

Connect 7 Devotions

Bethlehem Lutheran Church

June 13 – July 29



The seasonal change from spring to summer is about to begin. Summer is a time of great growth in nature. The festival season of the church year, which focuses on the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, is about to end. We are ready to enter the long Church Year season of Pentecost, the liturgical color green is commonly used for the many weeks ahead. Like many things planted by a gardener or farmer in spring, green shows growth and maturation of that which was planted. In the same way, at this time of the Church Year, we are reminded that that green carries the symbolic importance of our continued need and privilege as God's people to grow and mature as disciples of Christ through the Holy Spirit given. The Readings in this Pentecost season often remind us of the Early Church continuing to grow and spread to all people, which has continued to us here and now beginning in our Baptism and through all the days the Lord grants us.

The Devotions and scripture reading provided in this booklet contain nourishment for your soul. Each week the devotions are centered around our Sunday worship theme and are intended to connect you closer to God. It is our prayer that you put your roots down deep into the Word of God and that the Holy Spirit provide growth for your faith.

Connect 7 Devotions

For the Week of
June 13-17

	June 19 (Prop. 7)	Second S. a. Pentecost	Is. 65:1-9	Psalm 3	Gal. 3:23-4:7	Luke 8:26-39
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Theme: No Longer a Slave - Galatians 3:23 - 4:7

²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave^[a] nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave,^[a] though he is the owner of everything, ² but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. ³ In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles^[b] of the world. ⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷ **So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.**

The Beauty of Adoption

In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.

Galatians 3:26

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Galatians 3:26–4:7

The 2009 film *The Blind Side* depicts the true story of Michael Oher, a homeless teenager. A family takes him in and helps him overcome learning difficulties and achieve excellence in American football. In one scene, the family talks with Michael about the possibility of adopting him after he'd been living with them for several months. In a sweet and tender reply, Michael exclaims that he thought he already was a part of the family!

It's a beautiful moment, just as adoption is a beautiful thing. Love is extended and full inclusion is offered as a family opens its arms to a new member. Adoption changes lives, just as it profoundly changed Michael's life.

In Jesus, believers are made “children of God” through faith in Him (Galatians 3:26). We're adopted by God and become His sons and daughters (4:5). As God's adopted children, we receive the Spirit of His Son, we call God “Father” (v. 6), and we become His heirs (v. 7) and coheirs with Christ (Romans 8:17). We become full members of His family.

When Michael Oher was adopted, it changed his life, his identity, and his future. How much more for us who are adopted by God! Our life changes as we know Him as Father. Our identity changes as we belong to Him. And our future changes as we're promised a glorious, eternal inheritance.

By: **Con Campbell**

Reflect & Pray

How does being a child of God affect your self-identity? In what ways does this change the way you view yourself?

*Thank You, Father, for making me Yours.
Help me to understand my identity as Your child.*

Adopted

God sent his Son . . . that we might receive adoption to sonship.

Galatians 4:4-5

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Galatians 4:1-7

I'm glad when a philanthropist builds an orphanage for homeless children. I'm thrilled when that person gives even more and adopts one of them. Most orphans would be delighted merely to have a patron. But then to learn the sponsor isn't content merely to help me but also *wants me*. How must that feel?

If you're a child of God you already know, because it's happened to you. We couldn't complain if God had merely loved us enough to send His Son that we might "not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). It would be enough for us. But not for God. He "sent his Son . . . to redeem" us, not as an end in itself, but "that we might receive adoption to sonship" (Galatians 4:4-5).

The apostle Paul refers to us as "sons" because in his day it was common for sons to inherit their father's wealth. His point is that now everyone who puts their faith in Jesus, whether man or woman, becomes a "son" of God with equal and full rights of inheritance (v. 7).

God does not merely want to *save* you. He *wants* you. He has adopted you into His family, given you His name (Revelation 3:12), and proudly calls you His child. You could not possibly be loved more, or by anyone more important. You aren't merely blessed by God. You are the *child* of God. Your Father loves you.

By: **Mike Wittmer**

Reflect & Pray

Father, what a privilege to call You this! Thank You for saving me, and for wanting me.

You are more than saved. You are loved.

Hosting Royalty

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.

Galatians 3:26

Galatians 3:26–29

After meeting the Queen of the United Kingdom at a ball in Scotland, Sylvia and her husband received a message that the royal family would like to visit them for tea. Sylvia started cleaning and prepping, nervous about hosting the royal guests. Before they were due to arrive, she went outside to pick some flowers for the table, her heart racing. Then she sensed God reminding her that He's the King of kings and that He's with her every day. Immediately she felt peaceful and thought, "After all, it's only the Queen!"

Sylvia is right. As the apostle Paul noted, God is the "King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Timothy 6:15) and those who follow Him are "children of God" (Galatians 3:26). When we belong to Christ, we're heirs of Abraham (v. 29). We no longer are bound by division—such as that of race, social class, or gender—for we're "all one in Christ Jesus" (v. 28). We're children of the King.

Although Sylvia and her husband had a marvelous meal with the Queen, I don't anticipate receiving an invitation from the monarch anytime soon. But I love the reminder that the highest King of all is with me every moment. And that those who believe in Jesus wholeheartedly (v. 27) can live in unity, knowing they're God's children.

How could holding onto this truth shape the way we live today?

By: **Amy Boucher Pye**

Reflect & Pray

What does it mean to you to be an heir of Abraham? How could you invite others to become part of the family?

King of kings and Lord of lords, You are mighty and glorious.

Thank You for stooping down to love me and for welcoming me as Your child.

What Are You?

In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.

Galatians 3:26

Galatians 3:26–4:7

When I walked into the ice cream shop with my five-year-old biracial son, the man behind the counter glanced at me and stared at my child. “What are you?”

His question and harsh tone triggered the all-too-familiar anger and heartache I’d experienced growing up as a Mexican-American who didn’t fit stereotypes. Pulling Xavier closer, I turned toward my Black husband as he entered the store. With eyes narrowed, the store clerk completed our order in silence.

I prayed silently for the man as my son listed the flavors of ice cream he wanted to try. Repenting of my bitterness, I asked God to give me a spirit of forgiveness. With my light-but-not-white complexion, I’d been the target of similar glares accompanying that same question over the years. I’d struggled with insecurities and feelings of worthlessness until I began learning how to embrace my identity as God’s beloved daughter.

The apostle Paul declares that believers in Jesus are “all children of God through faith,” equally valued and beautifully diverse. We’re intimately connected and intentionally designed to work together (Galatians 3:26–29). When God sent His Son to redeem us, we became family through His blood shed on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins (4:4–7). As God’s image-bearers, our worth cannot be determined by the opinions, expectations, or biases of others.

