to help them by teaching them and modeling good behavior for them. But when that doesn't work, take your pick: Correction, rebuke, reproof, and even flat out punishment is in order.

Obviously, it is counter-productive to be harsh or harmful. That is not loving correction. But it is also not loving to be negligent in providing firm guidance. Loving discipline is what we do. And so does God, only better.

I turn your attention to the image of God as "The Good Shepherd" of Psalm 23. Having read this many times, it may never have occurred to you the words "your rod and thy staff they comfort me." seem incongruous. They are not. The rod was used to whack the sheep on the backside and drive them forward whether they wanted to go or not. The staff had a hook shaped end to drag a stubborn sheep when they would not go themselves. Still, they serve to "comfort".

Throughout our lives, the Good Shepherd often pushes and pulls us in directions that we do not wish to go, or cannot understand. This is for our benefit and to rescue us from dangers we don't see or comprehend. He does not ask our permission to save us. He just does it.

How many times have we misunderstood his correction? He is never harsh, or harmful. He corrects our path, so that we may learn to choose the right one. As a loving father cares enough to correct, so much more does our Father in Heaven. He does so, because he both "loves" us and "delights" in us. This is more than reason to offer proper fear and full trust in Him.

Suggested Time of Prayer: When ever we sense we are being denied blessings or pulled in ways we resent, we might actually find that we are in actual or figurative places or situations that are outside of God's will for our lives. Try and picture ways that God might be correcting, reproofing, or even rebuking us, or has in the past. Ask what you learned about God, and what you are learning about yourself by them. Ask God to teach, and reveal his ways in all this. Also, thank him for loving us enough to do so. Amen

Day 22 Saturday, March 18, 2023

Focus of the day: There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him:

haughty eyes,
a lying tongue,
hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked schemes,
feet that are quick to rush into evil,
a false witness who pours out lies
and a person who stirs up conflict in the community. Proverbs 6:16-19

This is a great example of Hebrew wisdom. Numbers have meaning beyond mere math in their language. “6” always represents the imperfect or incomplete, while 7 is the “perfect” number and signifies completeness. It is like saying, “He hates these six things, but add the seventh and He really hates them.”

What are they, then? They are not exactly the list we often call the Seven Deadly Sins: Wrath, Greed, Sloth, Pride, Lust, Envy, and Gluttony. But they are close. These are personal attitudes and actions that are contrary to God’s will and way. They are unwise, and unfitting for those who would live as citizens of His Kingdom.

They also seem to offer the opposite, the errors of darkness, to the spirit of the Beatitudes: The *beautiful sayings* Jesus shared from the mount.

God hates “A proud look” (TEV), the attitude of pride and arrogance before him. But he blesses the “poor in spirit”, those who are humble before Him...one might say, *those who have proper fear and awe of the Lord.*

God hates lies. He will not long tolerate violence against the innocent. He despises fraud, and those who gravitate towards the ways of darkness. False testimony is repeatedly condemned in his word.

There is particular disdain for those who create conflict within the family of God. They are not blessed, like “the Peacemakers.” They participate in the seventh despised attitude and action.

Jesus, Paul, Peter, James, & John speak with one voice about the kind of people who appear to be a part of the Church, but bring division and conflict instead of love and unity. Both sad and bad. We who make up His Living Body, have the calling to love one another. As Jesus said, “If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.” (John 13:35 TEV) Those who divide the Body with quarrels and competing factions, are disciples in name only.

The wise? They steer clear of the ways God has called wicked, and embrace the spirit of the Beautiful Sayings of Wisdom.

Suggested Time of Prayer: Confession is good for the soul. Confess before God the times you have justified these errors, because of feelings of hurt or need, or even pride. Know that his grace is greater than our sin, and his love endures forever. Amen

Day 23 Monday, March 20, 2023

Focus of the Day:

Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.

How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep?

A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest— and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man. Proverbs 6:6-11

Hebrew is a language suited to paint “word pictures”. This is a great one to express the wisdom of personal industry as opposed to “*Sloth*”. As a people, the Hebrews were known for their faith in the One God, but also had a reputation for hard work.

God called Israel his chosen people, because they were chosen to make known the coming of the Kingdom that would be ushered in by the King who would also be a Light for the gentiles. But along the way, they failed and faltered. They lost blessings and geography and even their freedom more than once, but they have perhaps the most remarkable history of resilience of all people. When they fell, no one ever worked harder to get back on their feet both spiritually and materially.

