DAILY GUIDE

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Daily Guide

Notes on the Bible chapter by chapter

By Darren Jones

Foreword

Reading the Bible for the first time can be daunting. So much of what we read feels ancient and alien to us. And yet, as Christians, we have a desire to hear from God and to learn about his grace by spending time with his written word.

This is, in some ways, the book I wish I'd had available to me when I first attempted to read the Bible cover to cover. Following the brilliant Robert Murray M'Cheyne Bible reading plan, I found myself frankly at a loss as I persevered through books like Chronicles, Job, the prophets, and even much of the New Testament. Part of the challenge of a whole-Bible reading plan is that there's a daily demand on time that means it's not easy to follow detailed devotionals or commentaries every day; there's a need for short, pointed explanations of what's being read together with a brief, prayerful reflection that applies the text to our hearts.

The guidance notes in this book are written to be a partner to the Robert Murray M'Cheyne plan which takes readers through the New Testament and Psalms twice and the rest of the Old Testament once each year. That said, it's hoped that these notes will be of benefit while reading the Bible following almost any plan, including simply reading through particular books of the Bible a chapter at a time.

The notes and accompanying prayer for each chapter are short. The aim is to explain the text simply and to orient you in your devotional reading of the Bible.

I'm indebted to the good folk of Bromborough Evangelical Church for listening to me preaching through the Bible between 2011 and 2024 and for their ongoing encouragement. I'm also grateful for my wife, Julia, for suggesting that I organise my daily note-taking in this format.

Darren Jones
January 2026

Genesis 1 – Goodness Communicated

In the beginning, God created time, space, and all matter by the power of his word, for his own pleasure and glory. A formless and empty world was given form in Days 1 to 3 and filled with life in Days 4 to 6. Ten times we're told, "Then God said…" as he worked to build a complex world of beauty and goodness. God is good and does good (Psalm 119:68), and he has communicated his goodness into his Creation. These themes later resurface at the giving of the Ten Commandments and the construction of the Tabernacle in Exodus. God communicates his goodness to us in good laws and means of approach by sacrifice. All this culminates in Christ our Good Shepherd who himself is our life.

Eternal Creator, you alone exist in utter independence. Everything that exists only by your purpose. Your commandments are good, and for our good. Forgive me for going my way as if I'd know better than you. Thank you for Jesus my Good Shepherd; lead me into your goodness.

Genesis 2 – Perfect Relationships

Eden was a vast estate, the source of huge rivers and home to an abundance of fruit-bearing trees. It was where God dwelt on earth, and it was Adam's great blessing to be there with God. Adam was given delegated authority over the earth to tend it and enjoy its fruit. The only thing "not good" was the absence of a helper, so God made Eve from Adam's rib – Adam is incomplete without her, and truly one flesh in union with her. Paradise for Adam was right relationship with God, with his wife, and with Creation. These three relationships are so missing and so needed in our world. Jesus, the second Adam, will again be God dwelling on the earth, with his bride (the church) delighting in him with perfect relationships remade.

Great God of such love, you created us perfect to dwell with you and enjoy you. Thank you that in Christ I can have fellowship with you, reconciled by your grace alone from sinful rebellion against you. Help me to sample Paradise now, in right relationships with you and others.

Genesis 3 – Deception and Grace

The serpent deceived Eve, but the choice to disobey God's command was freely made. Adam and Eve chose moral autonomy from God – the right to choose for themselves what counted as good and evil. It's a trait of humanity that continues to this day. When charged by God, Adam didn't confess or repent; he blamed Eve, and blamed God for giving him Eve. In this, Adam dishonoured God and deceived himself. Eve, in turn, blamed the serpent. We are quick to blame others or circumstances for our sins, but God is truth and we can only come him in repentance and faith when we first confess our sin. By grace to us, God curses Satan in v15 with the promise of Jesus who will one day undo the damage of sin.

God of all truth, you know my sin – including those sins I try to rationalise, hide, and deny. Search my heart, Lord, and help me to put sin to death. Thank you for your abundant forgiveness. Help me to live life truly pleasing to you as you define goodness and truth.

Genesis 4 – Godlessness

Abel's faith in God is seen in how he offers God the *best* of his produce, whereas Cain's offering of "*some* of the land's produce" suggests a cooler affection for God. In grace, God warns Cain of how sin lurks waiting to ambush him. But rather than turn in repentance to God, Cain commits murder and faces the punishment of his sin. On such foundations was a city built, and we end up with Lamech, seven generations from Adam. He founds civilisation as we know it, with agriculture, art, and industry – but also with injustice, power, pride, and women treated as possessions rather than partners. Could the promised seed of Genesis 3:15 already be an abandoned hope? Along comes Seth, and news of some who call on the LORD.

Holy God, perfect in goodness and wisdom, it often seems that your people must suffer while the world goes on in wickedness. Yet I thank you that you graciously forgave me for my part in the wickedness of this generation. Keep me living for you, Lord, away from sin's ambushes.

Genesis 5 – The Promise Stands

The genealogy of Genesis 4:17-24 from Adam through Cain led us in the 7th generation to the brash godlessness of Lamech. Here in Genesis 5 we have the line through Seth with key differences. First, the 7th generation leads to Enoch who walked with God. While Adam's sin brough death to humanity (a point thumped home by this chapter), there is a promise of hope and life with God for those who walk with him now. Second, while God isn't mentioned in Cain's genealogy, he is named at key points in the line from Seth. In particular, Noah's birth springs hope of relief from God's curse. Will Noah crush the serpent of Genesis 3:15? No, but he will be a type (a model) of the one who will.

Sovereign Father, it's beautiful to see in your word how your plans and promises aren't ever derailed by the wickedness of humanity. Abel's murder could not kill your promise. Thank you for Christ, that I can walk with you by faith in union with him, in newness of life today and always.

Genesis 6 – Evil All The Time

While the exact identities of the "sons of God," the "daughters of mankind" and "The Nephilim" aren't fully understood today, the LORD's concern is clearly stated in v5-7. God is good and does good; people do evil from the evil in our hearts (see Mark 7:21-23). God didn't regret creating us as if he'd made a mistake (he can't), but the multiplication of sin in his good Creation grieved him terribly. It still does. Noah walked with God (v9), so why didn't God take Noah as he'd taken Enoch and then wipe the rest of humanity off the face of the earth? In Genesis 3:15 God declared that a man would crush Satan's head, so in the Flood we see both wrathful justice and salvation purposes side by side.

Heavenly Father, you are unchangeably good, wise, loving and compassionate. How you must surely grieve at the world around us today. I know righteous judgment looms over the world again and I thank you for the grace you have extended to me. O God, forgive me.

Genesis 7 – The LORD Shut Them In

Genesis began with God communicating goodness and life into his Creation, but the chosen path of sin for humanity has led to evil society, death, and by the end of Chapter 7 to a kind of "de-creation." Noah, his family, and all those creatures were safely on board the ark when "the LORD shut them in" (v16). In doing that, the LORD shut everyone else out. Salvation for one is always judgment for another; salvation is always by undeserved grace. 1 Peter 3:18-22 connects Noah's ark with Christian baptism, in that baptism is a symbol of our union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Noah, safe in the ark, escaped the judgment of God on the world. In Christ, we enter life and become new creations by his grace.

Lord Jesus, you have passed through death and become the guarantee of the New Creation. By grace you call me to life with you, already declaring me a new creation in you! Thank you that I am safe in you. Help me to point others to hope and life with you before the Day to come.

Genesis 8 – God Remembers

The turning point in the Flood account is Genesis 8:1. God is perfect in knowledge and unable to change in any way, so he can't forget anything. In the Old Testament, for God to "remember" something is to bring it to mind for action. So here, after so many weeks afloat, it is time for a new beginning for humanity. As the waters recede and the land dries out, Noah and his family are told to go out and multiply (as Adam and Eve were told in Genesis 1:28). Was Noah to be the serpent-crusher promised in Genesis 3:15? No, but he's very much part of a picture for us: By faith we are secure in Christ from God's wrath and very much part of his New Creation already. We are to be fruitful and multiply the church not through childbirth but as we point people to Jesus.

Gracious God, I am thankful that you choose not to remember my sins against me, and that you do remember the work of Christ for me. Lord Jesus, thank you that you live and give hope. Help me to live kingdom righteousness in your name and strength, pointing others to you.

Genesis 9-10 – Family of Nations

There are a number of covenants in the Bible, but none like the one in Genesis 9. This is the only covenant God has with all humanity and Creation, and it's a promise never to flood the earth again. He truly is the loving Creator of all peoples and things. Sadly, Noah's sin shows that he is no serpent-crusher to fulfil Genesis 3:15 and so that promise will be fulfilled in one of his descendants. So Genesis 10 lists the "table of nations" as those nations begun after Noah and his three sons. Our own ancestors are there somewhere, a reminder that just as God is over all nations so we are related to all peoples. There are no grounds for racism, favouritism, oppression, or exploitation.

Great God over all, your love and care for your Creation and all humanity is clear. Forgive me, Lord, for my discriminatory attitudes that I'm barely aware of, and help me to look with your own compassion and love on everyone I meet and have any influence over, however indirectly.

Genesis 11 – A Name For Ourselves

The Genealogy of Noah's son Shem at the end of Chapter 10 leads us into the account of the attempt to build the Tower of Babel ("Babel" is translated "Babylon" throughout the rest of the Old Testament). Living with no overt reference to God, people co-operate and encourage one another in ongoing rebellion against him – as we still see today. They wanted to build a tower to make a name for themselves, since to be remembered for a legacy is often used as an empty proxy for life beyond death. More, we want our lives to *mean* something. But God is *above* the heavens and had to come to down to execute his judgments. Only in him can we hope for life and purpose – and so a variation in Shem's genealogy leads us to Abram, and to hope.

Great God above the heavens, thank you that Jesus has the name that is above every name, and that one day he will give me a new name! Forgive my pride, my faithlessness, my self-centredness – complicit in a wicked world. Help me gladly to live in humility, seeking only your glory.

Genesis 12 – Blessings and Curses

Up to Genesis 11, God's dealings have been with all humanity. Here in Genesis 12, with the promises to Abram, we see a new start: God's blessing to the world will be communicated through Abram and his descendants. So God begins his covenant with Abram with three elements: Descendants, land, and blessing to all nations. In fact, this will be the *only* way to know the LORD, so that rejection of faith like Abram's inevitably brings curse. But with his wife Sarai being barren and Abram himself homeless, the covenant seems impossible. It gets worse when Abram jeopardises Sarai in Egypt through his faithless deception. The LORD intervened and overruled. Abram was expelled with great wealth, but God's blessing would not come to the world that way.

Great God of all blessing, thank you that your promise of blessing has reached down the centuries to me, through Jesus, born into Abraham's line. Thank you that in Christ your children will inherit eternal blessing on a new earth. Thank you that you intervene and overrule my sin and folly.

Genesis 13 – Faith, Not Sight

Adam and Eve saw that the forbidden fruit looked good, so they took it and were banished eastwards, away from the blessing of the LORD's presence. In Genesis 13, Lot sees the land to the east looks good, so he departs from Abram to take it. Lot had been blessed with wealth by being with Abram in Egypt but leaving him would lead to great loss. And so Genesis lays down the foundations of truth for us: Blessing from God comes not in what looks good to our eyes but in resting on God's promises even when immediate circumstances suggest otherwise. Abram was promised countless descendants; Paul later wrote, "Those who have faith, these are Abraham's sons" (Gal 3:7). We live by faith.

Gracious God, forgive me that I am so often swayed by what I can see. Forgive me that I don't always order my life around you or your promises. Thank you for the faith you have granted me, and for such a Saviour as the object of my faith. Lord help me to remain in your presence and ways.

Genesis 14 – Blessed by God Most High

As so often happens, Lot is caught up in world events beyond his control. His life is stolen away. Abram's success with just 318 men is astonishing given the failure of the kings, but it is achieved at God's doing in God's blessing. At his return, Abram is met by two kings. Melchizedek, king of Salem, is honoured as Abram's superior and, as a man who is both king and priest, he foreshadows Christ himself (Psalm 110, Hebrews 7). The meeting is a moment to praise God for his blessing and help. The king of Sodom, however, is only concerned with recovering lost people and possessions. Abram's response to him displays Abram's confidence in God's promises: He trusted God, not men, to make his name great.

Father of all blessings, it's so easy for us to focus on things we see – or even things we lose. Yet Christ, like Melchizedek, is so gracious, generous, and full of blessing to all who come. Help me, Lord, to know ever more fully the blessing of fellowship with Christ, the king of peace and king of righteousness.

Genesis 15 – Credited Righteousness

In Romans 3, the apostle Paul describes how we're not saved by good works but only by faith, trusting that Jesus' death is a substitute atoning for our sins. In Romans 4, Paul explains that people have only *ever* been credited with righteousness by faith, starting in Genesis 15 with Abram. The imagery of ritual in v7-20 would be immediately recognisable to the first readers of Genesis, having been in Egyptian slavery for 400 years and then led by God as a column of cloud by day and fire by night towards the land promised to Abram. As we might 'cut' a deal, in Hebrew a covenant is 'cut' – illustrated by the cut animals. Trust God who binds himself to us with covenant certainty.

Faithful God, your promises are certain. You are gracious to provide a sacrifice to atone for my sin, and loving beyond imagination or measure to take that punishment on yourself. Thank you that you credit me with righteousness just as you did for Abram. Help me to trust in you daily.

Genesis 16 – Seen and Heard

It's easy for us to truly trust God on the one hand and yet deny that faith by trying to force God's hand by our works. With the years rolling by, Abram submitted to Sarai's plan to speed up the fulfilment of God's promises. Hagar became pregnant, and relationships turned sour. Yet God went to Hagar in tender compassion, promising her that her son would be the father of many nations – though not the child of promise for Abram. In our need, pain, and loneliness, God sees us and hears us. He seeks us out, if only we will turn and be found. Hagar was blessed on Abram's account, though her son's descendants would be outside the promised blessing. God is God over all, but only those who come to him in faith experience his fulness.

Heavenly Father, how humbling it is to know that you see me in all my sin and yet hear me in all my prayers. Thank you that Jesus came to seek and to save, and that the Spirit moved in me to grant me faith. Forgive me, Lord, when I act more in my own wisdom than truly by faith.

Genesis 17 – Covenant Obedience

God's covenant with Abraham begins with promises in Gen 12, then a formal ceremony in Gen 15, and is finalised here with Abraham's covenant obligations. Circumcision was common in the region at the time and is a clever sign of covenant obedience, since (a) a covenant is 'cut', (b) anyone disobedient is 'cut off', and (c) the promise of blessing of national growth comes through childbirth. The unconditional promises of Gen 12 and 15 are upheld for the nation of Israel, but the *individual* nature of obedience means that blessings can be lost if covenant conditions aren't met. In all this, we mustn't lose sight of the wonder that our Creator binds himself by formal covenant to bless fallen sinners.

Covenant making and Faithful God, thank you that you bind your promises to us so tightly, even sealing the New Covenant of grace with the blood of your Son. Thank you that all your promises of blessing are met in him. Grow your kingdom in me, Lord, to your glory.

Genesis 18 – Righteousness and Intercession

It emerges through chapters 18 & 19 that Abraham is met by the LORD and two angels. A son to Sarah is graciously (and firmly) promised. God is answerable to no-one, so his question in v17 is really for Abraham's benefit – and ours. Abraham has been credited with righteousness by faith (Genesis 15:6) as we are, but he must understand righteousness and justice himself, live by them, and teach them to future generations of God's people. In this way, we reflect God's own righteousness (v25). The conversation also prompts the Bible's first recorded intercession, as Abraham prays for Sodom (knowing how wicked at place it was, and that Lot lived there). The LORD waits nearby to hear such prayer.

Righteous Father, just Judge of all the earth, if you counted my sins against me you would still be righteous and glorious. Thank you for counting them against Jesus, and for counting me righteous by the faith you gave me. Help me live a life of righteousness and prayer for others.

Genesis 19 – Judgment and Salvation

Sodom is a reference point of wickedness throughout the Bible. The city's men had literally become a law to themselves. Abraham's prayer was heard: Righteous Lot (2 Peter 2:7) was rescued and not destroyed with the wicked. So we have these Bible themes emerge: (a) God is patient (Lot's influence in Sodom was ignored for his 25 years there); (b) God's patience will turn to judgment; (c) God's judgments are terrible and total; (d) He knows how to save – even forcibly (v16); (e) it is futile to cling to what will pass (Lot's wife didn't just glimpse the city, but turned and stared. She's a warning to all, so Jesus said, "Remember Lot's wife" (Luke 17:32)). So it will be at Christ's return; prayer and mission are urgent.

Holy God, the wickedness of Sodom has been repeated and multiplied over and over and our own society's laws and norms are so wicked in so many ways. Help me to point people to you, and give me Abraham's boldness and compassion in prayer. Lord, have mercy.

Genesis 20 – Slip of Faith

Why did Abimelech take Sarah at such a great age into his harem? Since Abraham died aged 175 and Sarah 127, it seems their lifespans were around double of ours. So Sarah in her beauty and 'sister' of wealthy Abraham would still be a catch for Abimelech. More to the point, why did Abraham repeat his deception of Pharaoh in Genesis 12? God had promised Abraham a son by Sarah within a year, so Abraham's action (a) displays a surprising lack of faith, and (b) jeopardises the plans and promises of God. Abraham acted out of fear, not faith, and it even put Abimelech's household in danger from God. It's very easy for us to believe God with our head but betray him with our actions.

Heavenly Father, mow many times have I done this? I know the good and right things you would have me do, and I know the blessing of doing your will, but fears and worries and lack of faith lead me to do something else. Father, help me to know your will and to do it.

Genesis 21 – Normal People

The name Isaac means "he laughs." Sarah laughed in disbelief at the thought of having a baby in old age. When Isaac was born, she laughed in delight (v7). Presumably jealous, Ishmael laughed in derision (v9) so Sarah insisted that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away. This greatly distressed Abraham, though he was reassured by God's intervention. The beginnings of nations are here in these boys, and history is in the air. And yet, we see that they are normal people doing normal things, reacting with typical human responses (good and bad) to events and to one another. Even the business of trade and treaty (v22-34) reminds us of just how ordinary their lives were.

Heavenly Father, as your word points out, not many of those you call are truly extraordinary people. You comfort me in the thought that you work your eternal purposes for me and others in the details of my life. So help me, Lord, to grow and live for you every single day.

Genesis 22 – Extraordinary Faith

We're told in v1 that the events of this chapter were to test Abraham. He has already seen how God's promises have begun to bear fruit and has learnt what it means to live by faith. So when God told Abraham to sacrifice the son of promised descendants Abraham obeyed in faith-filled assurance that God would keep his promise somehow (v5, Hebrews 11:17-19). Testing both proves and strengthens faith, and this episode demonstrates great faith for our benefit too. Further still, we learn faith in the God who does indeed provide – even to the point of providing his own Son as a substitute for us. Even when we can't understand how things will work out, we do right to trust the God of promise and provision.

Gracious and wise God and Father, thank you that you sent your Son as a substitute to die in my place. Forgive my sins, Lord, and my lack of faith. Help me to prove and strengthen my faith as I go through life's challenges, ever trusting in your promises and resting in your provision.

Genesis 23 – Real Estate

Abraham's own grief is briefly mentioned in v1-2 with the rest of this chapter devoted to an elaborate land purchase. The significance of the land is underlined by just how much text is devoted to it here. This is the first bit of promised Canaan owned by Abraham. He was offered a burial plot without ownership (v6) but refused the dependence it would imply. The elaborate process (and huge price) emphasises the transfer of ownership. It would be a long time before Abraham's descendants came fully into their promised inheritance, but here is confirmation of promise, a down-payment from the goodness of God. As we look forward to our inheritance in Christ, we're grateful for his help today.

Heavenly Father, you have secured your promises to us with binding covenants. Graciously, you provide the Holy Spirit himself as a down-payment and taste of eternal glory. Lord, help me to enjoy your present gifts, and to keep looking forward (as Abraham did) to all you have promised in Christ.

Genesis 24 – Sovereign Success

If God's promises to Abraham were to be fulfilled through Isaac, then Isaac needed a wife. The unnamed servant was dispatched to find a wife for Isaac from Abraham's relatives, about 400 miles away. The servant was diligent and obedient, and very much a man of prayer. It was as clear to him as it is to us that his success in finding Rebekah was all the LORD's doing. Indeed, it might be surprising that such a beautiful and eligible virgin was still not spoken for; the LORD had been preparing and preserving her for Isaac. The LORD is sovereign and kind, and our own salvation is bound up in these events so that we too may join in with delighted worship.

Sovereign Lord, we don't hear your voice yet we are aware of your hand on our lives – just like that servant. Help me also to be saturated in prayer as he was, conscious of my dependence on you, praising you before others for your kind interventions.

Genesis 25 – Choices

Abram's name was changed to Abraham which means "father of many nations" and here at the end of his life we're shown how that had begun to come true. The line of blessing, however, would be through Isaac and Rebekah, who was enabled to bear children after her prayer. Verse 23 sets out the future for Esau (later, the nation of Edom) and Jacob (later, Israel), demonstrating God's electing choice to bless through Jacob (see Romans 9:11-13). Both sons disappoint: Esau, like Adam and Lot before him, chooses short-term gratification of what he can see rather than wait for long-term blessing. Jacob is a scheming, opportunistic, self-serving rogue. Yet God is good and sovereign, and in him alone there's hope for us all.

Gracious Father, unless you had chosen to save me and call me by the power of your Spirit, I would never have come. Thank you for the grace you have shown me. Thank you that you're able to use such weak and sinful people to bring about your purposes. Help me to live well for you.

Genesis 26 – Covenant Continuation

Of the three patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), Isaac receives least coverage in Genesis. This chapter is Isaac's main text, and even here the primary point is how the covenant promises to Abraham are being passed on to the next generation. Isaac even repeats Abraham's poor judgment concerning the 'wife-sister' incident, fearing men despite hearing God's promises from the LORD's own voice. Still, Isaac's non-confrontation, peace-loving response to being mistreated over the wells ends up with a covenant of peace with Abimelech. His occupation in the land is thus legitimised and formalised in a tangible display of God's promises bearing fruit. We're all different, but God remains unchanged.

Faithful God, it's easy to see weakness in Isaac and to forget my own shortcomings. Thank you that you work through weak, failing people like me to fulfil your purposes. Help me to keep in step with your will, and to bring you glory in delighted obedience.

Genesis 27 – Dysfunction and Grace

Isaac would have known from Genesis 25:23 that God's blessing was to be on Jacob, but he sought to pass it to the elder twin Esau (v28-29). Esau had sold his birthright (his inheritance rights) to his brother but was ready to steal it back through his father's prophetic blessing. Rebekah cooked up a dishonest plan to deceive her husband, and Jacob was game to give it a try. Jacob's only hesitancy was based on fear of getting caught, not on the ethics of deceit. Not one of the four people acts with integrity: They're a sinful, dysfunctional family. Yet this is the nest from which Jacob came, later to be renamed Israel and father of the nation of his name. God's sovereign power and patient grace are on display.

Sovereign God and loving Father, I confess my dishonesty and lack of integrity before you. I am not what people think me to be. Father, please forgive my sins against you and others, and please bless others as you work your sovereign grace to those around me.

Genesis 28 – Gateway to Heaven

Following more scheming from Rebekah, Jacob is able to flee from Esau in a way that Isaac actually blesses. On the way, despite never seeming to have had a thought for God in his life, Jacob sees a vision of the LORD confirming the same promises be made to Abraham and Isaac. Until then, Jacob had been unaware of the spiritual realities that were so near. Later, Jesus claimed the stairway imagery for himself (John 1:51), and many people remain ignorant of the spiritual truth so close to us. Having heard God's promises, Jacob's conditions on God in v20-22 are completely redundant, but they are nonetheless tentative steps of tender faith from a man used to controlling events. God is patient with us.

Patient and loving God, your promise to be with Jacob and to watch over him was so gracious, and as I see how you kept your word I thank you for your promise to be with me also. Thank you for Jesus, the gracious and living gateway to heaven, and for keeping me even in my weak faith.

Genesis 29 – A Match for Jacob

Jacob meeting his future wife at a well has obvious links to Chapter 24, when Abraham's servant came seeking a wife for Isaac. But where the servant was a man of prayer, Jacob works alone. God had promised to be with him and to watch over him (28:15), so why did God allow uncle Laban to take such advantage of Jacob? It's clear that Laban and Jacob are family; they're both scoundrels. But the LORD's plans are long and good. The unloved, unmarriable Leah bears four sons by the end of the chapter. Levi will be an ancestor of Moses and Aaron; Judah will be an ancestor of King David and Christ himself. Leah, neglected by men, was cherished by God.

Heavenly Father, everything you do is good. Even when bad things happen to us, you work all things for good. Lord, it's not easy to see in the moment. Keep me prayerful and hopeful by the power of the Spirit and the delightful presence of Christ. Thank you for blessing those we so quickly overlook, and help me to do likewise.

Genesis 30 – Schemes and Plans

Leah wanted to be loved; Rachel wanted a child; Jacob wanted a son by Rachel, and to return home. The legendary aphrodisiac and fertility power of mandrakes couldn't do what only God can, and by grace the LORD granted children. Joseph's birth signalled time to return home, so Jacob and Laban start their negotiations. Verses 35-36 show how thoroughly Laban was prepared to rip his nephew off, ruining any prospect Jacob had of rearing speckled or spotted flocks. Jacob's folky solutions seems not to have any true farming basis, but it is highly successful. This is the LORD's doing, keeping is promises of blessing for offspring and blessing. Schemes of men can't thwart God's plan to bless.

Heavenly Father, I have felt the great blessing of your hand on my life. Even through difficult times, you have kept me and held me in your promise to bless. That's no excuse for a slack attitude to sin and failure in me, so I ask again for your forgiveness and grace. Lord, bless me and others through me.

Genesis 31 – Promises Kept

Jacob shrewdly ensures his wives are on board with the plan to flee their father Laban, and the departure at sheep-shearing time (v19) affords them a head start. Jacob clearly places his plans in the will of God, so Rachel's theft of Laban's gods is petty and unnecessary. Her theft and Laban's tent-by-tent search add much tension which explodes in Jacob's angry outburst against Laban's 20 years of trickery and exploitation. The covenant they strike up is meaningless – Jacob has no intention of returning – but it does at least bring peace. Verse 42 summarises Jacob's whole time with his uncle: In every difficulty, God had been with him. Laban knew this, but still wanted his dead idols back.

Living God, you kept your promise to Jacob to be with him and watch over him throughout those 20 years, keeping your covenant with Abraham. Thank you that you are with me, watching over me. Keep me from dead idols, and keep my heart set on you alone.

Genesis 32 – Struggling With God

Twenty years after fleeing Esau, the 60-year-old Jacob is on his way back. He has reason to fear for his life (27:41, 32:6) and so he prays a heartfelt prayer recalling God's promises. Jacob organises the night's camp and gifts for Esau, and finds himself wrestling an unknown man in the darkness. He's been fighting his whole life using his own strength and guile, but as night draws on he discovers that this man is supernaturally stronger than him. More, the man is God, ready to bless. Jacob's name is changed, and he is a changed man. Strife has given way to faith, and it is as a man of faith that he is finally ready to step forward into blessing in promised Canaan.

Holy Father, I was living by my own strength and guile, not knowing you were working good for me. Thank you for calling me, humbling me, and changing me. I'm no more the finished article than Jacob was, but I thank you that you are working in me, present in me by your Spirit.

Genesis 33 – Grace and Reconciliation

The meeting of Esau and Jacob is a picture of grace, reconciliation, and joy. The 'old' Jacob might have patted himself on the back for having orchestrated his return so well, but this is Israel, a changed man. He sees the grace of God as he experiences his brother's embrace – and the events of seeing God and seeing Esau merge into one (Genesis 32 and 33 are a single unit, bound in many ways, most obviously in 32:30 and 33:10). Jesus borrowed words from this scene to describe the Prodigal Son's return to his father in Luke 15:20. To come to God isn't to receive begrudging forgiveness but a complete and eternal welcome to family.

Heavenly Father, thank you for such a beautiful picture of forgiveness, reconciliation, and complete acceptance. Thank you that you love me like that. Forgive me my sins against you, and help me to forgive and love as completely as Esau did – and to perceive your grace (as Jacob did) every day.

Genesis 34 – Violence and Deceit

What a sordid chapter. Shechem certainly loved Dinah and spoke tenderly to her, but there is no excuse for violating her. Jacob hardly reacted at the news, possibly because Dinah was Leah's daughter, not his beloved Rachel's. The negotiations for a treaty were based on deceit on both sides. Simeon and Levi acted with disproportionate violence based more on revenge than justice. There are shades of light and dark in all the men, yet we might well hope that the people of Israel would be founded on men of God with higher moral standards. And so we praise God that he graciously and powerfully works his plans through fallen humanity. We also praise him for Jesus' perfections.

Holy Father, you know the sin in my heart and how unworthy I am to condemn the actions of those men. Forgive my sins, please. Work your eternal plans for others through me. Thank you that Christ has acted perfectly where all others fail; help me to live out my union with him in holiness of life today.

Genesis 35 & 36 – Grief and Division

Jacob's return to Canaan has been jeopardised by the Shechem massacre. Having been told by God to return to Bethel, he cleanses his camp of idols and returns to where he first met with God. Jacob, now Israel, is blessed by God (v11-12) with Abraham's blessing. After Rachel's death, Reuben defiled Rachel's slave, Bilhah, ensuring that there would be no more sons born to Israel. The family is deeply divided. With Isaac's death, Esau and Jacob also fade into the background in Genesis. As earlier in the book, the genealogy of Chapter 36 marks a new section as focus switches to the next generation. Things don't seem hopeful, but naming Benjamin "son of my right hand" rather than "son of my sorrow" signals Israel's faith.

Eternal God, if the future of your work rested solely on the wills and capabilities of humanity then there would be no hope. Apart from you, I can do nothing. Thank you for your interventions and enabling grace.

Genesis 37 – Sold Into Slavery

Jacob's love for Rachel rather than Leah spilled over into favouritism for Rachel's sons rather than the others. Jacob's sinful differentiation is epitomised in the splendid coat given to Joseph, who then responded with teenage pride – and his brothers hated him for it. The sins of Jacob (and others, e.g. Laban) carry over into the broken relationships of the next generation, as so often happens. Joseph's dreams of exaltation deem dashed when he's sold as a slave to Egypt. There's no mention of God in the chapter, so why is he letting this happen? The suffering of this man Joseph will lead to life for the whole Israel family within God's plan (Genesis 50:20). In this, Joseph points us to Christ.

Sovereign Lord, you govern all things to bring about your good purposes, yet I know that I am responsible and accountable for my sins against you. Lord, forgive me. Help me to live a life of purity, not entangling myself or others in my sins. Thank you for the holiness of Christ.

Genesis 38 – Turning Point

We're left in suspense wondering about Joseph in Egypt and given this sordid account of Judah and Tamar. Through sin and death, Judah's lineage hangs in the balance. As the rightful mother of Judah's heir (in that culture), Tamar resorts to prostitution and deceit. Judah's response in v26 isn't indignation or self-justification – he is convicted of his own sin. We need such convictions to lead us to repentance, though it is often deeply painful to us. It's no accident that Judah will have a key role in demonstrating a change of heart among Joseph's brothers later on. More, Matthew 1:3 says, "Judah fathered Perez and Zerah by Tamar" – a reminder that Christ was born to save sinners like us.

Heavenly Father, it is painful to experience a conviction of sin, but I thank you for it lest I drift further from you. Gracious God, forgive me my sins against you and others. Thank you that Jesus came to seek and to save me. Lord, lead me to live for you in righteousness.

Genesis 39 – "The LORD was with him"

As attention returns in Genesis to Joseph in Egypt, we're left in no doubt that the LORD was with him (v2-3). A model of godliness, Joseph was diligent in all he did, resisted temptation, and fled when Potiphar's wife opted for outright seduction. His motivation is God's rule (v9), suggesting that Jacob had taught his sons about God and that Joseph at least was living by what he'd heard. He finds himself unjustly accused and thrown into prison. But his success there mirrors his advancement in Potiphar's house (compare v1-6 with v21-23). Slavery and imprisonment might not look like any kind of success, but true blessing is to be with the LORD – and the LORD was with Joseph.

Lord Jesus, you have sent your people into the world to tell your gospel to everyone. I know I have works prepared for me to do, though I don't know where, when, or what they'll be. I do know that you will be with me always, and for that I am grateful. Help me grow in dependence on you.

Genesis 40 – Hopes and Dreams

Joseph had been a 17-year-old show-off when his brothers sold him as a slave, yet it was God's plan to have him save his own family and all Egypt from seven years of famine. By his late 20s, in prison with the cup-bearer and chief baker, Joseph has learned a lot at Potiphar's house and the prison. He is skilful in operational management, compassionate to the distressed, and consciously dependent on God. Everything is going to God's plan, but from Joseph's perspective his life seems terribly dark. The cup-bearer's forgetfulness must have been an awful blow. Affliction is the schoolroom of prayer, and God never lets us down.

Lord Jesus, you are so wise and kind, yet sometimes I do get hurt and confused as I ponder your providences. Thank you for Joseph's example, demonstrating your sovereign goodness. Help me to live today in conscious dependence on you.

Genesis 41 – Doubly Sure

Many events in the Joseph account (Chapters 37-50) happen twice, and the explanation for Pharaoh's two dreams explains why: It's all God's firm plan (v32). We're yet to see Joseph's own two dreams come true (Ch 37), but by now we're sure they will. We also note that the chapter ends with all the nations nearby being blessed through Joseph's actions, this great grandson of Abraham. The context of God's sovereignty is rich and broad, all pointing to give hope in the serpent-crusher promised back in Genesis 3:15. The whole Bible will continue to demonstrate God's salvation purposes for us, all spectacularly fulfilled in Christ. No wonder we can trust in his promises and goodness every day.

Sovereign Lord, glorious in knowledge, power, goodness, and wisdom, it is comforting to know your hand is on me for good. Help me to live for you in holiness, ready to do the works you have prepared for me in fulfilment of your perfect plan.

Genesis 42 – The Past Catches Up

Twenty years after selling Joseph into slavery, the lives of Israel's sons are largely unchanged. But, due to the famine, Israel sends all but his favourite son to Egypt for food. Back in Chapter 37, Joseph had dreamt about his brothers' sheaves bowing down to his – and here they are, if only the ones who betrayed him. So "he remembered his dreams" (v9) and could expect his other dream (which included his father and whole family) to be realised too. The brothers' minds are also taken back to those days as they ponder what God is doing in their lives (v21). We can't change our past, but by being responsive to God in the present we can trust in him for the future.

Gracious, patient and loving Father, thank you that all my offence against you has been nailed to the cross of Christ. Forgive me, Father, when I dwell on past sins as if unforgiven. Help me to see your hand on my life now, and to step forward in faith and holiness.

Genesis 43 – Can People Change?

The life of Joseph is reaching a climax point and the narration slows right down. It might be wondered why Joseph didn't simply disclose his identity to his brothers, but it seems he first wishes to test their character. Are they still the kind of men who would abandon a brother to the dismay of their father? His love for them is clear to us, though his kindness to his brothers was deeply unnerving to them. Love *is* kind, but not blind to faults. It would have been easy for them to *claim* remorse, but the path Joseph took gave them opportunity to demonstrate profound repentance and change of heart. Joseph's godliness is displayed in love and wisdom.

Lord Jesus, in whom are all treasures of knowledge and wisdom, thank you that you have granted me union with yourself by grace. Help me to partake of your nature, to live in love and wisdom, pointing others to you.

Genesis 44 – The Power of Love

Tearing clothes was sign of terrible anguish or grief. When Joseph was reported dead, only his father Jacob had torn his clothes. It is highly significant then that when Joseph's cup was found in Benjamin's sack, all the brothers tore their clothes. There was no debate about what to do; no-one wanted to leave Benjamin behind. They were all changed men, and Judah's offer to atone for the apparent wrongdoing by his own substitution powerfully demonstrates what true, committed, faithful love looks like. It is our love for Christ who gave himself up for us, and not unwilling compulsion, that leads us to take up our crosses daily for him.

Lord Jesus, you have loved me to death. While I was lost in sin, you loved me and called me into fullness of life. I pray that the Spirit would quicken this cold heart of mine for greater love for you and others, that I might more willingly serve you.

Genesis 45 – Full Reconciliation

This beautiful chapter shows us at least three important biblical themes: First, v5 captures the tension of human moral accountability running in parallel with God's sovereignty – the biblical pinnacle of this theme being the cross of Christ. Second, note Joseph's applied theology. With his mind set on things above, he is full of self-control and grace where once we might have expected rage and revenge. Thirdly, the experience of the guilty brothers is analogous to us as Christians: Not only are we forgiven, but God lavishes his love on us and invites us into security and ever-greater blessings with him. As Joseph points us to Christ, so the brothers show us shadows of the joy awaiting us.

Lord Jesus, thank you that your work at the cross has achieved for me a salvation I don't deserve. Help me to live in self-control and grace by your strength in the Spirit, always keeping my heart focussed on you, living for you every day.

Genesis 46 – Plans and Promises

Israel (Jacob) dearly longed to see Joseph again yet faced the dilemma of leaving Canaan, the land promised to him by God. Beersheba was at the southern edge of the land *en route* to Egypt, and it was there that God spoke reassurance and kind promises to him. It is good to pause, and to check our actions in light of God's revealed will. The reunion with Joseph is deeply moving, reflecting a loss and grief of over half of Joseph's life. Jacob was literally ready to die happy (v30), not unlike old Simeon on seeing the newborn Jesus much later on (Luke 2:29). The unlikely move to Egypt is fully in God's plan, God's hands, and Exodus 1:1-4 refers to these 70 people as the basis of its message.

Lord God, you are gentle and compassionate with your people. You know our weaknesses, doubts, and uncertainties. Thank you for your revealed will in your word, and the encouragement of these examples of your tender grace. When I find myself in uncertain times, it is good to know that you are always with me.

Genesis 47 – Settled, But Unsettled

With Joseph's guidance, things went well for his brothers in Egypt. Pharaoh graciously accepted the blessing of the aged Jacob, but Jacob's summary of his own years as "few and hard" reminds us of his life of tension, struggle, deceit, pain, and grief. His heart was in Canaan and in the promises of God so that Egypt was not, for him, a happy ending. That prompted Jacob's demand of Joseph in v30. Meanwhile, Joseph's dealings with the Egyptians in time of famine might sound harsh to us, but would have been regarded as honourable benevolence in those cultures at that time. Once again, all nations were being blessed through Abraham's offspring.

Living God, it is good to know that whether my years are few and hard or many and happy, you are with me for my good. To know you is to be blessed, and I thank you for calling me to know you. As a citizen of your heavenly Jerusalem, keep my eyes on you, yearning for home.

Genesis 48 – By Faith

Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, were born in Egypt. On the face of it, they seem unlikely heirs of the promised land of Canaan. But as Jacob looked back on God's hand of blessing, he faithfully blessed those boys with God's own blessing (v15-16) in a vision of the future they could not have understood. His deathbed faith in God's future blessing is commended in Hebrews 11:21. Jacob's blessings here and in the next chapter are prophetic, which explains his blessing of the younger over the older: He knew that God could and often does work contrary to human expectation and convention. Reflecting on God's help in times past nourishes us and strengthens our faith in God for the future.

Heavenly Father, you have kept and guided me through all manner of situations, and I know you will continue to do so. Help me to live by faith in you every day, even when the way ahead seems unclear or painful. Father, keep me close to you in Christ.

Gensis 49 – The Promised King

As we come towards the end of Genesis, we might wonder when the serpent-crusher promised at 3:15 might appear. Abraham was told that his descendants would be in slavery for 400 years (15:13), so we don't expect salvation in Israel's sons directly. Israel's blessings to his twelve sons are prophetic and varied, but our Christian interest and hope focusses on the words of promise to Judah. His great descendant, David, would rule all Israel in his day, and while kings after David would fall short of the expectations of v10, God's plan was never in doubt. That sceptre – the kingly rule – is now with the risen Jesus, "the lion of the tribe of Judah" (Revelation 5:6), and the serpent/Satan's days are numbered.

Holy, living Saviour and Lord, thank you for your victory over sin, death, evil, and Satan at your cross and resurrection. Thank you for your massive plan of salvation for humanity – most especially for including me. Help me, then, to live for you in kingdom holiness.

Genesis 50 – Forwards

There's a powerful sense of anticipation in this closing chapter of Genesis. Although the family of Israel are about to settle in Egypt, they know it's not their true home. The Egyptian honour bestowed on Jacob's funeral procession doesn't mask the obvious fact that Jacob wanted his final resting place to be in Canaan, the land promised by God. Joseph also recognised the hand of God on all their lives, even to the point of seeing his own tough years through the lens of God's sovereignty – summed up beautifully in v20. Our own salvation was worked by God over and above the wickedness of Pilate, Herod, and others. So we also trust God daily as we keep our eyes forward to our promised rest.

Sovereign Lord, you have promised an eternity of bliss with you by the work of Christ and the promise of your word of grace. Thank you. As difficult days come and go, help me to keep looking ahead, and give me a godly perspective on everything going on around me.

Exodus 1 – Daily Righteousness

All God's people have a role in his great plan for humanity. For hundreds of years, those Israelites worked, married, raised children, growing and multiplying Israel in fulfilment of God's covenant with Abraham. For all of us, a diligent life of daily godliness is pleasing to God. Sometimes, though, we're called to stand up and stand out for what's right. Those midwives could see Pharaoh's wickedness and God honoured their faith in action. What they might not have grasped was Satan's hand trying to halt the coming Messiah by murdering all the boys; we don't always know the significance of our daily righteous acts for God.

Heavenly Father, I know you care for and about the details of my life – as the perfect Father you are. I don't always know how my words and actions are used by you for your kingdom, so I pray for the Spirit's help to live a life of righteousness, boldness, and encouragement to others.

Exodus 2 – Riches to Obscurity

Pharaoh had wanted all the Hebrew boys killed, but ended up financing and supporting one brought up and educated in his own royal household and court. Evil often bounces back on itself, and the greatest example is Satan's defeat at the cross of Christ. Moses clearly felt he was to deliver his own people from Egyptian oppression, and his faith led him to the misguided step of murder. His flight to Midian has echoes of Jacob's escape from Esau, even to the arrival at a well that ultimately led to marriage. By the end of Exodus 2, Moses was about eighty years old and might have felt his most productive years were behind him. We must always be alert to God's timing in our lives, ready to step up for him.

Lord Jesus, you know that I sometimes jump the gun and rush ahead in the wrong direction – even into sin. Thank you for the faith you have granted me. Please help me to be attentive to your will, in your time, to your glory. Help me to do right today and this week.

Exodus 3 – Holiness, Grace, Eternity

In the natural order of things, the bush would have been consumed by the fire. Likewise, in the presence of a holy God we could be consumed but for God's grace and supernatural intervention. This image underpins the covenant, tabernacle, and all of Leviticus: God will make a way for us to approach him. Note also how God knows our suffering and hears our cries for help (v7-8), redeeming us from slavery. And who is this God? He is the LORD, the eternally existing I AM without beginning or end, not dependent on his Creation yet passionately involved in it. These are but shadows of the full reality he has called us to in Christ. Such love!

Eternal God and Creator, it is pathetically shameful that I should ever resist your will or goodness. Thank you for still loving me, and for your supernatural intervention in saving me in Christ. Help me to live out the holiness you have called me to today in speech and action.

Exodus 4 – Commission

Many believers have identified with Moses' sense of inadequacy in this chapter, feeling a desire to echo his final plea, "Please, Lord, send someone else" (v13). But Moses had spent 40 years in Pharaoh's court, and another 40 in the wilderness. The LORD had been preparing and equipping him for the work the LORD was calling him to. More, Moses would surely succeed simply because he would be doing the LORD's work. So we draw comfort in our work for the LORD likewise. Graciously, three miraculous signs were given to help persuade the Israelites Moses was returning to. The episode with the circumcision shows the absolute necessity for God's chosen leaders to live out kingdom life in private before they are fit to teach or lead others.

Lord Jesus, you alone have lived out perfect covenant faithfulness in a holiness of life that I fall short of every day. Lord, grow me in your likeness, and I ask for the Spirit's prompting and enabling to do the works you have prepared in advance for me to do.

Exodus 5 – Major Setback?

The three signs in Chapter 4 (the snake/staff, the white hand, the blood/water) were for the benefit of the Israelites. Pharaoh's "I don't know the LORD" (v2) is true, though he will come to know him as Judge where Israel will come to know him as Redeemer. It's clear from v23 that Moses was expecting some success from his meeting with Pharaoh, and the resulting intensification of oppressive slavery was as wicked as it was distressing. The next few chapters will reveal what God had planned, but none of the Israelites knew it at this point. As we take up our cross to follow Jesus, there is absolutely no guarantee of an easy ride – and Christ's own crucifixion is the ultimate example. But whatever happens, Christ will lose none of his people. He keeps us all to the end.

Father, forgive me when I am insensitive to your plans and will for me, seeing only physical obstacles instead of spiritual opportunities. Give me grace and strength for difficult days, so that I might continue to do right in your name even when the world around pulls me in other directions.

Exodus 6 – Knowing the LORD

It's surprising to read that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob didn't know God by his name, the LORD (or "Yahweh", v3). Maybe Genesis was written using God's name retrospectively (which would certainly be natural). More likely, his name is to be associated in the minds of his people with his great works of grace: The LORD is God, who hears his people's groanings, who acts in judgment against evil, who redeems by the blood of sacrifice, who binds himself to his people in covenant love and then dwells among them. His honour and reputation are bound up in the name he gave, and now we have the name of *Jesus*. The genealogy is given to authenticate Moses and Aaron within God's promises to Abraham.

Lord Christ, you are Jesus, the great and only Saviour. Thank you that you have made your name precious to me, though it is a curse and pending judgment to so many others. Help me to live worthy as one who bears your name, your reputation.

Exodus 7 – Hardness of Heart

Verses 1-3 set up the supernatural conflict that will be taking place through the ten plagues to follow. Pharaoh's magicians are given a warning shot; they are out of their depth before they even start. In the face of water turned into blood, they don't attempt to undo the plague (which would have been more helpful to the Egyptians), but to duplicate the result by magic. Such hardness of heart is found in anyone who *chooses* not to believe truth about God, preferring lies. The imagery of the plagues is repeated in Revelation as God continually sends and permits terrible things in the world so that people will hear his calls to repentance, return to him, and be saved. God remains gracious today, just as human hearts remain hard.

Father God, unless the Spirit had worked in me to give me a heart of flesh instead of stone I would be as dead and hard-hearted as Pharaoh was. Lord, I pray for the unbelieving people in my life, that they would hear your calls to repentance, turning to you for life in Christ.

Exodus 8 – The Finger of God

The chapter divisions in our Bibles aren't part of the original Hebrew and Greek texts, though they are extremely helpful. Just occasionally, they don't line up with the structures within the text, and the 10 plagues is such a place. Plagues 1 to 9 form 3 triplets, and there are pointers to help us notice (e.g. plagues 1, 4, and 7 begin with Moses going to Pharaoh "in the morning"). The first triplet (blood, frogs, gnats) ends with the proclamation from the magicians that "This is the finger of God" (v19). The LORD is God above all gods, above all dark arts, unlimited in power – and especially greater than the gods of Egypt. But hard hearts won't listen; only God can bring life to the dead.

Living God, the only true God, whose existence does not depend on anything in your Creation, you alone are to be worshipped. Unless you had given me life in Christ, I would be forever dead in my sin. Thank you for Jesus. Forgive me my sins, and help me point others to you.

Exodus 9 – Heart Hardened

The second triplet of plagues (flies, livestock, boils) marks a significant change from the first. Now, there is differentiation between the Egyptians and the unaffected Israelites living in Goshen. Pharaoh could see what was happening but his heart was hardened against God in fixed and determined refusal to acknowledge God's greatness. The LORD is patient, but there comes a point where he hands rebellious people over to the desires of their heart. After the sixth plague (boils) we read that God hardened Pharaoh's heart (v12). It's not for us to know whose heart he will soften, whose he will harden, or when he will act in mercy in judgment. Our task is to point people to his great love for them.

Gracious God, your word says that your gospel is an aroma of life to some and death to others. You are pure, good, wise, and holy. You only do right. Help me, Lord, not to discriminate in who I speak to about you. Use me to grow your kingdom to your honour.

Exodus 10 – Calls to Repentance

The third triplet of plagues (hail, locusts, darkness) brings two developments. First, we notice how some of Pharaoh's subjects and officials have come to fear the LORD (9:20, 10:7), though it is a fear of terror, not honour. Second, these plagues display God's authority and rule over nature and weather – especially galling for the sun-worshipping Egyptians. The plagues display God in supreme power, in judgment and grace, and in creative glory. They were spread out in time over around six months, so the plagues also gave ample time for reflection and repentance. As Revelation uses these plague images to describe our world today, we see how God remains the same, calling people to life.

Lord God, your word makes it clear that these judgments are shadows of what is to come on the day of Christ's return. Thank you for your grace and patience. Lord, help me to honour your patience by clearly pointing my lost family and friends to hope and life in you.

Exodus 11 – Redeeming God's Son

In Exodus 4:22-23, God told Moses to go to Pharaoh and say, "Israel is my firstborn son." Since Pharaoh would deprive the LORD of his firstborn son in slavery, God would deprive Egypt of its firstborn sons in judgment. More, Israel would leave with wealth (v2), just as God had said over 400 years before to Abraham (Genesis 15:13-14). The coming Passover and redemption of Israel was long planned by God as a defining moment for his people. They were loved, redeemed by the substitutionary death of a lamb, and brought into new life with God in covenant relationship. Once Christ came to be our Passover Lamb, our blessing is even greater – the glorious reality the original pointed to.

Lord Jesus, you are the Son, eternally begotten of the Father, glorious in your deity. Thank you that you gave your life in substitutionary sacrifice that atones for my sins. Thank you for the faith that saves. Father, thank you for adopting me as your child. Help me, by the Spirit's power, to walk worthy of such adoption.

Exodus 12 – Passover, Fath, Remembrance

The Egyptians experienced the terrible, pitiless judgment of God applied equally to all irrespective of social standing. It was a shadow of the judgment to come to the earth at Christ's return. For God's people, the obedience of faith led them to choose lambs, slaughter them on the 14th day, smear blood on the doorway, eat in families, and be ready for travel in the middle of the night. All who exercised such faith were spared by the LORD; the only death in those houses was the substitutionary lamb. Half the chapter is instruction for remembrance, just as Christ our Passover Lamb gave instruction at his supper to remember him. We must never take grace for granted or forget Christ's work for us.

Lord Christ, Great Passover Lamb, forgive me that I am so quick to forget your tender love and ultimate sacrifice for me. Thank you that your death atones for my sin, and for giving me the faith to believe. Thank you for the Lord's Table remembrance in church; help me to participate truly.

Exodus 13 – Redemption & Unleavened Bread

The redemption of Israel, God's son, from Egypt is a defining moment for the people, revealing God's power to act in grace and judgment. It reverberates throughout the Old Testament, bringing identity to Israel and praise to God. That's why they were commanded to celebrate the Passover feast every year, followed by a 7-day Feast of Unleavened Bread (that is, bread made without yeast). Their identity as God's firstborn redeemed son was to be ever before them, even to the point of giving up a whole week of remembrance every year. Since Christ is our Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7), we have even more reason to pause periodically and meditate on his power and grace towards us.

Lord Jesus, Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, thank you that my sins are covered over and atoned for by your blood. Forgive me, Lord, that I rarely meditate on the full gravity of your work or the horror of my sin. Thank you for the freedom of peace to pause here with you.

Exodus 14 – Glory, Judgment, Salvation

Like faith, unbelief is seen in its actions. The Egyptian pursuit seems remarkable at first but is surely a product of unbelief, grief, and rage. The death and judgment of the Egyptian army isn't awkward or embarrassing for God; twice, God says he receives glory by it (v17-18). Likewise, he is glorified in his great work of salvation for Israel, the people who stepped forward through the waters "by faith" (Hebrews 11:29). At the return of Christ, when all things are made new again, God will be glorified in his holy justice through those in the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:15), glorified in his mercy through those who have come in repentance and faith in this life, and glorified in holy justice *and* mercy in the person of Christ, the Lamb of God.

Holy, Glorious God, none of your actions with us can diminish your glory in any way. You are unchangeably perfect in every way. Thank you for saving me by the faith you gave me. Help me to display your glory and extend your mercy to the world around me.

Exodus 15 – "He Has Become My Salvation"

It might seem strange to us to sing a joyful victory song while the bodies of our enemies washed up on the shore in judgment, but that's what's happening in this chapter. The *theme* of joy is in the power of God to save, not in gleeful crowing over the Egyptians. Verse 2 is picked up in Psalm 118, that great Passover psalm sung over Jesus on Palm Sunday. We might well sing to rejoice over Christ's victory over sin and death that saves us – and that is exactly what happens in Revelation 15 when God's people who have overcome this world because of Christ will again sing the song of Moses. God's will and power to save will ever be the theme of heaven's praise in Christ.

Magnificent Saviour and Lord, you are worthy of the eternal song of your people, celebrating and rejoicing over you and your great works of salvation. Thank you that you are my song, and that I can claim no merit or glory but only bring praise to you. Help me stay in tune with you, Lord.

Exodus 16 – Bread of Heaven

Having saved Israel from Egypt, God wasn't about to let them die in the wilderness. Their grumbling is an important reminder of *our dependence* on God every day – a fact which should drive us to call to him daily. We also see here the *abundant grace* of God, providing blessing and food that no-one had to work for other than to receive and collect. The *sufficiency* of God's provision is seen here too, with everyone having all they needed and no more (a point Paul takes up in 2 Cor 8:15 in relation to Christian generosity to other Christians in need). Remembering that this manna is a Bible image of Christ, the Bread of Life (see John 6:32-35), we're reminded again of our daily dependence on the abundant and sufficient grace of God in Christ.

Lord Jesus, Bread of Life, you are all the life and nourishment I need for eternity. You are gracious to me, providing all I need daily to do your will. As I am blessed by you, so help me to be generous to others in material things, in time, and in love. Teach me contentment in your sufficiency.

Exodus 17 – Testing, Testing

The quality of our faith in God is often seen most clearly in times of difficulty. God will even send us into hard places to test, strengthen, and grow our faith. In Psalm 81:7, God says *he tested Israel* at the Waters of Meribah. Did they pass the test, giving glory to God in humble petition? No, *they moaned and tested God* in unbelief. Psalm 95 exhorts us not to repeat their hard hearts. Instead, worship and bow down before him. Hebrews 3:7-14 calls Christians also to remember these lessons and to be participants in Christ. The battle against the Amalekites is a graphic example for us: As we go to do God's will, we do so with hands lifted to him in prayerful dependence giving him all the glory, confident of success.

Kind and Gracious Lord, I am sure I often test you in my faithlessness and prayerlessness. Thank you that you do give me cause to come to you often. Keep my heart alive, participating in Christ, joyful in faith and holiness. Help me to make it plain to everyone that I live for you.

Exodus 18 – Testimony

When Moses spoke with Jethro he left nothing out. He told of rescue from Egypt, of course, but also of the supernatural provision and protection they had received. Jethro took all this testimony to rejoice over the goodness of God. We often underestimate the impact that telling people of God's help through our troubles can have. So, Jethro brought his sacrifices and worship to the LORD who is "greater than all gods" (v11). As a refugee camp of former slaves, Israel's only governance centred on just one man, Moses. Jethro's advice about delegation was more than operationally sensible: It ensured that the laws, statutes, and will of God were understood, taught, and lived out throughout the camp.

Heavenly Father, it is helpful to reflect on how your hand has been on my life, and to give you thanks. I pray that the Spirit would prompt me naturally to speak of such things to others so that they might praise you too. Bless and encourage our church leaders as they work to serve you.

Exodus 19 – Identity, Mission, Nature

This is one of the Old Testament's most important chapters, where Israel are given an identity, a mission, and a nature. Their redemption has already happened – a result of God's own heart rather than anything they deserved. So their identity was "God's special possession," his own chosen and cherished delight. Their mission was to be a "kingdom of priests," making him known to the world and leading the world to him. Their nature was to be a "holy nation," participating in God's holiness in proximity to him and purity of life. The vision of God at Sinai was to help them grasp the magnitude and wonder of what they had been called to as God's people. 1 Peter 2:7-10 uses the same terms to describe the church in Christ, exhorting us to live them out in holiness and witness.

Holy God, I thank you that my salvation does not depend on any good work of mine, but solely on your electing grace. Thank you for calling me out of my sin and into your holy nation. Help me to pray for others, to tell them of you, and to lead them to you. Keep me in holy proximity in Christ.

Exodus 20 – A Covenant

Chapters 20-23 are often called "the Book of the Covenant" (or "the scroll of the covenant"; see 24:7). God had rescued his people, given them identity and mission, and then he bound himself to them in covenant obligation so that they might enjoy his presence and blessings. Like any covenant or contract, the two stone tablets were probably identical – one copy for God and one for his people Israel. The 10 Commandments weren't some kind of moral minimum or pass-mark for Paradise; they defined how God's people were to *be* much more than what they should do. Jesus explores this in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) by searching out our hearts and motives rather than our outward, superficial obedience. God is holy and jealous; we must honour him truly.

Holy Father, thank you for the revelation you gave of yourself at Sinai – majestic and holy, yet gracious and loving enough to bind yourself to sinners. Please forgive my sins. Teach me holiness in all of life.

Exodus 21 – Redemption and Restitution

In Egypt, Israel's slavery meant exploitation and abuse, just as it does for so many people even today. The laws on slavery in Exodus 21 are alien to us yet would have been radical to the Israelites, promising liberty for all and rights for women. If you fell on hard times, you could voluntarily enter someone's service in return for food and shelter, knowing that freedom would come if you wanted it. The laws about possessions again sound primitive to us but were hugely important for this newly formed nation under God. The "eye for eye" law was given to prevent excessive retribution – punishment should be proportionate to the crime. How sinful must we be, then, if our sins are only truly atoned for by the blood of the eternal Son of God?

Lord Jesus, I was a slave to sin and barely knew it – until you redeemed me. I barely grasp the seriousness of my crimes against you until I consider what it took to atone. O God, forgive my coldness and indifference, and lead me to true and joyful holiness of life.

Exodus 22 – Loopholes?

As we consider the statutes in the Book of the Covenant (the sum of chapters 20-23), we might spot loopholes – things we could do that aren't specifically prohibited but we know aren't right. Our sinful tendency is to see law as restrictive, and we want to test the boundaries. In Colossians 2:23, Paul points out that laws curb conduct but can't shape desire. We must remember that these instructions were given to an *already redeemed* people. They show us something of what God is like and what it means to live under his blessing, to live in thanksgiving and worship. As we praise God for our salvation in Christ, our heart's *desire* will become more and more to live for him. And that is freedom.

Saviour Jesus, I thank you that you kept the whole of the law, both in complete sinlessness and in doing good. Thank you for the righteousness credited to me by faith. Lord, grow my faith and love so that my heart's desire is to live for you in every way.

Exodus 23 – God-Centred Living

Sometimes we know the right thing to do, but through favouritism, pity, peer pressure or enmity we would rather do something else. Verses 1-9 are all about doing the right thing whatever influence we're under. It's right to do right, reflecting the righteousness of God. Verses 10-19 concern Sabbaths and the benefit of ordering our weeks and years around time with the LORD. The Festival of Unleavened Bread recalled their Passover redemption (past blessings), while the other two festivals gave thanks for harvest provisions (current blessings). Verses 20-23 wrap up the Book of the Covenant (Ch 20-23) with God's promised future blessings resulting from Israel's covenant obedience.

Heavenly Father, these words remind me of how easily I'm influenced by others into compromise, so often failing to do right. Help me to order my days, weeks, and years with a growing dependence on you. Keep my eyes on the future blessings of Christ, so that I might do right today.