What are we? We’re children of God.

By: **Xochitl Dixon**

Reflect & Pray

When have you doubted your value as a person due to the opinions, expectations, or biases of others? How does knowing all God’s children are His image-bearers help you love those who are different from you?

Father God, please help me to see myself and others through Your eyes. Help me love with Your heart as I come into contact with people who are different from me

More than Water

All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

Galatians 3:27

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Galatians 3:23–29

One of my earliest childhood memories of church was a pastor walking down the aisle, challenging us to “remember the waters of our baptism.” *Remember the waters?* I asked myself. *How can you remember water?* He then proceeded to splash everyone with water, which as a young child both delighted and confused me.

Why should we think about baptism? When a person is baptized, there’s so much more to it than water. Baptism symbolizes how through faith in Jesus, we’ve become “clothed” with Him (Galatians 3:27). Or in other words, it’s celebrating that we belong to Him and that He lives in and through us.

As if that weren’t significant enough, the passage tells us that if we’ve been clothed with Christ our identity is found in Him. We’re the very children of God (v. 26). As such, we’ve been made right with God by faith—not by following Old Testament law (vv. 23–25). We’re not divided against one another by gender, culture, and status. We’re set free and brought into unity through Christ and are now His own (v. 29).

So there are very good reasons to remember baptism and all it represents. We aren’t simply focusing on the act itself but that we belong to Jesus and have become children of God. Our identity, future, and spiritual freedom are found in Him.

By: **Peter W. Chin**

Reflect & Pray

What does it mean for you to be clothed with Christ and to belong to Him?
What are ways in which you can regularly celebrate and remember the
meaning of baptism?

God, help me to never forget that through Jesus I am a child of God!

Connect 7 Devotions

For the Week of
June 20-24

June 26 (Prop. 8)	Third S. a. Pentecost	1 Kings 19:9b-21	Psalms 16	Gal. 5:1, 13-25	Luke 9:51-62
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Theme: No Longer Alone – 1 Kings 19:9-21

⁹ There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, **even I only, am left**, and they seek my life, to take it away." ¹¹ And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹² And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. ¹³ And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." ¹⁵ And the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. ¹⁶ And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. ¹⁷ And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. ¹⁸ Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

¹⁹ So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him. ²⁰ And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." And he said to him, "Go back again, for what have I done to you?" ²¹ And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him.

Escaping the Noise

After the fire came a gentle whisper.

1 Kings 19:12

Today's Scripture & Insight:

1 Kings 19:9–13

Several years ago, the president of a college suggested that students join her in “powering down” for an evening. Although the students agreed, it was with great reluctance that they laid aside their cell phones and entered the chapel. For the next hour, they sat quietly in a service of music and prayer. Afterward, one participant described the experience as “a wonderful opportunity to calm down . . . a place to just tune out all of the extra noise.”

Sometimes, it’s difficult to escape “extra noise.” The clamor of both our external and internal worlds can be deafening. But when we’re willing to “power down,” we begin to understand the psalmist’s reminder of the necessity to be still so we can know God (Psalm 46:10). In 1 Kings 19, we discover as well that when the prophet Elijah looked for the Lord, he didn’t find Him in the pandemonium of the wind or the earthquake or the fire (vv. 9–13). Instead, Elijah heard God’s gentle whisper (v. 12).

Extra noise is practically guaranteed during celebrations. When families and friends come together, it’s likely a time of animated conversations, excess food, boisterous laughter, and sweet expressions of love. But when we quietly open our hearts, we find that time with God is even sweeter. Like Elijah, we’re more likely to encounter God in the stillness. And sometimes, if we listen, we too will hear that gentle whisper.

By: **Cindy Hess Kasper**

Reflect & Pray

What will help you draw close to God in silence and solitude? How can you regularly “power down” both your devices and your busy mind?

It's in the stillness we're most likely to hear God's gentle whisper.

Who Needs Me?

When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram.

1 Kings 19:15

Today's Scripture & Insight:

1 Kings 19:9–12, 15–18

While on a red-eye flight to Washington, DC, opinion writer Arthur Brooks overheard an elderly woman whisper to her husband, “It’s not true that no one needs you anymore.” The man murmured something about wishing he were dead, and his wife replied, “Oh, stop saying that.” When the flight ended, Brooks turned around and immediately recognized the man. He was a world-famous hero. Other passengers shook his hand, and the pilot thanked him for the courage he displayed decades ago. How had this giant sunk into despair?

The prophet Elijah bravely and single-handedly defeated 450 prophets of Baal—or so he thought (1 Kings 18). Yet he hadn’t really done it alone; God was there all along! But later, feeling all alone, he asked God to take his life.

God lifted Elijah’s spirits by bringing him into His presence and giving him new people to serve. He must go and “anoint Hazael king over Aram,” Jehu “king over Israel,” and Elisha “to succeed you as prophet” (19:15–16). Invigorated with renewed purpose, Elijah found and mentored his successor.

Your great victories may lie in the rearview mirror. You may feel your life has peaked, or that it never did. No matter. Look around. The battles may seem smaller, the stakes less profound, but there are still others who need you. Serve them well for Jesus’ sake, and it will count. They’re your purpose—the reason you’re still here.

By: Mike Wittmer

Reflect & Pray

Who can you serve today for Christ? Why is it so vital for you to reach out to others with God's love?

Holy Spirit, open my eyes to those I can serve for Jesus' sake.

Shift into Neutral

And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

1 Kings 19:12

Today's Scripture & Insight:

1 Kings 19:9–12, 15–18

The man ahead of me at the carwash was on a mission. He purposefully strode to the back of his pickup and removed the hitch, so it wouldn't snag the high-powered rolling brushes. He paid the attendant then pulled onto the automated track—where he left his truck in drive. The attendant shouted after him, “Neutral! Neutral!” but the man's windows were up and he couldn't hear. He zipped through the car wash in four seconds flat. His truck barely got wet.

Elijah was on a mission too. He was busy serving God in big ways. He had just defeated the prophets of Baal in a supernatural showdown, which left him drained (see 1 Kings 18:16–39). He needed time in neutral. God brought Elijah to Mount Horeb, where He had appeared to Moses long before. Once again God shook the mountain. But He wasn't in the rock-shattering wind, earthquake, or raging fire. Instead, God came to Elijah in a gentle whisper. “When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out” to meet God (1 Kings 19:13).

You and I are on a mission. We put our lives in drive to accomplish big things for our Savior. But if we never shift down to neutral, we can zip through life and miss the outpouring of His Spirit. God whispers, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). Neutral! Neutral!