Jacob, who was also known as Israel, out-worked his conniving father-in-law to build the family that spawned the nation. Joseph worked his way from slavery to governor of all Egypt. David a shepherd, Joseph a carpenter, Peter and John fisherman...work was universally respected and encouraged. There was less disparity in respect for the degrees of labor in that culture than our own.

But wisdom suggests we consider the ant. The ant does not need to be told to work, it has an innate sense of balance between work and reward. It survives simply because it does what is best for itself, and for its collective community.

But that sluggard! Literally, that *lazybones*. What befalls these are by their own neglect? They open the door to their own poverty and distress.

Paul said, “Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you...” (1 Thessalonians 5:12) Would we not want to be respected for our work, rather than earn scorn for our inaction?

We have a dual charge to work. We have our day-to-day work in or outside our home, but we are also workers in his Kingdom. Speaking to all, He (Jesus) told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” (Luke 10:2) We are those workers, and wouldn’t He be happy if we went willingly and took joy in His work?

Suggested Time of Prayer: Oh Lord, help me to hear your call, see what needs to be done, and joyfully work my share of the harvest, that I may fulfill my purpose, and do what pleases you. (Take some time in reflective prayer to examine the gifts God has given you, and how He would have you apply them in your work for His Kingdom.) Amen

Day 24 Tuesday, March 21, 2023

Focus of the day:

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.

Proverbs 16:18

Pride brings a person low, but the lowly in spirit gain honor.

Proverbs 29:23

Better is the end of a thing than its beginning; the patient in spirit are better than the proud in spirit.

Ecclesiastes 7:8

Let's look at *Pride* here, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes share a voice. No mystery there. All of Scripture echoes with this truth: That the proud will be humbled, and the humble lifted up.

Our english language confuses the issue. The word *pride* seems to have a split personality. We should take *pride* in our work. We want to be *proud* of our kids. We even wish to take *pride* in our Church and its ministry. There are numerous ways in which *pride* seems a positive thing.

When we are humble before God, there are many ways in which we can express satisfaction, contentment, and a sense of accomplishment that are very positive. The label of *pride* is an unfortunate confusion of words. These positives are what I would label as *thankful pride*.

I know this to be a reliable truth: Grandparents are proud of their grandchildren, just as children are proud of their parents. (Proverbs 17:6 TEV) You have nothing else to do? Ask a grandparent about their grandchildren. That will kill some time. And if you ask a healthy person of any age about their parents, you will usually hear accounts of praise. That is *thankful pride*.

The bad stuff? That is *arrogant pride*. This is literally the opposite of the thankful sort. This pride is egocentric, selfish, haughty, and delusional. It is lifting one's self up at the expense of others. It is arrogance in the face of God, rather than humble fear. It is, simply, deadly.

It cannot last. The *arrogant proud* will be brought low. It is inevitable. But Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:3) Of all the things I am *thankfully proud*, knowing Jesus as my Lord is chief among them. Without Him, I am nothing at all.

Suggested Prayer: *Lord, I am tempted to judge others that I deem haughty or proud. I confess that this is itself a form of arrogant pride. I leave them to your care and grace. As for me, I know that I am poor in Spirit, and need more of your grace in my life. I humble myself before you, yet take thankful pride that you have called me your own.*

(Spend some time in prayer, humbled before God and thankful for what he has done for you.)

Amen

Day 25 Wednesday, March 22, 2023

Focus of the day:

Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools.
Ecclesiastes 7:9 ESV

Scoffers set a city aflame, but the wise turn away wrath. Proverbs 29:8 ESV

A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs 15:1 ESV

Wrath/Anger. What do we do with it? No one is immune. And when it erupts, it tends to spill in such a way that it covers a wide distance. The ripple effect can be toxic.

We can never hope to never become angry. Sometimes, our anger is justifiable. But Scripture teaches, or tries to teach us, how to temper our anger with love and grace. God has done so, and Christ is our example.

When anger is not checked, it heats up towards wrath. Wrath is sort of the explosive force of anger, directed towards others.

But inward anger can be a problem as well. Any anger unchecked or not dealt with, will eventually express itself in wrath. There is a therapeutic understanding that depression is often the result of anger turned inwards. Internal wrath is literally a disease.

“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. (Ephesians 4:26-27) Only the fool lets unresolved anger “lodge in the heart”. Get rid of it quickly, or Satan will use it for his purposes.