Exodus 24 – A Covenant Meal with God

The Book of the Covenant (the covenant scroll, Ch 20-23) was read to the people and they agreed to abide by it (v7). Then, uniquely in the Old Testament, the people were sprinkled with blood – the "blood of the covenant" (v8). It was a kind of contract exchange; the covenant was sealed with blood. Remarkably, 70 elders then ascended the mountain with Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu where they saw God and enjoyed a fellowship meal in his presence (also unique in the Old Testament). It's a huge moment in Old Testament history. This is why the Lord's Table is so important to Jesus, signifying the New Covenant in his blood (Mark 14:24), with all Christians having been sprinkled with that blood (1 Peter 1:1-2). The Lord's Table is our fellowship meal with God!

Lord Jesus, thank you for the New Covenant, sealed with your blood. Thank you for the certainty of promise of complete redemption from this world. Give me the joy of coming into your presence with your people, your church, feasting with everyone in joyful participation.

Exodus 25 – Immanuel

In Eden, God had dwelt on the Earth with humanity. Human sin brought divine judgment, yet God's heart and intention remained the same. The story arc of the Bible is how God would again dwell on the earth with his people – and verse 8 is an enormous step in that direction. Hebrews 8:5 tells us that these tabernacle details are "shadows" of heavenly realities, so in the coming chapters we'll do well to keep looking from the 2D shadow to the 3D substance they speak of. The details start with the ark of the covenant (a chest containing the 10 Commandments on stone tablets), covered by the "mercy seat" (or "place of atonement"), above which God would indeed come to dwell among his people.

Infinite and Glorious God, you are worthy of all praise and worship in your very nature. More, your loving heart is on display in your gracious intention to dwell among us. Lord, I could never hope to come to you, and I thank you that you reached down to us in Christ, our Immanuel.

Exodus 26 – Heaven on Earth

This is the kind of chapter we typically skim through, though it is helpful to have the basic dimensions and layout of the tabernacle in our minds. It was 45 feet long, 15 feet wide, 15 feet high. The rear third was the Most Holy Place, a 15 feet cube separated from the Holy Place by a curtain decorated with cherubim (mighty angelic beings), made in the colours of fire (blue, purple, scarlet). The Most Holy Place was a kind of "New Eden" where God dwelt on the earth, with human entrance still barred by cherubim (see Genesis 3:24). Cherubim imagery worked into all the walls' curtains further creates a sense of heaven on earth. The tabernacle's very design holds promise of Eden restored and heaven on earth. And the fulfilment of that is Jesus.

Lord Jesus, it is clear that my sin would condemn me never to approach holiness unless you made a way for me to come. You have gone through the curtain to heaven itself; thank you for the promise of being with you in your new and perfect Creation.

Exodus 27 – The Way to God

By specific repeated phrases and vocabulary, the instructions for the tabernacle components and its later construction cleverly echo Genesis 1's account of Creation. The tabernacle was a kind of scale model of Creation for us: God's presence would dwell in the utterly unreachable Most Holy Place (heaven), while his priests would be holy to him, serving him in the Holy Place (God's people in the world). The courtyard represented the world where ceremonially clean people could approach him, while outside of it would remain all that was unclean. The placement of the altar for burnt offerings was a powerful reminder that the tabernacle was both the house of God and the *way* to come to him.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the tabernacle's imagery, reminding us that although you are utterly beyond reach for us naturally you have given us a way. Lord Jesus, thank you that you are the way, the truth, and the life. Your grace alone is my salvation.

Exodus 28 – Glory and Beauty

The next two chapters relate to the priests. Aaron's clothes (as High Priest) are especially notable. First, notice that his garments are the same colour and splendour as the walls of the tabernacle. He is to be holy, a man of heaven, representing God to the people. Second, we see that he has precious stones representing the people of God on his shoulders and his chest; he represents the entire nation before God. Lastly, notice that his holy garments are to be for "glory and beauty" (v2, 40). His role signifies the grace of God in providing a mediator, an act of immeasurable compassion to lost humanity. Jesus, our heavenly High Priest, represents us by name and reveals God to us in glory and beauty.

Lord Jesus, perfect mediator between God and humanity, thank you that you are my High Priest. Thank you for showing me the Father, and for representing me at the throne of heaven. As a subject in your kingdom of priests, help me reflect your glory and beauty in holiness of life.

Exodus 29 – Ordination and Consecration

In v1-9, Aaron and his sons put on their new priestly garments. They looked ready, but they were far from it. So in v10-14 a bull's life was taken as a substitute death for the sins of Aaron and his sons – a sin offering. A burnt offering was a way of saying to God that a person was wholly dedicated to him, so v15-18 is a first burnt offering of a ram. But then a second burnt offering was given, the blood of which was put on the men's ears, hands, and feet, as well as on their garments and the altar. They were holy, consecrated to God in every way, together. The presentation/food offering was a sign of fellowship with God. All this was so that the LORD who saves could dwell among his people (v44-46).

Lord Jesus, Son of God, you needed no sacrifice for sin to enter heaven's glory. Sinless Son, you are heaven's glory. Thank you that you are both my High Priest and my once-for-all sacrifice for sin. Forgive my sins, Lord. Accept my praise. May I be wholly consecrated by your glory.

Exodus 30 – Incense

There were two altars in the tabernacle enclosure. The altar for burnt sacrifice was in the courtyard and offerings such as bulls would entail hard, dirty work. The bronze basin was needed by the priests to wash before entering the tabernacle tent itself. The change of scene would have included a change in smell, due to the oils and incense. The second altar was much smaller and only for burning incense. It stood just outside the curtain to the Most Holy Place, so its gentle perfume would seep through to the presence of God himself at the mercy seat. As such, the incense is a beautiful picture of prayer (Ps 141:2, Rev 8:3,4) – our very words ascending to God at the throne of grace.

Heavenly Father, it is a miracle of grace that my words should rise to your ears and be pleasing to you. Thank you for the Spirit's work in me, calling me to Jesus and enabling me to call you Father. May my prayer and delight be set before you as incense forever.

Exodus 31 – Spirit-Filled Beauty

When God created the heavens and the earth, he gave them lavish, sumptuous beauty. It was necessary and appropriate that the tabernacle complex reflected that glory and beauty and so the craftsmanship required had to be second to none. Bezalel was an artist, skilled with his hands. He is also the first person in the Bible to be filled with the Holy Spirit – suggesting that we should value beauty and art more than we do. Note that Bezalel and Oholiab would have learnt their skills as slaves in Egypt, prepared (like Joseph and Moses) in obscurity for the great works God had planned for them to do. Even so, our work for God is never an end in itself but rather to glorify him and rest in him.

Living God, you didn't have to create this world so beautiful, and yet you did. I love how Creation displays your own glory and beauty. Father, I know you have works for me to do and that you will prepare and equip me to do them. Lord, then, please strengthen my faith.

Exodus 32 – Intercession

These are the very people who had been delivered from Egypt, nourished by manna from heaven, and awed by the sight of God at Mt Sinai. Aaron's involvement is especially shocking, and his excuses are ridiculous (v22-24). If we are shocked by the judgment of death in v27-28 & 35 it's because we are more like those Israelites than we realise, not understanding the depth of sin or stench of offence. God would be just to destroy them, and he told Moses he would in v10 – even promising to make Moses himself into "a great nation." Moses' prayer in v11-13 has no reference to himself but calls for mercy, for covenant faithfulness, and for God's honour. Such intercession gets heard. How breathtaking it is, then, to know that Christ intercedes perfectly for us.

Heavenly Father, you would be just and right to condemn me and banish me from all that is good. I'm sorry that I barely realise the full extent of my sinfulness. Lord Jesus, thank you that your intercession for me is perfect and eternally effective. Help me to pray for others in your will.

Exodus 33 – God's Presence Among His People

God met with Moses at a 'tent of meeting' outside the camp. The plan was that the tabernacle would become *the* tent of meeting where God would meet Israel, dwelling among them in the centre of the camp. Following their golden calf idolatry, Israel's destruction was averted in response to Moses's prayer. But here in Exodus 33, God said he wouldn't go with Israel into Canaan, negating any need for the tabernacle as a tent of meeting. This would be a disaster, so again Moses prayed. In v15-16, he said to God that they won't go anywhere if God is not with them, since it's the presence of God among his people that distinguishes them from all others. Our local churches need Christ to be central among us, not outside knocking on the door (Rev 3:20).

Lord Jesus, you said that apart from you we can do nothing. When we remain in you, you nourish and bless us to your own glory. Forgive me that I try so much in my own strength; help me to live and act conscious of your presence, ready to do your will in your strength and power.

Exodus 34 – The LORD, The LORD

At the end of chapter 34, Moses asked to see God's glory. God said he would cause his goodness to pass before Moses and proclaim the name, "the LORD." So v6-7: "The LORD – the LORD is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth…" These words echo throughout the Bible because these are the means by which we behold his goodness and glory. This is his very nature – and the grounds on which we may call for compassion and forgiveness. God went on to re-establish the covenant with replacement tablets in his abundant faithful love. Moses' face shone with reflected glory which will always be feared and misunderstood by those who are ignorant (2 Cor 3:16). Jesus, Son of God, embodies all God's glory to us, seen by faith.

Lord Jesus, you are the evident public display of the compassion and grace of God. Lord, too often I lack compassion, I'm quick to anger, and I act faithlessly. Help me live out my union with you in love to others.

Exodus 35 – Gifts

The wide range of materials required for the tabernacle construction inevitably meant that they would need to be provided by people all across the camp. Some people could bring skills as well as materials. No-one was *required* to give, but everyone gave generously and willingly according to their ability. Where did they get such riches? These former slaves had plundered Egypt at the exodus, so everything they had were actually gifts from God. Bezalel and Oholiab were gifted craftsmen, but also had the gift of teaching others how to use their gifts. God still gives each of us gifts to use for his church, also gifting us with spiritual teachers to show us how to apply them. All our *combined* gifts matter.

Lord Jesus, the church is yours to build, nourish, and grow for your glory. It's amazing that you work through us in the world, graciously giving each of us gifts to be used in and for your church. Help me to see that all that I have and am are truly yours, for your work and glory.

Exodus 36 – Perfections

The rest of Exodus is largely about the construction of the tabernacle complex and the writer is at pains to point out that it was built exactly as commanded (in chapters 25-31). Given the lavish expense of some of the materials required, it is beautiful that the artisans had to request a stop to donations. For us as readers, this chapter feels repetitive based on what we've read before: Why not just write, "The tabernacle was built to spec"? The tabernacle was the earthly arena of God's glorious presence, a shadow and copy of the heavenly reality and the only meeting place of God and humanity. Emphatic perfection and obedience stresses the uniqueness of the place. When God gives a single means of approach to his holy presence, perfection is required.

Lord Jesus, we're reminded again that the tabernacle is a pale shadow of the heavenly realities you passed through for us. Thank you that you are the perfect meeting place of God and humanity. Thank you that I can meet with you, here and now, knowing your presence.

Exodus 37 – Presence

The ark (or chest) would contain the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, the basis of the covenant between God and his people. Storing the tablets in this way meant that the ark was a kind of "government record" holding both parties to the terms of the covenant. It's notable, then, that this was the only item in the Most Holy Place. Above it was the "mercy seat" (or "place of atonement") which was in turn below the particular Presence of God among his people. It is not a place of judging condemnation or punishment, but one of atonement that enables us to draw near to the God of compassion and grace, who abounds in faithful love and truth. Today, now, Jesus is our place of atonement, the Presence of God with us, our sealed covenant hope.

Holy God, a sinner like me would always be consumed by your holiness unless you forgave me and credited me with a righteousness not my own. Thank you that Jesus is my sacrifice and place of atonement, bringing me into fellowship with you. Father, forgive my sins today.

Exodus 38 – Repeating the Point

Again, the repetitive nature of these chapters stands out, hammering home the truth that everything was made exactly as God had instructed. It's worth remembering that those instructions were given to Moses on Mt Sinai before Israel began their pagan revelry and worship of their golden calf. God's plans to provide a means of approach for sinners pre-dated their terrible sin and, most beautifully, wasn't thwarted by it. The tabernacle would still be built in exactly the same way for the same purpose. In New Testament terms, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). If God waited for us to sort ourselves out before offering us salvation then grace wouldn't be grace at all.

Heavenly Father, your word says you loved me before the foundation of the world. You secured my salvation before I was born. Christ's death covers all my past, present, and future sins. In all this you are glorious and praiseworthy. Thank you for my life in Christ.

Exodus 39 – Holy to the LORD

The priestly garments are part and parcel of the whole tabernacle system and once they were completed Moses was presented with the flat-packed tabernacle, courtyard, furnishings, and tools. The High Priest would have a holy diadem on which was engraved "HOLY TO THE LORD." All this would mean that a holy God could dwell among sinful people. Zechariah 14 points forward to the end of time, when Jesus will return to the earth to reign in glory and live among his people. On that day, says Zechariah, "the words HOLY TO THE LORD will be on the bells of the horses"! That is, Christ will have so purified and beautified his people and his new Creation that *we* will dwell in perfect holiness forever.

Holy Father, you were gracious to provide ancient Israel with the tabernacle so that your people might approach you even as you dwelt among them. Thank you for Jesus, the ultimate High Priest, who will make me anew in his likeness and holiness. Lord, help me to live out holiness today, to taste that future heavenly reality with you.

Exodus 40 – Tent of Meeting?

Among the details of the assembly of the tabernacle is a simple but profound shift: It was becoming the "tent of meeting" (v2, 6, 12…) where God would meet with his people on the earth. Once everything was built, "The cloud covered the tent of meeting" – as it had covered Mt Sinai – "and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (v34). Because of that, however, no-one could now enter the tabernacle – not even Moses. How could sinful people enter the holy and glorious presence of the LORD? That is the question Leviticus will answer for us, showing us the need for atoning sacrifice for sin and a mediating, representative High Priest. Such are the shadows; the substance is Christ (Colossians 2:17).

Father in heaven, I often take for granted how amazing it is that I can come into your presence at any time or place. Thank you for adopting me, uniting me to Jesus, and filling me with the Holy Spirit. Thank you for such intimacy with you in all your glorious holiness.

Leviticus 1 – The Burnt Offering

The first of Israel's five great sacrifices is described without introduction or preamble. The Burnt Offering was the most common sacrifice in the Old Testament even though it was costly and usually voluntary. The worshipper would identify with the offering by touch before slaughtering it himself. In effect, the worshipper was saying, "This is me, giving my whole self to God." In a sense, they were being transformed (to dust) and transferred to heaven. If a bull was beyond your means, you could bring other specified offerings – but since everyone needed atonement, everyone had to bring something (atonement was never without cost). Christ has now been transformed and transferred, and as we have union with him by faith we are pleasing to the LORD.

Lord Jesus, as I go through Leviticus and think about sacrifices, priests, atonement, and holiness, open my eyes to see more of your glory. Help me to grow in wonder and praise for what you have done, and show me the true nature of holiness lived out for you.

Leviticus 2 & 3 – Tribute and Fellowship

Neither the Grain Offering (Ch 2) nor the Fellowship Offering (Ch 3) had any atonement value. So why were they there? The Grain Offering was a *tribute* from a subject to God as king. Covenants were often marked by salt because it doesn't deteriorate with time, so the "salt of the covenant" had to be included with every Grain Offering. It was a happy tribute to the benevolent covenant King. Of the five great sacrifices in these chapters, the Fellowship Offering would be offered last of all. It was the goal of the others. A worshipper, whose sin was atoned for by other sacrifices, could come with a Fellowship Offering and offer some to the LORD, some to the priests, and eat some himself. It was a meal with the covenant King at his invitation!

Lord Jesus, you have fully atoned for all my sins in your work. Thank you. Help me to devote my whole self to your kingdom, and to enter fully into the fellowship with you that you have made possible.

Leviticus 4 – Sin Offering

Whereas the offerings covered so far produced an aroma or food pleasing to the LORD, they did nothing to deal with the worshipper's sin. The key phrase in Leviticus 4 is, "…will make atonement… and he will be forgiven" (v26, 31, 35). The blood of the animal was spilt in place of the worshipper's. The blood was the life so, as the blood went towards the LORD, the sinner was both sanctified and cleansed of sin as he was represented by the blood of the sacrifice. There were no exceptions. The sacrifice was mandatory for everyone since everyone had sinned – and leaders of God's people were held especially accountable. Now, Christ has achieved "the removal of sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb 9:28).

Lord Jesus, because of you there is no condemnation for me. You are the sacrifice for my sin, cleansing me from guilt completely and forever. Free my guilty conscience from the shame of past sins, remembering them only to bring you glory in your grace to me.

Leviticus 5 – Reparation

After some specific 'cases' needing the Sin Offering, we come to the Guilt Offering (continued in Lev 6:1-7). Justice in the Old Testament generally falls into "doing right" and "putting right." The Sin Offering was an atoning sacrifice that purified the worshipper from sinning (failing to "do right"). But where there's sin there's harm, so the Guilt Offering sought to bring reparation for loss or damage in addition to purification from sin. Repentance that makes no effort to right wrongs might well be questioned for authenticity, presuming on the grace of God without participating in his justice. The more we understand the depths of our union with Christ, the more we will hate sin, seek to do right, and work to put wrongs right.

Heavenly Father, in whom there is purity, light, justice, and goodness, with no shade of dark or doubt, please forgive me for not even seeing myself in all my sinfulness. Help me to do right. And when I sin or see sin in others, give me grace and wisdom to put things right when I can.

Leviticus 6 – Priestly Service

We're given further instructions on the five great sacrifices in Chapters 6 & 7, this time particularly from the perspective of the priests. Priests were to be holy, very much part of the tabernacle complex, and so they couldn't just buy or produce food in the common marketplace. Their food had to be holy to ensure they were kept holy, so they would take part of the holy offerings for their food – to be eaten in a holy place. Worshippers, however, didn't offer food to the priests but to God, and the priests' food was a gift to them from the LORD's portion. Why does it all matter? First, to keep the priests holy to God. Second, to remind everyone that God's ministers are servants above all else.

Heavenly Father, thank you that Christ is the perfect sacrifice and High Priest, and advocate for me in your presence. Thank you that you provide church leaders today. Help us to give generously and happily to your work on earth.

Leviticus 7 – Living Sacrifices

Here end the instructions for the five great sacrifices. How were they used? First, you'd bring a Sin Offering – an animal must die in your place as punishment for your sin. Then the Guilt Offering would make reparation for the damage or loss your sin caused. A Burnt Offering would be made to commit your whole self to the LORD. Fourthly, a Grain Offering would honour God as your covenant King. The Fellowship Offering was the goal; having been purified from sin you could approach the LORD in fellowship, thanksgiving, oath, or simply as a freewill gesture. Christ has purified us from all sin and credited us with righteousness by faith. We are called to offer our whole selves as living sacrifices for his kingdom in our eternal fellowship with him.

Holy Saviour, the salvation you have accomplished for me is as complete as it is free. Yet as grim as I find these descriptions of animal sacrifice I know they're only a shadow of the pain you went through for me. Help me, every day, to live your kingdom life to the very full.

Leviticus 8 – Human Priests

This chapter is a re-run of Exodus 29, repeated here now that the tabernacle is ready for service. Being sinful men, the priests had to make Sin Offerings and Burnt Offerings to purify themselves from sin and to be wholly dedicated to holy service. The fact that they were sinful points to their humanity – we need a man in God's presence to represent us. This in turn reminds us of the glory of Christ our great High Priest, since he is the sinless man who now stands in heaven as our advocate before God. More, in offering himself as our Sin Offering, there is no more we can add. No wonder he cried out, "It is finished" in satisfaction and triumph as he died.

Lord Jesus, glorious in your eternal being, thank you that your priesthood is permanent and superior to those 2D shadows in the past. I'm sorry for my sin that caused you such pain. Help me to live rightly for you today.

Leviticus 9 – Eden Re-entered

The days when Adam dwelt with God in Eden were long gone since Adam's sin led to banishment. Entrance to Eden had been closed off on pain of death. We've seen how the tabernacle had deliberate echoes of Eden alongside imagery of heaven (e.g. cherubim everywhere). Here in Leviticus 9 Aaron the High Priest was enabled to do what Adam couldn't: He re-entered the Holy Presence of God and lived. God himself had provided the means: The tabernacle, the priesthood, the sacrifices, his own presence and glory. Aaron had to offer Sin and Burnt Sacrifices for himself and all the people to make atonement and those sacrifices were consumed by fire from God. The reaction of the people was to be physically, emotionally, and spiritually overwhelmed by God.

Glorious and Gracious God, how astonishing it is that you provided that means by which sinful people could approach you. How much more wonderful it is that Jesus is now both sacrifice and sympathetic High Priest, revealing your glory as seen in your love, justice, and compassion.

Leviticus 10 – Holiness and Grace

Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, had received all the detailed and specific instruction on how to approach God. Having seen their father enter God's holy presence, they stepped up and offered unauthorised fire. God had sent out fire to consume the *authorised* burnt offering, but their approach led *them* to being consumed. This time, instead of a joyous shout, there was shocked silence. Their bodies would taint the tabernacle with death; was it all over? Uniquely, God addressed just Aaron in v8-11, confirming him as High Priest to ensure God's laws were taught. Acting for his own glory, God made no mistake. So since Aaron was "of" God's holiness he must likewise not mourn his sons.

Holy Father, forgive me for the times I approach you without due reverence for all you have done to make that possible. You have given just one Way, your Son, and I thank you for him. Thank you that your gracious work is never put off by our sins. Help me live a holy life.

Leviticus 11 & 12 Life and Death

In Lev 10:10, the LORD told Aaron to teach the distinction "between the holy and the common, and the clean and the unclean." Anything in God's presence is holy; everything else is common. Everything common is either clean or unclean. Crucially, only that which is clean may be near holiness and nothing unclean may approach. The Israelites needed to be ceremonially clean to approach God and to have him dwell among them. These chapters on clean and unclean seem impenetrable to us until we think in terms of life and death. God gives life; sin brings death. And since life is in blood (17:11), a loss of blood has a whiff of death and eating blood takes that which belongs to God. Carnivores and scavengers were, therefore, unclean food.

Holy God, none of your laws are arbitrary or meaningless. Thank you that all you command is for our good. These laws remind me of the wonder of being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, in union with Christ in glory. Forgive me that I treat such things so lightly; renew my awe.

Leviticus 13 – “Unclean, Unclean!”

The point of this long chapter is brought home in v45-46, where someone had to cry out, “Unclean, unclean” and live outside the camp. Everything (and everyone) was either holy or common, and anything common was either clean or unclean. Nothing unclean could ever approach holiness. These skin conditions or problems of mildew and mould had a whiff of decay, of death, and are utterly incompatible with holiness and life. Worse, uncleanness was contagious – if you touched something unclean you would become unclean. All of this highlights the social and spiritual desolation of people with leprosy approaching Jesus: He was glorified in touching them, healing them, and restoring them.

Lord Jesus, everything you touch is improved, healed, restored, given life. Thank you that you touched me and brought me to your Father’s heart. Lord, thank you that I am indwelt and united to holiness. Help me to live out that holy reality in my life today – in all I say, all I do.

Leviticus 14 – Declared Clean

There’s obviously no moral failure associated with skin disease or a mouldy house, so why was there a need for sacrifice and atonement? Such things have the whiff of death and decay about them, representing the pollution of sin in the world. As such, anyone unclean from such things could not approach God in his holiness. Back in Lev 4, when a person brought a sin offering we read “and he will be forgiven.” Here in Lev 14, once offering was made we read “and he will be made clean” – no forgiveness was needed because no direct sin had been committed. This chapter explains why Jesus would send healed lepers to the priests so that they could be declared clean, rejoin society, and go to the temple to worship with thanksgiving.

Lord Jesus, as I look around I see decay and death everywhere. Sin has polluted everything. Thank you that the redemption you promise is total: A life in a world without pain, sin, suffering, or death ever again. While my own body ages, Lord, renew my inner person in fullness with you.

Leviticus 15 – Universally Unclean

We've seen how food, illness, skin disease, mould, and even sex made a person ceremonially unclean. That means that humanity is naturally unclean. Verse 31 is key to understanding the core matter: God is holy and his holy tabernacle was at the centre of Israel's camp, so the camp's population were to be kept ceremonially clean. Anyone or anything unclean had to exit the camp until clean. Not all uncleanness was directly sinful, but the whiff of decay, death, or loss of life (e.g. blood and bodily fluids) was enough to make you unclean. Everything to Lev 15 (the tabernacle, offerings, priesthood, rules for ceremonial cleanness) are to enable sinful people to approach a holy God. The summit is Chapter 16.

Living God, you are no less holy today than you were then. Thank you that every unclean person Jesus touched was healed and made clean, and then even forgiven and restored. Lord, thank you for the indwelling Holy Spirit and the freedom of approach you have granted me in Jesus.

Leviticus 16 – Full Atonement For All

This is the peak and pivot of Leviticus. The High Priest would sacrifice to make atonement for his own sin, and then he would make atonement for the whole nation. The first goat would be the nation's sin offering, and its blood (life) was taken behind the curtain right into the presence of God. Symbolically, the life of God's people was hidden with God. The second goat went east, taking the sins of the people far away. Even the tabernacle was purified (v16). The Day of Atonement was a solemn wonder: Sins removed, the tabernacle cleansed, and a High Priest representing the people of God in the very holy presence of the LORD. This is the Sabbath rest Jesus has accomplished for us, right now.

Holy Son of God, great Hight Priest and perfect sacrifice, thank you that you have sent my sin away and that you now represent me in heaven's glory. Forgive me all my sins, Lord. Clean the stain of guilt away from me. Help me to find and know all my rest in you.

Leviticus 17 – Life & Exclusive Worship

Everything so far in Leviticus has centred on the tabernacle system, showing how sinful people should live so that they can approach God. Now we come to laws beyond the tabernacle – and even outside the camp. Note two things: First, since blood (life) is required to atone for human sin it was not to be consumed or treated lightly. Life is from God and to God. Second, now that there was a complete and proscribed way to come to God, no other attempted means was acceptable. Worse, making offering away from the tabernacle would be idolatry since God dwelt among them in the Most Holy Place. This exclusivity is now reflected in Jesus words: “No-one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Son so that I might come to you. Forgive me for my idolatry and false worship, and help me to know you truly in him. Lord Jesus, thank you for loving me and promising to keep me forever.

Leviticus 18 – Surprisingly Necessary Laws

As we look at the laws in Lev 18 we might think that such prohibitions would be self-evident in any society. And yet these commands were necessary because they condemn practices that had become normalised in Egypt and Canaan. Israel were to be distinctively holy among the nations. The reason these laws seem so unnecessary to us is that the morality of our society has been shaped so much by Christian ethics. More, the biblical model of monogamous union of one man and one woman is an image of the faithful love of God and his people (or Christ and his church). The further people drift from God (individually or collectively), the further away from biblical ethics society falls.

Holy God, you have brought sinners into a beautiful mystical union with Christ, something that was conceived in eternity and will last forever. Thank you for Christ’s love for his church. Help your people to reflect your love back to you, displaying that love to the world in holy lives.

Leviticus 19 – Be Holy: Love Your Neighbour

Chapters 18 and 20 are very similar, which is a classic Bible technique to give extra focus on what comes in the middle. Everything up to the Day of Atonement (Lev 16) was about cleanness and how to approach God. But here the direction is reversed: We see how the holiness of God in the midst of his people is to flow outwards through them: "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy." Yet notice how it works out: It's in the daily acts of goodness, honesty, honour, truthfulness and generosity of life, summed up in v18's "love your neighbour as yourself." In union with Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we live out our holiness in every practical act of love to others.

Father, I often prefer to think of lived-out holiness as something rather abstract. Thank you for this reminder that holiness is entirely of you and is to be worked outwards in love towards others. Help me to live well for you, conscious of your holy presence.

Leviticus 20 – Defilement

We've seen how many things could make a person unclean, causing them to have to go outside the camp. But the sin and moral failures in Lev 18 & 20 made a person *defiled*, having the potential to defile a whole nation if normalised, causing them to be vomited out of the land. Israel were to be holy simply because they were the LORD's and he dwelt among them. They were not to live like the Egyptians (where they'd come from) or the Canaanite nations (where they were going to; see 18:2-3). Where Lev 19 gave positive laws about loving others (holiness in action, flowing outwards), Lev 18 & 20 give distinguishing prohibitions (holiness protected and preserved from defilement). Holiness shines in love and goodness, shunning evil.

Holy God, too often I think of holiness solely in terms of separation from evil, and not enough in embracing love and goodness – and doing them. Help me to shun temptation and evil, and to shine your holiness in a life of joyful submission to you in Christ, loving others with his compassion.

Leviticus 21 – Perfect High Priest

Given the brokenness of humanity, it might seem quite appropriate for us to be represented before God by an imperfect High Priest. But all imperfection is the pollution of sin in the world, and the High Priest was emphatically holy – "of" God – so such pollution would be intolerable. In fact, we might suggest that Satan himself would delight to parade us before God with all our sin and failure on display. How wonderful, then, to be in Christ, being represented by the one who is our faithful High Priest and Advocate, so that we are seen in heaven in him, credited with righteousness and beautified and perfected in his glory. Leviticus is the shadow; Christ is the substance.

Holy Jesus, my great High Priest, you alone are holy and glorious by nature, and yet you lavish such love on us and call us brothers and sisters. Thank you that though I am all sin by nature, in your forgiveness and grace there is now no condemnation. Help me to live out your holy perfections.

Leviticus 22 – Perfect Sacrifice

In the days of Malachi at the end of the Old Testament, God condemned the priests of the time for offering sacrifices to God that they wouldn't set before a governor (Malachi 1:8). If we think, "This will do for God, and I'll save the good part for something else," we display at best a cool heart for him and at worst just dry and empty religion. If we doubt that he is worthy of our best or most (in time, money, worship, love for others, etc) we need only remember the ultimate perfect sacrifice that God himself gave to atone for our sins. Those perfect bulls and goats all spoke of the glorious once-for-all sacrifice of Christ himself. Wholly forgiven, we are to offer our whole selves as living sacrifices – gladly so.

My God and Saviour, I confess I do hold back and I don't devote everything consciously for you. Thank you that all my sin and guilt are washed away in your abundant forgiveness. Give me the heart of Christ by the Spirit's sanctifying work, so that I might live wholly for you today.

Leviticus 23 – Rhythms of Life

Seven appointed times were given for the nation. There was the weekly Sabbath, three Spring festivals, and three Autumn festivals. Some were sombre, some joyous. Some remembered God's grace in the distant past, others were focussed on his present provision. They might seem remote to us, but they meant that the rhythms of life for the nation revolved around the presence of the LORD among them – in thanksgiving and grateful dependence on his covenant blessing. Israel was blessed to gather, resting from work and enjoying all that God had given. If only such rest with him could last for ever! Yet that is exactly the eternal rest Christ has in store for all his people (Hebrews 4:9-10).

Heavenly Father, I thank you for the rhythms of my life that mean I can be with you daily and gather in sacred assembly with your holy people every week. Thank you for my life lived for you and with you. Lord, help me to rest in you; keep me from sin.

Leviticus 24 – The Light of Life

The light of the lamp in the Holy Place was to shine forwards (Exodus 25:37), onto the twelve loaves representing the tribes of Israel, Sabbath by Sabbath in a weekly rhythm of life. It was a beautiful image of the whole nation under God's constant blessing, his face shining on them, his Name placed on them (Numbers 6:24-27). The "eye for an eye" laws at the end of the chapter were to ensure that punishment for crime was just and proportionate, so we might wonder why the blasphemer was stoned to death. To curse the name of the God who shines life and blessing is to reject him and his gifts. To curse God is to choose death – a point graphically brought home that day, but also repeated every day as people reject the gospel of Christ.

Lord Jesus, Author and Giver of life, forgive me for every act of mine that denies or rejects your blessings to me. Thank you for your eternal, unchanging blessing bringing light and life and hope to me in dark days in a dark world. Help me to shine brightly for you, even today.

Leviticus 25 – Jubilee

The Sabbath was holy time with God, and holy time with God is the gift we were created to enjoy. Leviticus 1 to 15 was all about *approaching* God, reaching a climax on the Day of Atonement in chapter 16. The chapters after that teach about God's blessing and holiness *flowing out and through* his people and the Sabbaths were foretastes of the eternal rest he has in store for all his people. The Year of Jubilee would ensure that no-one amassed wealth without limit, while also meaning that no family became destitute beyond hope. All the land belonged to God anyway – and he cares for rich and poor alike. Besides, money can't buy the gift God gives freely: Time with himself.

Living God, you are gracious to give time with you, sanctified precisely because you are in it. Thank you for the time and peace to be with you, and for the prospect of your promised eternal rest. Help me, Lord, to ground all my hope and rest in you.

Leviticus 26 – Blessings or Curses?

The blessings and curses of the covenant are spelled out. It's God's delight to gather his people, to bless, and to walk among them (v12). The curses for disobedience are laid out as escalating in severity and avoidable by repentance. We see that each curse is a foretaste of life away from God's blessing, with the ultimate result being Israel scattered from the promised land, far from God physically and spiritually. Elijah, Jeremiah, Amos and other prophets would be sent by God to call Israel to repentance, regularly using the language of Leviticus 26 to explain what was happening and why. God is life, and will always call sinners to life in Christ, but over and over people are hard-hearted, choosing sin.

Saviour Jesus, if you had not called me by your Spirit I would have remained lost and hard-hearted for ever. Thank you for calling me to repentance. Hear me as I repent of my ongoing sins, both intentional and unintentional. Thank you for giving me life in you.

Leviticus 27 – Vows and Redemption

1 Samuel begins with the barren woman Hannah praying to the LORD for a son, promising to give the child over to the service of the LORD. Leviticus 27 deals with such vows, where anyone may voluntarily vow to devote people, animals, houses, or land to the LORD. Anything so devoted was then at the disposal of the priests. Such vows shouldn't be taken lightly: If circumstances changed so that the devoted items needed to be redeemed, the redemption price set at the start would be paid (with 20% added in some cases). Everything we are and have are already God's, so it's unwise to make rash or empty promises. Ananias and Sapphira paid with their lives when they lied to God about such gifts (Acts 5).

Holy, all-knowing God, you will not be mocked or cheated. You are the gracious giver, and I know that all I am and have are already at your disposal. Help me to know that in my heart, so that I hold nothing back in deception or idolatry.

Numbers 1 – You're in the Army Now

It's easy to see why this book is called Numbers. This is the first census in the book and it's explicitly counting the number of men who could serve in Israel's army. For each man there would have been the honour of being counted and the reality of battles to come. A key theme in Numbers is the faith needed to step forward to take hold of all that the LORD has promised. Revelation 7:4-5 deliberately echoes the Numbers 1 census to remind us as Christians that we are counted by God, sealed for eternity, and yet engaged in spiritual warfare daily. Ancient Israel proved themselves faithless for the battle despite God's presence among them. We must learn from their mistakes and overcome in Christ.

Lord Jesus, you have already secured victory over temptation, sin, and even death. As I battle with temptations and my own sinful desire, work in me to live for you. Help me to do the works you've prepared, fighting the battles I face by drawing on your strength and grace by faith.

Numbers 2 – Military Stance

The specific arrangement of the tribes makes it clear that this was a military camp. While the men had been counted for the army, the whole camp had roles to play in the battles to come – just as all Christians are involved in spiritual warfare today. Since the tabernacle's entrance was on the eastern side, this was the "front" of the camp. That made Judah the lead tribe. While that's probably because it was the largest by soldier count, we can't help but remember that Jacob had prophesied kings in Judah's line in Genesis 49. Above all, this new perspective on the camp reveals to us the extent to which God was among his people: He was the absolute centre of society both physically and spiritually.

Living God, when you are at the centre of your people we are, of course, invincible. When you are for us, who can be against us? Forgive me, Lord, that I'm often quick to see problems larger than they are, forgetting the Spirit within and the Son ahead and beside me. Help me to stand.

Numbers 3 – On Guard

There were 12 tribes in Israel, with Joseph's descendants *further* split into the half-tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. That meant 12 tribes could be arranged around the camp (Chapter 2), leaving 1 tribe over for specific service for the LORD. The Levites would stand before God in lieu of the firstborn sons of each family in Israel (with the redemption prices set in Leviticus 27 paid to redeem the excess number of firstborn sons in Israel compared with the number of Levites). Why does it matter? It's because the Levites would camp immediately around the tabernacle, keeping the other tribes at a distance. God needs no guard, but recalling Nadab and Abihu we know that casual contempt for God's holiness is lethal.

Holy God, you were gracious to dwell among your people so that they could enjoy your presence without being consumed by your holiness. How much more wonderful it is to draw near to you in Christ, as he is in me by your Spirit. Keep reminding me of your holiness, and your grace.

Numbers 4 – In Service

A lack of familiarity with Numbers 4 once cost a man his life. The census of Levites in Chapter 3 was to count them in lieu of the nation's firstborn sons. This census in Chapter 4 is about men of an age for tabernacle service, their primary function being transportation. The Kohathite clan were to carry the most holy objects after they had been packed up by the priests. The priests were holy, but the Kohathites weren't. The Kohathites couldn't look at (v20) or touch (v15) the holy objects or they would die. In 1 Chronicles 13, Uzzah touched the ark of God while it was being brought to Jerusalem, and he died. Even the seraphim before God cover their eyes in his holy presence. All the more amazing, then, that we shall one day see his face and live (Revelation 22:4).

Holy Father, I am barely aware of the true intensity of your holiness, of how spectacularly pure and beautiful and different you are. I am so finite and dull. Thank you that the Holy Spirit is in me, sanctifying me and conforming me to the likeness of Jesus.

Numbers 5 – No Secret Sins

Leviticus taught us about how only someone who was ceremonially clean could approach God in his holiness at the tabernacle. Numbers 5 begins with a reminder, saying that unclean people had to exit the camp. This helps us make sense of the ritual in v11-31. Its purpose was to protect innocent women from spurious accusations from their husbands in a male-dominated culture. An innocent woman had nothing to fear; there was nothing poisonous in what she was to drink. A guilty woman, however, trying to conceal her guilt, would be unclean so that drinking holy water would be disastrous. The LORD knows all our secret sins and we dishonour him by our lack of confession.

Gracious God, your laws display your great compassion on the most vulnerable of people. It's also clear that there is nothing hidden from you. Lord God, please forgive me all my sin, wash away my guilt and cleanse my heart from fear of punishment.

Numbers 6 – Consecration and Blessing

The word “Nazirite” comes from the Hebrew word for “consecrated.” A person could voluntarily consecrate (devote) themselves to God for a period of time, usually in combination with an oath. It was a solemn undertaking, as evidenced by the sacrifices surrounding it. Samson was probably a life-long Nazirite, along with (possibly) Samuel, but it was usually done for shorter periods of time. The practice is obscure to us now, but what remains clear is that we must be careful not to dishonour God with rash promises. As Israel’s time at Mt Sinai was coming to an end, it’s appropriate to have words of blessing over God’s people. They are words of immense promise and a statement of ownership by God. More, they are all ours in Christ.

Holy Saviour, you have consecrated me for your service and blessed me with your eternal protection, presence, grace, favour, and peace. You know I have all sorts of hopes and intentions, but please forgive my rash promises and help me live in daily fulness of fellowship with you.

Numbers 7 – Equal Portions

In Numbers 10, Israel set out from Sinai where they’d been since Exodus 19. The beautiful blessing at the end of Numbers 6 has a sense of rounding off the Sinai events, with Chapters 7 to 9 acting as a kind of appendix of specific supplementary material. The mechanical repetition through Numbers 7 makes for dull reading, not unlike an accountant’s ledger. It’s helpful with such texts to ask why it was written that way, when it might have been easier just to give the totals. It then becomes apparent that each tribe has an equal share and responsibility towards the tabernacle and worship of God, while the Levites’ service is to guard and transport everything.

Lord Jesus, the church is wholly yours, your body. Such imagery reminds us that we are all one, with no-one so great as not to need others, and no-one so small as not to be needed. By grace, we all have an equal inheritance in you, and I thank you for my place in your kingdom.

Numbers 8 – Priests, Levites, and Holiness

The lamps on the lampstand in the Holy Place in the tabernacle were to shine forward, onto the twelve loaves representing the twelve tribes, just as the LORD's face shone blessing to all Israel. The tribe of Levi (the Levites) belonged to the LORD for his service, supporting the priests in their work. The procedure in Exodus 29 (and Leviticus 8) was given to make the priests holy; the similar procedure here in Numbers 8 would make the Levites ceremonially clean. Both the priests and the Levites would rightly strive to avoid becoming unclean. Here we have the background to Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), with a priest and Levite avoiding a potential corpse. Yet the command to "love your neighbour as yourself" is part of "be holy" (Leviticus 19:18, 2).

Living God, I know that to be holy is to be like you, and that to be like you means to love others. Forgive me for the times when I go through the motions of lifeless religion instead of fulfilling my union with Christ. Help me to love with true humility and compassion.

Numbers 9 – Passover, Cloud, and Fire

This Passover was celebrated by the very people who had lived through the original event one year earlier. Some genuine practical matters were raised and dealt with but the underlying message was clear: Remembrance of what the LORD had done was not optional. Likewise, we remember Christ our Passover lamb at his table to be ever conscious of his grace and work. The description of God's presence in cloud and fire speaks both of his transcendence and his nearness. He couldn't be seen, but he was obviously there. Fire is both dangerous and comforting, consuming and protecting. As we journey through life under his leading, we also do well to work and rest as he commands.

Lord Jesus, Immanuel, all my hope in life and death is bound up in you. Thank you for my salvation, and for keeping me day by day. Thank you that you walk with me, leading and guiding me. Help me to keep in step, even when you lead into dark valleys, safe in your light and presence.

Numbers 10 – The Trumpet Call

The silver trumpets were signals to Israel either to gather to the LORD or to set out under his lead. There would be no hesitation, only obedience from the entire nation. We see trumpets in the New Testament also at key passages: In Revelation 8-11, trumpets sound to call the world to repentance and the church to mission, witnessing to hope in Christ as revealed in the Bible. Also, on the day of Christ's return, Paul writes of "the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thess 4:16). Yet these calls to action are responses to the mission of God among us; he is the one who rises to scatter his enemies and who rests among his people (v25-26). Blessed to serve him, we're blessed to rest in him too.

Lord God, there will be a day when you sound that trumpet to gather all your people to yourself forever. Thank you for my faith in Christ – a gift from you that prepares me for that day. Help me, then, to rise and to rest in a wise rhythm of mission to those around me.

Numbers 11 – Complaints and Responses

On several occasions, Moses' leadership is under scrutiny in Numbers. Here, Moses even questions his own ability. The people were grumbling again about food, having grown tired of manna from heaven. So both Moses and the people were complaining to the LORD. Moses' complaint was that he was overwhelmed by the challenge of God's mission on his shoulders. He felt unworthy and unable to do all that God had asked. Graciously, the LORD anointed seventy leaders with his Spirit to ease the spiritual burden on Moses. The people, however, were fundamentally dissatisfied with the goodness of the LORD, asking for meat. Often in the Bible we see God giving ungrateful people over to their own desire – usually as an act of judgment. God is good, does good, and gives good.

Heavenly Father, you have given us Jesus, the very Bread of Life. Where else could I go for the abundant life he brings? Yet I share Moses' feeling sometimes, short of the strength and ability needed to do all your will. Forgive me that I so often neglect the gift of the Holy Spirit in me.

Numbers 12 & 13 – Challenges and Faithlessness

Here, Moses' leadership was questioned by Aaron and Miram, his own brother and sister, who themselves held placed of honour in the community. Notice their nit-picking, fault-finding comments about Moses' wife: It often seems that if we can't build ourselves as high as we'd like then we start to tear others down. But they envied Moses' role without understanding either Moses' genuine humility or the LORD's firm appointment. Aaron, the High Priest, was humbled by God into asking Moses to intercede for Miriam. Sending scouts into Canaan was strategically smart, but the report they brough back said much about them. In v27 they speak of "the land where you sent us" rather than "the land the LORD promised" – they saw only Moses, not the God he served.

Heavenly Father, thank you for all the godly people you have put in my life to encourage me and to build me up. Help me consciously to obey and honour you as I submit to those spiritual leaders you have provided. Lord, keep them from temptation, close to you, humble of heart.

Numbers 14 – Lack of Faith

All the men who went to scout the land were reputable leaders and men of standing (Numbers 13:2-3). The report they brought back was true, in the sense that taking Canaan would be impossible by normal standards. The camp believed them and went into meltdown, threatening to stone the only men who had true faith in God. But then the glory of the LORD appeared to all the Israelites. Yet again, Moses had to intercede for them and although God pardoned them there were still consequences for their rebellion. Chapter 1's census was reversed: It now counted all those who would *not* enter the Promised Land. This whole event is a lack of faith to step forward into difficulty to take hold of what God had promised.

Lord Jesus, you know the times I have similarly shown a lack of faith, missing out on the blessing of pleasing you, and even withholding your love and blessing from others. Lord, forgive me. Give me greater delight, confidence, and boldness to step forward for you – even into difficulty.

Numbers 15 – The Promise Stands

Having travelled from Sinai to the very brink of the Promised Land of Canaan, only to be turned back because of their faithlessness in God, it might have seemed to many that the dream was over. Verses 1-31 might seem out of place at first, but their placement here is beautiful and gracious: “When you enter the land I am giving you to settle in…” says the ever-faithful, covenant-keeping LORD to his rebellious, faithless people (v2). The laws promise ongoing fellowship and atonement and a future with God. But when a former slave in Egypt chose work rather than God’s gift of Sabbath rest, his rejection of God was confirmed by God in capital punishment. Future blessing was promised, and present obedience was demanded daily – in the very fabric of life.

Faithful God, you are ever true to your promises, giving great hope to all who call. Thank you that my salvation does not depend on my faithfulness or else I know I’d have been lost a thousand times. Help me to choose to love and to serve you today.

Numbers 16 – Discontented Grumblers

It seems that everyone wanted to be Moses – except for Moses himself. Korah and his followers wanted a stake in the priesthood, despite the Levite honour of living near and serving around the tabernacle. Dathan and Abiram rejected Moses’ authority with a rejection of the entire exodus enterprise. At first, we might sympathise. But Moses was clearly appointed by God, so rejection of him was rebellion against God. In their blind wickedness and arrogant certainty, the rebels even condemned their own families to destruction. The New Testament letter of Jude says that there are still those who repeat Korah’s rebellion: False teachers among God’s people usurping God’s leaders –leading many astray.

Lord Jesus, Jude’s words and Korah’s rebellion are a reminder of the seriousness of truth in your church. Lord, keep the wolves out of our church, and help us all to remain true to you and the leaders you have appointed.

Numbers 17 & 18 – Nourishment

After so many challenges to Moses and Aaron's leadership, the incident with Aaron's wooden staff is a final positive statement from the LORD. He could have turned the other staffs to ash, but by causing Aaron's to bud, blossom, and bear fruit he reminds the people of how God brings remarkable nourishment and life through his chosen High Priest. We do well to ponder our own High Priest, once nailed to wood, now risen and giving us nourishment and life. The chapter on tithing gifts follows naturally: God will bless his people through priests and Levites in dedicated service, but since they still need to eat their food will come from the tithe (tenth) gifts of the other tribes. For their own hearts' benefit, they also then give a tenth of their tenth incomes.

Lord Jesus, Great High Priest, all my life and hope is in you. You are the nourishing Bread of Life and I thank you for these lovely positive Bible images reminding me of your abundant grace. Thank you for the leaders you have appointed in our church; help us all in our generosity.

Numbers 19 – Red Cow's Ashes

All these rebellions against the LORD and his appointed leaders led to much death in the camp. That meant many bodies and funerals, and since touching a dead body made someone ceremonially unclean there was a constant need to restore people to a clean state. Only when clean could they live normally in the camp and approach the tabernacle for worship. The "water for impurity" produced from the ashes of the red cow enabled potentially large numbers of people to be cleansed after, for example, a time of plague or battle. That such a measure was needed demonstrates the unavoidability of death, while also highlighting God's grace even in the face of judgments.

Gracious God, death is still a gloom hanging over all humanity. It's comforting to know that Jesus has conquered death and that despite this judgment on us you have given us life in your Son. Help me to bring such hope to others.

Numbers 20 – Faithlessness and Stolen Glory

By this point Moses was a very old man. With the death of his sister Miriam and the grumbling of the people, we can understand his frustration. And yet Moses' action was a catastrophic failure of leadership. By his words ("shall *we* bring water") and actions (striking the rock instead of trusting God), Moses had stolen some of the glory due to God alone. The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "you did not believe me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people" (v12). So it would be through Moses and Aaron's banishment from the land that the LORD would "show himself holy" (v13). The church is constantly in need of godly leaders who point us to Jesus – and not to themselves.

Heavenly Father, you are glorified in your great love. Forgive me, Lord, for ever seeking glory for myself in your service. Keep our church leaders aware of Christ's perfect shepherding and good governance. Help us all to glorify you in the world, trusting you enough to obey you in everything.

Numbers 21 – Look Up and Live

The book of Numbers is in five scenes, beginning at Sinai (Chapters 1-10), travelling (10-12), at Kadesh-Barnea (12-19), travelling again (20-21), and at the plains of Moab (20-36). So this chapter has a sense of progressing towards Canaan, approaching via Moab to the east of the Jordan because of Edom's refusal of easier passage in Chapter 20. In the face of progress, however, there was *still* some grumbling and rebellion, so God sent fiery snakes among them as a judgment. Where there is judgment, there's also grace. Any Israelite bitten by a snake could turn in faith to look at the serpent on the pole and they would not die. Jesus used that event to illustrate to Nicodemus of how all who look to the lifted-up Jesus will have eternal life (John 3:15-16).

Lord Jesus, you were lifted up on that cross, then raised from death, and now ascended to glory. Thank you that I only need turn to you in faith to receive the eternal life only you can bring. As I journey through life, help me to keep on looking at you. Protect my heart from grumbling.

Numbers 22 – Even a Donkey

With the Israelites so numerous and spread out on the plains of Moab, the king of Moab sent for the distant prophet Balaam to come and curse Israel. God allowed Balaam to go but needed to impress on him an important truth. Balaam's donkey was able to see spiritual danger and defied Balaam's instruction three times. When Balaam's eyes were opened to see the Angel of the LORD he realised his folly and the lesson was driven home: He had been hired to curse Israel, but he must copy the donkey and obey God rather than the man giving him instruction. As Christians, we also see spiritual dangers in the world and do well to copy the donkey too, alerting the spiritually blind to their danger. Thankfully, if God can use a donkey he can use us too.

Holy God, you are gracious to provide warnings to sinful humanity. Thank you that you opened my eyes to see my sin and to look to Jesus for eternal life. Open my mouth also, to speak truth and warning to those around me, and open their eyes so that they turn to you and live.

Numbers 23 – Only Blessing

Balaam knew that he could only speak what the LORD told him to say. For Moab's King Balak to hear what he wanted would mean that God had changed his mind about Israel, cursing instead of blessing. But "God is not man… that he should change his mind" (v19). Israel were blessed: (a) To be God's chosen people (v6), (b) by becoming so numerous (v10, as promised to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3), (c) by having God as their king in their midst (v21), (d) by being saved from slavery (v22), and (e) being unstoppable in progress (v23-24). Balak was incensed, when he'd have been better to be humbled before God. To see God so tangibly at work before you and still to reject him is hopeless blasphemy.

Faithful God, in whom there is no shadow but only light and life, thank you that all you bless is truly and permanently blessed. Thank you for Jesus, the ultimate and present promised blessing, and for counting me among his countless people by your own free grace.

Numbers 24 – The Star & Sceptre

Balaam's third oracle was yet another word of blessing, this time with explicit expectation of a king. The oracle finishes with an unambiguous reference to the blessing on Abraham in Gensis 12:1-3. Balak, king of Moab, hired Balaam to curse Israel and clearly didn't feel he'd had his money's worth. He fired Balaam, but Balaam went on to give four more oracles, shorter than the first three. The stand-out portion for us is in v19, with the promise of a star and sceptre to rise from Israel – a king to come. This all-conquering, all-ruling king was partly fulfilled by David, but the ultimate global kingship is Christ's, "the root and descendant of David, the bring morning star" (Revelation 22:16).

King Jesus, bring morning star, ruling and shining in the heavens in your resplendent glory, thank you that your blessing can't ever be thwarted or revoked. Thank you for including me in your kingdom, and for the expectation of endless blessings to come.

Numbers 25 – Seduced into Sin

Christ's letter to the church at Pergamum includes a rebuke at Revelation 2:14 that some in the church "hold to the teaching of Balaam." Numbers 31:14-16 makes it clear that the events of Numbers 25 were the result of Balaam's advice to Balak, king of Moab. Unable to curse Israel, they *seduced* Israel into sin. First there was sex, then idol worship, and then outright disregard for the LORD. Phinehas was a priest, and his action revealed the wrath and zeal of God to the people (v11) while also representing the people to God in a way that halted judgment (v9). The leaders were executed for moral failure in leadership. Beware the escalation of seduction, and repent (Revelation 2:16).

Lord Jesus, the warning you gave your people in Pergamum doesn't age as long as the devil continues to entice and seduce. Lord, help me to live out my union with you, and to live a life of wisdom and zeal for your honour – since you have blessed me with your name.

Numbers 26 – Count Up to Countdown

As Israel camped on the plans of Moab about the cross the Jordan westwards into Canaan, a second census was taken. This census looked back, noting that everyone counted in the first had died over the years in the wilderness except for Caleb and Joshua. There are notable names, not least Dathan, Abiram, and Korah (v11). Yet we might notice a slight increase in the overall number despite the many deaths and judgments. More, this census was both for counting the army and for the fair distribution of land, and so is full of hope and promise. In that, we see God's powerful hand at work, keeping his covenants and providing blessing. The detail in the data reminds us that God deals with us both corporately and individually.

Heavenly Father, each of your people were counted one by one, each with hopes and dreams and families. You are wise and just in your discipline while remaining ever faithful to your promises. Thank you for such fatherly care for me and our church.

Numbers 27 – Good Leadership

The second census, with its emphasis on the distribution of land, raised hopes and expectations about entering Canaan. The land was the LORD's, however, and so wasn't to be bought and sold by Israelites as if they owned it. Inheritances were to be kept within families, clans, and tribes. The decision for Zelophedad's daughters demonstrates both fairness and the importance of remembering the land is the LORD's. The expected entry into Canaan raised the question about leadership too, since Moses would not go with them. Joshua would be God's chosen leader, having been in preparation for years. The rest of Numbers and Deuteronomy relates to wrapping up teaching before Moses' death.

Lord Jesus, you rule your church with wisdom, fairness, and love. Your commands are good for us and for all. You appoint leaders in your churches as good gifts for our good. Lord, protect us from false teachers and bless all who proclaim you truly.

Numbers 28 – The LORD's Offerings

God's blessings on Israel though Balaam on the plains of Moab reiterated God's intention to bless Israel – and the world through Israel. His mission would continue, and Israel needed to continue under covenant faithfulness to be effective. While Numbers 28 and 29 cover ground already seen (Leviticus 23), what is unique here is the specific quantities proscribed for each offering. We must also note that only those offerings that are for the LORD himself are mentioned (so no sin or guilt offering, for example), and that these are to be made regularly so that life moves along in a rhythm of worship. Thoughts of land an inheritance in Numbers 26-27 must not be separated from devotion to God.

Holy and gracious God, every good gift is from you and for your own glory. Forgive me, Lord, for those times I focus more on what you have done for me than on you. You are worthy of all my praise and worship, and always will be.

Numbers 29 – Perfect Worship

It's hard to ignore the number 7 in chapters 28 & 29. There are 7 feasts progressing from weekly to monthly to annual. As the 7th day is especially holy, so too the 7th month is notable for having 3 feasts. The feasts of Unleavened Bread and Tabernacles each lasted 7 days. Sacrifices are numbered (or totalled) in multiples of 7. The 7th feast is by far the greatest, offering more animals than all the others combined. This is the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths or Shelters), when Israelites would (a) live in temporary shelters to remember their experience after leaving Egypt, and (b) communally sacrifice huge quantities in celebration of the LORD's gracious abundance. 7 is the "perfect" number and all the LORD's worship is perfect.

Holy and gracious God, you have always provided your people with the perfection of worship and fellowship with you. All the Sabbaths cause me to long for the day of endless rest with you, granted by your grace through Jesus. Until then, thank you for such moments as this, right now.

Numbers 30 – Vows

1 Samuel begins with Hannah with her husband on his annual trip to the temple at Shiloh to offer sacrifices. Desperate for a son, Hannah makes a vow to the LORD at the temple. Such practice probably explains why the vow legislation of Numbers 29 follows the laws on offerings in Chapters 27-28. Gender roles is a big topic, but Ephesians 5:22 does say that "the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church." So the legislation of Numbers 30 prevented women from undermining their husband's or father's authority by making a vow to the LORD that they wouldn't approve of. While the Bible has no obligation for anyone to make vows to God, it's clear that it's never to be taken lightly.

Holy God, you are utterly faithful in all you do while I know I am weak and so often faithless. I ask for the Spirit's help to keep my language true and honest before you and others, needing no vows by simply letting my 'yes' be yes and trusting in your goodness.

Numbers 31 – Measured Wrath

We're told at the outset that this war against Midian was commanded by God. It was to avenge the Midianites for their seduction of Israel in Numbers 25, prompted by Balaam, which lead to 24,000 deaths. There would be similar battles to come as Israel entered Canaan, so the main content of the chapter deals with ceremonial cleanliness, purification (of people and things), and the division of the spoils of war. Given that not one Israelite died, the hand of God is seen in Israel's action. When we're shocked by the severity of judgments such as those Midianites, we do well to recall that they are but shadows of the great Day of Judgment to come. The focus on process here highlights that God's wrath is measured and controlled – and all the more terrifying for that.

Holy God, you have made it clear over and over that the Day of Judgment to come will be truly awful for everyone who denies you. Lord, forgive me that I grasp that so dimly, seen in my sluggish approach to evangelism. Thank you that Jesus took the full measure of wrath for me.

Numbers 32 – Commitments

The Promised Land of Canaan lay between the Mediterranean Sea to the west and the River Jordan to the east. When the tribes of Reuben and Gad (and half of Manasseh) saw that the land east of the Jordan was good for their livestock, they approached Moses to ask for that as their inheritance. Moses was appalled. He saw it as a repeat of the disaster of the scouts (spies) in Chapters 13-14. But the offer to lead the armies of Israel into battle demonstrated their desire for national unity and a commitment to Israel. Moses bound them with a covenant formula (v20-24) with witnesses (v28-30) and the plan is set. It is, however, their commitment to the LORD that is lacking, rejecting his planned inheritance for them in Numbers 26.

Lord Jesus, you have secured an inheritance of life with you for all your people. Forgive me, Lord, for the times when my head is turned towards things of the world and my thoughts of a future with you drift from my mind and affection. Lord, keep my eyes forward to you.

Numbers 33 – Look Back to Go Forward

If you cast you eye over an old diary or calendar you might see events and places mentioned that bring back memories. Memories, of course, can be good or bad. As the people of Israel were about to cross the Jordan river heading west into Canaan, the journey itinerary in Numbers 33 would have brought back memories of both God's abundant care and the nation's grumbling faithlessness and disobedience. Before stepping forward *for* God, be sure you're stepping *with* him. This very much the platform for Deuteronomy, Psalm 78, and elsewhere in the Bible. Such reflection will always lead to a truer knowledge of God and of ourselves. Apart from him we can do nothing.

Heavenly Father, as I look back on your loving care over my all my life I thank you that you are constant in patience and grace. Forgive me my foolishness, sin, and rebellion. Help me to do the works you have prepared for me to do – and to do them only in your strength.

Numbers 34 – The Full Measure of Blessing

Here we have the dimensions of the Promised Land described fully for the first time. Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh had chosen land to the east of the Jordan, so they were excluded from the allocations within Canaan. The interesting point is that Israel never managed to occupy the full territory, coming closest in biblical times under David. We'll come to see that the failure to take the land was rooted in faithlessness, compromise, and idolatry. These things were written as examples for us (1 Cor 10:6). How often do we fall short of the full measure of blessing that the Lord has in store for us because of our own faithlessness, compromise, and idolatry? We must grow in our walk with him daily, stepping forward in faith in everything.