By: Mike Wittmer

Reflect & Pray

How do you slow down to spend time with your Father? Why is time in neutral necessary for driven people?

Father, I am still because You are God.

Strength for the Journey

All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.”

1 Kings 19:5

1 Kings 19:1–9

One summer, I faced what seemed an impossible task—a big writing project with a looming deadline. Having spent day after day on my own, endeavoring to get the words onto the page, I felt exhausted and discouraged, and I wanted to give up. A wise friend asked me, “When’s the last time you felt refreshed? Maybe you need to allow yourself to rest and to enjoy a good meal.”

I knew immediately that she was right. Her advice made me think of Elijah and the terrifying message he received from Jezebel (1 Kings 19:2)—although, of course, my writing project wasn’t anywhere near the cosmic scale of the prophet’s experience. After Elijah triumphed over the false prophets on Mount Carmel, Jezebel sent word that she would capture and kill him, and he despaired, longing to die. But then he enjoyed a good sleep and was twice visited by an angel who gave him food to eat. After God renewed his physical strength, he was able to continue with his journey.

When the “journey is too much” for us (v. 7), we might need to rest and enjoy a healthy and satisfying meal. For when we are exhausted or hungry, we can easily succumb to disappointment or fear. But when God meets our physical needs through His resources, as much as possible in this fallen world, we can take the next step in serving Him.

By: **Amy Boucher Pye**

Reflect & Pray

Looking back, when have you needed to slow down and receive sustenance before pressing on? How can you look for signs of burnout as you serve God?

Creator God, You formed us as Your people.

Thank You for our limitations, which remind us that You're God and we're not.

Help us to serve You with gladness and joy.

You're Not Alone

I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal.

1 Kings 19:18

Today's Scripture & Insight:

1 Kings 19:8–11, 15–18

“So great to see you!” “You, too!” “So glad you’re here!” The greetings were warm and welcoming. Members of a ministry in Southern California gathered online before their evening program. As their speaker, calling in from Colorado, I watched silently as the others gathered on the video call. As an introvert and not knowing anyone, I felt like a social outsider. Then suddenly, a screen opened and there was my pastor. Then another screen opened. A longtime church friend was joining the call, too. Seeing them, I no longer felt alone. God, it seemed, had sent support.

Elijah wasn't alone either, despite feeling like “the only [prophet] left” after fleeing the wrath of Jezebel and Ahab (1 Kings 19:10). Journeying through desert wilderness for forty days and forty nights, Elijah hid in a cave on Mount Horeb. But God called him back into service, telling him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet” (vv. 15–16).

God then assured him, “Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him” (v. 18). As

Elijah learned, while serving God we don't serve alone. As God brings help, we'll serve together.

By: Patricia Raybon

Reflect & Pray

What support has God recently sent when you were serving Him? Whom could you invite to serve with you to grow your ministry impact for God?

*Dear God, when I feel alone while serving You,
remind me that others are with me as we joyfully serve.*

Connect 7 Devotions

For the Week of
June 27 - July 1

	July 3 (Prop. 9)	Fourth S. a. Pentecost	Is. 66:10-14	Psalms 66:1-7	Gal. 6:1-10, 14-18	Luke 10:1-20
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Theme: Boast in the Cross - Galatians 6:1-10, 14-18

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. ³ For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. ⁴ But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. ⁵ For each will have to bear his own load.

⁶ Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. ⁷ Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. ⁸ For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. ⁹ And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. ¹⁰ So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

14 But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. ¹⁵ For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. ¹⁶ And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

¹⁷ From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

¹⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.

The Blessing Is Coming

Let us not become weary in doing good,
for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.
Galatians 6:9

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Galatians 6:7–10

A friend and I went for a walk with her grandkids. While pushing the stroller, she commented that her steps were being wasted—they weren't being counted on the activity tracker she wore on her wrist because she wasn't swinging her arm. I reminded her that those steps were still helping her physical health. "Yeah," she laughed. "But I really want that electronic gold star!"

I understand how she feels! Working toward something without immediate results is disheartening. But rewards aren't always immediate or immediately visible.

When that's the case, it's easy to feel that the good things we do are useless, even helping a friend or being kind to a stranger. Paul explained to the church in Galatia, however, that "a man reaps what he sows" (Galatians 6:7). But we must "not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest" (v. 9). Doing good isn't the way to gain salvation, and the text doesn't specify whether what we reap will be now or in heaven, but we can be assured that there will be "a harvest of blessing" (6:9 nlt).

Doing good is difficult, especially when we don't see or know what the "harvest" will be. But as with my friend who still gained the physical benefit from walking, it's worth continuing to do good because the blessing is coming!

By: **Julie Schwab**

Reflect & Pray

Are you discouraged? Ask God to help you trust Him to be faithful in what He's called you to do. What good thing can you do for someone today?

Not all rewards are immediate or visible.

Faithful Until the Harvest

Let us not become weary in doing good.

Galatians 6:9

Galatians 6:7–10

A woman I know planned an event at a local park and invited all the neighborhood children to participate. She was excited about the opportunity to share her faith with her neighbors.

She recruited her three grandchildren and two high school students to help her, gave the assignments, planned a number of games and other activities, prepared food, prepared a Bible story about Jesus to present to the children, and waited for them to gather.

Not a single child showed up the first day. Or the second day. Or the third day. Yet, each day my friend went through that day's activities with her grandchildren and helpers.

On the fourth day, she noticed a family picnicking nearby and invited the children to join in the games. One little girl came, entered into the fun, ate with them, and listened to the story about Jesus. Perhaps years from now she'll remember. Who knows what the outcome will be? God, through the book of Galatians, encourages us, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people" (6:9–10).

Don't worry about numbers or other visible measures of success. Our job is to be faithful to what He wants us to do and then leave the harvest to Him. God determines the outcomes.

By: **David H. Roper**

Reflect & Pray

What best-laid plans of yours have gone wrong? How can you learn to trust God with the outcome despite disappointment?

God, I'm grateful that You're the one in charge of the results. You're the one at work. Help me to do what You ask no matter what.

Unashamed Loyalty

Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together.

Psalm 34:3

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Psalm 34:1-4

Sports fans love to sing their teams' praises. By wearing logos, posting notes on Facebook about their beloved teams, or talking about them with friends, fans leave no doubt where their loyalty stands. My own Detroit Tigers caps, shirts, and conversations indicate that I am right there with those who do this.

Our sports loyalties can remind us that our truest and greatest loyalty must be to our Lord. I think of such unashamed loyalty when I read Psalm 34, where David draws our attention to Someone vastly more vital than anything else on earth.