We know what this unresolved anger can and will do. It will wound and divide and embitter. It will spread like an infection. It will overwhelm affection and happy memories until they cease altogether. It can damage our health. In the Church, and in our lives, it is deadly. Our own anger can hold us captive.

The only cure is *Love*. Not affection, but the selfless love of Christ that expresses itself in grace. Not by feeling, but a supreme act of the will: *forgive*. When Peter asked how often we forgive others, Jesus replied: “Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.” (Luke 17:4) In Hebrew, the number 7 signifies always and completely. That is how we ought to forgive.

That is how God, of course, forgives us. He has plenty that He could be angry about, but loves and forgives us. “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” (Mark 11:25) Defeat anger with love and grace, as it has been done for you.

Suggestion for Prayer: Slowly recite the Lord’s Prayer. Soak in and affirm each phrase. Consider how “His will be done”, and how we forgive others as we have been forgiven. Take some time to unburden yourself by forgiving others, and sense the release it gives.

Amen

Day 26 Thursday, March 23, 2023

Focus of the Day:

A greedy man stirs up dissension, but he who trusts in the LORD will prosper.

Proverbs 28:25

If you love money, you will never be satisfied; if you long to be rich, you will never get all you want. It is useless.

Ecclesiastes 5:10 TEV

I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners...

Ecclesiastes 5:13 ESV

Oh *Greed*. So misunderstood. Greed is no kin to the desire to work hard and earn wealth. It is the raw desire for more than we have without regard for the perspective of God's sovereign ownership of all things. It is want, without understanding the real value of "our" possessions.

I get tired of people misquoting Scripture by saying, "Money is the root of all evil." Money is neither bad nor good by itself. It is an inanimate object, not a spiritual being like us. It is what is in the heart of the greedy that makes the problem.

Paul said, "For the love of money is a source of all kinds of evil. Some have been so eager to have it that they have wandered away from the faith and have broken their hearts with many sorrows." (1 Timothy 6:10 TEV) Paul captured what Solomon certainly discovered earlier, that earthly riches cannot fully satisfy, no matter how much you gather. If you succumb to greed, eventually, it owns you more than you own it.

The greedy are consumed with the wealth they have and the wealth they want. In fact, "...all they do is think about what they would like to have. The righteous, however, can give, and give generously." (Proverbs 21:26) It is in generosity, and obedience to God's way, that we truly enjoy what we have. Little or much, generosity makes it seem like a fortune.

God gave us a formula for being satisfied with what we have, and we're promised to have more. The wise teacher says, "Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine." (Proverbs 3:9-10) If we trust in the Lord, we are not afraid to test His promise. The faithful have always found this true.

Suggested Prayer: Ponder your own view of wealth and riches. What do you desire? Simply ask God to provide. But also ask if you are ready to be a good steward of more. If God granted you more and more, would you hoard it? Or would you appropriately return firstfruits to God and be generous towards others? That is between you and Him. Take your time on this one, because it is a key to true maturity in the Faith.

Amen

Day 27 Friday, March 24, 2023

Focus of the Day:

**A heart at peace gives life to the body,
but envy rots the bones.**

Proverbs 14:30

**Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming,
but who can stand before jealousy**

Proverbs. 27:4

Jealousy & Envy. What are they really? They are wanting what someone else has. Things, wealth, reputation, attention, affection, health, and all kinds of other favor. “Why them?” and “Why not me?”

These often overlap with the other deadly habits. But they have another name as well: Coveting.

Commandment number 10 out of 10 also overlaps the others: **“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” (Exodus 20:17)** I am not stretching, but rather referencing the heart of the law, to say that this extends to the intangibles I listed above. That is the “anything that belongs to your neighbor” part of the equation.

I don’t want to get into the issue of romantic jealousy. It is related, but worthy of another day’s discussion. This attitude of covetousness, of envy and jealousy, is powerfully destructive. And while it may lead to the harm of others, it is most dangerous for its self inflicted wounds.

When we crave what others have, we do not appreciate what we do possess. When we envy another’s reputation, we become unable to build up our own. Nothing about who we are or what we have satisfies, when our jealous eyes are on others.

A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones. (Proverbs 14:30) This verse is saying that envy is like a cancer. No one wants that, and everyone hopes for the cure.

Love is always the cure. If we love others, we can become happy for what they have, and celebrate their good fortune. But we need an extra dose of thanksgiving as well to wipe away the green stain of jealousy. If we are wholeheartedly grateful for who we are and what God has given us, we spend so much time being thankful that we have less time for envy. And gratitude always reveals that we have more than we imagined.

