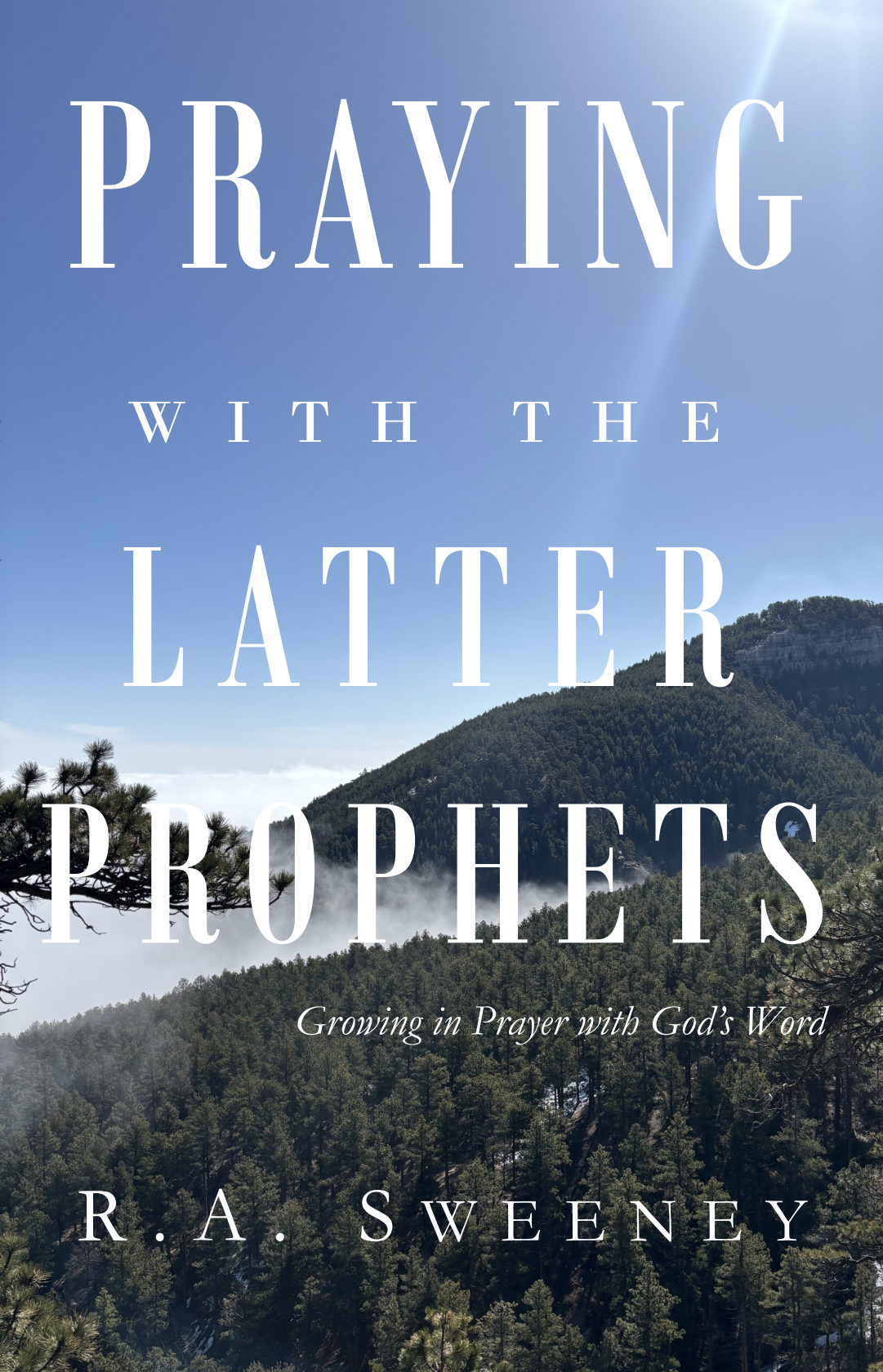




PRAYING WITH THE LATTER PROPHETS

Growing in Prayer with God's Word

R . A . S W E E N E Y

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Growing in Prayer with God's Word

R. A. SWEENEY



Davek Le'lohim
Books

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NOTE ON BOOK ORDERING

Many readers may be wondering, as they pick up this book, what in the world are the “latter prophets.” In what I was taught to call the “Protestant Ordering” of the Bible, the Old Testament is broken down into the *Torah* (or usually called the *Pentateuch*), the history books, the writings, and then the prophets. This is a perfectly fine way of reading, and I think, in many ways, it is a better way to read these books than I am following.

I follow the *Tanakh* ordering of the Scriptures. This is the way the Jews in Jesus’s time would have read them, and there is actually a lot of evidence in the way Jesus spoke to suggest He read the Old Testament in *Tanakh* ordering as well. If I want to understand the Scriptures the way that He understands them, I want to look at them the way He does. And I do think ordering and grouping do shape the way we read these texts. Regardless of how Jesus read these texts, I do think the organization of the *Tanakh* is a better fit for the way we are examining prayers.

Tanakh is actually an acronym—TNK—with vowels added. The TNK stands for *Torah*, which means “wisdom-teaching” or “instruction,” *Nevi’im*, which means “prophets,” and *Ketuvim*, which means “writings.” In this ordering, the *Torah* and the Pentateuch are identical, but the historical books are distributed between the prophets and the writings. Even then, some of what the Protestant

Order would consider to be prophetic books are also in the writings.

The *Nevi'im*, or prophets, are comprised of the former prophets—Joshua, Judges, Samuel (1 and 2), and Kings (1 and 2)—and the latter prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Scroll of the Twelve. (All twelve minor prophets were considered one text.) In this book, we look at the second group of prophets, the Latter Prophets. We examined the former prophets in the previous book.

INTRODUCTION

Now, we finally get into what we tend to think of as prophets. Certainly, the books of the Former Prophets have prophets in them, and their text is considered prophetic by the Hebrew people, but they don't get into the real challenging and strange prophetic speech that we see here.

I will warn you—if you are coming to this expecting an in-depth analysis of all the prophetic speech, end times analysis, or anything like that, you have the wrong book. This series is designed to look at how the Bible presents prayer and offer commentary on the prayers themselves in order to shape how we pray.

That said, these sections are like no other. Not even with Moses or Abraham did we see the types of back-and-forth dialogue that we see here. The prophets were called to speak God's words to the people, but we find in these prayers that they were often just as lost. These were not the cream of the crop righteous and faithful. The prophets were just ordinary guys whom God used in surprising ways. You can see God working on their own hearts as much as on the hearts of the people they were supposed to be reaching.

And, somehow, the wrestling of the prophets and their words to the peoples have an uncanny way of speaking across centuries into our own lives. Their struggles look like our struggles. Their messages cut us to

the quick. The rebukes and corrections they receive hit us exactly where we need to be struck. Truly, these groups of literary works speak into our prayer lives in ways like nothing I have experienced.

I will also warn you—these passages are more difficult as well. There are all kinds of literary techniques used in these writings. There is hyperbole. There is word play. There is poetic license. There is a tremendous amount of historical background. We will be looking at Hebrew language and history lessons as well as making connections between prophetic works and also to non-prophetic works. All of the Bible links together through these texts. Either supplying the background or drawing future references, it all comes back to these.

As always, I have thoroughly enjoyed putting this together, and I pray that you will too. I have grown tremendously through putting this together, and I hope you will as well. In all of it, I pray that you would grow in your practice of prayer and that our God would be glorified.

*Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of all creation,
Who brings into being all things by His Word!*

~ A Traditional Ancient Jewish Prayer of Praise for the
God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob¹

ISAIAH

*Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,
And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him,
The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The spirit of counsel and strength,
The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
And He will delight in the fear of the LORD.*

~ Isaiah 11:1-3

Isaiah 2

Isaiah chapter 2 is a complicated interchange between God's words to His people and Isaiah's words to God. In the middle of God's words about the restoration and renewal that He was planning, there is a subtle shift in the language. This shift demonstrates that Isaiah had ceased prophesying and started responding. God wanted to bring peace and prosperity to Israel, and Isaiah couldn't wrap his mind around it. He pointed out all of Israel's failures and imperfections and asked God not to *forgive* them.

This can spur on ideas of certain people being beyond forgiveness. But the Hebrew word used here can also mean "lift up" or "exalt." His prayer was that God would not bring the people that behave in sinful ways into prominence or favor among the culture. Isaiah wasn't asking for God to go against His character that delights in forgiveness. He was asking God to not include the sins of Israel in His *new creation*.

God continued to explain how the interchange between new creation and those who delight in rebellion was going to work. The veil would be removed from everyone's eyes, and people would flock to God or flee from Him. Isaiah responded by marveling at God's patience and diligence in being righteous to the undeserving.

Isaiah approached God concerning what did not seem like righteousness. He questioned in his first prayer and marveled in his second prayer. When we approach

God with questions, we can know that His righteousness and patience can withstand the questions. When we want to understand, we can trust that He delights in revealing Himself. When we seek to know Him, we can have certainty that His character will lead to marveling.

*Now it will come about that
In the last days
The mountain of the house of the LORD
Will be established as the chief of the mountains,
And will be raised above the hills;
And all the nations will stream to it.
And many peoples will come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
To the house of the God of Jacob;
That He may teach us concerning His ways
And that we may walk in His paths.”
For the law will go forth from Zion
And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
And He will judge between the nations,
And will render decisions for many peoples.*

~ Isaiah 2:2-4



Isaiah 6:5

Isaiah, in a vision, found himself in the presence of God in His throne room. He looked upon God and panicked. He claimed to be *undone, unmade, shattered, or broken*. He claimed that he was being dissociated or disintegrated. He knew that he could not come, as he was, into God's presence and remain even close to what he was before that point. His assumption was that he was rotten to the core and nothing could survive the purifying fire of God's righteousness. The poetry of his prayer is beautiful as well.

I wonder how much we relate to this. Do you or I have that amount of reverence for God? Are we ashamed before the eyes of God? Is there guilt knowing we stand before the One whose eye can pierce between joints and bones and between will and life?

He has reclaimed His throne and is establishing His reign across all creation. We are standing in His presence. We are before His face in our sin. Do we have the humility of Isaiah here? Granted, we can have confidence before Him in the gifted righteousness we receive from Jesus, but our continual sin should create this level of shame and fear that Isaiah had. When we come to God in prayer, are we seeking after this type of undone that Isaiah experienced to remove sin as a barrier between us and the One we seek?

Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?”

Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

~ John 3:3–8

Isaiah 6:8–11

I love Isaiah's response to God in the next part of Isaiah 6. God asked a question about who would go do something for Him. That is about the level of detail recorded in the passage. God simply asked, "Who will go do something for me?" (verse 8 paraphrased). Isaiah didn't ask follow-up questions. He didn't have a skeptical attitude. God wanted something done, and Isaiah's hand shot up in the air to volunteer.

I was reminded about the times people ask for favors but expect you to agree before you know what the favor is. Usually, it is unwise to accept without getting the details first. But that wasn't Isaiah's response. If God had a plan, he wanted in. He knew enough about God to know that it didn't matter what God wanted; it would be good. After he agreed, he asked the follow-up questions and details. That part seems like he was only clarifying his mission to ensure he did it correctly. But whether or not he wanted to participate was never in question.

How humbling to think how much I fail to live up to that measure. When we seek God in prayer, are we excited to be a part of His purposes? Are we asking to serve God? Are we seeking ways to be included in what He is doing? Are we asking for the faith to trust the plan?

Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God."

~ John 6:68–69

Isaiah 7:12

When God spoke to Ahaz, He offered Ahaz a sign to prove His trustworthiness. Ahaz refused to ask, saying that it would be wrong to ask for a sign from God. This seems like the right response because the Scriptures tell us in multiple places not to ask for signs and that demanding signs is a wickedness. But God rebuked Ahaz for not obeying.

My mind went to 1 John 4, that instructs us not to believe any spirit that speaks to us. But we are instructed to test the spirits to ensure they agree with God. How would Isaiah's instruction to Ahaz from God measure up to John's test? Seemingly, this would be a spirit to reject because it doesn't measure up. But apparently it wasn't. Do we know the sound of God's voice well enough to distinguish in a moment like this?

If you remember your history, Ahaz was not a righteous man or a follower of God. From the details in Kings and Chronicles, we know that Ahaz worshiped the host of the heavens and even sacrificed his children to his gods. One could assume that Ahaz made offerings, maybe even his children, in order to try to deliver Jerusalem from Aram. God sent Isaiah to Ahaz to try to turn him back to worshiping God. He even offered to allow Ahaz to test Him. When Ahaz was desperate, God humbled Himself to try to reach Ahaz where he was. God was that diligent to rescue His chosen king.

The irony is that Ahaz refused God's attempt to

draw him into relationship. He claimed it wouldn't be right. Ahaz refused to honor God because he said it would be dishonoring to God.

This is the kind of passage where it is easy to miss the forest for the trees. Ahaz certainly missed what God was doing. How often do we miss what God is doing because we are too focused on the wrong things? When we pray, are we asking for clarity? Are we asking God to help us understand? Are we asking Him to focus our minds and our hearts on what He is trying to do? Are we quieting our minds to hear what He is saying?

Then the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, "Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven."

But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!" Then he said, "Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well?"

~ Isaiah 7:10-13

Isaiah 12

Isaiah gives us a perfect case study in prayer because it is God's own words about prayer. God spoke through Isaiah the words people would pray when God's Messiah began to rule, when the faithful of God's people were united to each other and to Him. This is what prayer should look like for Christians. This is the relationship followers of the Christ are invited to experience in the present world. This prayer should be our prayer.

The prayer follows a beautiful sequence. The prayer begins with thanksgiving in response to God's mercy, generosity, loyalty, and love. Reflecting on the salvation that God has achieved in the life of the person praying, this person moves on to his or her situation. The believer chooses, based on his or her experience of the goodness of God, to trust in Him rather than fear. The believer closes in another bout of rejoicing in God.

Thanksgiving, then reflection on salvation, then explaining current circumstances, then choosing to trust, then rejoicing in God.

The cool thing with this prayer is that it has two parts. The first part is the entreaty, and the second is the response. After the rejoicing and the petition, the second part comes: the response. After asking, the believer goes on to rejoice in God and proclaim His goodness. True worship of God always leads to praise, and true praise always leads to worship.

How do your prayers measure up?

It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples."

And He said to them, "When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be Your name.

Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,

For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

And lead us not into temptation."

~ Luke 11:1—4

Isaiah 25:1–5

Isaiah 24 and 25 is another picture of the coming *Day of the LORD*. God's work will be so dramatic and new that it defies words. Instead, God gave multiple pictures to view it from multiple angles to try to approximate it for our simple minds.

The cool thing with this prayer is the chiastic arrangement. All of chapter 24 is the depiction of the justice God would bring on the Day of the LORD. It is all about reversing the fortunes of the wicked and destroying everything that stands opposed to God's purposes for good. Chapter 25 is mostly a description of God's rescue of His people and the lavish generosity He has planned for them.

The middle portion, the transition, is this small prayer. It is like Isaiah laid out the two sides of the Day of the LORD. The destruction of the wickedness in creation and the exaltation of righteousness are presented as the two options. The prayer, which follows the destruction of wickedness and precedes the exaltation of righteousness, is all about rejoicing that God has removed the wickedness of the world. It is full of allusions to the early chapters of Genesis. But the essence of the prayer is praising God because He had removed all the wicked things that are opposed to His purposes.

This prayer is the hope of the righteous. It is the hope that wickedness will be removed. Too often we cling to the wrong things. We want God but also want sin. We

want God to forgive us but also allow us to continue in sin. It is only in this hope—the hope that wickedness will be removed, not the hope that wickedness will be permitted—that turns our experience of the Day of the LORD from the one experience to the other.

Are our prayers hoping this hope? Are we seeking, in our prayers, to experience this reality without the sins of this world? This prayer is an invitation to look at our own hearts and see the truth of our beliefs and convictions.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

~ Romans 1:18–23



Isaiah 26

Imagine paradise. Imagine a reality in which your desires are fulfilled. Not necessarily an existence where you have all that you want, but where you are truly satisfied. Perfected. Whole. Resolved. You have all your desires to the proper amount and in the ways you are designed to enjoy them.