David says, "I will extol the Lord at all times" (v. 1), and we are left to wonder about the gaps in our lives when we live as if God is not our source of truth, light, and salvation. He says, "His praise will always be on my lips" (v. 1), and we think about how many times we praise things of this world more than we praise Him. David says, "My soul shall make its boast in the Lord" (v. 2 nkjv), and we realize that we boast about our own small successes more than what Jesus has done for us.

It's not wrong to enjoy our teams, our interests, and our accomplishments. But our highest praise goes to our Lord. "Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together" (v. 3).

By: **Dave Branon**

Reflect & Pray

Lord, help me to have Your praise be on my lips and to boast in You. Help me to keep my focus on You.

Loyalty is the test of true love.

Something to Brag About

Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength
or the rich boast of their riches.

Jeremiah 9:23

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Jeremiah 9:23–26

What does it mean to be real? That's the very big question answered in the small children's book *The Velveteen Rabbit*. It's the story of toys in a nursery and the velveteen rabbit's journey to become real by allowing himself to be loved by a child. One of the other toys is the old and wise Skin Horse. He "had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and swagger, and by and by break . . . and pass away." They looked and sounded impressive, but their bragging eventually amounted to nothing when it came to love.

Boasting starts out strong; but in the end, it always fades away. Jeremiah lists three areas where this is evident: "wisdom . . . strength . . . riches" (Jeremiah 9:23). The wise old prophet had been around long enough to know a thing or two, and he countered such boasting with the Lord's truth: "But let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord" (v. 24).

Let us, the children, brag about God, our good Father. In the unfolding story of His great love, it's the wonderful way you and I grow to become more and more real.

By: **John Blase**

Reflect & Pray

Think of a person you know who embodies the ability to “boast in the Lord.”

What is one way this week you can follow their example?

Father, help me to remember Jeremiah's words. May my only boasting be in the knowledge of You and Your great love which endures forever.

Free Indeed

If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

John 8:36

Today's Scripture & Insight:

John 8:31–36

The film *Amistad* tells the story of West African slaves in 1839 taking over the boat that was transporting them and killing the captain and some of the crew. Eventually they were recaptured, imprisoned, and taken to trial. An unforgettable courtroom scene features Cinqué, leader of the slaves, passionately pleading for freedom. Three simple words—repeated with increasing force by a shackled man with broken English—eventually silenced the courtroom, “Give us free!” Justice was served and the men were freed.

Most people today aren't in danger of being physically bound, yet true liberation from the spiritual bondage of sin remains elusive. The words of Jesus in John 8:36 offer sweet relief: “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” Jesus pointed to Himself as the source of true emancipation because He offers forgiveness to anyone who believes in Him. Though some in Christ's audience claimed freedom (v. 33), their words, attitudes, and actions regarding Jesus betrayed their claim.

Jesus longs to hear those who would echo Cinqué's plea and say, "Give me freedom!" With compassion He awaits the cries of those who are shackled by unbelief or fear or failure. Freedom is a matter of the heart. Such liberty is reserved for those who believe that Jesus is God's Son who was sent into the world to break the power of sin's hold on us through His death and resurrection.

By: **Arthur Jackson**

Reflect & Pray

How has Jesus set you free? What can you share with others about God's liberating power?

Jesus, help me to believe that You can set me free.

Connect 7 Devotions

For the Week of
July 4-8

	July 10 (Prop. 10)	Fifth S. a. Pentecost	Lev. (18:1-5) 19:9-18	Psalms 41	Col. 1:1-14	Luke 10:25-37
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Theme: Bearing Fruit – Colossians 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

²To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, ⁷just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf ⁸and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

⁹ And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ ***so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;*** ¹¹ being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you[Ⓜ] to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Celebrate Freedom

The law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.

Romans 8:2

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Romans 6:15–23

After being kidnapped, held hostage for thirteen days, and released, New Zealand news cameraman Olaf Wiig, with a broad smile on his face, announced, “I feel more alive now than I have in my entire life.”

For reasons difficult to understand, being freed is more exhilarating than being free.

For those who enjoy freedom every day, Olaf’s joy was a good reminder of how easily we forget how blessed we are. This is also true spiritually. Those of us who have been Christians for a long time often forget what it’s like to be held hostage by sin. We can become complacent and even ungrateful. But then God sends a reminder in the form of a new believer who gives an exuberant testimony of what God has done in his or her life, and once again we see the joy that is ours when we are “free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2).

If freedom has become boring to you, or if you tend to focus on what you can’t do, consider this: Not only are you no longer a slave to sin, but you are freed to be holy and to enjoy eternal life with Christ Jesus! (6:22).

Celebrate your freedom in Christ by taking the time to thank God for the things you are able and free to do as His servant.

By: **Julie Ackerman Link**

Reflect & Pray

Living for Christ brings true freedom.

The Ultimate Wave

The gospel is bearing fruit and growing.

Colossians 1:6

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Colossians 1:1 – 8

People love doing “the wave.” At sporting events and concerts around the world, it begins when a few people stand and raise their hands. A moment later, those seated beside them do the same. The goal is to have one sequential flowing movement work its way around an entire stadium. Once it reaches the end, those who started it smile and cheer—and keep the movement going.

The first recorded incident of the wave occurred at a professional baseball game between the Oakland Athletics and the New York Yankees in 1981. I love joining in the wave because it’s fun. But it’s also occurred to me that the happiness and togetherness we experience while doing it is reminiscent of the gospel—the good news of salvation in Jesus that unites believers everywhere in praise and hope. This “ultimate wave” started over twenty centuries ago in Jerusalem. Writing to the members of the church in Colossae, Paul described it this way: “The gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it” (Colossians 1:6). The natural result of this good news is “faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for [us] in heaven” (v. 5).

As believers in Jesus, we're part of the greatest wave in history. Keep it going! Once it's done, we'll see the smile of the One who started it all.

By: **James Banks**

Reflect & Pray

From whom did you first hear the good news of Jesus? How can you share it with another person close to you this week?

I praise You for the wonderful gift of my salvation, Father. Please send me to someone who needs to hear of Your kindness today!

Send It in a Letter

Since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you.

Colossians 1:9

Colossians 1:9–12

Like most four-year-olds, Ruby loved to run, sing, dance, and play. But she started complaining about pain in her knees. Ruby's parents took her in for tests. The results were shocking—a diagnosis of cancer, stage 4 neuroblastoma. Ruby was in trouble. She was quickly admitted to the hospital.