Lord Jesus, simply to be in your presence is joy beyond comprehension, and to live for you is a great privilege. Forgive me, Lord, that I don't live wholly conscious of you in every decision, every step, thereby falling short of the fullness of blessing of participating in your works of love.

Numbers 35 – Death & Refuge

The sacrificial systems of Leviticus enabled restitution to be made in the event of harm, damage, or loss. But the only reparation for taking someone's life was another life. In the case of murder, Israel carried out capital punishment at the LORD's command. Even for manslaughter (accidentally causing death), there were serious consequences. Such a person would go to a "City of Refuge" and stay within it until either they or the High Priest died. The death of the High Priest was sufficient to release a person from a City of Refuge. But early absence from the city carried its own death penalty. Christ is the High Priest who has died for us – and he's our place of refuge from whom departure is fatal.

Lord Christ, there is no refuge from you for all who reject you, and yet there's no better refuge than you for all who will come. Thank you that in you there is eternal life, and that you will keep me today, tomorrow, and for all time.

Numbers 36 – Planning Ahead

This chapter might feel like an anticlimactic end after all that's happened in Numbers – but it's lovely. In Leviticus 25:23, God made it clear that the land must never be permanently sold because it belongs to the LORD; Israel were his tenants. The Numbers 26 census would be used to allocate land by tribe, and allocated land could not be passed from tribe to tribe. The concern in Numbers 36 was that the inheritance due to Zelophedad's daughters (who had no brother) could pass to another tribe through marriage. Hence the command to marry only within their tribe. What makes this so lovely is that they haven't yet entered the land but are already working through finer points of law for occupation. They are, at last, acting in faith.

Lord Jesus, you have secured a future for your people that we can barely grasp, and yet by your grace we taste it by looking ahead to being with you. Help me to live here and now today as a citizen of your eternal kingdom by faith.

Deuteronomy 1 – Reflections on Faith

The book of Numbers ends at the plains of Moab with Israel about to cross over the river Jordan to enter Canaan. Deuteronomy is Moses' final teaching to Israel to prepare them for living for God and with God in the land. The first four chapters are reflective, looking back on the good faithfulness of God in the light of the rebellion and faithlessness of Israel. Such reflection is always helpful when standing on the verge of a big decision or life event, fearful of what the future might bring. Recalling the lack of faith to enter Canaan 40 years earlier, the people were given a stark reminder of lost blessing. Their subsequent disobedience and disaster shows how little they understood of the nature of God's rule.

Heavenly Father, it's clear from your word that you have a mission to bring your righteous kingdom rule to many people across the world. Help me, Lord, when I'm slow to step forward for you, to remember your good providence in my life.

Deuteronomy 2 – Patience and Grace

Moses continues his remembrance of Israel's travels with more recent events. Notice how Israel were already told by the LORD that certain lands weren't to be entered because God had given those lands to its occupants. The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, so he defines occupancy and borders. He alone causes nations to rise and fall. So when Israel left no survivors after defeating Sihon and his army (and their women and children, v34), it's clear that this was also the will of God. That may shock us, until we remember that all have sinned and are destined for a similar judgment. It's only God's grace and patience that stays his hand. The peace we enjoy in our country is by God's grace and we test his patience by abusing it with idolatry.

Lord Jesus, it's clear that my sins deserve just punishment and that I deserve no good thing from you. You are glorified in grace and patience towards me. Thank you. There are so many people in my life facing judgment, help me to be effective in making you known.

Deuteronomy 3 – Looking Ahead

The defeat of Og and the taking of his land was important because (a) it would be part of the settlement of Simeon, Gad, and half of Manasseh outside Canaan, and (b) it provided an encouraging model for how things could go in the conquest of Canaan itself. This was especially important for Joshua who would be leading the nation in. Moses' final plea to the LORD seems so unhappy at not entering the land, but the LORD won't change his mind. We might pity Moses, but then recall that years later he would stand on the Mount of Transfiguration with Elijah as they accompanied the Son of God himself revealing his glory to the disciples (Mark 9:4). All God's discipline is good training. He keeps us to glory.

Holy God, you were wise and good with Moses; that is your nature. You disciplined as a good Father; that is who you are. You had wonders in store for him that he couldn't imagine; you are gracious. Help me to meditate on you when things aren't as I'd choose them to be.

Deuteronomy 4 – The Purpose of Law

This is a remarkable chapter, giving foundational reason why Israel were to keep the laws of God. Firstly the laws are *relational*. God didn't give laws arbitrarily; they're in the context of his covenant relationship with his people (v13). It is God's intent to bless his people as they enjoy fellowship with him, and for that they must live in covenant obedience and holiness. Secondly, the laws are *missional*. Through visible distinctive living his people will display the goodness of God to others (v6-7), fulfilling their calling to be a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19). Finally, his laws are *right and appropriate* simply because of who God is: "God is in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other."

Heavenly Father, your laws are good and are for our good. They reflect and reveal your nature, while highlighting my sinfulness before you. Forgive me that I neglect so rich a gift as my relationship with you. Forgive me that I am such a poor witness. Spirit, keep me in holiness.

Deuteronomy 5 – The Ten Commandments

Deuteronomy is laid out as a covenant document and the Ten Commandments (literally, "Ten Words") are meant to be an over-arching summary. They are to be kept by each individual but with a definite intention of keeping a godly society. Chapters 12 to 26 will flesh them out in more detail. They key to understanding them comes in the last commandment, relating to coveting. How can a command curb *desire?* When Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) he explored most of the Ten Commandments and how they expose our sinful desires. His aim in that sermon was to call us to repentance, which takes us back to the First Commandment. The more we repent and turn to the one and only God in Christ, the more we will love to obey him above all.

Holy God, your word searches my heart most uncomfortably, stripping away all my pretence and pride. Forgive me my sins, O God, and help me to live only for you, close to you in Christ, loving you more each day and delighting in obedience.

Deuteronomy 6 – Love the LORD

There's a powerful connection between obedience and faith. Obedience without faith is joyless religion. But obedience by faith acknowledges trust in God and in his goodness in the laws he gives. The command in v4-5 is, according to Jesus, the greatest of all. But how can love be commanded? As we obey God by faith we understand more of his goodness, care, and provision – our relationship deepens and we learn to trust him more. This is how we come to love him wholly. More, Jesus quoted v13 and v16 in response to Satan's wilderness temptations (Matt 4), demonstrating the power against evil embedded in the goodness of God's commands. Obedience by faith brings us closer to God in love.

Heavenly Father, my love for you has grown by your grace. You have brought me from rebellious indifference to faith, love, and obedience. I know I am far from what I will be when perfected at Christ's return, so please help to resist temptation, living out my union with Christ today.

Deuteronomy 7 – Wipe Clean

How do we reconcile the destruction of Canaanite nations commanded here with the promise of blessing to all nations through Israel (Gen 12:1-3)? That promise of blessing did also promise curse for all who rejected the truth of God, and certainly Canaan was filled with idolatry. But couldn't Israel evangelise Canaan? There's a time for that, but there's also a time for judgment. The conquest of Canaan was somewhat like Noah's flood, wiping out sin and idolatry and promising a fresh start. Israel were holy to God (v6) and their distinctive worship was key to proclaiming God to the nations. As Christians, we're not a single ethnic nation so 'conquest' of that type is no longer relevant. But our pursuit of holiness and fight against idolatry is to be as strong as ever.

Lord Jesus, you have told us to love our neighbours and our enemies. Surely the highest love is to lead them to you. Help me daily to live and speak in such a way that scatters seeds of hope in you. Help me also to be aware of my own idols, and to smash them with the Spirit's help.

Deuteronomy 8 – Remember Hard Lessons

When things in life get tough we sometimes feel it's unfair, as if we don't deserve such trouble. Yet Deuteronomy 8 makes it clear that God deliberately tested Israel with hunger in the wilderness. He could have provided manna before they got hungry, but by waiting until they cried out he was disciplining (training) them in dependence on him. And such dependence goes beyond bread – we need the word of the LORD in every aspect of our lives. From v11, Israel are warned not to forget such dependence when they come to the land of abundance God has promised. Any success we experience at home, work, or church is a good gift from our wise heavenly Father. We congratulate ourselves for our resourcefulness when we ought to thank God for his faithfulness.

Wise and loving heavenly Father, you have put my life through many seasons – ups and downs, good times and bad. Thank you for the times I've learned to cry out and depend on you. Lord, help me to remain joyfully dependent on your grace in all the seasons of life.

Deuteronomy 9 – To God be the Glory

There's so much encouraging wisdom in this chapter for any believer about to embark on activity for God. In v1-3, the challenges facing Israel are identified as real and significant, but there's huge confidence in knowing that God goes before them (as the Spirit goes before us into the world). Any progress is, therefore, to the LORD's glory (v4-6) and we have no grounds for self-congratulation or pride. Moses reminded Israel of their constant rebellion in v7-29 (especially v24!) and the necessity of his intercession for them. Likewise, we may *expect* progress as the Lord goes before us in *his* work, and we give glory to God for *all* progress, remembering that it is Christ himself interceding for our aid.

Living God, you call your people to service and it's a privilege to be in your kingdom. Forgive my efforts at doing things under my own steam, or for any sense of glory I steal in your work. Help me to remain joyful as I do the work you have planned for me.

Deuteronomy 10 – Your Praise, Your God

Verses 1-11 conclude Moses' summary of travels and events. So v12's "And now, Israel…" gathers every single thought thus far (God's mission, holiness, grace, faithfulness combined with Israel's weakness and bias to forgetful rebellion), and then asks, "what does the LORD ask of you?" The answers are given: Fear the LORD, walk in his ways, love him, worship (serve) him, and keep his commands – all for your good (v12-13). The one who owns and runs all of Creation loves you, and as his holy possession you are to be like him in your care for the weak, the vulnerable, the asylum seeker, the unloved. If you see these things as burdensome you've forgotten that "He is your praise and he is your God" (v21), who delights to bless you and gives you laws for your good.

Gracious Father, all you ask of me is only right and appropriate in the light of your infinite love and grace. Show me more of your glory in Christ, so that I might know even more the wonder of praising you. Help me to fear, walk, love, worship and obey you as I ought in your kingdom.

Deuteronomy 11 – Blessing or Curse?

Chapters 5 to 11 give general conditions of God's covenant with Israel, with detailed stipulations beginning in the next chapter. So there's a summarising feel to Chapter 11, calling on Israel to obedience to enjoy the LORD's blessing. Verses 2-7 remind Israel that the LORD does indeed judge wickedness and knows how to redeem his people from powerful opposition. In faith and obedience, they must step forward to take hold of the blessing God has promised. He even gave a command for an event at a specific place *in the land* (v19-30). We should not be surprised when the LORD brings us discipline in Fatherly love, nor should we doubt his relentless desire to bless us and keep us.

Lord Jesus, you became sin and took the curse of death for me. All wrath against me is satisfied by your sacrifice. Forgive me, Lord, when I linger over past sins as if not forgiven. Help me to see the Father's wisdom and love in discipline. Spirit, keep me from sin.

Deuteronomy 12 – Smashing Idols

We have read so far about God's commitment to Israel as they entered Canaan in response to their covenant obedience. From Chapter 12 onwards, we're told more about what that obedience looks like based on Exodus and Leviticus. The order of the laws in Chapters 12-26 loosely follows the outline of the 10 Commandments, explaining how those overarching words are to be lived out daily by God's people. So, since we are to have no other gods then it's clear we must approach this one God, the LORD, in the manner and place he has given – now, of course, that being Jesus. Israel were to smash all idols of other gods to maintain true worship. The laws about eating animals ensured that religious meals and sacrifices were only conducted at the tabernacle.

Gracious God, I know you are the only living God. Yet you know the idols and gods in my life better than I see them myself. Help me to smash all idols, and to worship you truly in Christ, thankful for all your blessings to me without letting any of them become an idolatrous snare.

Deuteronomy 13 & 14 – One God, One Worship

The third commandment, "Do not misuse the name of the LORD your God (or "Do not take the name of the LORD your God in vain") is far more reaching than avoiding cheap language. It's about fidelity to God. If you are a Christian, you are to live like one: Don't empty your claim to Christ of meaning by a life that is out of step with faith in him. This underpins the drastic action of Deuteronomy 13 in terms of removing all idolatrous compromise from the community. "You are the sons of the LORD your God," says 14:1, God's own "special possession." So all our worship and the response of our whole lives is to be to him alone.

Faithful God, all your promises are true and wonderful. There is life in you and no other. Yet still I fall for the false promises of the short-term world around me. Help me to rejoice in the good things you give without worshipping them in a spirit of dependence.

Deuteronomy 15 – Gospel Generosity

Deuteronomy holds in tension laws both for the perfect ideal Israel and for life in an imperfect world. So v1-5 are God's blueprint for generosity, freedom, and redemption in society, ensuring abundant blessing (and therefore no poverty) for national obedience. Knowing that obedience will not be total, further laws regarding the poor and slaves are given. Likewise, v19-23 reminds Israel of God's rightful claim on the firstborn animals (the ideal) but prohibits offering imperfect animals (as happen in practice). Such care for the poor reflects God's own heart, and radical generosity is a powerful missionary statement into our culture. Chapter 4 gave the principle of living distinctively with gospel intent, and here it is in how we are to care for the poor.

Lord Jesus, Luke tells us that in your early church there were no poor among them because of the generosity, love, and care of your people. Help me to have that heart – reflecting your own. Open my eyes to see the needs of those around; open my heart to care, and my hands to give.

Deuteronomy 16 – Feasts of God

The Sabbath day was meant to be a day to enjoy rest with the LORD for the entire community – very much an anticipation of our eternal rest with Christ. The 4th Commandment's principles underpin chapters 15 & 16 with a clear inclusivity of blessing for everyone (see v11, 14). Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread was a solemn reminder of the cost of redemption, but also a forward-looking, hopeful event – very much as the Lord's Table is today. The Festivals of Weeks and Shelters were to be celebratory and joyful, enjoying both the good gifts God gave and the presence of God among them. All those festivals were to be in the land where God put his name (v6, 11, 15); all *our* thanksgiving is in Christ.

Heavenly Father, it's clear that there's a time to mourn our sins and a time to rejoice and celebrate your goodness. Forgive me for neglecting both, and therefore falling short of the fullness of blessing it is to be with you in Christ. Be my strength and my song.

Deuteronomy 18 – Under God's Authority

The general pattern of detailed laws underpinned by the 10 Commandments continues with a chapter on authority structures, reflecting and amplifying the 5th Commandment. Above all, God is Judge and King over all his people, so reports of idolatry were to be investigated and dealt with (v2-7). Difficult cases were to be taken to the priests at the temple so that decisions given had God's own authority (v8-13). Even when appointing a king over them, Israel were to do so in a way that recognised God's authority over the king. Even the best human priests, courts, and kings stumbled at some point, highlighting the glorious appointment of Jesus as the Messiah, King of kings, Son of God, Ruler of the ages.

Lord Jesus, your rule for the universe and for my life is good and right. Give me wisdom to be a godly citizen in this country, rightly subject to the laws that don't contradict your word or work. Keep me obedient to your own good rule above all.

Deuteronomy 18 – Priest and Prophet

The Levites (people of the tribe of Levi) had no land inheritance in Israel. Yet as priests and servants of God they exercised spiritual leadership and service to the nation. Most societies have ruling classes awash with wealth and status: Establishing the Levites as dependent on God and on the obedience of his people demonstrates the extent to which his community of believers are meant to depend on one another under his blessing. The prohibition of all forms of divination is no surprise: God speaks to his people, and promised a prophet who would lead and teach them. None of the Old Testament prophets led Israel like Moses; the promise is fulfilled in Jesus, leader of our exodus.

Great God and Saviour, Lord Jesus, help me to see and live out the deep inter-connectedness you have established in your church. Thank you that you are the Prophet, revealing the Father to me, teaching me, calling me to repentance, and leading us all out of slavery into your own rest.

Deuteronomy 19 – Measured Justice

After "Honour your father and mother" comes "Do not murder," so it's not surprising to see instruction relating to cities of refuge. The punishment for murder was death, and a murderer was to be tried and, if found guilty, shown no pity (v13). But if anyone who caused the accidental death of another was put to death, that would be to take the life of an innocent person – as bad as murder (v10). Justice must be carried out but based on full knowledge of the facts from two or three witnesses. It's slow, steady, measured, and therefore pitiless. This prevents miscarriages of justice in the heat of anger (V6). Social media often propagates half-truth and lies at the speed of light, necessitating godly restraint and wisdom.

Holy God, you alone give life and take. You are perfect in knowledge, wisdom, and justice. Help me to be measured and just in my assessments of others, speaking only grace and truth. Give me the love and wisdom of Jesus in all my communications.

Deuteronomy 20 – Upside-Down Warfare

A military strategist might well marvel at the apparent upside-down priorities in this chapter. In the context of Israel facing a superior enemy force (v1), they were to permit exemptions that would reduce the strength of their own army. The principle seems to be that no man should die in battle without first enjoying the very things he's fighting for. This is a kindness, but also a spur since those fighting knew exactly what and who they're fighting for. War was to begin with an offer of peace (v10) and be conducted in an eco-friendly manner (v19-20). How can anyone be confident of success in such an approach? We're told in v1: "the LORD your God is with you."

Mighty God, nothing can prevent you from accomplishing all your holy will. When you choose to accomplish it through me, help me to remember your strength, purpose, and presence. Give me great wisdom and love for others even in difficult circumstance.

Deuteronomy 21 – Compassionate Society

Chapter 4 promised laws that would stand out among the nations, demonstrating the unique greatness of the LORD. Our society leaves unsolved murders to the police and crime enthusiasts, with only the most shocking murders even reaching public awareness. Contrast that with the community response in v1-9 and we realise how lost and uncaring we have become. A woman taken captive in war was vulnerable to rape, slavery, and abuse as the "spoils of war." Yet in v10-14 Israelite soldiers were to provide the dignity and status of *wife* (not slave or concubine) after giving sufficient time for mourning. Verses 15-21 continue this theme of protecting the vulnerable. Verses 22-23 explain the Jews' haste to see Jesus dead on Good Friday (John 19:31).

Good and Compassionate God, your ways are not our ways for sure. I am naturally so self-centred, yet you are unbounded in your care for the weak, the vulnerable, and abused. Help me to live under your good rule joyfully in a way that displays your goodness to those around me.

Deuteronomy 22 – Responsible Community

Our individualistic society promotes self-care above others, encouraging us to "keep our heads down" and "look after number one." Yet the laws of v1-12 are so clearly community-oriented, ensuring we look out for one another's property and protection. Even care for animals is included in godly attitudes. The laws on marriage and sexual ethics continue the flow of the 10 Commandments in these detailed laws, reaching "Do not commit adultery." To rape a woman is to steal the life she may have had, which is why the death penalty applied (a life for a life). Underpinning it all is the crucial importance of godly families for healthy society, while also protecting the innocent and vulnerable.

Father, please forgive me for the self-centredness that characterises so much of my life. Help me to look out for others, to be more proactive in care, and to take a stand where necessary. Bless and strengthen the families in our church, protecting them from evil and temptation.

Deuteronomy 23 – Radical Grace

We've seen most of these laws elsewhere, but three things stand out: (a) Verses 9-14 call for cleanliness in military camps on the grounds that "the LORD your God walks throughout your camp" (v14). Wherever his people gather to do his work, the LORD is present to protect and deliver. (b) The law on *not* returning an escaped slave to his master in v15-16 is unlike any nonbiblical law on slavery anywhere. There's a recognition of the vulnerability of a slave as a human being in God's image, trumping claims of 'ownership' from abusive masters. Old Testament slavery was utterly unlike that of the British/American slave trade. (c) God's prohibition of prostitutes (v17) is met with a realism that prohibits profits from prostitution entering the temple (v18).

Lord God, your laws are so counter-cultural and surprising it's a reminder of how far our society has drifted from you – and also just how deeply society's values rest in my own mind. Renew my thinking with your word and help me to grow with Christlike godliness and priorities.

Deuteronomy 24 – Generous Society

This whole chapter celebrates God's concern for society's most vulnerable. Verses 1-4 are the basis of Jesus being questioned about divorce (Matt 19:1-9). The specific grounds of divorce aren't given here, but rather provision is made to protect women from being passed around. Her certificate was her protection from accusation of adultery if she remarried. The laws concerning the poor place obligations on the rich to be generous and to uphold the human dignity of those who have so little materially. Such thinking has far-reaching ethical implications for us – from topics such as where our groceries are sourced, to giving tips, to our attitude to governmental foreign aid packages.

Generous God, you have placed humanity on a world so fertile that no-one should hunger, and yet we maintain imbalance through self-centredness. Help me, Lord, to live a life of open-handed generosity and grace toward others, loving as you love.

Deuteronomy 25 – Justice Matters

The nearest thing to a prison in Deuteronomy is a City of Refuge, so that anyone found guilty of a crime typically faced reparation and punishment. The flogging of v1-3 was typical of the region at that time (and see 2 Cor 11:24). The preservation of family lines was also common, and especially important in Israel to keep land within families, clans, and tribes as allocated by God. The punishment of v11-12 is unique in Deuteronomy. The woman has jeopardised the man's family line, so the crime is severe (though the punishment might be euphemistic language for a life of chastity; no children for her either). The fate of the Amalekites in v17-19 is because they picked off the most weak and vulnerable of Israel, the very opposite of Deuteronomy's heart.

Holy God, you have made it clear that no sin goes unpunished because none is unknown to you and you are perfect in justice. I have not loved the weak and vulnerable as I ought – please forgive me. Thank you that Jesus was punished in my place. Help me to live with Christ's heart.

Deuteronomy 26 – God's Heart in His Law

This chapter brings to a close the detailed laws of chapters 12-26. The liturgy presented is an apt summary of the nature and ethos of God's laws: Verses 1-11 help individual believers remember God's faithfulness to the nation, recalling the history that has enabled the worshipper to present his offering with glad gratitude. Verses 12-15 focus on how love and obedience to God inevitably overflows to caring for the poor and vulnerable in society. God's own heart is exposed and revealed in his laws: His people are to display *him* to the world through obedience to his commands. This lies behind the summary of v16-19, where obedience to him makes him known to the nations.

Heavenly Father, your laws are a beautiful display of your tender care for all who are weak, hurting, or vulnerable. Lord, help me to display your love through a life of love to others. Help me to seek out and love the unloved and unlovely, even today.

Deuteronomy 27:1-28:19 – Public Law

Remembering that Deuteronomy has an underlying structure of a covenant document, it's natural to follow the covenant stipulations with a list of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. The instruction to have the law written on plastered stones highlights once again that obedience was to be understood by the whole community. The spectacle of blessing pronounced from one mountain and curses from another (v11-12) demonstrates the binary choice to be made – a theme of these final chapters. The list of activities drawing a curse is notable for relating to things done in secret (or at least in a low-key manner). The demands for holiness run deep into the lives and homes of every community member.

Holy God, you are good to give us a written record of the holiness required to serve you. I am reminded of my sin, and therefore of your grace in Christ. You have called me to blessing. Help me to live that out in holiness of life – at work, at home, every day.

Deuteronomy 28:20-68 – Blessings or Curses?

The curses of chapter 28 make grim reading, but aren't far-fetched in their severity in the ancient world (or still in some places today). The crucial point to note is that the curses weren't inevitable. Israel were already in a state of blessing and v10 emphasises once again that their obedience was to be a means by which they'd make God known to the world. To fall under curses would mean to have chosen to reject God, when God himself would have us choose blessing. More sobering still, this long list of curses is only a dim foretaste of the chosen cursed suffering of hell – the awful reality awaiting all who reject God today. No wonder God wants us to evangelise.

God of all comfort and compassion, thank you for sending Jesus to become curse for us. Thank you that the Spirit opened my eyes to see my offensive sin and your gracious heart. Father, forgive me, and help me to point others away from idolatry to you, the fount of living water.

Deuteronomy 29 – Individual & Community Blessing

Chapters 29 and 30 are a single unit, bringing the covenant document to a close (the remaining chapters are about Moses' succession and end of life). Again, Moses calls on Israel to look back on how God has carried and blessed them, even delivering the first portions of land in anticipation of Canaan to come. There's an emphasis on whole-community inclusion (v10-15), since everyone is equal before God and all may receive his blessing. That means also that obedience to the covenant is demanded of everyone, with individual secret sin and idolatry having a bearing on the whole community – bringing awful curse. Could that happen by accident? No, because "the revealed things belong to us and our children forever" (v29).

Holy God, you have made known the way of salvation in Christ and have given us the great task of making that way known. Help me to live out my holiness of life, taking my place in the community of your people, making you known to those who've never heard.

Deuteronomy 30 – Choose Life; Choose God

The "When" at the start of v1 shows that the LORD knows that Israel will abandon him and his laws. But he is compassionate and gracious, always ready to gather and restore his repentant children who turn to him (v1-10). Verses 11-20 are climactic: "This command" (v11), by which he means the whole law, doesn't need wise sages to grasp – whether in heaven or across the sea. The law is for everyone and is easy to understand. In truth, the laws in Deuteronomy are even easy to do. Keeping the law kept the LORD front and centre of society and life, "For he is your life" (v20). Since Christ is the goal and fulfilment of the law, Paul uses these verses to express how we now find life in God in Christ, right here and now (Romans 10:1-13).

Father, your compassion and grace are abundantly clear both in your laws and in how you deal with us when we fail to keep them. Thank you for Jesus, who kept the law, gives life, and is life itself.

Deuteronomy 31 – Not Everything Changes

Chapters 1-3 can be joined to chapters 31-34 almost seamlessly, first looking back on Israel's travels and then looking forward to a future without Moses. Chapters 4-30 form the covenant heart of the book. A change of leader is always a little disturbing, not least in a church setting. But here we have encouragements: First, God's word is constant and is to be handed down from generation to generation (v9-13). Second, the LORD goes ahead of all, working through his leaders (v3). Third, the LORD knows how we will fail, yet remains compassionate and gracious (v16-23). Above all, God is invested in his people and will equip every humble leader to achieve all that God has planned for him to do.

Lord God, you do not change and your faithful love remains forever. Your word is fixed – all the revelation we need for faith and life. Thank you that you will never leave me nor forsake me, and help me to do all that you have planned for me to do.

Deuteronomy 32 – Judge of All Nations

Verse 4 might be familiar to us as a chorus we sing at church, but the rest of Moses' song is less celebratory. It's structured as a formal indictment against rebellious Israel, complete with witnesses (heaven and earth), a charge (v15-18), deliberations, and sentencing. God is judge over all the nations, and he will hold them all to account. The imagery of v34-43 takes us all the way to Revelation 19, when Christ shall ride out victorious over all the nations of the world. Why is this all set as a *song?* Because songs combine words and music to convey deep emotion. Even more than just Moses, the LORD himself *feels* the depths of sadness and frustration in this song, even in his glory.

Lord Jesus, the sadness here is the utter inevitability of the rebellion of your people Israel. I know that I would fall away too unless you kept me. You are my glorious refuge, and I look forward to the day when you take me to be with you forever.

Deuteronomy 33 & 34 – True Leadership

For all the laws, failures, and curses on the preceding pages, Moses' final words were of warm blessing on the nation. He always understood that he was serving God and not himself, and that Israel belonged to the LORD. So v26-29 are filled with confidence for the future grounded in the refuge, power, and faithful love of the LORD to his own. To apply those verses to Christ's beloved church is a rich meditation. In 33:1, Moses is referred to as "the man of God" – a term usually applied to God's prophets. In 34:5 he's called "the servant of the LORD" – a term later to become synonymous with Christ himself. Could there be better terms to describe a leader suitable for God's own people?

Lord Jesus, you appoint leaders over your churches. Thank you for Moses' example of humble leadership, a man who knew you face to face and served you in humble dependence. Lord, grow our church leaders today into that same humble walk with you.

Joshua 1 – Strength and Courage to Obey

For Joshua, the new leader of Israel, the phrase ringing in his ears was clearly, "Be strong and courageous" (v6, 9, 18)! That command was intimately connected with obedience to God's covenant (v6-9). Joshua was to be strong and courageous in the execution of all the commands God had given – to take, occupy, cultivate, and worship in the land. Obedience would guarantee success since that was what God had bound himself to in the covenant, and yet would still require significant effort for Joshua and the nation. Such is the mystery and privilege of doing anything for the LORD: Paul could say, "I worked harder than any of them, yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (1 Cor 12:10).

Heavenly Father, holy God, I see here how obedience and faith are intertwined. Forgive my faithless disobedience in failing to love others and failing to proclaim you. Give me strength and courage, trust and boldness, to obey all your good commands to your glory.

Joshua 2 – Covenant Kindness

The advance of Israel was clearly expected by the authorities in Jericho who were ready to defend their city as needed. Yet v11 makes it clear that their courage had gone, replaced by a terrible fear of the LORD. This is how God goes before his people, preparing and unnerving hearts. The New Testament celebrates Rahab's faith (James 2:25, Hebrews 11:31), though we might well observe her outright lie to her own countrymen as being her act of faith. In fact, her deception matches the subterfuge of the spies. Her language in v12 hints at covenant community relationship – she is identifying herself with Israel. She has faith that God will lead Israel to take Jericho *and* show mercy to all who will come to him – even repentant prostitutes.

Gracious Father, it's clear that you will extend grace and mercy to any sinner who comes to you in faith. This gives me confidence in the completeness of my own forgiveness, and great hope in evangelism: No-one is beyond your grace.

Joshua 3 – Immanuel

With the Jordan in seasonal flood, crossing it would have seemed impossible for those camped on its bank for three days. And yet, some of them had passed through the Red Sea as children with their parents. So this event cemented Joshua in their minds as the God-appointed replacement for Moses. Far more than that, though, it was clear that God would be true to his promise to go ahead of them to prepare their way for inheritance of Canaan. The ark of the covenant wasn't an idol, but it did represent both the presence of God and his covenant faithfulness to them. With Christ, our Immanuel, we pass through many difficulties with the assurance of his presence, knowing he will land us safely home.

Ever-present Lord, Immanuel, it is comfort beyond words to know that you are with me in everything, that you prepare the way ahead of me, and that you will keep me safe to the end. Forgive my independent heart, Lord, and help me to do your work in your strength.

Joshua 4 – Twelve Stones at Gilgal

Three words come to mind meditating on this chapter: Presence, dependence, and remembrance. The LORD is not distant from us when we work to do his works; he is Immanuel, with us on the mountain-tops and in the valleys. Equally, apart from him we can do nothing. He is the giver of help and strength, and to attempt spiritual endeavour cut off from the one who is Spirit is to be set up for failure and disappointment. These truths were brought home to Jesus' disciples at the last supper (John 15:4-8). We are quick to forget, so just as Joshua erected twelve stones as a memorial to all that God had done, so Jesus commanded us to remember him at his table – and to remain in him.

For all you have done, O God, you are to be praised and thanked forever. Thank you for your presence, to help and to guide always. Help me ever to grow in dependence on you – lead me to prayer often. Cause me to remember you, to keep from sin, ever in joyful obedience.

Joshua 5 – Out of the Wilderness

At long last, Israel had finally entered Canaan, the land promised to Abraham. But successful occupation and longevity in the land was subject to covenant faithfulness and obedience from everyone in the nation. The starting point had to be to catch up on circumcision, the sign of the covenant with Abraham in Gensis 17. Celebrating the Passover was an appropriate recollection of God's redeeming grace, and the end of the manna ended the wilderness years and held great promise for the future. The enigmatic commander of the LORD's army serves as a reminder that God fights for his own honour, blessing Israel for covenant obedience but holding them accountable for sin (as in chapters 6-8).

Heavenly Father, you know me and all my failings. You are right to teach and discipline your children according to your good ways. Lord, help me remain true to you, serving you and doing all you have prepared for me to do for your glory. Lead me even today, Lord.

Joshua 6 – Circling Jericho

Why did God command the Israelites to march round Jericho for seven days? Three reasons: (a) Joshua is again seen as Moses' successor, and everything was done just as God commanded through him; (b) The manner of Jericho's fall was a powerful demonstration to Israel and other nations of God's supernatural actions to act through his people; (c) As the grace to Rahab showed, there was ample opportunity for the people of Jericho to turn to the LORD. But their stubbornness showed misplaced confidence in their own strength and idolatry. The seven trumpets of Revelation 8-11 echo the trumpets of the priests around Jericho, sounding calls to repentance to our own society as we witness to Jesus.

Gracious God, there are so many signs in the world that would cause people to turn to you, if only they knew to. Help me in my daily conversation to go beyond the problems and to point people to hope in Christ. Lord, lift my thinking and bless my speech.

Joshua 7 – Will He Get Away With It?

God had made it abundantly clear that his blessing to Israel was dependent on their obedience – all under covenant agreement. We've seen how God's laws were to be made known throughout the nation too. Achan knew it was wrong to take items devoted to destruction, but he thought he could get away with it. In taking the items, he was choosing to be identified with objects under God's curse rather than life under his blessing. The elaborate process is high drama! Why didn't God just simply point the guilty out? In grace, Achan was given time to come forward and confess, to be for God's mercy and compassion. Achan's silence until the end shows he hoped to get away with his crime. His is the fate of all who reject the gospel of repentance and faith in Christ.

Heavenly Father, it is humbling and heartwarming to know that your knowledge of my sin is complete, that your justice demands punishment, and that Christ's work covers all my sins now and forever. Forgive my deceptive heart, Lord, where I still try to harbour secret sin.

Joshua 8 – Covenant Community

Having failed utterly to take Ai in Chapter 7, success come under the sure hand of the LORD in Chapter 8. Every step is directed by God, and Israel's dependent obedience under Joshua is rewarded with a complete rout. The painful lesson of Achan's sin has been learnt by everyone. The whole-community commitment to God's covenant is renewed and emphasised by the spectacle of v30-35, an event commanded by Moses in Deut 11 on the plains of Moab. The letters to the churches in Rev 2 & 3 also call on churches to remove sin and those living in open rebellion from among them, calling them to repentance. It's sobering that our personal sin has a bearing on our church's witness and existence.

Holy Spirit of God, you have searched me and you know my inmost thoughts and desires. Convict me of my sin, and lead me in repentance and faith to Jesus, so that I might enjoy the loving face of my Father, to the glory of the Triune God.

Joshua 9 – Tricked!

In Deuteronomy 7:2, God commanded Israel to "make no treaty" with any of the nations of Canaan, lest the worship and witness of the LORD be diluted with idolatry. The Gibeonites didn't know that, but they did know that Israel had wiped out Jericho and Ai. Fearing for their lives, they deceived Israel. Deuteronomy 20:11 allowed for inhabitants of distant cities to become Israel's servants rather than be wiped out, and so Joshua was duped and a treaty made. As Balaam had been unable to curse Israel and resorted to seduction, the Gibeonites knew that war would be futile so opted for deception. Verse 14 shows that Joshua ought to have consulted the God of truth. We must love others, but without the naivety that will lead us to sin.

Holy, all-knowing God, you have been gracious to give us such lessons and examples in your word. Help me to be wise in all aspects of life, turning to you often, aware of the devil's schemes to trip me up. Help me to see and flee the seductions and deceptions that would ruin me.

Joshua 10 – A Long Day

On the face of it, the 5-nation attack on the Gibeonites could be seen as an opportunity to have them wiped out, voiding the tricked treaty of chapter 9. But such treaties included clauses of mutual protection, so Israel were bound by treaty to help. The resulting destruction of the kings and their cities makes for tough reading for us. But Joshua wasn't attacking for fun or gratuitous brutality: He was under God's command. Why did the Canaanite nations need to be wiped out, rather than evangelised? Deuteronomy 9:5 makes it clear that it was an act of judgment, and judgment is always terrible. We shrink back, not feeling the wickedness of sin; God moves heaven and earth to bring justice.

Holy God, it is a spectacular and remarkable miracle to cause the sun and moon to stand still, to give extra daylight for Joshua to complete his mission for you. The miracle of the hours of darkness for Christ on that cross is even more remarkable: Thank you for that justice and mercy.

Joshua 11 – Hearts Hardened

Psalm 2 asks, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers conspire against the LORD and his Anointed One." While not always the case, we do get a startling answer to the psalmist's question in Joshua 11:20. All the nations of Canaan worked together to raise and army to defeat Israel – and their hard hearts were, like Pharaoh's in Exodus 9, a result of God's judgment against them. The enemies of Christ conspired to have him crucified, and that event was Christ's great victory instead of theirs. We take comfort, when surrounded by opposing and powerful evil, that no enemy can ever prevail against the LORD and his Christ.

God of refuge, my rock and high tower, thank you that I am secure in you forever. Give me a godly fearlessness to oppose all who oppose you, even in the normal conversations of life. Thank you that by your grace I am eternally secure in Christ.

Joshua 12 & 13 – Land Allocations

After the excitement of everything so far, much of the rest of Joshua is (to us) a rather dull record of land allocation. Yet these allocations represent the fulfilment of promise: First to Abraham so many centuries before, and later to Israel through Moses. The detailed descriptions of land allocation would be the basis of so much in the nation, such as inheritance laws, marriage, boundary stones, harvests, and so on. To us, there is the encouragement that when we step forward to take hold of all that God has promised, he is utterly powerful and faithful to keep his promises. Like Joshua's Israel, that may well mean struggle against overwhelming opposition, but nothing can stand against God's grace.

God of great and precious promises, how thrilling it is when you so visibly work through your people, fulfilling your promises as we take steps of obedience and faith. Help me to hear the call of this book of Joshua to be strong and courageous to obey you in everything.

Joshua 14 & 15 – Life-long Faith

Joshua and Caleb were the only two scouts sent out by Moses in Numbers 13 who had the faith in God needed to believe Israel could take Canaan from its incumbent nations. Only they remained of their whole generation, as promised by God. Caleb, aged 85, was finally in a position to claim the land promised to him. Yet even that land remained occupied, so we see that not only was he still of sound mind and body (14:11), but also undiminished in his faith in God to keep his promises. Those who have a life of faith, who constantly step out to take hold of all that God has promised, are usually those whose active faith enables them to continue to trust in God for everything.

Heavenly Father, how it must please you to see such faith that gives you honour as a good and promise-keeping God. You were faithful to Caleb all his life, sustaining and strengthening his faith in you. Lord, help me to be so strong and courageous in faith today, this week, and all of life.

Joshua 16 & 17 – Get On With It

Among the details of land allocations we can still see so much to encourage us – and to warn us. Legislation for Zelophehad's daughters (who had no brother, possibly jeopardising their father's inheritance) was given in Numbers 27 and 36. In Joshua 17 they step forward to take what the LORD had promised – and they received their inheritance. Surely, the LORD is good and faithful. At the end of Joshua 17, descendants of Joseph complain of too little land. The reasons for this are (a) they don't want to have to clear forest to reclaim land, and (b) they are fearful of the well-armed Canaanites in the valley. Their timidity is thankfully met with the firm faithful leadership of a man who knows God's will and strength: Joshua tells them to get on with it.

Heavenly Father, you are gracious indeed, lavishing your love on us in our adoption through Christ. Forgive me for the times I expect things in this world to be easier than they are. Help me to grow in faith, ever ready to trust you, stepping forward to do your work.

Joshua 18 & 19 – The Next Generation

Jacob's final blessing on his sons said that Levi and Simeon would be distributed among the other tribes (Gen 49:7). Between the censuses of Numbers 1 & 26, the tribe of Simeon reduced in number. Moses' final blessing in Deuteronomy 33 doesn't even mention Simeon. This all stems from Levi and Simeon's deceit and disproportionate, vengeful violence against the men of Shechem in Genesis 34. So in Joshua 19, Simeon are allocated two regions within the large inheritance of Judah. Though Levi had no *land* inheritance, they were restored by their zeal for God to the honour of his service. The faithfulness and zeal for God of our generation will surely affect the spiritual health of the next.

Lord God, you adopt us in grace person-by-person, and you obviously have no grandchildren. Yet I know that my zeal and faithfulness today will affect the next generation of your kingdom. Lord, keep me true and close to you in Christ. Spirit, compel my conscience to holiness.

Joshua 20 & 21 – Rest

After all the land and city allocations, Joshua 21:43-45 is the theological high point of the whole book. As God had promised Abraham, Israel had finally taken possession of the land. Throughout the book there have been hints at failure to occupy all of the land, and some enemies were subdued rather than wiped out. But such failure was always the result of the faithlessness of the people: The LORD had handed over everything when Israel had stepped out in faith. Crucially, "The LORD gave them rest" (v44). Whatever rest we enter into in this life, true rest with God is ahead. Hebrews 4:8-11 highlights the temporary nature of Joshua's rest, reminding us to yearn for and seek the eternal rest Christ brings.

Lord Jesus, your great work of salvation has secured an eternal rest beyond anything I have ever known. Thank you for the prospect of being with you for ever, resting from fighting sin and temptation and guilt, knowing only the joy and peace of your presence. Help me to trust today.

Joshua 22 – Conflict Resolution

With Israel at rest in Canaan, the 2½ tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh were released to return to their allocated land east of the Jordan river. Joshua is careful to remind them of their covenant obligations using the language of Deuteronomy (v5). The violent passion in response to the altar being built comes from a godly zeal based, in part, on a remembrance of Achan's sin in Joshua 7 – the sin of the 2½ tribes would affect the standing of the whole community before God. The resolution of the dispute satisfies everyone, since it is born out of a desire to preserve the true worship of the LORD for all Israel for the generations to come. Christians in disagreement might well benefit from such zeal and direct speech for God's glory.

Lord Jesus, your people often have disagreements where everyone thinks they're right. Give me a zeal for your kingdom, but also a humility to listen to others and to work to be at peace with your people. Help me to learn the depth of your forgiveness so that I might forgive others.

Joshua 23 – Remember

At the end of his life, Joshua gathered the nation together to deliver his final words. Like Moses before him, he knew that the people were the LORD's, so he had no desire for his own remembrance or legacy. His only concern was that Israel remain true to God. Again, like Moses, Joshua impressed on them the need to remember all that God had done, bringing them land and success as he had promised to do under his covenant. Joshua warned them that the covenant of blessing had another edge, too: Should Israel break the covenant with disobedience and idolatry they would experience the same covenant's curse. God won't be mocked; we take grace for granted at our peril.

Lord Jesus, I am quick to forget your grace and all your ongoing care and intercession for me. Forgive me, Lord, for when I lean on idols rather than instinctively turning to you. Spirit, keep me in Christ, in a godly walk, doing all your holy will for the Father's glory.

Joshua 24 – Covenant Renewal?

At the end of this book, Joshua laid out a clear choice for Israel: Worship the LORD who had so carried and blessed them from Abraham onwards or abandon him for pagan gods. We can't make others love God though we can certainly exhort them, leading to the beautiful confidence of v15: "As for me and my family, we will worship the LORD." The nation responded enthusiastically in covenant renewal, so that at the deaths of Joshua and Eleazar things seems to be in good shape for Israel. Sadly, the book of Judges will chart Israel's moral degeneration, reminding us that a local church is only ever one generation away from disappearing.

Holy God, you know how quickly we fall away from you and grow cold in our affections if left to our own devices. Thank you for the assurance I have in Christ that you will keep me to the end, and that it's by your grace alone that I can ever say, "I will worship the LORD."

Judges 1 – Destabilising Compromise

We saw in Joshua 19 that the tribe of Simeon was allocated land within the area assigned to Judah. So it might seem reasonable for Simeon to support Judah in further occupation of the land (v3). Yet that's not what God told them to do (v2). Their apparent success masked the destabilising compromise of all Israel, and it's no surprise to begin to read of failures creeping in for all the other tribes. It comes naturally to us to work at things under our own steam (and it's right to use the gifts God has given us) but we must be careful to obey him in everything without excusing disobedience and compromise by our pragmatism.

All-knowing and gracious God, you know how I make excuses and dream up caveats for myself, when what you require is whole-hearted obedience grounded in faith and love. Lord, give me boldness and strength to do your works today.

Judges 2 – Downward Spiral

This chapter sets the tone for the book of Judges – and indeed for the whole period between Joshua and Samuel. We're introduced to the repeating cycle: Israel abandoned the LORD, so in covenant justice he handed them over to enemies; they cried out to the LORD, and he provided a 'Judge' – a leader to deliver them from their enemies. After the Judge died, the cycle would repeat. Two things stand out: (a) It's not so much a repeated cycle, but more of a downward spiral. By the end of the book, Israel is a moral and spiritual shambles. (b) There's an overwhelming need for a saviour Judge who will save Israel and not die!

Holy Jesus, no wonder you told your disciples to remain in you. To sin and fall is always painful, and it's so easy to slip further away from the joy of knowing you and being in your presence. Lord Christ, help me to know you more and more, every day and forever.

Judges 3 – Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar

Of the twelve judges in the book, the first three appear here. Othniel is presented as a model of the cycle outlined in chapter 2. Yet while God is gracious, Israel cried out in misery rather than repentance so it's not a surprise to see them fall again after Othniel's death. Ehud is so unlike Othniel that he serves as a reminder of God's ability to work through the most unlikely of saviour. And the dark humour of the account is there for us to delight in and rejoice over the surprising wonder of so great a salvation. Shamgar is the first of six judges about whom we're told very little, but no work for the LORD is unseen or undervalued by him.

Lord Jesus, it's a delight to reflect on your work of salvation from such texts. How perfect is your work, how shocking – even foolish to the world! – and how totally and humbly executed. Lord, thank you that you rule perfectly; help me to serve you as I ought.

Judges 4 – Crushed Temple

If Ehud was an unlikely judge, Deborah is even more of a surprise. Barak was unwilling to obey a command from God, and his insistence that the prophetess went with him was a lack of faith that would rob him of the final prize. The battle was in a location that suited the enemy's iron chariots, but Israel were sure of success in following the LORD's command. The end of Sisera came at the hand of a non-Israelite woman, so that God was assured of glory throughout while the men of Israel fell short. As we recall God's promise to provide a saviour who would crush Satan's head (Gen 3:15), this shadow keeps hope alive that God has not given up on his people forever. We now have that secure in Christ.

Lord Christ, to many you seemed the least likely saviour and messiah, and of course to many you still do. Thank you for calling me to yourself and opening my eyes to see. Thank you that you used unlikely people like Ehud and Deborah to do your work – it encourages me to boldness.

Judges 5 – Blessed in Battle

When Sisera rode with his 900 chariots against Israel, victory must have seemed certain. But he was fighting against the LORD of heaven and earth! God caused rain, and the river Kishon flooded the plain, making chariots useless (v20-22). No wonder Sisera fled on foot. The battle was won by and for the LORD yet fought through Israelite soldiers in hard combat. Deborah's song celebrates the brave men who joined the battle (e.g. v14), but also draws attention to those who didn't. Reuben dithered (v16), Dan and Asher stayed at the coast, and the town of Meroz was cursed by the Angel of the LORD himself (v23). The LORD will always achieve all he plans to do, and we are blessed when we step forward to be useful to him.

Heavenly Father, you know how often I dither, shrink back, and make excuses rather than step forward in faith to serve and obey you in the world. Forgive me, Lord, and give me greater boldness to do all the works you prepare for me to do.

Judges 6 – Weakness

The chapter begins with the familiar cycle of idolatry, being handed over to enemies, and then crying out to the LORD. Israel were already a shadow of what they'd been under Joshua. The angel of the LORD went to the youngest son of a family in a weak clan in a small tribe and hailed him as "valiant warrior" (v12). Gideon truly was a weak man, but the LORD would call on him to do great things. First, however, God taught Gideon faith by giving him a relatively small yet undoubtedly dangerous task – destroying the Baal altar and Asherah pole. The fleece tests show how brittle Gideon's faith was. But shining through all is God's patience and grace, fulfilling his purposes to his glory through weak people.

Heavenly Father, this is all very encouraging. I feel weak and ill-suited to any kind of spiritual work, and yet it's clear that you are glorified in my weakness when I step out in faith's obedience. Teach me faith in the small things, Lord, so that I might be ready for bigger trials.

Judges 7 – Patient Nurturing

With 32,000 men in his army, Gideon had still needed the reassurance of the fleece to be confident enough to act. Since God had chosen Gideon in all his weakness, the LORD was gentle with his servant's feeble faith. Having reduced Gideon's army down to just 300 men, he then further encouraged Gideon by sending him into the Midianite camp to eavesdrop on the panicky fear among the enemy troops. Emboldened, Gideon engaged the enemy and then called for reinforcements to finish Midian off. Gideon was the agent, but the victory was the LORD's. Faced with our own challenges, we draw comfort from how much of this chapter is devoted to God's patient nurturing of Gideon.

Lord Jesus, your apostles were so faithless and headstrong for so long, yet you taught and refined them into your own likeness. You know my weaknesses and sinful tendencies, and your patient grace fills me with faith and hope. Lord, lead me on in your righteous ways.

Judges 8 – Whose Glory?

Questioned by the men of Ephraim (v1-3), Gideon misses the opportunity to give glory to God. As he progresses after the Midianite kings, the refusal of help from Succoth and Penuel draws a response that betrays a proud heart somewhat giddy with power. Certainly Gideon makes no reference to God in his endeavours. The idolatry of Gideon's ephod caps off his failures, living like a king as if his successes were his own. The nation's idol worship and abandonment of God is a natural result of Gideon's failure in spiritual leadership. When Christ, the King of kings, came to save us, he did so with a servant heart and an attitude that gave glory to God in everything. May our church leaders be modelled on him.

Lord Jesus, by grace you give your church seasons of encouragement and blessing. Forgive us, then, when we're tempted to steal glory that is wholly rightfully yours. Help me and our church leaders to serve with your own compassion, in active dependence on you, in your will.

Judges 9 – Not a Judge

Gideon declined the invitation to be king, but then lived like one. He named one of his sons Abimelech, which actually means “My father is king.” In doing so, he passed on a deadly desire for power which drove Abimelech to carry out terrible atrocities. He was not a Judge chosen by God to bring deliverance to Israel. Abimelech was self-serving and power-hungry. The fate of those who perished in the Tower of Shechem sounds awful, and yet they were the very people who helped him rise to power. Danger isn’t always “out there” in the world; it is often in our own hearts, in own churches, seen in those who desire power without accountability, leadership without service.

Lord Jesus, your church is precious to you. Keep the wolves away, Lord, and help the leaders in our church to be servant-hearted and humble, serving you and your people in a way that reflects your own gracious heart.

Judges 10 – Why Should the LORD Save?

After two more Judges (Tola and Jair), the downward spiral of Israel continued. We’re not told the land had peace any more; the oppression of Israel was as hearty as their complete abandonment of the LORD. When they did finally cry out, God challenged them to cry out to their ‘other gods’. It’s easy to become worldly and practice practical atheism, only returning to the LORD in times of trouble. German poet Heinrich Heine’s last words are reported to be, “Of course God will forgive me; that’s his job.” But no-one deserves God’s grace, compassion, or help: All have sinned. Yet he is compassionate and gracious, abounding in faithful love and truth, so we pray with humility, thankfulness, and praise.

Heavenly Father, I deserve no good thing from you, yet you lavish your love and mercy on me in adopting me at the cost of your Son’s death. Forgive my tendency to take your grace for granted, and help me to remain close to you – far from sin and temptation today.

Judges 11 – A Terrible Oath

Just as Israel cried out to the LORD after rejecting him in chapter 10, so too they called on Jephthah for leadership after rejecting him. The LORD responded in weary compassion, but Jephthah for power. His letter to the king of the Ammonites showed a clear grasp of the nation's history under the LORD's hand, and his ultimate victory earned him recognition in the list of people of faith in Hebrews 11. And yet his rash vow revealed how little he knew of the nature of God himself: The LORD commanded against such sacrifices and there's no mention here of Jephthah's offering being acceptable to God. Moreover, if he had confessed his foolishness he could have cast himself on God's mercy. We must beware of covering sin with sin.

Heavenly Father, this is a heartbreaking account of unnecessary loss of life. Thank you that we have such a full revelation of your heart of compassion and forgiveness here in your Bible. Lord, prevent me from adding sin to sin; keep me true in confession to you.

Judges 12 – Shibboleth

After the earlier Judges, we were told that the land had peace for a number of years. By the time of Jephthah, the rescues (and rescuers) of Israel were becoming more flawed. Just as they did after Gideon's success, the men of Ephraim challenged Jephthah by complaining that they hadn't been involved. It all ended in the Shibboleth moment and the loss of 42,000 Ephraimite lives – another awful sign of the disintegration of the nation over time. Sadly, it's easy for churches to compete and feel envy for one another too, highlighting differences and looking for flattering comparison points. Yet we have one Father, are saved by one Saviour, indwelt by the same Spirit. If we lose sight of God, we also disintegrate.

Lord Jesus, you must surely grieve over all you see in your churches. Forgive me for my part in that. Help me to love both my church and other churches that love you but maybe do things a bit differently.

Judges 13 – Strange Nativity

No other Judge comes to us with such a nativity story. Such birth details are reserved for significant Bible moments, so our expectations are high. What makes Samson so special? The clue is in v1: Although Israel had been handed over to their enemies for 40 years, they didn't bother to call out to God any more. That God should appear so dramatically to Manoah and his wife shows a gracious intervention from our compassionate God, planned and worked out years in advance. At the end of Ruth, we'll see how God had worked in David's line generations before his birth. These imperfect saviour / rescuers all point forward to the perfect one whose work was planned in eternity.

Lord Jesus, holy and eternal Word of the Father, thank you for your work of salvation planned outside of time yet accomplished in gritty reality at Jerusalem. I know that likewise you have prepared works for me to do and I pray for the Spirit's help to do them in a way that pleases you.

Judges 14 – Honey from a Carcass

In some ways, Samson was a mirror to the nation of Israel. Born into such promise and expectation, his parents despaired when Samson wanted a wife from among the Philistines, the occupying and oppressive enemy of Israel. His reason was (literally) was that she looked "good in his eyes" (v4). The incident with the lion taught Samson himself the power of God's Spirit in time of need. Would his wife be *his* honey from the carcass of a defeated Philistine nation, with victory won by the power of God? Sadly not, since Samson buckled under pressure and acted in grumpy vengeance. He was a deeply imperfect saviour for Israel, and yet over all this was the sovereign hand of God, working salvation.

Holy Jesus, King of kings, you are the perfect saviour and leader of your people. Thank you that your judgement will be true and just. Help me to live by the Spirit's power in my life, dependent on the strength you give as I face difficult people, conversations, and tasks.

Judges 15 – Defeated at Heart

Samson's antics with the foxes are wildly destructive, but the Philistine's brutal murders are barbaric. Back in Chapter 1, Judah had proved to be valiant and successful in taking land God gave them, so to see their pathetic state in Chapter 15 is yet another indicator of how far Israel had fallen. Yet Samson's victory at Jawbone Hill is a clear reminder that just one man empowered by the Spirit of God can prevail over any number of enemies. Perhaps Israel's biggest enemy was unbelief, manifested in a defeatist attitude that Israel's heyday was over and without hope of recovery. As we consider the world around us it's easy to get despondent as if evil has won. Yet Christ's victory over Satan and death is all our hope.

Saviour Jesus, our world is indeed a mess. Thank you for securing a perfect eternal reconciliation and a hope of eternal rest in you. Give me a cheerful heart to have confidence that you will continue to grow your kingdom, and that evil will not prevail. Keep me from temptation.

Judges 16 – Victory in Death

When something looked good in Samson's eyes, he would take it. He is a mirror to Israel, having been born with such hope and promise, dedicated to God, yet led astray so easily by his own desires. Samson knew he was flirting with disaster when he told Delilah false stories about the source of his strength. We are weak, and having put one foot down towards compromise we inevitably make it our standing foot, ready to step further in. We must avoid the first step to sin if we are to keep from the last. Samson was the last Judge in the book, though not a complete failure. In his death he did accomplish the beginning of the victory over the Philistines. How grateful we are to Christ our sinless king, whose death was utter victory.

Living Jesus, I know how prone to sin I am, blessed with the same Holy Spirit who gave Samson his strength. Teach and guide me in your ways, so that I will steer clear of temptation. Thank you for your perfect life, victorious death, and risen life applied to me by your Spirit.

Judges 17 – Vague Religion

There are a number of references to the LORD in this chapter, but only from the people's lips – the narrator doesn't mention him. Micah's mother's curse and blessing are both in the name of the LORD, but empty of any credible value. This is life with a vague religion, completely lacking in relationship with God. Micah took a young Levite backpacker into his house, delighted to have a Levite to serve as priest at his homemade shrine to the LORD – offensively rejecting the actual tabernacle system that God had given. He called the priest his father (v10) but treated him as a son (v11). Many pay similar lip service to God while treating him as one who is to serve us.

Gracious Father, you have revealed your great love and compassion to me and called me to living faith in your Son. You know I have friends and family who have vague ideas about you, church, and religion. Give me boldness to stand tall and hold firm to your truth, to point people to you.

Judges 18 – False Confidence

Back in Chapter 1, the Danites had failed to take the land allocated to them by God because of their sin and faithlessness. So in Chapter 18 we see them heading in a different direction, adding sin to sin. Along the way they pick up a Levite priest and Micah's idols, and find an unprotected region they can take. Micah's fate is pathetic: "You took the gods I have made" (v14), yet the Danites perceive their "progress" as blessing from the LORD despite a complete lack of submission to him. God made man, but people prefer manmade gods. Verses 30 and 31 show the grace and judgment of God: His tabernacle was still available providing a way for all who would come in the way given; exile would come after centuries of rejection of God.

Heavenly Father, I often unwisely look for signs of your favour in measures of success from this world, like health, financial security, numbers added to your church. Father, keep me humbly dependent on Jesus, obedient to your word, sanctified by your Spirit.

Judges 19 – Society Without Restraint

There are echoes of the angels' visit to rescue Lot from Sodom in this account. It seems that the sins that got Sodom destroyed were to be found among God's own people living in the Promised Land. If the man's regard for his concubine was despicable, her brutal treatment at the hands of the mob is heart-breaking, sad, and awful. Why did he cut her up and distribute her across the nation? Because neither he nor anyone else had any regard for God, his laws, or his rule, so the man appealed to the nation, society, and culture for a response. The God-less response he got is no surprise. The downward spiral of Israel was speeding up as they fell apart. One wonders how far our own nation might yet fall.

Living God, your word makes it clear that you grieve over your world in all its mess. Yet it's also clear that you hand us over to our sins in judgment. O God, give me a pure heart to live for you – straightness in a crooked world.

Judges 20 – Where's the Enemy?

Israel were to remain true to God and take full possession of God's promised blessing. Through Judges they spiralled downwards morally and spiritually, falling into disintegration and fearful of occupying enemy forces. By Chapter 20, their only reference to God was a pathetic attempt to get him to bless *their* plans – which was met with judgment and loss of life. Where all the Judges had failed to unite Israel against enemies, the man with his dead concubine managed to unite them internally as one against one of their own tribes. He did it through shock and being less than honest about his own involvement in her death. When we lose touch with God, we lose sight of who our real enemies are and begin to fight internally.

Holy Jesus, your church is so precious to you and yet we are so full of imperfection. Enliven your people, Lord, so that we will remain true to you, united around the truth you proclaim, rejoicing to serve, opposing evil where it truly lies. Keep me daily at your feet.

Judges 21 – Moral Collapse

The state of Israel at the end of Judges could hardly be further away from how it was at the start of Joshua. God had been true to his covenant promises both in blessing and in curse, yet the nation had drifted further and further from him. The decisions made in Chapter 21 to wipe out Jabesh-Gilead, steal its virgins, and later permit the Benjamites to kidnap 200 more are frankly ridiculous. The last verse of the book is damning. This is the downward spiral of any person, group, or nation that resolutely turns its back on God: We add sin to sin, making ever more awful moral choices, justifying our actions to ourselves, doing *anything* rather than turn in repentance to God.

Merciful God, if you counted our sins against us we could not stand before you. Thank you that you have halted that downward spiral in my life by grace. Help me to move ever upwards to you, growing in godliness and holiness every day.