Imagine everything negative is removed. Your hurts, ailments, and infirmities gone. The only trace of them are the scars to remind you they are gone. Imagine your brokenness and sin healed. Imagine all the wickedness around you disappeared and gone forever.

Joy inexpressible. Peace to the fullest. Complete protection from anything negative.

That is the setting for the song and prayer in Isaiah 26. This is the rejoicing God's people were predicted to have. But this is no longer some distant hope in the future. This is the reality we are invited to live in as we follow our King. He lives in this reality and invites us to join Him in it.

This song is our song. It is the song of new creation, of which we are the firstfruits. I would encourage you to meditate on this prayer. Meditate on the response of the person God has re-created into His image.

*Indeed, while following the way of Your judgments, O
LORD,
We have waited for You eagerly;
Your name, even Your memory, is the desire of our souls.
At night my soul longs for You,
Indeed, my spirit within me seeks You diligently;
For when the earth experiences Your judgments
The inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.*
~ Isaiah 26:8–9

Isaiah 33:2–4

Many of the prayers sprinkled throughout the prophetic speeches seem to be sidebars as the prophet was speaking. Isaiah 33:2–4 seems to be one of these occasions. Isaiah had been pronouncing the coming of God’s judgment. A righteous King was coming to bring justice to all of creation for all corruption and wickedness.

Any follower of God who humbly allows the Spirit to speak into his or her life would start to feel uncomfortable after speaking something like Isaiah 32. Isaiah 33 begins by continuing this theme. Isaiah proclaimed that the wickedness of the wicked will be turned back on their own heads. Calamity would be the recompense for every sin. It would be devastating. By the second verse of the chapter, Isaiah seemingly could not take it anymore. He asked God to be merciful to the sinners who put their hope in Him.

As followers of Jesus, our mission is similar to Isaiah’s. We are to be people of prayer. We are to be people who speak the truth of God. We are to be people who bring the reality of God’s character and purposes to the ends of the earth. If that doesn’t cause us to dwell on and respond to God’s mercy and generosity, then what does that say about us?

*For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice,
And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.*

~ Hosea 6:6

Isaiah 37:3–20

Isaiah 37:3–4 is a recounting of Hezekiah’s prayer from 2 Kings 19. The language is identical. Likely, the author of Kings copied the language from Isaiah, just as he borrowed from the book of the Kings of Judah and Israel.

Hezekiah’s prayer at the temple, recorded in verses 14–20, is similar to the prayer recorded in 2 Kings 19, but it isn’t identical. Most scholars agree that, in the original Hebrew, Isaiah is probably the most beautiful poetry recorded in the Scriptures. It is little wonder, then, that the recording of this prayer in Isaiah is much more poetic and beautiful than the version in Kings. 2 Kings 19 records the urgency of the prayer by shortening the words, while Isaiah demonstrates the respect and reverence Hezekiah had for God.

This made me reflect on the different ways we pray. There are the rushed and hurried prayers, those that bypass all manners and respect. There are the scheduled or scripted prayers, those like the Lord’s Prayer or something similar. There are the prayers for personal quiet time, those where we aren’t rushed and have open dialogue with God. All are important. All are beautiful. All grow the relationship in important ways.

As you reflect on your own prayer life, do you engage in different types of prayer? Do you feel comfortable offering rushed prayers without formality? Do you take the time to worship and praise when you

have the time? Just like a relationship with a spouse or loved one, different types of communication are important for different circumstances.

Hezekiah prayed to the LORD saying, “O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, who is enthroned above the cherubim, You are the God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Incline Your ear, O LORD, and hear; open Your eyes, O LORD, and see; and listen to all the words of Sennacherib, who sent them to reproach the living God.”

~ Isaiah 37:15–17



Isaiah 38

The story of Hezekiah falling ill and God's healing in the book of Isaiah is, again, similar to the story as recorded in 2 Kings. The prayer itself is not materially different, but Isaiah's account adds a poem that Hezekiah wrote about the event. The poem is an outpouring of Hezekiah's heart and an explanation of his prayer.

The poem is difficult. Hezekiah seems to have been wrestling through his emotions. He recognized that God was the One bringing him to the point of death. Yet, he also knew God was the One that sustained his life. Hezekiah concluded by reflecting on the idea that worship of God only comes from the living. His request was that God would sustain his life so that he could continue to worship God.

What I realized as I read this passage was that Hezekiah was appealing to God's passion for community. God delights in being in relationship with others. He loves to have others to share His love with. Hezekiah delighted in that relationship as well. His poem reflected that the motivation for his prayer was to continue the relationship. Hezekiah prayed that he would remain alive so that he might continue to enjoy God and that God might continue to have delight in loving him.

What better motivation for prayer can there be? What more could we ask for? This is also the foundation of all prayer: relationship with God. We can offer worship or ask for deliverance, but Hezekiah only asked that his

relationship with God would continue. What do you seek in prayer?

*Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am pining away;
Heal me, O LORD, for my bones are dismayed.
And my soul is greatly dismayed;
But You, O LORD—how long?*

*Return, O LORD, rescue my soul;
Save me because of Your lovingkindness.
For there is no mention of You in death;
In Sheol who will give You thanks?*

~ Psalm 6:2–5



Isaiah 44:17

I think this little prayer in the middle of Isaiah is important. It comes right after a bunch of discussion about the futility of idols, and it is a simple little prayer. The person praying in this passage asks for his god to deliver him. The problem is that his god is not *the* God. The person praying did not pray through God's intermediary but through a piece of wood, stone, or metal. He didn't seek after the God who loves him, but a lesser god; one who cannot save.

Prayer is a natural reaction. We tend to try to handle things on our own, but when we come to the end of ourselves we instinctively turn to prayer. The problem is that the god we pray to at that moment is the god we want. Do we want a god who allows us to act like we always do? Do we want a god who will allow us to be harsh or unkind? Do we want a god who allows us to be critical and judgmental? Or do we want a God who expects us to be forgiving, sacrificial, and loving? The god we pray to is the god we seek, and whatever we seek from our god is what they will expect of us. Violent gods demand violence. Lewd gods demand immorality. The loving God demands loving behavior. This person had made an idol because he didn't want a god who would expect anything from him. In response, when he prayed to his god, that god didn't do anything either.

Who is your god? What kind of god are you seeking after? What do your actions reflect? What kind of

response can you hope for in your prayers based on what you are pursuing in life?

Yet you have forsaken Me and served other gods; therefore I will no longer deliver you. Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your distress.

~ Judges 10:13–14

Isaiah 45:15–17

Do you ever feel like you don't understand something about God? Or do you ever feel like you don't have a clear picture of the God you pray to?

According to Isaiah, when God sent His Savior, the nations would come to serve God's people in order to be near God. But they would come with misunderstanding and without knowledge. In Isaiah's words, they would claim that God is a god who doesn't reveal Himself and remains hidden.

The beauty that God reveals in this passage is how He would respond to the misconceptions. The nations came claiming that God is secretive, but God responded by revealing the truth the nations had hidden from themselves. God's response was to demonstrate the truth about how He had worked in creation for all eternity to make Himself known to everyone. It wasn't a rebuke. It wasn't punishment. It was truth. God would remove the wool from their eyes and allow them to respond.

He is a God who wants to be known. He makes Himself known but will not force Himself to be known. We can come to Him asking to know Him better and know that He will respond with favor. He wants us to know Him. Are we asking to know Him better?

*The heavens are telling of the glory of God;
And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.*

~ Psalm 19:1

Isaiah 51:9–11

Isaiah 51 begins by addressing a group of people who seek God and desire righteousness. God spoke to them to tell them about the coming Day of the LORD, in which all that is broken shall be made new and all that is wicked shall be removed from the earth.

Verses 9–11 give the response of the people. They asked God to rise up in power and strength. They asked Him to do a mighty work like when He killed the chaos dragon, Rahab, (figurative language describing God establishing order out of chaos) or like when He parted the Sea of Reeds so that His people could find life in the most inhospitable place you could imagine. When those who sought righteousness and unity with God prayed, they asked for God to perform a mighty work of deliverance to rescue them from the power of death and destruction. They asked God to create highways in the desolate places that led to His dwelling .

These people didn't want God to shore things up—they wanted complete renewal. They didn't want God to work in little ways—they wanted God to remake all creation. They didn't want these things—they were desperate for them.

How big and passionate are your prayers? Are they remake-all-creation-sized prayers? Are they “make Your arm stronger so it can do more” desperate prayers? That, apparently, is how those who seek God and righteousness pray, so how do we pray?

*Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD;
Awake as in the days of old, the generations of long ago.
Was it not You who cut Rahab in pieces,
Who pierced the dragon?
Was it not You who dried up the sea,
The waters of the great deep;
Who made the depths of the sea a pathway
For the redeemed to cross over?
So the ransomed of the LORD will return
And come with joyful shouting to Zion,
And everlasting joy will be on their heads.
They will obtain gladness and joy,
And sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

~ Isaiah 51:9–11



Isaiah 58

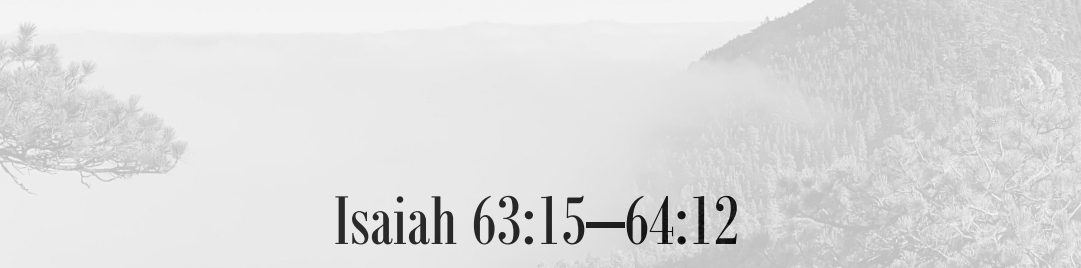
For anyone who ever wonders why their good deeds do not seem to profit, Isaiah gives us a useful test in the form of a prayer. God rebuked His people who came to Him offering their acts of piety as evidence that He should show them more favor. When the people prayed, they would ask if God did not notice their good works. The simple response they got was a question about their works and their motives. This whole chapter discusses how corrupt these people were in their motives. This chapter also demonstrates what truly pleases God.

So I ask, do you ever feel like God doesn't answer your prayers? Do you feel like God takes no notice of the good things you do or should recompense them more fairly? Ask yourself: What are your motives in doing the works? Are you really seeking goodness and righteousness in them? Or simply going through the motions? Are you trying to live according to God's will? Or are you defining your own method of serving Him regardless of what He would call you to?

*Is this not the fast which I choose,
To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free
And break every yoke?*

*Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry
And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, to cover him;
And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
Then your light will break out like the dawn,
And your recovery will speedily spring forth;
And your righteousness will go before you;
The glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.
Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
You will cry, and He will say, "Here I am."*

~ Isaiah 58:6–9



Isaiah 63:15–64:12

This last prayer from Isaiah gives us a wonderful picture of wrestling in prayer. The end of Isaiah 63 is all a critique of God. Isaiah asked why God wasn't working. He laid out the evidence. God had separated out a people for Himself and had blessed them. He had put Himself in their presence and raised up leaders who would lead them in following God. Why had God stopped blessing them? Where was His presence or His leadership? Why was God not at work?

Chapter 64 begins to show Isaiah's process of changing his mind about the reality of the situation. By laying out the claim, Isaiah began to ask why there wasn't more of God leading the people. This turned into a lament of how wicked the people had become. Slowly, it turned into a confession. The people had created their own problem because of their wickedness. God had dwelt in their midst, but they did not seek Him. He raised up leaders, but the leaders refused to shepherd the people. There was no one who sought after His presence and no one righteous to raise up as a deliverer. God couldn't act as He always had (raising up a human from among them as a deliverer) because the people had shut down those options. The prayer moved from accusation and questioning, to lament, to confession, and, finally, to humble petition.

Isaiah came to God fired up at God's unrighteousness. Only, Isaiah discovered that God was

not the unrighteous one in the dispute. But he also got to witness God's patience and to experience the influence of God's Spirit in his own prayer to bring reconciliation for an offense He had not caused. That is the love we find in prayer.

*You meet him who rejoices in doing righteousness,
Who remembers You in Your ways.
Behold, You were angry, for we sinned,
We continued in them a long time;
And shall we be saved?
For all of us have become like one who is unclean,
And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment;
And all of us wither like a leaf,
And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on Your name,
Who arouses himself to take hold of You;
For You have hidden Your face from us
And have delivered us into the power of our iniquities.*
~ Isaiah 64:5–7

JEREMIAH

“Behold, I will gather them out of all the lands to which I have driven them in My anger, in My wrath and in great indignation; and I will bring them back to this place and make them dwell in safety. They shall be My people, and I will be their God; and I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me always, for their own good and for the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me. I will rejoice over them to do them good and will faithfully plant them in this land with all My heart and with all My soul.”

For thus says the LORD, “Just as I brought all this great disaster on this people, so I am going to bring on them all the good that I am promising them.”

~ Jeremiah 32:37–42



Jeremiah 1:6

The book of Jeremiah opens with the calling of a prophet. Jeremiah's calling should be reminiscent of Moses at the burning tree on Mount Sinai. If you recall, Moses offered up five objections against being called. One of those objections was not speaking well. Jeremiah offered the same complaint, along with disqualifying himself because of his youth. Jeremiah's complaint seems to be an abridged version of Moses's complaints. God's response to Jeremiah seems to be an abridged version of God's responses to Moses.

I think the thing we are supposed to notice is how much more Jeremiah was open to God's will than Moses was. Moses wouldn't agree until God became angry. Jeremiah raised his concerns and accepted God's response.

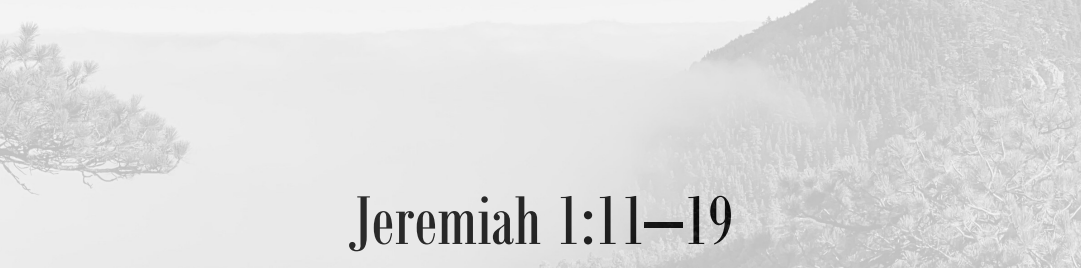
I do not think we are supposed to view this as a faithful response. The language of Jeremiah maps too closely to the rebellion of Moses for us to believe this is how we are supposed to respond. I think, instead, we are to view this as being open to God's correction and resting in the patience of God.

When you pray, do you try to poke holes in God's purposes, like Jeremiah did, or do you humbly ask for provision? I think of Jacob's confession of faith where he said, "If You will . . . then I will . . ." (Genesis 28:20–21). Not that we are bargaining, but simply we are asking God for what we need.

I don't think raising our concerns is a problem as long as we are seeking to obey. Jeremiah basically said, "God, I can't because of these reasons." But couldn't we instead pray, "God, I am willing to obey, but these are my concerns. Please meet my needs as I step out in faith?"

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top. He called the name of that place Bethel; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, and I return to my father's house in safety, then the LORD will be my God. This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

~ Genesis 28:18-22



Jeremiah 1:11–19

The first prophetic visions of Jeremiah had an audience participation element. God didn't just show Jeremiah things or tell him to say things. In these, God invited Jeremiah to participate in the prophecy.

These are kind of weird visions. I always imagine Jeremiah answering God's questions with absolutely no clue why he was seeing the almond branch or the boiling pot. But God explained the visions. Jeremiah simply needed to answer truthfully and trust it had purpose.