Ruby's hospital stay lingered on, spilling over into the Christmas season, a hard time to be away from home. One of Ruby's nurses came up with the idea to place a mailbox outside her room so family could send letters full of prayers and encouragement to her. Then the plea went out on Facebook, and that's when the volume of mail coming in from friends and complete strangers surprised everyone, most of all Ruby. With each letter received (more than 100,000 total), Ruby grew a little more encouraged, and she finally got to go home.

Paul's letter to the people at Colossae was exactly that—a letter (Colossians 1:2). Words penned on a page that carried hopes for continued fruitfulness and knowledge and strength and endurance and patience (vv. 10–11). Can you imagine what a dose of good medicine such words were to the faithful at Colossae? Just knowing that someone was praying nonstop for them strengthened them to stay steady in their faith in Christ Jesus.

Our words of encouragement can dramatically help others in need.

By: **John Blase**

Reflect & Pray

How have others' words encouraged me? What opportunities do I have to give someone else the "letter" of encouragement they need?

God, bring someone to my mind that needs encouragement.

Then help me act on Your prompting.

Spitting Image

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

[Colossians 1:15](#)

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Colossians 1:15–23

During an outing, we met a woman who had known my husband's family since he was a child. She looked from Alan to our son, Xavier. "He's the spitting image of his daddy," she said. "Those eyes. That smile. Yep. Looks just like him." As the woman delighted in acknowledging such a strong resemblance between father and son, she even noted similarities in their personalities. Still, though they are alike in many ways, my son doesn't reflect his father perfectly.

There's only one Son—Jesus—who reflects His Father completely. Christ is the "image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" ([Colossians 1:15](#)). In Him and through Him and for Him all things were created (v. 16). "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (v. 17).

We can spend time in prayer and Bible study, discovering the Father's character by looking at Jesus—God in the flesh. He invites us to witness His love in action by examining how He interacts with others in Scripture and in our day-to-day living. After surrendering our lives to Christ and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, we can grow in knowing and trusting our loving Father. He transforms us to reflect His character, so we can live for Him.

What a joy it would be if others could say we look just like Jesus!

By: **Xochitl Dixon**

Reflect & Pray

What character trait of Jesus have you seen cultivated in your life over the last year? What trait would you like to cultivate in the coming year?

Jesus, please help me know You more as You make me more like You!

Monkeying with the Cosmos

He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together.

Colossians 1:17 nlt

Colossians 1:15–20

In the early 1980s, a prominent astronomer who didn't believe in God wrote, "A common sense interpretation of the facts suggests that a super-intellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as with chemistry and biology." To this scientist's eye, the evidence showed that *something* had designed everything we observe in the cosmos. He added, "There are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature." In other words, everything we see looks as if it was planned by Someone. And yet, the astronomer remained an atheist.

Three thousand years ago, another intelligent man looked at the skies and drew a different conclusion. "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" wondered David (Psalm 8:3–4).

Yet God cares for us deeply. The universe tells the story of its Intelligent Designer, the "Super Intellect" who made our minds and put us here to ponder His work. Through Jesus and His creation, God can be known. Paul wrote, "[Christ] existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth" (Colossians 1:15–16 NLT).

The cosmos has indeed been "monkeyed with." The identity of the Intelligent Designer is there to be discovered by anyone willing to seek.

By: Tim Gustafson

Reflect & Pray

In what ways can you see God in every detail of your life? How might you humbly share your confidence in God with someone who doubts His existence?

Thank You, heavenly Father, that You can be known through Your creation.

I pray for those who don't see You. Please draw them to You.

Connect 7 Devotions

For the Week of

July 11-15

	July 17 (Prop. 11)	Sixth S. a. Pentecost	Gen. 18:1-10a (10b-14)	Psalm 27:(1-6) 7-14	Col. 1:21-29	Luke 10:38-42
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Theme: The Mystery Made Known – Colossians 1:21-29

²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

²⁴ Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, ²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶ **the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.** ²⁷ **To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.** ²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present

everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

How to Reflect Christ

God has chosen to make known . . . the glorious riches of this mystery,
which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Colossians 1:27

Colossians 1:25–27

Thérèse of Lisieux was a joyful and carefree child—until her mother died when she was just four years old. She became timid and easily agitated. But many years later on Christmas Eve, all of that changed. After celebrating the birth of Jesus with her church community, she experienced God releasing her from her fear and giving her joy. She attributed the change to the power of God leaving heaven and becoming a man, Jesus, and through His dwelling in her.

What does it mean for Christ to dwell within us? It’s a mystery, said Paul to the Colossian church. It’s one that God “kept hidden for ages and generations” (Colossians 1:26), but which He disclosed to God’s people. To them God revealed “the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (v. 27). Because Christ now dwelled in the Colossians, they experienced the joy of new life. No longer were they enslaved to the old self of sin.

If we’ve asked Jesus to be our Savior, we too live out this mystery of His dwelling in us. Through His Spirit, He can release us from fear, as He did Thérèse, and grow within us the fruit of His Spirit, such as joy, peace, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23).

Let’s give thanks for the wonderful mystery of Christ within us.

By: Amy Boucher Pye

Reflect & Pray

How do you see Jesus reflected in your life? In the lives of those you love who follow Him?

Jesus, thank You for lowering Yourself and becoming a man, and for living within me. Help me to understand more of Your work in my life.

The Greatest Mystery

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

Colossians 1:15

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Colossians 1:15–22

Before I came to faith in Jesus, I'd heard the gospel preached but wrestled with His identity. How could He offer forgiveness for my sins when the Bible says only God can forgive sins? I discovered I wasn't alone in my struggles after reading J. I. Packer's *Knowing God*. Packer suggests that for many unbelievers the "really staggering Christian claim is that Jesus of Nazareth was God made man . . . as truly and fully divine as He was human." Yet this is the truth that makes salvation possible.

When the apostle Paul refers to Christ as "the image of the invisible God," he's saying Jesus is completely and perfectly God—Creator and Sustainer of all things in heaven and earth—but *also* fully human (Colossians 1:15–17). Because of this truth, we can be confident that through Christ's death and resurrection, He's not only carried the consequences for our sins but has also redeemed human nature, so that we—and all of creation—can be reconciled to God (vv. 20–22).

In an amazing, initiating act of love, God the Father reveals Himself in and through Scripture by the power of God the Holy Spirit and through the life of God the Son. Those who believe in Jesus are saved because He *is* Emmanuel—God with us. Hallelujah!

By: Xochitl Dixon

Reflect & Pray

When have you wrestled with your understanding of Jesus?

What was the result?

Loving God, thank You for revealing Yourself and reconciling us through Jesus.

Virtual Presence

Though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit.