Ruth 1 – From Famine to Harvest

After the exhausting and depressing cycles in Judges, Ruth comes to us as a breath of fresh air – even though it's set in the same times. The book's purpose is to remind us of God's sovereignty, both in our day-to-day lives and in his great plan of salvation. That matters because Naomi went through very real pain and loss just as we can expect to in life. It's a book of reversals, of covenant love, and hope, involving normal people used by the LORD in his plans for grace and blessing. We're reminded also of our personal choices and life-affecting decisions within God's sovereignty: As the three women stood on the road with Bethlehem ahead and Moab behind, it was a choice of the LORD's blessing ahead or dead gods behind. Gentile Ruth chose to enter God's covenant love.

Sovereign Lord, your plans and purposes span all of time and are wonderfully worked through the details of our lives. Help me, then, to keep in step with the Spirit and to be closely attuned to your will and plans, both for me and for those around me.

Ruth 2 – A Match Made in Heaven

God is abundantly generous and gracious, and his laws ensure that his goodness is worked out in and through his people. He cares for the poor, the foreigner, the widow – and Ruth was all of these. Boaz's harvest operation was clearly set up in a beautiful outworking of God's law, evident in his workers' care of Ruth even before Boaz arrived. Yet Boaz reflected the spirit of the law too, with a generosity and protection that went far beyond basic covenant obligations. The narrator delightfully points out "coincidences" and chance moments, making it clear that this was a match made in heaven. More, Boaz is a shadow of our perfect bridegroom Jesus, lavishing love on us forever.

Lord Christ, your love for me and all your people is displayed in your gracious work at Calvary. Thank you that by your grace I have entered into and experienced your love as the Spirit has worked life in me. Help me to display your abundant generosity and grace in my life.

Ruth 3 & 4

In Chapter 1, Ruth said to Naomi, “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” In Chapter 2, Ruth came under the blessing of God’s people as his generous laws were worked out in the fields around Bethlehem. Chapter 3 mirrors Chapter 2 as the covenant blessings of God come closer still in the language of marriage and intimate love. Ruth, at Naomi’s prompting, becomes vulnerable at the feet of Boaz and yet her faith in him is grounded in his godliness before the LORD. Boaz’s wise negotiations are upright and true, securing for himself a wife of faithfulness. The brief genealogy is repeated in Christ’s lineage in Matthew 1:5, reminding us of the eternal purposes of God being worked out in the moments of our lives.

Lord Jesus, great Redeemer of your church, thank you for calling me into intimacy with you. Forgive me for my transactional approach to prayer, and help me develop the relationship with you that you saved me to enjoy. Help me to see you at work in all of my life.

1 Samuel 1 – Faith-filled Prayer

This book begins with an unremarkable but godly man and his two wives who went each year to worship and sacrifice to the LORD at Shiloh, the place where God’s tabernacle resided throughout the time of the Judges. The taunting of the barren woman, her heartache, and the concern of her husband make a sad domestic scene. Yet Hannah had faith. She took her pain, tears, and plea to God (v10-11), pouring herself out before him (v15). Such was her faith in God, her spirits revived after being in his presence. All she wanted was to have children and to be released from that culture’s disgrace, yet God’s abundant grace would provide a child who would ultimately shape the nation.

Sovereign Lord, your plans and purposes span the centuries to do us good, and yet they are worked out in our prayers and daily lives. Spirit, keep me prayerfully dependent, confident of your goodness and mercy as I bring my requests to you.

1 Samuel 2 – Ripples and Shadows

Psalm 113 celebrates how the LORD whose glory is above the heavens stoops down to raise the poor from the dust. It deliberately quotes Hannah's song (v8) as an example of his particular and spectacular grace. Births in the Bible usually denote important moments (though Samson's nativity highlighted Israel's lostness), and this Samuel would be the last Judge, eventually anointing God's chosen king, David. Psalm 113 was traditionally a Passover psalm, sung to praise God for hearing the misery of his people and then redeeming them from slavery. These shadows point us to the nativity of the Son of God, our Redeemer and Passover Lamb, heir of David's throne over God's people forever.

O God, your word says, "From the rising of the sun to its setting, let the name of the LORD be praised." Your care for us is richer and deeper and broader than we can take in, and our lives more woven into your plans that we can know. Help me to praise you as you glorify your name in me.

1 Samuel 3 – Here I Am

This the chapter where the dark days of the Judges really begin to turn towards light. There had been few visions (v1) and the priest's eyesight was failing (v2). Yet the lamp of God had not gone out in his tabernacle in Shiloh, and one night he called to Samuel. The message God gave Samuel was already known to Eli, so was in fact a lesson for the boy to learn to trust God by giving prophetic messages that people might not want to hear. Even more, the fact that the LORD came and *stood* there with Samuel (v10) would be a powerful reminder of who it was he would be serving. Our God is always with us, dwelling in us by his Spirit, so may we always be ready to say, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening."

Lord Jesus, you have given us a message that sin-loving hearts don't want to hear. And yet you do call people to turn as the Spirit convicts hearts and gives life and faith. Help me to be as ready for service as that boy Samuel, and to serve you all my life as he did with boldness.

1 Samuel 4 – Ichabod

It's notable that the Israelites refer to the ark as "the ark of the LORD's covenant" (v3) when they agreed to take it from the tabernacle in Shiloh. They have so roundly abandoned the covenant that they scarcely pause to reflect on the presence of God at his tabernacle. They treat the things of God as a lucky charm, expecting success as if God himself was their puppet. The same spirit continues today with people wearing Christian emblems and popping along to the odd church event or service – it's little more than superstition. The poor woman's grief in childbirth was a true reflection of Israel's state. Only God is truly glorious, and his departure can only be disastrous.

Holy God, you who dwell in unapproachable light, immortal and invisible, thank you for revealing your glory to me by faith in Christ. As you are glorious in holiness, mercy and grace, help me remain close to you in joyful and reverent awe, never taking your care for me for granted.

1 Samuel 5 & 6 – Fear of God

Every culture in the world has some kind of religion, born of an innate human awareness of spiritual reality beyond all we can see. As for the Philistines, they had their god Dagon. The statue was no different on the ground without head or hands than it had been before – unable to see, hear, speak, or act. Faced with an awareness of the presence of the LORD, the true and living God, how did they react? They might have forsaken their idol and turned in repentance and faith, but they preferred to send him away by sending the ark back down the road. It's no surprise that people still prefer snack-spirituality rather than the abundant nourishment of the Christ of glory. Like those of Beth-shemesh, we must also revere the LORD.

Holy God, I know that it is good to have a healthy, reverent fear of your holiness and greatness. I also know that the Spirit is continuing his work of sanctifying me. Give me ever greater awe of you, so that I might praise you and live out the holiness you have bound me to in Christ.

1 Samuel 7 & 8 – Ebenezer Rejected

Once again, the highs and lows of Israel (and us) are on display. In Chapter 7 there seems to be genuine repentance and a turning to the LORD (v4). The tight chronological links from repentance to prayer to deliverance can hardly be missed, and establishing the stone of Ebenezer ("stone of help") is lovely and appropriate. Chapter 8 reminds us of Eli and his wayward sons, hinting at trouble to come. God knows our hearts and motives, understanding the rejection of Samuel as a rejection of God's own rule. Even when the cost of having a king was fully explained, the people still chose to reject God. The desire to be like the world around us undermines our faith, missing out on blessing.

God of help, hearer of prayer, gracious Father and Lord, you have watched over me and cared for me so very much. Forgive me for my faithlessness and desire to fit in with the world around me. Spirit, keep me in repentance and faith.

1 Samuel 9 – Sovereign Control

Given the chaotic ending to Judges, it's no surprise that Benjamin was the smallest tribe. Saul was an insignificant man in a small tribe, though his physical stature would be just what Israel would look for in a king (v2). His search for his father's donkeys feels sluggish and messy, and a series of events has him finally at Samuel in v14. The surprise is that we're then told that God *sent* Saul to Samuel (v16) to be anointed ruler over God's people, which Samuel did. God's sovereign rule over our lives is hard to understand and totally humbling. Who knows what good he will do through us as we go about our lives? Notice that Saul was ruler, not king, over God's people, commissioned to free them from the Philistines. Failure would cost him the throne.

Sovereign Lord of all, I have been aware of your hand on my life many times. It is reassuring, encouraging, and humbling. Forgive me my sins that must grieve you so much. Help me and use me in your kingdom. May I be a useful servant to you today.

1 Samuel 10 – Kingdom Authority

Samuel had anointed Saul in secret, but the time came for him to be publicly declared ruler of Israel. The people were volatile and picky, so the extended process of gathering everyone and then choosing by tribe, clan, and family ensured that there could be no challengers to the throne. For all that, when it came down to Saul he was hiding, reluctant to take up the kingship being thrust on him. Verse 25 is pivotal: Saul's kingship was not absolute rule without restraint; he was king over God's people, ruling subject to all the laws of the covenant already given, himself subject to the absolute authority of God above. If only our own world leaders had such awareness.

Lord Jesus, it is good that you are King of kings since you are perfect in goodness, knowledge, wisdom, and justice. Help me to embrace your rule over my life. Work in our world leaders too, so that they might know their accountability to you.

1 Samuel 11 – Saul Changed

The brutality facing the men of Jabesh-gilead hardly needs emphasizing – we naturally and rightly recoil. Yet such awful mutilation continues in some form or other in every sphere of modern warfare. The action of Saul was just and appropriate, bringing an end to the wicked violence. The remarkable thing for us is to notice the drastic change in Saul. In a short space of time, he's gone from hiding from responsibility (hidden among the supplies, 10:22) to being a powerful leader able to do great things for God. It's reminiscent of the change that came over Simon Peter at Pentecost. The difference for both men is the Holy Spirit of God in them, urging and strengthening them for the works given. Christian, the same Holy Spirit dwells in you and does not slumber.

Holy Spirit, Saul's effectiveness and victory are all to your glory. Forgive my timid and faithless heart, and teach me what it is to trust in your strength and purpose. Help me to love Jesus better and to be more like him. Help me to speak of him boldly to others.

1 Samuel 12 – Samuel's Speech

This is Samuel's last public speech. He has gathered the people and their new king, Saul, to address them as one. He reminds them of God's good kingship over them, rescuing them from Egypt and a string of other enemies, hearing their cries of repentance over and over. All this is to show that they have sinned against God by asking for a different king, and the thunder and rain confirmed his words. There is always hope, always grace, so Samuel instructs them to remain true to the LORD even as he promises to pray for them and to teach them (v23). The whole event is a beautiful example of clear and godly spiritual leadership. May our own church leaders be so godly.

Lord Jesus, great God and King, how perfect you are as you intercede for us before the Father and teach us through your Spirit-inspired word. Help your pastors to be more like you, so that all your people would delight to remain true to you.

1 Samuel 13 – Running Ahead of the Command

The situation for Israel seemed bleak, facing an enemy of overwhelming force, and having no proper weapons for battle. Yet we've seen such situation before (e.g. Gideon's 300 men) and know that if Saul is obedient to God then all will be well. He was commanded to wait for Samuel to receive instruction from the LORD (10:8), but on seeing his army deserting he ran ahead of the command and began offering burnt sacrifice. He was putting his trust in his army rather than the word of the LORD. His unbelief would cost him his dynasty, and prompted Sanuel to announce the rise of another king (v14). Worst of all for Saul, Samuel left without further instruction from the LORD. It was silent judgment.

Heavenly Father, it's no surprise that your word tells us to keep in step with the Spirit. Your plans are perfect and your word is good, so please forgive me when I go my own way in my own strength. Help me to be patient in obedience every day.

1 Samuel 14 – The Pomegranate Problem

Back in 1 Samuel 9:16, God said that Saul would be the ruler of God's people to save them from the Philistines. Yet it was Saul's son, Jonathan, who struck the first blow (13:3), provoking the military situation we see in Chapter 14. Then, while Saul sat under a pomegranate tree, Jonathan and his armour-bearer stepped forward in faith towards the enemy. Still, Jonathan was careful to confirm that his actions truly were what the LORD intended (v9 & 10). When we know what the LORD wants (e.g. witnessing, loving, growing) we must take steps of faith, checking that we're in step with the Spirit as we go. We can't engage as disciples if we dither under a pomegranate tree.

Lord Jesus, you know my tendency to dither and delay. Forgive the cold selfishness of my heart, preferring comfort to the necessary and good activity required to witness, to love, and to grow. Help me in your work.

1 Samuel 15 – Denial of Sin

God makes no mistakes, though not all his actions bring him joy. Certainly the sin of the world provokes him to wrath and necessary judgment or discipline. His regret at Saul's kingship signified his sadness (v11). Saul's failure to carry out the LORD's command in full dominates this chapter. Confronted with his sin (v19), Saul's first reaction is denial (v20), though the reference to "the LORD your God" introduces an unhelpful and telling distance. When Saul does confess, he does so with justifying caveats (v24). His sorrow seems to be more about the loss of his throne and status than about his offence to God. We are no better. How often we deny our sin, then justify our actions, when we would do better to go to Christ in confession.

Lord Jesus, you know my sin. The Spirit searches my heart and knows all my rebellious, selfish inclinations. Forgive me my sins, please. Thank you that you are faithful and just to forgive. Help me to be true and repentant about the sins of my heart; help me to grow in holiness in you.

1 Samuel 16 – God Sees the Heart

Samuel was apprehensive about going to Bethlehem, fearing death from Saul. That might explain the fear in the men of Bethlehem, not wanting to come between Saul and Samuel. Yet the visit was divinely appointed to anoint young David. Samuel at first succumbed to the error of Israel when they chose Saul, looking at the outward appearance of Jesse's sons. As it happens, both Saul and David were good-looking men, but that is of no relevance to suitability for leading God's people (v7). The bridge from v13 to v14 is clear: The Spirit came powerfully on David and remained, but the same Spirit had departed from Saul for good. Jesus, Son of David, born in Bethlehem, is where we see God's own heart.

Saviour Jesus, you were ridiculed and despised by men and yet had the most perfect heart for God there can ever be. Forgive me for being so quick to judge on others' appearances; help me to discern hearts for you. Thank you that you will never remove your Spirit from your people today.

1 Samuel 17 – Getting Behind the Saviour

Before we get to David putting a stone in his sling, we're given quite a bit of detail about the circumstances of the battle, Goliath's taunting offer of combat, and how David came to be there. It's clear that he was still a boy even to his own family, which works to highlight the utter imbalance of the situation. This is not, however, a story of how we are to be like David. Rather, we are in the ranks of Israel, desperately in need of a saviour who will rise up and defeat our enemies – temptation, sin, and death. David crushing Goliath's head gives us a shadow of the great Son of David who came to put an end to the works of the devil. Jesus is already victorious over all our enemies; he is the one promised who would crush Satan's head (Gen 3:15).

Great Messiah Jesus, you have already conquered Satan and secured eternal life for all your people. Forgive me for trying to go into spiritual battles in my own strength. Help me to turn instinctively to you for everything that comes my way.

1 Samuel 18 – Opposite Fortunes

David must have marvelled at his change in fortunes, though his words to Goliath made it clear he knew his success was entirely from God. It seems almost everyone loved David, from the king's son and daughter to the public who sang of his triumphs. Saul must have been distraught at his own change of fortunes, and clearly saw that David's rise was a sad counterpart to his own demise. Other than some obvious rants caused by the spirit sent to him, Saul kept his animosity largely hidden, anticipating David's failure at the hands of the Philistines to be inevitable and fatal. But God's love for his people eclipses all opposition.

Heavenly Father, it is good to know that you are my ultimate protector, and that Christ will present me to you at the last day whatever comes along in this life. Keep me persevering in hope through all challenges, anticipating your presence, knowing and experiencing it daily.

1 Samuel 19 – Open Attack

The chapter begins quite well with Saul being persuaded by his son Jonathan to be gracious and thankful for David. But another of David's successes against the Philistines sparks another murderous rant. This time, Saul is more open, commanding his soldiers to kill David. David escapes and goes to Samuel (it is good to seek out the LORD's people in times of distress). When Saul's men follow David they're blessed to prophesy by the Holy Spirit – and even Saul himself is so blessed when he eventually goes there himself. Despite overt action against the LORD's anointed, David, the LORD makes it clear where the future of the monarchy lies.

Holy God, you protected David to fulfil your plans for your own glory, and your purposes are themselves glorious. Thank you that neither Saul, nor Pilate, nor Satan himself could ever thwart your plans. Thank you that by grace you have called me to yourself and united me to Christ.

1 Samuel 20 – Christ-like Love

We've already seen that everyone except Saul loved David. Jonathan's love, however, displays a beautiful Christlikeness. As the king's son, Jonathan was heir to the throne and would normally have been expected to oppose David. Instead, he gave up his royal privileges and clothed David with his own royal clothes, elevating David from shepherd boy to king-in-waiting (a status David already had from his anointing by Samuel). Christ left his heavenly splendour, emptying himself into humility and indignity so that we could become children of the living God, co-heirs with Christ himself. Unlike Jonathan, Christ remains king forever.

Gracious Saviour, I can't grasp the astonishing wonder that you, the eternal Word and Son, should step into your creation to live a human life. I thank you that you became like us so that we could become like you. Help me to love others and to honour them in your name.

1 Samuel 21 & 22 – New Low for Israel

The LORD desires "mercy, not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6), so the priest did well to give the holy bread to David. It was wise to confirm ceremonial cleanness too, lest holy food become lethal to unclean men. Jesus used this occasion for himself in Matthew 12, Mark 2, and Luke 6. David was then protected in enemy territory, but it was so unsettling for him that he has seven psalms from those days. Jesse, grandson of Moabite Ruth, was protected in Moab. The priests, however, were not protected from the wickedness of Doeg and were murdered in petulant cold blood at the command of Isreal's king. What a dark day. By God's grace, a remnant survived and gathered to the LORD's anointed.

Wise and good God, truly awful things sometimes happen to your people in this unjust and wicked world. Thank you for your promises and assurances and the expectation that one day your perfect governance will be fully experienced. Until then, give me that good and gracious heart of your servant Ahimelech.

1 Samuel 23 – Lost Focus

Saul had been anointed ruler specifically tasked with freeing Israel from Philistine rule. Here in 1 Samuel 23, however, it's David who is going to rescue the town of Keilah from the Philistines after enquiring of the LORD to see if that was the right course. Saul had so lost touch with the LORD and his purposes that he was aiming his army against David and his men. The certain battle between them was avoided only by a direct plea to Saul to go and resolve a Philistine incursion (v27). When nations, organisations, and churches lose sight of who the real opposition is, they often resort to civil war and disintegration. We must keep our unity in the Spirit to serve one Lord together.

Living God, you know how prone we are to losing sight of you, of our spiritual warfare. Forgive me that I find it easier to speak and act against your own children than against evil in the world. Help me to battle against sin, and to fight for righteousness in Christ's name.

1 Samuel 24 – Patient Submission

Why didn't David finish Saul off in the cave? And why did he feel such remorse for cutting a corner off Saul's robe? David knew that God had anointed him to be king some day and it was an act of faith to wait for that day, rather than grasping it in his own time. Cutting the robe was a crude display of how he could take the throne whenever he wanted, which was quite out of step with the humility of waiting. So he was content to know that God would deal with Saul's injustices (v15) and gracious enough to swear protection (v20-22). This recalls the time when Satan offered Jesus all the blessings of the Messiah without the pain of the cross (Matthew 4), but Christ would not be diverted from obedience to the Father.

Heavenly Father, there are times when a way seems right to me, but I know I don't always think biblically or theologically. Help me instinctively to turn to you and your word when faced with decisions in life. Give me growing godly wisdom.

1 Samuel 25 – Kept from Sin

It's obvious that Nabal was as rude as he was foolish. His reply to David, denying basic hospitality and not repaying David's kindness, was awful. Yet David's reaction was equally awful, if not more so. He intended to wipe out all the men in Nabal's household (v22) which was vengeful, petulant, and disproportionate. We are often over-the-top in our responses to being wronged. The action of Abigail showed a beauty within, clearly motivated by wanting to protect David from carrying out an obvious evil; David would be king, and his reign mustn't be tainted by past sins (v30-31). We are eternally grateful for Jesus' perfect reign, and pray "lead us not into temptation" with expectant hearts.

Heavenly Father, Jesus taught us to pray "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." I barely know how often you have done exactly that for me. I pray for the Spirit's help to be kept from sinning against you. Lead me into good paths and choices.

1 Samuel 26 – The Kingdom at David's Feet

This chapter reminds us of the cave episode in Chapter 24. Chapters 24-26 go together to show us David's growing understanding of his need for faith, patience, and restraint. He learned from Nabal that God will right wrongs and protect the promise of kingship to David. So v19 shows David's confidence that God will somehow bring justice against Saul (with a little godly creative thinking to aid the faith of his companion, Abishai). It was clear to everyone that David could have taken the kingdom, but also that he was waiting for the LORD's timing. It was also clear that he could no longer trust Saul, choosing not to return to him despite his contrition (v21). They never met again.

Lord Jesus, your timing and purposes are good and perfect. Give me wisdom, Lord, both to act when I should but also to be patient when that is needed. Help me to know your power at work and to encourage others with words and action based on experiential faith.

1 Samuel 27 – A Way That Seems Right

Given that Saul was anointed ruler to free Israel from the Philistines, it might have seemed odd for David to flee to Gath (again) in Philistine territory. He doesn't seem to have consulted the LORD, and indeed the whole chapter doesn't even mention God. David is living on his wits and shrewdness, and his scheming seems to be remarkably successful. It will lead to tensions when he's called on to attack Israel, but until then he must have been satisfied. And yet, the lesson from Chapters 24-26 was that he was kept from danger in Israel by God's providence, so perhaps going into Gath and Ziklag wasn't so wise. We must learn conscious dependence on the LORD.

Heavenly Father, you know how often I do things on my own without reference to you or your will. Forgive my desire for autonomy and help me to learn conscious and godly dependence on you. Thank you for this daily time with you.

1 Samuel 28 – Faithless Terror

Many psychics and mediums are money-making charlatans, but some – like the woman at En-dor – are the real thing. But since we only come to God through Jesus, mediums certainly won't be in touch with God but rather with demons – even demons masquerading as angels of light. Why did Saul go there? Because God didn't answer (v6) and Saul wanted to know what to do (v15). But really he knew what God wanted, which was to engage the Philistines in battle. The truth was that Saul was terrified. He had never entrusted himself to God before and was unable to pray "your will be done" when it came to his darkest hour. We can be thankful that in Christ's darkest hour, he destroyed the work and power of the devil in obedience to the Father.

Lord Jesus, it takes faith to be obedient, and by grace you train us in faith through difficult days and seasons of life. You know how hard it can be to pray "your will be done" so I ask for your promised help in time of need. Help me always to experience my union with you.

1 Samuel 29 & 30 – Strength in the LORD

It's hardly surprising that the Philistine commanders were suspicious of David no matter what assurances were given. Yet we see the providence of God too, since David and his men would be far from Saul on the day of his last battle (next chapter), freeing David from all culpability. That said, the situation at Ziklag was dire and mutinous. "But David found strength [literally, 'strengthened himself'] in the LORD his God" (v6). His trust in God was personal. We can strengthen ourselves in the LORD by remembering his providences and nature, and then putting one foot in front of the other in dependent prayerfulness, obedient to his will. The more we know Christ and spend time with him, the more we strengthen ourselves in him when we have need.

Holy God, your providential care over David is easy to see in these chapters. You helped and encouraged him personally, in his heart, by your good purposes. Thank you that your purpose for David was ultimately to bring us Jesus. Work your plans through me today.

1 Samuel 31 – A Battle is Not the War

Back in 1 Samuel 11, Saul was empowered by the Holy Spirit to deliver the men of Jabesh-gilead from Ammonite mutilation and humiliation. Here in 1 Samuel 31, those men now rescue Saul's mutilated corpse for honourable burial. It must have seemed a great day of victory for the Philistines, crowing over Saul's armour in their idol's temple. Yet we know that the LORD was at work throughout, and Saul's demise was a divine judgment. The promised messiah (anointed king), David, would soon emerge not only to be victorious in battle but also to lead Israel into true worship of the living God. Saul's awful death is a reminder to us of the reality of judgment, but also gives trust and hope that God reigns.

Heavenly Father, you are holy and just – and right to punish sin against you. Thank you for Jesus, taking the punishment I deserve. Help me to grasp the terrible reality of the judgment awaiting my unsaved family and friends so that I might witness with greater urgency and passion.

2 Samuel 1 – A Time for Grief

1 & 2 Samuel actually form a single book, though from here on the focus is wholly on David. The Amalekite thought he was bringing David good news: Saul was dead. He expected that to be so celebrated that it was worth lying and trying to claim merit. But David had had plenty of opportunity to take Saul's life himself and refused it, preferring to trust in God's timing. We might share the Amalekite's surprise: Why didn't David and his men receive the news with joy? Saul and his sons were kin, loved by David. More, as the king of Israel, Saul's demise would tarnish God's name in the idolatrous celebrations in Philistine temples. David grieved for Saul. God himself takes delight in the death of no-one.

Lord Jesus, I confess that I don't always grieve over the inevitable destiny of those who don't know you – though I clearly ought. Spirit, move my heart with Christ's own compassion. I'm surrounded by sheep without a shepherd; help me to lead them to Jesus.

2 Samuel 2 – The Rise of the King

David's first move towards the throne over Israel was to pray, asking the LORD for instruction. Such conscious dependence on God characterised his life and reign – a shadow of the perfect obedience of Jesus to the Father. David was to go to Hebron, the place Abraham had bought a plot of land to bury his wife in (Genesis 13:18), and there he became king of Judah in the south. Abner was Saul's cousin and very much part of Saul's command (it was Abner who brought David to Saul at the killing of Goliath, 1 Samuel 17). So Abner knew David was the LORD's anointed king and that opposition to David was opposition to God himself – doomed to failure. Tragically, Abner's rebellion cost others their lives.

Father, thank you for the perfect good rule of your Son. Thank you for his perfect obedience to you, and for crediting me with the righteousness he alone has earned. Help me to live out his kingdom reign in love and purity, even when people oppose it.

2 Samuel 3 – Power Struggles

There's so much politics in this chapter. When Abner slept with Saul's concubine it was (in that culture) a power grab for Saul's throne. Saul's son, Ish-bosheth, was incensed, though when Abner then chose to defect to David he undermined any power that Ish-bosheth might have had in Israel. David offered Abner peace, but then sought the return of Michal, Saul's daughter (and David's first wife) from Ish-bosheth, which undermined Abner's apparent authority. Joab's assassination of Abner in retaliation for his brother's death was unjustified because Abner had killed in battle – and then only after giving fair warning (2:22). The despicable murder was likely yet another power grab. For all this, David's power and reign was *given* to him.

Messiah Jesus, great God and King, you rule over all the presidents, kings, prime ministers and rulers of this world. All their political manoeuvring is subject to your ultimate authority and power. This gives us hope. Help me be true to your kingdom under secular government.

2 Samuel 4 & 5 – Throne Secured

The hold that Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, had on Israel was weak and fading, and his murder by Rechab and Baanah was hardly heroic. They expected David's delight as they claimed the LORD's victory (4:8), but in their public execution David was able to clear his own name of any involvement. The result is Chapter 5, a collection of records of events describing how David came to be king over the whole nation – Judah in the south and Israel (the other tribes) in the north. He finally ousted the Jebusites and set up Jerusalem as an ideal seat of national power. He also secured significant victory over the Philistines through careful obedience to the LORD. The cloud on this sunny day is in v13-16: Women were his weakness.

Lord Jesus, reigning in splendour, it's good to know that you are a king with no weakness of character, no flaws at all. Help me to me aware of my weaknesses, and to do right and put right every day in your name.

2 Samuel 6 – Holiness and Humility

God is holy. He is holy in himself, independent of creation. His holiness is the bright brilliance of his perfect love and beauty in his own being. Such a spectacular nature prompts immediate adoration and worship from any sinless creature (e.g. angels) in God's presence. To sinful creatures like us, his holiness is lethal. The ark of the covenant was holy by its proximity to the LORD, so Numbers 4 has careful instructions to protect people transporting it from death. Uzzah died because a lack of reverence for God's holiness led to slackness in obedience to God's law. Grasping this helps us worship as David did – astonished that such a God should ever dwell among us to bless us.

Holy God, so worthy of the worship of all Creation, spectacular in your glorious holiness, forgive me that I undervalue your holiness, even to the point of contempt. Gracious God, thank you for calling me into your holiness, into intimacy, and help me live in holiness today.

2 Samuel 7 – Son of David

This is one of the most important chapters in the whole Bible. David quite reasonably wanted to build a house (temple) for the LORD, a permanent structure to replace the tabernacle now that Israel were settled. But God said that it would be David's son who would build that house. Much more, God would build David a house, a dynasty of kings that would last forever (v16). David was floored, seeing that such a promise would be good for all humanity for all time (v19). That promise seemed lost by the time of Joseph, descendant of King David, Nazareth's carpenter, engaged to young Mary. So Jesus is the Son of David, the eternal King of kings whose reign is without end. "I am the root and descendant of David, the bright morning star" (Revelation 22:16).

Faithful God of covenant promise, neither the failings of your people nor the opposition of wicked unbelievers could halt your eternal plans for Christ. Thank you that Jesus is King of all, and that you will complete all your plans and purposes in him forever.

2 Samuel 8 & 9 – Power and Grace

The catalogue of victories in 2 Samuel 8 is impressive. David was decisive and ruthless, gaining victory over Israel's enemies and yet ruling with justice and righteousness (8:15). But in Chapter 9 we begin to understand what it means for Israel to have a king after God's own heart. David had bound himself by covenant to Jonathan and his descendants (1 Samuel 20:42), though he might reasonably have dispatched them as enemies. David's care for Jonathan's son Mephibosheth was far beyond what might come from a mere contract with terms and conditions: This was a covenant born out of love. So Christ binds himself in lavish grace to us, rescuing us from crippling sin to dine at his table.

Saviour Jesus, while I was dead in trespasses and sins, lost in idolatrous desires, you saved me in covenant love. Thank you for calling me to fellowship with you, experienced in part here, now, and yet holding such promise for the ages to come.

2 Samuel 10 – Diligence and Faith

We might think this chapter could be skipped, or replaced with something like, "David was successful in all his military campaigns." But there are two important lessons here: (1) While David's kindness to his men was commendable, we should be surprised that David sent Joab to lead the troops rather than go himself (v7). It might not seem much, but this drop in diligence would become a pattern that led to spiritual disaster in the next chapter. (2) Joab was a battle-hardened rogue of a man, but his rousing words to his brother in v11-12 are theologically robust and helpful: We are only ever instruments in the LORD's hands, and we must be responsive to his will as we step out in faithful service.

Messiah Jesus, I seek to do your will and yet I'm so like David, allowing compromise to creep in where I ought to be conscientious for you. Give me the spirit in Joab's words, ever ready to do your will, responsive to change as I see your will unfolding.

2 Samuel 11 – Catastrophic Sin

First a dereliction of duty, then an abuse of power, then exploitation of a married woman, and (in effect) murder to cover his tracks. What terrible actions from a man so blessed by God. Yet no-one jumps to such sin overnight. We've seen David's appetite for women (e.g. 5:13) and his tendency to send others to lead battles instead of going himself (10:7). Sin leads to sin as we try to deny and hide our wrongdoing, yet we only fool ourselves. God knows our actions, our secrets, our hearts. Fear of shame and punishment drives us to harden our hearts, when confession to God in heartfelt repentance is our only way to lasting peace.

O God, you know all the things in my heart of which I am ashamed – things I'd hate to be exposed to the people I care most about. Father, forgive my sin against you. Thank you that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, and for the full reconciliation you have granted.

2 Samuel 12 – I Have Sinned

Nathan's parable helps David see his own sin objectively for what it is. As we see David's compromise, temptations, and sin, and then piling on more sin, we hear the Spirit convicting us in equal measure: *You are David*. But where Saul made excuses, David owns his sin immediately: "I have sinned against the LORD" (v13). We do well to do the same. David murdered Uriah (v9) and the punishment for murder was death, but he would be spared that. Nevertheless, there would be consequences of sin and v10-11 form the background to the rest of the book. Having experienced God's grace, David prayed earnestly for the child until he died – a sombre sign of the sorrow to come. God is just and wise and good, and *his* Son died to take the punishment we all deserve.

Holy Father, I have sinned against you repeatedly, both unintentionally and intentionally. Father, please forgive me. Spirit, thank you for convicting me of my sin and leading me to repentance and saving faith. Lord Jesus, thank you for taking the punishment I deserve. Give me grace to humbly accept your good discipline in my life.

2 Samuel 13 – Rape and Murder (Again)

We saw how 2 Samuel 12:10-11 would be the background to the rest of the book, and immediately we see David's abuse of power, rape, and murder brutally repeated among his own offspring. Tamar was a godly, beautiful, gifted and hard-working young woman, but Amnon was frustrated because "it seemed impossible to do anything to her" (v2) – a truly chilling phrase. Jonadab proposed awful sin, and his shameful lack of integrity can't be overlooked. Absalom's premeditated murder was shoddy and wicked. David was furious over the rape and grieved terribly over the murder but did absolutely nothing to execute justice. How do the sins in our own lives entangle with others to cause terrible harm?

Lord Jesus, you will judge the earth with righteousness, putting all wrongs right, wiping every tear, bringing peace and restoration to all your people. In a world of rape and murder, lies and injustice, your reign brings me peace.

2 Samuel 14 – Conniving and Scheming

When Nathan told his parable to David, there was a clear and direct correlation between the parable and David's actions. The appeal in *this* woman's story (concocted by Joab) is for a son who seems to have inadvertently taken his brother's life. David extends royal mercy on the surviving brother and is then challenged to repeat extend it to Absalom who killed his brother Amnon. He does so, despite the lack of firm correlation: Absalom acted in planned, premeditated wickedness. Perhaps David's own sins have undermined his willingness to pass judgment, but his failure to rule with righteousness paves the way for disaster. We pile sin on sin; Jesus adds grace to grace.

Great God and King, in you there is no shadow or turning. Your throne is pure righteousness, goodness, wisdom, knowledge, and love. Help me to face up to my sins honestly, confessing all before you in heart-felt repentance. Father, please, forgive me now.

2 Samuel 15 – Masquerading Evil

Evil rarely jumps out at us. It creeps up, smiling, persuading, and cajoling. If often looks so reasonable and compassionate. Absalom's methods of controlling narrative and stealing hearts are still prevalent today in ethical issues of public policy. David knew that everything that was happening was a consequence of his own sin, and leaving Jerusalem was a shrewd way of preserving life in his own household as well as finding out who was still loyal to him. Sometimes, wisdom rolls with the punches. Yet David's trust was in God's righteousness (Psalm 3), so the ark was to remain in its place. He prayed for help expectantly and saw the appearance of Hushai as specific answer to prayer.

Heavenly Father, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Have mercy on our country, thwarting attempts to introduce laws that are contrary to your good ethics. Give me true wisdom and compassion for victims of evil.

2 Samuel 16 – Many Faces of Opposition

David had shown kindness to Mephibosheth out of covenant love for his father, Jonathan. Ziba was to serve Mephibosheth, maintaining his land. Ziba's account in 2 Samuel 16 is unlikely, but David had to act quickly and gave the land to Ziba. Ziba's kindness was a ruse: Should David succeed, he would have to recall Ziba's kindness; not going with David could win favour with Absalom. The cursing from Shimei was obviously far more open and explicit. Yet although Shimei's reasons for rage were wrong, David knew that the whole miserable situation was caused by his own sin and, therefore, the wearisome opposition was justified. In the light of Amner's rape of Tamar, Absalom's treatment of David's concubines is as shocking as it is shameful.

Lord Jesus, as you went around Galilee and Judea you were opposed by so many people – some openly, and others with sly intent. So it still is for your church under opposition today. I confess my sin before you again, and yet I ask for protection for your church for your name's sake.

2 Samuel 17 – Repent and Live?

Amid all the scheming and conniving in these chapters, we need to keep a close eye on what the LORD is doing. Verse 14 is a key bit of information: Through the self-seeking manoeuvres of sinful men, God was continuing to work his own purposes out. The promise of a lasting dynasty in 2 Samuel 7 stood firm, but it would not come through Absalom. It's quite possible that this was the realisation that had come to Ahithophel: It's futile to oppose the LORD. Yet Ahithophel made the same gross error that Judas did: They each took their own lives rather than cast themselves on the mercy of God in repentance and faith.

Holy God, you are compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love and truth. Forgive me, Lord, for the times I oppose you by going my own way in pride. Thank you that you will fulfil your good purposes in me.

2 Samuel 18 – Hanging on a Tree

Not a man in the army was unaware that Absalom was to be treated gently for David's sake. When a man found Absalom dangling from a tree by his hair, he wouldn't dream of harming him. Joab had no such qualms and killed him in cold blood. Was it because Absalom was a traitor to David? Perhaps it was to avenge Israel's 20,000 dead in this power-grabbing civil war? Or Joab might simply have been executing judgment for Absalom's murder of his brother (something David had failed to do). In a sense it doesn't matter. What matters to us is the constant reminder that while God disciplines those he loves, he also punishes those who work against him and his anointed.

Gracious God, there is no condemnation for those you unite by faith to the Lord Jesus. How I thank you! Lord, my desire is to keep in step with the Spirit, never to work against your purposes. Forgive me that I so often fail in this regard. Help me to live well for you today.

2 Samuel 19 – Kingdom Restored

David's grief for his son was like that of any father, no doubt amplified by guilt since all these events were precipitated by David's sins against Uriah and Bathsheba. Yet Joab was right to call David to his responsibilities of leadership as king. David then wisely won the hearts of the nation back, showing grace to those who'd cursed him and lied to him, and restoring Mephibosheth as before. David's love for Absalom had clouded his judgment: He would have been far more aggressive against any other challenge to himself as the LORD's anointed. And yet he also knew that all these troubles were from the LORD. Christ, our perfect king, loved his enemies also – enough to die for us.

Great God and King, Lord Jesus, it's clear how your reign surpasses that of even the best of kings. You gave your life for me, even as you grieve over my sin and rebellion against you. Help me to forgive those who sin against me.

2 Samuel 20 – The End and The Means

In the previous chapter, on his return to Jerusalem, David had appointed Amasa as commander over his army instead of Joab (19:13). Joab would have been livid. So as Chapter 20 closes the restoration of David's kingdom we see so much of what we've seen before: Treacherous scheming, revolt against God's anointed king, cold-blooded murder, women suffering from being objectified, and human 'wisdom' that is based on the end justifying the means. In David's night of passion with a married woman (Chapter 11), he sowed the wind and reaped a whirlwind of pain and damage. We give thanks (a) that God works good even through such human mess, and (b) that Christ our king rules with perfect goodness.

Holy Jesus, you know what it is to walk this earth, to see and suffer the wickedness of humanity. Help me to navigate this life with your own godly wisdom, to live in holiness, close to you and assured of the blissful perfections of your new creation to come.

2 Samuel 21 – Federal Sin and Atonement

The Gibeonites were the people who tricked Joshua into making a covenant with them back in Joshua 9. That covenant was made in the LORD's name, so for Saul later to attack the Gibeonites was to bring God's name into disrepute. As king and head of Israel, Saul's actions reflected on the whole nation, resulting in the 3-year drought. The execution of some of Saul's sons and grandsons atoned for the guilt on the whole nation – a reminder of the terrible cost of atonement for sin. The heartbreaking sight of Rizpah's grief cries out to us still: How many lives are affected and broken by *our* sin? To be "in Christ" is to be in his kingdom, under his federal headship, knowing that he himself has fully atoned for all our sins in his own death.

Lord Christ, these sombre events remind me of the mortal danger of my own sin, and I thank you that your death has atoned for all my sin. Yet I know how lives are still damaged by my sin. Please forgive me still, and help me to live your kingdom life now.

2 Samuel 22 – Reflective Praise

This song is repeated as Psalm 18. It was written towards the end of David's life and serves as a reflection on his reign. We might expect a biography of a king to draw attention to his great successes, but this song emphatically gives all the glory for all David's success to the LORD. David was the LORD's anointed, and he knew that it was only in that context that he could expect success. David's sins aren't mentioned because they were all his own doing and shame, and this is a song to glorify God. The Sinai-like language of God reminds us of who it is who hears *our* prayers, while the world-wide blessing of the final verses speak of the reign of our Messiah, Jesus.

Holy God, rock and refuge, giver of life and hearer or prayer, thank you that Jesus is the perfect Messiah King. It's my heart's desire to join David and look back over my own life with praise to you. Help me today *to face everything with your help as part of a life lived for you.*

2 Samuel 23 – Prophetic David

Where Chapter 22's song was a reflection on David's life, his song here in v1-7 is deliberately prophetic. Inspired by the Spirit and rooted in the covenant God made with David in 2 Samuel 7, he speaks of a ruler to come who will rule in righteousness and in the fear of God. As we see this fulfilled in Christ we also see the glory of God in saving us by such an astonishing plan; yet we also see the fate of those outside Christ's covenant (v6-7). The impressive lists of valiant men end pointedly and poignantly with Uriah, a reminder of the great cost of David's life to others – and the grace of God to preserve his covenant promises.

Heavenly Father, your word makes much of Christ as the Son of David. Rightly so, since you are glorified as the patient and gracious God who works all things for the good of your people. Thank you that Christ's reign is so perfect, and help me to live under it.

2 Samuel 24 – Atonement in Jerusalem

The specific reasons for God's wrath against Israel aren't explained. Neither are we told why a census should be so foolishly sinful. In Psalm 20 (which is a prayer for the king), Israel celebrates God's name rather than military strength, which means a census taken by the LORD's anointed king displays unbecoming faithlessness in God himself. The ensuing plague cost 70,000 lives and was only lifted as sacrifice was made to atone for sin at a particular location in Jerusalem. Here at the end of the book our minds are brought to atoning sacrifice at Jerusalem, fulfilled once and for all for us by Jesus' own sacrifice. He is our perfect King, our God, our priest, our atonement, our life.

Holy Jesus, thank you for your great sacrifice, wholly atoning for all the sins of my life. Forgive me for the times I assess my strength before action without first remembering your strength and presence in me. Lord, forgive my unbelief, and grow a spirit of boldness in me for your work.

1 Kings 1 – Long Live the King

1 and 2 Kings form a single book, following immediately on from 1 and 2 Samuel. David, Nathan, and Bathsheba were in their prime back in 2 Samuel 11, but here they're much older – though David's treatment of women as objects seems little changed. 1 Chronicles 22 makes it clear that it was the LORD's will that Solomon be king after David, so Adonijah's throne grab is in opposition to God himself. Nathan needs no word from the LORD to act since his will is already known, so he cooks up a plan to galvanise the old, cold, complacent king into action. When we know the LORD's will, we should act on it. How good it is to serve a king who never tires through the ages.

Lord Jesus, it's good to know that Creation is a monarchy ruled by you. Forgive me that I fail to live wholly under your kingdom rule. Give me wisdom and discernment to know your will, and boldness, compassion, and love to do it.

1 Kings 2 – A Firmly Established Kingdom

And so the kingdom passed from David to Solomon. The new king was reminded of his covenant position and the need to obey everything in the law of Moses. He also executed a mixture of justice (most notably Joab) and patient grace (Abiatha, Shimei). In asking for David's concubine Abishag, Adonijah was really making another move for David's throne (just as Absalom took David's concubines in 2 Samuel 16). It is foolish and fatal to challenge the LORD's anointed king. Solomon will prove to be the high point of all Israel's kings, and yet even he will lose his way. Christ's kingdom is all perfection: Goodness, wisdom, power, justice, grace.

Lord Christ, as I look at the world leaders of our times I see open rebellion against you and your good rule. Nonetheless, help me to live by your kingdom even when that means I run into trouble or opposition. Help me to stand tall and hold firm to your rule for my life.

1 Kings 3 – Wisdom and Discernment

The opening lines about Solomon marrying Pharaoh's daughter sound an early alarm bell for his ultimate downfall. His meeting with God, however, was blessed. In asking for a receptive heart to judge the people well, he would be ruling with righteousness and justice just as God himself does. We are so often faced with moral shades of grey that defy simple black and white responses. Wisdom navigates through the mess of this world in a way that honours truth – demonstrated in Solomon's dealings with the two women and exemplified in Jesus' dealings with tricky situations in the gospels.

Lord Jesus, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in you. By grace, you have given me union with yourself. Give me wisdom and discernment to navigate this world when choices don't seem clear-cut, so that I might live well for you and make you known.

1 Kings 4 & 5 – A Taste of Heaven

Solomon had asked for wisdom to govern Israel, and Chapter 4 shows tremendous ability. His senior team led civil, priestly, and military organisations, and a large administration needed large provisions (4:20-28). The language of blessing extending to all nations (4:34), a people as numerous as sand by the sea (4:20), and security in all of Canaan (4:21) all recall the promised covenant with Abraham. This tiny foretaste of God's new Creation still has a big hole: The presence of God in their midst as a rightful community focus. Chapter 5 begins the crucial work of building a temple that is sufficiently spectacular for worship of the living God.

Lord Jesus, heaven must indeed be wonderful, but it can't be heaven without you. Help me to find peace and security in your presence, and to order my life consciously under your good rule. Thank you for the glimpse of the perfected new Creation your return will usher in.

1 Kings 6 – Lavish Expense

Societies often build lavish buildings and monuments to honour deities and heroes, and the temple Solomon built was as extravagant as any. The big difference here was that his temple wouldn't just be in God's honour: It would actually *house* his Presence among his people. No amount of expense could be too great. We note also that most Israelites would never see the temple's interior, so these chapters gave them insight and awe. If anyone is tempted to think the expense a waste, it's because they have too small a view of God. Likewise, those who considered Jesus' anointing with expensive perfume to be a waste (Mark 14:4-5) were blind to his deity and majesty.

Holy God, it is gloriously gracious that you choose to dwell among your people, and that you give us a way to come to you. Forgive my limited and domesticated understanding of your greatness. Help me to know you more, to see you bigger, that I might worship you as I ought.

1 Kings 7 – Goodness and Beauty

Despite the detail listed, any attempt to recreate the temple from these measurements soon highlights gaps. In fact, the details more favour the interior decoration and furnishings which were clearly extravagantly beautiful and ornate. This is despite the fact that most people would never see any of it. When God created the world he made it beautiful and filled it with goodness and beauty. How appropriate it is then that our worship reflect his glory back to God in extravagant delight. Even more, our daily acts of worship (praise and witness) are also for his glory – even when unseen by others.

Lord Jesus, you are always and eternally with me by your own good grace. Forgive me that my daily walk often fails to reflect your glory that you have revealed to me. In my daily life and in Sunday's gathered worship, help me to worship you for your own delight, and not for an audience of others.

1 Kings 8 – The Glory of God Among Us

This chapter is spectacular. After years in the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant was finally placed in a permanent temple in Jerusalem. God had given his people rest and came to rest among them. The cloud's appearance was the same as at the tabernacle in Exodus 40 – a beautiful statement about the presence of God in all his unapproachable holiness. Solomon's prayer acknowledges the glorious omnipresence of God, while celebrating the fact that he hears prayers from heaven (v30, 59). He also asks for mercy for sinful Israel using covenant language (Lev. 26, Deut. 28). Where else is the grace of the infinite God brought to fellowship and dwelling among us but in Christ, God With Us?

Holy God, it is amazing that you call us to be with you, and that you make it possible by reaching down to us. Lord Jesus, you are our place of atonement and it is only through you that my prayers are heard in highest heaven. Forgive me for undervaluing prayer and time in your presence. Thank you that one day I will see your face; there will be no cloud.

1 Kings 9 – Integrity and Godliness 24x7

1 Kings 8 was a spiritual high for Israel. As the Holy Spirit dwells in us corporately (1 Cor. 3:16) and individually (1 Cor. 6:19), we also experience highs in his presence. For Solomon personally, that continued here in v1-9 as God met with him again, impressing on him the need for integrity and godliness (v4). The rest of the chapter then has Solomon doing his day-job of kingly activity: Foreign affairs, work-force management, engineering and construction projects. And yet it's precisely in these day-job activities that Solomon was to act with integrity and godliness. We dishonour the God who walks with us and dwells in us when we compartmentalise our lives, losing integrity and godliness.

Living God, you have united me to Jesus by faith and yet I compartmentalise my life, having parts of my life less touched by grace as I fail to war against temptation and sin. Help me to wholly enter in to who I am in Christ, a holy child of God.

1 Kings 10 – Queen of Sheba is Blessed

This chapter has Israel at its peak moment in the Old Testament – and yet still fatally flawed. The Queen of Sheba epitomises the foreign nations and rulers gathering to Israel's king for wisdom, paying tribute to Solomon and the God he served. We're dazzled by the gold and splendour, but the Queen was deeply affected by Solomon's wisdom and (more importantly) gave her own praise to God (v9). In Matthew 12:42, Jesus said that the Queen of Sheba would condemn those who failed to praise God in the presence of one greater than Solomon, even Christ himself. Jesus had no flaws and is our perfect king, but the last verses of this chapter show law-breaking compromise by Israel's king, against Deuteronomy 17:16-17.

Lord Christ, there are times when I allow apparent progress or success to cloud my judgment about what is right. I drift and compromise when I ought to guard my heart and affections. Lord, forgive me. Help me to meditate on you, to keep my eyes on you, and to walk in your ways.

1 Kings 11 – A Change of Heart

Although the writer of Kings has given us clues that all was not as secure as it could have been, Solomon's collapse in this chapter still takes us by surprise. In 1 Kings 3:3, we were told that Solomon loved the LORD – the *only* person in the Old Testament of whom that is said. But his love for his many foreign wives "turned his heart away" (v3). When we compromise and dabble with sin, our moral centre of gravity shifts away from God. Every step towards sin feels like it's only the first. If we are still to be faithful to God in our old age then we must walk faithfully with him every day. The opposition that rose against Solomon shows God's wise discipline while being true to his covenant promise.

Gracious, wise, and holy Father, you are perfect in integrity and holiness. I am far from what I ought to be. Father, I drift and dabble in darkness in my affections and twisted will. Spirit, make my heart straight in righteous desire so that I might remain close to Jesus in love and spirit.

1 Kings 12 – Disaster

This is one of the most important chapters in the Old Testament – but for all the wrong reasons. Rehoboam's foolishness led to the division of the nation into Israel (most of the tribes) in the north and Judah (with Benjamin) in the south. The rest of 1 & 2 Kings traces them as separate nations. Notice Jeroboam's use of religion to wield power – something repeated by many regimes, cults, and (sadly) church leaders. His manmade worship actively prevented Israelites from going to Jerusalem as the LORD had commanded. False worship, even of the true God, is never acceptable: It's offensive in light of all God has given. Israel would *never* recover. We must remain true to Christ.

Heavenly Father, there are so many perversions of Christianity that lead so many astray. It's heartbreaking. Lord God, keep me true to the gospel as you have revealed it in your word: Saved by grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone, to your glory alone.

1 Kings 13 – Words of Warning

This is a strange chapter. At so many points we wonder why this or that happened, but most questions go unanswered. The biggest question of all *is* answered, however, loud and clear: The whole event was to impress on Jeroboam the danger of disobeying the word of God. He had the double witness of a cracked altar and a withered hand, added to the death of the disobedient (albeit tricked) man of God, yet still did not repent. He wanted God's good news (that he would be king of Israel) but not his good rule. Beware of that. We must also avoid the man of God's error of being better at applying God's words to others than to ourselves.

Living God, you have spoken to us clearly through your Son, risen from the dead, mighty to save. Your word graciously and clearly calls me to life in him, and I'm grateful for the Spirit's life-giving illumination so that I might see Jesus. Lord, keep me true to your word and will always.

1 Kings 14 – Kidding God?

Jeroboam was in a terrible family crisis. People will often turn to God at such times, or even turn to his people for them to intercede for them. Jeroboam wanted to keep God at arm's length, while simultaneously asking for his help. He wanted light in his dark place, but not for his path going forward. But God sees through all our kidology and masks, knowing and weighing us far more forensically than we do ourselves. For an unbeliever trying to manipulate God, this spells danger. For an open-hearted believer pursuing holiness, it's uncomfortable and reassuring in equal measure. Neither Jeroboam (Israel) nor Rehoboam (Judah) ever humbled themselves before God.

Lord Christ, it is reassuring that you know all my sinful desires and actions, for how else could I be sure of the completeness of your salvation? Forgive my foolish and pathetic attempts to deny or hide my sin, and lead me in your righteous paths every day.

1 Kings 15 – Sons of David

It's commonplace in 1 & 2 Kings to come to chapters like this, where brief descriptions are given of various kings in northern Israel and southern Judah. All the kings of Israel were bad, as were most of the kings of Judah. The records tend to say little of the ability to govern, but rather each king is weighed for their devotion to the LORD (or to other gods). Since our own eternal hope is bound up with Jesus, Son of David, we trace God's patience with interest. Abijam was not devoted to God (v3) but the LORD remembered his covenant with David (v4). Righteous Asa's shrewd business actually displayed a lack of faith in God, but God still preserved David's line for our sake.

Heavenly Father, I know I often repeat Asa's error, choosing to solve things in my own way in my own strength. Give me wisdom to use the gifts you've given me in conscious dependence on you, quick to give you all the glory in everything.

1 Kings 16 – Lower and Lower

From 1 Kings 15:25 and into chapter 16 we're following a succession of kings in (northern) Israel. Some take the throne in brutal coup; others take their father's reign. Some rule for decades; others just 2 years or 7 days. But all of them did evil, following the benchmark of the false worship of the golden calves at Bethel and Dan established by Jeroboam son of Nebat. Omri established a new capital city (Samaria) but his biblical obituary summarises him as evil. It all feels like Israel is at rock bottom, but the introduction of Ahab is a new low: Israel will turn to Baal worship. The rebuilding of Jericho epitomises contempt for the word of the LORD, while also highlighting its enduring power.

Heavenly Father, as I consider the moral standards of the leadership of this country, I see the same contempt for you and your word. Yet I know that you are reigning and bringing all things together for the good of your people. As a citizen of heaven by grace, give me wisdom to live well for you in this society.

1 Kings 17 – Grace Prepared

Elijah suddenly appears to us out of nowhere. While Israel slid from the false worship of the true God to worship of a false god (Baal), the LORD had been raising up a prophet in grace. In line with the covenant curses of Leviticus 27, King Ahab's Israel would learn what 3½ years with neither the blessing nor the word of the LORD would be like. The widow is an image of Israel at social, financial, and emotional rock bottom. Elijah being sustained by ravens meant he'd get to her at just the right moment of need. By raising the boy to life we are assured that God's word is powerfully life-giving and sustaining. Our covenant God is both patient and gracious.

Heavenly Father, your interventions in my life have been so perfectly timed. You are wise and good, patient and gracious. Help me to accept your disciplining with a humble, learning heart. Give me the simple trust of that woman to depend on you day by day.

1 Kings 18 – A Call to True Worship

It's tempting to see this chapter as a simplistic demonstration that the LORD is God and Baal is nothing. Certainly, since Baal was supposed to be a god of rain and fertility the 3½ year drought was a humiliation of Baal worship. But the fire from God for the burnt offering was only previously seen at key moments of tabernacle and temple dedication (Lev 9, 1 Chron 21:26, 2 Chron 7:1), and the twelve stones of the altar rather than ten is a crucial detail. This event is a call to the people to return to the true worship of the true God, abandoning both Baal and the golden calves. We, like those Israelites, face the binary choice of v21.

Living God, you are gracious to give us demonstrations of your power, and to do so in a way that calls us to return to you. Thank you for Jesus, the true and only way to come to you. Help me to see the empty idols in my life and to turn my heart to you.

1 Kings 19 – Covenant Undone at Sinai

At Carmel, Israel were invited by God to return to true worship and blessing. Ahab and Jezebel's rejection is a turning point in Israel – and the reason for the book slowing down to focus on Elijah. The LORD is tender towards his rejected prophet, knowing the rejection is keenly felt. Elijah is summoned 300 miles south, mountain to mountain, Carmel to Horeb (another name for Mt. Sinai). It's a court scene at Horeb. Elijah states the case against Israel: They have utterly rejected God's covenant. Where the covenant was made, God declares judgment against Israel. There is more power in his words than in any wind, earthquake, or fire. Israel's end is sealed.

Lord Jesus, you once revealed your glory to your disciples in the presence of Moses and Elijah. You are glorified in your new covenant of grace, leading your people into rest, sealing promises with your blood. Thank you for such secure salvation.

1 Kings 20 Perfect Prophecy

The LORD was hugely gracious to Ahab. Not only did he rescue Ahab's Israel from the king of Aram, but he also sent a man of God to deliver prophecy in advance. Ahab could be in no doubt that it was entirely the LORD's doing. The Arameans had an unworthy, limited regard for the LORD, and their downfall was so that everyone would know that the LORD is God. The emphasis here is that everything the LORD says will happen must happen. But since Ahab had an unworthy, limited regard for the word of the LORD he cherry-picked the bits he liked and ignored the rest. When challenged about his sin, Ahab became "resentful and angry" (v43) when he ought to have become contrite and repentant.

Holy God, you are gracious to give us your words of prophecy and instruction in the Bible. Help me to be ever aware of my cherry-picking, so that I might submit wholly to your perfect will. Lead me to repentance and faith, certain of all your good work for me in Christ.

1 Kings 21 – Institutional Wickedness

Naboth was an innocent man. More than that, he was a godly man, since his refusal to sell his land wasn't out of pettiness but rather a desire to remain faithful to the LORD. Land belonged to the LORD and wasn't to be transferred (v3). The chilling observation about what happened next is that it was all done through official governmental channels. It was institutionalised wickedness, where rulers abused their power in opposition to God – and the godly vulnerable people suffered. Jesus likewise suffered at the hand of the ruling class of his day, and it's no surprise if we also find ourselves at the receiving end of godless government policy.

Mighty Christ, you rule with true glory and majesty, King of kings, with all human authorities accountable to you. It's clear from examples such as Ahab that wicked governments have ungodly individuals in key positions. So Lord, please, have mercy on this country's government.

1 Kings 22 – Full Disclosure

This is one of those chapters that raises many questions! Why did Ahab send for Micaiah if all he got was bad news? Why did Micaiah say the same as the other prophets to begin with? Was Ahab deceived by God? Micaiah probably knew that Ahab would do whatever he wanted, so that whatever Micaiah said would be ignored. And in fact the full disclosure Micaiah gave about the scene in around the LORD's throne should have jolted Ahab into a true fear of the LORD. In the end, Ahab's rejection of the word of the LORD would this time prove fatal following an "accidental" arrow. The contrast with godly Jehoshaphat could hardly be stronger.

Living God, forgive me that even with the full disclosure of your word so clearly laid out in the Bible I still sin in so many ways. Help me to take your word seriously, delighting as much in your instruction as I do in your promises.

2 Kings 1 – Man of God

1 & 2 Kings are a single book, and it's no surprise that Ahaziah should follow in the footsteps of his father, Ahab. Yet in sending Elijah to intercept Ahaziah's messengers, God was once again gracious to remind sinful Israel of his presence. The death of the two captains and their troops is shocking until we realise that they *share* the king's contempt of God. The first says, "Man of God, the *king* declares…" and the second, "Man of God, thus says the king…" – each speaking as if the king was a higher authority. The third captain feared both death and God – with good reason, seeing a hundred corpses on the ground. In Christ, however, although we may fear dying, death has lost its sting.

Lord Jesus, your resurrection demonstrates your utter dominion over all things in life and death. Our bodies are so fragile, I'm reminded of the wonder of the New Creation and a body raised incorruptible. Thank you, Spirit, for giving me a healthy fear of God and no fear of death.

2 Kings 2 – Where is the LORD?

This is the first time we've heard of Elisha since God's judgment on Israel was announced in 1 Kings 19. His request for a "double portion" of Elijah's spirit is simply the inheritance share of a first-born son, so he's asking to succeed Elijah. Up to this point, the lone prophetic voice of Elijah has been "the chariots and horsemen of Israel" (v12), so Elisha's grief was very real anxiety for the future. But the LORD was with Elisha. The incident with the bitter water being "healed" is a reminder to Israel of the blessings of God's covenant. The death of idolatrous Bethel's boys is a covenant curse (Lev 26:21-22). So, "Where is the LORD God of Elijah?" With his people, always.

Lord Jesus, mentors and role models come and go, yet you are the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, the shade at my right hand, my shepherd, my light. Thank you for your faithful help and care, your perpetual presence. Help me to do good; keep me from temptation.