When we come to God in prayer, are we comfortable with getting partial answers? Are we willing to act on something we do not understand and trust that He has a plan?

Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."

~ John 20:29

Jeremiah 3:4–5

God spoke through Jeremiah the words the people of Israel had prayed to Him. The prayer makes the claim that the Israelites were being faithful to God. They asked God when they would receive mercy from God in the midst of the wickedness they had experienced.

Is this a familiar prayer? Asking God why things are going poorly? Asking God how long your suffering must continue? Asking God what He is doing since you are hoping for better circumstances? These are great prayers. We can come to Him and ask these. But we need to be ready to possibly receive an answer we do not like.

God answered these prayers through the words of Jeremiah in this passage. The people offering the prayer had not sought God. They had not submitted to God and were not walking in His ways. Here, God said this people chased after every type of wickedness they could find.

This is significant. Do we not think God will punish sin? All who do not walk according to the instruction from Moses will die. Do we not think that sin can hinder our prayers? Husbands are warned to show their wives Christ-like love so their prayers would not be hindered¹. Do we not think that the negative circumstances of our lives might be on account of unconfessed sin? Paul warned the Corinthians that their sinful observance of the Eucharist was the cause of weakness, illness, and death in their community².

This prayer should encourage us not only to come

before God in prayer with our troubles and struggles but also to look first for conviction of our sins so that we might repent and find restoration.

Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

~ Matthew 7:3–5

Jeremiah 3:22–25

This passage at the end of Jeremiah 3 seems to be one of several places where God narrated the hearts of a people group back to them through a prophet. In this prayer, God offered His people an invitation to return to communion with Him.

The people came to God in confession and lamentation. They confessed their sin and that the life God had planned for them had been withered to dust by their sin. They confessed that God was the only salvation and that everything they once pursued was a lie. But this was not the end of the outpouring of their heart. As they lamented the loss of the life of Eden, the life that had dwindled for generations, passed the point of grieving, they gave up hope. They refused to ask for deliverance. They knew that God was the only salvation there was, but they, instead, asked to lie down in death and be buried in their shame.

How do we respond? We are offered the same restoration, but are we truly willing to accept it? Certainly, we may desire to have our slates wiped clean, our debts canceled, and the punishments we have incurred voided. But are we ready to stand naked before our Creator? Are we ready to present to Him our scars and ugly parts? Are we ready to expose our rebellion to God, in full knowledge of His complete forgiveness, and allow Him to heal the rift with full view of our guilt uncovered for all to see? This is repentance. This is the prayer that leads to unity with God.

Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name. At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved.

~ Matthew 24:10-13

Jeremiah 4:10

There are several passages in Jeremiah that present plays on words but offer little explanation if you do not catch the word play. This is one of the places. Jeremiah responded to what God had revealed to him about the judgment that was going to come upon Judah. Jeremiah seems to have been surprised by this news because he claimed that God had deceived them. He said that God had been promising peace and life; when in reality, He had been planning to bring the sword of judgment against them.

The word for *deceive* in the original Hebrew is *naw'shaw*. There is a similar word, *naw'saw*, spelled identically but with a single dot difference, that means “lift up” or “exalt.” The prayer that Jeremiah offered accused God of wrong-doing, but by moving a dot ever so slightly, we find the truth. God didn’t deceive. He was going to purge the wickedness from the middle of the people. He was going to remove the rotten core of the people. He was going to remove that which stood between the people and Eden. The sword and peace were not conflicting realities. The sword was the reality that led to peace. Instead of deceiving, God was lifting up. The difference between the two is a single dot’s placement on a single letter. It is a word-play to show Jeremiah thought one thing, but God was doing something else.

Here, the misunderstanding of purpose and method led to Jeremiah missing God. Eve faced the same trouble beneath the trees of the garden. She had a slight misunderstanding of God's identity that led to exile. How are we missing God by misunderstanding Him and, consequently, finding ourselves in exile? But we can rejoice, knowing that God delights in making Himself known to those who seek Him. We need only seek, knock, and ask.

*God is not a man, that He should lie,
Nor a son of man, that He should repent;
Has He said, and will He not do it?
Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?*
~ Numbers 23:19

Jeremiah 5:3–5

Jeremiah 5 presents a parallel to Abraham as he overlooked Sodom. As we see repeatedly throughout the prophets' writings, God was sending a scouting party of spiritual beings to assess the situation on the ground. He promised to spare the entire people if even one righteous person was found. God didn't seem to think that was likely. Through his prayer, Jeremiah seemed to agree with this prognosis.

Unlike Abraham, Jeremiah did not appeal to collateral damage when interceding for the people but to their foolishness. Abraham was worried about innocent people being killed in the midst of God's justice. Jeremiah, instead, asked God to remember that the people were like foolish beasts. You might say that Jeremiah asked God to remember these people did not "know their right hand from their left."³ Whether a test of Jeremiah or the work of a man partnering with God to bring blessing to the world, Jeremiah asked God for mercy for those too foolish to obey.

I am reminded of Jesus's words on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."⁴ This is our reality. We are both the fools and the intercessors. We have the constant need to pray for the wisdom to not be like treacherous Judah and also to pray for those who are under condemnation for being too foolish to obey or repent.

Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, “O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, ‘With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth’? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’”

~ Exodus 32:11–13

Jeremiah 6:16–17

God presented a dialogue to Jeremiah. The conversation is between God and His people. It is God's appeal to them to return to Him to find blessing. He directed them to stand by the ancient roads and watch in order to see where blessing is. The idea seems to be that there would either be a group of people flocking toward the blessing for the observer to join in with, or a group of people laden with blessing for the observer to ask where they found the blessing and track it down. Perhaps both. The people didn't refuse to stand at the ancient road and look, but they refused to walk in the path. They were seeing the needy and the blessed but still refused to believe the road had blessing on it.

The second picture was a command to listen for the trumpet. The trumpet could be summoning the people for a festival or feast. Given the mention of the watchtower, though, it seems more likely this is the trumpet to announce an incoming attack, so the people could flee to safety. The people refused to even listen for the trumpet.

You can imagine the prayers of the people:

People: "God, please bless us because we are in need!"

God: "I will gladly bless you! Go walk in my Torah and you will be blessed."

People: "Well, I'm not doing that. Just bless me some other way!"

Or

People: “God, our enemies surround us and will destroy us!”

God: “Listen, I am summoning you to Me to find refuge!”

People: “Well, that’s not how I want to be rescued, so find a different way!”

It reminds me of the proverbial man on the island praying for God to rescue him, so he refuses to accept the offer of rescue from several ships. God is reaching out to bless and to rescue. His passion, desire, and delight are to rescue and to bless. The biggest obstacle is our own lack of desire to receive the blessing and rescue that He offers.

When we come to Him in prayer, are we seeking what He offers? Or are we just grasping at straws to improve our circumstances without altering our desires or behaviors?

“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,” says the LORD of hosts, “if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows. Then I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes,” says the LORD of hosts. “All the nations will call you blessed, for you shall be a delightful land,” says the LORD of hosts.

~ Malachi 3:10–12



Jeremiah 7:16

This passage does not contain actual prayer, but God's instruction to Jeremiah provides an important understanding of prayer. The concept is repeated a few times throughout the book of Jeremiah. It is instruction for Jeremiah to not pray for the tribe of Judah. The time for mercy had come to an end, and justice could not wait any longer.

We see in these instructions a tension in God's own heart. Like in the time of Noah, humanity had corrupted creation beyond what could be tolerated⁵. God needed to act. But like in Hosea, God's nurturing love for His people drives Him to forgive and be patient⁶. God knew that if the prayer of a righteous man was offered in intercession He was likely to give in to His compassion and forgive the people. God forbade Jeremiah's prayers for Judah in order to prevent those prayers from stirring up His compassion.

This is the God we pray to. He is loving and merciful. He is a God who desires justice. He wants to rescue the poor and afflicted. He wants to put an end to oppression. His love influences Him even in His justice. Most relevantly, He is influenced by the prayers of His people. So, pray. Pray knowing God wants to hear you. Pray knowing He loves you. Pray knowing that He will be impacted by your requests.

*How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I surrender you, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart is turned over within Me,
All My compassions are kindled.*

~ Hosea 11:8



Jeremiah 8:19

I think this is a familiar prayer. Isn't it all too familiar to wonder where God is? Or even to ask that question in prayer? To wonder if God is in control? To wonder if He sits enthroned over the earth? Certainly, those praying this lament had ceased to believe it. Only a few verses before this, the person offering the prayer had resolved to go to the city, not for rescue but to die there. How many times have you found yourself in this same position of hopelessness?

So many questions come to mind. The context of this prayer is in the face of impending doom that God was bringing upon His people for their disobedience. Had they bothered to humble themselves before God or seek reconciliation through actual repentance? If they were among the righteous remnant, did they not recognize the need for God to execute justice? To steal language from many of the Eastern contexts—balance is essential in all things—including in God's interaction with His creation. He must bring justice in order to be loving. Did they still have hope in God's rescue? Did they even want to be rescued if rescue required a cataclysmic reordering of their own lives?

These are all questions for us as well. When we are wondering where God is or why He is allowing situations that displease us, we need to ask these questions to examine our own hearts before putting Him on trial.

Then Peter said to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?" And Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last; and the last, first."

~ Matthew 19:27–30

Jeremiah 10:6–10

There is really cool poetry in this passage. The words were spoken to God after He explained the folly of idols in several verses.

Jeremiah seems to have taken up God's explanation of foolishness in the poem but mixed in ideas of folly and wisdom from the Proverbs as well. None of the wisdom the nations could produce compared to God. The idols, in comparison to Him, are like dumb animals, and their wisdom is untrustworthy. The idols were made with simply material things that humans dug up or made. Jeremiah described the people who make the idols by saying that the idols were made by wisdom. (Wisdom, in Hebrew, can also mean proficiency in a skill or task.)

So, the nations had a type of wisdom, and the craftsmen had a type of wisdom, but none could come close to God's wisdom. The idols, though, were completely without wisdom, like a beast of the field, and could not produce a trustworthy foundation for living on. But God is the God of life, and the God in whom we can trust as a trustworthy source of true wisdom.

I also like the contrast of the character of the idols and God. The idols were made of silver (*kesef* in Hebrew), but, at God's wrath (*ketzef* in Hebrew), the earth trembles.

I think this is a valuable type of prayer. Jeremiah reasoned out the differences. We tend to put God on a pedestal and think that we cannot examine Him or consider Him, but He is open to exploration. You can

almost read this passage as a pros and cons list for idols and for God. Get out your paper. Make the lists, draw your Venn diagrams, or do whatever else you need in order to work out your confusion. God can withstand the scrutiny and welcomes it when it is done in faith. So, take your prayers off your knees sometimes and pray on paper or pray in a conversation with others. Explore who God is and settle areas of confusion by inviting God into that time of discovery as a type of prayer.

*But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.
He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season
And its leaf does not wither;
And in whatever he does, he prospers.*
~ Psalm 1:2–3

Jeremiah 10:23–26

This prayer packs a weighty theological punch, but I think it is very relevant for our prayers and for understanding many of the prayers we find in Scripture.

Jeremiah began his prayer as a rhetorical argument. To lay the background for his argument, he made a single claim: Humans are not in control of their lives; something else influences the path they walk and the steps they take. This argument is reminiscent of Proverbs 16:9 but does not attribute the influence to God in the way the proverb does. Jeremiah's case is based on a much larger spiritual understanding than most modern Christians like to acknowledge in the Bible. Paul describes the "powers and authorities" in many places, as do other parts of the Scriptures. Jesus lays out a reality of humans being slaves to the gods they serve. Jeremiah's bold request is based on the understanding that the spiritual powers, good or bad, influence everything a man does. Either the Lord guides a man in righteousness, or the enemy spirits seek to deceive and herd him to death.

Based on that, Jeremiah asked God to treat him with justice. It is a call for mercy. Jeremiah was asking that God treat them as slaves who were forced into service rather than independent actors on their own desires. It is a plea for rescue in place of punishment.

This is relevant to our prayers because the same reality applies to us. We are beset with spiritual forces that seek to destroy us. Our enemy is deceiving and beguiling

us. Certainly, they exert influence on our own sinful desires and play to our own corruptions, so that we are not guiltless, but we need rescue from them. And the claim of the Gospel is that our Rescuer has come.

As we pray, it is important that we beg pardon from the King whom we have offended. But we would be remiss if we did not ask for rescue from our oppressors as well. In fact, if we ask only for forgiveness without rescue are we not demonstrating our contentment with the slavery in which we find ourselves?

For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

~ Colossians 1:13–14

Jeremiah 11:5

I like this little prayer as a demonstration of Jeremiah's heart and an important aspect of our prayer lives.

Jeremiah prayed this short prayer in response to God laying a curse upon His people. The curse was a contingent curse (It only fell upon those who did not follow God's Torah.), but the people were already on the wrong side of the curse. But, like always, God provided a way of escape through trusting Him.

Jeremiah's response was simply "*Ameth.*" We often translate this as "amen" or "truth," but it refers to stability and trustworthiness. Jeremiah was told that his people were cursed, and his response was to trust that this was good. He was told they had a way of escape, and his response was to trust that it was reliable. Are we willing to respond with trust in the unpleasant or unbelievable?

The other thing that is important here is that Jeremiah didn't sit silently by in the middle of God's revelation. In fact, so much of the prophecy in the book of Jeremiah is presented as a back-and-forth with God. The people could simply hear God's word and be subject to it. Jeremiah could have merely repeated the words God gave him and been an instrument of it. But God opened up the opportunity for it to be a dialogue, and Jeremiah engaged in it to become a participant in God's words and in the relationship with Him.

In the same way, if my wife asks me to do something, I can respond in a few ways. I can simply hear

her words. I can do what she asked. Or, I can engage with her words to join in a conversation with her. In doing that, I get to take part in shaping the outcome and also grow closer to her. That's what prayer invites us into.

But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves. I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.

~ John 17:13–19

Jeremiah 11:18–20

Throughout the book of Jeremiah, we have seen Jeremiah express his concerns to God several times. Each time, God promised that He would protect Jeremiah and not allow anything to happen to him. (Note: This is not a blanket promise to every one of God's followers in all circumstances.) Here, we see Jeremiah's complaints and God's promises come to a head.

Apparently, Jeremiah thought that things were going well. Condemning the people and exposing the false prophets didn't seem to him like anything that might upset anyone. Ridiculing the king or priests didn't seem to register as problematic in Jeremiah's mind. He had no clue that they were plotting against him. God did. And God revealed it to Jeremiah. Seemingly, though, God only revealed that plots were being hatched. Based on Jeremiah's prayer, it seems safe to conclude that Jeremiah was not told if God would handle the situation or what that handling might look like. He simply was told there were plots.

I think Jeremiah handled it pretty well. While the prayer did not exactly thank God for revealing this truth, the beginning does strike me as an expression of gratitude. Jeremiah didn't seem to panic or doubt. The simple request was that, given the circumstances, God would rescue Jeremiah. He said that he had placed his trust in God. He said that he was going along with God's plan based on God's promise of protection. Then,

Jeremiah asked that God would remain true to His character and protect him in the way He had promised.

I tend to avoid suggesting we focus too much on the promises of Scripture. I find most people want to claim promises for themselves that were never made as blanket statements for all believers for all times. Instead, I always recommend praying according to God's character. I cannot claim promises of personal safety for myself, but I can rest in God's character, which is generous and nurturing. It would be foolish to cling to the promises about God's people praying toward the Jerusalem Temple in repentance to find forgiveness (because the temple isn't there and Jesus is the New Temple), but I can rest in God's character, which is loyal and trustworthy. So, in times of trouble and hardship, do we panic and doubt? Or do we rest in our understanding of who God is and in His character?

*The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth.*

~ Exodus 34:6

Jeremiah 12:1–4

Chapter 11 ends with Jeremiah asking God to fulfill His promises to protect him and God demonstrating that He would do so. God had shown Jeremiah that He is just and faithful.

Jeremiah seems to have been emboldened by this response. He continued with a longer prayer in the opening of chapter 12. Since God had answered his prayer so clearly, Jeremiah advanced further. The prayer he raised up brought questions about God's methods. Jeremiah wanted to know why God worked the way that He does and how He could allow the things He allows.