Colossians 2:5

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Colossians 2:1 – 5

As the novel coronavirus marched across the globe, health experts advised increased physical distance between people as a means to slow the spread. Many countries asked their citizens to self-quarantine or shelter in place.

Organizations sent employees home to work remotely if they could, while others suffered a financially debilitating loss of employment. Like others, I participated in church and small-group meetings through digital platforms. As a world, we practiced new forms of togetherness despite being physically disconnected.

It isn't just the internet that lets us maintain a sense of connection. We connect to one another as members of the body of Christ through the Spirit. Paul expressed this notion centuries ago in his letter to the Colossians. Though he hadn't personally founded their church, he cared deeply for them and their faith. And even though Paul couldn't be with them in person, he reminded them that he was "present with [them] in spirit" (Colossians 2:5).

We can't always be with those we love for financial, health, or other practical reasons, and technology can help fill that gap. Yet any form of virtual connection pales in comparison to the "togetherness" we can experience as fellow members of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). In such moments, we can, like Paul, rejoice in one another's firmness of faith and, through prayer,

encourage each other to fully “know the mystery of God, namely, Christ” (Colossians 2:2).

By: **Kirsten Holmberg**

Reflect & Pray

How have you experienced a sense of connection with other members of the body of Christ? Who needs your prayers of encouragement today?

Jesus, thank You for being with me even when no other person can be physically present. Thank You for the connection You give me to others through the Holy Spirit.

Loving Correction

Whoever heeds life-giving correction will be at home among the wise.

Proverbs 15:31

Luke 10:38–42

For more than fifty years, my dad strove for excellence in his editing. His passion wasn't to just look for mistakes but also to make the copy better in terms of clarity, logic, flow, and grammar. Dad used a green pen for his corrections, rather than a red one. A green pen he felt was “friendlier,” while slashes of red might be jarring to a novice or less confident writer. His objective was to gently point out a better way.

When Jesus corrected people, He did so in love. In some circumstances—such as when He was confronted with the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (Matthew 23)—He rebuked them harshly, yet still for their benefit. But in the case of his friend Martha, a gentle correction was all that was needed (Luke 10:38–42). While the Pharisees responded poorly to His rebuke, Martha remained one of His dearest friends (John 11:5).

Correction can be uncomfortable and few of us like it. Sometimes, because of our pride, it's hard to receive it graciously. The book of Proverbs talks much about wisdom and indicates that “heeding correction” is a sign of wisdom and understanding (15:31–32).

God's loving correction helps us to adjust our direction and to follow Him more closely. Those who refuse it are sternly warned (v. 10), but those who respond to

it through the power of the Holy Spirit will gain wisdom and understanding (vv. 31–32).

By: **Cindy Hess Kasper**

Reflect & Pray

How do you usually respond to loving correction from your heavenly Father?

What correction have you received from someone that's made a significant difference in your life?

Father, help me learn to graciously accept Your loving correction so I can grow in wisdom and understanding.

Beyond the Neighborhood

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Mark 12:31

Luke 10:25–37

In the summer of 2017, Hurricane Harvey brought devastating losses of life and property to the Gulf Coast of the US. Many people provided food, water, clothing, and shelter for those in immediate need.

The owner of a piano store in Maryland felt prompted to do something more. He considered how music could bring a special kind of healing and sense of normalcy to people who had lost everything. So he and his staff began to refurbish pre-owned pianos and to make inquiries to see where the need was the greatest. That spring, Dean Kramer and his wife, Lois, began the long trek to Houston, Texas, driving a truck filled with free pianos to give to grateful families, churches, and schools in the ravaged area.

We sometimes assume the word *neighbor* means someone who lives nearby or at least is someone we know. But in Luke 10, Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan to teach that our love for our neighbors shouldn't have barriers. The man from Samaria freely gave to a wounded stranger, even though the man was a Jew, part of a people group at odds with the Samaritans (vv. 25–37).

When Dean Kramer was asked why he gave away all those pianos, he explained simply: "We're told to love our neighbors." And it was Jesus who said, "There is no commandment greater" (Mark 12:31) than to love God and our neighbor.

By: Cindy Hess Kasper

Reflect & Pray

In what way are you limiting your understanding of the word *neighbor*? How might God be urging you to expand the borders of your “neighborhood”?

Father, help me to look beyond borders and barriers, to see everyone as my neighbor, and to love in generous ways as You have taught me.

Connect 7 Devotions

For the Week of
July 18-22

	July 24 (Prop. 12)	Seventh S. a. Pentecost	Gen. 18:(17-19) 20-33	Psalm 138	Col. 2:6-15 (16-19)	Luke 11:1-13
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Theme: Teach Us to Pray – Luke 11:1-13

11 One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “**Lord, teach us to pray**, just as John taught his disciples.”

² He said to them, “When you pray, say:

“Father,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.

And lead us not into temptation.”

⁵ Then Jesus said to them, “Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.’ ⁷ And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

⁹ “So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

¹¹ “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹² Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

Confident Prayer

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead?

Luke 11:11

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Luke 11:5–13

Having tried for years to have a child, Richard and Susan were elated when Susan became pregnant. Her health problems, however, posed a risk to the baby, and so Richard lay awake each night praying for his wife and child. One night, Richard sensed he didn't need to pray so hard, that God had promised to take care of things. But a week later Susan miscarried. Richard was devastated. He wondered, *Had they lost the baby because he hadn't prayed hard enough?*

On first reading, we might think today's parable suggests so. In the story, a neighbor (sometimes thought to represent God) only gets out of bed to help the friend because of the friend's annoying persistence (Luke 11:5–8). Read this way, the parable suggests that God will give us what we need only if we badger Him. And if we *don't* pray hard enough, maybe God won't help us.

But biblical commentators like Klyne Snodgrass believe this misunderstands the parable—its real point being that if neighbors might help us for selfish reasons, how much *more* will our *unselfish* Father. We can therefore ask confidently (vv. 9–10), knowing that God is greater than flawed human beings (vv. 11–13). He isn't the neighbor in the parable, but the opposite of him.

“I don't know why you lost your baby,” I told Richard, “but I know it wasn't because you didn't pray ‘hard’ enough. God isn't like that.” By: **Sheridan Voysey**

Reflect & Pray

If the neighbor in the parable represents God, what does it suggest God is like?
If verses 11–13 clarify the parable, what then is God like?

Father, today I bring You my needs and the needs of others, confident that You'll hear and answer, and grateful that it's Your goodness and not my words that count.

It's Up to God

Your will be done.