2 Kings 3 – Grace and Purpose

Moab was east of the river Jordan, and its king rebelled against Israel after Ahab died. Ahab's son Joram wasn't quite as bad as Ahab in that he didn't worship Baal, but he upheld the hated calf worship of the LORD at Bethel and Dan. The coalition of Judah, Israel, and Edom was to enter Moab from the south but (ridiculously) they ran out of basic provisions *en route*. Joram blamed the LORD (v10, 13), demonstrating his complete lack of understanding and humility. Elisha was scathing towards Joram and only agreed to help because of Jehoshaphat (the king in David's line, through whom the line to Christ would come). God graciously provided both water and victory over the despicably wicked king of Moab.

Living God, it is surely in your gracious nature to give us far, far more than we deserve – and often even so much more than we ask. It is also encouraging to glimpse how you preserve your good purposes in answering prayer. This assurance keeps me praying.

2 Kings 4 – Elisha's "Type"

An important notion in understanding how the Old Testament points to Jesus is to look for 'types' – models or blueprints in the form of people or events that are fulfilled in Christ. As Elijah points to John the Baptist, Elisha is a type of Christ. Each of the miracles in 2 Kings 4 finds a counterpart in the life of Christ, though with Jesus everything is amplified and expanded. He gives the Spirit in abundance (not oil), raised the dead (physically and spiritually), declares food clean, and feeds the 4,000 and 5,000 to reveal that he is the Bread of Life. Noticing that Elisha always went towards pain in people, we come with thanksgiving to the God who came to us.

Gracious God, it's easy sometimes to read these ancient texts just as history. Thank you for the reminder that you still work in us and for us in Jesus, the one who came to save us. Help me to be useful in your hands, ever ready to move towards people in pain.

2 Kings 5 – Free Grace is Really Free

The young Israelite servant girl must have been devastated when taken from home by raiding Arameans. In the wisdom of God, her pain became tremendous and eternal blessing to someone else. This should give us pause for though in our own troubles. When Naaman reached Elisha's house he was expecting religious ceremony and, in particular, an exchange of gifts – silver and clothing for healing. But God's grace is truly free, and all Naaman had to do was submit by faith in obedience to a command from God. He was an utterly changed man, seen in his bruised conscience over false god worship. Gehazi's great sin was to demean God's free grace with greed and deceit. Perhaps the greatest wonder is that all this was for a Gentile (Luke 4:27).

Heavenly Father, help me to have the wisdom to know when you need me to be like that servant girl. Help me also to revel in your free grace, not adding to it with religious duty. And help me to present your grace to others as truly free, not dependent on anything we do or give.

2 Kings 6 – Spiritual Sight

When Elisha caused the axe-head to float, it was both remarkable in its own right and another example of being a 'type' of the Saviour to come – one who could himself walk on water. In 2 Kings 5:16, Elisha spoke of the LORD "in whose presence I stand." Here in the siege of Dothan we glimpse something of what he experienced. Verse 16 is a comfort to any believer at any time, and Elisha's servant was blessed to see the truth of it with his own eyes. The Aramean soldiers had their eyes opened to mercy and grace in Israel. When Jesus was arrested, he spoke of being able to call on his Father for more than 12 legions of angels to rescue him (Matt 26:53), but he didn't. Our salvation is in his death.

Gracious Saviour, your word helps us see something of the true spiritual nature of the world around us. Yet we walk by faith, not by sight, so help me perceive fully the spiritual battle within me and around me all the time, fighting in the armour and weaponry you give.

2 Kings 7 – Good News

The previous chapter ended with grim scenes inside Samaria, the capital city of Israel, under siege from the Arameans. Now Elisha bursts into the scene with a declaration that seems too good to be true (v1) and indeed the captain can't believe it. Four diseased and socially excluded men then make the discovery of their lives – the Arameans have fled. We're told explicitly that this was the LORD's work (v6). The men realise "Today is a day of good news" (v9) – and good news is for sharing. But the good news of God's salvation is also judgment against those who oppose him (the Arameans) and who won't believe him (the captain). The same remains true of the gospel today.

Lord Christ, the angels announced good news to mere shepherds at your birth, just as these four men were first to learn good news at Samaria that day. Thank you that the Spirit has brought your good news and salvation to me. Help me, then, to share it with those around me.

2 Kings 8 – Kindness and Severity

We see here the gentle kindness of God, as well as his grief over the sin of humanity that results in judgment. The Shunamite woman's kindness to the prophet in 2 Kings 4 is met here with the LORD's kindness to her, sovereignly setting up a situation where she would not only be safe from drought but then also receive her livelihood back on her return. Elisha and Hazael were mentioned (with Jehu) in 1 Kings 19 in the context of God's judgment against Israel. While the king of Aram would not have died from his illness, Hazael ruthlessly killed him and took the throne. What he would do to Israel brought tears to Elisha's eyes, surely mirroring the pain of God even in just judgment.

Righteous Father, it is clear from your word that you delight no more in punishment than you do in the sin that demands it. Forgive my lack of meditation on what it cost for you to punish your Son in my place. Thank you that your particular grace still reaches individuals like me.

2 Kings 9 – Threads of Grace

The second half of Chapter 8 lines up the various people in certain locations ready for the events of Chapter 9. We might struggle to keep up with the names and places, but certain things stand out. First, recall 1 Kings 19 where God passed judgment on covenant-breaking Israel, saying that it would come through Elisha, Hazael, and Jehu. These events are part of the settled, righteous judgment of God. Second, we're told that the parentage of Ahab and Jezebel made its way into the royal families of both Israel and Judah, but Judah was to be preserved on account of David's line to Jesus. Lastly, judgment always relates to specific sins (v26), as it must to be truly just. No sin goes unpunished.

Lord God, here again we see your perfect justice at work. No-one can deny your righteousness or your right to judge. You are greatly glorified with threads of grace throughout, preserving David's line all the way to Jesus. Help me to remember that my own salvation is bound up in texts like these, and to give thanks.

2 Kings 10-11 – Baal Down

Through Ahab and Jezebel, the royal families of both Israel and Judah had been infected with Baal worship. By the end of these two chapters, both the line of Ahab and the worship of Baal had come to an end. Jehu's brutality at Jezreel accomplished the judgment of God, though the end did not justify the means. Hosea 1:4 prophesises judgment to come on Jehu's descendants for such bloodshed. Athaliah's murder of her young grandsons in her grasp for power was also met with judgment. The young king was protected by the wife of a priest, and by such threads are the lines to David's heir kept open.

Heavenly Father, I know that at times I work to justify my desires and actions by appealing to outcomes, when really I knew I was wrong all along. Spirit, help me to put sin to death in my heart, mind, and will, and to live in holiness, righteousness, and godliness.

2 Kings 12 – Biblical Instruction

This chapter is pretty upbeat about Judah's king Joash until we hear of him giving away items to deflect an Aramean attack on Jerusalem. 2 Chronicles 24 gives a fuller account, describing how Joash abandoned the worship of the LORD in favour of Asherah poles and other pagan idols. The key point is to understand where it went wrong, which we're told in v2. Jehoida was the faithful priest who had brought the child Joash to the throne. Jehoida instructed the king in the ways of the LORD. But once Jehoida died, King Joash no long received biblical instruction and his abandonment of the LORD became inevitable. We know Christ through the Scriptures, so we must work to know them better.

Holy Spirit of God, you inspired and carried men along to write these words of Scripture. Keep me nourished in them, Lord, and show me more of Jesus day by day. Keep me in loving obedience to him, so that in him I might know and please the Father.

2 Kings 13 – Spiritual Ambition

The records of the kings of Israel and Judah follow set formulae, with varying amounts of detail added. For each, whatever else they did, the ultimate detail is their heart for the LORD. We should see ourselves likewise. When Elisha put his hands on the king's hands to shoot an arrow (v15-17), the image given was that when Jehoash shot at Aram, God would be working through his hands giving success. Jehoash was to strike arrows into the ground as he hoped to strike Aram, but stopping after just three arrows displayed a lack of spiritual ambition in what God might do. As we have union with Christ (he works through our hands, as it were), our similar lack of spiritual ambition is equally deplorable.

Holy God, you are still at work through your people for your glory and our good. It's humbling to think that in eternity all that will really matter from life today is my walk with you. Help me to love, to evangelise, to forgive – to live out my union with the eternal Son, Jesus.

2 Kings 14 – Kings, kings, kings

Jeroboam son of Nebat was the first king of Israel after the kingdom split. By instituting false worship of the true God with golden calves at Bethel and Dan, he became the benchmark for the idolatry and wickedness of all Israel's kings. We count 7 kings from Jeroboam to Ahab (with his Baal worship, and the covenant closure at Sinai with Elijah), and now 7 kings from Ahab to another Jeroboam. The next cycle of 7 will be catastrophic for Israel. As Bible readers, we note the prophet Jonah in v25, the same Jonah who went to Nineveh to preach judgment resulting in repentance. As the capital city of Assyria, the LORD would use it against Israel in 7 kings' time. His sovereign rule is stunning.

Heavenly Father, world events seem so chaotic with everyone doing what seems right in their own eyes. Your word reminds me over and over that you are sovereignly in control for your own honour and glory, and that you pour out blessing from compassion on us. You are to be praised.

2 Kings 15 – Relentless Rebellion

Azariah, king of Judah, was also called Uzziah. 2 Chronicles 26 gives him a fuller account, explaining why the LORD afflicted him with a skin disease. This chapter gives the impression of relative stability under the godly rules of Azariah and his son Jothan, very much contrasted with the treachery and murder taking place in Israel. Five Israel kings spanning perhaps 20 years or so are listed, four of whom repeat the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat (Shallum isn't charged with that, but he only lasted one month). Ominously, we read of the rising influence of Assyria, not least in the attack on Galilee. Israel is speeding towards judgment, clinging on to false worship.

Heavenly Father, you are patient and slow to anger, and yet we seem so relentless in our rebellion. If not for your compassion and intervention in my life, I would be caught up and swept away in the world's destruction. Thank you for including me in your heavenly kingdom under Christ.

2 Kings 16 – Damning Rejection

It's possible to read 2 Kings 16 and think of Ahaz as yet another faithless king in the book. But he was king of Judah, in Jerusalem, in David's line, so his wickedness jeopardises the line to Christ. 2 Chronicles 28 spells out his sin more clearly, but it's his rejection of God's grace and rescue promised in Isaiah 7 that is most condemning. God sent Isaiah to Ahaz in his hour of need, and Ahaz rejected help. Going to Assyria for help (offering a bribe of silverware from the LORD's temple) was yet further damning. The erection of a new altar, while keeping the old one for "guidance" (v15) was as wicked as it was laughable. Still, God's grace is not thwarted by evil.

Heavenly Father, thank you that you don't count our sins against us. Left to my own heart, I'd no doubt be as foolish as wicked Ahaz – yet you are relentlessly gracious to us. Thank you that while we were yet sinners in our greatest need, Christ died for us. Forgive me my sin against you.

2 Kings 17 – The End of Israel

And so we come to Hoshea, Israel's last king. He fell under Assyrian rule, conspired against them, and brought about the end of Israel and its capital city, Samaria. The people were deported and replaced, a displacement from which the northern tribes would never recover (and the root of division between Judea and Samaria in Jesus' day). This chapter is crystal clear that the exile was a direct result of Israel abandoning true worship of God. Over time, God repeatedly sent prophets to call Israel to repentance (e.g. Hosea, Amos – see v13), but v21-23 summarises Israel's determined rebellion. Exile was the final step of curse under God's covenant (Leviticus 26).

Holy God of covenant faithfulness, you will not be mocked or taken for granted. What happened to Israel is sobering. As I reflect on people I have known who once seemed so very much on fire for you but have since slipped away, please keep me close to you and use me as that prophetic voice of repentance to them.

2 Kings 18 – A Second David

While all the kings of Israel were bad, some of Judah's kings were moderately good. The description of Hezekiah is uniquely positive – he was like a second David (v1-8, especially v3). Like David, he wasn't perfect, and when he took the silver from the LORD's temple he displayed both naivety about the duplicity of Assyria's king and (worse) a lack of faith in God. When Assyria's army came to Jerusalem's walls, the spokesman recounted much truth about Assyria's victories and made big promises to the people if they would only surrender. But he over-stepped the mark when he suggested that the LORD would be as impotent as gods of other nations. The chapter ends in high suspense.

Gracious Father, you are so patient with your weak and foolish children. Forgive me my sins, Lord, as you have promised to do. In times when faith is tested, give me strength. When tempted by enticing offers and stories, give me godly discernment.

2 Kings 19 – Take it to the LORD in Prayer

King Hezekiah makes his own spiritual progress in this chapter, and it's encouraging to ponder it. Faced with the Assyrian spokesman's words in the previous chapter, Hezekiah calls on Isaiah to pray to "the LORD your God" (v4). There seems to be a reprieve, but then a letter reiterating the Assyrian threat arrives in Hezekiah's hand. This time, he goes to God himself (not via Isaiah). In a beautiful image of true prayer, he literally lays his problem (the letter) out before the LORD. His prayer is God-honouring, clear, specific, and succinct. Most of all, his prayer is heard. The Sovereign God's words to Assyria are devastating and humiliating, as is the rout.

Gracious Father, listening God, compassionate and patient Lord, thank you that you hear me when I lay my concerns, worries, and burdens before you. Forgive me for seeking help in other places when I ought to honour you with such prayers.

2 Kings 20 – In Sickness and Health

The Bible often arranges events thematically rather than chronologically. Hezekiah's desperate near-death prayer in v1-11 very likely happened prior to receiving the letter in the previous chapter. A personal crisis led him to pray and taught him to take all his needs to the LORD. In this we see the LORD's kindness in giving Hezekiah his illness. This prayer is placed before the account of the visit from Babylonian envoys so that we will see a glaring contrast: 2 Chronicles 32:31 tells us that God withdrew from Hezekiah to test his heart. What we see is that in times of ease and safety, Hezekiah is far slower to seek God's presence and help.

Lord Jesus, we see over and over in your word how people will hurry to you in times of crisis but drift from you when life feel good. Forgive the tendency of my heart to wander. Help me to remain close to you, seeking your presence morning, noon, and night.

2 Kings 21 – A Pagan Generation

Manasseh's 55-year reign was disastrous for Judah. Some of his predecessors had worshipped the LORD in Jerusalem but left the pagan high places of worship intact. Manasseh brought pagan worship right into God's temple itself. The LORD alone is God - a jealous God, who does not room-share his temple. The problem with such a long reign is that the generation of Hezekiah who had seen and experienced the LORD's salvation was replaced by a new generation who knew nothing of it. Instead, all they knew was pluralistic pagan worship throughout Judah. Such national abandonment of God would lead to exile (v14).

Lord Jesus, it's often said that a local church is only one generation away from extinction. Help me and our church to nurture and encourage a next generation of believers. Keep us all true to you and your word in vital relationship with you daily.

2 Kings 22 – A King with a Tender Heart

Josiah was a godly king, very much a successor to David and Hezekiah. In the next chapter we'll read of a national programme of spiritual cleansing, and 2 Chronicles 34:3&8 spell out the chronology: The temple repairs and discovery of the book of the law came *after* the national reforms. It seems Josiah knew the need to return to true worship of the LORD, but it was only when he read the full gracious provision of the LORD in his covenant law that the full weight of Judah's sin hit home. His response was passionate, and through his prophetess Huldah the LORD noted Josiah's "tender" heart (v19) and would be gracious to him, though Judah's judgment was inescapable.

Lord Jesus, great God and King with a tender heart, I'm ashamed of my sins that have caused you such pain and offence. Thank you for your word which helps me know my sin. Thank for the Spirit who convicts my heart. May my stony heart grow in tender compassion to others and against sin.

2 Kings 23 – Temporary Reform

The catalogue of reforms carried out by Josiah was impressive in breadth and depth. He swept across all Judah and even into Bethel in Israel, and the destruction of the places of worship was utterly devastating. The cleansing at Bethel (v15-18) reminds us that false worship had been drawing the condemnation of God for centuries. We might expect such reform to be a pivotal change point for Judah, but the judgment of God had been pronounced. It would not come in Josiah's time in honour of Josiah's tender heart, but the speed with which the nation fell into idolatrous ways at the king's death reveals unchanged hearts. Christ, king forever, will bring complete and permanent reform.

Lord Christ, the reform in Josiah's day is a pale reflection of all you will do on the earth at your return. It is both comforting and awesome to think about the complete removal of all that is blasphemous, unworthy, and morally corrupt. Lord, help me be reforming my heart every day.

2 Kings 24 – History is Theological

The last days of Jerusalem are briefly told in chapters 24-25, though they form the backdrop of several of the books of the prophets. Jerusalem came under Egyptian rule in 609 BC when Josiah died. In 605, Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar's forces and young Daniel and others were sent to Babylon. Despite Jeremiah's warnings, further rebellion led to a much larger deportation in 597 which included the prophet Ezekiel. The third and final stage of exile comes in chapter 25. It's quite possible that the writer gives less detail here simply because his first readers would have remembered the events themselves. For them, and us, the critical comments are theological: The LORD is patient and gracious, but he won't be mocked.

Gracious, patient Lord, the whole world rejects you as surely and as completely as ancient Judah ever did. You are glorified in patience, just as you will also be glorified in judgment. Help me to repeat the works of your prophets in such times, pointing others to life and hope in you.

2 Kings 25 – Judgment and Grace

Jeremiah the prophet was in Jerusalem throughout the tumultuous final years of the city. His witness to Zedekiah fell on deaf, rebellious ears. The truth is that the Babylonian (Chaldean) invasion was an act of God's unstoppable judgment, so resistance was pointless. In 587 BC, the third and final stage of exile happened, and Jerusalem's walls and great temple were destroyed. The people were ejected from the Promised Land, just as the terms of the covenant promised. For Gedaliah's murderers to flee to Egypt is an awful undoing of the exodus. For all that, 2 Kings ends on a surprisingly hopeful note. Jehoiachin (also known as Jeconiah) is in Christ's genealogy at Matthew 1:11-12.

Lord God, your plans cannot be halted. Here in this chapter we see your judgment fall with utter certainty – a shadow of the great Day of the Lord to come. Yet we also see your determined grace, preserving the line to Christ, ultimately bringing salvation to me. Thank you for such comfort.

1 Chronicles 1-2 – God's People, Ancient Roots

Once exiled to Babylon, the people of Judah spent 70 years there. The became immersed in the culture and many of their children spoke only Aramaic, not Hebrew. When they were allowed to return home to rebuild Jerusalem, the new generation had lost much of its sense of identity. The genealogy of 1 Chron. 1-9 spans history from Adam until after the return to Jerusalem. While we can't make sense of every name, we can see the purpose of the book revealed across these 9 chapters. The placement of Judah's genealogy in chapter 2 (ahead of the other tribes) highlights the audience for the book. The intention is to provide the returning exiles with a sense of identity as God's people from ancient times.

Heavenly Father, I'm aware that my own salvation is bound up with those returning exiles and the preservation of your promises to bring a king, a son of David, to rule forever. Knowing that you chose me before the world began is dazzling given the precarious nature of human history.

1 Chronicles 3-4 – Blessing Under David's Rule

Chapter 3 gives the genealogy of King David through to his descendants in Jerusalem after the exile. The writer will make much of David in the book, and the aim is to give the returning exiles both a sense of roots and an example of godly rule. David is held up as true to God and a conduit of blessing to God's people, so that if the returning exiles are to be blessed they will do well to live in covenant faithfulness under a David-like king. In 4:9-10 we meet Jabez, whose name sounds like "He Causes Pain." This one man prayed that he might be blessed rather than fulfil his name, and God blessed him. Our prayers are likewise heard by Jesus, Son of David.

Great God and King, Son of David, Lord Jesus, it is good to be in your kingdom and under your rule. Like Jabez, we don't have to be what we were born to be. You bless us beyond imagination in your grace. Keep me praying, Lord, happy under your good rule.

1 Chronicles 5-6 – Dependence on God

There are two important points being made in these chapters for the returning exiles. First, 5:18-22 describes significant success for the 2½ tribes and attributes it to their trust in the LORD as they cried out in prayer to him. This is immediately contrasted with 5:23-26 where the same 2½ tribes were later exiled to Assyria for abandoning the LORD. The message to the returning exiles is clear. Second, Chapter 6 gives disproportionate coverage to the Levites, tracing the priestly line from Aaron in particular. This emphasises both the authority and the authenticity of the priests of the day, opening the door to blessing for the whole community under God.

Lord Jesus, you commanded your disciples to remain in you so that you would remain in them. Thank you for your faithfulness to your promises and to your people. Thank you that you are our eternal high priest, always interceding and advocating for me at the Father's throne.

1 Chronicles 7-8 – History: Relevant and Irrelevant

The writer of Chronicles used multiple sources for his genealogies (including Genesis and Numbers). Across these two chapters, the tribe of Benjamin appears twice – with all of Chapter 8 devoted to that one tribe. Compare that with the single verse dedicated to Naphtali (7:13) and the complete omission of Zebulun. For the returning exiles comprising mostly of Judah, Levi, and Benjamin, the detail of the other tribes was falling into history. For us, tracing the line of the coming Messiah, the continuity in Judah in particular is an element in our praise of God. And the darkness on Zebulun and Naphtali in Galilee is now eclipsed by a "great light," even Jesus himself (see Isaiah 9:1-2, 6-7).

Gracious, Sovereign Lord, it's amazing to see in these genealogies your fingerprints in time in the affairs of generations. Thank you for keeping your promises. Help me to recall your faithfulness when I'm in times of doubt or need.

1 Chronicles 9-10 – Christ in All the Scriptures

The genealogies were to give the returning exiles their roots, an identity grounded in God's election and covenants. In re-establishing themselves in Jerusalem, they were to note the emphasis on blessings for dependent, faithful obedience and curses for disobedience. More, they would flourish best under a David-like king and a functioning system of worship with a faithful priesthood. So these genealogies then point us to Christ, our great eternal King and High Priest. This all explains the rather brief account of Saul and his sons, compared with the many chapters of 1 Samuel devoted to him. And so we choose Christ as our king, seeking life in his kingdom every day.

Lord Jesus, you are my perfect King and High Priest. In you I come to the presence of holy majesty. Before you I bow in appropriate worship. Thank you that your word continually raises my eyes, heart, and thoughts to you, helping me to keep everything in perspective.

1 Chronicles 11-12 – Glories of the Past

Imagine being among the returned Israelites reading these chapters in Jerusalem. Your nation has spent a humiliating 70 years in exile in Babylon, and you have been permitted to return home only at the decree of the Persian emperor, Cyrus. You don't have a king because you're just a province in the empire, though your Governor is at least of royal descent. The impact of these two chapters would initially be a yearning for the past, for days of valour and power. But there should also be two lasting responses: (a) A determination not to repeat the sins of the past that led to exile; (b) A longing for the fulfilment of 2 Samuel 7, and a king to reign over God's people forever.

Lord Jesus, hope for the future can only ever rest in you. If I am to keep from repeating sins, I can only do so with the strength you give by the Holy Spirit. Help me not to yearn for past glories, but to strive forwards by faith every day.

1 Chronicles 13-14 – Blessings to All Israel

An important thread throughout Chronicles is that of "all Israel" as the writer has two related aims: (a) To show that the nation was at its best when it was united as one, not divided into Israel (north) and Judah (south); (b) To encourage the returning Israelites towards inclusive unity, putting old divisions aside. This explains the emphasis on "all Israel" in the account of the failed attempt to bring the ark to Jerusalem. Note also that the passion and enthusiasm of vibrant worship could not offset the sin of approaching God's holiness in an unlawful and unworthy manner. The God-given military success of Chapter 14 shows how God continues to pour out blessing on his repentant children.

Gracious Father, how it must grieve you to see your church divided and beset by wolves. Help me, as part of my church, to worship you in spirit and in truth, mediated by Jesus, giving glory to you. Help me to love my church as you do.

1 Chronicles 15 – The Past, The Future

The ark of the covenant had been part of the original tabernacle at Sinai. It represented God's covenant faithfulness, personal presence, and holiness. The writer stresses how it came to Jerusalem under the direction on King David and the carefully obedient supervision of the Levitical priests, again reminding his readers (the returning exiles) of the spiritual heights available to God's faithful people. Michal is given as an example of spiritual deadness and joylessness. By the time of Chronicles' writing, the ark had long ago been stolen away, lost to Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon. But we must look forward. Christ is our king and high priest, our revelation of God's covenant faithfulness, presence, and holiness.

Lord Jesus, great sacrifice of atonement, high priest and Immanuel, how gracious you are that I am united to you, the one in whom all heaven's treasures of knowledge and wisdom reside. How astonishing it is that you are with me every moment of the day; help me live that today.

1 Chronicles 16 – Gathered Worship

The pattern of worship at God's tabernacle had changed little since the days of Moses, but this chapter signifies a huge change with the addition of organised music. We *feel* music so that what we sing becomes deeply embedded in us. The song here is a composite of Psalm 105:1-5 (looking back in grateful praise), Psalm 96:1-13 (looking up, calling the world to praise God), and Psalm 106:47-48 (looking forward, petitioning God for help). Jesus, our king, still calls us to gather to worship God. The pattern of the psalm in this chapter is still fitting, with Christ himself worthy of worship in his own being while mediating our worship of the Father. Let us never neglect his call to gather together for worship.

Lord Christ, it is good for us to gather to worship you. We have everything to thank and praise you for, and we grow as we see how worthy of worship you are in your own nature. Lead us to the Father's presence, so that we might know and adore him even as you do.

1 Chronicles 17 – Son of David, Eternal Reign

This chapter draws heavily on 2 Samuel 7, and together they form the theological framework for our own relationship with Jesus, our Messiah King. David was rightly concerned for God's honour now that he had a cedar palace but the ark of the God of all the earth rested in a tent nearby. The rest of 1 Chronicles charts the construction of the spectacular temple to be build by Solomon, but the promise of God in this chapter is of even greater importance. Here we read of a distant Son of David who will reign forever – unlike any manmade temple. Christ's disciples couldn't comprehend his death, *expecting* him to reign forever.

Holy Jesus, you have called me into your eternal kingdom over which you are the everlasting king. All else in my life will pass and fade away, yet you hold me in an unbreakable grip, and you promise me eternity with you. Spirit, work in me to live in joyful kingdom obedience.

1 Chronicles 18 – Organised in War

In the days of Joshua and Judges, Israel had failed to take full possession of the land. These chapters in 1 Chronicles describe military campaigns that extended and secured borders, had neighbouring nations bringing tribute, and raised wealth for the building of the temple (e.g. v8). The political, financial, and military stability David achieved would be needed for temple construction and commission. Yet his psalms make it clear that he knew all his success was from the LORD (v6, 13). That said, David worked hard in the LORD's strength, and the officials in v14-17 reveal a well-organised government. It is when we work for God that he works through us.

Heavenly Father, I know that you have prepared works for me to do. Give me grace, peace, and wisdom to serve you in every situation. Help me to be organised and deliberate in loving others and sharing your gospel, waging war on sin and temptation.

1 Chronicles 19-20 – Peace for Worship

Much of what we read in Chronicles has already come to us in Samuel and Kings, but it's often interesting to see what the writer has left out. These two chapters notably leave out mention of David's flaws – in particular his adultery with Bathsheba and subsequent murder of her husband, Uriah (compare 20:1 with 2 Samuel 11:1). The writer's focus is on demonstrating the completeness of David's campaigns: There was peace in the land, paving the way for construction of the temple. While our leaders will fail and some fall, nothing will hinder God coming to dwell among his people. We have confidence beyond shadow of doubt that we shall see Jesus.

Lord God, your word commands us to pray for peace so that we may worship and proclaim you freely. Help me not to squander the relative peace we have in this country. Have mercy, and bring peace to those corners of the world still torn apart in bloodshed.

1 Chronicles 21 – Place of Atonement

In 2 Samuel 24, we were told that the LORD was angry with Israel and that he stirred David's heart to call a census. But God does not tempt or entice us to sin, so here we see that he released Satan to entice David. As a military census, the count suggested a lack of faith in God's strength to fight for Israel – obviously sinful in view of the last of the last few chapters. As the plague swept through the people it was ultimately halted at the threshing-floor of Ornan, which David then bought and used for burnt offerings to the LORD. Fire from heaven demonstrated acceptable atonement. This would be the temple's location and works of the devil were called to an end.

Lord Jesus, you are the place of atonement at which the works of the devil are ended. As I sin and display faithlessness in you, forgive me. Spirit, work in me that I might put sin to death daily; help me to live life to the full in Christ.

1 Chronicles 22 – War and Peace

Chapters 22 to 29 are unique to Chronicles, covering material not in Samuel or Kings. The king is being shown as one who prepares for and prioritises the nation's worship of the LORD above all else – very much a picture of how Christ enables our worship in every way. The contrast here between David as a man of war and Solomon as a king of peace is illuminating: Peace and rest with God are his gift to give, and come only after enemies are defeated and removed. In this we see a shadow of the great Day of the Lord when Christ shall return and remove Satan, death, Hades, tears, crying, and pain. And we shall always be with the Lord.

Lord Jesus, you are the Lord of Peace, and you have a promised rest for your people eternally in your presence. I know you will one day remove all evil in the world, so help me now in my own spiritual battles against sin and temptation.

1 Chronicles 23 – Unseen Service

David knew that true worship needs more than just a building, however magnificent it might be. The next three chapters cover the many *people* needed to enable the nation's worship. Back in Numbers, the Levites were given the task of transporting the tabernacle, but as the ark came to rest in Jerusalem they were assigned important roles as workers at the temple. It was an honourable task, and we do well to thank God for those who enable our public gatherings at church today: Some stack chairs, some serve as welcomers, while others have less visible roles such as ensuring bills are paid, toilet rolls bought, light bulbs replaced. Anything enabling others to worship is worthy of thanks.

Lord Jesus Christ, worthy of our regular gathered worship as a local church, thank you for those who serve your people by ensuring everything is in place with no distractions. Show me how I can serve others in their worship and service, delighting to serve you in this way.

1 Chronicles 24-25 – Inspired Music

After all we read in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, it's no surprise to see details about Aaron's descendants, the priests. It provided the returning exiles a sense of continuity, identity, and authority to pick up the pre-exile systems of worship. We might be a little more surprised by the large numbers of musicians. Was this an indulgence of the (artistic) king? Not at all. It's clear that they were to prophesy and exalt the LORD (25:1, 2, 5), and we see the names of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun in the headings of several psalms. Even so, the musicians all had to learn their craft (25:7), as all musicians must. The role of singing in gathered worship has ancient roots.

Great and merciful Father, thank you for those in our church who dedicate time to enable us to gather in worship. Thank you for the joy of singing your praise with brothers and sisters in Christ. Thank you most of all that it is Christ himself, our great High Priest, who leads us in worship to you.

1 Chronicles 26-27 – Primacy of Worship

These chapters conclude the description of how Jerusalem's government was organised. The gatekeepers were probably tasked with preventing unauthorised entry to the temple compound and seem to have been linked with Israel's military. Various secular roles are listed since much of the king's ongoing costs were met from his own land and wealth management rather than taxes. Mention of the census in 27:23-24 illuminates the events of Chapter 21. What is clear from these chapters is the focus on the centrality of temple worship of the LORD within David's reign – a clear signal to the returning exiles and to us as we centre every aspect of our lives on Christ.

Lord Christ, I can do no better with my time and energy than to worship you, whether in the gathered worship of your people or the scattered worship of daily life. Help me to do just that, being ever conscious of your presence, always delighting to delight you.

1 Chronicles 28 – David Commissions Solomon

Chronicles gives David more credit for the preparation of the temple's construction than the books of Samuel or Kings. As ever in Chronicles, there's a desire to demonstrate Israel's roots (e.g. v4) and continuity of blessing under godly rule and obedience (v8's commands are plural to the whole nation). We also see why David was not the one to build the temple (v3), but his plans were clearly extensive (v11-19). Although these are David's words, it is God's own faithfulness and covenant love that shine through. "Don't be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD God, my God, is with you" (v20) – true for us all in the Lord's work.

Lord Jesus, you have given me commands to fulfil in your name – commands of love and witness. Thank you for your own perfect obedience to the Father, and help me Lord not to be afraid or discouraged but rather always to remember that you are with me.

1 Chronicles 29 – What's in Your Hand?

This chapter has some of the Bible's most profound teaching on how we regard our possessions. In v14-16, David prays to the LORD an acknowledgement that everything we have is the LORD's; it was his before we were born, and it will be his when we are gone. To give to God is to give what is in his hand already. David calls on others to give to the LORD in v5, that they will "consecrate" themselves to the LORD. The Hebrew expression for "consecrate" here is literally "fill one's hand," so there's a lovely play on words: As you empty your hands of belongings, you fill your hands (consecrate yourself) with the LORD. As that seems hard to us, v10-13 lifts our eyes to see the beauty of the LORD.

Eternal Father, words are too small to use to praise you, so I join with David in piling them up to recall your greatness, power, glory, splendour, majesty, and honour. Forgive me for thinking anything I can hold in my hands is as precious as worshipping you in Christ. Help me to consecrate all that I am to you.

2 Chronicles 1 – The LORD First

Chapters 1 to 9 of 2 Chronicles will take us again through the life of Solomon, though with a different emphasis from the early chapters of Kings. Once again we read of Solomon asking for wisdom to judge the nation, and the LORD graciously added so much more. Most of the material in these Solomon chapters will be about the construction of the temple, and our writer reminds us that true wisdom begins with humility and worship before the LORD. So it's helpful to us to remember that the LORD's invitation to pray is as open to us as it was to Solomon: "Ask: What should I give you?" (v7). Our hearts are more exposed to ourselves and to God when praying than in any other place or time.

Gracious, prayer-answering God, it is astonishing that you should bend your ear to the prayers of your people and bind your will to us. Help me to know you better, to grow in wisdom, and to serve you with true humility and love. Forgive any and all pretence in my prayers; heal my heart.

2 Chronicles 2 – Building Worship

The original tabernacle built by Moses followed careful and specific instruction from the LORD. Solomon's temple would retain the crucial features of the tabernacle, with added splendour appropriate to a permanent structure. Yet Solomon knew that not even highest heaven can contain the LORD (v6). Certain buildings hold special memories for us – places of baptisms, marriages, memorable sermons etc. and it's important to keep church buildings in good order, befitting gathered worship. Yet if we *need* a specific kind of building or décor to be able to worship God then we must question whether we're truly worshipping in spirit and in truth, or are our buildings actually idolatrous substitute glory?

Infinite God, Solomon was right to recognise that highest heaven – even all Creation – cannot contain you. How precious to know, then, that you are here with me in this moment. Help me to experience your presence always, and especially in the gathered worship of your people.

2 Chronicles 3 & 4 – The LORD Provided

Just as all human language falls short of describing the infinite majesty of God, so too no temple could ever have splendour enough to reflect his glory. Solomon understood this, creating a temple of astonishing expense and beauty (e.g. v6). There's a small but significant detail in v1 not to be missed: The temple was built on Mount Moriah. Back in Genesis 22, Abraham had been told to sacrifice his son Isaac in the mountains of Moriah. Abraham would have given his son, but the LORD provided a ram to be offered instead, and the place was named The LORD Will Provide. It's an apt place for the temple, but even more so as the place of crucifixion for the Lord our Saviour.

Great God of all provision, you have given us all we need for life and godliness. By the faith you have given we are saved, and by the Spirit's work you conform me to the likeness of Christ. Help me to learn contentment with such spiritual riches, trusting you for daily provisions.

2 Chronicles 5:1-6:11 – Descending Glory

This chapter draws heavily on the wonderful account in 1 Kings 8. With the ark in its final resting place in the temple, the glory of the LORD came down, God's presence both seen in and hidden by the cloud. For a returning exile in Jerusalem, reading this would be heartbreaking. They knew that God's glory left the temple at the time of the exile because of Israel's sin (Ezekiel 10). They also knew that the rebuilt temple in Ezra's day was less grand and – crucially – did not experience the cloud presence of the LORD at its dedication. Christ's glory was glimpsed in the cloud at his transfiguration (Mark 9), seen clearly when we join him in the clouds at his return (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

Holy Saviour, Lord Jesus, you are glorious in your very nature, worthy of honour and praise. Thank you for humbling yourself to humanity to save us. Forgive my small thoughts of you; help me to know you better, and to live my life in expectation and anticipation of being with you forever in your presence.

2 Chronicles 6:12-42 – Dwelling Among Sinners

This outstanding prayer is soaked in covenant language based on the blessings and curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. Solomon knew that humanity is inherently sinful and that Isael would inevitably sin. At such times, only the mercy of God can help us. It's notable that although the people are expected to pray towards God's presence in the temple, Solomon calls on the LORD to answer from heaven. He is acutely aware of the infinite power and reign of the LORD over all nations, and of the inadequacy of even Jerusalem's lavish temple to house him. It is humbling, thrilling, and sobering that such a God should come to dwell in us by the Holy Spirit.

Holy, infinite God, beyond all time and space, thank you for coming personally to me, lifting me from my dusty creatureliness, and raising me to be your child, united to Jesus and indwelt by the Holy Spirit himself. Help me to live conscious and worthy of who I am in you.

2 Chronicles 7 – Glimpses

Those Israelites who witnessed the temple filled with the glory of the LORD and saw fire from heaven consume the burnt offering were blessed indeed! It causes us to yearn for the day when we will see the LORD in his glory, as we bow down in his immediate presence – a glimpse of heaven. The LORD's words to Solomon are graciously grounded in the promises of the covenant. Where there is repentance before God, he is always ready to forgive and to restore. And yet the first readers of Chronicles, the returned exiles, would have been acutely aware of the awful outcome of regret following repeated sin and apostasy – a glimpse of hell.

Living God, you are gracious to reveal your glory to sinful people like me. You are gracious to forgive, and even more to give your Holy Spirit to bring me to repentance and faith. Help me to live for you in anticipation of seeing you.

2 Chronicles 8 – Blindspot

This chapter provides quite a glowing summary of Solomon's reign, listing building projects, public worship, and trade arrangements that combined to produce a country rich spiritually and materially. That the forced labour can be described as being "this way today" (v8) shows how the writer has compiled his book from multiple historical sources, since such forced labour was not in place after the exile. Solomon's decision to move his wife, the daughter of Pharaoh, away from the areas of holiness in Jerusalem seems sensible and pragmatic, but it masks a heart problem. He has compartmentalised a section of his own heart away from the LORD. Sanctification of *most* of our lives is not enough.

Holy, omniscient Father, you know how I harbour sins in my heart, kidding myself that I'm ok because I'm doing satisfactorily in other areas of life. Open my eyes to my spiritual blindspots, Lord, and help me to make the difficult life changes that true repentance brings.

2 Chronicles 9 – How Good it Was

Where the books of Samuel and Kings spell out significant flaws in both David and Solomon, Chronicles portrays them only in the best light. From the genealogies in 1 Chronicles 1-9 onwards we've been given a picture of Israel at its greatest when (a) ruled by a David-like king whose heart is set on worship of the LORD, and (b) true worship is enabled by a functioning priesthood. The visit of the Queen of Sheba highlights Israel being a blessing to the nations in line with their calling in Exodus 19. Subsequent chapters will describe the religious, moral, social, financial, and political collapse of the nation, causing Chronicles' readers to yearn for a return to godly rule and functioning worship.

Lord Christ, you are the perfect King and High Priest. Your rule is good, wise, and just, and you bring your blessing to all nations – even to me. You are to be praised. How gracious you are to allow me to know you personally, and to be my help and guide every day.

2 Chronicles 10 – Split

Drawing on 1 Kings 12, this chapter recounts the disastrous turn of events that saw "all Israel" split into the northern tribes (known as Israel) and the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin (known as Judah). Was it Jeroboam's scheming, or Rehoboam's foolishness? Ultimately it was from God's hand, because of his anger at Solomon's apostasy (not recorded in Chronicles). Focus in the rest of the book will be on Judah, being both more directly relevant both to the first readers (the returning exiles) and to the line of covenant promise to David. With Rehoboam, however, we're shown that it's not enough simply to have a king in David's line – we need a king with David's heart for God.

Lord Jesus, you are the great and perfect king of your people. You are flawless in goodness, wisdom, and love. Your devotion to the Father is beyond measure or comprehension to us. In all this it is amazing that you are the one who died and rose again to save me, and I thank and praise you for your astonishing grace.

2 Chronicles 11-12 – Serve the LORD

The kingdom's split into Israel and Judah meant that people generally were forced to decide between true worship of the LORD in Jerusalem and false worship at Bethel and Dan's golden calves. The priests and Levites (who had no land inheritance) gathered to Rehoboam in Judah (v13-14), further emphasizing the spiritual and political division. What becomes clear in chapter 12, however, is that even having David's grandson on the throne and a consolidated Levitical priesthood in Jerusalem are not an automatic guarantee of prosperity. The king did not have absolute power; he was subject to the LORD. They discovered that it's better to serve the LORD than anyone else (v8).

Living God, you know how much I serve idols and gods in my own heart, seeking security and happiness in so many things that will ultimately pass away. Help me not to settle into empty religious habits, but rather to serve you personally, drawing on your strength every day.

2 Chronicles 13 – Outnumbered?

The battle lines drawn in this chapter are as much spiritual as they are military. Abijah's speech to Jeroboam are as much for Chronicles' readers as they were for Jeroboam's Israelite forces. How could Judah's smaller army hope to succeed against Israel's superior numbers hemming them in to front and rear? "Israelites, don't fight against the LORD God of your ancestors, for you will not succeed." As the priests blew the trumpets and Judah cried out to the LORD, they might have recalled Elisha's words to his servant, that "those who are with us outnumber those who are with them" (2 Kings 6:16). In the end, just one person with the LORD is a majority.

Lord Christ, I often feel overwhelmed as I try to contemplate the commands you have given: I fail to love as I ought; I'm slow to witness; I'm forgetful in prayer. Forgive me for attempting such spiritual things in my own natural strength. Help me to be useful in your hands, at the Spirit's impulse.

2 Chronicles 14-15 – Revival

Chapters 14-16 cover the life of Asa in much more detail than 1 Kings 15. In line with Chronicles' emphasis on the blessings of life under a David-like king and a functioning system of worship, we see here the overflow of godly rule to the people: God gave them peace. When Cush attempted an invasion, "Asa cried out to the LORD his God" (14:11) and they were delivered. Faithful Israelites from the northern tribes found blessing in Jerusalem. False idol worship was removed, and the whole of Judah enjoyed fellowship with God and even covenanted together to commit to him (15:15). We are not defined by the apostasy of earlier generations: Blessing is for all who will repent.

Gracious Saviour, it is comforting to realise that you are always compassionate and welcoming towards any repentant sinner, and that I am not defined by what I was before you saved me. Thank you for including me in the blessing of your peace, protection, and presence.

2 Chronicles 16 – Faithlessness and Rage

It doesn't matter who we are or how long we have trusted in the LORD, we must always be diligent in guarding our hearts. The previous two chapters show great blessing for Israel under Asa, but here we see a sad downfall. His appeal to the king of Aram would have taken planning and diplomacy – this was no spur-of-the-moment slip but rather a prologued lapse of faith. The LORD is gracious to point out our sin so that we might repent and be restored, but Asa's reaction is typical of many of us when our sin is called out: He was enraged (v10). As Asa's life drew to a close, he turned less and less to the LORD (v12). Small wonder Jesus commanded us, "Remain in me."

Lord Jesus, thank you that when I am faithless, you are faithful to your promises. Forgive me, Lord, that I am so quick to defend my actions rather than own up to my sin before you. May I remain in you, close to you, deep into my old age and for all time.

2 Chronicles 17 – Teachers Appointed

Jehoshaphat is given much more coverage in Chronicles than in Kings, and he's held up as a very positive example of a David-like king. The stand-out moment in this chapter is his initiative of sending men out throughout Judah to teach everyone "the book of the LORD's instruction" (v9). Relationship with God is not something to be outsourced or left to a few professional clerics; it is for everyone to know the LORD and to live in his ways, enjoying his blessing. Ephesians 4 describes how Christ has appointed apostles, prophets, and pastors and teachers "equipping the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11-12). We are always to be learning from him.

Lord Christ, your care for your church extends into every aspect of our lives. Thank you for giving us your word, and for equipping some to teach it well to us all. Give me listening ears, an obedient heart, and willing hands to do all that you teach.

2 Chronicles 18 – Do Not Love the World

This chapter is almost identical to 1 Kings 22, except that the bias here is more towards Jehoshaphat king of Judah rather than Ahab, king of Isreal. Jehoshaphat is portrayed as godly, working hard to bring all Judah under God's blessing and rule. Ahab, married to Jezebel, worshipped Baal. That makes Jehoshaphat's promise of "I am as you are, my people as your people" (v3) and his subsequent partnership in war sound wholly unwise and unsound. Perhaps his suggestion that Ahab enquire of a prophet of the LORD might be somewhat evangelistic. In the end, there is disaster for Ahab and wrath for Jehoshaphat (19:1-3) for partnering with wickedness. Discernment is always necessary.

Lord Jesus, you have left us in the world though we are no longer of the world. We are in you, citizens of heaven. Give me godly discernment to engage with unbelieving people as your ambassador, without ever being tempted by or embroiled in the sin around me.

2 Chronicles 19-20 – We Look to You

In 17:10, we read that neighbouring nations didn't attack Judah because of a fear of the LORD – a protection given in response to Jehoshaphat's godly rule. Following his disastrous partnership with wicked Ahab, the LORD was angry with him (19:1-3). Jehoshaphat resumed his wise rule, establishing justice in the land (19:4-11), but God's wrath was worked out in the threat of invasion from a coalition of enemy nations (Chapter 20). Jehoshaphat's prayer is a picture of humility as the king gathered all the people together and prayed, "We do not know what to do, but we look to you" (v12). The salvation that came to them was unmistakeably God's own hand and it's no surprise to read of singing and rejoicing. We are fools not to ask the LORD for help in times of need.

Heavenly Father, you are to be praised for your great love, patience, and compassion. Like Jehoshaphat, I'm capable of letting you down over and over, and yet you forgive with grace upon grace. Teach me the humility and dependence to say, "I don't know what to do, but I look to you."

2 Chronicles 21 – To No-one's Regret

This account of Jehoram's reign in Judah is somewhat longer than in 2 Kings 8 and has the highly unusual inclusion of a letter from Elijah. Elijah was prophesying in Israel, but the sins of Ahab's royal family had infiltrated Judah's. Where good kings in Judah enjoyed peace and honour, Jehoram's sin reaped rebellion and personal disaster. The manner of his death alone is a terrible warning against apostasy, and the fact that he died "to no-one's regret" is a devastating obituary. We are foolish to think that others are unaffected by our actions: When we do good through all of life, many others benefit; when we do evil, many suffer. We do well to "Hold on to what is good" in Christ (1 Thess 5:21).

Lord Christ, you are good and you do only good. It is a blessing to know and to serve you, to live under your good rule. Forgive me for the harm I have done to others through my sinful words, actions, and negligence. Help me to do good in your name.

2 Chronicles 22-23 – Providence and Faith

Ahaziah's reign was brief and wicked, heavily influenced by his evil mother Athaliah (22:3). After her son's death, Athaliah set about killing all her own grandsons in an attempt to seize power. Her wicked rule is one of the stand-out low-points of Israel's history. In the preservation of a single heir, the child Joash, we see two key Bible principles in tension: First, God's promise to provide an eternal dynasty in David's line cannot fail – and certainly won't be thwarted by wickedness such as Athaliah's. Second, the LORD works through the faithful bravery of his people. Jehoida the priest and his royal wife Jehoshabeath risked their lives to keep God's promises alive.

Sovereign Lord, you command all things for your own honour and glory and the good of your people. Give me boldness and wisdom to do the works you have prepared in advance for me to do, and greatly bless others through me for your glory.

2 Chronicles 24 – Bold Godliness Speaks Out

Chronicles comes last in the ordering of books in the Hebrew Scriptures, and it is likely that that was the case in Jesus' day. It is also likely, then, that the Zechariah stoned here in 2 Chronicles 24 was the one mentioned by Jesus in his condemnation of Israel's religious authorities in Matthew 23:35. The way Joash turned from the LORD following the death of the godly High Priest Jehoida seems shocking, and yet it's not so surprising that he should fall once he ceased to be fed by the word of God. The subsequent stoning of Jehoida's son (possibly grandson) was idolatrous wickedness from an ultimately God-less king. Jesus' words show that the LORD remembers sin against his people.

Lord Jesus, your word says that your holy people will be vindicated in their steadfast devotion to you on the day of your return. It is good to know that your rule is unchangeably good, wise, and pure. I pray for the boldness of Zechariah to stand out for you.

2 Chronicles 25 – Off the Rails

Here we have another king who appeared to be godly to begin with but then lost his way. When Amaziah listened to what the man of God said (in v7-8), his obedience wasn't easy and even led to trouble from disgruntled Israelites: Amaziah was to learn not to enter into coalition with Israel. His success over Edom was clearly from God, so why Amaziah should then seek and take Edom's gods to worship is hard to fathom (v14). When he foolishly challenged Israel to battle he did so on his own, totally without the LORD's support. Doomed to failure, Amaziah was taken prisoner and held by Isreal. Once released, he was stoned to death by some of his own people for his apostasy.

Living God, our hearts are prone to wander from you. Left to my own devices, and without your presence or word, I'm sure I would have drifted into unbelief long ago. Thank you that you are faithful. Help me to draw ever close to you, and not to run away under my own steam.

2 Chronicles 26 – Almost Fatal Arrogance

It's quite possible that Uzziah became king while his father Amaziah was imprisoned in Israel (25:23). He was immeasurably blessed to have a "teacher of the fear of God" (v5) and his long reign was marked by success. Sadly, he became the third king in a row to have a good kingship turn bad, this time when the king went to offer incense at the temple. Only priests were to do that, and it was indeed brave of the priests to take a stand against the king. Standing there, firepan in hand (v19), he was a moment from death for such ungodly arrogance. His leprosy was a mercy, reminding readers that we must remain faithful to the LORD throughout our whole lives.

Heavenly Father, the three kings in these chapters remind me how important it is to be true to you all my life, day by day. Today then, Lord, forgive me my sins against you and help me to know you and the grace you give in Christ.

2 Chronicles 27-28 – Choose Your King

Throughout Chronicles, the writer has demonstrated the blessings on Judah under a David-like king and a functioning system of worship, and the curses that come when the LORD is abandoned. These two chapters spell that out again at a time when the northern tribes of Israel were finally being dismantled under Assyrian rule. Readers are being forced to ask what king of king we'd like to serve, and how might we come under the LORD's blessing. Above all, we see the relentless grace of God sending a prophet to prevent further sin and to introduce grace (28:15). Ahaz thought his trouble came from the gods of Damascus, so he worshipped them (28:23) instead of the true, disciplining God.

Messiah Jesus, perfect king given to us for perfect rule, forgive me that so often I still prefer to go my own way instead of yours – as if I could possibly know better. Help me to live for you and serve you in every aspect of my life.

2 Chronicles 29 – Open the Doors

We begin several chapters on the reign of Hezekiah. The book of Kings barely mentions the religious reforms we read of here, once again illustrating the emphasis we've seen in Chronicles of the blessing from God when we serve a David-like king. King Ahaz had shut the temple doors and led Judah to match the pagan idolatries of Israel and the other nations. Hezekiah opened the doors and commissioned repairs. He galvanised the priests and Levites for the cleaning and restoration of the temple to make it ready for service. His speech in v3-11 makes it clear that their obedience is not so much demanded by the king but needful for proper worship of the LORD. The chapter ends in rejoicing.

Gracious Jesus, you are the one who opened the doors to heaven itself, who cleanses us and sanctifies us for worship in the Father's presence, being worthy of worship and adoration in your own right. Thank you that you revive my heart for worship and are always ready to receive me.

2 Chronicles 30 – Passover and Grace

This lovely chapter continues the spiritual revival of Judah under Hezekiah as he calls the whole nation to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. It is especially lovely that such grace was extended to anyone in Israel who had escaped the Assyrian deportations (v10-12). The priests and Levites were badly unprepared, and many of the people who participated were ceremonially unclean which was forbidden by law. Yet God is truly gracious, extending mercy to all who come to him by faith (v18-20). Jesus would later quote Hosea 6:6 to those who prioritised formal religion over love for God and humility of heart (e.g. Matthew 9:13). Like the previous chapter, this one also ends in rejoicing.

Saviour Jesus, great Passover Lamb of your people, it is sobering and thrilling that you see my heart. You know all my pride, all my self-deception, all my sinful desire – and it is you who works to cleanse and sanctify me by your presence and grace. I thank and praise you, Saviour and Lord.

2 Chronicles 31 – Mutual Encouragement

The emphatic covenantal connection between vibrant worship of the LORD and his abundant blessing on his people continues, seen this time in overflowing storerooms of offerings from the nation in provision for the priests and Levites. There's an important principle here for today's churches, worked out in a virtuous cycle: The priests and Levites were well provided for, enabling them to fulfil their duties of sacrifice, justice, and teaching with no concerns over material wellbeing. That meant that the nation was spiritually nourished, leading to grateful, joyful offerings of praise to the LORD. Spiritual leaders and those led work together for mutual encouragement in the LORD.

Lord Christ, thank you for the leaders you have placed in our church. Thank you for their leadership and teaching, their care and example. May your people be blessed by a growing knowledge and experience of you, generously and joyously contributing to the work of your kingdom.

2 Chronicles 32 – The King and Kingdom Blessing

The account in 2 Kings 18-20 follows Hezekiah's predicament relating to Assyria in more personal terms than we read here. The events of the taunting of Assyria's commander are set here in a frame of a Jerusalem who had experienced blessing under the LORD and were therefore inclined to trust their king. While there are passing remarks about Hezekiah's failings (v25, 31), the overwhelming picture is of a David-like king who led his people to covenant-faithful worship of the LORD, which in turn drew the promised blessings of abundant provision and protection. He is yet another reminder to Chronicles' first readers (the returning exiles) and its latest (us) of the blessings of God's kingdom rule.

Messiah Jesus, you have both called us and enabled us to come into your kingdom. Indeed, the Spirit has reoriented my spiritual desire to serve you and to know you. Forgive my foolish wrongdoings, Lord, and keep me true to you in thought, word, and action.

2 Chronicles 33 – Personal Revival

Back in 2 Kings 21, Manasseh's 55-year reign clearly led Judah into such complete apostasy from God that their rejection by God was inevitable (2 Kings 21:14). That picture is carried over to this chapter (e.g. v6, 9). It comes as a surprise, then, to read of Manasseh's repentance and prayer in chains, and the LORD is glorified in his grace. So we notice: (a) However comprehensive our sin and abandonment of God, he will always hear prayer offered in true humility and faith – and he will sometimes take us to a very dark place specifically so that we will pray. (b) Though the king turned to God, the people were less than whole-hearted. Faith can't be outsourced to godly leaders.

Heavenly Father, you are perfect in wisdom and kind in discipline, leading us through the pain of confession and repentance to the joy of Christlikeness and peace. Forgive me my sins against you, Lord, and help me to grow closer to you myself.

2 Chronicles 34 – Wholesale Reform Needed

It's possible that Josiah's reforms began when he was so young because of guidance from the prophets Zephaniah and Jeremiah (based on chronology). The extension of the reforms into northern Israel was probably an indication of weakening Assyrian domination. What is clear is that although his father Manasseh had turned to the LORD in later life, it was too late to turn Judah round as a nation: Wholesale reform was needed, though even Josiah's efforts didn't change hearts in the longer term. Above all else, the discovery of the book of the covenant is most significant, not least in explaining the covenantal basis of ultimate exile.

Holy God, you are gracious to give us your word for us to read. We have these narratives that remind us of how you work through your people, and how we in turn are repeatedly rebellious. Teach me your word, Lord, and help me to know it and live by it for you.

2 Chronicles 35 – Passover and Failure

In Hezekiah's day, the priests and Levites had prepared Passover sacrifices for the people due to ceremonial uncleanness (Chapter 30), and the practice seems to have continued into Josiah's time. It's not certain why Josiah had to command the Levites to put the "holy ark" in the temple, but it was an important element of the restoration of true worship; it should never have been removed. Josiah's death, following such a whole-hearted devotion to the LORD, surprises us and would have rocked Judah. Jeremiah even composed a mourning song. Egypt's King Neco was heading north, past Judah, to aid Assyria against a growing Babylonian empire. His message to Josiah (v21) seems genuine, which explains Josiah's death as punishment for tragic rebellion.

Lord Christ, so many of these kings did so much good in your honour and for the great blessing of your people, only to fall away into error. Thank you that you are eternally the same. I pray for the Spirit's help to keep me faithful to you day by day to the very end.

2 Chronicles 36 – Not The End

Some of Judah's most tumultuous years are compressed into a chapter that gives the barest details. Chronicles was written for the returning exiles, for whom the events of the exile were all too well-known, so the thrust of the book has explained why they were exiles and how they must now live to enjoy God's blessing. The book of Jeremiah gives detail about Jerusalem's final pre-exile years, including a promise that the exile would last 70 years (v21, Jer 29:10). The final verses are repeated as the opening of the book of Ezra, describing the return from exile in Babylon. So God's word is faithful: He keeps his covenant (in blessing and in curse), calls us to repentance (v15), and keeps all his promises.

Holy God, this book of Chronicles vindicates all your actions towards your people and also exposes our hearts as idolatrous and bent away from you. Thank you for your relentless grace, for your word that calls me to repentance and faith, for your patience and forgiveness.

Ezra 1 – Supernatural Interventions

Where the Exodus from Egypt was marked by huge, supernatural events and high expectations for the Promised Land, the return from exile seems considerably more humble and mundane. Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon had given way to Cyrus's Persia across the 70-year time span promised by God through Jeremiah, and Cyrus was allowing God's people to return home to Judah – though still as a provincial state in his empire. Notice: (a) God orchestrated events by moving the spirit of Cyrus and the people (v1, 5), so this is no less supernatural than the Exodus; (b) In this, we learn to reappraise events in our own lives and times as God's work; (c) The path to Christ's birth in Bethlehem included this Babylon to Jerusalem road.

Heavenly Father, you moved my spirit by the life-giving, irresistible work of the Holy Spirit, leading me to repentance and faith in Christ. Thank you that you adopted me, and that you continue your interventions in far more ways than I realise. Give me ever-greater awareness of your hand.

Ezra 2 – By the Book

In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah form a single book. That means that the list of names given here must be extremely important because it appears again in Nehemiah 7. (Some numbers differ, usually attributed to simple copyist errors since Hebrew numbering is so wordy.) There are two main reasons for its importance: First, land would be allocated based on genealogy; and second, it would dishonour the LORD and be fatal to the people if unqualified (non-Levite) men served at the temple. This explains the exclusions of v62-63. The Urim and Thummim (v63) were small, marked stones the priests would use to enquire of the LORD. In everything, the returning exiles were trying hard to do the right thing.

Lord Christ, by grace you called me and saved me from sin. You have given me new life and a new future. I pray for the Spirit's help to lead me forward in righteousness, never going back to repeat the sins of the past. Help me to put sin to death and to live a life that pleases you.

Ezra 3 – First Things First

Seventy years after Nebuchadnezzar's forces had destroyed the temple and reduced Jerusalem to rubble, it would still have been easy enough to see where key features had been. But where should the rebuilding begin? They began at the altar in the temple courtyard, a large platform for offering sacrifices to the LORD. In this they were putting first things first: Worship before bricks. In time, they made arrangements for the building of a new temple, with tears and joy an appropriate response to the bittersweet feelings of grief and hope. We worship truly in Christ, who is himself our foundation as the Spirit dwells in us, God's temple (1 Corinthians 3:11, 16).

Holy Jesus, true worship of God is only made possible by you. You are the foundation of my hope, my atoning sacrifice, my sanctification, enabling me to come to the Father. Keep me in true spiritual union, not needing special buildings or places to feel close to you.