Suggested Time of Prayer: I don’t know why we often don’t think we are blessed enough. Do you? Consider how we can celebrate the blessings of others without envy or coveting. Lay past failures there at His feet. Now count the ways in which he has blessed you. If you have trouble coming up with enough, ask Him.

As another exercise, ask some folks close to you how they think you have been blessed. You might find that others have envied you. What a great opportunity to give it all to Him.

Amen

Day 28 Saturday, March 25, 2023

Focus of the Day:

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.

I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure
to find out what is good."

But that also proved to be meaningless.... Ecclesiastes 2:10 & 1

Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure;
I am clean and without sin"?

Proverbs. 20:9

Lust is an age-old problem. How many kings and commoners in the Old and New Testament were tripped up there? How many great and powerful people in modern history have been found weak and wanting? Male and female, young and old; there is a human problem here.

Without going into all the details, lust is not always hormonal or physical. People lust for power and position. We covered some of that earlier. But not even all desire for physical gratification is rooted in physical want.

Many people obsessed with power have used sexual conquest to enhance that sense of their own power, and truly desired the sense of possessing another. That is a cold, passionless desire. There is not even a shadow of love there.

David can speak from experience as one who slipped up. It cost him, his family, and his nation dearly. Speaking from experience, he asked this question before God in prayer: "**How can a young person stay on the path of purity?**" (Psalm 119:9a) Forget the young, how about anyone? He answered his own query, "**By living according to your word.**" (Psalm 119:9b) God's Word is not outmoded or outdated. It teaches us not to objectify others for our pleasure, but to love.

The world is wrong. They think love is the problem. It is not. Real love is the answer. You do not lust for what you actually love. You respect and protect and sacrifice for the one you love. You are patient and kind. Lust is about possession; love is about becoming one.

The Word of God is an offense to those who wish to deny themselves no pleasure, usually at the expense of others. But if we trust God, and fear Him properly, the relationships we have are all the sweeter and more blessed without the insatiable shadow of lust.

Suggested Prayer: *Oh Lord, we live in a world that worships sensuality and lust as if they were a right or privilege of humanity. I pray that we would see a renewal of purity in the Church and in the culture. I pray that we would rediscover a respect for one another, and that more and more people would receive the promise of physical, spiritual, and emotional fulfillment in the context of your way and the institutions blessed by your Word.*

Amen

Day 29 Monday, March 27, 2023

Focus of the Day:

The wise store up choice food and olive oil, but fools gulp theirs down.

Proverbs 21:20

**Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat,
for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.**

Proverbs 23:20-21

If you find honey, eat just enough— too much of it, and you will vomit.

Proverbs 25:16

The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.

Proverbs. 22:9

Gluttony. The last of those nasty habits we have been looking at. Not to be a downer, but the wise avoid it. But gluttony is not all about food. It is about the habit of excess.

Paul spoke of people given to excess this way: **“Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.” (Philippians 3:19)**

The glutton is not the one who simply overeats or drinks. They are the ones who crave more than they reasonably should. You can be a glutton simply by being overly obsessed with those things, even if it's a binge on veggies or health foods. It is about excess and obsession.

To cut through the confusion, the issue is one of priorities: The obsession with lesser things. Jesus said, **“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?” (Matthew 6:25)** Enjoy the blessings of food and beverage and fellowship, but with a thankful heart for the first and a focus on the latter.

I hate to have to say this, but we in the Church are prone to become “Spiritual Gluttons” as well. In essence, when we aim inward, tailoring everything in the program, ministry, and worship, to “feed” our wants and desires, we are gorging ourselves while others starve. When we place our feelings ahead of the truth and our faith in it, without proper fear and trust in the Lord, we have become guilty of this failing.

The true mark of the glutton is that they cannot bring themselves to share. **“A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor.” (Proverbs. 22:9)** If we are unselfish, and care about the needs of others, we are overcoming the allure of gluttony in its base desires.

Suggested Prayer: *Dear Lord, I thank you that, in a hungry world, I am blessed with enough. On occasion I may want more or different, and you even bless me with that. But make me mindful of the ways I may feed others. Not just physically, but spiritually as well. That will help me keep a perspective of what is truly important. I know that all I enjoy here, is merely a foretaste of the Eternal Banquet without limits in your Kingdom. I look forward to that.*

Amen

Day 30 Tuesday, March 28, 2023

Focus of the Day:

**The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD;
he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases. Prov. 21:1**

We are too easily overawed by the powers and authorities of this world. Kings, rulers, and governors seem important and demanding of our deference.