Matthew 6:10

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Matthew 6:5–15

Nate and Sherilyn enjoyed their stop at an *omakase* restaurant while visiting New York City. *Omakase* is a Japanese word that translates, “I will leave it up to you,” which means customers at such restaurants let the chef choose their meal. Even though it was their first time to try this type of cuisine and it sounded risky, they loved the food the chef chose and prepared for them.

That idea could carry over to our attitude toward God with our prayer requests: “I will leave it up to You.” The disciples saw that Jesus “often withdrew to lonely places” to pray (Luke 5:16), so they asked Him one day to teach them how to pray. He told them to ask for their daily needs, forgiveness, and the way out of temptation. Part of His response also suggested an attitude of surrender: “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

We can pour out our needs to God because He wants to hear what's on our hearts—and He delights to give. But being human and finite, we don't always know what's best, so it only makes sense to ask with a humble spirit, in submission to Him. We can leave the answer to Him, confident that He's trustworthy and will choose to prepare what's good for us.

By: Anne Cetas

Reflect & Pray

What do you want to share with God right now? What would it look like if you totally surrendered it to Him?

Thank You, God, for carrying me and my needs close to Your heart. I surrender my life and those I love to Your care.

Our Father

This, then, is how you should pray: “Our Father . . .”
Matthew 6:9

Matthew 6:5–13

Most mornings I recite the Lord’s Prayer. I’m not worth much for the new day until I’ve grounded myself in those words. Recently I’d said only the first two words—“Our Father”—when my phone rang. It startled me as it was 5:43 a.m. Guess who? The phone display read “Dad.” Before I had a chance to answer, the call quickly ended. I guessed my dad had called by mistake. Sure enough, he had. Random coincidence? Maybe, but I believe we live in a world awash in the mercy of God. That particular day I needed that reassurance of our Father’s presence.

Think about that for a minute. Of all the ways Jesus could have taught His disciples to begin their prayers, He chose those two words—“Our Father” (Matthew 6:9) as the starting point. Random? No, Jesus was never less than intentional with His words. We all have different relationships with our earthly fathers—some good, some far less than that. However, praying in the way we should is not addressing “my” father or “your” father, but “our” Father, the One who sees us and hears us, and who knows what we need before we even ask Him (v. 8).

What an amazing reassurance, especially on those days when we might feel forgotten, alone, abandoned, or simply just not worth much. Remember,

regardless of where we are and what time of day or night it might be, our Father in heaven is always near.

By: John Blase

Reflect & Pray

How can you make the Lord's Prayer a part of your prayer life? What feelings do those two words—"Our Father"—stir in you?

Father, thank You for Your promise to hear me when I pray, regardless of where I may be.

Prayer Eggs

Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.

Habakkuk 2:3

Habakkuk 2:1–3

Just outside my kitchen window, a robin built her nest under the eaves of our patio roof. I loved watching her tuck grasses into a safe spot and then hunker down to incubate the eggs. Each morning I checked her progress; but each morning, there was nothing. Robin eggs take two weeks to hatch.

Such impatience isn't new for me. I've always strained against the work of waiting, especially in prayer. My husband and I waited nearly five years to adopt our first child. Decades ago, author Catherine Marshall wrote, "Prayers, like eggs, don't hatch as soon as we lay them."

The prophet Habakkuk wrestled with waiting in prayer. Frustrated at God's silence with Babylon's brutal mistreatment of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, Habakkuk commits to "stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts," to "look to see what he will say to me" (Habakkuk 2:1). God replies that Habakkuk is to wait for the "appointed time" (v. 3) and directs Habakkuk to "write down the revelation" so the word can be spread as soon as it's given (v. 2).

What God doesn't mention is that the "appointed time" when Babylon falls is six decades away, creating a long gap between promise and fulfillment. Like eggs,

prayers often don't hatch immediately but rather incubate in God's overarching purposes for our world and our lives.

By: **Elisa Morgan**

Reflect & Pray

How difficult do you find it to wait while God works? While you wait, how can you obey God in what He has already given you to do?

Dear God, help me to trust You to work while I'm waiting.

The Privilege of Prayer

Give my son Solomon the wholehearted devotion to keep your commands, statutes and decrees.

1 Chronicles 29:19

Today's Scripture & Insight:

1 Chronicles 29:11–19

Country artist Chris Stapleton's deeply personal song, "Daddy Doesn't Pray Anymore," was inspired by his own father's prayers for him. The poignant lyrics reveal the reason his father's prayers ended: not disillusionment or weariness, but his own death. Stapleton imagines that now, instead of speaking with Jesus in prayer, his dad is walking and talking face-to-face with Jesus.

Stapleton's recollection of his father's prayers for him brings to mind a biblical father's prayer for his son. As King David's life ebbed away, he made preparations for his son Solomon to take over as the next king of Israel.

After assembling the nation together to anoint Solomon, David led the people in prayer, as he'd done many times before. As David recounted God's faithfulness to Israel, he prayed for the people to remain loyal to Him. Then he included a personal prayer specifically for his son, asking God to "give my son Solomon the wholehearted devotion to keep your commands, statutes and decrees" (1 Chronicles 29:19).

We too have the remarkable privilege to faithfully pray for the people God has placed in our lives. Our example of faithfulness can make an indelible impact that will remain even after we're gone. Just as God continued to work out the answers to David's

prayers for Solomon and Israel after he was gone, so too the impact of our prayers
outlives us. By: Lisa M. Samra

Reflect & Pray

How have someone's prayers made a significant impact on your life? How
might you encourage others with your prayers?

*Heavenly Father, I bring my loved ones before You and ask that You would work
out Your plans in their lives.*

Connect 7 Devotions

For the Week of
July 14-29

	July 31 (Prop. 13)	Eighth S. a. Pentecost	Eccl. 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-26	Psalms 100	Col. 3:1-11	Luke 12:13-21
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Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-26

² "Meaningless! Meaningless!"
says the Teacher.

"Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless."

¹² I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³ I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! ¹⁴ I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

¹⁸ I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. ²⁰ So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. ²¹ For a person may labor

with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. ²² What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? ²³ All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.

²⁴ A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? ²⁶ To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Do Whatever

For without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

Ecclesiastes 2:25

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Ecclesiastes 2:17–25

In a recent film, a self-proclaimed “genius” rants to the camera about the world’s “horror, corruption, ignorance, and poverty,” declaring life to be godless and absurd. While such thinking isn’t unusual in many modern film scripts, what’s interesting is where it leads. In the end, the lead character turns to the audience and implores us to do whatever it takes to find a little happiness. For him, this includes leaving traditional morality behind.