The response He received is interesting. God responded with His own questions to Jeremiah. By his previous prayer, Jeremiah had proven that he was not ready for these answers. Jeremiah did not have the wisdom or understanding to comprehend God's ways. Never was Jeremiah's previous prayer treated as inappropriate or wrong, but it was evidence that Jeremiah was not ready for the answers to this prayer.

God's response was an encouragement. It was encouragement to meditate on the Torah. It was encouragement to continue to seek God through prayer. It was an encouragement to grow closer in trust and faith.

Now it shall be, if you diligently obey the LORD your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you if you obey the LORD your God:

Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country.

Blessed shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground and the offspring of your beasts, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock.

Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

The LORD shall cause your enemies who rise up against you to be defeated before you; they will come out against you one way and will flee before you seven ways. The LORD will command the blessing upon you in your barns and in all that you put your hand to, and He will bless you in the land which the LORD your God gives you. The LORD will establish you as a holy people to Himself, as He swore to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in His ways. So all the peoples of the earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will be afraid of you.

~ Deuteronomy 28:1–10

Jeremiah 14:7–9

The continual disobedience of the people of Judah had led to a drought. Things were, according to the first verses of this chapter, incredibly bad. Jeremiah offered up another great prayer of intercession in response.

Judah had rebelled over and over, but yet, the prayer was for God to remain loyal to them. They were *His* people, so they were *His* responsibility. God had promised to be their Savior. He had promised that He would hear their prayers that were offered to Him in His temple. (Although, humble and repentant hearts were a caveat to that promise.)

The prayer was made, as most of these types of prayers are, as an appeal to God's loyal love, or *keheshed* in Hebrew. The interesting thing about *keheshed* is that this type of love inspires a loyalty that then demands more love in response. The love of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and all the other righteous followers of God had inspired God to be loyal to their line. They had not *earned* that love, only *inspired* it. Jeremiah appealed to God to maintain loyal love for the people because of the loyal love God still continues to have for the patriarchs.

This prayer hurts my heart and humbles me to the core. This is the exact context of every one of our prayers. Our corruption does testify against us. Our idolatries are

indeed many. We have turned our backs on God. We love to wander. We do not control the wandering of our feet.

But yet we have a greater *keheshed*. Ours is not based on the patriarchs. The *keheshed* we receive is based on God's own self. He has not only loved us through Jesus but bound Himself to us through marriage, a covenant whose transgression God despises according to the words of Malachi⁷.

So, as we come in prayer, we should survey our landscape. We should survey our context for prayer. And having done so, let us rejoice in the way God has opened to us.

*Although our iniquities testify against us,
O LORD, act for Your name's sake!
Truly our apostasies have been many,
We have sinned against You.
O Hope of Israel,
Its Savior in time of distress,
Why are You like a stranger in the land
Or like a traveler who has pitched his tent for the night?
Why are You like a man dismayed,
Like a mighty man who cannot save?
Yet You are in our midst, O LORD,
And we are called by Your name;
Do not forsake us!*

~ Jeremiah 14:7-9

Jeremiah 14:13

God had continued to forbid Jeremiah from interceding for the people, but yet, Jeremiah continued to intercede on their behalf. I find it interesting how many times we see that God had asked prophets to stay out of His way while He brought judgment. Every time an obedient prophet refused to obey this command, it was met with mercy. I think this truth is impactful in motivating us in our prayers for ourselves and for others.

Jeremiah's prayer rested on the circumstances the people found themselves in. He begged mercy because the false prophets had deceived the people. We will remember that Jeremiah felt God had deceived him because of all the messaging of peace that these false prophets had proclaimed. Jeremiah's petition now was that the people had not known they were in the wrong because the prophets had been telling them that they were righteous.

This should sound familiar. Eve's response to God's question about eating the fruit was to claim she was deceived and, thus, not culpable. God refused to accept this excuse from Eve nor would He accept it from Jeremiah on behalf of the people. I think of Romans 1, that God's character is perceptible by merely examining the cosmos. No one is without excuse for their disobedience.

Today, we are like the people of Judah. We are beset with false prophets. Most stand behind pulpits.

Many are lauded as great among preachers. But their words are no excuse for our failure to follow God. Let us seek, then, to come to know our God. Let us seek to understand Him. Let us inquire after the truth of our sins so that we might repent more wholly. Let us seek Him.

The man said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" And the woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

~ Genesis 3:12–13

Jeremiah 14:19–22

I think this next prayer of Jeremiah is the true picture of faith in God. Jeremiah had been repeatedly told by God that it was too late for the people to repent and be saved. It seems that he finally began to believe that God truly would not rescue His people. Seemingly, before this, Jeremiah thought God would relent and rescue them. At this point, Jeremiah finally believed God was not making threats or hyperbole.

At this point, Jeremiah lamented for the people and begged for mercy one last time. He appealed to the glory of God's name and to the covenants God had made with His people. The promises to Moses and the love for David are implied in the language of the prayer. But God's response was that He wouldn't spare the city even if Moses or Samuel (David's spiritual tutor) were in the city. This is reminiscent of Abraham overlooking Sodom⁸. This implication, that God would not spare the city even on account of the righteous people within, was God's way of demonstrating that the people were worse than Sodom. It was God's way of demonstration that Abraham's intercession (which the people often appealed to) would not be enough.

You can feel the tension in the interchange. Jeremiah was praying the same prayers his predecessors had prayed. He was a righteous intercessor like they had been. He was appealing to God's character and seeking God's purposes and God's glory. But, like in the days of

Noah or Sodom, the outcry was too great. A greater intercessor was needed.

But as we come in prayer, I cannot think of better models for prayers than these offered by Jeremiah. These are prayers to meditate on. These are prayers to emulate. These are prayers that truly honor our God.

*Have You completely rejected Judah?
Or have You loathed Zion?
Why have You stricken us so that we are beyond healing?
We waited for peace, but nothing good came;
And for a time of healing, but behold, terror!
We know our wickedness, O LORD,
The iniquity of our fathers, for we have sinned against You.
Do not despise us, for Your own name's sake;
Do not disgrace the throne of Your glory;
Remember and do not annul Your covenant with us.
Are there any among the idols of the nations who give rain?
Or can the heavens grant showers?
Is it not You, O LORD our God?
Therefore we hope in You,
For You are the one who has done all these things.*

~ Jeremiah 14:19–22

Jeremiah 15:15–18

There is a stark reminder in this prayer from Jeremiah. In the prayer, Jeremiah lamented his condition (Seemingly, the door is open for us to take up this lament; God isn't offended by it.) and prayed for God to move in his life. He prayed for deliverance from enemies, protection from being carried away, and to be given reprieve from unpleasant circumstances. But in asking, he presented his case based on his own faithfulness. He was being persecuted because he was faithful to God. He lived a miserable life because he was following God. He reasoned that God should remember all these things Jeremiah had done and endured, and should come to his rescue.

God's response didn't seem to agree with Jeremiah's assessment of the situation. He simply told Jeremiah that if he wanted to enjoy the blessings of God then Jeremiah needed to return to God. Apparently, God recognized a fault in Jeremiah's heart. Jeremiah's argument was basically that God owed him what he was asking for. Those prayers don't work.

Do you ever find yourself there? Do you ever feel like you have earned something from God? Do you ever find yourself serving God so that you can collect on your sacrifice later? God's words of "return to Me"⁹ should ring true in all of our hearts. Are we seeking after Him or what He can do for us?

*For every beast of the forest is Mine,
The cattle on a thousand hills.
I know every bird of the mountains,
And everything that moves in the field is Mine.
If I were hungry I would not tell you,
For the world is Mine, and all it contains.*

~ Psalm 50:10–12

Jeremiah 16:19–20

After another poem about God's impending restoration of the faithful remnant, Jeremiah lifted up this prayer. He rejoiced that God was a Defender of Israel. This is what Jeremiah had been hoping for from the start. He never could believe that God would punish Israel or bring about their destruction. Jeremiah was told that God would destroy the people but preserve the faithful few. But he seems to have heard that God might bring *some* punishment but that He wouldn't be severe.

Jeremiah was rejoicing that God was the Savior rather than a Judge. His rejoicing went on to the point of gloating. He boasted that the other nations would lament their idol worship because their idols could not protect them like God can.

Jeremiah had become Jonah. He was gloating over the exclusive protection God offered to Israel. He wanted those other nations to perish and Judah to receive all the blessings God had to offer. He missed the hope of the new creation. The interesting thing is that Jeremiah used God's language about the future unity of all nations to then disqualify those nations from the very blessings God wanted to bestow upon them.

Jeremiah continued to demonstrate his heart. As always, God knew just where to shine the light on Jeremiah in order to show him the failures of his heart. As we come to God in prayer, are we praying for His

purposes or ours? Are we praying His words back to Him correctly? Are we listening to how He is trying to reshape our understanding?

Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.

~ Jonah 4:2

Jeremiah 17:12–18

This seems to be an earnest prayer of desperation and petition for mercy. Both the prayer itself and the lack of a rebuttal from God seem to support that conclusion. A couple of things stand out to me in the prayer. First, Jeremiah seems to be paraphrasing God's words back to Him, as if in agreement he said, "Those who forsake God will not flourish because God is the One who makes people abound in blessing."

The second thing that is noteworthy is how Jeremiah continued on after agreeing with God's assessment that these people would be cut off. He then petitioned to be excluded from the cut-off people based on a couple of interesting things.

But the most interesting argument is in verse 16. Jeremiah declared that he did not want the day of despair. This could be interpreted a few ways, but given the rest of the prayer, it seems clear, at least to me, that Jeremiah was claiming that he did not want death and destruction. Rather, Jeremiah wanted a different kind of Day of the Lord. Jeremiah's desire was for blessing and prosperity. His desire was for repentance to be achieved by the carrot, not the stick. His desire was repentance. But if repentance could not be achieved, a complete sundering of the wicked from the righteous so that this new creation might not be soiled with wickedness.

What is your desire when you pray? Jeremiah

asked to be healed of his unrighteousness because he desired peace. Are you praying with a desire for love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control?¹⁰ Are you praying with a desire for compassion, grace, slowness to anger, abounding loyal love, or trustworthiness?¹¹ Are you praying with a desire for the kingdom of the heavens, comfort, the inheritance of the earth, the satisfaction of righteousness, mercy, the vision of God's personal presence, or identification as His son?¹² These are the things that lead to God. If those are not our desires in prayer, or in any other discipline, then we cannot expect to find God in the ways we are seeking Him.

*Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant,
Houses are without people
And the land is utterly desolate,
The LORD has removed men far away,
And the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.
Yet there will be a tenth portion in it,
And it will again be subject to burning,
Like a terebinth or an oak
Whose stump remains when it is felled.
The holy seed is its stump.*

~ Isaiah 6:11-13

Jeremiah 18:19–23

There are prayers like this one scattered throughout the book of Jeremiah. I find them interesting because Jeremiah seems to pinball back and forth between asking God to not bring judgment against Judah and then asking God to completely blot out the memory of those who oppose him and plot bad things against him. It reminds me of the repeated refrain in the book of Judges where the people of Israel bounce between faithfulness and rebellion. In either case, if you track the amount of flip-flopping, it becomes exhausting. And I think that is the point: to demonstrate how exhausting our faithlessness is in God's eyes.

What struck me about this back and forth is that, clearly, Jeremiah did not recognize that he was praying opposing prayers for the same people. He didn't seem to recognize that the object of both of his categories of prayer (destruction of the wicked and mercy for Judah) was the same group of people. He didn't seem to see who his real enemies were.

I think this is commonplace for us today. We tend to rail against people whom we see as our enemies. Like Jeremiah, we want to see people wiped out and obliterated. Yet, Paul wrote that our enemy is not flesh and blood but the spiritual forces in rebellion against God¹³. He wrote that the Enemy is snaring and enslaving people to force them to do his bent will¹⁴. But Peter said

that God desires all people to come to repentance and salvation in Jesus.¹⁵ So, Paul wrote that the weapons of our war against this spiritual enemy are not the weapons of the flesh but of a spiritual nature¹⁶. So, when we practice love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control⁹ toward the people we see as enemies, we actually are confronting them with the liberating power of Jesus that frees captives and turns our true enemy to flight.

This should drive our prayers.

*Alas, you who are longing for the day of the LORD,
For what purpose will the day of the LORD be to you?
It will be darkness and not light;
As when a man flees from a lion
And a bear meets him,
Or goes home, leans his hand against the wall
And a snake bites him.
Will not the day of the LORD be darkness instead of light,
Even gloom with no brightness in it?
~ Amos 5:18–20*

Jeremiah 20:7–18

There are many prayers in the Scriptures that begin in lament, only to be turned into praise upon reflecting on God's character through the prayer. This is not one of those prayers. Verses 7–13 seem to follow that pattern, but then verses 14–18 demonstrate that the prayer had not changed Jeremiah's mind or attitude. He was upset. He was broken. He was ready to be done. He was back to the point of accusing God of deception because he didn't think his walk with God lived up to what he wanted it to be.

But what this prayer does is form an inward symmetry or chiasm. It points to the middle. When surrounded by grief and sorrow there is an island (only three verses) of praise. Despite being broken beyond rejoicing, Jeremiah reminded himself of what his brain knew, even if his heart wouldn't believe it.

We do this every day. It is the truest nature of loyalty. When we are hurt by those we care about or are told things we don't want to believe, our hearts might cause us to mourn, but our minds can keep us fixed on the truth. God spoke to Jeremiah only a couple of chapters before this, saying that the heart is deceitful above all else and desperately sick. When our hearts lose sight of our joy in God, praying what our mind knows to be true of God is what keeps us tethered to Him.

*Will the Lord reject forever?
And will He never be favorable again?
Has His lovingkindness ceased forever?
Has His promise come to an end forever?
Has God forgotten to be gracious,
Or has He in anger withdrawn His compassion?
Selah.*

*Then I said, "It is my grief,
That the right hand of the Most High has changed."
I shall remember the deeds of the LORD;
Surely I will remember Your wonders of old.*

~ Psalm 77:7–11

Jeremiah 21:1–7

Zedekiah, the king, and Pash'khur, the priest, had been ignoring God's word spoken by Jeremiah and physically abusing Jeremiah, God's prophet. Despite this, when Nebuchadnezzar was coming to bring war against Judah, the king went to the priest to inquire about God's word. Specifically, the king asked if God would do a mighty work, like the ones He did in former days, to bring about deliverance.

And, of course, God had the perfect answer for him. Zedekiah asked for a mighty work like the ones of old. God responded by referencing some of those works. Perhaps, Zedekiah was thinking about the time Elisha led the Arameans into the middle of Samaria, so they might be captured by the army of Israel¹⁷. God responded that he would do something similar with the Babylonians, only it was the Judeans who would be captured when God led the Babylonians into the city. Perhaps, Zedekiah was asking for something like when God destroyed Egypt or Sodom. God responded that He would, in fact, bring about a cataclysmic destruction of the wicked nation, but it was Judah that was the wicked nation, not Babylon.

Here, in the last days of Judah, even the wicked were praying for God to bring justice, but they never bothered to learn what justice means to God, and it overtook them. Have we bothered to learn what God's justice looks like or means for us? Ask God to reveal the

injustice in your own life. Ask Him to show you where you need to be more just. Ask Him to put a passion for justice, as He defines it, in your heart.

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

And to walk humbly with your God?

~ Micah 6:8 NIV

Jeremiah 23:33–40

I felt like this discussion of prayer was interesting. As God continued to pronounce His judgment through Jeremiah, He said a day would come when His revelation to people would be stopped. The people would continue to inquire, but He would not answer.

It always impresses me how inquiring from God is always treated as a given. God seems to give the impression that when things get bad anyone and everyone would turn to Him in prayer. Clearly, He would know because He has seen it happen since Adam and Eve. It's true of our time just as much as it was true with Jeremiah's time. How common is it for even the most staunch atheists to cry out in prayer at rock bottom or on their deathbed? There is a natural instinct in every human to pursue God. We can suppress it or fight it, deny it or disqualify ourselves from it in our own minds, but the instinct is there.