But the wise fear God, not human beings. As we have said, **“If we fear the Lord, we need fear nothing else.”** He is high above the greatest Emperor, King, Prime Minister, or Commander in Chief. Even if they do not know him or acknowledge his sovereignty, He is in control and in charge.

Even against their knowledge and will, God used the likes of Pharaohs, wicked Kings, and Roman Emperors to achieve his goals. Some who opposed him most vehemently failed to stop his purposes, though they generally suffered for their efforts. God is God, and his will is irresistible.

In our politically-charged culture, about half the people in the nation don't approve of who is President at any given time. That is the privilege of our freedoms that our founding documents attest came from God. But it does not change the truth above, or our responsibility as Christians.

Through Kings good and bad, Israel was expected to acknowledge and put their faith in God. When the King was most faithful, the nation was most blessed. When the King was not, God's will was never thwarted. The people were still called to faith first, but still to allegiance to the throne, unless it clearly violated God's directives.

Paul said, **“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”** (1 Timothy 2:1-4) At a time when Rome ruled over the land, oppressing many and persecuting the Church, he continually instructed Christians to respect and obey the authorities, only second to the sovereignty of God.

That is because God is in charge, and will be when all earthly authority fades. In the meantime, we pray for those who govern us. We pray for their wisdom and protection. And most of all, that they would come to know the proper fear of the Lord: Christ our Savior. **“All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed.”** (Psalm 72:17)

Suggestion for a Time of Prayer: Pray for those who govern and lead us. Pray for their well being, for their families, and for the wisdom to lead justly. Pray most of all that they be tender towards God and His Truth. Pray that the knowledge of the Son of God would lead them to the proper fear of the Lord, that they may govern in true wisdom.

Amen

Day 31 Wednesday, March 29, 2023

Focus of the Day:

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. Ecclesiastes 9:11

I have always had some issues with this saying, because of one word: *Chance*. My theology of the sovereignty of God is at odds with the idea of random chance. I don't pretend to know how the specifics work, but the whole idea of God creating us for a purpose seems incongruous with mere chance.

It was helpful to go to the original Hebrew. Without boring you with details, the word used here seems like it leans a bit towards the idea of *destiny*. Perhaps it is better understood, that time reveals the destiny of all. But win or lose, there is a purpose for each of us.

That being said, there is another kind of "chance". We always have a chance to win and succeed, when we fear and trust the Lord. Who knows that destiny may favor we who may be the apparent "underdog" at times. Not just in a sporting contest or gainful work, but in life and the pursuit of our calling.

Paul said, "**And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.**"(Romans 8:28) I always remind folks that this does not imply that everything that happens is itself good, but rather that God is with the faithful through all circumstances and produces eventual good for those who love Him. His purposes are good, and we get to be involved in their coming to fruition.

We may win or lose in the moment, but in time, we see our destiny unfolding according to his purpose if we continue to seek His wisdom in the proper fear and trust of the Lord.

Suggestion for Prayer: Consider the times you achieved a "win" for no earthly reason, and think of how it worked by and for God's purpose. Conversely, think about the times you suffered loss that seemed unexpected. How *has* that, or *is* that, likely to work for God's purpose? Therein lies the purpose of both fear and trust in the Lord: The elements of faith. Pray for his purposes to be done, and for the clarity to recognize the hope they provide.

Amen

Day 32 Thursday, March 30, 2023

Focus of the Day:

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under heaven:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Once again, the teacher speaks of time.

Time is often the sticking point for many theological arguments. Some people worry about the time frame of Creation, as if it doesn't fit their conventional understanding of time. What they really don't understand is that God transcends time. We are in it, but He is over it.

Time is a problem for us. We only have so much of it. It is the one thing we can never make more of. Even though we often put a price on it, it is truly priceless. Time lost is impossible to regain.

If that is the case, we had best use it wisely. We should put it to the best use. **“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die...”**(Ecclesiastes 3:1-2a) There may be a time and a season for everything, but wisdom would suggest we use time for the better things.

Some would say life is fleeting, that the time between the day of our birth and death is short and goes by fast. It is not the length of life, but time spent with the Lord of Life that makes our mortal expanse meaningful. And the Lord of Life has promised to provide us eternity in place of that time.