Ezra 4 – Years of Opposition

Biblical writers often arrange historical material thematically rather than chronologically, and the writer here has condensed around 60 years of events into this chapter. It begins with an approach from non-Israelite locals offering to be part of Jerusalem's temple rebuild. Judah's leader, Zerubbabel, turns the offer down. The returning exiles are working hard to establish true worship of the LORD and the last thing they need is multi-faith compromise. The rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls eventually came through diplomacy and official channels, alongside other work to discourage the hearts of the builders. Like the disciples of Acts 4, we must pray not for escape but rather for boldness to proclaim Christ's name.

Lord Jesus, in this country we don't face much direct physical opposition but there are plenty of people who would discourage us and hinder us from serving you. I pray for boldness and strength in the Spirit to continue to stand out and stand tall for you, leading others to hope in you.

Ezra 5 – Two Prophets, Two Rockets

At the end of Chapter 4, we read that the rebuilding of the temple halted "until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia" – that is, for 16 years. During that time, worship had continued at the altar site and the people got on building homes for themselves. But the trajectory of the Bible is towards the LORD dwelling among his people: They *needed* the temple because they needed the LORD's presence. So he sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to rebuke (e.g. Hag. 1:7-9) and inspire (e.g. Hag. 1:14), and the letter to Darius is part of the LORD's purpose for blessing. We are lazy and foolish to know what the LORD commands and then hide away from obedience.

Heavenly Father, I thank you for both the rebuke and the encouragement of your word, the rod and staff of a Good Shepherd. Help me to be diligent and creative in my obedience to your commands to love others and to speak of you to the lost people around me.

Ezra 6 – Joy-filled Events

The letter from Darius suggests all the bureaucracy and diplomacy of government, and yet to us there is an unmistakeable imprint of the hand of God over affairs. The chapter closes with two joyful events: First, the temple is completed and dedicated for service. This meant that God himself could dwell among his people once again, becoming the focus of life and society in Jerusalem, built around the temple. The second joyful event was the Passover feast, properly observed by everyone. Their return from exile in Babylon would surely have added poignancy as they recalled redemption from Egypt. We know joy as we likewise meditate on these two things: God is with us, and God is for us.

Lord Christ, eternal Son, I am blessed to know that you are Immanuel, God With Us. Thank you that you are for us, working to bless us. Forgive me my sins against you and against others. Help me to keep in step with the Spirit, living in joyful contentment in you even in the ups and downs of life.

Ezra 7 – A Teacher of God's Law

There's a gap of almost 60 years between chapters 6 and 7, and it's only here that we're introduced to the man Ezra. Ezra and Nehemiah sit very much at the end of the Old Testament timeline, when most of the Hebrew Scriptures were complete. Chronicles was being written, and the Psalms were being edited into their final form. So God didn't send a miracle-working prophet to his people: He sent a teacher of the word already given. Verse 10 highlights the right order and attitude for any would-be teacher of God's law, and three times we're told that the hand of God was on him (v6, 9, 28). With the Bible now complete, the church desperately needs more people like Ezra.

Lord God, in these latter days you have spoken to us through your Son, revealed to us in your completed word, illuminated to us by the joy of the Spirit. Give your churches people who study, obey, and teach your word in all humility and truth, so that we might serve and proclaim you to all.

Ezra 8 – Opt In

Around 50,000 people had returned from Babylon in the first wave recorded in Ezra 2. They had rebuilt the alter and, following urging from Haggai and Zechariah, they'd completed temple (the city walls remained in ruins). Here, Ezra takes a further 5,000 or so (including women and children) but has to send messengers to locate priests and Levites since it seems they had opted out of returning. But however gifted a church leader may be (and Ezra was highly gifted), the whole community of believers is needed to accomplish the LORD's work together. Ezra's faith was an example, but it was necessary for others to follow.

Lord Jesus, you have given your church many people with a wide variety of gifts to do your will. Help me to see all the gifts you have blessed me with and to use them enthusiastically and joyfully in your service. Lord, with the Spirit's help, I opt in.

Ezra 9 – Confession of Sin

Ezra was a Bible teacher, not a miracle worker or a prophet. The more of God's works we hear and know, the more we are exposed in our ungrateful sinfulness. So those people came to Ezra with reports of intermarriage: After all the spiritual decline recorded in Kings and Chronicles that lead to exile, and having been given a gracious opportunity to start again, they have repeated the sins of the past. Ezra was devastated, appalled, mournful. His prayer is all shame, all confession, and very much aware of God's righteousness. He offers no excuses and doesn't even seek forgiveness. It is pure confessional worship, wholly exposed before the righteousness of God.

Holy God, I'm quick to excuse my sin with all manner of mitigations. Yet the truth is simple: I have sinned against you. I confess I don't even feel the full weight of shame before you that I ought. As a Spirit-enlightened child, I continue to sin against you to my utter shame. I'm so sorry.

Ezra 10 – Heavy Weather

The heavy rain matched the miserable mood of the assembled Israelites, and for the affected families it must have been a deeply troubling time. The law's prohibition against marrying foreign wives wasn't arbitrary: It was to protect Israel from being drawn away to serve foreign gods. Since each Israelite was to appear before local judges, it seems likely that each situation was weighed fairly. Where a woman committed herself to the LORD (like Rahab and Ruth in earlier times), there would be acceptance. But idolatrous rejection of the LORD would be met with expulsion from Israel. Repentance is often more costly than rejecting temptation.

Heavenly Father, I know that my sins have hurt the people close to me, and I regret that deeply. Forgive me, Lord. May the Spirit shout loudly to warn me of dangerous temptations so that I might always choose your righteous ways.

Nehemiah 1 – Earnest Prayer

Ezra had returned to Jerusalem under the orders of the Persian king Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:21), to teach the Israelites the law of God. The temple was long rebuilt (Ezra 6) but it seems the walls of Jerusalem were being repaired in Ezra's day. Ezra 4 showed us a letter exchange where Artaxerxes ordered the wall repair work halted. So where Nehemiah hoped for good news about Jerusalem renewed he was distraught at the heavy-handed turn of events. He was close to the king as his trusted cup-bearer, but how could he hope to get Artaxerxes to issue another decree opposite to his earlier one? So he prayed earnestly every day all winter long: "Give your servant success today."

Heavenly Father, you know that there are things I have brought before you with great passion, but in my inconsistency and faithlessness I have cooled and drifted in my earnestness. I pray for the work of the Spirit of prayer to keep me ever near you, praying constantly as I ought.

Nehemiah 2 – Expectant Prayer

After months of praying for an opportunity to speak to the king about the state of Jerusalem, Nehemiah was utterly ready for it when it came. His replies to Artaxerxes demonstrate Nehemiah's considerable planning and forethought, which also reveals his expectancy in prayer. His prayer in v4 could be little more than a heavenward glance, a heart inclination, but built on months of earnest prayer it perfectly fitted the situation and was answered by the LORD who had himself been preparing the king's heart for that very moment. Nehemiah understood how the LORD works through us, so didn't shrink back from the hard work of scoping the rebuild and motivating an intimidated community.

Holy God, it is remarkable how you work out your eternal purposes through us. Forgive the lack of urgency, earnestness, faithfulness, and expectancy in my lacklustre prayer life. Spirit, help me to pray, clothed in Christ, loving the Father.

Nehemiah 3 – Take Your Place

The language of 'building' is often used to describe church growth. Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matt 16:18); Peter describes us as a "spiritual house, being built to be a holy priesthood" (1 Peter 2:5); Paul wrote of the gifts Christ has given his church "to build up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12). So Nehemiah 3 gives us pointers as to how we take our own place in Christ's building: First, though Nehemiah was the leader, he didn't rebuild Jerusalem. In fact, not one person did – rather, everyone did. Second, status played no part: The High Priest got his hands dirty (v1), and (unusually) women are also credited with work (v12). Thirdly, the nobles of the Tekoites are eternally shamed for not lifting a finger (v5). Lastly, there were no gaps in the wall. We must all do our allocated work as one.

Lord Jesus, you are building your church and it is thrilling to see. Grow your kingdom, Lord. Help me fully to grasp my place in the work you would have me do for your church, and then give me the desire and diligence to do everything you have planned.

Nehemiah 4 – Swords and Trowels

Opposition to the rebuilding of Jerusalem began as dispiriting mockery, but once the walls were showing tangible progress things became more menacing. Verse 10 highlights the discouragement that was settling on the Israelite builders, despite progress made. Nehemiah didn't interact with Israel's enemies directly; he prayed (v4-5). He understood what it is to pray and to have the LORD work his purposes out through our actions: "So we prayed to our God and stationed a guard" (v9). We do well also to emulate the posture of the labourers (v17), doing good with one hand while fighting sin, temptation, and injustice with the other. We must never take our eyes off the enemy.

Lord Christ, too often I do things that I hope will build your church but I fail to pray and fail to take account of my own sinful heart. Keep me from getting tired in your work; help me to keep focus on all that I'm to do.

Nehemiah 5 – Do What's Right

People were coming to Nehemiah with an assortment of problems, all one way or another connected with not having enough money to buy food. Some of the more wealthy were lending money (which was lawful, Deut. 24) and some were also charging interest (unlawful, Deut. 15). Some money went to buy freedom from slavery, while others sold their children into slavery to buy food enough to live. Nehemiah hit the reset button. It was not a time for lending but for giving; people had been standing up for their rights instead of doing what's right. Deuteronomy's laws were for the protection of the poor, not the rich. So Nehemiah's attitude to wealth distribution mirrors the grace of God himself.

Gracious Father, you hold back no good thing in your love to me, even giving your own Son to save me. Forgive me that I don't reflect your generous, giving heart to those around me. Help me to be prepared to reset things I must, and to do right in your sight always.

Nehemiah 6 – Distract, Deceive, Discredit

We have read several times that the gracious hand of the LORD was on both Ezra and Nehemiah. Any opposition, then, can be attributed to Satan's schemes, and this chapter highlights several for us. First, there's malicious distraction: Opponents try to entice Nehemiah away from the work. Second, there's falsely spiritual deceit, where a "prophet" was hired to lie. There are plenty of rich false teachers still around today, duping millions with their lies. Finally, there's an attempt to discredit Nehemiah by luring him into the temple: Since he was not a priest, entrance to the temple would be forbidden. In each case, Nehemiah's clear vision of his task fuelled godly obedience.

Lord Christ, there are so many things that I allow to distract me; help me to focus on you and your works through me. Give me discernment to be aware of deceit – even in my own heart. Keep me true to you, so that I might never discredit you or your church in the world.

Nehemiah 7 – Faith and Fear

The text from v6 is copied from Ezra 2 (though with some minor copying errors in some of the numbers; Hebrew numbering is awkwardly wordy). The rebuilt Jerusalem would be divided according to the genealogies of those who had returned decades before Nehemiah and Ezra. The appointment of Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, in charge of Jerusalem (v2) is notable. Hanani had given Nehemiah the original report about broken Jerusalem in Chapter 1, so was no doubt intelligent and resourceful, but the reason for his appointment was that "he was a faithful man who feared God more than most" (v3). Character always trumps gifting for leaders of God's people.

Lord Jesus, I know that the church is yours and that you gift us with pastors and teachers for our good. It's also sadly clear that Satan sends wolves to harm the flock. Lord, protect your church, and keep the leaders of our church faithful to you, living in holy awe and respect for you.

Nehemiah 8 – The Joy of the LORD

At Sinai the people had gathered and heard the voice of the LORD. So too, here in Jerusalem, everyone gathered to hear the word of the LORD read by Ezra. It was a crowd of many thousands, so Levites were distributed throughout to make the word of the LORD clear to everyone who could understand. It would be a sobering experience, being reminded of both corporate and individual sins before a holy God. Yet they were to rejoice, not weep (v10), since their collective presence was a sign of God's faithful love and unbounded grace. And this good news if for everyone, so the family heads gathered to learn more (v13). We do well to weep over sin, but we also must rejoice in the Lord always.

Lord God, you are unchangeable in your eternal bliss. My sins are grievous and offensive, harmful to myself and to others. Yet you are gracious and forgiving, and by your grace I enter into the joy you give me in Jesus. Thank you that such joy gives me strength.

Nehemiah 9 – Sinful Through and Through

In Ezra 9, Ezra remembered the LORD's relentless goodness and faithfulness to Israel as he confessed the nation's sin relating to intermarriage with foreign wives. The national confession of sin in this chapter is even more searching, reviewing the history of Israel from Abraham onwards. At every stage, the LORD is shown as powerfully working for his people, ever gracious in his forgiveness in restoration. The people, on the other hand, descend from those who repeatedly turned away from God, rejected his good rule, and spurned his calls to repentance given via the prophets. Now slaves in their own land, they see that God is just. But their hearts, it seems, are focussed on God's future blessings.

Heavenly Father, your word has many occasions where people reflect on times past. You are always seen to be good and faithful in every way; we are always so selfish and fickle. Thank you for the Spirit's work, giving me a heart of flesh, reorienting my desires to serve you.

Nehemiah 10 – Put Sin to Death

As we look at the list of names here we realise that the whole community was involved in this solemn covenant commitment. Reading through the terms of the covenant we see that there's nothing really new here; they're just committing to submit themselves to the law of Moses already given (and taught to them by Ezra). The commitments have different dimensions, covering relationships within the community, with God, and with outsiders. Why these particular terms? They are typical of the sins of the past and represent the most likely sins of the future amid a godless, pluralistic culture. We do well to contemplate our own greatest temptations and to commit to putting sin to death – with the LORD's help.

Holy Spirit, you know my inmost being far better than I know myself. Convict me of my sins and sinful desires, working in me such communion with Christ that I am willing and able to put sins to death as you conform me to his likeness.

Nehemiah 11 – The Holy City

The details of this chapter are taken from 1 Chronicles 9 which (among other things) includes more information on the remnants of other tribes. It makes sense that the various dignitaries should live in Jerusalem, and the rest of the population was settled by lot. Others settled throughout Judah, but some went further north and south into nearby Persian provinces so that they could resettle in their ancestral towns. But what all this detail? It's being made clear that they weren't just lucky refugees: They were connecting with their ancient roots and re-establishing themselves as God's chosen people. Everything was orderly and (most importantly) God-centred. It's no accident that Jerusalem was called the "holy city" (v1, 18).

Heavenly Father, truly the heavenly Jerusalem – the body of your people in Christ – is the glorious and holy city. Thank you for making me a citizen of it. Help me then to live that kingdom life now, joyfully subject to your good and perfect reign.

Nehemiah 12 – Celebrations and Contributions

The emphasis in Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah has been to establish post-exile Israel on firm spiritual foundations. It's entirely appropriate, therefore, that the celebrations for completing Jerusalem's rebuild are essentially religious, led by priests in joyful procession towards the temple. Verses 44-47 seem mundane in comparison, describing the gathering, storage, and distribution of contributions for the priests and temple workers. Yet note that men were appointed to that work on the day of the celebrations (v44). We enjoy special services, conferences, and various spiritual highpoints, but we must prepare for and participate in a whole lifetime of worship in God's community.

Precious Saviour Jesus, thank you that there have been particular times and seasons where I have known your presence and rejoiced. Help me to know what it is to worship you every day, and to contribute rightly to the community of your people, the church.

Nehemiah 13 – Spot the Difference

Back in Chapter 10, the people had willingly entered into a covenant not to intermarry with other nations, to keep the Sabbath for rest and worship, and to provide for the ongoing needs of the temple and its workers. There's a gap of around 12 years between chapters 12 and 13, and it's not clear how long Nehemiah was away serving King Artaxerxes (though it was several months, possibly years). On Nehemiah's return, we see that Jerusalem had abandoned even the terms of their own covenant. The more we compromise with worldly values the less we value true worship of the living God. What made Nehemiah different? Recall his praying in chapters 1 and 2: This man kept close to the LORD.

Gracious God, intimate guide, I've seen many people profess your name only to fade away and go back to the world. I have felt temptation, and I know the pull of sinful desire. Saviour, keep me daily in your presence, and teach me what it is to shun evil.

Esther 1 – "More Worthy"

The setting for the book of Esther is distant Persia, the empire that replaced the Babylonians. The scene before us is lavishly extravagant with no expense spared. The king's plan to display his beautiful queen to a hall full of drunk nobles was utterly demeaning to her (and, as it happens, to them) and we applaud her refusal, recognising what it would cost her. A plan is hatched to find a woman "more worthy" than her (v19), by which they mean both stunningly beautiful and humbly compliant. The king is concerned with power and wealth, and his unlimited wealth was amassed from the millions of poor in his empire. Contrast all this with Christ, our servant king, who reached down to lift us up.

Lord Christ, resplendent in glorious majesty, you are honoured and praised for humbling yourself to humanity – even to death. You are the one who makes your bride, the church, beautiful as you clothe us in righteousness. Saviour, thank you.

Esther 2 – Preparations

It speaks volumes that the king's plan to find a new queen is to hold what amounts to a "Miss Persia" contest. We are about as far away from the biblical ideal of husband and wife as we could be. The chapter introduces us to Mordecai and his beautiful charge, Esther. They are hardly model Jews, going along with the king's sordid plans while withholding information about Esther's ethnicity. We notice that there is no mention of God yet, and in fact the book is famous for having no reference to God at any point. Yet, by the end of the chapter, God has Esther with her God-given beauty installed as queen, and Mordecai with unrewarded valour in the royal records.

Sovereign Lord, you prepare your people with gifts and abilities, temperament and intelligence, to do the works you have prepared for us. I pray that I might be kept in step with the Spirit, happily serving you in everything according to your plans.

Esther 3 – The Dragon

The whole book of Esther is often read in its entirety in synagogues around the world to celebrate *Purim* each year. There's often a fun, pantomime atmosphere where listeners hiss and boo whenever wicked Haman's name is read. But where God is the true hero of the book without being mentioned, so too Satan is the ultimate villain. He is Revelation 12's dragon, bent on preventing the birth of God's messiah – here in Esther 3 by the annihilation of all God's people throughout the Persian empire. But God already had Esther and Mordecai in place to pre-empt Haman's evil plot and the devil's schemes.

Heavenly Father, your Son taught us to pray that we be delivered from evil. How many times have you graciously intervened in my life for my good? More than I know, I'm sure. Help me to keep closely in step with the Spirit, doing good and shunning evil.

Esther 4 – “Such a time as this”

Up to this point in her life, Esther has been portrayed to us as a fairly passive victim of circumstance, her life being governed by the men around her. Her written correspondence with Mordecai is revealing in several ways: (a) Mordecai trusts God to bring about a rescue of the Jews somehow (v14); (b) Esther has to come to terms with the fact that her position was ordained in heaven, and that she must go from victim to champion for her people; (c) This realisation changes her. She starts to *give* orders to Mordecai – and he obeys. (d) The call for a fast shows the *collective* passion of the Jews in the city and the severity of their predicament – three days is a long fast.

Gracious Father, you are kind to hear our prayers. More, you are beyond understanding in how your bind your sovereign purposes to our prayers. Give me wisdom to know how to serve you where I am, knowing that you have placed me here to do your will.

Esther 5 – Faith and Works

Esther began as a beauty queen acquired as a decorative trophy wife by the king. In this chapter she truly becomes Queen Esther, risking her life for the benefit of her own people, the Jews. In approaching the king, she has no idea what mood he might be in; an ill-timed approach could be fatal if the king proved unreceptive. But the 3-day fast (and, by implication, prayer) indicates that her action is prompted by faith, and faith without works is dead. She has planned a banquet for the king and wicked Haman and both men are delighted. The king’s curiosity is piqued by his lovely wife, but all Haman can see is his own elevated status and Mordecai’s rebuff.

Holy Father, your word says that you have prepared works for me to do. Forgive me for my lack of faith and for my disobedience when I fail to step forward. Thank you for Esther and so many like her, who remind me of your constant faithfulness and help in time of need.

Esther 6 – Pivot

The book of Esther is carefully structured so that events turn on a single pivot moment: On the night between Queen Esther's two feasts, the king could not sleep. His heaven-sent insomnia began a sequence of events where fortunes were very much reversed for Haman and Mordecai. The cliff-hanger situation at the end of Chapter 5 begins to unravel here, with Haman's plans to hang Mordecai immediately reduced to tatters. Haman's great moment became his downfall and shame. This is one of the Old Testament shadows of what was to take place when the Messiah came. As Satan worked through wicked men to have Jesus killed, that death became the pivot on which the works of the devil came to an end.

Sovereign God, it's encouraging to think of you intervening in such a simple but profound way. There were no signs or wonders, no prophets, much as things are today. Yet you are no less at work than ever. Help me to be aware of the spiritual realities around me all the time.

Esther 7 – Reversals

Queen Esther played events perfectly, ensuring absolute focus from the king as he waited to hear her request. The scene for all three people is heart-stopping and devastating. Haman had been incensed that Mordecai the Jew would not bow down to him, and now Haman himself bows at the feet of a Jewish woman. The gallows Haman had prepared for Mordecai become the means of his own destruction, just as the cross of Christ is how Satan's power is destroyed. These reversals are typical of Bible imagery and are, in fact, mirrored in our own lives when we come to saving faith. The old is gone; we are new creations in Christ, reversals of what we once were.

Lord Christ, you have brought me from death to life, darkness to light, sin to righteousness. I still feel a twistedness in me that would lead me down old paths, so I pray for the Spirit's help to make this reversal complete.

Esther 8 – Salvation

It was normal practice for a traitor's estate to be absorbed into the crown's, and it is typical of this book's reversals that Mordecai himself should end up as head over Haman's house and land. The date set for the planned annihilation of the Jews became a date when those Jews could legally remove their enemies. Salvation for some is always condemnation and loss for another; the great Hallelujah chorus of Revelation 19 rejoices that the sinful world has been destroyed, finally, at Christ's return. As a side point, it's interesting to note how many of Israel's exiles were spread across the empire, and that though they retained their identity as God's people – for better or worse.

Lord Christ, King of kings, Word of God, your return will be stunningly joyful for your people. That will be met with horror in equal measure by those who have rejected you. Yet you are to be praised and worshipped in all your perfection; all you do is good, righteous, just, and glorious.

Esther 9-10 – War Against Sin and Evil

The edict for the Jews explicitly gave them permission to loot their enemies as the spoils of war (8:11), yet three times in Chapter 9 we're told they took nothing (v10, 15, 16). The true essence of holy war is not about the acquisition of possessions, but the opposition of sin and evil. Any attempt to extinguish God's people as a light to the nations is by definition sin and evil, since to know God is humanity's highest state. The rejoicing of those Jews was appropriate to God's honour, and Purim became a joyful reminder (albeit bittersweet in later sufferings). Christ has sealed victory over sin and evil forever, so it's good for us to gather together to celebrate and remember.

Saviour Jesus, your victory over sin and evil is permanent and glorious, and so in you I may also be more than a conqueror over temptation and sin. Help me to live in newness of life, ever joyfully aware of the victory you have won.

Job 1 – Stripped Back

The description of Job in v1 is startling: “He was a man of complete integrity, who feared God and turned away from evil.” We also learn that he was very wealthy and blessed with a large family. We might be tempted to think that it would be easy to be ‘spiritual’ if we were as wealthy and blessed as Job. And that was Satan’s point: He felt that Job would cave if his life wasn’t so comfortable. But God weighed Job’s heart, knowing him to be one who “fears God and turns away from evil” (v8). And since that is who Job is, he still *has* all that he *is* even after Satan was permitted to strip away his vast livestock and even his sons and daughters. Verse 21 is astonishing in every way.

Lord Jesus, you said that our lives do not consist in the abundance of our possessions, and Job epitomised that. Give me a true grasp of who I am before you, and help me to live a life of revering you, turning from evil, and facing every problem in godly confidence.

Job 2 – Laid Bare

We probably shouldn’t view the heavenly throne room scenes too literally, but they do teach us some important lessons: (a) Satan is only ever a created being, subject at all times to the limits set on him by God; (b) Knowing the awful suffering of Job in chapter 1, the LORD permitted Satan to go further still. God, in his wisdom, permits terrible things to happen to his people. (c) Job’s suffering was in no sense a punishment for sin since God again describes him in glowing terms (v3). (d) Satan uses material suffering to take our eyes off our spiritual blessings. In all this, Job prepares Bible readers for the Suffering Servant, the innocent Messiah who will die for the sins of his people (e.g. Isaiah 53).

Eternal God, your goodness and wisdom can never be doubted or questioned. I know you permit your people to suffer in many ways, and that you do so with high purpose not always understood by us. When my time comes, heavenly Father, give me grace.

Job 3 – Darkness

The previous chapter ended with Job's three friends coming to him and grieving his condition in silence for a week. It was their finest hour. Among the Bible's 'darker' chapters, Job 3 is pitch black. Job has suffered the loss of his sons and daughters, his wealth, and his health. His trust in God hasn't wavered, but that doesn't diminish his sense of loss and grief. He is not exaggerating when he says he wishes he'd never been born – it's a true reflection of the desperately low state of his heart. We must realise that such anguish is not sin; rather, it's wholly appropriate – and those in such circumstances usually need our presence more than our advice.

Lord Christ, you knew the depths of anguish at Gethsemane, and as our sympathetic High Priest you understand our deepest pain. Give me more wisdom and compassion to comfort those in pain, and grace in abundance when I need it myself.

Job 4 – Discussions: Round One

Chapters 4 to 27 are a cycle of arguments put forward by Job's three friends in an attempt to explain to Job why he is suffering and what to do about it. As readers, we already know the heavenly scenes but that's unknown to Job and his friends. It's natural, when we suffer, to ask why. But as we'll see from these discussions it's easy to be wrong. Eliphaz, unaware that God regards Job as a man of complete integrity who fears God and turns away from evil, suggests that Job is being punished for his sin (v7). Worse, he claims to have learnt this through a mysterious spiritual vision in the night (v12-17), just as so many false teachers, mediums, and sect leaders have done for years.

Holy God, you have communicated to us all we need to know you and the blessings of life in Christ. Yet there are so many things we don't know, and the causes of our sufferings are so often such bearers of anxiety and confusion. Lord, at such times, keep me focussed on you alone.

Job 5 – Presumption

Eliphaz continues his first speech to Job. In v1-7 he reminds Job that no-one is perfect, and that trouble will always come to those who turn away from God. In v8, Eliphaz begins to give advice: After reminding Job of the glorious power and nature of our Creator, Job should appeal to God for help. He speaks of the very great blessings that will come to Job if he appeals to God (v19-27). But as readers we know that Job is already very much in favour with God, so Eliphaz is not seeing things as they truly are. We may know much of the revealed nature of God, but we must beware presuming to know his unrevealed purposed. Even suffering has its purpose in God's plans, epitomised at the cross of Christ.

Gracious Saviour, as your splendour vastly outshines Job's wealth and status, so too your suffering was even greater than his. Yet Scripture makes plain the great truth that you have purpose and work all things for the good of your people. In all suffering, keep me mindful of the cross.

Job 6 – Bland and Empty Help

What possible comfort can come to a person in such suffering? Job is acutely aware that God has permitted it, and *that* knowledge is the greatest pain of all (v4 is key). Death would bring comfort (v8-10), but without death there is no hope (v11-13). Yet he still has friends, doesn't he? We've only heard from Eliphaz so far, but already Job dismisses his words as being bland and empty (v5-7). His friends are like seasonal rivers in a wadi (v14-23); where he might have had cause to hope for comfort from them, all he has found is arid dryness. If they think his suffering is judgment from God for sin, Job calls them to identify his unrighteousness (v28-30). Unwise words from friends can pile up further agony.

Lord Jesus, your words are always pure, true, helpful, and comforting. You draw closer than breath itself, and your presence brings peace. As I am comforted by you in times of uncertainty and pain, so help me bring your comfort to others with godly wisdom.

Job 7 – Why?

Where Job spoke to “you” in plural in Chapter 6, speaking to his friends, the “you” in this chapter is singular, suggesting that he’s speaking to God. He laments months of agony, with nights passing slowly and days quickly, knowing that to God Job’s life is “but a breath” (v1-10). So in v11-21 he openly takes his pain and sorrow to God. He never accuses God of doing wrong, but he asks the age-old question on every sufferer’s lips: Why? As readers, we know the answer in part from Chapters 1 & 2, but Job and his friends know none of that. We might think Job’s words impertinent, but we don’t share his suffering. He might as well have asked, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

Lord Jesus, clearly Job’s agony was very real, felt in his mind and emotions as much as his body. Surely you know such pain yourself and more, so I thank you that I come to a great High Priest who sympathises with me in every way. Saviour, in my anxieties, bring me comfort.

Job 8 – Graceless Logic

Where Eliphaz least attempted some sincere reasoning and sensitivity, Bildad’s first speech has the gentleness of a freight train. His thinking is based purely on a sense of justice: That good comes to good people and bad comes to bad people. He applies it with shocking bluntness to Job’s children (v4), showing absolutely no compassion for Job’s grief. Using illustrations from nature, Bildad is certain that all these bad events are the just outcome for Job’s sin. The danger of such thinking is that it leaves no room for suffering for righteousness. Worse, it has no room for Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice, where a wholly innocent man suffered undeserved agony for others.

Saviour Jesus, you suffered immeasurable pain in the death you did not deserve. The good that comes to me through that is all by your grace. How blessed I am that you became sin for us. Help me to be sensitive to others in pain, pointing people to hope in you.

Job 9 – Justice and Fairness

Bildad had a very clearcut view that good comes to good people and bad comes to bad people. The surprise here is that Job agrees (v2). This is the heart of Job's turmoil: He knows that he has not sinned to deserve the calamity that has come to him, so could it be that God is actually unjust? We often confuse justice and fairness. Fairness is when everyone is treated the same, and God is not obliged to do that. He is, however, perfectly just – unchangeably so. In v24, Job has an inkling that something else might be going on, and of course as readers we know that God has permitted Satan to inflict Job. But that *isn't* a punishment for sin. If anything, it's for *our* edification.

Heavenly Father, your justice, goodness, and wisdom are unchangeably and infinitely perfect. In my confusion, the certainty of your nature is comforting. Thank you that Job points to Jesus as the ultimate sufferer for the good of others, even for me.

Job 10 – This Was the Plan?

Job's reply to Bildad continues, now turning his words towards God. Frankly, he rages against God. He again appeals his innocence in v1-7 and acknowledges the creative work of God in Job's own conception and birth (v8-12), but then rails at God's plan that calamity would come whether Job was good or bad (v13-17). He ends his speech again wishing he had never been born (as he did in Chapter 3). Job's heart was good, though some of his words display a lack of understanding about the nature and wise actions of God. But he is still asking "Why?" – which means he *knows* he's missing something. Crucially, he is still taking his pain to God.

Holy God of wisdom and compassion, it is sometimes hard for us to see you clearly through our pain. Teach me your great glory, so that I will be prepared for darker days. In any and all trouble, I ask that the Spirit keep me in dependent prayer.

Job 11 – No Gospel At All

Zophar, the third friend, now addresses Job. Obvious false teaching is easily dismissed, but Zophar's words sound not unlike something we might hear in our churches today. He calls Job a sinner (v1-6), extols the greatness of God (v7-9), mentions God's justice (v10-12) and then calls on Job to repent and pray to be restored (v13-18) or perish (v19-20). He also incorrectly assumes Job's sin is the root of his suffering (v6, 11, 14). But Zophar's error is subtly dangerous: He urges Job to repent and pray not for God's honour but so that God would *automatically* reinstate his earlier blessings. This "gospel" is all works and no grace.

Great God of wonders, your ways are not our ways. You are glorious in grace, and your wisdom surpasses ours as the sun outshines a torch. Forgive me for ever thinking I could manipulate anything from you, rather than simply delighting in your abundant, generous grace.

Job 12 – The Hand of the LORD

This is the first of a three-chapter reply to Zophar, and it's Job's longest reply to his friends. Where the three friends are locked in a simplistic moral mindset that good comes to good people and bad comes to bad people, Job's suffering is causing him to reappraise that outlook. He can see how people at ease hold "calamity in contempt" (v5) without compassion or depth of wisdom even while "those who trouble God are secure" (v6). Job is as able to reason as his friends (v3), but the situation is forcing him to meditate on the wisdom and power of God (v16). There is so much complexity in the ways of God in the world, and we do well to learn humility before him.

Sovereign Lord, the world is complex beyond understanding yet your word makes it clear that you are perfectly working for the good of your people through all the good and evil in the world. Keep me humbly conscious of your good purpose, especially when things aren't as I'd like them to be.

Job 13 – Turn to God

Job is painfully aware of the wrongness in the words of his three friends and realises that his best route forwards is to “speak to the Almighty” (v3). He says that the arguments put forward are based on deceit and that the friends could not stand before God (v6-12). Spiritual error that leads to hell is deceit from Satan, the father of lies. So Job prepares to speak to God, fully aware of God’s perfect righteousness and right to take the life of any godless person who dares approach (v13-19). His appeal to God is for mercy, that his condition be eased and that he might know the sins that caused it.

Heavenly Father, your word is truth and there is no shadow in you. The world is full of deceit and I’m too willing and able to deceive myself. Show me more of your holiness, Lord, and more of my sin, so that I can praise you all the greater for salvation in Christ.

Job 14 – Resurrection Hope

Job’s longest reply to his friends brings the first round of discussions to a close, although as with his other replies he ends by addressing God. His theme is death, and how it’s permanent for people even though a cut down tree might yet sprout new life (v7-12). The Old Testament understanding of death was blown wide open by Christ’s resurrection, since before that there was only a vague conception of the grave (Sheol) as the place of the dead. Job’s yearning for the possibility of resurrection and the idea of his sins being sealed up and covered over beautifully anticipate our own hope bound up with Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice and resurrection life granted to us by faith.

Lord Jesus, death would only be a prospect of despair and loss without you. You have conquered the grave, and you do offer life and hope. Thank you that I am freed from the gloom of death that hangs over humanity. Help me to live now, here, for you.

Job 15 – Traditional Wisdom

The second round of speeches begins again with Eliphaz, though where he had some sensitivity in his first speech he's very much on the attack here. The common idea of 'Karma' underpins so much religious thought and simply can't find a place for undeserved suffering in the world. Eliphaz claims that Job is flatly wrong (v1-6), and in v7-13 accuses him of ignoring traditional wisdom as if Job had some special insight (which, ironically, Job's suffering *has* given). So in v14-35 Eliphaz applies traditional wisdom to explain how wicked people suffer – using language that Job himself has used to describe his own condition. Simple moralistic religion has no space for grace.

Lord Christ, all my hope is bound up in your own undeserved suffering and the righteousness I'm credited with by your grace. Thank you for the undeserved hope of life with you. Forgive me for ever thinking I deserve anything from you.

Job 16 & 17 – An Advocate in Heaven

Job describes his friends as "miserable comforters" (v1) as they bring only condemnation instead of comfort. Job, as a man who fears God and turns away from evil, would bring comfort if he were in their place (v5). His description of suffering reminds us of Christ's own experiences at the hands of men, innocently crushed within God's perfect plans for us. So Job's awareness of an advocate in heaven (v19) anticipates perfectly Christ's work on our behalf now (1 John 2:1). And yet, Job can see no immediate hope of relief: In Chapter 17 he invites more from his friends though he expects no real wisdom, comfort, or help (v10). With only an Old Testament worldview, he sees hope only in the oblivion of death.

Gracious Saviour, where Satan would accuse me of my many sins and lead me to hopeless despair, I thank you that you have been punished in my place, leaving no room for condemnation, and that you are my advocate before the Father. Help me to live today worthy of so great a salvation.

Job 18 – Calamities of Hell

Here we see the complete absence of grace in simplistic moral religion where good comes to good people and bad comes to bad people. Since Bildad is not in Job's place, he assumes that God must reckon him 'good' so that he feels comfortable speaking of the calamities of hell that come to the wicked. In truth, the frightening judgments Bildad speaks of are what we *all* deserve since we're all equally wicked before God. Yet if we imagine a self-righteous Pharisee gleefully reciting Bildad's speech to Christ on the cross we realise how richly complex God's grace is and how fatally empty proud religion can be. Satan is the accuser, but there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.

Gracious Saviour, surely here is a glimpse of the Father's wrath that you willingly suffered in my place. Yours was the ultimate undeserved suffering. Thank you that your gospel is so full of grace. Help me to make that clear to others lest they imagine a false self-righteousness in me.

Job 19 – My Redeemer Lives

Job's expression of suffering is not unlike the book of Lamentations: Verses 1-12 picture Job as a besieged city with enemies all around – and with God as the ultimate enemy. Yet where Lamentations' suffering was indeed judgment from God, Job's situation is very different. As he laments loss of all friendship in v14-22, he cries that "God's hand" has struck him (v21), though we know that it is in fact Satan's hand (2:6). All of which makes Job's faith in v22-27 extraordinary. Who could redeem him from God other than God? Who will stand on the dust of Job's grave and yet enable him to see God? Job's words only make sense in the light of Christ's redeeming work and resurrecting promise, so his final statement in v28-29 is a true warning to his friends.

God of all comfort, you were kind to give Job such insight into your triune nature and redemptive resurrection power. How much more you are revealed now in Christ. Help me to keep an eternal perspective and living trust when things in this life seem so full of struggle.

Job 20 – Non-Mover

Zophar's reply is livid. He makes the same points as Bildad and we feel like these speeches are getting nowhere, except that Job himself is making some progress. So we notice the intransigence of unbelief: The three friends have their worldview and they are intent on squeezing the reality of Job's situation into it. Notice also their poor logic: They are correct to say that God will judge sin and cause sinners to fall, but that simply doesn't mean that if someone is suffering it must be God's judgment on them. Above all, we must also acknowledge the awful truth of Zophar's description of the suffering of sinners under God's judgment, making this chapter another terrible picture of hell's pain.

Saviour Jesus, you give us here another glimpse of the horrors you suffered for us. Thank you. Forgive me for having too small an understanding of the seriousness of my sin or the terrors of hell. Give me an urgent regard for the unsaved people around me.

Job 21 – Truth in the Real World

All three friends in this second round of speeches have focussed on the same argument that since bad comes to bad people, and so much bad has come to Job, he must be bad. So in his final reply in this cycle, Job challenges their thinking by pointing out the simple reality that, in fact, many bad people enjoy lives of wealth, comfort, and ease. Such people go to the grave in peace, yet they say to God, "Leave us alone!" (v13-14). The simplistic view of God's justice that the friends have just doesn't fit with the real world (v29). Job's assessment that good and evil people end up in the same death is despairingly true if this life were all there is (see 1 Corinthians 15:19).

Lord Christ, if we had hope only for this life then we might be pitied by many, yet your resurrection is proof of the vindication of your justice and brings hope of life to me by faith. Help me not to envy the wicked at ease, but to cherish and anticipate the life you give.

Job 22 – On the Offensive

Eliphaz kicks off the third round of speeches. Previously, the friends have concluded that Job must be suffering because of some unspecified, unrepented sin. Here Eliphaz accuses Job of a range of specific sins, generally associated with the abuse of power of a wealthy man. Such accusations don't match the description of Job as "the greatest man among all the people of the east" in Job 1:3. Eliphaz even repeats his plea to Job that he repent, again with the express certainty that God will surely restore Job's honour if he does. Eliphaz's unshakeable religious worldview locks himself out from knowing the true God of wisdom and grace.

Living God, you are wonderfully patient and gracious with us, so much so that we don't always understand your ways. Forgive me for the times when I let religious dogma cloud my view of your beautiful wisdom and grace. Lord, I just want to know you better.

Job 23 – To Stand Before God

As ever, Job's suffering is not only from his obvious grief, loss, and illness, but also from the knowledge that God has permitted it all despite the fact that Job simply didn't deserve it. He'd love to be able to stand before God to plead his case (v1-7), and yet he's sure that despite God being invisible to him (v8-9), all Job's ways are seen by God (v10-12). And even though Job knows his suffering is undeserved, he still fears God because he is so different, so powerful, and so terrifying to mortals. Even so, Job is not destroyed by darkness and he has not cursed God in all his trouble. In dire pain, it's easy for us to wonder if God knows what he's doing: Job's humble trust in pain is a helpful model for us.

Lord God, no-one could stand before you if you counted our sins against us. Thank you that one day I will stand, clothed in the righteousness you grant me in Christ, and I will delight in you. Give me a reverent fear of your majesty and a holy delight of your intimacy.

Job 24 – Compassion

As Job continues his reply to Eliphaz, his words here sound very much like the things his friends have said, yet there is a crucial difference. The friends have drawn attention to how wicked people are punished for their sin (concluding that Job must have sinned terribly to suffer so badly). They even called on Job to repent so that his blessings might be restored. But Job's emphasis is less on the consequences for the sinner and more on the harm caused by those sinned against. If we fear getting caught and punished more than we fear causing hurt to God and others, then we are living under law rather than grace, having a religion of rule rather than compassion.

Holy God, I confess that I don't hate my sin as much as I ought. I allow myself to linger on unhelpful thoughts, and I don't have the compassion for others that I ought to have as your child. You know this. Spirit, help me to become more like Christ, with a sensitive heart that loves truly.

Job 25 & 26 – End of Cycle

Bildad's final words are cut short and Zophar doesn't even get a third speech. It's the last we'll hear from the friends which is fine since they have learnt nothing and have nothing new to say. Here, Bildad mocks the futility of Job's wish to stand before God. But Job's reply sarcastically acknowledges their 'help' before speaking about the surpassingly complex nature of God. Job's words reflect the ancient near eastern language of how the universe is structured: God is sovereign over the under-world of the dead (v5-6) and sits above the heavens (v7-11); he stirs the world's chaos and owns Rahab (Leviathan, the mythical sea monster of deathly chaos, v12-13). And all these are "but the fringes of his ways" (v14). The friends presume a clockwork God.

Living God, as creation itself is comprehensively and beautifully complex, it is surely naïve and arrogant to presume to understand all that you do. As I see pain in the world and even in my own heart, teach me humility and wisdom, rejoicing in your good and sovereign power.

Job 27 – Friend or Foe?

The friends' speeches are over. Job now addresses them with two discourses of his own (Chapters 27 and 29). Job's integrity remains intact and he again states his righteousness as undeserving of all that has happened (v1-6). But he now sees his friends for what they are, spiritually speaking: His enemies (v7). In their relentless accusations they have sided with Satan (whose name means "Accuser"), so that Job is able to replay all the talk of the outcome of the wicked and apply it to the friends. He does this without malice or glee: These are words of warning. We might well show concern enough when people mock our faith to respond with similar heartfelt warnings.

Holy Father, I thank you and praise you that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, and that Satan's darts can have no eternal effect. When others mock the faith you have given me, give me also a heart of compassion and earnest wisdom to point them to you.

Job 28 – Where is Wisdom to be Found?

This chapter is a beautiful stand-alone poem reflecting on the search for wisdom. It interrupts the flow of the book, yet sits here perfectly placed to regard all that's been said so far. As readers, we know that Job truly has suffered without deserving it, and we have some idea of why from Chapters 1 & 2. But why did God allow that at all? We ask "why?" in many ways. The poem celebrates humanity's amazing abilities to search out deep treasures from the earth, but where can wisdom be found? No-one knows. But God has revealed it in v28: "The fear of the LORD – that is wisdom. And to turn from evil is understanding." These are exactly the words God used to describe Job at the start. Despite all Job's anguish and questions, he already had all the wisdom he needed for life.

Lord Christ, in you are all treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and by grace you have called me into union, sealed by the Spirit, to bring me to the Father. No-one could know this but for the revelation you give. Thank you for revealing truth to me in my inmost being and bringing me to life.

Job 29 – That Was Then

Chapters 29-31 are a single speech, tightly connected. Job begins with a yearning for days gone by. He reminisces over the high standing he had in the community, respected and loved by old and young alike. And it wasn't his wealth that provoked such warmth towards him; it was his determined acts of righteousness towards the poor, the widow, the blind, and the lame, and the way he upheld the cause of the oppressed. Understanding all this as the blessing of God, he expected a long and happy life (v18-20). And this brings us to his greatest yearning: For the friendship of God (v2-4). Likewise, all humanity's longings can only ultimately be met with God through Christ.

Righteous Father, you have told us to have no other gods before you. The command is clearly for our good, since lasting peace, joy, and happiness can only ever be known in you. May the yearnings of my heart be redirected more and more into fellowship with you, irrespective of my earthly situations.

Job 30 – Despised and Rejected

We noted earlier in the book how the three friends couldn't grasp the notion that an innocent man might suffer; they were convinced Job's suffering must result from his sin. And yet in his undeserved suffering, Job paves the way for us to Jesus, the Lamb of God slain not for his own sins, but for ours. This chapter reminds us of how greatly the Son of God suffered in his humiliation for us: Job had been the greatest man in the east, feared, loved, and respected by all. But in his stricken state he is abused, mocked, and spat on by the lowest of low-lifes around. So it was a thousandfold for Christ, the eternal God, who came to save us yet was cruelly beaten and horrifically executed. But Christ did so willingly.

Lord Christ, your willing humiliation to become human and to be treated so badly for me is astonishing. Saviour, what do I have or hope for other than you? Spirit, cause me to live and love more like Christ today, leading others to praise the Father's glory.

Job 31 – Case for the Defence Concludes

At the start of the book Job was described as a man of integrity who feared God and turned away from evil. Here in this chapter, Job's summary case for the defence spells out what that looks like. He is able to claim a holiness of life both in outward action and inwards purity, he has dealt with everyone with the dignity they deserve as image-bearers of God, and he has remained true to God without putting his trust in wealth or status. And so, here at the end, we see the same old question rotting his heart: Why? Why has God permitted undeserved suffering? Even we might point to Chapters 1 & 2, yet still ask why God listened to Satan there? Suffering cannot help but ask, "Why?"

Lord Jesus, I could not give such a hearty or convincing statement in my defence. I would be better to ask why you should extend undeserved grace to me. Thank you that your great moral perfection made you such a perfect, unblemished sacrifice for my sin.

Job 32 – A Fresh Look

Elihu is a bit of an enigma and opinion is divided among commentators as to his standing in the situation. But since God speaks from Chapter 38 berating the three friends without reference to Elihu, it's perhaps safest to see him as a prophet. Certainly his assessment of the discussions so far is forensically accurate (v2-3): Job's correct insistence on his innocence incorrectly suggests that somehow God has done something wrong, while the friends are clearly wrong to condemn Job without proving their case. There has been too much presumption regarding God's motives and far too little humility before God's infinite wisdom and goodness – more words than wisdom or fear.

Heavenly Father, I am quick to defend myself and feel sorry for myself without sufficient humility for your greatness. For give me for attempting greater understanding than you have revealed in your word. Thank you for the reminder that you are good, and you do good.

Job 33 – God Does Speak

Elihu repeats Job's statements back to him, and the sense is that Job suggests that God has wronged him (v9-11). While it's true that Job's suffering is not the result of any sin, it's also clear that Job's suffering has lead him to say wrong things about God. We must learn wisdom in better days to prepare us for worse ones. A repeating theme from Job is that he wishes God would speak to explain what's going on. But Elihu says that God speaks clearly to everyone in different ways: Sometimes in a disturbed heart (v15-16), sometimes through suffering (v19), yet always God is calling us to turn to him and find joy in God himself (v26). That *is* joy.

Heavenly Father, you are good and wise in everything you do. Please help me to hear your voice in everything. Forgive me my sins, and help me to turn wholly to you, ever conscious of your loving discipline that leads me to delight in you and to walk in paths of righteousness.

Job 34 – Applied Truth

Job's three friends had wrongly accused him of sins he was supposed to have done, and Job had much to say in reply. Here, Elihu continues to charge Job with wrong things he has actually said, and Job has no defence to offer. And lest we think ourselves less fortunate than Job because God did speak to him (from Chapter 38), we hear Elihu speak truth into our suffering and our false notions of God: "It is impossible for God to do wrong, and for the Almighty to act unjustly" (v10). Even silence and apparent inaction from God is no indication of indifference or injustice (v29). The intensity of Elihu's words come from concern, not harshness; Job's danger is that "his answers are like those of wicked men" (v36).

Gracious God, thank you for your great and precious promises, for your bright and clear revelation of your goodness and justice. Forgive me for when I have base thoughts of you due to some pain or circumstance. Give me Job's humility to listen to godly rebuke when it's given.

Job 35 – Crying Out, But Not to God

Elihu is again addressing Job and taking him to task for something he's said. Job wondered what's point of doing good if God permits you to suffer anyway (v3). But Elihu points out that God is transcendent above the heavens, and is never put in debt to you for your goodness nor harmed by your sin (v4-8). Besides, many people cry out in misery without actually crying out *to* God, and Elihu says that that's exactly what Job is doing (v14-16). We struggle to shake off the idea that God will automatically reward good conduct and that suffering must be punishment. But God is most honoured when we seek him for who he is, rather than for what we can get.

Eternal God, independent of all your creation and needing nothing for your perfect bliss, you are gracious to care for a sinful rebel like me. Forgive me that my small thoughts and expectations of you are so far short of your majesty and glory. Help me to know and praise you truly.

Job 36 – Crying Out in Repentance

Elihu continues to orient Job's (and our) thinking correctly towards God. In v5-7 he sounds a little like the three friends in contending God's justice, but he expands our thinking greatly in v8-12: God will use afflictions with grace and wisdom to reveal to us our sinful hearts so that we might cry out in repentance. Although Job's suffering is not punishment for sin, it has exposed some sinful notions of God in his heart. Many, of course, see only the affliction and are lost in sin as they never cry out to God (v13-15). So Elihu's appeal to Job is to see his own suffering in the greater light of God's infinite goodness, and v21 is Elihu's core appeal to anyone suffering in life. Verses 22-33 join with the next chapter to conclude Elihu's speeches.

Heavenly Father, how wise you are in your good dealings with us. Confession of sin and turning in repentance crush our pride and false sense of worthiness. Thank you that only Jesus is truly worthy and that in him only can I come and know you as Father.

Job 37 – Consider God's Wonders

Towards the end of the previous chapter, Elihu asked Job to consider the wonder of water drops evaporating, becoming mist and clouds, and eventually falling as rain. Here in Chapter 37, be goes further and asks Job to contemplate the spectacular power of a violent thunderstorm. And we mustn't let our scientific knowledge rob us of awe either – we're to share in the wonder of our Creator. Elihu's point is that, in God's perfect wisdom, the same powerful events are destructive for some and life-giving for others (v13). "Listen to this, Job. Stop and consider God's wonders" (v14). In suffering and affliction we might think that God is not good, does not care, or is not powerful. Elihu reminds you that those are lies; we must let God be God and fear him with joy and wonder.

Holy God, even as I spend time with you in your word I'm reminded that I spend too little time considering the wonders of who you are and all you have done. Forgive the idolatry of my heart; help me to know you better.

Job 38 – Out of the Whirlwind

In the ancient near eastern poetic language echoed in much of the Old Testament, the sea was a place of chaos and death. More, the realm of the dead (Sheol) lay beyond the deepest darkness of the sea. As God addresses Job with a series of rhetorical questions, he makes it clear that the boundaries of the sea (and, by implication, chaos and death) are set by God himself. He knows the place where the dead go (v16-18). Again, the weather itself is so unpredictably powerful – both giving life and destroying it – and yet God controls it all for his purposes. Even the stars above are all at his command. How can we join Job in the thought that perhaps God makes mistakes or can even be unjust? How can we possibly imagine that we know better than God how things should be?

Eternal Father, in sin I choose to go my own way as if I could know better than you what is good for me or others. I do get confused at the state of the world, but forgive me for when I allow that to cloud my knowledge of your goodness. Rather, give me peace and trust.

Job 39 – Ordered Wilderness

Back in Chapter 1 we were told that Job had 7,000 sheep and goats, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys. His estate was well run, ordered, and domesticated. The range of animals here in Job 39 are all wild, far beyond farming or human control. God emphasises the wildness and the fragility of life, and yet there is clearly a created order providing food for predator and prey, young and old. And while this is outside human sight or control, it is the way of the world under God's rule and order. The message to Job (and to us) is clear: Creation is hugely complex and rich beyond our ordered lives, and our Creator's ways are far richer and more wonderful than ours.

Great Creator God, you made everything by your own goodness and pleasure, and you sustain all life on earth by your will. Forgive me for presuming to suggest I might ever find fault in anything you do. Give me ever greater awe in contemplation of your goodness.

Job 40 – A Sword for Behemoth

Job has no answer to God's powerful and good rule over the natural world (v3-5, concluding the previous chapter). But now the LORD goes much deeper. In Job 40 and 41, God speaks of his control over the great Behemoth and Leviathan. Since this is the climax of God's speech we dishonour him if we try to identify them as hippos and crocodiles (or even, as some do, dinosaurs). Rather, God continues to use the categories of ancient near east thinking: Early readers of Job would have understood the darkly spiritual forces being referenced. The insatiable, indestructible Behemoth, untouched by the passing river of time, and tamed only by God (v19) is none other than death itself. Could Job do better than God (v10-14)? Obviously not.

Great God of Wonders, truly your ways are not our ways and we are fools to question your wisdom, goodness, or power. You are kind to us to keep from us mysteries too deep to grasp. Thank you that in Christ's resurrection you have so clearly displayed your power over death itself.

Job 41 – A Rope for Leviathan

A quick Bible search for the name Leviathan soon reveals his identity as Satan pictured as a vicious, hateful, destructive creature of the sea (with the sea itself another ancient near eastern motif for treacherous chaos). That evil serpent hates God and all God's people with a wicked zeal and energetic passion. Who could tame him, this Leviathan? No human can tame such wild evil. Yet we recall from Job 1:12 and 2:6 that Satan's boundaries are completely set by the LORD. Satan is, after all, only a creature under God's command. But how does this help us when we have big "Why" questions in our life? There comes a time to stop asking why, and let God be God over all his creation.

Holy God, there is much evil in this world. Forgive me for questioning your sovereign goodness through my own limited understanding. Thank you that Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil and succeeded. In the light of your greatness, give me a humble heart.

Job 42 – Grace and Blessing

Job is deeply humbled by the LORD's words to him, saying, "I reject my words and am sorry for them; I am dust and ashes" (v6). He doesn't know why he has suffered so much, but he has begun to grasp the immense power and divine wisdom God wields over the world and our lives; he will let God be God. There will be no more "Why?" from Job. God calls him "my servant" (v7, 8) to make it clear that he is accepted and justified before God, and it's Job who must pray for his friends for God's grace to be extended to them (v8). Of utmost importance, we notice that all this happens before the restoration of Job's wealth and family – he would have been blessed even if left in his dire poverty and sickness. Yet his "resurrection" to blessing foreshadows Christ's own and, wonderfully, ours in the new Creation with Jesus.

Heavenly Father, your ways are utterly beyond ours – too wonderful for us to grasp. As things happen to me and those I know and love, give me humility to know my limitations and to rejoice in your unbounded glory.

Psalms 1 & 2 – Foundations

There is a deliberate shape and composition to the book of psalms. These two psalms are foundational. Psalm 1 teaches us that the way of blessedness is to meditate on the word of God and to live in God's ways, nourished and flourishing like a tree planted by water. Psalm 2 is a coronation psalm, where the King is anointed by God and given authority. The nations do well to honour the King, God's Son. Our lives, like the psalms, are to be founded on the word of God and lived under the blessed rule of the Son of God. The New Testament identifies Jesus as the royal fulfilment of Psalm 2, and he is the truly blessed man of Psalm 1. In Christ, we too are blessed and nourished.

Son of God, you are glorified and magnified in your heavenly majesty. Still the nations reject you! Thank you for the living water of your word applied to me by the Spirit. I am blessed to be in your kingdom, so please help me to walk the way of the righteous to bring honour to you, my God and King.

Psalms 3 & 4 – 24-Hour Security

In both psalms, the King laments his situation. In Psalm 3, David has abandoned Jerusalem, fleeing with his household to prevent bloodshed. Out in the open, surrounded by enemies, he's vulnerable. Yet he sleeps in safety and wakes in confidence. In Psalm 4, his rule is being questioned by those close to him. But he reminds them not to challenge the LORD's anointed (v3) and to reflect and repent (v4). In the psalms, we are the chorus to the King's lead voice. Jesus experienced enemies around him and doubts from close friends, yet slept soundly and woke each day confident in God. In our distress, we're always secure in Christ.

Saviour God, it is good that salvation belongs to you. There is no hope higher, no protector stronger. Thank you that you know what it is to be opposed even by those closest to you and that you demonstrated such confidence. Help me to search my own heart for sin, and to sleep and wake and live each day trusting you.

Psalms 5 & 6 – Justice and Grace

Once again, the King laments his situation. In Psalm 5, David is being slandered by ungodly enemies. Knowing that God is *his* king (v2), David rightly perceives their lies as slandering the LORD (v10). He petitions God for justice according to God's own nature. David's lament in Psalm 6 concerns a severe illness. He asks for healing and that the LORD would save his life. Confident of God's goodness, David rebukes his enemies. Where he prayed for justice in Psalm 5, in Psalm 6 he prays for grace (v2). We were once God's enemies in our sin, but his justice and grace meet at the cross where our God and King took our punishment, sickness and death.

My God and King, if you dealt with us as we deserve we would have no hope. We would dwell in this sin-soaked world in endless lament. You are to be praised for your justice, and I thank you for your grace and mercy pouring out to me at the cross. Lead me in righteous paths, Lord.

Psalms 7 & 8 – Justice and the Son of Man

In Psalm 7, King David again laments opposition and he prays for God to bring justice. He knows God will judge the unrepentant (v12) and is confident of his own innocence (v3-5). The LORD judges nations and individual persons (v8). It's all very personal, which amplifies the sense of wonder in Psalm 8: Since the LORD is God of the universe, it's remarkable that he cares about us and for us personally. He set humanity over his created world to care for it in his image, and he cares for us still despite our rebellion. Even more, Hebrews 2:6-8 applies v4-6 to Christ in *his* humanity. The God who judges us individually also saves us individually in Christ. Praise his name!

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! Your perfect knowledge would condemn me every day, yet by grace you count Christ punished in his humanity in my place. Who am I, Lord, that you should be so gracious? Forgive me for taking your grace for granted, and accept my thanks and praise.

Psalm 9 – Righteous Judge

Almost all the petition-lament psalms include a strong confidence in God, and here David states it firmly at the outset: God is enthroned on a seat of power and justice and has upheld David's cause against wicked enemies (v1-8). David exhorts everyone to trust the LORD (v9-10) and to sing his praises (v11-12). All this testimony gives him confidence in his current predicament. He prays to be restored from the gates of death to the gates of Zion, to worship (v13-14). The wicked will perish, but not those who depend on the LORD (v15-18) for he is the LORD (v19-20)! God is still enthroned, and Christ's victory gives *us* all the confidence we need to petition our Father too.

Thank you, Lord, for this reminder. I often see problems bigger than they are, forgetting that you are on your throne and you do everything right. Thank you for the eternal comfort and hope that Christ's victory brings and help me to trust in you in all the details of my life.

Psalm 10 – Strengthened Hearts

The tension in this psalm is typical of a number of psalms: Wicked people prosper while the helpless suffer, so what *is* God doing? The wicked person says there's no God (v4), though really only hopes it (v11, 13). The petition in v12-15 calls on God to rise up and help the helpless – surely a prayer God will delight to hear. The confidence in God in v16-18 shows a trust in God to do right at the right time, but also to strengthen the hearts of the humble in the meantime. The situation of the psalm feels so contemporary to us, and we also pray for an end to the strength of the wicked. As we wait, and pray, Christ grants us grace and strengthened hearts.

Living, righteous, and holy God, we remain surrounded by wicked people with no regard for you. Break the strength of ideologies and regimes opposed to you, Lord. Protect the weak, the vulnerable, the poor, the unborn, the elderly. Give me grace and strength to do your will in a world opposed to you.

Psalms 11 & 12 – Bad Advice, Bad Intent

In Psalm 11, David is advised to flee some incoming trouble. But he's confident he doesn't deserve judgment from God, so will stand – precisely because God is immoveable and righteous in heaven. Given ungodly advice, David speaks *of* God. In Psalm 12, David is under attack from people full of lying, boastful flattery and treachery. His response this to is to appeal *to* God. We might recall Jesus correcting Peter's bad advice at his confession (Mark 8:29) or at the transfiguration (Mark 9:9), compared with his cry at the cross, "My God, my God" (Mark 15:34). We must pray for the instinctive wisdom to know when to speak *of God* in confidence and when to speak *to God* for help.