But as we have seen in several passages, God will shut up His ears to prayers in some circumstances. The story of the Bible, which God has given us in order to understand Him, is not a story of God just giving people whatever they ask. He is on a mission to bring about new creation. Our struggle, then, is not about saying the right or wrong things or about doing the right or wrong actions. It is about competing desires, passions, and longings. For those who hunger and thirst for

righteousness, God will satisfy their desires¹⁸. But for God to satisfy the desires of those who do not seek after righteousness, generosity, patience, and love would actually fight against His purpose of restoring Eden. So, to use prayer as a *get-out-of-jail-free card* doesn't work. Coming to God in a difficult situation with a humble and faithful heart works. But asking to be bailed out without desiring Him doesn't.

So, where are your passions and desires? What are you seeking after? If we aren't seeking Him and the new creation He is making then there might come a day when He shuts up His ears to our prayers and refuses to hear us.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

~ Matthew 5:6

Jeremiah 24

When I was a kid, my uncle ran a fruit-growing operation. My goal in life (for like a year as a child) was to grow up to work in quality control on his farm. I wanted to taste-test the fruit. Not out of any passion for making sure the quality was good but only because I love eating fresh fruit.

I was reminded of that when I read this passage. God gave Jeremiah a vision of figs and asked him to describe what he saw. Jeremiah didn't simply answer fruit or figs, but he gave a description of the quality of the figs. Some were good-looking figs, and some were so bad they weren't even usable. God laid evidence in front of Jeremiah and asked him to judge the quality.

The kingdom of God is often described as a garden, a new Garden of Eden. And the people of God are often described as vines and fig trees. And the quality of the fruit is often commented on in the Latter Prophets.

People often get upset and claim that Christians shouldn't judge others. But that clearly is not what the message of the Scriptures communicates. Judging the garden is not for us. Judging the vines and trees is not for us. But apparently judging the fruit is for us. Our role is to examine the fruit of ourselves and of others to determine its usefulness in building up the kingdom. And this process is always a collaborative effort between God's people and God Himself.

So, we need the boldness and discernment to be fruit inspectors. Those are gifts we receive from God and need to be prayed for. We also need to cling to God in these times of discernment. That requires prayer as well.

*And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,
Judge between Me and My vineyard.*

*What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not
done in it?*

*Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it
produce worthless ones?*

~ Isaiah 5:3—4

Jeremiah 26:14–15

Technically, there is no prayer in this passage. But I wanted to include it as part of the discussion of Jeremiah's prayers. If you read verses 1–13, you might expect Jeremiah to pray. This sort of situation had happened multiple times in the previous chapters. Each time, Jeremiah cried out in distress and despair. I fully expected to find a prayer like that.

Instead of that same type of prayer repeating again in this passage, Jeremiah responded to threats by simply trusting God. He told his aggressors that they were welcome to do whatever they wanted to him, but they would have to answer to God for their injustice. Jeremiah finally trusted that God would be just and good to him.

The other cool thing is what happened after this. The repeated cycle of threats, despair, and God's reassurance stopped. Once Jeremiah started trusting, it became the new norm. In addition to breaking the cycle, the people also began to respond. They began to remember God's word and the history of God demonstrating His character to them. They seemed to repent when faced with Jeremiah's faith.

This is significant for us. Jeremiah ran to God in a panic over and over. God welcomed him each time. Jeremiah wrestled with trusting God. God was patient in response. Over time, the continual prayer finally produced its intended effect in Jeremiah's own hard heart, and faith

won out. Once that happened, Jeremiah's righteousness overflowed and blessed the community.

Come to God. Wrestle with Him. Try. Try over and over until faith wins out.

He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, "From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water."

~ John 7:38

Jeremiah 29:7

God's messaging to His people had become unthinkable. Babylon was taking the people of Judah into exile, and God instructed His people to pray for Babylon and seek its goodwill. Babylon! The anti-Eden! The power seat of spiritual evil in the world! The archnemesis throughout the Bible! God wanted His people to seek the welfare of that city and pray for it.

We could certainly make a case for some platitude about praying for your enemies, but this isn't that. It, at least, isn't superficial like the platitudes often are. If we recall, it was the righteous remnant that God had sent to Babylon as a way of sheltering them in the belly of the beast as a strange means of protecting them from the coming destruction of Jerusalem. These were a righteous people who were exiled in Babylon. And aside from praying for the city and seeking its welfare, God used a ton of language from the story of Eden. They were supposed to make tabernacles and plant gardens. They were supposed to be fruitful and multiply. They were supposed to make Eden in the very center of Babylon. They were a holy seed of Eden, and Babylon was to be the soil in which that seed would be planted.

As I reflected on this, I realized that this is the core message of praying for our enemies. Our mission in life is to plant ourselves as outposts of Eden wherever we find ourselves. We plant Eden seeds around us and pour

out the water of life to cultivate the surrounding soil into a garden.

Are we praying for the soil around us? Are we seeking the welfare of whatever surrounds us? Are we praying to be fountains of the water of life so that God's glory might reach the ends of the earth?

The tree that you saw, which became large and grew strong, whose height reached to the sky and was visible to all the earth and whose foliage was beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which the beasts of the field dwelt and in whose branches the birds of the sky lodged— it is you, O king; for you have become great and grown strong, and your majesty has become great and reached to the sky and your dominion to the end of the earth.

~ Daniel 4:20–22



Jeremiah 31:7

This chapter depicts the coming of a Savior. The watchmen saw the approach and announced to the people to hurry to God's house to meet this Savior there. The prayer of the people as the Savior approached was for this Savior to come and rescue God's people. The Hebrew word they would proclaim is *yashanna*, but in the New Testament, they use a version of this word conjugated slightly, *hosanna*. Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is the fulfillment of this prayer.

I was also reminded of an old hymn, "Pass Me Not O Gentle Savior." In both the prayer of this passage and in the hymn, there is this deep longing for rescue coupled with a humble realization that we are not worthy of such a rescue. It truly comes down to a desperate plea for unmerited favor.

This is the cry of God's true people. On the one hand, this is a fulfilled prayer. But as this hymn reminds us, this is our day by day prayer. God is at work, and we don't want Him to pass by without us. Do we pray this daily in desperation for God to bring His work to completion?

*The crowds going ahead of Him, and those who followed,
were shouting,*

“Hosanna to the Son of David;

*BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME
OF THE LORD;*

Hosanna in the highest!”

~ Matthew 21:9

Jeremiah 31:18–19

God foretold the people of Ephraim would pray this prayer. I found it to be an excellent response to God's correction and a great model for repentance.

The prayer begins with acceptance of the discipline. It acknowledges God as the One bringing discipline for the good of the person He disciplines. Along with that acknowledgment comes an acceptance. The person praying accepts that the discipline is appropriate and just, because our sins make us more like beasts of the field than God's image bearers.

After confessing our sin and the justice of our punishment, the prayer goes on to ask for restoration. The person praying has accepted God as his god. He renounces all other gods, and desires a restored relationship between himself and his God.

The person praying goes from confessing, to turning from sin, to turning toward God, to being instructed (as opposed to being like the senseless cattle he was before).

It is interesting that the prayer ends in guilt and shame. We like to talk about our forgiveness as taking away our feelings of guilt and shame, but that simply isn't how God frames it. Our repentance should lead to feelings of shame over our former lives. Just as Paul was guilty of persecuting the Church and became a champion of the Church once he repented, and just as Peter was

ashamed of his denial of Jesus and became a leader of the Church after he repented, so too are we expected to be driven by the remembrance of our shame to build up the Church.

The best part of this prayer is God's response to it. God declared that, despite his wandering, Ephraim remained His son. And as God's son, Ephraim retained a Father's love from the God who will always accept repentance. We come as adopted children in Jesus and can rest in the same knowledge that God delights to forgive His children¹⁹.

“Then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and your abominations. I am not doing this for your sake,” declares the Lord GOD, “let it be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel!”

~ Ezekiel 36:31–32

Jeremiah 32:16–25

This prayer is easy to skip over. Jeremiah's prayer sounds like a million other passages in the Bible. It starts with Jeremiah describing God's character and then recounting the history of the nation of Israel. This happens so many times we often glaze over through these passages. But there is more here that deserves another look.

If you pay close attention to the language, you can see God working on Jeremiah's heart and understanding. God revealed Himself to Moses by proclaiming His name. He said He is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, loyal in love, trustworthy, just, forgiving, and extra loyal in love²⁰. Jeremiah began his prayer referencing that character. But while God revealed Himself to Moses with gentle and loving language, Jeremiah's language focused on God's justice, the element of God's character that seemed punitive to him. His mind saw God as a punisher. The entire prayer is focused on God's punishment.

Jeremiah was so focused on his perception of God that he couldn't believe what God was telling him. Even his understanding of the Scriptures was skewed by his situational understanding of God. Simply, Jeremiah's experiences shaped his understanding in ways that clouded his understanding of what God had spoken to His people. Jeremiah thought God was out for blood, so the promise of restoration was inconceivable to him. It

was like God told him to start repainting inside a house that was on fire.

God responded in the same way He had done over and over with Jeremiah. He patiently walked through Jeremiah's confusion to help him understand.

Sometimes, we need to just lay things out in prayer. We can just pour out our confusion. We can come to Him with our understanding of who He is. If we seek to understand Him, we can trust that He wants to share with us in order to grow in fellowship with Him.

Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

~ 2 Timothy 2:7

Jeremiah 33:2–3

This passage is not the offering of a prayer but an invitation to pray. God invites all people to call to Him. He promised that whoever calls to Him will be answered. It mirrors Jesus's words about asking, seeking, and knocking²¹. God not only promised to Jeremiah that He would answer those who call to Him but that He would reveal great and powerful things.

Have you called to God? Have you allowed Him to instruct you in mighty things? He wants to show you His name. He wants to show you His glory. He wants to show you His character. He wants to show you His heart for you. He wants to show you the plans He has for you. He wants to show you how far you are from His plans and the plans He has to heal your brokenness and failures. He wants to show you His plans to share in Eden-life, both now and in the future.

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you; call to Him and He will answer²².

Thus says the LORD who made the earth, the LORD who formed it to establish it, the LORD is His name, "Call to Me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know."

~ Jeremiah 33:2–3



Jeremiah 37

Chapter 36 tells the story of King Zedekiah completely rejecting God's word spoken to Jeremiah. Chapter 37 opens with Zedekiah asking Jeremiah to pray on his behalf. God orchestrated a series of events to test whether Zedekiah would trust what God had been telling him. Zedekiah failed that test. In the end, Zedekiah still asked Jeremiah to speak to him on God's behalf. The message from God was unchanged the second time.

God isn't arbitrary. He doesn't do things without purpose. The calamity coming on Judah was in response to their sin. God had told them how to avoid the calamity—they needed to repent. Zedekiah kept asking for a new message because he didn't like that message. He wouldn't listen to God's instruction and God wasn't changing it.

Prayer is not something casual. It isn't trying to get the answers we want. It is God's invitation to experience Eden. To offer prayer to God is a petition for God to draw you into the experience of Eden. If we are accepting that invitation, then we are making a commitment, and it is not something to take lightly. If we do take these things lightly, we cannot be surprised if God doesn't answer our prayers.

Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.

~ John 17:1-5



Jeremiah 42

In the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem, there was chaos throughout the land. Bands of warriors grouped together to seek their own desires after the power structures had fallen. One such band came to Jeremiah to seek guidance from God. They were headed to Egypt to find refuge and were asking for the safest way. Their prayer was an inquiry of route and a promise to obey whatever God told them for how to get to Egypt.

The only problem is that God didn't tell them how to get there but rather to stay. The narrative recounts that Jeremiah prayed and waited for ten days before returning with God's response. The ten days should set the reader to expect that God will make prosperity out of chaos. And that is exactly what God promised. He sent word to them that if they stayed, then they would find life, peace, and prosperity, but that if they went to Egypt, they would surely die.

God also rebuked this band of warriors because they would not listen. They had promised to take whatever route God instructed so long as it led to Egypt. Once Egypt was off the table, so, too, was their promise of obedience. They were willing to obey as long as they got what they wanted. Once they could not reach the goal they hoped for, they refused to obey.

How fickle is your obedience? Is God the thing you seek in prayer? Or is God just a means to an end?

“If you will indeed stay in this land, then I will build you up and not tear you down, and I will plant you and not uproot you; for I will relent concerning the calamity that I have inflicted on you. Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon, whom you are now fearing; do not be afraid of him,” declares the LORD, “for I am with you to save you and deliver you from his hand. I will also show you compassion, so that he will have compassion on you and restore you to your own soil.”

~ Jeremiah 42:10–12

EZEKIEL

Then he brought me back to the door of the house; and behold, water was flowing from under the threshold of the house toward the east, for the house faced east. And the water was flowing down from under, from the right side of the house, from south of the altar. He brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate by way of the gate that faces east. And behold, water was trickling from the south side.

When the man went out toward the east with a line in his hand, he measured a thousand cubits, and he led me through the water, water reaching the ankles. Again he measured a thousand and led me through the water, water reaching the knees. Again he measured a thousand and led me through the water, water reaching the loins. Again he measured a thousand; and it was a river that I could not ford, for the water had risen, enough water to swim in, a river that could not be forded. He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen this?" Then he brought me back to the bank of the river. Now when I had returned, behold, on the bank of the river

there were very many trees on the one side and on the other. Then he said to me, "These waters go out toward the eastern region and go down into the Arabah; then they go toward the sea, being made to flow into the sea, and the waters of the sea become fresh. It will come about that every living creature which swarms in every place where the river goes, will live. And there will be very many fish, for these waters go there and the others become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes. And it will come about that fishermen will stand beside it; from Engedi to Eneglaim there will be a place for the spreading of nets. Their fish will be according to their kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea, very many. But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they will be left for salt. By the river on its bank, on one side and on the other, will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither and their fruit will not fail. They will bear every month because their water flows from the sanctuary, and their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing."

~ Ezekiel 47:1–12

Ezekiel 4:14

I have always found this prayer humorous. God was going to use Ezekiel for an object lesson and instructed him to cook his food over a fire of human poop (gross). Ezekiel objected to the plan, and God's response was to accommodate Ezekiel's concern. Instead of using human poop, he could use cattle poop. I know cattle poop was used for fires in many contexts, but that's still disgusting in my book.

The humor misses the point of the prayer though. God gave Ezekiel a command that required him to violate the purity laws of the Torah. Ezekiel was appalled. Perhaps, some of this was over the gross factor, but the astonishment Ezekiel must have felt had to include surprise that God would ask him to become unclean intentionally for a long time. That would separate him from human contact, synagogue participation, participation in the required festivals, the offering of sacrifices, or even communion with God. When he heard this, he could not believe God would ask him to do it. Abraham didn't question when God asked him to do something completely against God's nature¹. Ezekiel did. Neither was met with rebuke, though Abraham's obedience did produce a much better outcome than Ezekiel's questioning.

One thing to note in this prayer is that there isn't necessarily a right or wrong response to God. Abraham

trusted God and acted in faith, and that seems to have been pleasing to God. Ezekiel was appalled and questioned God *in faith*, and that seems to have been good too. God wants the faith. How that faith plays out allows for variability.

Another thing to note in this passage is that Ezekiel chose to trust God despite being told to do something that seemed to go against the kosher rules. We are specifically warned about this in John's epistles². But Ezekiel had just seen God driving His storm chariot. He had just interacted with God as he was fed the scroll of God's words. He hadn't just heard about God, but Ezekiel knew God personally. The more we come to know God, the more we come to differentiate Him from other spirits.

Finally, I note God's response to Ezekiel's lament. Ezekiel asked to not have this required of him because it would make him unclean. God did not actually concede. He still required Ezekiel to use poop to cook the bread, so neither the gross factor nor the ritual uncleanness were removed, but God gave him a way that was less reprehensible. God doesn't always give us what we want or remove all concerns, but He will comfort and console wherever possible.