But will “do whatever” work? Facing his own despair at life’s horrors, the Old Testament writer of Ecclesiastes gave it a try long ago, searching for happiness through pleasure (Ecclesiastes 2:1, 10), grand work projects (vv. 4–6), riches (vv. 7–9), and philosophical inquiry (vv. 12–16). And his assessment? “All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (v. 17). None of these things is immune to death, disaster, or injustice (5:13–17).

Only one thing brings the writer of Ecclesiastes back from despair. Despite life’s trials, we can find fulfillment when God is part of our living and working: “for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?” (2:25). Life will at times feel meaningless, but

“remember your Creator” (12:1). Don’t exhaust yourself trying to figure life out, but “fear God and keep his commandments” (v. 13).

Without God as our center, life’s pleasures and sorrows lead only to disillusionment.

By: **Sheridan Voysey**

Reflect & Pray

How much do you seek happiness through things that won’t last? Since the writer of Ecclesiastes didn’t know the hope of resurrection, how would you consider his search in light of Romans 8:11, 18–25?

God, today I place You anew at the center of my living, working, joys, and disappointments, for without You nothing will satisfy or make sense.

The Reason to Rest

What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun?

Ecclesiastes 2:22

Ecclesiastes 2:17–26

If you want to live longer, take a vacation! Forty years after a study of middle-aged, male executives who each had a risk of heart disease, researchers in Helsinki, Finland, followed up with their study participants. The scientists discovered something they hadn’t been looking for in their original findings: the death rate was lower among those who had taken time off for vacations.

Work is a necessary part of life—a part God appointed to us even before our relationship with Him was fractured in Genesis 3. Solomon wrote of the seeming meaninglessness of work experienced by those not working for God’s honor—recognizing its “anxious striving” and “grief and pain” (Ecclesiastes 2:22–23). Even when they’re not actively working, he says their “minds do not rest” because they’re thinking about what still needs to be done (v. 23).

We too might at times feel like we’re “chasing after the wind” (v. 17) and grow frustrated by our inability to “finish” our work. But when we remember that God is part of our labor—our purpose—we can both work hard *and* take time to rest. We can trust Him to be our Provider, for He’s the giver of all things. Solomon

acknowledges that “without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?” (v. 25). Perhaps by reminding ourselves of that truth, we can work diligently for Him (Colossians 3:23) and also allow ourselves times of rest. By: **Kirsten Holmberg**

Reflect & Pray

How can you invite God into your labors? How might you allow Him to be your satisfaction even when your work isn't “finished”?

God, You bring meaning and purpose to all my labors.

Leave a Little Behind

Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you.

Leviticus 23:22

Leviticus 23:15–22

Pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters, and occasionally a half-dollar. That's what you'd find on the nightstand beside his bed. He'd empty his pockets each evening and leave the contents there, for he knew eventually they'd come to visit—*they* being his grandchildren. Over the years the kids learned to visit his nightstand as soon as they arrived. He could have put all that spare change in a coin bank or even stored it away in a savings account. But he didn't. He delighted in leaving it there for the little ones, the precious guests in his home.

A similar mindset is what's expressed in Leviticus 23 when it comes to bringing in the harvest from the land. God, via Moses, told the people something quite counterintuitive: not to “reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest” (v. 22). Essentially, He said, “Leave a little behind.” This instruction reminded the people that God was behind the harvest in the first place, and that He used His people to provide for those of little account (the strangers in the land).

Such thinking is definitely not the norm in our world. But it's exactly the kind of mindset that will characterize the grateful sons and daughters of God. He delights in a generous heart. And that often comes through you and me.

By: **John Blase**

Reflect & Pray

What's your first reaction to the thought of "leaving a little behind"? What's one way you could practice such thankful generosity toward the poor or the strangers in your life?

Loving God, thank You for Your provision in my life. Give me eyes to see ways in which I can share with others, especially those poor and in need.

Finding Joy in the Meaningless

When I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

[Ecclesiastes 2:11](#)

Ecclesiastes 2:1–11

In 2010, James Ward, the creator of the blog "I Like Boring Things," launched a conference called the "Boring Conference." It's a one-day celebration of the mundane, the ordinary, and the overlooked. In the past, speakers have addressed seemingly meaningless topics like sneezing, sounds that vending machines make, and inkjet printers of 1999. Ward knows the topics may be boring, but the speakers can take a mundane subject and make it interesting, meaningful, and even joyful.

Several millennia ago, Solomon, the wisest of kings, launched his own search for joy in the meaningless and mundane. He pursued work, bought flocks, built wealth, acquired singers, and constructed buildings ([Ecclesiastes 2:4–9](#)). Some of these pursuits were honorable and some were not. Ultimately, in his pursuit of meaning, the king found nothing but boredom (v. 11). Solomon maintained a worldview that didn't press beyond the limits of human experience to include God. Ultimately, however, he realized that he'd find joy in the mundane only when he remembered and worshiped God (12:1–7).

When we find ourselves in the whirlwind of tedium, let's launch our own daily mini-conference, as we "remember [our] Creator" (v. 1)—the God who fills the mundane with meaning. As we remember and worship Him, we'll find wonder in the ordinary, gratitude in the mundane, and joy in the seemingly meaningless things of life.

By: **Marvin Williams**

Reflect & Pray

Why is it so hard to find meaning in things that can never satisfy? How do you need to reprioritize your commitment to and worship of God so you can find your meaning in Him?

God, take the unremarkable moments of my life and infuse them with Your joy and wonder.

Who Am I Working For?

"For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?"

Ecclesiastes 4:8

Today's Scripture & Insight:

Ecclesiastes 4:4-16

Henry worked 70 hours a week. He loved his job and brought home a sizeable paycheck to provide good things for his family. He always had plans to slow down but he never did. One evening he came home with great news—he had been promoted to the highest position in his company. But no one was home. Over the years, his children had grown up and moved out, his wife had found a career of her own, and now the house was empty. There was no one to share the good news with.

Solomon talked about the need to keep a balance in life with our work. He wrote, "Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves" (Eccl. 4:5). We don't want to go to the extreme of being lazy, but neither do we want to fall into the trap of being a workaholic. "Better one handful with tranquillity than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind" (v. 6). In other words, it is better to have less and enjoy it

more. Sacrificing relationships at the altar of success is unwise. Achievement is fleeting, while relationships are what make our life meaningful, rewarding, and enjoyable (vv. 7-12).

We can learn to work to live and not live to work by choosing to apportion our time wisely. The Lord can give us this wisdom as we seek Him and trust Him to be our Provider.

By: **Poh Fang Chia**

Reflect & Pray

Lord, show me if my priorities are skewed and where I need to make changes.

Thank You for the gift of family and friends.

To spend time wisely, invest it in eternity.