Living God, it's always a reassurance to remember that you reign as righteous judge and king. Help me to remain steadfast and confident in you when prompted by others to drift away. Give me that instinctive wisdom to speak of you and to you, both for your glory and to the blessing of others.

Psalms 13 & 14 – Prayer for Deliverance

In Psalm 13, even though King David is yet again surrounded by enemies, his greatest concern is for the LORD. He has anxiety of heart and prays for help as the LORD's anointed king for the sake of God's honour. As such, he ends the psalm in confident praise. Psalm 14 is a broader reflection and lament on how people deny God and live in godless corruption. Paul quotes Psalm 14 in Romans 3:10-12, and our own society is just the same. David prays, "Oh, that Israel's deliverance would come" – and it has, in Christ, for all who will turn to him. As his people, we also pray for the honour of his name as the church is under attack in a godless world.

Saviour God, this world is no less rebellious against you than it ever was. Your name is dishonoured, your reign denied. You have given us Jesus, light of the world, so please bring that light and salvation to many in grace and love. Bring glory to your own compassion and steadfast love.

Psalms 15 & 16 – Resurrection Life

Naturally speaking, both these psalms are beyond us. Who can dwell with God? We might expect the answer to relate to sacrifices offered, but instead we see ethical demands none of us can meet. Psalm 16 is the king's delight in God and his holy people, ending in such a joyful perspective on death that it was even beyond King David. Peter (Acts 2:22-32) and Paul (Acts 13:32-38) both apply Psalm 16:10 to the necessary and foretold resurrection of Jesus our Messiah, the only person who could own both these psalms in his own right. As forgiven sinners, in union with Christ, we gladly now own them for ourselves too.

Holy Father, it's clear to me that I fall short of your moral standards for my life and that naturally I could never approach you. Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, not abandoned to death but now risen and reigning and saving. Forgive me my sins, Lord, and help me to live rightly, delighting in you and your people.

Psalm 17 – Praying for Protection

In the psalms, David often prays that God would act justly, bringing down wicked people who oppose David while also vindicating his innocence. We need to remember that he prays as God's anointed king. Opposition to the king is contempt for God and an attack on God's people. Our great king, Christ himself, is no less opposed today, so we can join the chorus as *he* sings this psalm and pray for his honour and the protection of his people. We pray that God would hear us in his justice (v1-5) and also in the knowledge that we are loved by him (v6-9). Whatever happens, because of Jesus we shall see his face.

Loving heavenly Father, your beloved Son is rejected and your church ridiculed widely. Much of that ridicule is earned by ungodliness among your people: Lord, help me to live as I ought for you. Restore and protect your church, so that your name might be hallowed and revered.

Psalm 18 – Head of Nations

The lovely psalm of grateful praise is by King David as he reflects on his whole life. It's also in 2 Samuel 22 which places it firmly at the end of David's reign. He uses imagery from Exodus to highlight that he has been rescued by the same holy God, the LORD, who redeemed his people from Egypt. And when this king is victorious, his people follow and are blessed by God. This psalm is truly Christ's, who was despised, rejected, and killed, but then raised from death and is now exalted as the ultimate "head of nations" (v43) by the power of God. As his people we are blessed in our exodus, our redemption, being more than conquerors in Christ.

The LORD lives – blessed be my rock! Lord Christ, your exaltation is a due victory bringing great glory to the Father and hope to your people. Lord, as I progress through this life, help me to submit to your glorious rule; work through me to grow your kingdom in others.

Psalm 19 – The Knowledge of God

God graciously, beautifully, and joyfully gives us a knowledge of himself as we contemplate Creation around us. The sun brings life to the earth in dependable, mathematical precision, displaying a majestic order in God's Creation. No wonder the words God has provided for us are praised so highly (v7-11), since by them we gain godly wisdom, gladness, and life. In such light, sin is not only offensive but it's downright foolish – how can we know better than our Creator what is good for us? Even more, it's only in the Bible that we'll find hope in faith in Christ. We do well to meditate on him and his ways.

Great Creator God, you know my heart, my sins, my desires better than I do. Thank you that Christ is a whole sacrifice for sin – his clean conscience and sin-free life atoning for my complete sinfulness. Help me to meditate on you, my Creator and Redeemer, and to live worthy of the forgiveness you have granted.

Psalms 20 & 21 – The King's Victory

These two psalms are structurally and thematically linked as "royal psalms." In Psalm 20, the people pray for God's blessing on their anointed king. He can't succeed without divine blessing; he can't fail with it. Importantly, the king's victory is the people's blessing. So in Psalm 21 the people give thanks to God for the victory he has given. The language exceeds anything David (or any other king) achieved, finding fulfilment only truly in Christ. In Christ, we are more than conquerors and will participate in his victory over temptation, sin, and even death itself. So we praise God for the victory of his Royal Son for us.

My God and Father, thank you for the victory Christ as won in obedience to your will and love. I pray that his victory would be more keenly and visibly felt as you call others to enjoy the salvation he has accomplished. Help me, then, to serve this king in the commission he has given me.

Psalm 22 – Crucifixion

David writes of experiences and situations that don't ever seem to have applied to him. No-one pierced his hands and feet; no-one cast lots for his clothing. But David was a prophet (Acts 2:30), and in this psalm we have the Bible's only first-person perspective of Christ's crucifixion. Verses 1 to 21 alternate between praise for the righteous faithfulness of God and lament for the crucified man. Christ's suffering was utterly, terribly real, and yet wholly within the good plan of God for our salvation. This good news for the nations will bring great joy and life to many, reflected in the glorious praise and delight of v22-31.

Great Saviour, Suffering Servant, forgive me my sins that cost you such pain. Lord, I am sorry for my sins against you and against many people, even those closest to me. Thank you for the grace and hope your death and resurrection has brought. Help me to live a life of truth and righteousness.

Psalms 23 & 24 – Righteousness from God

Psalm 23 ends with the beautiful and encouraging image of believers dwelling with God in security. But Psalm 24:3-6 reminds us how unworthy we are: We're simply not pure in word or action. Psalm 24 also celebrates the entrance of God's anointed king, and it's only in Christ we see fulfilment of the entrance of a perfect man who is the LORD entering heaven itself. In Christ, we are given blessing and credited with righteousness (24:5), and only in him may we ascend to God. As such, we know Christ as our Good Shepherd who provides and protects, and who leads and guides us through green pastures and dark valleys.

Lord Jesus, Good Shepherd, my sins of word and action would exclude me from your holy presence for ever, except that you are gracious beyond anything I could hope for. Forgive me, Lord, and lead me truly to walk in right paths – wherever those paths may lead. Lord, please, walk with me and guide me.

Psalm 25 – Confession & Entreaty

It's easy to take God's grace for granted and to ask his forgiveness too lightly. This highly structured acrostic psalm shows how David has reflected greatly on his situation, on his own sin, and on the character of God. There's no triumphalism here, but there is a blend of humility and confidence in God that we do well to emulate. "The LORD is good and upright; therefore he shows sinners the way" (v8). We humbly acknowledge and confess our sins, seeking his forgiveness. Then more, we pray his kingdom rule would extend to every aspect of our lives for his honour. All our hope, all our confidence, is in the Lord.

Gracious God, I do take your grace for granted. I sin in thought, word, action, and inaction, and don't feel the horror and shame I ought. Forgive me, Lord, and don't count my sins against me. Rather, remember your grace and steadfast love. Father, lead me in good paths and preserve me that I might bring honour to your name.

Psalms 26 & 27 – Seeking the LORD's Face

We know that King David wasn't perfect (he will confess sin in later psalms). But the words of Psalm 26 are a just claim that his delight is in the LORD and he asks for grace on that basis. As king, he will then praise God before all the people. In Psalm 27, David feels a little adrift from God. In v1-6 he speaks of his confidence and delight in the LORD's presence and protection; so in faith he will continue to seek God's face (v7-10) and his ways (v11-12), confident to wait on God. With Jesus *our* king, who is himself Son of God, we have an even more certain hope than David's subjects! So we too seek Christ's face and ways, and wait.

Lord Jesus, great Messiah King, thank you that you are truly righteous and glorious. Lord, I know that when I feel adrift from you it's never you who has moved, but me. Help me to seek your face in constant prayerfulness, and to live your ways daily – with a clear conscience and a happy anticipation of your return.

Psalms 28 & 29 – Strength & Peace

Psalm 29 calls on highest heaven to worship the LORD. He is shown to be powerful over the nations and his creation, acting through his powerful voice. The LORD is enthroned as Judge and King (v10) yet his people aren't overcome by him, but rather blessed and strengthened. This is David's basis for petition and confidence in Psalm 28. Though David is opposed by wicked people, he knows God will hear his plea for help. As God upholds his anointed King David (v8), he blesses and strengthens his people. With Christ our God and King, we know our prayers are heard and that he himself is our strength and peace.

Great God of all Creation, enthroned in splendour and majesty, seated in good and perfect judgment, thank you for your gracious and specific love to me. Thank you that you hear my prayers for help, granting strength and peace to me in union with Christ.

Psalm 30 – "You Brought Me Up"

In this song of grateful praise, King David rejoices in how God has delivered him from death. David had prayed for healing and God healed him. As ever, the king's blessing before God is the people's too, and David calls God's faithful to sing praises (v4-5). That Christ sang this psalm is remarkable. He was delivered *to* death, but then raised to eternal life in joyful communion with his Father. When we pray for healing we *might* receive it, but in Christ our hope of a joyful morning (v5) isn't just for tomorrow, but an 'eternity of tomorrows' in a joyful communion with the God of salvation.

Gracious Father, when Christ was lifted up on that cross it looked like failure to many, but you lifted him further. You know my days are sometimes hard and this world is wearying, so I thank you for the hope of life you have given. Help me today to live a life of praise to you.

Psalm 31 – Commit

David moves from lament and petition to praising God twice in this psalm (v1-8, then again v9-24). David is confident of rescue precisely because the LORD is his God and David is God's anointed. He knows God is his refuge and that God will do right. Since Jesus was repeatedly beset by enemies, it's appropriate that these words should be precious to him, even quoting v5 as his last words on the cross (Luke 23:46). So, now, in Christ we also suffer opposition and yet God is still our God, our refuge, our help and our strength. We too commit our spirit to the living God – there's no greater refuge.

Lord Christ, once again your humanity shines through in your own pain expressed in this psalm. Thank you for loving me and saving me. Be my strength and refuge day by day. When I have doubts and wobbles, help me to commit my spirit to you.

Psalm 32 – The Joy of Forgiveness

There can be no greater bliss for a human being than to be in the presence of God under his smile and blessing. Our sin always spoils our communion with God and always robs us of true joy (even if we do enjoy that sin for a little while). David experienced all this and confessed his sin to God, crying out for forgiveness. This psalm is his testimony of restoration joy (v1-5) and his teaching to you to do likewise (v8-11). But don't treat confession mechanically like a mule on a line (v9); confess truly to God, seek his face, enjoy communion with him in Christ. Because as Romans 4:6-8 makes clear, our forgiveness is only found in Christ.

O my God, you are compassionate and gracious. You know my heart, my faults, my desires, my sins. Father, forgive me my many sins. For good things not done and bad things I've contemplated and done, please forgive me. Grant me joy in Christ in close communion, daily living with you and for you.

Psalm 33 – Call to Praise

It's entirely appropriate to thank and praise God for what he has done for us, but there is a place for praising God purely about him, with little or no reference to ourselves. Verses 1-3 calls us to enthusiastic praise of God, and then v4-19 give ample reason to marvel at him in all his splendour and power. Praise is the appropriate response of Creation to its Creator! Verses 20-22 are calmer, reflecting a steady lifelong trust in God, bringing gladness of heart. In eternity with God, we won't pray for forgiveness, patience, help, strength or faith, but we *will* praise God, delighting in who he is.

Glorious God, worthy of all praise from all your Creation, thank you for this psalm reminding me to enjoy you for who you are. Thank you for the voices in heaven who sing your praise truly, and help me to know you better so that I might praise you as I ought.

Psalm 34 – Full Deliverance

The heading for this psalm refers to an incident in 1 Samuel 21 when David's life was in danger. Psalm 56 is his prayer for deliverance, and Psalm 34 is his subsequent song of grateful praise. But it's also an exhortation to us to know this God for ourselves – to taste and see that the LORD is good, to live for him, and to cry out to him in our afflictions because the LORD is near (v18). The promises of v19-22 sound too much to expect, and indeed they may be in this life. But in Christ we anticipate Christ's presence with us now and a future life redeemed from sin, death, and decay. So live for God, know him, pray, and praise him before other people.

Gracious God, you do hear us when we cry out to you. You have heard me, and you are near me, and by your grace I have come to know that you are good. Help me always to turn to you in times of need and to experience your goodness and relief. Help me then to bear witness of your goodness to others.

Psalm 35 – Against Opposition

There are three parts to this psalm as David brings his enemies to the LORD in prayer (v1-10, 11-18, 19-28). Each time, David asks God to act against his opponents and ends his prayer with an anticipation of praise. Is this how we are to pray concerning those who oppose us? No, because we are not the king! In fact, *our* king has told us to pray for those who persecute us and to love our enemies. The victory is already won by Christ, so we pray for and love the lost individuals we come into contact with. Our hearts should be set on compassion, not conquest, as we desire to see kingdom growth.

Gracious and compassionate God, once I was alienated from you and at enmity against you in my sin. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for Christ's victory over sin and death, and for the new life I now have in him. Lord, give me a compassionate heart for those who oppose me.

Psalm 36 – Life and Light

This psalm is a beautiful model for prayer where the petition of v10-12 is grounded in the nature of God. The description of the wicked in v1-4 is applied in Romans 3:18 to all humanity – small-minded and cold-hearted in denial of God. Verses 5-6 provide a spectacular view of our Creator in his glorious steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, and judgments. This God is intimately involved with his Creation (v7-9) precisely because of who he is as giver of life and light. On this basis, David prays confidently for God's steadfast love and righteousness to him, and for the defeat of wickedness. Our light and life is Christ, and in him we pray.

Heavenly Father, great Creator and Sustainer, thank you for you intimate love extended to me, a sinner. Thank you for the life of Christ which is light to us, our only hope of life with you. I pray, Lord, that your kingdom would extend as you call lost people to yourself – including my unsaved family and friends.

Psalm 37 – Wait for the LORD

This psalm has a very different style from most of those before it, written rather like the wisdom in the book of Proverbs. Like, Proverbs, the psalm deals with the realities of life: Who hasn't been agitated by evildoers or envied those who do wrong at some point? The remedy lies in looking to the future, when God will judge the wicked and bless the righteous. With that in view, you can face today. If this life were all there is, this psalm would seem quite hollow since many bad people die old, rich, and seemingly content. But Christ's resurrection points to a day when all will rise to judgment. Only then will this psalm be fully realised.

Risen Saviour, I know that one day you will return. You will bring righteousness to the earth, and by your grace your people will inherit the earth. Help me not to envy anyone who doesn't know you, remembering the painful judgment that awaits them. Rather, help me shine your love to them.

Psalm 38 – "I Am About to Fall"

As Christians, we trust that Jesus Christ, Son of God, was punished on our behalf so that God justly punishes all sin even as he forgives us. He cannot and will not punish us again when we sin. As a loving Father, he *will* bring discipline and correction, leading us again to repentance and to cry out to him. In this psalm, David is terribly ill as a discipline from God (v2-8) which causes David's friends to stay away and his enemies to circle round (v10-14). He is repentant (v16-20) and his confidence in God punctuates his lament (v9, 15). His petition (v21-22) is simple and God-focussed: David longs for the blessed nearness of God, asking for help from the LORD his salvation.

Heavenly Father, you are good, wise, kind, and holy. Like David, I confess my sins before you. I have contemplated and acted on sinful desires that are unbecoming of a child of God. Lord, have mercy. Lord, God of my salvation, forgive me. Help me to right wrongs and to follow Christ in righteous paths.

Psalm 39 – Temporary Residence

David has sincere questions about God's discipline of him, but he wouldn't air them before wicked people for their sport (v1-3). Instead, he spoke to God. Why should God discipline us when our lives are so short? Isn't it cruel that we lose our little time through illness or the problems of life? The psalm raises the question but David will have to wait for an answer (v7). In the end, Christ is God's response: (a) The Son's incarnation dignifies and sanctifies humanity; (b) Christ's sacrifice clearly demonstrates God's immense *love* for us; (c) in Christ, God adopts us and disciplines us into the likeness of Christ – the highest good and richest joy we can know.

Heavenly Father, thank you that Jesus is the answer to this psalm's cry. In him, life isn't even short, but eternal. You changed my perspective by opening my eyes to the risen Jesus. As my life here is so brief, help me to use the time well, becoming more Christlike, making him known today.

Psalm 40 & 41 – God is Great

King David's grateful praise to God is so strong in 40:1-5 he knows that no sacrificial offering will suffice, so he offers himself (v6-8)! In this, he speaks words of Christ, *the* Messiah and sacrifice as explained in Hebrews 10. Christ himself is our public praise (v9-10), and the grace he brings to us is the confidence we have to come to God in our need. Bad things seem to pile up against us, and in Psalm 41 David's illness is compounded by enemies who hope he'll die, by rumours about him, and even by the betrayal of a close friend (v9). In these things, he is a shadow of what was to come to Christ and, in many ways, the church. Some people will oppose us, and even close friends betray or disappoint us, but we follow David's lead by having our hearts set on the Lord. As we look to Christ, let us ever love his salvation and say, "God is great."

Great God and Father, thank you that Jesus is the one complete sacrifice for sin, atoning for all my sin. You know how things seem to pile up in trouble in life, Lord, and I ask for your help. Give me your sustaining presence daily, so that I might continue to sing your praise.

Psalms 42 & 43 – Put Your Hope in the LORD

These two psalms combine, joined by a shared refrain (42:5,11, 43:5). Psalm 42 is the lament of someone who longs for God, reminiscing over the joys of worshipping with God's people (v1-4). But he's far away from Jerusalem's worship, and depressed (v6-7) – not least because of the taunts of unbelievers (v9-10). He has confidence in God (v8) so he prays that God will bless him and enable him to worship again (43:1-4). Throughout, the psalmist has an inner dialogue, telling himself to put his hope in God. As citizens of heaven longing for home, we do well to speak to ourselves: Trust the Lord; keep your eyes on Jesus.

Living God, in this world which is opposed to you in so many ways, I often go through times when I'm aware of how spiritually dehydrated I am. Help me, Lord, never to see this life as home, listening to the false words of a godless culture. All my hope is in you. Lord, keep me close.

Psalm 44 – More Than Conquerors

"What have I done to deserve this?" We might ask it lightly, but we may well find it verbalises an ache in our heart and bones. This psalm is a community's lament over awful things that have happened to them. They know blessing comes from God, and they also know they don't deserve the calamity that's come to them – they're true to God. But God does permit bad things to happen to his people. It doesn't mean his love had waned or his hand has slowed. The psalmist's horizon is only this life, but in the majestic Romans 8 Paul quotes v22 in all its pain but with a confidence in God that nothing can separate us from his love.

Sovereign Lord, things in our world, country, and culture are so often against your people. Life is often hard in many ways. Help me not to doubt your unwavering steadfast love, but rather to cling to your promises and draw near to you for help in time of need. Lord, help me today.

Psalm 45 – Royal Wedding

In the UK we know how impressive a royal wedding can be! This psalm rejoices in a magnificent king and his beautiful, happy bride. It would be suitable to sing this at any royal wedding, except that verses 6 & 7 might seem a little over-the-top. Hebrews 1:8-9 applies those verses to Jesus, Son of God, risen Lord and Messiah King. So who's the happy bride? His church of all his people across all space and time, gathered as one. We're hardly a beautiful virgin; more like an unfaithful, self-centred ex. Yet we will be Christ's bride, arrayed with the glory of God (Revelation 21:10-11), perfectly and fully redeemed. Now *that's* a happy bride.

Gracious Jesus, fairest of ten thousand, this psalm is so right to imagine your majestic splendour. It also reminds me of my unworthiness before you, and yet fills me with anticipation of the transformation you will work in me and all your people. Lord, help me know more of you now in anticipation of that day.

Psalms 46 & 47 – Christ Enthroned

The portrayal of God in these two psalms is of him as the great king reigning over all nations and peoples. Nations might war with one another, but no-one can challenge God (Psalm 46). Indeed, he will call every nation to account. Yet to his own, the sight of God enthroned is cause for praise and rejoicing (Psalm 47). Psalm 47:5 echoes 2 Samuel 6:15 where David led celebratory worshippers as the ark of the covenant came to rest in Jerusalem. But that's a pale shadow of the great Son of David, Jesus who is now ascended and reigning in praiseworthy splendour and majesty. The tone of these chapters helps us *enjoy* Christ.

Lord Christ, spectacular in your holy glory, thank you that these psalms lift my eyes to you. Thank you that while all around is trembling and wobbling, your throne is established and firm. Help me, then, continually to come to you for refuge and strength every day.

Psalm 48 – The Joy of the Whole Earth

Here is another joyful, triumphant song of praise to the God of the whole earth. The psalmist contemplates Zion, the mountain in Jerusalem where the temple sat and God's glory resided on the earth. The LORD blessed and protected his people for his own sake, and they praise him for his love and justice (v9-10). We're encouraged to marvel at Zion (v12 & 13) so that it will prompt us to praise our God for ever and ever. This might well cause us to lament the current state of the wider church in general, wondering how we might glorify God. And yet, every sinner who repents and every believer striving for holiness brings praise and glory to God.

Holy God, dwelling beyond time and space, yet residing in me by your Holy Spirit, your own transforming and beautifying work in every sinner you call is worthy of praise and glory. Lord, work in me to shine out your glory, and help our local church to be lovely to outsiders, pointing them to you.

Psalm 49 – God Will Redeem Me

This psalm proclaims words of wisdom for all humanity, speaking not to God but to people. Unusually, death is personified as a shepherd (v14) leading everyone to the grave. Despite anyone's wealth and stature in life, the grave is their only permanent real estate – from which no wealth can ransom a person. In that, v12 says mankind is like the animals. Yet v20 adds more, that mankind *without understanding* is like perishing animals. No wealth can redeem us from death, but God can (v15). His is the only way of life with meaning and hope, and that life is open to everyone in Christ who gave his life to redeem us.

God of all wisdom, you are gracious to remind me of the fleeting, temporary nature of wealth and possessions. Thank you for the reminder that only Christ can and has brought redemption. Lord Christ, thank you that Death is not my shepherd, but you have redeemed me and will lead me to life every day.

Psalm 50 – True Worship

In Deuteronomy 30:19, heaven and earth were called as two witnesses of God's covenant with his people. In this psalm, they are called by God the Judge to witness *against* Israel. In v7-15, God's people are reminded that they aren't called to religion but to God himself. The old rites and rituals enabled relationship and were never meant to substitute for it. Perhaps worse, v16-21 condemn those who use a veneer of religion to cover up a sinful life. The psalm is a call to us to repent and return to our first love and is as relevant to the church of Christ as it was to ancient Israel. God calls us to salvation (v23) in himself (v15).

Living God, you are gracious and merciful to call us to know you. Forgive me, Lord, for the times when things and church and prayer become dry routine to me. Help me to know you in vibrant reality, aware of your strength and salvation always.

Psalm 51 – A New Heart

The heading to this psalm takes us to 2 Samuel 11 & 12 when King David committed adultery and (in effect) murder. These awful crimes began in David's heart through neglect of duty and unchecked lust. All he can do is beg God for mercy based on God's own nature. More, David knows himself to be sinful by nature, lamenting both his sinful acts and his corrupt heart (v3-6). So he asks both for forgiveness and for a new heart, to be changed (v7-12). The depth of pain here goes beyond regret at being caught. David's heart is exposed before God's holiness, and it burns. Only when we see ourselves in this way can we understand the complete redemption Christ is working in us by the Spirit.

Holy God, my secret sins and ungodly desires are as exposed before you as anything I ever did. Father, forgive me. Holy Spirit, continue to convict me and lead me in holy ways. Lord Jesus, thank you for the completeness of the redemption you have accomplished. Lord, have mercy.

Psalms 52-54 – Opposition All Round

Anyone seeking to live a life wholly pleasing to God will face opposition at some point. As Psalm 53 reminds us (and Romans 3, quoting it), it's counter-cultural to live a life of truthfulness, prayer, kindness, or even contentedness. Society is wired against peace with God. That means we will sometimes experience direct opposition from individuals (as Psalm 52) or even whole groups of people (as Psalm 54). These psalms remind us (a) opposition is normal, (b) doing good can actually *attract* trouble, (c) in all circumstances we can and should trust in God. God will help us in the present and wholly redeem us in the future, and the Risen Christ is our certainty in everything.

Faithful God, this world is as opposed to you as it ever was, finding new ways to express its rebellion. Lord, I trust you. Help me and strengthen me as I seek to do good and to live a life pleasing to you. Lord, I need you.

Psalm 55 – Betrayal

At the heard of David's lament in this psalm is the wilful personal betrayal of a close friend and co-worshipper. We all let friends down sometimes, and we know what it is to be let down, but for someone to betray David was to oppose the LORD's anointed king. That would distress David and, because of David's status, ultimately be bad for the friend. Here we see a shadow of Jesus' grief at Judas's betrayal and the disaster that became. And yet Jesus' grace extends to all who turn to him in brokenness of spirit. So we pray for grace for our enemies and betrayers and leave their ultimate fate to the Lord.

Gracious God, you know how we want to see our opponents get their just desserts, forgetting that you don't count our sins against us. O Lord, give me a gracious and compassionate spirit towards those who are against you. Help me to learn the depths of my forgiveness so that I might truly forgive others.

Psalms 56 & 57 – Above the heavens

Both psalms begin, "Be gracious to me, God." In Psalm 56, David is surrounded by enemies in Goliath's home town. In Psalm 57, he's hiding from Saul in a cave. In each case, David's thoughts and language soar far beyond his immediate situation, confident that the God who is exalted above the heavens will save him. "God is for me," writes David (Psalm 56:9), leading Paul later to ask, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). Paul also saw Psalm 57:9 fulfilled as the gospel of Christ is now the praise of us Gentiles. Jesus is the theme of our songs, praises, and joys the world over.

O God, how you have answered David's prayer, "Be gracious to me"! You have given us Jesus, our great hope and saviour. As I find myself in difficult times, remind me that you are for me, graciously strengthening me with the encouragement of my sympathetic High Priest. I will praise you, Lord.

Psalms 58 & 59 – Justice and Rescue

In Psalm 58, King David reflects on how the godlessness of the world's rulers leads to so much injustice on the earth. But when David, the LORD's anointed, prays in v6 the remainder of the psalm anticipates God's justice on the earth. Such a cosmic vision is truly beyond David, yet wholly appropriate to the risen Christ, born into David's line. Psalm 59 is based on David's escape from a window in 1 Samuel 19:11 and seems like a relatively localised skirmish. But David's perspective in v13 shows how he sees the bigger picture: Now, Christ is risen and reigning and ready to return to the earth, though as his ambassadors we can expect opposition at any time. Still, God is our strength and our praise.

Lord Jesus, you experienced terrible, unjust opposition throughout your ministry. That opposition continues against your people. Yet my trust is in you to bring justice to the earth. Until then, help me daily to live for you, to speak up for you, even to suffer for you as necessary for your glory and honour.

Psalms 60 & 61 – Home From Home

In both of these psalms, David is far from home and worried. Psalm 60's heading has David fighting battles in the north while Joab defends Israel in the south. It's a stretching, dispiriting time of anxiety. But God's voice in v6-8 reminds us of his sovereign power – he won't abandon his people as he is God over enemy nations too. In Psalm 61, David calls to God "from the ends of the earth" (v2) and finds shelter and security in God himself. As so often, David's prayer goes far beyond himself and is only fully realised in Christ, who alone sits enthroned before God for ever (v7). Wherever we find ourselves, Christ is our solid rock, reigning over all nations and situations.

Kind Father, thank you that your word conveys the sense of anxiety that often grips us. We often feel that attacks and problems come at us from different directions and we feel so vulnerable. Thank you that Christ is king, reigning today. I take my refuge there, even where I am right now.

Psalms 62 & 63 – Vapours

Many of us can look back on difficult times in our lives. As we get older, those events can feel like a lifetime away, happening to other people. David's proverbs in Psalm 62 reflect on how we are all no more than fleeting vapours – and that is also true of our enemies and all opposition. So David's thirst for God in Psalm 63 and his confidence in God in both psalms help him look forward with a helpful perspective on where he is right now. This is the perspective we often meet in the New Testament, confidence of God's righteous judgment to come when Christ appears. As we develop greater thirst for Christ, we too will have a more godly perspective on our present troubles.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your word that so clearly sets an expectation of your Son's return. Thank you that by faith alone I am in Christ, and he is in me. Help me to develop a greater joy in Christ, and to live today a life pleasing to you, joyfully anticipating his appearing.

Psalms 64 & 65 – Ambush and Harvest

There's a suffocating fear of others in David's lament of Psalm 64:1-6. People are hatching plans against him and planning to ambush – just as others did much later against Jesus. But God will bring sins done in secret into the daylight to the shame of those who plan them (v7-9) to God's great praise (v10). In contrast, Psalm 65 has a joyous, open aspect reflecting on God's goodness in his Creation. It's a psalm meditating on God's forgiveness that allows us to come to him at all (v1-4), delighting in his provision with words suitable for any harvest thanksgiving meal. The contrast between the two psalms is stark: Evil takes; God gives.

Holy Saviour, Lord Jesus, you subjected yourself so willingly to the harm that humanity threw at you. Thank you that you did this as an act of giving, of grace, so that I may be forgiven. Until we feast with you on that final harvest day, Lord please keep me safe from those who oppose you, and help me give as you give.

Psalms 66 & 67 – Blessing and Praise

Psalm 67 opens and closes with a blessing for the whole earth. This blessing comes through recognising God's good rule over all nations (in obvious contrast to the earthly rulers we can see), and is very much a fulfilment of the promise of blessing to all nations made to Abraham in Genesis 12. Is God's rule generally recognised? Obviously not. But Psalm 66 is an invitation to the world to praise God on the basis of given testimony: First, Israel can testify to God's protection and care (v6-7), and then each of us has our own personal witness and testimony too (v16-17). There is no call to "go and see God" but rather to "come and know *this* God."

Great God of all blessing, you are good to me. You heard my cry for forgiveness and have brought me into the blessing of union with Christ. Help me to be effective and bold to take news of your blessing to others, so that many more would come to praise and experience you in Christ.

Psalm 68 – Gifts

This processional psalm celebrates the day the ark of the covenant was brought into Jerusalem. The very throne of God on earth had come to its final resting place on Mount Zion. There are echoes of Exodus (v7-10) and Judges (v11-14), and from v19 the scene is one of praise to God at Zion. It's a day of joy and blessing for God's people, marking defeat for Israel's enemies. When the New Testament quotes the Old, we're meant to absorb the whole context of the quoted verses. Paul quotes v18 in Ephesians 4:7-16, using the processional joy to celebrate the gifts Christ showers on his church today (e.g. teachers and pastors). Do we thrill in those gifts with the joy of Psalm 68?

Lord Christ, you are glorious in your exalted ascension, raised above every power and nation. Thank you for the gifts you have given us for our building up into maturity, love, and truth. Lord, strengthen me to do the works in your church you have given me the gifts to complete.

Psalm 69 – Zeal and Persecution

David's prayer of lament is charged with emotion. He is suffering persecution and opposition precisely because of his zeal for God, and his concern that God's people might also suffer is high in his mind (v6-7). The New Testament writers understood this to be a prophecy of Christ (Matthew 27:34, John 2:17, Romans 15:3), giving us insight into Jesus' suffering heart. Yet David's prayer in v22-28 is in contrast to Christ's words, "Father, forgive." Where David's prayed for judgment against sinners, Jesus prayed for their forgiveness even as he took the punishment sinners deserve. As followers of Christ, we can expect to draw opposition – but leave judgment to him. Love your enemies.

Merciful and forgiving Father, if you counted my sins against me I could not stand before you. Thank you for Christ's substitutionary death, atoning for my sin. Thank you even that he suffered. Help me, Lord, to be gracious towards those who oppose your kingdom.

Psalms 70 & 71 – Help in Old Age

Does life get easier as we age? Does our dependency on God reduce? Psalm 70 is a repeat of Psalm 40:13-17, as if to suggest a repeated need to cry out to God for help. Psalm 71 is yet another plea for help – this time from someone in later life (v9, 18). We never grow out of our need of God's help, and we may well need him more as our bodies weaken. But with age comes experience, and a life with God in younger years gives confidence later on. So v20 looks back on God's care and help in past troubles, leading to a renewed expectation of praise for the future (v22-24). Inwardly we are renewed by Christ daily (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

O God, who is like you? You reign above the heavens yet you reach down to lift me up again and again. Gracious Father, as the years go by, help me to learn what it is to experience your help and strength in all situations, and to praise you before everyone with a life of testimony to your goodness.

Psalm 72 – Long Live the King!

This is the last of the psalms in Book 2. Books 1 and 2 are dominated by David and often point to a king for God's people far beyond anything David could ever be. So now David's son, Solomon, has a psalm praying for a king who will rule with God's own justice and righteousness (v1-4), reign forever (v5-7), rule the whole earth (v8-11) with compassion for the weak (v12-14), and bring blessing to the nations (v15-17) as promised to Abraham in Genesis 12. Knowing that all this is comprehensively fulfilled in the person of our God and King Jesus Christ, we do well to join in with the praise of v18-20. Amen and amen!

Sovereign Lord, your rule is supreme in goodness, righteousness, and justice. Forgive me for my foolish attempts to govern my life apart from you, and help me actively to serve you and to pursue your kingdom righteousness and rule daily.

Psalm 73 – God is Good

The tone of Book 3 of the psalms (73-89) is generally darker, reflecting difficult times for God's people. Here, while the psalmist knows that God is good (v1), he speaks of a time of envying the wicked for their apparent ease and wealth (V2-13) compared with the difficulties of godly living (v14-16). But the temple sanctuary reminded him (v17) that God is holy yet gracious to give us a means by which we may draw near to him. The wicked will perish, far from God, but God holds the right hand of all who put their trust in him (v23): We will never fall, even if we stumble. Now, we have no temple but rather look to Christ by whom we have access to God's eternal, good presence.

Heavenly Father, you are good and it is my highest good to be in your presence, mediated by Jesus, applied to me by the Holy Spirit. Forgive me when I envy anyone whose happiness is tied to things that will pass. Help me to keep my eyes on Christ, the prize already so freely given.

Psalm 74 – God's Honour at Stake

In 587 BC, following centuries of idolatry and lip-service to God among his people, God's judgment fell on Jerusalem. The people were exiled, and the Babylonians reduced Jerusalem and its temple to rubble and ruin. This psalm cries out from the pain of those times, but the heart of the psalmist's anguish is how the whole scene looks like God himself has been defeated. The psalmist speaks to God about "your adversaries" in "your temple" – God's own honour is at stake (v4-8). In return, God seems silent (v9-11). Yet God is our Redeemer and Creator (v12-17) so the notion he can ever be defeated is ridiculous, and dishonouring his name won't be tolerated for ever. If only our own prayers were so concerned for God's honour.

Great Creator God, Redeemer of your people, your name is utterly dishonoured in our society. Lord, have mercy. Reveal yourself to many, and may the Spirit be pleased to use me to speak of Christ, silencing those who dishonour and disregard you.

Psalms 75 & 76 – God is the Judge

We are rightly comforted to know that God is in sovereign control of all things. Yet Psalm 75 reflects on God's sovereign rule and reminds us that that is fundamentally a cause for *praise*. The great Judge is glorified in his justice. So Psalm 76 is a song of praise, recalling a great deliverance of Jerusalem (such as from Sennacherib in 2 Kings 19), the seat of God on earth. But more, v7-10 remember that God dwells in heaven, not Zion, and he is ruler of all nations – ready to judge great and small alike. So one day everyone who ever lived will stand before Christ in all his perfect justice. He alone will be praised; we will bow.

Lord Jesus, you will judge the earth and separate everyone into those who know you and those who don't. Lord, thank you for calling me by the work of the Holy Spirit. Help me to praise you before others so effectively that many people would want to turn to you and praise you for themselves.

Psalm 77 – Has God Forgotten?

There's no doubting the strength of feeling here. The psalmist is in a "day of trouble" and cries out to God in anguish (v1-3). At night, he can't sleep as all his worries fill his mind. But while the world sleeps, the psalmist turns worries into meditations (v4-6). He asks a series of questions about God's character and his affection for his people (v7-9), wondering can God change? The answer to each of his questions must be, "No." So, in spite of his worries, he will meditate on God (v13-15) in all his redeeming power (v16-20). Likewise, we will have days of trouble that we can meet with the great and precious promises of God's word. Above all, we cling to Christ himself who will never forsake us.

Holy Father and Saviour, your character is beyond all variation, infinitely perfect, and unquestionable. Sometimes, Lord, our days are hard and it's difficult to perceive your good purposes. I pray that the Holy Spirit will lead me to your promises, remind me of your presence, and nourish me with the Bread of Life daily.

Psalm 78:1-39 – History Lessons

It's one thing to learn history, but quite another to learn *from* it. Biblical history is always theological, tracing God's dealings with sinful humanity. This psalm is historical wisdom, highlighting the power, patience and grace of God towards a rebellious, ungrateful nation. But if our response is only, "silly them" then we have learned only facts. In truth, they were no different from us and we are to know Bible history specifically to avoid the sins and mistakes of those who have preceded us. We are to learn, and we are to pass on our understanding to the next generation. The biggest lesson is to know more of God: To fear him, to love him, and to praise him for his grace to us in Christ.

Gracious and patient Father, how often I turn from you and repeat the sins of so many who have gone before. Help me to know your word, to meditate helpfully on it, to be taught, rebuked, corrected and trained in righteousness by it. Show me Jesus in it, that I might know you in him.

Psalm 78:40-72 – The Shepherd King

Remembering Joseph's rise to power under Pharaoh at the end of Genesis, we might expect a future king of Israel from Joseph's blessed son, Ephraim. But no, the kingdom is to be ruled under God's law (v9-10) and in fact the history of Israel is one of continued rebellion. So *God himself* chose a shepherd boy to become his own shepherd king, caring for God's people as God would have it (v65-72). The psalm ends abruptly, leaving the reader with the obvious conclusion that it is good and right to live for God under the rule of his given king. Revelation 7:17 identifies Christ as the Lamb who now shepherds the people of God, and our highest good is to serve king Jesus.

Lord Jesus, thank you for these lessons from the past, and for the revelation of your word that shows a better way to live. Shepherd me, Lord. Forgive me waywardness, Lord. Keep me safe, and lead me on righteous paths in all of life.

Psalm 79 – How Long?

Like Psalm 74, Psalm 79 reflects the pain of God's people at the time Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian invasion. The opening verses picture a desperate scene of death and humiliation, and the psalmist is appalled at the brutality. He doesn't hide Israel's sin but rather asks that God atone for them (v9) because he is their God. The concern is that Israel's humiliation is also God's, and that is the basis of the psalmist's pain and confusion. Like most lament psalms, there's an expectation of praise at the end reflecting the goodness and faithful love of God towards his people. Too often our prayers lament our condition for our own sake, not the Lord's.

Father in heaven, please give strength to your church. We are weak in ourselves, and ridiculed. Your word is not revered and is even undermined by many who claim you as Father. For your own honour's sake, Lord, have mercy and revive your church, strengthen your people, and make yourself known.

Psalm 80 – Turn

This community lament cries out three times that God would restore his people (v3, 7, 19), asking him to turn them to him so that he might bless and save them. The threefold petition escalates the name of God each time to emphasise urgency. God is glorious (v1-2) but his people are suffering (v4-6). The psalmist knows that God himself planted Israel (v8-13) and prays that God would turn himself towards them, place his hand on them, and restore them. Church revival is not about growth in number but in spiritual health. That comes as we turn (or are turned) to God, enjoying his blessing and presence. So we cry to him for grace.

Good Shepherd of your people, I have gone astray along with so many of your people. Lord God, save us from disaster and ridicule. Turn us back to you in repentance and faith. Forgive me my sin, Lord, and please bless me in communion with you.

Psalms 81 & 82 – Sing to the God of All the Earth

Psalm 81 calls us to sing praises to God (v1-3) because he saved his people, and then gives the command not to worship foreign gods (v4-10). We praise him for this command because to worship God is to come to the One who desires to bless with "honey from the rock" (v16). Israel's rebellion stands as a warning for us (v11-15) – so sing! Psalm 82 depicts God as supreme king over all the world's rulers and powers ("gods" in v1), and he calls them to account. The poor and needy do not receive God's blessings (v4-5) because the rulers do not reflect God's justice or concerns. This is our world. So we will sing (Psalm 81) and yearn for Christ to come to set this world straight (Psalm 82:8).

Lord Jesus, it is good and right to sing your praises. Yet there is a weight in our hearts as we see so much pain in the world caused by rulers and authorities with no regard for you or your righteous concerns. May your kingdom come – both now, here, in my heart and life, and also ultimately at your return.

Psalms 83 & 84 – Surrounded and Yearning

Sometimes we're so moved and encouraged by a church service or Christian event that we wish it could last forever. Then we have to leave and are again surrounded by a world opposed to God and his church. Psalm 83 prays that those surrounding influences would be judged by God (v9-17), and that the whole earth would know the truth of God's greatness (v18). Psalm 84 captures the yearning for eternal blessing in God's presence. Both psalms will be fully realised at Christ's return, when every eye shall see him and he will dwell on the earth with his people. Until then, he has graciously granted us his presence by his Spirit, and we go in his strength every day.

Lord Jesus, to be in your presence is my highest joy. To join with your people to praise you without sin in our hearts is a prospect that pulls on my heart. Help me, then, to walk in your strength in this world which is so opposed to you, making you known in countless ways for your glory.

Psalm 85 – Love & Truth, Righteousness & Peace

God's covenant with Israel promised blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience. The curses were calls to return to God in repentance and faith – very much calls to blessing. The scene in Psalm 85 seems to follow a return to God with sins atoned for (v1-3) and yet the curse of sin not yet lifted, in the form of crop failure (v12). Will God abandon them forever (v4-6)? Of course not – and it's that meditation on the nature of God that enables a confident expectation of him. Verses 10-13 are beautiful and hopeful, but even more so for us who anticipate Christ's return. Being made perfect, we'll only know his perfect blessing forever.

Father God, there are times when things seem worse than we expect them to be. I know you are the God of my salvation and that your faithful love is unwavering. Holy Father, please forgive my sin, and I pray for the Holy Spirit's help to live a life of holiness in Christ today.

Psalm 86 – Teach Me Your Way, LORD

This is King David's only entry in Book 3 of the psalms. He's under attack from godless people and wants to ask for God's help. In truth, however, none of us deserve any good thing from God and David is humbly self-aware enough to realise it. But his confidence is in God's grace and love to all who call on him (v5-7), and in God's supreme power over all – including foreign gods (v8-10). David wasn't perfect, but his heart's desire was to know God (v11-13) and it's on this basis that he asks for help against godless attackers. This is such a helpful model for prayer: God is honoured and exalted, while David prays humbly for grace, strength, and a greater love for God.

Eternal God, ruling and reigning over your Creation with perfect goodness, wisdom, and love, forgive me that my prayers are so often more focussed on my problems than your greatness. It is a blessing for me to meditate on your compassion, grace, love, and truth. Lord, teach me and give me an undivided mind to fear you always.

Psalms 87 & 88 – Day & Night

The tone in these two psalms differ strikingly. Psalm 87 joyfully acknowledges Zion (Jerusalem) as God's beloved city, and then amazingly says how God will adjust the birth records of Gentile nations to say they were born there. Gentiles will be born again, from above, and added to God's kingdom with joy. In contrast, Psalm 88 is the darkest of all the psalms, totally lacking any glimmer of hope, joy, or even praise. Christ himself held both these psalm's perspectives in his crucifixion, knowing the joy of doing the Father's will within his cosmic plans for all of us, yet also dreading the personal agony of the cross. Even in our darkest moments, we can pray: "My God, my God."

Lord Jesus, I thank you for these psalms. Thank you for the reminder that I can rejoice at your great purposes and still grieve and lament over my own condition. I pray for the Spirit's prompting always to cause me to turn to you in all circumstances, for you alone are my security.

Psalm 89 – Covenant Failure?

In 2 Samuel 7, God promised David that one of his descendants would reign over God's people for ever. Verses 1-37 here rejoice in that covenant promise of God, and it's a key theme in the Old Testament's Messianic hope (e.g. Isaiah 9, Ezekiel 34). But by 587 BC, when Israel was exiled to Babylon, the royal line from David seemed broken, bringing God's promises to nothing. That confused heart is the essence of v38-52, wondering what will become of Israel's hope now. Matthew 1's genealogy reveals that the line to the Messiah was maintained to Jesus, Son of David. Though we can't always see it at the time, God's plan's never fail, and he is always at work for our good.

Sovereign God, you know how we are so often overwhelmed by the complexities and wickedness around us. Thank you that you govern all the details and influences of my life. Thank you that Jesus is the great example of your rule for good. Help me trust, and forgive my unbelief.

Psalm 90 – Eternity and Mortality

This community lament psalm meditates on the shortness of life – something our culture refuses to engage with. First, though, we recall the eternal nature of God (v1-2) in all his glory. That puts the full brevity of our lives in true perspective (v3-6). But verses 7-12 explore the painful reality that our death is the just result of God's wrath at our sin. So we hold these three truths: God is eternal, we are mortal, and the wages of sin is death. We are powerless to alter this, hopelessly moving towards the grave, except for the answered prayer of verses 13-17, when God showed compassion and favour towards us, graciously gifting salvation and eternal life in Christ by faith.

Eternal and gracious God, you would be just and right to condemn me for ever. Thank you for the salvation and eternal life you offer in Christ. Help me to live these few years in a way that's pleasing and honouring to you, and to do so day by day.

Psalm 91 – The Shadow of the Almighty

Many Christians have drawn comfort from this psalm in times of danger or need. Yet others, facing severe persecution or even martyrdom might feel the words don't ring true. In reality the psalm is for us but not about us. The words can only be wholly applied to Christ, surrounded as he was by so many dangers yet untouched by them all. No-one could take his life until he chose to lay it down. Satan knew the psalm is about Jesus which is why he quoted it in the desert temptations. Christ is the great victor. So, in the face of affliction, persecution or even death, Paul could confidently say, "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." We are not invincible, but Christ our saviour is.

Great Saviour God, thank you that Christ is such a glorious and victorious king. We are frail and our lives are so short, yet there is eternal confidence to be had in you. Help me to face my troubles in the strength you give, and even to look at death itself as already defeated by Jesus.

Psalms 92 & 93 – How To Thrive

Psalm 92 is a "song for the Sabbath" and was probably sung every week in the Temple at Jerusalem. We're to sing praises to God, gratefully acknowledging his love and faithfulness to us. He is God Most High (v1, 8), but wicked people don't understand. They will fade like grass. God's people will soar upwards though, like flourishing cedars or palm trees (v12, 13). Psalm 93 describes God as the great and firm king ruling above all the chaos in the world. More, since his decrees reflect his nature we can partake of firm security by living in his rule, his kingdom (v5). Taken together, these psalms remind us of the joy, privilege, and blessing of weekly church.

God Most High, it is a pleasurable blessing to contemplate your majesty, faithfulness, and love. It is gracious of you to give us your good commands, and beyond expectation that Christ should keep those commands for us. Bless and teach me, Lord, Sunday by Sunday in the company of your people.

Psalm 94 – The LORD My Refuge

In the Arctic Circle, winter darkness may last for months and yet the sunrise does always come eventually. Psalm 94 sees the long night of spiritual darkness all around us and asks, “How long will the wicked celebrate?” The evil done against God’s people (v4-7) is met with corrective rebuke (v8-11), remembering that God *does* know and *is* just. So the pain of “how long?” gives way to confident praise that God is with us in our troubles (v12-15), stands with us against evil (v16-19), and will bring justice in his own timing (v20-23). It feels so contemporary it could have been written yesterday. Still, God is our help, our joy, our refuge.

My God and Saviour, perfect Judge of the whole earth, you are gracious to your people. Lord, this world does feel overwhelming at times; there is so much evil. Thank you for Christ, the firstfruits of the resurrection and guarantee of an eternity free from all evil. Lord, please be my help, strength, joy, and refuge today.

Psalms 95 & 96 – Goodness and Power

Psalm 95 calls the people of God to sing praises to God because he is our powerful Creator (v3-5) and we are the sheep under his care (v7). That’s easy to do when times are good, but v8-11 urges us to continue trusting God when the way forward seems hard (the writer to the Hebrews quoted these verses to believers tempted to give up in the face of persecution (see Hebrews 4)). Don’t forget his goodness and power; don’t step back when you should be stepping forward in faith. Psalm 96 calls the whole of Creation to sing praise to God! Every nation, all the heavens, the earth, the sea and the fields – all are to worship God, for he is coming to rule in righteousness at Christ’s return.

Living God, it is a great and striking image that everything in all Creation should sing your praise! Great Saviour, we who are your own sheep should have a great desire to sing – and to trust you. Forgive my lack of trust, and keep reminding me of your goodness and power.

Psalms 97 & 98 – Rejoice in the LORD

These glorious psalms call the whole earth to worship God. He is worthy of worship for his own nature (his righteousness and justice, Psalm 97:2-5), and for how Creation reveals his righteousness to us (v6-7). Psalm 98:2-3 call us to rejoice that God has applied his powerful arm to save us, as demonstrated in Christ's death and resurrection. Both psalms end by calling us to praise God for his rule (97:8-9, 98:7-9), with a specific call to hate evil and rejoice in the LORD in Psalm 97:10-12. To live under God's rule is itself an act of praise, and for our praise to be fully true we must wholly embrace his good rule for our lives.

Lord Jesus, you taught us so much about how we are to live. I confess I don't always grasp the sheer goodness of your commands. Forgive my selfish sinful heart, Lord. I pray that the Spirit would help me to live joyfully under your kingdom rule, conforming me into your likeness and renewing me day by day.

Psalms 99-101 – One God, One Saviour

These three psalms combine to display the God of gospel grace. In Psalm 99:1-5 we're called to exalt God in his awesome holiness, and then v6-9 calls us to praise him for hearing and answering prayer. Psalm 100 calls all the earth to draw near in praise and worship precisely because the LORD (that is, the God of biblical revelation) is God. You can't know him any other way; Christ is the only way to God. Psalm 101 is too grand for David and properly belongs to Jesus, the risen and reigning Messiah. He governs his kingdom in righteousness, and he alone determines who will enter it.

Heavenly Father, enthroned above the heavens, yet hearing my prayers, you are glorious. You would be just to cast us off, and you are gracious to forgive and to call me into your kingdom. Help me to walk in kingdom righteousness, Lord, and forgive my many sins.

Psalm 102 – Your Years Will Never End

The heading for this psalm shows how it is intended to be useful to anyone in time of affliction. This is comforting simply because affliction comes to us all. The distress of v3-11 is passionate and consuming and will resonate with many. But, as ever, the psalmist's confidence is in God, enthroned above all yet hearing the prayers of the weak (v17). The prayer for recovery in v24 is the psalmist's heart laid bare. Hebrews 1 quotes v25-27 as spoken from God the Father to Jesus his Son, and it is only in Christ that this prayer is fully answered. Heaven and earth may pass, and people along with them, but sickness and death cannot keep us from eternal life in Christ.

Living God, Eternal Father, we are dust and know that our time is so very short. Keep me from affliction, please, so that I might praise you and make you known. Thank you that although time creeps up on me there is nothing that can keep me from eternal life in you.

Psalm 103 – Everlasting

In subjects such as sport, music, or science, those who study more deeply become enthralled and will praise their subject enthusiastically. This psalm takes that to higher realms, meditating on God's innumerable benefits to us. He is from everlasting to everlasting and we pass like flowers in a field, yet he is rich in compassion towards us. His grace brings him glory, since we have done nothing to deserve such goodness from him. When we grasp the wonder of his steadfast love the only response we can give is praise, and it's natural for us then to call others to join in this praise too.

Gracious Father, there are not enough words in any language to capture your greatness, and your grace to me is beyond anything I can fathom. It is right that I praise you for who you are and what you have done for me. Thank you for Scripture's vocabulary of praise, perfectly spoken in Christ.

Psalm 104 – Creator & Sustainer

It's good and right to watch science and nature programmes that give a sense of wonder at the world and space around us. This psalm is similar, but lifts our eyes to marvel further still at the God of such creative power, brilliance, and beauty who created it all. He dwells in lofty majesty (v2-4), yet delights in his handiwork. The universe is not like a wind-up mechanism watched by God from afar; he is intimately involved, not least in the giving and taking of life. All Creation ought to praise such a God and so we do in Christ. Not everyone does (v35), so the psalm hints at the day of Christ's return when all things will be made new.

Great and majestic God, you who dwell in such splendour that you look down on the heavens, thank you for your particular care to me. Your kind hand touches all life, and you have opened my eyes to perceive it. Help me to see more of your beauty as I meditate on all you have made.

Psalm 105 – Faithful God

Books 4 and 5 of the psalms have a distinctly congregational air, so different from the intensely personal psalms of Book 1. Here the people of God are called praise him for his promise of land (v7-11), protection and preservation in Egypt (v12-22), his supernatural intervention in saving them (v23-26), and for then providing for them on their desert travels (v37-45). These community recollections of God's faithfulness to us in the past are important as we praise him together and encourage one another in the faith. As Christians, we also draw comfort as we worship the same God, and now gather to celebrate and remember Christ's work at the cross.

Faithful God, you care for your people to a degree that we're barely aware of. It's good to remember your works of the past and to encourage one another with them. Forgive me that I so quickly forget, and help me to trust you for your grace and help for the future.

Psalm 106 – Faithless People

To begin with, Psalm 106 seems similar to Psalm 105. But whereas Psalm 105 recalls God's unswerving generosity, goodness, and faithfulness to his people, this psalm reflects on the ungrateful faithlessness of Israel through those same times and events. They tested God, rebelled against his appointed leaders, compromised with other nations, and followed after other gods. God be praised, he remembered his covenant promises and preserved his people. We kid ourselves if we think we'd have been different from those ancient Israelites, so we must give thanks that God is unchangeable in his beautiful grace.

Gracious and ever-faithful God, while we were yet sinners you demonstrated your love for us in Christ. Forgive me my sin, Lord, according to your mercy and compassion. I know I don't deserve it. Father, save me and keep me; help me not to fall into repeated sin.

Psalm 107 – God's Acts of Faithful Love

As we enter Book 5 of the psalms we notice how there is a strong community focus to these songs of gathered worship. Appropriately, this psalm rejoices in God's faithful love, having gathered his people from exile back into the promised land. They had been hungry and lost (v4-9), broken and imprisoned (v10-16), sick (v17-22), and even terrified at sea (v23-32), but when they cried out to God he gathered them to himself. To gather around God is our richest hope and highest blessing. The New Testament identifies Christians as exiles (1 Peter 1:1) and citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20), already safe in Christ though far from home. This encourages us to think of him and to pray (v43).

Infinite and eternal God, how gracious you are to listen to my prayers and cries for help. Thank you that in Christ I am already secure from sin and its consequences, though I still stumble and let you down. Father, forgive me. Help me to live for you, consciously knowing your strength in my life.

Psalms 108 & 109 – Praises Among the Nations

If you start with Psalm 57:7-11 and add Psalm 60:5-12 you get psalm 108. David's words of trouble and praise still read well in Book 5 with its general background of exiles returned to Jerusalem. And since Psalm 57:9 (=Psalm 108:3) is quoted in Romans 15:9 about the gospel coming to us Gentiles, it's no wonder the psalms still speak to us. The strongly-worded petition of Psalm 109:6-15 is also picked up in the New Testament (Acts 1:20) in the context of Judas, the betrayer of the Messiah. Opposition to David, the LORD's anointed king, echoed down the years to Christ and onto us, his ambassadors. Still the psalms speak to us, though with Christ now victorious we will pray for our enemies.

Lord God, these ancient texts remain ever current, ever vibrant and relevant. Our problems keep repeating in new contexts, yet your faithfulness does not change. Holy Father, as I change through life, keep me coming to you for your unchanging steadfast love.

Psalms 110 & 111 – His Praise Endures Forever

Psalm 110 is unusual in that it both speaks of the Messiah to come and is claimed by Jesus Christ for himself (Mark 12:36). Peter also pointed to Jesus using Psalm 110 in Acts 2:33-35, and Hebrews expounds the importance of Jesus as both King and Priest who lives forever. What kind of eternal rule will he bring? Psalm 111 calls us to praise him for his works, majesty, righteousness, grace, mercy, provision, covenant faithfulness, power, justice, trustworthiness, redemption, holiness, and awesomeness! So we can anticipate an eternal King (Psalm 110) ruling with unchanging goodness (Psalm 111) mediated by our eternal Priest (Psalm 110).

Lord Christ, great ruler of all, thank you for calling me by the Spirit to come to you by the faith you gave. Thank you for your intimate presence and your transcendent majesty. All I can do is answer these psalms with praise for you. Lord God, help me to know you better.

Psalms 112 & 113 – The Compassion of the Almighty

In the spectacular majesty of God displayed in Psalm 113, God is all the more glorified for stooping down from above the heavens to raise poor and needy people from dust and ash. His compassion pours out on us, and we are called to praise him. Psalm 111 is an acrostic that highlights the richness of God's attributes, suggesting he is all he is in all his ways all the time. Between these psalms is Psalm 112, an acrostic psalm describing the godly man in the style of 'wisdom' books like Proverbs. Such a person reflects the kindness and generous compassion of God in everything they do. The blessing of godly living isn't found only in Sunday worship, but also in daily godliness at home, at work, and in caring for the weak (as God does).

Great God of goodness and compassion, we chase after happiness in so many things. Yet here is happiness described for us: To be like you in holiness, goodness, and compassion. I pray for the Spirit's sanctifying work as he conforms me to Christ's likeness day by day.

Psalms 114 & 115 – The Presence of God

Psalms 113 to 118 are sometimes known as the "Hallel" psalms ("hallel" means "praise"), traditionally sung near Passover. Psalm 114 recalls the Exodus, the time of that first Passover, and rejoices at God's presence among his people as the cause of supernatural blessing in the natural world. Psalm 115 builds on the supernatural nature of God in that he is sovereign above the heavens (v3), not some idol that needs to be carried around. Everyone is called to trust him (v9-11) and to be blessed by him (v12-15). Many will trust idols, though being inanimate they cannot offer life but only death (v8). In Christ, risen and glorious, we will praise God forever (v18).

Living God, these are rightly called "praise" psalms! You dwell beyond time and space, and by grace you dwell in me, sanctifying me by your presence. Father, forgive my idolatry. I'm often barely aware of it. Show me more of Jesus, so that I might trust him and praise you forever in him.

Psalm 116 – "How Can I Repay the LORD?"

Verse 12 asks the impossible question, "How can I replay the LORD for all the good he has done for me?" The psalmist has been ill to the point of death, but when he cried out to the LORD he was heard and healed. His faith led him to pray (v10, quoted by Paul in 2 Cor 4:13) but there can be no presumption on God's grace. And because his grace to us is bountiful he is good to us for his *own* sake and pleasure. Also, his grace to us is utterly free – we cannot think of repaying grace or else we deny its freedom, attaching obligation and payment. So, like the psalmist, we love God (v1) and will thank and praise him with his people (v17-19).

Gracious God, my sin was a debt to you that I could never repay, and yet you, in grace, have redeemed me in Christ. Forgive any sense of repayment in me, Lord, so that I might wholly delight in your grace, the free salvation granted to me in Christ. Help me to love and praise you before all people.

Psalms 117 & 118 – Hosanna!

The Passover's "Hallel" ("Praise") psalms 113-118 end with Psalm 118's vision of a king making his way to the temple. Having been surrounded by enemies, the king was strengthened and given victory by the LORD himself. He was rejected by many but by the LORD's doing he has become the very Cornerstone of the kingdom. The crowds sang this psalm as Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, echoing v25 in their "Hosanna" ("save us, please"). Christ is the ultimate victorious King and he fully owned this psalm – though only he knew in advance how v27 would cost him to save us. So Psalm 117's call to the whole world to join in praise to God for his love and faithfulness sings on.