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, 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

Ezekiel 9:8; 11:13

Ezekiel seems to have run into the same problem as Jeremiah—he didn’t understand what God was doing in the punishment of Judah. He clearly knew the Torah and the Former Prophets. It seems likely he probably knew the scroll of Isaiah well too. He knew that God would preserve a righteous remnant from the tribes of Jacob. But he was missing the whole picture.

In these two prayers, Ezekiel had seen visions of what was happening in Jerusalem. Along with the visions, God had shown Ezekiel the punishment that would come to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. First, the punishment would go to the people, and then to the leaders. In both instances, Ezekiel prayed against the destruction of God’s promised remnant. At first, Ezekiel had thought that the people still living in Jerusalem were the remnant. Once God debunked that idea, he seemed to have thought the leaders were the remnant. It did not occur to Ezekiel what God was telling Jeremiah—those who were taken into exile (including Ezekiel) were the remnant that God was preserving within the belly of the beast.

Ezekiel took it upon himself to stand up to God as an intercessor for God’s mercy. When God showed Ezekiel that Ezekiel was acting on wrong assumptions, Ezekiel stood up again against another wrong assumption. But God was patient and gentle to correct Ezekiel’s misunderstandings. And even though God had gone

through this process with Jeremiah, God was willing to go through it all again with Ezekiel. God is patient in our ignorance and foolishness as long as our purpose is to pursue righteousness.

In that day the Branch of the LORD will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth will be the pride and the adornment of the survivors of Israel. It will come about that he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy—everyone who is recorded for life in Jerusalem. When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning.

~ Isaiah 4:2–4

Ezekiel 14:1–11

The elders of God's people came to Ezekiel, apparently seeking to hear from God. We never hear their prayer, but we do see how God felt about them coming to pray. Verse 3 outlines God's feelings, and the following verses elaborate three times, twice by explaining His statement and once by explaining the opposite. God's position is that those who pursue idols have no right to consult Him in prayer.

The main thing I notice in God's positional statement here is that prayer comes down to desires. The statements God makes in this passage give us a composite picture of the person who offers inappropriate prayers. According to this passage, this person is someone who seeks after other things than God. This person has supplanted God in his or her heart with other things. This person doesn't look for God's ways to bring life, joy, prosperity, or deliverance but looks for twisted means of achieving his or her purposes or needs.

God's position about this type of person coming to Him in prayer is that He will answer according to that person's own desires. This person praying had no desire for God or His ways, so neither would he or she receive God's presence or blessings. In His mercy and generosity, God will give us what we desire. So, when we desire these other things, that is what He will give us.

Two other things jump out at me that are

important. God said that Israelites or people who join themselves to the Israelite people can expect this type of treatment. These are the people who know God and know better. God didn't hold these expectations up for people who had not had the opportunity to learn who He is. Those people can come in their ignorance, and God will reveal Himself to those who wish to know Him. But ignorance is the only excuse.

The other thing is that people who come with other desires in their hearts and other passions before their eyes forfeit their right to come to God in expectation through prayer. God didn't say that their prayers *couldn't* be answered. The door was left cracked open because of God's mercy. We should assume that if our hearts and eyes are in rebellion, then God will not respond to us. But we can rejoice knowing that God is the kind of god who regularly gives what is not deserved and blesses in ways that could not be expected. That is His nature.

Any man of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, puts right before his face the stumbling block of his iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the LORD will be brought to give him an answer in the matter in view of the multitude of his idols, in order to lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel who are estranged from Me through all their idols.

~ Ezekiel 14:4-5

Ezekiel 20:1–32

Again, the rebellious leaders of God's people came to Ezekiel seeking to hear from God. God restated His previous assertion that they had no right to ask anything of Him because of their rebellion. But then, rather than explaining to Ezekiel why He wouldn't answer them, God invited Ezekiel to judge whether or not God should answer these rebellious people. He then recounted the story of God's continual pursuit of His people and their continual rebellion. It is a long and tedious passage. As I read it, I found myself wondering if I had lost my spot and was rereading something because the people's rebellion was so repetitive and redundant. After outlining a twenty-eight-verse history of the people rejecting God's pursuing love, God left the case to be evaluated by Ezekiel.

This made me wonder how this would look in our lives. If God were to recount the history of His pursuit of you and your response to it, would you judge that God should answer your prayers? Or would you be forced to judge that God's generosity had so far exceeded your faithfulness that His continued generosity toward you would be irrational?

But, only a couple chapters earlier, God had told Ezekiel that if a wicked person turns from their wickedness and acts righteously then his wickedness will be remembered no more. It is never too late to change your degree of faithfulness to this God.

*Will you judge them, will you judge them, son of man?
Make them know the abominations of their fathers.*

~ Ezekiel 20:4

Ezekiel 20:49

Many of Ezekiel's prayers are these quick laments. They remind me of a passage I wrote in *Praying with the Torah* on Exodus 15:22–27. The point of the passage was that the difference between a complaint and a prayer is direction and intent. In these quick prayers, Ezekiel pointed his distress at God with the hope that God would fix his problem and with the faith that He could.

But in this particular passage, Ezekiel lamented that God was speaking to the people in riddles and parables and that they couldn't understand. Jesus addressed this same concern. He also spoke in riddles and parables so that only those who were filled with God's Spirit of wisdom could understand. The book of Proverbs begins by stating that the purpose of the proverbs is to train the reader to understand riddles and parables through the pursuit and application of God's wisdom. Thus, it is only those who seek God and His wisdom who can understand God's messages.

But this isn't some secret decoder ring system or Gnosticism of the first century, designed to exclude those without. It is a consequence, not a cause. God speaks of things that are complex. He speaks of things that require wisdom to understand. He has motives that are opposed to the motives of this world. God isn't using wisdom as an exclusionary measure. Rather, He speaks freely in the

plainest language that will suffice, but those who pursue the world cannot understand because they have chosen a different type of motivation and knowledge.

Are you praying for wisdom and understanding? Are you praying to be filled with the Spirit that leads to godliness? N.T. Wright recounts the story of a friend who was asked if he was filled with the Spirit. The response of Wright's friend was "Yes, but I leak."³ Likewise, we are in continual need of filling with God's Spirit, and that only happens when we ask for it in prayer.

Go, and tell this people:

*"Keep on listening, but do not perceive;
Keep on looking, but do not understand.
Render the hearts of this people insensitive,
Their ears dull,
And their eyes dim,
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
Hear with their ears,
Understand with their hearts,
And return and be healed."*

~ Isaiah 6:9-10

Ezekiel 36:37–38

I love the second half of Ezekiel 36. It is such a vivid picture of God's emotions and actions all coming together to fulfill His purposes. At the end, there is a little add-on, and it happens to be a prayer that God gives for His people to pray at the time when God redeems His people and restores them.

After God removes all unrighteousness and iniquity from His people, after He heals them of their bentness and rescues them from their failures, after He returns them to Eden and surrounds them with blessing, *at that point*, God blesses still more. He not only invites His people to ask for increase in their congregation but He even gives them the instruction to do so. This isn't a first-come-first-served situation or a limited seating party. God promised that these redeemed people could ask God to do this work in the lives of others and to grow their numbers. God is not only abundantly generous, but He is abundantly generous abundantly. He has abundant generosity for everyone. All are welcome. All can receive. All are welcome to bring others into the fold.

I think this is what Jesus had in mind when He instructed His disciples to pray for more workers because the harvest is so plentiful. God's generosity is so great, and there are so many people who are only an invitation and a prayer away from the party. There are so many who need to be welcomed in but don't realize their need.

There are so many who don't realize there is an Eden to come to. All of them, according to these promises from our trustworthy God, are only prayers away.

Are we asking for the increase of His kingdom?
Are we asking Him to give us opportunities to share?

Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."

~ Matthew 9:36–38

Ezekiel 37:3

Another short prayer from Ezekiel. The passage is fairly well known, but I confess I have overlooked this prayer in the past and suspect most people have. The prayer itself is kind of awkward in our English translations. God asked Ezekiel if the dry bones could have life. Every translation I have ever sat down with says that Ezekiel responded with, “You know.” Then, God doesn’t really ever acknowledge the response from Ezekiel, and it leaves you wondering why this verse is even in the story because it makes more sense without it.

What I suspect is going on is a complication with the word *know* in this response. The Hebrew word has an incredibly wide range of meaning. I think what Ezekiel was saying in his response was not so much pushing the question back on God, as if to say, “I don’t know but I am sure You do,” as much as it is to say, “You have the knowledge.” I think this is a statement of faith. Ezekiel was claiming that God knew how to bring the bones back to life. He said God was able to accomplish it.

The narrative tells that not only were there bones, not only were there *dry* bones, but the valley was *filled* with bones that were *very* dry. It points out that this valley is about the furthest thing from vitality you can imagine. God asked Ezekiel if he thought God could bring life to these symbols of death. God asked if Ezekiel believed God could do even this. Ezekiel responded with

confidence. His response seems to confirm that these very dry bones were well beyond the hope of life, but God had the wisdom and power to do it. Ezekiel responded that no one but the true and living God could do something like this, but Ezekiel's God could.

And in response to his act of faith, Ezekiel was able to witness an amazing work of God and be a part of bringing a message of hope to a broken people. Like so many people before in the story of the Bible, God required a demonstration of faith before He would perform mighty acts of creation and blessing.

We are faced with this same test when we enter God's presence. When we pray, we are coming to ask God to do great and mighty things. But, just like when Jesus could not perform many miracles in His hometown⁴, God does not perform mighty acts for those who trust God only in word. When we come, our faith and trust are tested. If we doubt, we ought not to expect anything in response to our prayers⁵.

But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

~ James 1:6-8

THE TWELVE

*How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I surrender you, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart is turned over within Me,
All My compassions are kindled.
I will not execute My fierce anger;
I will not destroy Ephraim again.
For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst,
And I will not come in wrath.*

~ Hosea 11:8–9

Hosea 2:16

God's love for His people demands a response. Verse 14 of this chapter has always struck me as one of the greatest surprise twists in the Scriptures. God spent twenty-four verses in the book of Hosea leading up to this one by piling up a huge mountain of evidence why He should destroy the people. They were wayward in every way. They refused to obey. They turned away every chance they got and spit in God's face for the blessing He had given them.

Verse 14 starts with *therefore* and you can feel a monologue of destruction and decimation to follow, but instead, God committed Himself to demonstrate love and loveliness. He committed Himself to making Himself the kind of being who would be impossible not to love.

Returning to verse 16, we are given another snippet of prayer from God. He said that once we are drawn to Him, we get to call Him *Ishi*, which means "my husband." God gives us a prayer of intimacy for the relationship that will be inaugurated. The title links all the way back to Genesis chapter 2 when Adam first met the woman who God had made for him. Adam exclaimed in joy and passion at the discovery of a treasure. That narrative goes on to discuss the unity of the marriage covenant and the intimacy therein. In this passage, God is inviting us to share in that same kind of joy and intimacy with Him.

Are we willing to embrace Him like this and
delight in His joy?

*“Therefore, behold, I will allure her,
Bring her into the wilderness
And speak kindly to her.*

*“Then I will give her her vineyards from there,
And the valley of Achor as a door of hope.
And she will sing there as in the days of her youth,
As in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt.
It will come about in that day,” declares the LORD,*

*“That you will call Me Ishi
And will no longer call Me Baali.*

*“For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth,
So that they will be mentioned by their names no more.”*

~ Hosea 2:14–17

Hosea 5:15–6:3

God presents us, through Hosea's prophetic speech, with the model of repentance. Before examining the prayer, I do want to touch on how the prayer first struck me because I fear it might strike others similarly. The penitent in this prayer speaks a series of couplets about God harming them and then healing them. Given our modern culture, this will likely appear to many readers to look like the words of people suffering mental and/or physical abuse. These victims often rationalize the abuse they receive in a similar way. I think this makes the surrounding chapters incredibly important.

In the first chapters of Hosea, God describes His punishment as ceasing to provide blessing. He accused Israel of attributing God's blessings to their idols, so God decided not to give the blessings anymore. This is a far cry from abuse; it is ceasing to be an enabler. In chapter 8, God said that Israel had sown the wind (symbolic of chaos in this instance), so they would reap the whirlwind (symbolic of a magnified chaos). God wasn't beating the people down. He was giving them what they had chosen for themselves. This is after generations of God's pleas for Israel to turn from their ways as well. I confess that this prayer might sound like the victim of abuse, but the context dispels that illusion.

The prayer itself demonstrates a simple model for repentance. The penitent acknowledged their current

situation and recognized that God was the source of deliverance. The couplets make it clear that they were suffering because they were in opposition to God. It is a recognition of the hopelessness of this situation. It is the words of one who was fed up with suffering that comes from sin. It is the words of one who was exhausted from trying to make their own Eden. It is the words of one who came to terms with the reality of their rebellion and their own guilt in their life.

But the prayer does not end with simple resignation. This is not a realization that God is too brutal to fight. It is a recognition that God is too loving to hate. The resignation is an admission that God loves too much to add blessing to someone who uses their blessings to curse others. The complement to the resignations is the admission of God's character. This is a God who loves to heal and forgive. He is the One who will shower blessings upon the repentant and forget the sins of the person who turns from rebellion. Having come to this point, the only appropriate response is how the prayer ends. The penitent committed him or herself to a lifetime of pursuing the One who loves so extraordinarily.

*For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.*

~ Psalm 103:11-12



Hosea 8:2

These prayers terrify me. We have discussed this kind of prayer before. It is the prayer that Jesus must have had in mind in Matthew chapter 7, that many will come on the day of judgment claiming to belong to Jesus. Many will come, but few will be justified.

Just like in Matthew 7, Hosea was speaking of God's day of judgment. Just like Jesus, God was saying that many would come claiming fellowship and be rejected. Here, the people of Israel would come claiming to know God. It made me wonder if, perhaps, the people did *know* God, but did they *love* Him? After all, even the demons *knew* God. They recognized Jesus even after He took on flesh. Clearly, they had met. But while they knew Him, they rejected Him, just as God spoke through Hosea that the people had rejected good.

The prayer of Israel on the Day of the Lord is potentially the prayer we might offer as we are shut out of God's Kingdom. Prayers of love for God now are the preventative to praying this prayer on that day. So, how are we praying now in light of that?

*They cry out to Me,
“My God, we of Israel know You!”
Israel has rejected the good;
The enemy will pursue him.
They have set up kings, but not by Me;
They have appointed princes, but I did not know it.
With their silver and gold they have made idols for
themselves,
That they might be cut off.*

~ Hosea 8:2–4

Hosea 9:14

This prayer is actually pretty surprising once you dig into it. In the immediate context, it appears that God was venting His frustration as He prepared to destroy the people of Israel. In His justice, God will not destroy those who are ignorant, so here He was giving warning about their coming doom. There is this little prayer injected into the middle as if to show Hosea was in agreement with God's judgment. But I think there is more than that.

I mentioned above the immediate context of the prayer. But if you take the larger literary unit of Hosea as a whole, you will notice that this section of Hosea is all about God wrestling with the need to punish these people and His unwillingness to strike those He loves so tenderly. You can imagine a parent wrestling with the need to punish a child but also their lament at being the one to bring that punishment upon his or her precious child. It is heart-wrenching.

In that larger context, Hosea's little prayer takes on a different tone. I think of Abraham overlooking Sodom or Moses on Sinai. They were both making intercession to prevent God from destroying the people. Here the reverse is true. Seemingly, Hosea was acutely aware that God was wrestling with His loyal love and mercy for His people being at odds with His justice and protective love of the rest of creation. Rather than

standing up for the condemned to beg for mercy, Hosea took the same stand against God, but with the opposite intention. Hosea recognized how wicked the people had become. He knew they were ruining the land. Perhaps, Hosea was thinking back to the last time that wickedness was able to thrive until God's breaking point in the days of Noah. He knew that punishment was needed and interceded against the people rather than for them. He all but demanded that God cut off the people from life.

This is a hard position to advocate for. It is difficult to advocate for prayers of condemnation. But Hosea was not so much advocating to condemn Israel, so much as he was advocating for God to rescue creation from the destructive wickedness Israel continually poured out. It is a cry for justice. It is a cry for mercy. These are the prayers we are to continually offer to God, and they take all different forms. But, just as Hosea's prayer was motivated by love for those oppressed by Israel, so, too, must all of our intercession be based in love in order for our prayers to be honoring to God.