Eternity is better. Time and eternity are actually opposites. Time is finite, while eternity is infinite. Time will end, eternity will not. The Hymn, *Amazing Grace*, tells our story in eternity: *“We've no less days, to sing God's praise, than when we first begun.”* The time we spend serving Christ here, prepares us for that never-ending Joy.

Suggested Focus of Prayer: Ask God to provide you a perspective on the use of your time. If you are too busy for prayer and worship, or service to Him, or love for others, ask him to help you find it, so you can practice the habits of eternity now. **Amen**

Day 33 Friday, March 31, 2023

Focus of the Day:

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under heaven:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

The late Pete Seeger put these verses to music, and it was thought enduring and brilliant. He did well to utilize the power of what the wise King had learned. Some of what Solomon learned was through difficult experience, but his understanding is expressed poetically and well.

These are 14 opposites. Constructive and destructive actions. **“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:” (Ecclesiastes 3:1 KJVS)** Sometimes, even the things that we would not readily choose or wish for serve a necessary purpose.

We may plant, but plants do not last forever. They must either be harvested or replaced at some time. What has been built will not last forever. There is a time when it needs to come down. What has been torn may be mended, or perhaps will soon be torn again.

This Solomonic writing does not state that all this is good or pleasant stuff, just that there is a time for these things to take place. And they will. As was said before, they will all eventually serve the purposes of God.

In the dizzying pace of our lives, we will experience a dose of every one of these opposites that cover a wide bit of ground. In times good or bad, our comfort is in the proper fear and trust of the Lord, whose irresistible will is accomplished both through and in spite of life's events. We always have time to pray for his will to be done, and are wise to do so.

Suggested Prayer: *Oh Lord, the longer I live, the more I will see events both good and bad. Help me to better understand the ebb and flow of life and the constancy of your presence, so that my fear of what comes next is taken away, because I trust in you. (Spend some time in silent prayer considering the ways in which we have witnessed his constancy in the midst of the flow of events around you.)* Amen

Day 34 Saturday, April 1, 2023

Focus of the day:

Two things I ask of you, LORD; do not refuse me before I die:
Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?'
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God. Proverbs 30:7-9

These sayings are credited to a wise prophet named Agur, who spoke them to two folks named Ithiel and Ucal, who were likely students or apprentices to him. We will pick up next week with his prophetic vision, which is fitting to the approach of Easter week. For now, we enjoy the first segment of his wisdom.

He is asking two things. It may look like more, but he is referring to the byproducts of his requests.

He asks God to grant him integrity. That may seem odd at first. Why ask God for integrity? Just tell the truth. But the wise man knows, by his proper fear and trust in the Lord, that we are weak. His humility reveals to him the truth about himself, and of us all. We have been infected by the power of the Worldly One, who is the source of deceit. We can try, but humbly ask God to give us integrity all the way through.

David says of God, "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place." (Psalm. 51:6) Wisdom and truth are inextricably bound together. One leads to the other, for "The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity." (Proverbs 11:3) Truth leads to life, as the wise well know.

But Agur asks in wisdom, "Keep falsehood and lies far from me..." He does not just want to be truthful. He wants to be surrounded by truth.

When smoking was allowed in restaurants, I used to ask for a non-smoking table. Often, it did little good, as the table near me was a smoking table. I would often try to explain to the hostess that I didn't want a place where I couldn't smoke, but where others would not as well. I think that is the correct analogy.

Agur wanted not only to be one who speaks the truth, but to be surrounded by it. He wanted to live in and be surrounded by integrity. In the world we live in, that is a rare and precious thing.

From powers and authorities, to businesses, to the media, and to the common person, truth and integrity has become an endangered species. We could join Agur in his request, in spite of the challenges, and allow truth to begin with us.

Suggested Course of Prayer: Pray with Agur in this request. Confess before God where you have not held the standard of integrity. Without judging others, pray that you be surrounded by people of integrity as well. (Time of silent prayer)

Amen

Day 35 Monday, April 3, 2023

Focus of the Day:

Two things I ask of you, LORD; do not refuse me before I die:
Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?'
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God. Proverbs 30:7-9

We pick up again with the second of Agur's two requests. First, he has asked to live in and be surrounded by integrity (kind of a clever way to "kill two birds with one stone). Then he asks, "give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread."