You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.

~ Leviticus 19:17–18

Hosea 14:2–3

The writings of Hosea provide us with a glimpse into God's heart in a unique way. From beginning to end, we see God's brokenness over His people's waywardness, His anger over the marring of His creation by the wickedness of mankind, and His unrelenting loyal love and mercy for His people that seemingly cannot be overcome by any amount of sin. As we glimpse God wrestle through these emotions, He ended with a final promise that is rooted in prayer.

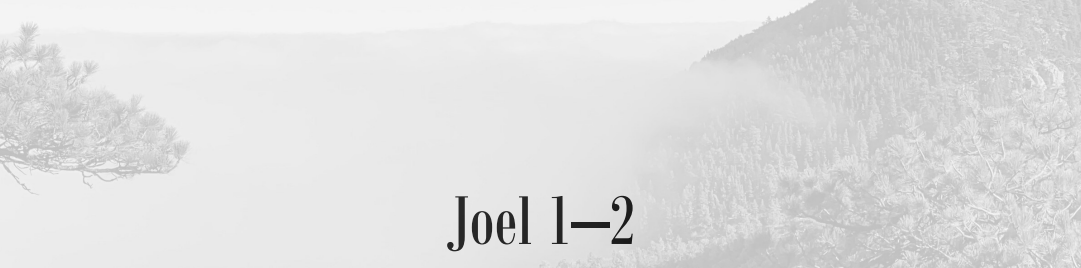
It seems the verdict at the end of the wrestling was that destruction would come. Chapter 13 ends gruesomely by offering a hint of the horror Israel had in store. In fact, if you research the brutality of the Assyrians, you will know that God's words here do not do the horror of the Assyrians justice. They were *brutal*.

But God didn't close with the warning of Assyria's coming brutality. He made one last attempt to beg the people to repent and promised that true repentance would return them to peace and prosperity. The people were wicked enough to warrant being flayed alive. They were wicked enough to warrant pregnant women having their stomachs cut open so that they could watch their unborn child dashed to pieces. But yet, God's mercy was great enough that even at that degree of guilt they could still come back to Eden. They only needed to repent. This speaks volumes about the power of prayer.

*Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God,
For you have stumbled because of your iniquity.
Take words with you and return to the LORD.
Say to Him, ‘Take away all iniquity
And receive us graciously,
That we may present the fruit of our lips.*

*“Assyria will not save us,
We will not ride on horses;
Nor will we say again, ‘Our god,’
To the work of our hands;
For in You the orphan finds mercy.”*

~ Hosea 14:1–3



Joel 1–2

The writings of Joel have a single focus—the Day of the Lord. There is a thread running through all three chapters about how the Day will fall upon people.

Chapter 1 depicts that the land and animals will suffer on that Day. Just as Adam’s sin caused the ground to be cursed and as the blood of Abel that was drunk by the land caused further curse, similarly, the wickedness of Judah had brought a curse upon the land and the animals that would cause destruction on the Day. Joel, in verses 13–14, called the people to come together to repent and call out to God collectively on behalf of the land and animals. Verses 19–20 depict the prayer the collective might offer to God. It is a simple lament of the coming doom and plea for God to rescue.

In Chapter 2, the curse and destruction were pointed at the people. An army was coming that would destroy everything in its path. Again, in verses 15–17a, Joel called the people to come together in prayer. Then verse 17b, again, depicts the prayer to be offered up. The prayer is, again, a simple plea for mercy and rescue.

This all culminates in Chapter 2 verse 32—“And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved” (ESV). The Day of the Lord is coming. It will be like the days of Noah. Humans will be living their lives when suddenly complete and total destruction will come upon the earth to purge it of all

corruption and defilement. The destruction is total. God will purge everything in creation that stands opposed to God's purposes. But, those who lament the brokenness of the world and cry out to God as a Savior will be rescued from destruction and sin.

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left.

~ Matthew 24:36–41

Amos 7:2–9; 8:2

In chapter 7, God showed the prophet three visions of the three different ways destruction was coming to Judah. Each time, Amos interceded for the nation. Twice God relented, but by the third time, He would not. God mentioned that He could no longer pass them by.

This idea of relenting and passing over was used again at the beginning of chapter 8, where God gave Amos a vision similar to the one He gave Jeremiah about a basket of figs. This time, instead of rotten figs like Jeremiah saw, the basket of figs was ripe. It represented the time to strike Judah because their wickedness was ripe. Similar to how God left Israel in Egypt for 400 years because the wickedness of the Amorites was not yet complete, here the wickedness of the people of Judah *had* become ripe. Destruction was necessary. This makes me wonder if Jeremiah saw the same basket many years later, and it was the same figs that were now far past ripe and into rotteness.

All of this ties back together into a single idea that Judah had turned from God past what He could overlook. Amos was a faithful prophet and interceded for the people over and over, but eventually, it was not enough. I am reminded of Hosea's prayer in Hosea 9, where the compassion for the rest of creation began to outweigh the compassion for the wicked. This is where Jesus's words in the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come,"¹ become so

poignant. Again, I do not think I would advocate for praying prayers to destroy people, but certainly, there is a time when we can stop praying for God to allow the wicked to continue unchanged. We can pray, not for God to pardon the wicked, but to change them. There is a time when we can pray for God to put the wicked into the crucible, so that their negative impact on their surroundings would be stemmed. There is a time to pray that those who are corrupting creation would be stopped.

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord. "BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN DOING SO YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

~ Romans 12:17–21

Jonah 1 and 3

These two chapters, though not chronologically adjacent, demonstrate a clear picture. In both chapters, prayers were offered by pagans. In chapter 1, it was the gentile sailors, and in chapter 3, it was the wicked people of Ninevah. None of them seemed to be followers of God. In fact, the sailors began by praying to whatever god they could think of. They didn't know what to do, so they did what they could. Even when they finally submitted to the seeming necessity of throwing Jonah overboard, they did so in fear and doubt because they did not have confidence in their prayers or in God. But, yet, God answered their prayers and delivered them from the storm.

Similarly, when the king of Ninevah ordered all the people and animals in Ninevah to fast in sackcloth and ashes (like Joel had told Judah to do), his own instruction demonstrated his lack of confidence or surety. He concluded his instructions with a statement that he *hoped* God would relent, but it was not a confident assertion. Again, God was merciful and answered their prayers.

Looking at the pagans, there is a lot to be said about the simplicity of prayer. They didn't know what they were doing and had no basis for their hope, but they asked anyway. They called on the Lord and were saved (Joel 2:32).

But the other thing to note in these passages is Jonah. He was sent as a prophet to the gentiles. He was supposed to speak God's word to them and instruct them in His ways. In chapter 1, he was literally asleep on the job, and in chapter 3, he was putting the least amount of effort into the job he possibly could. Jonah was failing hard.

This made me think about how I interact with those who do not know God. Am I a faithful prophet for my God? Am I leading others to Him and helping them to know Him? Or am I asleep at the wheel and half-heartedly going through the motions like Jonah? What else could God have meant when He said He would make His people into a kingdom of priests than that our mission is to connect those around us with God in personal and meaningful ways?

“As I live,” declares the Lord GOD, “Sodom, your sister and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy. Thus they were haughty and committed abominations before Me. Therefore I removed them when I saw it. Furthermore, Samaria did not commit half of your sins, for you have multiplied your abominations more than they. Thus you have made your sisters appear righteous by all your abominations which you have committed. Also bear your disgrace in that you have made judgment favorable for your sisters. Because of your sins in which you acted more abominably than they, they are more in the right than you. Yes, be also ashamed and bear your disgrace, in that you made your sisters appear righteous.”

~ Ezekiel 16:48–52

Jonah 2

While I do not think the exact words of this prayer are better known than most other prayers, the fact that Jonah prayed inside the belly of the great sea creature is, perhaps, one of the most well-known examples of prayer in the Bible. When you read it, it is a very poetic prayer. Clearly, Jonah worked on this one for a bit while inside that monster. It reads similar to a psalm, and after you read it you go away feeling like Jonah got it right. He had fled from God in rebellion, but inside the fish, he repented and offered this prayer of repentance. Right?

The only problem with that idea is that it isn't exactly what happened. If you read closely through the prayer you will notice that Jonah didn't actually repent. He was praying a prayer of rescue. He knew that he had sunk into certain death and that he had been rescued. He said idol worshipers were foolish, but he would worship God. But even while he was still fleeing on the ship he claimed to be a worshiper of God. He merely listed facts: He was dying, God rescued him, everyone should worship God, he would keep worshiping the way he always had, and God is the only One who rescues. None of that is repentance. This becomes doubly clear when you read about his terrible preaching in Ninevah and then his tantrum with God on the hill overlooking the city.

Contrast Jonah's lofty and eloquent prayer with that prayer of the sailors in chapter 1. Jonah spoke

beautifully, while the sailors were fumbling over themselves. Jonah used all sorts of biblical language to make his prayer really special, but the sailors hardly knew what to say. Jonah's prayer was full of confidence (likely way too much), while the sailors didn't know if God would even listen. But yet, God rescued the sailors. By the way he responded after the prayer, it is clear that Jonah did not allow God to rescue him from his true peril.

I often hear people praying Jonah prayers. They are lofty and grandiose. They use the "right" language or follow the "right" pattern for prayers. They are modeled to sound like whichever big-name church leader the person follows. But they are hollow.

God doesn't want you to pray these extravagant empty prayers. That would be like a man only communicating to his wife by reciting poetry. Sure, it might be nice at times and sound pretty, but God wants our hearts. He wants us to be real with Him. He wants us to be open and vulnerable. Don't worry about the words or the patterns. Simply open up to God and speak from the heart.

When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

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

And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.

So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

~ Matthew 6:5–8



Jonah 4

Jonah, finally, revealed his heart. He knew who God is. Apparently, he had a good picture of who God is. He knew God would rescue the Ninevites if they repented, and Jonah didn't want that. He knew who God is and didn't want that God. He wanted a different version of that God. He wanted a god who acts how God acts, but only to his people. He didn't want a God who would love His enemies and forgive the wicked. He didn't want God.

In the final chapter of Jonah's story, Jonah had a dialogue with God. God, through the storm, aquatic rescue, and mission to the Ninevites, had slowly been bringing Jonah to a place where he was face-to-face with his sin. Even then, Jonah could not look beyond himself. He could not see the amazing rescue that God had enacted through him. He could not see the miracle he had taken part in accomplishing. He could not see anything but his hatred of the Ninevites and the God who would forgive them. He remained deaf to God trying to speak to him and unmoved to God trying to rescue him.

What is God bringing you face-to-face with? What is God speaking to you? What is He trying to rescue you from? Are you responding?

Then the LORD said, “You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?”

~ Jonah 4:10–11

Micah 7:7–20

This passage depicts the Day of the Lord from yet another angle. Micah began with what was near to his heart—shame. We don't know who specifically *she* was in this passage, but we see that she had been shaming him because of his hope in God. But on the Day of the Lord, Micah was excited to see that the shame would be reversed. He would be vindicated, and she would be the one to be ashamed. God's enemies would be put to shame and brought low.

But this hope, in the reversal of fortune, was centered in the promise of a Shepherd for the people. God's people had long awaited the coming of a new *Shoot* from the stump of Jesse who would suffer for His people and redeem them from the dust, leading a host of captives free². Micah's hope was for this Shepherd to come to lead the flock of God's people who were lost in the wilderness and rescue them as God did in Egypt.

He knew that this restoration would be accompanied by the forgiveness of sins. Because this was Micah's hope, he rejoiced that God is merciful, gracious, and full of loyal love. Not only was he excited that God would forgive the sins of His people but also that He would teach His people wisdom. This was Jeremiah's hope as well, that God would write His Torah on His people's hearts³.

I like this prayer because it is both cosmic and

personal. Micah knew the Scriptures. He was excited for the Messiah to come. He knew what that meant and hoped for it in a big way. His prayer reflects that. But Micah also seems to have had a personal focus on shame.

Our prayers should have a big cosmic focus on our hope for God's work, but God also wants us to bring our personal concerns in our prayers too. And the best thing about God's work is that usually, His desires overlap with the deepest parts of our desires. He wants life, joy, and abundance for us, so when we pray for those primal desires of our hearts, we are often praying for His will as well.

*Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity
And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His
possession?*

*He does not retain His anger forever,
Because He delights in unchanging love.
He will again have compassion on us;
He will tread our iniquities under foot.*

*Yes, You will cast all their sins
Into the depths of the sea.*

*You will give truth to Jacob
And unchanging love to Abraham,
Which You swore to our forefathers
From the days of old.*

~ Micah 7:18–20

Habakkuk 1:2–4

There isn't much introduction to the book of Habakkuk, but right away, the prophet made his position pretty clear. Habakkuk looked out at the world and he didn't like what he saw. He wrestled with reconciling what he observed with how God revealed His own character in the Scriptures. In this cognitive dissonance, he cried out to God.

Habakkuk's lament fits our context today. He complained about senseless violence. He hated to look out at the world and see warped ideas and passions pervading. He was grieved at the ruin he saw from strife and contention. His heart was broken that people failed to live by God's wisdom and instruction. He wept over the oppression of the helpless. Do any of those ring true in your context today?

All of Habakkuk's writings are presented as a dialogue with God. After the prophet raised this prayer, God answered. His response was not what Habakkuk expected or even what he wanted. First, God told Habakkuk to look closer at what was happening. He pointed out that there were stirrings and whispers of God at work. Just as God appeared to Elijah in the gentle breath instead of the tornado and fire⁴, God continued to work subtly and quietly.

God, then, went on to explain what He was doing, things Habakkuk was supposed to have noticed. He was

doing something about all the things that Habakkuk complained about. But God's plans are higher than our plans⁵, so His plan seemed strange to Habakkuk. God's plan was patient. It was already prepared before the prayer of the prophet and would take time to come, but then would come swiftly once it began.

When we come to God with our laments, He can answer like He did with Habakkuk. He can give specifics and details like He did here. But when He doesn't, we can know He is true to His character. If we are concerned that the world isn't running the way God says He wants things, we can be sure He is concerned about it too. When we ask Him to do something about wickedness or things that stand opposed to His kingdom, we can know that He has already begun and will see it through. We can trust Him with these prayers.

*How long, O LORD, will I call for help,
And You will not hear?
I cry out to You, "Violence!"
Yet You do not save.
Why do You make me see iniquity,
And cause me to look on wickedness?
Yes, destruction and violence are before me;
Strife exists and contention arises.
Therefore the law is ignored
And justice is never upheld.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
Therefore justice comes out perverted.*

~ Habakkuk 1:2-4

Habakkuk 1:12–17

In the last passage, we saw that Habakkuk poured out his concerns to God, and we saw how God answered with unexpected solutions to Habakkuk's concerns. This passage continues the dialogue between the prophet and God.

In response to the news that God was going to raise up the Babylonians to exact punishment on the very people Habakkuk had been lamenting over, the prophet could not believe his ears. This prayer started with what he knew to be true. He knew that God was powerful and holy and that He had a wisdom that transcends all time. He also knew that God would not allow the Babylonians to completely destroy the Israelites because of God's trustworthiness in His promises. But he also knew that God said he had picked the Babylonians, who were not godly at all, to be His chosen judges. This didn't add up.

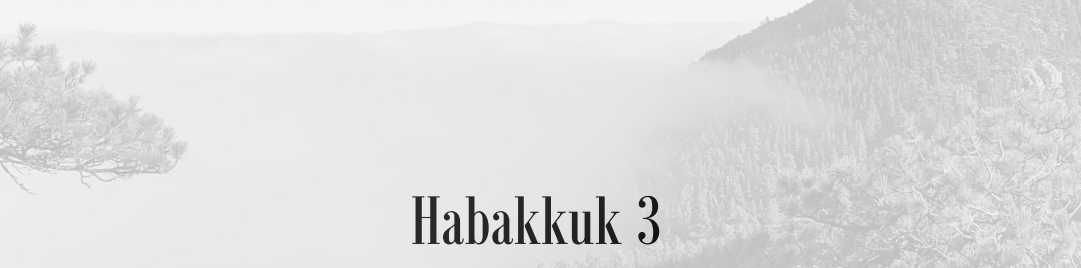
So, after stating the facts, Habakkuk moved on to his questions. They all centered around the idea that the Babylonians were some of the most wicked people around, so he did not understand why God was raising them up. How could they be God's chosen people for bringing justice? His prayer ends at the end of chapter 1, but chapter 2 starts with Habakkuk deciding he will watch, wait, and listen to know how God would respond to these questions.