What is he thinking? That is not the common prayer of believers today. Yes, the majority would pray that they be kept from poverty, but you won't fill many auditoriums with folks on their knees asking not to be granted riches.

But Agur must be on to something. Otherwise, Jesus would not have quoted him in the one Prayer that sets the tone for all our prayers. He directed us to ask God, "**Give us this day our daily bread.**" (Matthew. 6:11 NRSV) The bread here is indicative of God's provision for our all our needs for each day. The Lord's Prayer does not ask for food for tomorrow, but today. In proper fear, we trust him for tomorrow.

I would be lying, *which Agur wouldn't have liked*, if I said I never asked God for riches. I have always asked with good intentions. I always figured that if God gave me a million, I'd give the Church a quick 100 grand, maybe even 200. God is smarter than that. He knows our weakness, and I am no different. Neither was Agur.

Agur was fearful of having more than he could manage, and enough to tempt him to love riches more than God. "Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?'" Believe me, this has happened to many people. It is depressing how many lottery winners have come to ruin, because it was too much.

Too little is no bargain either. Poverty itself does not cause crime, but desperation can.

God may trust us with much. If he does, he is laying a great responsibility on us. I sort of think he has. It becomes the mission of those who are blessed, to be a blessing to others. It is a mission of the Church to help those with little, and to trust God for what he will have tomorrow.

Suggested Time of Prayer: Pray with Agur, that God would provide what you need, and trust him to establish the level that is best for you. Consider how your wealth, or lack thereof, is a blessing or a problem, and pray in such a way that leads you to trust Him all the more. Recite the Lord's Prayer, and consider its meaning.

Amen

Day 36 Tuesday, April 4, 2023

Focus of the Day:

Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.
Proverbs 11:28

Wealth is a ransom for a person's life, but the poor get no threats.
Proverbs 13:8 NRSV

Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings
and fly off to the sky like an eagle. Proverbs 23:5

A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.
Proverbs 22:1

As we quickly approach what we call "tax day" in less than 2 weeks, it's worth a follow-up on the whole concept of riches. April 15th is a unique day in our culture, because it is the one day everyone claims to be poor.

Perhaps there is some good in having just enough. For trusting in riches is a precarious habit. They can be stolen, fade, rust, or simply "fly off". As was opined in the previous study, too much can weigh us down.

For the most part, those with just enough don't need security systems or body guards. They don't need a staff of money managers or rental fees of strong boxes. They get lower insurance rates to boot. And the IRS can only squeeze a moderate amount of their life's blood out. This is just a way of saying that moderate wealth demands only moderate maintenance.

What is better than wealth? The integrity Agur asked for, a good name and reputation. And the proper fear and trust in the Lord that makes us wise enough to know all this.

Jesus said, **"Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."** (Luke 12:33-34)

The point is not that we should have meager amounts here on earth. God is generous to all. The point is the priorities of Heaven over the desires of earth. We should use what we have here to care for others, and promote the growth of His Kingdom, and store up treasures in His Kingdom to come. That is how we build up a "good name", because we reflect that we are known by His name.

Judas made a pretty good profit for one night's work. Yet it cost him a good name, and everything else. Better to have heavenly treasure and that "good name", than all the riches of earth.

Suggested Time of Prayer: Oh Lord, thank you for how you have blessed me. Help me to hold all I have in an open hand, that you may use what is needed for others, and be able to place more in my hand because I have not tightened my grip. May I be known for generosity, charity, and the Love of Christ, rather than worldly wealth.

Amen.

Day 37 Wednesday, April 5, 2023

Focus of the Day:

**I have not learned wisdom, nor have I attained to the knowledge of the Holy One.
Who has gone up to heaven and come down?
Whose hands have gathered up the wind?
Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is his name, and what is the name of his son?
Surely you know!**

**“Every word of God is flawless;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. “** **Proverbs 30:3-5**

Good old Agur. We know he was wise, because he knew he was not. He was humble before God, and knew that he didn't know it all. He also understood that the answers are not found on earth, but come down from heaven.

I get weary when people assume that the OT is about “God”, and the NT is about “Jesus”. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not contained in either one, they burst forth from the entire Word: His Living Word.

Here Agur is prophesying about what we most need to know this Easter week. We don't need great learning or study or insight to simply offer the answer Agur sought. “Surely you know!” Surely we do. We know the “Holy One”, and we know “the name of his Son”.

“Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.”