God's response was that He would do what He

had always done. Just like with the Judges, God did not have someone righteous to use for His purposes, so He picked what was available. In this case, the Babylonians could be unleashed, like Samson had been, as a bludgeoning tool to rid the world of the wicked. God did not condone their behavior and did not look upon their actions with favor, but they could be used to stop the wickedness of the wicked. But once they enacted their own wickedness, God would raise a different bludgeoning tool to deal with them. As long as there was not a righteous one to be His instrument, bludgeoning tools would have to serve His purposes.

In my context, people tend to fall into one of two camps in these situations. Some will see that the Bible and reality do not match and assume the Bible is wrong. They reject the Bible because their experiences do not align with what the Bible says. The other camp I often see is the head-in-the-sand camp. These people trust the Bible so much that experiential data that is not consistent with the Bible must be rejected. These people don't believe anything if they cannot force it to fit the biblical mold. What this prayer in Habakkuk is confronting us with is that things are not all okay. Things are not going the way God would like them to. There is a glitch in the matrix. And we are called to pray into that dissonance for reconciliation and resolution.

*I will stand on my guard post
And station myself on the rampart;
And I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me,
And how I may reply when I am reproved.*
~ Habakkuk 2:1



Habakkuk 3

This has to be one of the coolest prayer openings so far in the Scriptures. Habakkuk, whose complaint was that God allows injustice and wickedness, who did not seem to like God's answer about the cycle of wicked nation destroying wicked nation, got down to it here. He said he had heard about a God who was powerful. He had heard about a God who was to be feared. He, by his own admission, feared that God, but that wasn't the God he was seeing. He wanted the God he had heard about.

It is unclear whether Habakkuk created the poetry that followed in the prayer or if he was telling God what he had heard. He had heard of a God whose glory covers the whole earth in lightning, and that's what God looks like when He is holding back. He had heard of a God who sends disease running scared and leaves disaster for His enemies in His wake. He had heard of a God who made the foundations of the earth shake for fear. The God he had heard about trampled down the waters of chaos and set the celestial bodies in their places. This God was the Mighty One of Israel he had heard about, so why wasn't he seeing that now?

The prayer ends anticlimactically. This fear, Habakkuk said, had entered into his own gut and his own bones so that even he was terrified to see that kind of God at work. Instead, he proclaimed that he would wait for the invaders to come and be patient as new invaders

came to kill the first. Regardless of circumstance, Habakkuk was going to give worship to God.

So, what happened? The wind came out of the sails right at verse 16. As Habakkuk continually lodged his complaint about the way in which God managed the world and administered judgment against the wicked, Habakkuk must have begun to realize where he fit into his own worldview. He pleaded for God to cosmically devastate all wickedness, only to be confronted by the reality that “all wickedness” included himself. His prayer for violence and destruction led him to his own sin, which then made him pray in patience and with a desire for mercy.

Prayers like these make me think that there are no bad prayers. Prayer is a process in which we come to know God more and by which He shows us ourselves more and more. Habakkuk had a complaint and lodged it against God. The answer only brought more complaints, so Habakkuk continued in prayer and lodged those too. Finally, as Habakkuk continued still in prayer, his repeated complaint against God achieved its goal in changing Habakkuk’s heart rather than God’s methods.

Come to God in prayer. Whatever you have to say, bring it to Him. And continue to search for truth until God reveals Himself to you and reveals your own self as well.

*The mountains saw You and quaked;
The downpour of waters swept by.
The deep uttered forth its voice,
It lifted high its hands.
Sun and moon stood in their places;
They went away at the light of Your arrows,
At the radiance of Your gleaming spear.
In indignation You marched through the earth;
In anger You trampled the nations.
You went forth for the salvation of Your people,
For the salvation of Your anointed.
You struck the head of the house of the evil
To lay him open from thigh to neck. Selah.*

*You pierced with his own spears
The head of his throngs.
They stormed in to scatter us;
Their exultation was like those
Who devour the oppressed in secret.
You trampled on the sea with Your horses,
On the surge of many waters.*

~ Habakkuk 3:10–15



Zechariah 1:12

The words of the prayer that we see here are unremarkable. We have seen them many times in the Scriptures leading up to this point, but there is something unique here.

Israel's prophets and leaders had prayed similar prayers many times before. It is a common cry for mercy, but here the cry came from the Angel of the Lord. *Angel* is a transliteration of the Greek word for "messenger," so this is God's mouthpiece. God's own personal messenger prayed this prayer. Many have connected this mysterious figure to a preincarnate Jesus. I think it is more likely that this is Gabriel if it is anyone we see named somewhere. But it is interesting that God's angel prayed. This isn't a creature of the world. It is a creature of the heavens. It is a spiritual being.

The Body of the Christ is not just a local church. It is not just believers near us. It is a multicultural group of followers of God that spans beyond the physical. When we pray, we join in with the brothers and sisters in our community. We join in with brothers and sisters across the globe. We join in with followers of Jesus throughout the world and the spiritual realm to all come together, worship our God, and request His will be done.

When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

And they sang a new song, saying,

Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.”

~ Revelation 5:8–10

Zechariah 7:2–3

An entire town sent representatives to the prophet in this chapter to ask about God's word. The town of Bethel, we will remember, was one of the places Jeroboam set up golden calf idols in the nation of Israel after he led the ten tribes into rebellion⁶. True to their heritage of idolatry, God spoke through Zechariah that the representatives might as well go home because they had never previously sought Him truly, and their behavior showed they were not following Him at this point either. They wanted to know what rituals to follow, not how to walk faithfully with God.

Aside from that, though, the question they brought to God is an interesting one. These men had fasted and wept ritually as a lament over the destruction of God's kingdom by the Babylonians. Now that the people were returning and Jerusalem and the temple were being rebuilt, they were wondering if the weeping and fasting were still necessary or appropriate.

This reminded me of Jesus's words when asked about fasting. He said that His friends couldn't fast when He was with them, but after He was taken away they would weep and fast⁷. Apparently, there is a time for weeping and fasting (times for lamenting and grieving) and a time to not weep and fast (times for rejoicing and celebrating).

If the story of the Bible is about exile from God

and reconciliation with God, and about the war between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the enemy, how does our prayer reflect our connection with the drama God has set before us? Are we lamenting the exile of our neighbors or ways in which we remain in partial exile from God? Do we rejoice in our reconciliation with Him? Do we lament the prominence of the kingdom of the enemy or the victories it wins? Do we rejoice over the coming of the kingdom of God and the victories He wins?

Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will grieve, but your grief will be turned into joy. Whenever a woman is in labor she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy that a child has been born into the world. Therefore you too have grief now; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you.

~ John 16:20-22

Zechariah 10:1

At last, a simple prayer. The prophets presented some truly complicated prayers and made us go really deep into some passages, but this one is simple. God invites us to simply ask for what we need. As simple as that. Here, He invites us to pray for the rain we need for harvest. But it could just as easily be money to pay rent, healing to have a happier life, or a million other things. If we need something, He wants us to ask.

I was interested by the following verse about other places to go with our requests. The *teraphim* were household idols. God was saying that the idols did not bring answers, and those who used magic to try to understand the universe, or even alter it, could not bring real help. It was because of these sources of inquiring that the people were wayward.

This made me think of our context. How many things are out of whack? How many ways is the world flawed? Are we bringing those things to God or are we seeking answers from someone or something else? In my context, people are worked up about global warming, government overreach, conspiracy theories about the corruption of the wealthy elite, and so many other things. These are, first and foremost, things that we need to bring to God. Are we turning to scientists for answers to global warming? Are we turning to politicians for solutions to government overreach? I am not claiming that these

people do not have a place in the solution, but the first thing we need to do is bring our needs to God, lay them at His feet, and ask Him to solve our problems. He will mobilize the plan. And His plan might use scientists or politicians, but whatever His plan is, we know we can trust in Him.

*Ask rain from the LORD at the time of the spring rain—
The LORD who makes the storm clouds;
And He will give them showers of rain, vegetation in the
field to each man.
For the teraphim speak iniquity,
And the diviners see lying visions
And tell false dreams;
They comfort in vain.
Therefore the people wander like sheep,
They are afflicted, because there is no shepherd.*

~ Zechariah 10:1–2



Malachi 1:1–13

God spoke a convicting dialogue through Malachi in this chapter. In the dialogue, God was speaking like a parent to an ungrateful child. He started out by confessing His love for His people, but they threw it back in His face, asking what He had ever done to show His love for them. He encouraged them to remember the generations of faithfulness and blessing they had received.

He continued on with His dialogue by accusing the leaders of His people of treating His name as unimportant. The priests, who had just discounted generations of God's loving provision by claiming God did not love His people, responded with questions about how God could say they had dishonored His name. God continued by elaborating on how the sacrifices were of poor quality and the service of worship was neglected. The priests responded that worshiping God was exhausting, and they were bored and tired.

I was really humbled by the passage. The priests had essentially become bored with God and with worshiping Him. In their boredom, they treated Him awful. This made me think of how they should respond to Him. Receiving God's love and mercy should be a life-altering event for anyone. They should be talking about it forever, rejoicing in it, and telling everyone about it. The ability to come into God's actual presence and worship Him and to bring the needs and concerns of others before

Him in the way the priests did should have been even more impactful.

We have the privilege. We get to come before God. We get to experience Him personally and in closeness. How do our responses measure up?

For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED." And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling." But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

~ Hebrews 12:18–24

Malachi 3:1–15

The tone of this passage is heavy. I think we often breeze through some of these passages without weighing them, but this is a heavy passage. It begins as an appeal from God but quickly turns into a courtroom scene between God and His people. God appealed to His people in light of the condemnation He had made of their behavior. He pleaded for them to return and be forgiven.

Immediately, the people went on the defensive, just like the priests did in chapter 1. This is where it becomes the courtroom scene. God made accusations, the people asked to see the evidence, and God presented the evidence. Only in this courtroom, there was no one to defend the accused. There was no defense. God Himself was the witness. Who can dispute His testimony? They stood condemned. How would you or I stand in that courtroom with God as witness for the prosecution?

But remember where the discussion began. God did not begin the conversation by telling the people judgment was coming without hope. He came pronouncing impending doom and encouraging the people to seek refuge in Him from the doom through repentance. At each step of the discussion, you can hear how serious the charges were against the people, but, always, the appeal was to repent.

In response, some of the people did repent. Some certainly did not, but the passage goes on to describe the

repentance of those who feared God and how they were delivered from doom.

This inspired an idea of prayer for myself. The people were asking God how they were committing sins. How often do we do that? How often do we pray the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount, asking God each step of the way to reveal to us the ways in which we are guilty of those things? This prayer suggests that if we ask, He will reveal, and that if we accept His testimony and repent, He will remain faithful as a Rescuer. He has always been a Rescuer, and He does not change; therefore, we are not consumed.

“For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.

“From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from My statutes and have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD of hosts.

~ Malachi 3:6–7

CLOSING

As we come to the end of the Latter Prophets, I hope that you have been changed by it. I hope that you have seen God more clearly. I hope that you have seen yourself more clearly. I hope that you have prayed along with these passages and read the context in between the parts this book focuses on.

There were some judgments made about what to include and what not to include, so if there are parts or pieces that you feel I missed, I would ask your forgiveness and encourage you to pray those passages as well.

Now that you have finished praying through the Latter Prophets, go back and pray it again. And pray through other passages. Continue praying through the Old Testament or pray through the New Testament. Go back to the Torah and the Former Prophets and pray through those.

Ultimately, my goal in putting this together was that you might be blessed and that your prayer life might be enriched; that is my prayer as we come to a close.

Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD from the heavens;
Praise Him in the heights!
Praise Him, all His angels;
Praise Him, all His hosts!
Praise Him, sun and moon;
Praise Him, all stars of light!
Praise Him, highest heavens,
And the waters that are above the heavens!
Let them praise the name of the LORD,
For He commanded and they were created.
He has also established them forever and ever;
He has made a decree which will not pass away.
~ Psalm 148:1–6

ENDNOTES

Introduction

¹ Sweeney, R. A. 2024. Prayers from the Time of Jesus. Davek Le'lohim Books.

Jeremiah

¹ 1 Peter 3:7

² 1 Corinthians 11:27–32

³ Jonah 4:11

⁴ Luke 23:34

⁵ Genesis 6:5–7

⁶ Hosea 11

⁷ Malachi 2:16

⁸ Genesis 18:22–33

⁹ Jeremiah 3:22; Jeremiah 15:19-21; Joel 2:12-15;
Malachi 3:7

¹⁰ Galatians 5:22–24

¹¹ Exodus 34:6–7

¹² Matthew 5:1–11

¹³ Ephesians 6:12

¹⁴ 2 Timothy 2:26

¹⁵ 2 Peter 3:9

¹⁶ Ephesians 6:12; 2 Corinthians 10:4

¹⁷ 2 Kings 6:8–23

¹⁸ Matthew 5:6

¹⁹ 1 John 1:9

²⁰ Exodus 34:6–7

²¹ Matthew 7:7–12

²² Matthew 7:7–8

Ezekiel

¹ Genesis 22:1–19

² 1 John 4:1

³ N.T. Wright, host, episode #77 “Gifts of the Spirit: How much should we value prophecy and tongues?” Ask N.T. Wright Anything Podcast, Augus 5, 2021, <https://opentheo.org/i/4503599627370518387/77-gifts-of-the-spirit-how-much-should-we-value-prophecy-and-tongues>.

⁴ Matthew 13:58

⁵ James 1:6–8

The Twelve

¹ Luke 11:2–4

² Isaiah 11

³ Jeremiah 31:33

⁴ 1 Kings 19:9–13

⁵ Isaiah 55:8–9

⁶ 1 Kings 12:25–33

⁷ Luke 5:34–35

Prayer is one of those things. We know we should do it, and maybe we even want to. We see others do it, and maybe we do it ourselves. For some, it is a discipline or a habit, but for others, it is a struggle. But would any of us say we are great at it?

Praying with the Latter Prophets continues where *Praying with the Former Prophets* left off. In this book, we go deeper into the Scriptures to grow in the wisdom God has shown us about prayer in the texts. Our study will look deeper into the context of the prayers and will explore the nuances of the original language more. Through these books, we gain a much more complex understanding of prayer. *Praying with the Former Prophets* left off with Kings, and *Praying with the Latter Prophets* picks up with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve.

This book was written with the same purpose in mind. I invite you into a whole new level of God's word. I hope our passions to pursue the Living God are sparked to greater intensity. I trust we will continue to develop and reinforce habits. I expect we will continue to be inspired and gain a richer perspective.

Praying with the Latter Prophets is the third installment of the *Praying with the Bible Series*. This series presents prayer in a way unlike anything else. Rather than leading readers in reiterating scripted prayers, this book explores how the Bible presents prayer, in both positive and negative perspectives. If you're searching for a comprehensive look at the way the Bible presents how to pray—and if you want to learn from the earliest followers of God how the practice of prayer is intended to be used—then you'll cherish *Praying with the Latter Prophets* as an indispensable resource.

R.A. Sweeney writes, not as an expert teacher, but as a tour guide of the Scriptures. After getting to know Jesus in his mid-twenties, he became a Hebrew scholar and has taught Scripture and led Bible studies for many years. He strives to write in a way that helps others understand what the Bible is saying, rather than speaking for the Bible.

He has lived in Wyoming nearly his entire life and enjoys exploring the glory of God's masterpiece in the Wyoming outdoors.



Davek Le'lohim
Books