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” John 1:14

“This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,” Acts 17:3b

Suggested Time of Prayer: Thank God that we have had revealed to us what the wise of the past longed to know. We know the Holy One and the Son of God. And more than they imagined, we know Him as Savior and Friend. We know Him in a personal relationship, so we may walk daily with our Lord. Take some time in prayer, expressing your gratitude for this blessing.

Amen

Day 38 Thursday, April 6, 2023

Focus of the day:

Wounds from a friend can be trusted,
but an enemy multiplies kisses.

Proverbs 27:6

This seemed a fitting Proverb for the day.

A true friend can be trusted to tell you the truth. If they can't tell you that, they are not a real friend. If you can't hear the truth from them, you are not the true friend.

A true friend will tell you you are wrong when they believe you are. An enemy will tell you you are right when they believe you are wrong.

We need to give friends permission to hold us accountable for who we are and what we say and what we promise. Love so constrains us.

Paul famously said: Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

Christ is always that loving friend to us. He loves us as we are, and loves us too much to allow us to remain that way. He loved us to life.

"Maundy Thursday" is the day we attribute to the institution of the Lord's Supper. It was there that Judas, in one act, feigned fellowship with Jesus; and soon after gave him the "kiss of death".

How great is the love of God, that he gave us one another to love. And his love "rejoices in the truth". As his Truth is among us in the person of the Holy Spirit, let us be true friends to Him, and to one another.

Suggested Time of Prayer: Consider the truth of this Proverb. Visualize the friends that God has put in your life, and thank God for them. Consider how you may become more humble before God by being open to truth, and how you may become a better friend to others in the same way. Thank God for the eternal fellowship of our One Great Friend, who gave all for us.

Amen

Day 39 Friday, April 7, 2023

Focus of the day:

To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.

Proverbs 21:3

Then he said, “Here I am, O God, to do your will.” So God does away with all the old sacrifices and puts the sacrifice of Christ in their place. Because Jesus Christ did what God wanted him to do, we are all purified from sin by the offering that he made of his own body once and for all.
Hebrews. 10:9-10 TEV

I get to bend the rules here, and marry a Proverb with an Epistle. Call it Grace. Better yet, call it “Grace and Truth.”

God made it plain in the Old Testament, that sacrifices were not getting the job done. No ritual could restore the broken covenant. It took the set of the heart to bring us near to Him.

David said. “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”(Psalm 51:15-17)

Only the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross was sufficient to erase the Sin, heal our brokenness, and restore our relationship with the Father, through the Son, and with the constant help of the Holy Spirit.

What is just and right today, more acceptable the sacrifice, is to come to him in faith. In the proper, humble, fear and trust of the Lord.

Isn't that exactly what Ephesians refers to? For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

I should not need to instruct you how to pray on this day. Certainly, Give thanks to him for what he has done. But focus on what he has done for you!

Amen

Day 40 Saturday, April 8, 2023

Focus of the day:

After having heard it all, this is the conclusion: Fear God, and keep his commands, because this applies to everyone. God will certainly judge everything that is done. This includes every secret thing, whether it is good or bad. Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 God's Word

Solomon, after all the highs and low, joy and depression, arrived here. It *isn't* that everything is meaningless. It is that *all is meaningless without Him*.

You are now wiser. Not because I wrote and rambled on, but because you pondered the Word of God and prayed.

We are not waiting on the resurrection. It has already happened. As you celebrate it again, do not stop. Resurrection is an every-day event for those who believe. We connect with it every time we pray.

Spend some time today, praying thankfully for what you know, asking for more wisdom, and joyfully seeking His way in the proper fear and trust in the Lord. Amen.

End Note: A thought for the Easter Miracle we celebrate on the coming day.

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

Ecclesiastes 3:11

We have studied and prayed primarily through the mens of Old Testament Writings. But each chapter and verse were foreshadowing the coming of Christ in our flesh, his Message of Salvation, His work upon the Cross, and the resurrection that seals to us His promise forever.

If we missed it, it was oversight that can easily be corrected by connecting the testaments by prayer and study. It is well worth the effort.

Don't stop here. Continue to grow far beyond this exercise, into a life of prayer that is a lifetime habit. Do yourself the great favor of making daily prayer the foundation of all you do. If you need help, seek it. If you need others to hold you accountable, ask them.

You can use Scripture as a means to both speak to him and hear his voice. It does both by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is waiting for us to come to Him. He is the one who said **"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."** (Matthew 11:28-30 TNIV)

Do not carry your burden alone for one second. Pray to Him now.

Amen.