Mighty Jesus, what hope have I of victory over temptation, sin, or death other than the victory you have already won? I can only join the crowds who rightly cry Hosanna – please save us. Thank you that you yourself became the sacrifice to atone for my sin, and that you are now the Cornerstone of your church and my life.

Psalm 119:1-24 – Wondrous Things

By far the longest psalm, Psalm 119 is an extended acrostic with successive groups of eight verses each beginning with letters of the Hebrew alphabet (Aleph, Beth, Gimel…). Verses 1-3 are introductory, describing the blessed state of anyone who meditates on God's word in order to seek him and to live for him. From v4 onwards, the psalm is a prayer spoken to God delighting in his word and asking for help. Verse 12 is foundational: Since God is blessed, his commands reflect his nature. So knowing and obeying his word helps us partake in and enjoy him! Verse 18 reminds us that we need the Spirit's illumination of spiritual truth and his help to obey amid hostility (v22).

Lord God, I thank you that as I read and study your word I grow in knowledge and understanding. Help me, Lord, to see more of you and the great works you have done. Help me to grow in Christlikeness and to develop an ever-stronger thirst for you.

Psalm 119:25-48 – Teach Me, LORD

Like other acrostics in the psalms, Psalm 119 is an extended meditation exploring various facets of one theme, here a kind of A to Z of thoughts about God's word. So v25-32 reflects on how the word of God can lift us when we're down and strengthen us when we're weak. Verses 33-40 meditate on how Scripture turns our eyes from what is passing and sets our heart on the everlasting God. Verse 41-48 ask for salvation to prove the truth of God's word to others – the psalmist will boldly tell everyone of God's wonders. Over and over, the psalmist asks for help from God – our goal is not to become Bible students but Christ's disciples.

Lord Jesus, I echo the psalmist's plea for help. Strengthen me by your promises, Lord. Nourish me and set my heart on you as gloriously revealed. Keep me from idolatry, please. And give me boldness to speak of you as I experience more and more of your steadfast love in my life.

Psalm 119:49-72 – God Is Good and Does Good

The meditations on God's word continue. In v49-56 the psalmist describes how he deliberately calls God's promises and judgments to mind in difficult times, obtaining comfort and hope to go on. In v57-64, he recalls the entanglement of sin and sinners, and how God's word brought him to repentance and delight in the LORD. Then in v65-72 he recalls how sin led to affliction – and how that is a good work of a good God since it caused the psalmist to turn back to truth. We do well to meditate on the extent to which God's word has shaped our lives. Are we listening to God truly?

Living God, you are gracious to have caused your word to be written down for us so that we can keep coming back to learn from you. I pray for the Spirit's work to cause me to live by your good word, delighting in you. Forgive me for not reflecting your goodness in all of my life.

Psalm 119:73-96 – "My Delight"

In v73-80, the psalmist knows from God's word that his affliction from God is fair. But he asks for compassion and comfort in healing so that (a) those who slander him will be silenced, and (b) he might encourage others who fear God. The LORD's timing is always perfect, and often we're not aligned with it, so in v81-88 the psalmist laments his situation before God asking how long until he is rescued. The answer to that comes in v89-96 in the realisation that God and his words stand forever, outliving any enemy or affliction. We endure all trouble by delighting in God's word (v92). Every aspect of the psalmist's meditation is in relation to his life before God. God is our delight, revealed in his word.

Heavenly Father, my trust in you and my knowledge of you come from your own gracious hand through your word. I pray for the Spirit's help to recall your great and precious promises in every moment of doubt, temptation, or worry. Give me patience and grace when things don't seem too good, and help me to remain steadfast, trusting your word.

Psalm 119:97-120 – Spirit of Wisdom

In verses 97-104 we're reminded that God's words make us wiser than all powerful but ungodly people – not cleverer, but wiser towards God, seeking to keep on straight paths and hating every false way. Likewise, in v105-112 God's word is a lamp and a light to us, helping us see where we are and the way we should go. Wisdom helps us make good choices when the way isn't always clear, and with God's decrees as the joy of our heart we will grow in wisdom. We can't do that unaided, so v113-120 asks God to sustain us as we put our trust in him. Jesus said that apart from him we can do nothing, but he sent us the Spirit of wisdom to sustain us on the way.

Lord Jesus, in whom are all treasures of knowledge and wisdom, you always chose the good and wise path even when cornered by opponents in traps. I pray that I would grow in wisdom with the Spirit's help, nourished and guided by your holy word, living a life pleasing to you.

Psalm 119:121-144 – Supernatural Revelation

God is revealed to us in Christ, and Christ is revealed to us in the Scriptures. Our hope and delight in Christ is wholly grounded on what we read of him in God's word. So, as in v121-128, we may well grow weary waiting for his return – though not weary of doing right. Verses 129-136 remind us of the supernatural revelation that Scripture is, keeping us from sin as God alone decrees it, living under his blessing. Verses 137-144 point out that God is righteous, so his commands must be too. Obeying him might bring opposition from people but we continue through trouble and distress to delight in God's word as we find our ultimate delight in God in Christ as revealed to us.

My God, thank you for your eternally good and righteous word. You show me my sin, and you reveal Jesus' work for me – all supernaturally revealed and applied to me. Thank you, Lord, and continue to teach me your way so that I might please you even as I delight in you.

Psalm 119:145-176 – Straying Sheep

At the end of this mammoth psalm we continue to see the psalmist's deep hunger for God himself, v145-152 highlighting his 24-hour meditations. In v153-160 he again asks for rescue from opponents who don't know God's word, yet his plea is based not on self-righteous obedience but on God's faithful love. Even under pressure from princes (v161-168), the psalmist's love for God and his word keeps him from stumbling. And so the final stanza (v169-176) brings to mind the believer as a lost sheep, crying out for help, loving and depending on the Good Shepherd to guide and protect. And since God often does that through his word, we make this whole psalm our own.

Great Good Shepherd of your sheep, even as your own we're prone to wander and need your constant good guidance. Thank you, Lord, for your great and precious promises, your covenant of grace, and the revelation of your nature to me. Help me to know and love your word so that I might know and love you more.

Psalms 120-122 – The LORD Protects You

The fifteen psalms of ascent (120-134) were traditionally sung by Israelites travelling to Jerusalem for annual feasts. Above all, they are about travelling through life with God's people to come and worship him. Psalm 120 has us lamenting to be so far from our destination (God) and surrounded by ungodly people. As we step towards God, will he help us? Yes, Psalm 121 reminds us that he is our Creator and it is his very nature to care for us and keep us on our way. So Psalm 122's joy at arriving at Jerusalem is cause for praise to God, and also makes Jerusalem itself something to pray for. Our Jerusalem is the church (Hebrews 12:22-24), and we walk together to God our king under his care.

Gracious God, I was once so far away, yet you called me to Jesus and added me to your people, the church, the heavenly Jerusalem. Help me, then, to praise and thank you as I ought, and to live at peace with all your people. Lord, help me to be a peaceable, unifying person in your church.

Psalms 123-125 – I Lift My Eyes To You

The psalms of ascent have been compiled for us to read as a set, noting the forward movement towards God throughout. Psalm 123 laments the weariness of contempt and scorn we face for living for God but refuses any compromise to ease the pain. Rather, we wait on God's rescue – indeed, Christ's return. So Psalm 124 pauses, looking back, praising God for help along the way. Christians observe his help through past pain, illness, loneliness, grief – and praise him. And so Psalm 125 reflects on God's great protection around us. Nothing can separate us from his love or pluck us from his hand. Life isn't promised to be easy, but our God will be with us and will see us safely into his arms.

Heavenly Father, you have always known me from my mother's womb. You know me better than I know myself. Thank you for the grace you have shown me thus far in life. Father, I look to you for the future, for whatever may be. Help me always to live for you, to look to you, moving forwards in Christlikeness every day.

Psalms 126-128 – House Building

These psalms are about God's blessing on the community of his people, and the themes remain valid as we hope to see the church flourish and grow today. Psalm 126 might cause us to remember revivals of the past, but also reminds us that such things are God's work. That said, when we do look to build his house in his name and strength then Psalm 127 reminds us to pray and keep in step with the LORD. And so if we hope the growing and blessed family and community of Psalm 128 is to be reflected in the church then we must be careful to walk in God's ways. So we work for God, in holy dependence on him, as he uses us to grow his kingdom.

Lord Jesus, your own images of your kingdom in the gospels so often speak of life and growth. Help me and our church to live in holy dependence on you. Give me wisdom and strength to do the works you have prepared for me to do, and the humility to give you all the glory.

Psalms 129-131 – Hope in the LORD

The fifteen psalms of ascent are a series of five triplets and Psalms 129-131 demonstrate that well. Psalm 129 recalls deep and often brutal persecution against God's people ultimately overcome by God's grace. But for those suffering right now, what help or encouragement is there? Psalm 130 reminds us that we aren't owed any good thing by God, yet in grace he deals with us beyond anything we might deserve: So hope in the LORD (v7). This enables David in Psalm 131 to be calm and quietened in his soul, trusting in God for the future, not needing all the answers *now*. Remembering how Christ suffered for us for the joy of our salvation, we hear the psalmist's call: Trust the LORD.

Lord Jesus, you suffered terribly and gave your life to glorify the Father through gracious salvation of sinners like me. Lord, thank you. When days are difficult, help me to keep looking forward to you, to keep my hope in you rather than idols that are sure to fail. All my hope is in you.

Psalm 132-134 – Journey's End

The psalms of ascent follow the journey of pilgrims travelling from far away to gather in Jerusalem for worship. Since the state of the people is so linked with the king, Psalm 132 asks God to protect the king in memory of king David (v1-10). But God will do better: He *covenanted* to send a Messiah Saviour in David's line (v17, Luke 1:68-69). So Psalm 133 describes our joy as we gather round Christ in the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22-24). In fact, full joy and praise in Christ is never a solitary experience but a *community* one. And while Psalm 134 calls us to bless (to praise) the LORD, the psalms of ascent end with blessing *from* God, our saviour and strength every step, every day.

Compassionate and loving Father, unless you called us and enabled us, no-one would come to you. We naturally need you but don't want you. Thank you for opening my eyes to your love and to the salvation and life you give in Christ. Lord Jesus, thank you for walking with me day by day, giving strength, assurance and guidance all the way.

Psalms 135 & 136 – His Faithful Love

There's an obvious sense of a community gathered in worship in these two psalms. Psalm 135 rejoices in God's goodness, electing grace, power over Creation, and gifting of land to his people after defeating Israel's enemies. What manmade idol could do that? None, so we are called to worship the true God. Psalm 136 builds on the same themes (in some cases using identical lines) for a call-and-response communal worship. Notice (a) the place of factual remembrance of God's character and actions in gathered worship, and (b) how that remembrance gives us confidence in God for forever.

Lord Jesus, you are the same yesterday, today, and forever, unchanging in holiness, compassion, and love. Help me always to recall your mercy and grace, your promises and love, so that I might praise you as I ought. Help me wholly to enter into the gathered worship of your church, praising you in spirit and in truth with all my heart, mind, soul, and voice.

Psalms 137 & 138 – Sing!

God told the prophet Habakkuk that although Babylon would be God's instrument of judgment on rebellious Israel, there would later be judgment on Babylon too. Psalm 137 reminds us that such judgments are very real and deeply painful, and the raw edge of the language used shows how helpful and right it is to expose our full emotion in prayer. Also, it is appropriate to pray for national and international justice while also praying for our enemies individually. So, in Psalm 138, king David gives thanks that the LORD heard his prayer when surrounded by enemies and gave David strength in his situation. The king then leads the praise and thanksgiving to God before all God's people.

Heavenly Father, thank you that Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords, and that through him you will bring a rule of justice and peace to the world. Thank you that though I was your enemy in my sin, you have granted reconciliation by Christ's death in my place. Lord, help me also then to love those who oppose you, so that they might yet praise you.

Psalm 139 – Any Offensive Way?

This majestic psalm has such confidence in God (v1-12) and such praise of God (v13-18) that the language of v19-22 takes us by surprise. In truth, they point to the central focus of the psalm. David, the author, is king over God's people and feels the responsibility to reign over the kingdom with heavenly righteousness. So v19-22 laments the presence of wicked people within God's own nation of Israel. But David isn't perfect, so he asks the LORD who knows him, sees him, and is with him always to search him out and lead him in the everlasting way of righteousness. So we praise Christ our *perfect* King, and anticipate his eternal rule by seeking to live in his righteousness today.

Lord Christ, you have pointed out how the kingdom of heaven is utterly incompatible with wickedness and sin. Thank you that your government is perfect. Forgive me my sin. Search out and extinguish lingering sin within me by the Spirit's sanctifying and mortifying work.

Psalms 140 & 141 – Ongoing Opposition

Book 5 of the psalms generally relate to Israel's time after the return from exile in Babylon. These two psalms of David would have been more than 500 years old when the psalm editors placed them here in Book 5. There's a timelessness to opposition to God's anointed kings, so David's prayers for rescue and protection (Psalm 140:1, 4) and for justice (v9-12) remain pertinent for the church today. In Psalm 141, David's self-awareness as a sinful man prays for openness to godly rebuke, especially regarding his words that can be so powerful (v5-6), while also seeking protection from the wicked opponents. In all this we realise how incredibly blessed we are now that Christ is king.

Lord Jesus, King of kings, opposition to you continues in opposition to your people. Help me to live in your kingdom righteousness. Help to be open to godly rebuke, to repent under your word, and to live for you. Thank you that your rule is good, wise, and perfect.

Psalms 142 & 143 – Release

We're back in the cave with David, surrounded by enemies, trapped in prison (v7) – just as the Israelites felt in Babylon. God did rescue David and the exiles, and we can also make this prayer our own in Christ. He is the LORD's Anointed King, and his deliverance from his cave/tomb is also our redemption from the prison of sin and temptation. In Psalm 143 David prays again for release, knowing he doesn't deserve it (v1-2), asking for the sake of God's name (v11-12). Even so, his desire goes beyond rescue: He wants to experience God, being rescued, taught, and led by God in life. Christ has glorified the Father in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension and has bought for us not only salvation but also the rich experience of God that comes with adoption.

Living Saviour, your own time on this earth was filled with such pain and opposition, yet you are now raised and glorified in splendour due to your glorious being. Death and the grave could not hold you, and how that gives me eternal hope! Help me to experience you more every day.

Psalm 144 – Happy and Blessed

This psalm shows the heart of David as he delights in God and longs for blessings on the nation. Personally, David loves the LORD and humbly rejoices (v1-4). He prays that God would rescue him (in language reminiscent of Psalm 18) with an expectation of joyful praise and song (v5-11). But David's motivation is for God's covenant blessing on the people (v12-15). In all this we see Christ's heart also, as Hebrews 2:5-18 reminds us how he became human to bring us to glory as his brothers and sisters. We enjoy the blessings of the kingdom only through the Messiah's suffering in obedience to the Father, in love for us.

Gracious Saviour, unless you had worked salvation for us we would be without hope in the world. Thank you that your death, resurrection, and ascension have generated bountiful blessing on me now and forever. Lord, bless me, and help me to demonstrate such happy blessing before others who so need it too.

Psalm 145 – Righteous In All His Ways

King David's final psalm in the book is appropriately a meditation on the glorious nature of God (v1-7) and the blessings of his kingdom (v8-21). His delight springs from God and flows to God, and the anointed king's desire is that the greatness of knowing God be known to future generations (v4). Jesus, our glorious and majestic Messiah is in the presence of the Father, delighting in him, surrounded by holiness, love, and glory, worshipped by countless millions of heavenly beings. And, echoing and multiplying David, Jesus invites and includes us in the blessings of his kingdom – to his very great praise and honour.

Lord Jesus, you are gloriously and wonderfully delighting in the awesome and joyful presence of your Father. It is astonishing that you call me to enter into that pleasure by your own grace, compassion, patience and love. Lord God, thank you for so great a blessing – even an eternity with you.

Psalms 146 & 147 – Praise!

Our society is so full of heroes and role-models, and we put our trust in the authority and expertise of others again and again. Psalm 146 questions this, asking whether you would rather trust mortal humans (v3-4) or the eternal God who does good to all who revere him (v5-10)? Psalm 147 expands the thought, examining how God's goodness stretches to all Creation (v7-9, 15-18) and yet he gives particular tenderness and blessing to his chosen people (v2-6, 10-11, 13-14, 19-20). Psalms 146-150 all begin and end with "Hallelujah" (Hebrew for "Praise the LORD") and these two psalms remind us that to praise the LORD is both appropriate to him and a blessing to us.

Great and gracious God, you deal with such tenderness to all who depend on you. You hear my prayers and deal with me kindly – not as my sins deserve. Lord God, show me more of yourself, in Christ, so that I might not put my trust in mortals but always look to you for hope and blessing.

Psalm 148 – Let Heaven and Earth Praise God

Many psalms make requests to God and he is glorified when we acknowledge his greatness and our dependency. In eternity, when we have no petitions to make, our songs will be like Psalm 148 – praising God for all he is and all he's done. Verses 1-6 call on Creation to praise God our Creator and Sustainer, while v7-13 calls all Creation to praise God's own exalted nature. It ends with praise for Israel in particular, which is surprising at first. But Israel's praise is the grace of God dwelling among us, fulfilled in Christ through his spiritual Israel for all humanity. All Creation will be redeemed and reconciled to God in Christ, and all Creation groans for the day!

Heavenly Father, Creation can't contain you, nor can we praise you in full measure of the honour due to your name. Lift my eyes, my mind, my heart to you Lord. Show me more and more of yourself in Christ so that I might praise you truly and fully.

Psalm 149 & 150 – Hallelujah!

These psalms carry us as Christian readers to Revelation 19, looking forward to the day when we will sing "Hallelujah" at the fall of Babylon, the godless world we live in. Christ will be seen and honoured for who he is; his followers will be vindicated before the world for their faith; all who have rejected him will perish. There will be no more crying, grieving, pain, sin, death, or tears. And there will be no faith or hope either, since we shall be like Christ and we will see God's face. And when all is said and done, one thing remains: Praise the LORD. We gather together to praise God in Christ, for Christ, sanctified and beautified in Christ, praising him forever. Hallelujah!

Gracious and wonderful God, you alone are worthy of the praise of everything that has breath. Thank you that my feeble worship is added to and included in the exuberant worship of heaven. Thank you that I can approach you in Christ, praising you for him and the grace you have lavished on me. Hosanna! Hallelujah! Lord, come soon.

Proverbs 1 – What is Wisdom?

Several collections of ancient proverbs are brought together in this book, and verses 1-7 act as in introduction to the collection. Verse 7 is very much a foundation statement for the whole. The style of the book is that of a father passing wisdom on to his son (e.g. v8, 10) which is reflected in some of the gender language – such as the personification of wisdom as a woman in v20-33. Wisdom is not like law. Law sets firm boundaries, but wisdom helps us steer through the moral maze of life when the boundaries are less clearly seen. In 1 Corinthians 1:24, Paul says that "Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God," so that to grow in wisdom is to grow in Christ and to grow in Christ is to grow in wisdom.

Lord Christ, all treasures of knowledge and wisdom are found in you. Help me to learn wisdom from these proverbs so that I might partake more fully in your nature. Teach me how to navigate life when the right or best paths aren't always obvious.

Proverbs 2 – Seek Out Wisdom

Proverbs 2 is a single sentence in Hebrew. You're to cry out and seek after wisdom since gaining wisdom is active rather than passive. To grow in wisdom is to grow in the fear of the LORD and to know him (v5), since wisdom is itself given by God and not earned (v6). Wisdom growth also teaches you how to live before others in "righteousness, justice, and integrity" (v9), not through obligation but through knowledge and delight in your heart and mind (v10). Such wisdom (a fear of the LORD and a delight in righteousness) will keep you away from sin (v11-19) and in "the way of the good" (v20-22). When we remember that Christ is himself "the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24) the rich logic and truth of this lovely chapter fills us.

Great Saviour, to grow in wisdom is to grow in you. Thank you that such wisdom is given, not earned, so that I can never boast in myself. Lord, give me ever more wisdom, more fear, more delight in you, so that I might be kept from sin and temptation, living in righteous integrity.

Proverbs 3 – Trust the LORD

Verses 5 and 6 are one of the best-known parts of Proverbs but they shouldn't be separated from v7. Many people are wise in their own eyes, but there is no substitute for the wisdom that comes from the LORD. Among several reasons given, we note just two: First, wisdom from God is "a tree of life" (mentioned only in Genesis, Proverbs, and Revelation). Such is wisdom in Christ, who alone gives us the right to eat from the tree of life (Rev 2:7). Second, wisdom is the foundation and rhythm of Creation (v19), so that heavenly wisdom enables us to live as we ought in God's world. Moreover, wisdom is seen in her actions (Matthew 11:19), so v27-35 describe godliness towards others.

Heavenly Father, it's clear that being wise in my own eyes leads me to sin against you. Help me to grow in the heavenly wisdom that delights and honours you. Help me to live such wisdom out as I deal with others.

Proverbs 4 – Brighter and Brighter

Here, a father urges his son to embrace wisdom just as his own father taught him. This is a natural human process simply because growth in wisdom takes time. When we read in James 1:5 about asking God for wisdom, we often really want an instant answer in a given situation. But v11 pictures the path of the righteous as the light of dawn shining brighter and brighter until midday – a result of a slow and steady purposeful growth in heavenly wisdom. It's not a light switch you can turn instantly on. Parents do well to put their children on the path of righteousness and wisdom, and we must all walk this path guarding our hearts (v23) with eyes fixed ahead on Jesus (v25).

Gracious Father, you have promised wisdom to those who ask. Give me a teachable spirit, so that I might learn from you. Spirit, work in me to conform me more and more to the likeness of Christ. Help me not to turn to the right or the left, but to keep my eyes on the prize of being with you.

Proverbs 5 – Entangled in Adultery

Adultery is not a sin of a moment. It's an accumulation of circumstances over time where temptation, desire, and opportunity begin to direct the steps of the unwary into ruin. Proverbs is written as fatherly advice to a son, which explains the emphasis on immoral women in this chapter, but wisdom isn't gender-specific and women need to be equally aware of predatory men. Two remedies are given: First, "Don't go near the door of her house" (v8) – run in the opposite direction. That might be physical or mental, noting that adultery is often an act of the imagination (Matt 5:28). The second remedy is to wholly and fully enjoy your spouse and be completely and joyfully satisfied in one another. As the church is the bride of Christ, applications to idolatry are obvious.

Holy God, Righteous Father, you know the inclinations of my heart better than I know myself. Forgive me my sinful desires, and change me into full Christlikeness in every way. Lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil. Give me a pure heart to enjoy all your good gifts.

Proverbs 6 – Burning Coals

What is striking about Proverbs is the broad range of topics covered. It's little use having wisdom in one area of life but being a fool in another. That said, some deficiencies in wisdom are more dangerous than others. In v1-5 you're encouraged to sort out unhelpful debts as soon as you can – your lack of wisdom is still recoverable. If you're lazy (v6-11) you can expect trouble, but again you can turn things round. But outright wickedness has you on the wrong side of the LORD (v12-19) with potentially eternal consequences. Similarly, being lured into adultery leads to a ruined life, bringing calamity to at least one family as well as just retribution. So "corrective discipline is the way to life" (v23).

Patient and Loving Father, your word has many instructions regarding adultery, no doubt simply because we find sin so attractive. Give me a pure heart, a delight in Christ, and wisdom to guide my feet in right paths. Powerful Spirit, show me my sin and drive me to Jesus for refuge.

Proverbs 7 – A Poisoned Feast

We shouldn't be surprised at Proverbs' continued emphasis on the dangers of adultery, especially in our culture of normalised pornography and sexual immorality. Technology only provides new opportunities for sinful seduction in promised secrecy. The seductress in this chapter offers so much to the hapless young man: A night of sensual pleasures with no painful consequences – after all, her husband won't be back for a long time (v20). But why is her house the road to death (v27)? Because adultery is a process of many steps, first flirting with temptation's pleasures and eventually entangling you in a web of deceit and betrayal. The advice is simple: "Don't stray onto her paths" (v25).

Father of all wisdom and purity, truly you know what is good for us. Keep me away from sin's paths, Lord. Give me a discerning spirit to see temptation for what it is and to deal with others in all purity.

Proverbs 8 – Woman Wisdom

Wisdom is personified here as a woman (as Folly will be in the next chapter). She is of surpassing value compared with any material wealth, and indeed to have wisdom is often seen in Proverbs as a means to success in the world. There has been much theological debate over Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 8: Verses 22-23 suggest that wisdom was created – a particular problem given the New Testament's emphasis on Christ as the wisdom of God. But God *is* wise. Since he cannot change, he never acquired wisdom nor learned it. Rather, all wisdom has God as its source. The acts of God *communicate* his wisdom, beginning (for us) at creation (v27), being displayed to the universe in the church (Eph 3:10), and finding its fullest expression in the person and work of Christ (1 Cor 1:24, 30).

God only wise, your interventions in the affairs of humanity are staggeringly intricate and perfect. You always do good even when people work wickedness against you. Grant me the wisdom you have promised to those who ask, and help me to communicate it in actions.

Proverbs 9 – Wisdom and Folly

Wisdom and Folly are personified as two women, each calling out the same thing: “Whoever is inexperienced, enter here” (v4, 16). Wisdom calls out openly from the highest points of the city. She has nothing to hide and calls us to a life of growing knowledge and understanding in the fear of the LORD. But Folly cries out from a place nearby, picking off individuals as they pass by. She offers short-term pleasures and stolen delights, the long-term fruit of which is death. In our soundbite, social media culture of technology and immediacy, Folly’s voice calls to each of us all the time. We’re mostly barely aware of it. We must hear Wisdom’s call to life and pursue the longer way of understanding.

Lord Christ, you are the very wisdom of God, displayed in a redemptive plan that spans all of time itself. Your church is your display of wisdom to the seen and unseen universe. Help me to hear your voice above all others, growing in knowledge and understanding all my life long.

Proverbs 10 – Wisdom’s Breadth

There are many chapters in Proverbs like this one, comprising a string of largely unrelated sayings in no particular order. Closer reading reveals repeated themes and we’ll take one theme each day from tomorrow. But for now, we ask why are they presented so randomly? Why not group them by theme? Two reasons: (a) Life itself is chaotic, and true wisdom is a lively, dynamic response to the wide variety of issues that come at us; (b) In a related point, wisdom itself must be varied in us. If you are wise in one area but unwise in another, you can be sure that Satan will target your weakness. His only rule is hate. We must grow in wisdom in every aspect of our life and character, or we are not really growing at all.

Saviour Jesus, you were consistently wise in your dealing with people, whether they came to you in need, confusion, or hostility. Help me to grow in wisdom for every situation, kept aware of my blind spots and weaknesses. Lord, please protect me and grow me.

Proverbs 11 – Honesty & Generosity

Proverbs has much to say about giving, lending, and taking, especially in business and commercial environments. To use dishonest scales (v1) is simply theft, charging someone for goods you have not provided. The Bible's reply to theft goes further than honesty, however, encouraging us to be generous givers (v24, 25) simply because that is what God himself is like. There's always prudence in Proverbs too so that business is conducted openly (v26) but carefully to avoid being taken advantage of (v18). Loans and security for loans weren't forbidden by law, but Proverbs would dissuade you unless you're prepared for loss (v15). That said, generous love always makes us vulnerable to loss, but we still love.

Great Giver of life and all that is good, it's surely better to be like you than to attempt to hoard things I can't keep anyway. Thank you for the material things you bless me with, and help me to use them freely to love others and to share your love.

Proverbs 12 – Idleness & Diligence

While there will always be exceptions, it is generally true that those who work hardest achieve most in life. Verses 11, 24, and 27 all compare the output of a diligent person with a lazy one. The New Testament also commands against idleness (e.g. 1 Thess 5:14) and urges pursuit of good works (e.g. Titus 3:14). It is an astonishing mystery that God should bind his eternal sovereign purposes to our prayers, but we mustn't lose sight of the fact that he also binds his purposes to our actions. Can we hope for church growth but never evangelise? Or pray for someone's needs to be met but not lift a finger to help? Busyness *can* become an idol, but that's no excuse to be idle. Wisdom is seen in actions.

Heavenly Father, your eternal wisdom is displayed for us in Christ and the amazing eternal plan you have to gather your people in him. In Christ, your wisdom is made visible, now proclaimed through your church. Forgive me for my times of idle inaction, and help me to do the works you have prepared for me to do.

Proverbs 13 – Wealth & Poverty

Wealth and poverty are recurring themes in Proverbs, but there isn't a single all-encompassing statement. Those who are idle can expect poverty (v4, 18), yet some are poor due to the injustice of others (v23). Wealth can be obtained through hard work (v11), yet it brings its own stresses (v8). We might recall the provision of the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25, a measure to prevent anyone amassing wealth without limit while protecting others from poverty without hope. The wisdom of Proverbs helps us grasp the right attitudes to wealth and poverty, work and laziness, justice and inequality, but only on the firm foundations of a fear of the LORD. To be content in Christ is to be rich beyond measure.

Lord Christ, I'm not as rich as I could be nor anywhere near as poor as so many. Forgive me for being taken in by our materialistic culture. Thank you for providing all I need and more. Teach me contentment in you above all things.

Proverbs 14 – Emotional Intelligence

While Proverbs is mostly concerned with external dealings with others, some proverbs subtly draw attention to the inner person. If we are to deal wisely with others, we need to recognise that how they present externally might be quite different from how they feel (v13). In fact, since we are all different with a unique set of circumstances and relationships, you can never truly wholly know another person's emotion – whether sadness or joy (v10). Proverbs goes further still in v30, recognising the link between mental health and physical health – something to be aware of both for others and as we take care of ourselves. "Emotional intelligence" might be a modern phrase, but it's an ancient concept.

Spirit of God, you know the deepest concerns of my heart – all my motives, desires, and needs – along with the experiences that have shaped me. Give me a Christlike compassion and sensitivity towards others, so that I might weep with those who weep and laugh with those who laugh in a way that is deeply true and loving.

Proverbs 15 – Disciples & Fools

In the Bible's wisdom books, "the fool" is someone who is morally deficient; it has nothing to do with intellectual ability. Such people reject wise instruction and have no fear of God. The desire for moral autonomy is the root of all sin and rebellion, so it's no surprise to see "fools" despise instruction and good advice (v5, 12, 32). The tragedy, of course, is that such spiritual blindness will end in hell's ruin (v10). Jesus' great commission to the church is to "Go, therefore, and make disciples… teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). The call to repentance (v31) and the fear of the LORD (v33) lead us to life-long discipleship and learning from Christ.

Great Messiah King, you are so gracious to have called me into your kingdom. I once rejected your laws, not knowing my offence to you or the consequences of rebellion. Thank you that the Spirit has caused me to turn from such foolishness. Help me to learn to be more like you today.

Proverbs 16 – Making Good Plans

As we read through Acts and Paul's New Testament letters, it's clear that he was constantly making travel plans and mission plans, while also remaining sensitive to adjustments and corrections from the Lord (e.g. see Act 16:6-10). God himself is the ultimate planner and worker of plans, displayed in our salvation in Christ. Proverbs makes it clear that the best plans are those made with an awareness of and submission to God's sovereign purposes (v3, 9), since even random acts are actually already known to him (v33). Whether we make plans for work, home, evangelism, or charity, we must check our hearts to see if we're planning to God's glory or our own: The LORD knows which it is (v2).

Sovereign Lord, some of our plans are big and some are small, and you know how seldom I truly consider how or if I'm working for your honour and glory. Spirit, keep my eyes on Jesus so that my plans will put my feet in good places for your purposes. May your will be done.

Proverbs 17 – Family

Proverbs has much to say about family relationships, the whole collection being wisdom passed from father to son. Since the command to Adam had been to multiply and the promises to Abraham included vast numbers of descendants, Proverbs clearly links families and age with blessing (v6). Yet there is sorrow when the next generation foolishly departs from the LORD's ways and blessing (v21). In life, our friends may come and go – though a true friend can be relied on in times of trouble. Verse 17 reminds us that family doesn't come and go, and we are blessed to be able to depend on family throughout our lives. This should be doubly true of our Christian brothers and sisters.

Father of Mercies, how lovely it is that you should choose to adopt me according to your own sovereign will and grace. Spirit of Adoption, work in me so that I might be a dependable help to my brothers and sisters in Christ. Show me where there is need and lead me to action.

Proverbs 18 – Powerful Words

It hardly needs saying that words can be immensely powerful both for good and evil. We often lap up gossip as eagerly as good news (v8), though only one will do us good. Foolish words betray a foolish heart, and they will bounce back at some point (v6, 7), whereas wise words are "a flowing river, a fountain of wisdom" (v4). As we contemplate generals, politicians, and preachers (both false and true), the full strength of v21 is clear: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." All the more reason, then, to listen carefully before we speak and only to speak truth when we do (v13). More still, we must apply all this truth to our written word too, whether in emails, text messaging, or social media.

Lord Christ, you are the very Word of God, the exact representation and communication of the Father to us, mediated here in me by your Spirit. All that comes from you is truth and wisdom, and I'm grateful to have your words available to read. Help me to choose words that are good and true, deliberate and kind.

Proverbs 19 – Friends & Money

There are many proverbs about the value of friendship and how we are to relate to our neighbours. But v4, 6, and 7 point out that friendship relationships can be complicated or even ruined by money. Wealth can attract a superficial friendship, while poverty can leave you abandoned. In Luke 19:6, Jesus tells us to "make friends for yourselves by means of worldly wealth so that when it fails, they may welcome you into eternal dwellings." Recognising the wisdom in v4, 6, and 7, we can use our wealth to do good to those in need, generating a positive response to the gospel that prompted our generosity. Our giving is an investment in someone else's eternity – earthly wealth for eternal blessing.

Lord Jesus, you gave up your heavenly splendour to come to save me. My salvation cost you dearly. Forgive me for having worldly attitudes to the poor and rich, and give me wisdom to use the gifts you have given me for your glory and kingdom growth.

Proverbs 20 – Leadership

We're not subject to the kind of royal rule that existed when Proverbs was written, but the many wise words given on kings still apply to all levels of leadership – in the home, at work, at church, in society. Remembering that Solomon is the author, v8 is very apt. Sadly v2 reminds more of his son, Rehoboam, whose folly caused the kingdom to split. Certainly, a wise leader will seek to do the right thing and eradicate injustice (v26). The "loyalty" in v28 is usually translated as covenant or steadfast love, and the proverb is ambiguous whether that describes the relationship between God and the king or the king and his people. We embrace the ambiguity and seek love in all those relationships for our blessing.

King Jesus, your reign is beyond challenge and your power is exercised with infinite goodness and perfection. Help me to submit always to such perfect rule. Give us leaders in church who love you and your people with a passion, so that all will follow their lead as they lead us to you.

Proverbs 21 – Liars Lie

Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6) and that the devil is “the father of lies” (John 8:44). It’s no surprise to see proverbs about lying and there are two in this chapter. Verse 6 speaks of someone getting rich through lying; the pursuit of riches you cannot keep at the expense of your external soul is truly a “pursuit of death.” Verse 28 speaks against a lying witness – a perversion of justice that flies in the face of God’s demand for righteousness. These proverbs not only speak against liars, but also warn the wise: The second half of v28 encourages us to listen well to spot inconsistency, discrepancy, and deceit. Be “as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16).

God of all truth, you know the times I have been dishonest with you, with myself, and with others. Lord God, forgive me. Forgive my attempts at self-justifying excuses. Your word is truth and shows me what I truly am. May the Spirit of Truth conform me to Christ’s likeness every day.

Proverbs 22 – Words of the Wise

At v17 we begin a new section of the book, and v17-21 form an introductory paragraph to the “words of the wise” in the clear teaching and exhortation style of Chapters 1 to 9. These “words” are probably based on earlier Egyptian sayings but their inclusion here is certainly Holy Spirit-inspired for our good. That in itself is a reminder that since humanity is created in God’s image we should expect to see wisdom in the world, even among those who deny him. Also, after so many pages of proverbs, we might be glazing over somewhat, so the reminders here serve to focus our attention again: Living in a fear of the LORD under godly wisdom will cause your confidence in his goodness and righteousness to grow.

Righteous Father, your word is true and good, and your commands are for our good. Help me to grow in wisdom, attentive to all you have to say in your word. Show me my many shortcomings so that I might grow in the likeness of Christ, speaking truth and life in every situation.

Proverbs 23 – Drunkenness

While certain people in the Bible were banned from drinking alcohol (e.g. Nazirites in Num 6:3), there no general prohibition. Wine in particular is regarded as a celebratory drink, seen both in the wedding at Cana (John 2) and the feast the LORD will provide at the death of death in Isaiah 25:6-8. And yet, from cover to cover, the Bible denounces drunkenness over and over. So v29-35 are hardly unexpected in a book of wisdom. The loss of sense and self-control described here will be familiar to anyone who has ever been drunk, and it's a state completely at odds with the teaching on godly wisdom seen so far. We recall Wisdom and Folly from Chapter 9: Folly will lead you astray with empty, short-term promises that will never deliver wisdom's lasting fulfilment.

Living God, you give us so much that is joyful, beautiful, and pleasurable, and yet we idolise them and we become so much less that we ought to be. Help me to be wise about my own weaknesses and sinful desires, and to live always in godly self control.

Proverbs 24 – Attitude to Unbelievers

Proverbs helps us to have godly attitude and insight as much as to do good actions. If we are honest, there are times when we do envy the success of wicked people. But v1 reminds us that trouble *will* come to the wicked, and v15 puts it even more strongly by saying, "the evil have no future." So what should our attitude be to the unbeliever if we know their fate better than they do? Negatively, "Don't gloat when your enemy falls" (v17) because that's a clear sign that you have forgotten that you were once the same, saved only by God's gracious intervention in your life. Positively, v11 tells you to "Rescue those being taken off to death" which, in our Christian context, means sharing the good news about Jesus. Verse 12 urges you not to make excuses.

Heavenly Father, there are still times when I wistfully contemplate the easy lives of others who don't know you. Thank you for the wisdom of your word, always pointing me to the bigger picture of your grace.

Proverbs 25 – Living Sacrifice

When someone wrongs us we often want to take revenge, even in the most trivial and meanest of spirits. But that is anything but charitable. Verses 21-22 urge you to 'retaliate' with unexpected kindness and generosity, since such behaviour can bring shame ("burning coals") on the person who has wronged you, and it is to be hoped that you might prompt repentance and reconciliation. This is, after all, how God extended grace to you. Paul quotes v21-22 at the end of Romans 12, saying "as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Rom 12:18). Such wise actions are the outworking of God's mercies in us as his people: So we see here what "living sacrifices" look like (Rom 12:1).

God Only Wise, thank you for showing me so clearly how you want me to live as your child in Christ. Thank you that such living is in response to your gracious forgiveness, rather than in a desperate attempt to attain a holiness far beyond my natural abilities.

Proverbs 26 – Proverbs and Law

Verses 4 and 5 directly contradict each other. They illustrate a key difference between proverbs and law: If these words were laws, they would make no sense but as proverbs they highlight that different situations require different actions. A wise person fears the LORD and knows his commands already, and the path of wisdom steers a good course even through the murkiest of moral choices. Jesus was the master of wise words and actions, confounding his opponents who tried to trick him with awkward questions (e.g. see Matt 22:15-22 on giving to Caesar what is Caesar's). It's clear that such wisdom doesn't come quickly to us but grows over time as we spend time with the LORD and meditate on his word.

Lord Christ, in whom are all treasures of knowledge of wisdom, it is good to learn from you. You knew the laws, you understood the hearts of men, and you were perfectly wise, gracious, and good in everything you said and did. Lord, grant me such wisdom as I meet with you day by day.

Proverbs 27 – Time Moves On

Some people urge an outlook of *live for today* and say you should live every day as if it's your last. But there is always a tomorrow, even if it may be filled with uncertainty (v1). Time moves forward, and daily care today helps us face tomorrow. Indeed, a wise fear of the LORD helps us prepare for eternity with him. Verses 23-27 capture a shepherd's wisdom, working with care every day as the seasons and years pass by. He will provide for himself and his family, knowing that wealth is not forever and that all things pass in the end. Whether at home, in work, or in church, we do well to honour the LORD's wisdom, daily moving forward with him.

Heavenly Father, the eternal relationship you have called me to is my only unchanging permanent joy. Neither time nor circumstance can remove me from your hand. Grant me wisdom to love and care for all those in my life, and to use my fleeting time well for you.

Proverbs 28 – Greed or Grace?

In the Bible, there is no sin in being rich or poor, though attitude towards wealth and poverty reveals much about the state of our heart. This chapter has several proverbs speaking against greed and idleness among those who want to be rich (v19, 20, 22, 25), and others warning against oppression, injustice, and self-confidence among the rich (v3, 6, 8, 11). We can see from these same verses some positive traits of a godly believer, whether rich or poor: Integrity (v6), kindness (v8), discernment (v11), diligence (v19), faithfulness (v20), trust in the LORD (v25), and generosity (v27). Such a heart comes only from the work of the Holy Spirit in us, conforming us to Jesus' likeness since he is all these things and more. May we learn contentment in Christ always.

Father of the heavenly lights, from whom all good things come, forgive me that I cling so tightly to passing things and that my heart is so formed by the materialistic culture around me. Spirit, help me to have the humility and generosity of Christ, and to learn contentment in him.

Proverbs 29 – Anger or Temper?

We have seen several proverbs on anger and there are three in this chapter (v8, 11, 22). Anger is not inherently sinful: It is right to be angry at cruelty and injustice, for example, and God himself most certainly does get angry as we store up his wrath against ourselves (Rom 2:5). But his anger is holy, just, measured, and appropriate; ours might have righteous roots, but tainted by our sinful nature we struggle to contain it. Our reactions are hasty, ill-informed, and disproportionate. Verses 8 and 22 speak of those who revel in anger and stir it up in others, but it is better to control oneself where possible (v11), and better still to dampen unhelpful rage in others (v8).

Lord Christ, you said, "Blessed are the peace-makers" and I would want to be known as that, rather than as someone who stirs up trouble. Yet I pray also for wise, Spirit-led reactions to seeing sin around me, so that I can do right and put right in a measured and controlled manner.

Proverbs 30 – Three or Four

We have no idea who Agur was and this chapter stands out as one of the trickiest to translate from Hebrew. That said, its message remains clear and lovely. Back in Proverbs 3:19 we read, "The LORD founded the earth by wisdom" and this chapter encourages us to examine the wonders of Creation around us in a thousand tiny details, meditating on our God and Creator as the only one who can truly make sense of it all. Between such reflective proverbs there are reminders to keep in God's truth (v5-6), to flee from sin (v17, 20, 32-33), and to live in a material contentment under the LORD's care (v8-9). True wisdom is humble before God and delights in his good and wise works.

Living God, I could not count the things that are beyond my understanding and I'm delighted to know that there is absolutely nothing beyond your knowledge or control. Grant me a humble joy to meditate on you and your beautiful works.

Proverbs 31 – Nobility

The identity of King Lemuel is unknown and it's likely he wasn't even an Israelite. His mother's advice (v1-9) warns the king against the distractions of women and alcohol so that he will reign wisely – principles for all Christian leaders too (1 Tim 3:2-3, 8, 12). Verses 8 to 31 form a Hebrew alphabetical acrostic describing "a wife of noble character" in idealistic, poetic terms. We note two things: (a) She has all the characteristics of wisdom that we have been reading about in Proverbs, especially being someone who fears the LORD (v30). (b) In the Hebrew Bible, the next book is Ruth; though a foreign, destitute widow, she is called "a woman of noble character" (Ruth 3:12). And *that* is beauty.

Gracious God, it's easy to have our heads turned by the world's short-term pleasures. It's easy to compare ourselves with others and feel we need more things. Thank you for calling me to yourself and granting me faith in Christ. Help me to serve you in godly, noble sobriety.

Ecclesiastes 1 – Absolute Futility!

Psalm 113:6 says that the LORD "stoops down to look on the heavens" but the worldview of Ecclesiastes is restricted to life "under the sun" (v14). It is a search for meaning in life from a Teacher whose perception of God is distant and dim. He sees life as "Absolute futility. Everything is futile" (v2), as substantial as visible breath on a frosty morning. He concludes that since everything goes round and round in circles then anything we do is just a futile "pursuit of the wind" (v14). The book is therefore a description of his pursuit of wisdom and meaning in life, justifying his conclusion. But time is not cyclical, it's linear: It has a direction determined by the significant events of God's plan of redemption. There is meaning only in life under the Son.

Heavenly Father, there does seem to be much futility in life. Thank you for revealing your salvation to us, and for the hope you have given in Christ. Help me to keep my heart focussed on him when all around seems such chaos and despair.

Ecclesiastes 2 – Finding Meaning in Experiences

The Teacher (the author, see 1:1) explains how he tried to find meaning in life by experiencing as much of it as possible. While there is pleasure in many things, he found ultimate meaning in none of them. Some activities yield fleeting pleasure (e.g. laughter, sex) while others have more lasting outcomes (e.g. building projects). But even our best work will be passed on to someone else when we die. The Teacher's investigation concludes that you might as well enjoy life even if it has no purpose (v24-26). Job 28 is a poem exploring the earth and humanity's abilities to search out wisdom, ending with words from God: "The fear of the LORD – that is wisdom." When we fear God and know him in Christ, everything has meaning as good gifts from him.

Lord Christ, you bring meaning and purpose as you grant eternal hope to us. I delight in all the good things you give, reminding me of your graciousness and kindness. Forgive me for seeking purpose in worldly things, and help me to put them to good purpose in your kingdom.

Ecclesiastes 3 – Time and Eternity

The rhythmic poetry of v1-8 chimes well with our own experiences of life. And yet since God put eternity in our hearts (v11) we all have an innate sense that there must be more to life. The Teacher knows this, but since his wisdom is restricted to life under the sun he has little comprehension of God or life after death (v19-22). He knows that God is just and righteous, but that justice and righteousness are often absent from the courts of men (v16). His conclusion that people are spiritually the same as animals (v19) is little different from an atheist's outlook, though the Teacher agonises precisely because he knows that there is a God. How thankful we are for the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Eternal God, you exist outside all time and space and yet you intervene in our tiny, time-bound lives with such care and compassion. We all sense eternal things beyond this life, so thank you for opening the way to them in Christ – the way, the truth, and the life.

Ecclesiastes 4 – Envy and Contentment

Verse 4 stands as a powerful commentary on our advert-driven consumer culture. We fill our lives with things we could easily live without, and the pursuit of these things inevitably demands money. Many people are trapped in jobs as they work to pay for things they don't need but want because they see others having them. We work rightly to avoid poverty (V5), but we must avoid being slaves to work (v6). The Teacher speaks of someone who becomes wealthy alone, and wonders what pleasure there could be in that (v7-8). We are made for community and friendship, even in the pursuits of work (v9-12). Our highest contentment is to be adopted into the holy community of the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Living God, I am far more invested in the things of this world than I realise. I do get taken in by adverts and I do envy the lives I see others leading. Forgive me for losing sight of the richness of my adoption in Christ, and teach me contentment in your presence every day.

Ecclesiastes 5 – Speaking to God

The chapter divisions in Ecclesiastes aren't always well-placed, and v8-20 really for a unit with the next chapter on the theme of wealth. Verses 1-7 instruct the Old Testament believer on his approach to God in the Temple, rather like preparing a subject to meet their king. The words are full of appropriate reverence: "God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few" (v2). As those who are in Christ, we dwell in the presence of holiness all the time, and our prayers ought not to have any less reverence than the Teacher's. However, as God's children we also have an intimacy with God that the Teacher couldn't imagine. Our transcendent, imminent God welcomes our heartfelt prayers.

Heavenly Father, holy God and Creator, thank you for the astonishing intimacy into which you have called me. Please grant me such understanding that I would always come with the immediacy of a dependent child while constantly being in awe of your holy greatness.

Ecclesiastes 6 – Contemplating Wealth

The Teacher contemplates wealth in 5:8-6:12 in his search for meaning in life, but sees only unhappiness. He sees how wealth flows up, not down, in society (5:8-9), and how riches never satisfy (5:10-12). Lost wealth is seen as catastrophic, despite the fact that we brought none into life and will take none out (5:13-17). To be content with what we have is a gift from God (5:18-20), and yet the Teacher says that sometimes God will take riches away and give it to someone else (6:1-7), and that in such loss it would be better not to have been born. When we search for meaning by observing life under the sun we will always draw wrong conclusions about God, no matter how perceptive we are.

Heavenly Father, when we look to ourselves to see you we have only a god in our own image, deeply flawed. Thank you that you are so perfectly and completely revealed to us in your Son, the Lord Jesus. Keep me learning and meditating on your word, knowing and seeing you truly.

Ecclesiastes 7 – Wonky Wisdom

Having made many observations in his quest for wisdom and the meaning of life, the Teacher now dispenses wisdom to us. As a perceptive observer of life under the sun, we might expect him to give some helpful advice. Yet we've also seen how dim his understanding of God is, and how distant he is from knowing the LORD himself. So the proverbs of v1-12 seem to fit the world, but v13 sits uncomfortably with us: God didn't make the world crooked; we did. The Teacher's suggestion that we moderate wickedness and righteousness (v15-18) is world away from God's command, "Be holy, for I am holy." So again, we're reminded in v23-29 that all the Teacher's enquiries are under the sun. He neither asks God anything nor seeks his word.

Spirit of Truth, there are often voices in the world that seem to teach wisdom and yet you grant true heavenly wisdom as you work in me. Please continue to reveal more of Jesus to me, the very wisdom of God, and give me discernment to distinguish true wisdom every day.

Ecclesiastes 8 – Life to the Full

The Teacher's limited wisdom "under the sun" continues. Here we are urged to be careful to obey authorities, not because it is right but rather for self-preservation. Verse 14 captures a moral enigma that has caused many people pain and confusion, and as long as life is viewed only to end at death then there is no answer, just as if Christ is not raised then we are to be pitied (1 Cor 15:19). His conclusion in v15 is wholly wrong and actually distant from the fellowship and holiness God calls us into with himself. It is better to read v14 in the shadow of the cross of Christ, giving thanks that he was pierced for our transgressions and that we are credited with righteousness by faith. Then live and enjoy life fully in him.

Lord Christ, you are the good and perfect King over all and it is good to serve you. Risen Saviour, thank you for your sacrificial death in my place that means I can be wholly forgiven and credited with a righteousness I haven't earned. Help me to live life to the full in you, with you, for you.

Ecclesiastes 9 – Seize the Day

Our culture urges us to complete bucket lists of "100 places to go" or "100 things to do" before you die. "Seize the day," we're told. "You only have one life: Live it!" This all sits very comfortably with the Teacher's words in this chapter. For him, whether you're good or bad, wise or foolish, rich or poor, we're all soon forgotten in the oblivion of death, so you might as well seize the day and enjoy life while you can (v10). Such is life under the sun with only a minimal concept of God. Jesus smashed all this wide open in his incarnation, his teaching, his death, and his resurrection. If there is only one thing to do before you die, it is to come to saving faith in the Son of God.

Lord Jesus, in you only there is meaningful life given and eternal life promised. You have given me so much: Help me to know deep contentment in you and to enjoy life received from your hand with joy and gratitude.

Ecclesiastes 10 – Uncertain Futures

There isn't an obvious coherency to this chapter, but a connecting thought may be the uncertainty of future events. Folly and fools will be foolish, but a wise person will tend to do right (v1-4). But things still don't always go as you'd expect (v5-7), and even the normal activities of life can lead to disaster (v8-11, 18). Things become especially precarious when our leaders are fools (v12-17), but the Teacher advises against speaking up (v20) and rather favours living for the enjoyment we can (v19). The Teacher's thoughts drift to the future in the last two chapters, but with an outlook of such uncertainty he is not offering much meaning to us, despite having eternity in our hearts (3:11). In the end, Christ is our only certainty in life.

Lord Jesus, you are from everlasting to everlasting, the Alpha and the Omega, the same yesterday, today, and forever. It is good to know that all my days are in your hands, secure in the here and now and into eternity. May your will be done in my life today.

Ecclesiastes 11 – Investing

Since the future is so uncertain from our perspective, the Teacher's advice is not to put all your eggs in one basket. Invest time, money, and energy into a range of things, not knowing where they will land or what disaster may come (v1-3). Don't try to predict the future that only God knows may seem sensible (v4-6), but as ever the Teacher never actually prays or commits his way to the LORD. His thinking is one of self-sufficiency in an unstable world where God is distant and disinterested, so enjoy life (especially while you're young) and leave nothing to chance. But while we are wise to plan ahead and be prudent, we do so under God's sovereign will, confident of his parental care in Christ.

Lord Jesus, you told us not to worry about the future but to trust in the goodness and wisdom of the Father. You have never let me down. Forgive me for my tendency to self-sufficiency; help me face the future with wisdom and confidence in you, whatever you have planned for me.

Ecclesiastes 12 – All Has Been Heard

The Teacher advises us to "remember your Creator in the days of your youth" largely because old age is so hard: Verses 1-7 poetically describe a failing, ageing body (e.g. losing teeth and eyesight in v3). For the Teacher, if all we have to look forward to is difficult old age and then death, we should make the most of our younger years. He knows nothing of the Holy Spirit renewing the inner person into older age (2 Cor 4:16), of life beyond death, or of resurrection. In this the Teacher is like many moralistic people today. Verses 8-14 are a separate commentary on the Teacher's wisdom, acknowledging some helpful words but also directing us to true wisdom: "Fear God and keep his commands" (v13).

Heavenly Father, yet again I'm driven to give you thanks for revealing yourself to us in your Son, himself revealed to us in your word. As I grow older in this failing body, may I be renewed in my inner self in union with Jesus, ever anticipating the life to come.

Song of Songs 1 – The Ultimate Song

This is the only book in the Bible whose primary theme is love. The phrase 'Song of Songs' is part of the text and has a double meaning: It is a series of songs and poems brought together into a single love song, and it is also a Hebrew idiom meaning "the ultimate song." It is full of garden imagery, reminding us of when Adam and Eve were naked without shame (Gen 2:25), and the language is charged with sensual desire and delight. Is the song about human relationships or is it an allegory for God's love for his people? It is primarily about a husband and wife in passionate, faithful, joyful union, and as we contemplate the depths and challenges of their love we shed greater light on the 'love of loves' God has for us in Christ.

Loving God, thank you for this beautiful book. Thank you that in our sexualised culture you have given us such a positive and helpful blueprint for flourishing relationships. Help me to contemplate these things in a healthy and godly manner, growing to love you better.

Song of Songs 2 – My Love is Mine; I Am His

The woman speaks of her lover in delighted, sensual, satisfied language (v3-6). It seems his very approach excites and thrills her (v8-10). In turn, he calls to her with the language of Spring, the time for new life when the animals mate. That said, none of the erotic language is overtly concerned with procreation; it is all for mutual pleasure. Such intimacy is much more than physical, however, since their desire for one another is rooted not in empty lust but in powerful love: “My love is mine and I am his” (v16). This is why she gives the warning of v7 three times. Our shallow, image-led culture needs to regain the value of life-long, loving relationships.

Glorious Saviour, you have displayed your powerful love to me over and over, and most spectacularly in calling me from death in sin to life in you. Thank you that intimacy is only possible where love is found, and that that is what you have called me to.

Song of Songs 3 – Dreams of Love

It’s difficult to know for sure whether the dream-like language of the song depicts an actual dream (see, e.g., 3:1, 5:2) or is simply a happy meandering of thought. The image of the woman searching the streets certainly feels like a dream, though the troubled anxiety of the search reminds us that their love is being realised in the ordinary, real world. That said, v6-11 seem to portray Solomon as a desirable model icon that any woman would desire, and the dream-like language seems to associate the Song’s man with Solomon, presumably because that is how the man seems to the woman. How can such passion be maintained in the real world? By two people consciously desiring and dreaming of one another even when apart.

Living God, your word urges me to set my mind on things above, to keep my eyes fixed on Jesus. Forgive me that I’m so distracted so easily. Spirit, help me to meditate on Christ, to desire to be with him, and to delight in his presence every day.

Song of Songs 4 – Physical and Exclusive

Back in 1:5-6, the woman was described as having heavily tanned skin. That means she was an outdoor, manual worker and not an indoor, wealthy trophy wife. And yet to the man she is “beautiful” (v1, 7), and his description of her leaves little to the imagination. But the Song reminds us that marital love is physical: He calls for her to come to him and he delights in her caresses (v10). The Song also makes it clear that such is love is exclusive: She is a “locked garden” (v12), locked to all others but open to her one lover, her husband, her man. Our world sings songs of casual relationships, of pornography, and all sorts of sexual immorality, but this husband/wife marriage is truly the Song of Songs.

Lord Jesus, you warned us to beware of our sinful thoughts, conscious of our willingness to sin in our imaginations even if not with our hands. Thank you for healthy relationships, and help me to keep my thoughts good, pure, and pleasing in your sight.

Song of Songs 5 – My Love, My Friend

Verses 1-7 have a dream-like quality whose sequence of events feel disjointed. Intimate bliss is followed by anxious searching, even to the point of attack in the city (v7). The woman describes her man in beautiful language, calling him “notable among ten thousand” (v10). As ever in the Song, her passion is rooted in love that is deeper even than their physical attraction: “This is my love, and this is my friend” (v16). If we raise our thinking to the relationship between Christ and his church, we must ask two searching questions: (a) Can you say of Christ truly, “This is my love, and this is my friend”? (b) If you lost him, would you go out searching with an anxious heart until you found him again?

Lord Christ, you are the fairest beyond ten thousand times ten thousand. By grace you have called me to sweet communion with you, enabling me to dare to call you my love, my friend. Forgive me my faithless, cold heart. Help me to cherish you more and more each day.

Song of Songs 6 – Balance and Exclusivity

Back in Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve sinned, the curse on Eve included the statement, “Your desire will be for your husband, yet he will rule over you” (Gen 3:16). Tension exists between men and women in every society and culture. In the Song, we’re seeing equal and complementary words from the lovers and a glimpse of how Eden’s love was meant to be: She can truly say, “I am my love’s and my love is mine” (v3). In a world of promiscuity and adultery, the man enjoys delighted exclusivity with his bride, choosing her over a harem of queens, concubines, and young women. When Christ’s bride is called to the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, union will be perfect: There will be no more curse (Rev. 22:3).

Lord Christ, I pray for all who are in married relationships in our church, that they might experience such Eden-like love with balance and delighted exclusivity. More, I pray that we would taste more and more of the perfection of life with you. I yearn for that world without curse.

Song of Songs 7 – Dancing and Devotion

The Hebrew text begins this chapter one verse earlier, at 6:13. We can then see that the man delights to see her dancing, which explains something of why his visual delight in her begins at her feet and works up her body. She is a garden of pleasure to him, and her invitation to him is filled with blossom and bloom. Back in Genesis 30, the childless Rachel had bargained for mandrakes with Leah, since they were considered to have aphrodisiac properties; so it’s no surprise to read of mandrakes’ fragrance here in Song 7:13. Most lovely of all is how she has treasured everything up, both “new and old” (v13), holding nothing back of all she is and has in her love.

Lord Christ, you need nothing from me because you are utterly perfect in yourself, and yet it is entirely appropriate that I should hold nothing back in my devotion to you. Forgive me, Lord, that I still cling on to things as if they were mine, when all I have and am are already yours.

Song of Songs 8 – An Almighty Flame

It's possible that public display of affection was frowned upon for couples but not for siblings, in light of v1. Verses 5-7 are the climax of the book, reflecting on love itself rather than just describing it. Though God is not mentioned in the whole book, his name is hinted at in the Hebrew of v6, wholly appropriate given the powerful imagery. The woman wants to be a seal on the man's heart and arm – for his whole person to be permanently marked with her identity; they are one. The climax of the Song is not sex, but relationship. Her brothers want to barricade her sexuality but she has already matured in love (v8-12). The Song is open-ended and ongoing (v13-14), as all real-life loving relationships are.

Gracious God, your word tells us that you are *love, and the evidence given is the salvation you grant in the sacrifice of Jesus. Thank you that I am called from condemnation and punishment into astonishing relationship, into a union with you that will outlast the ages.*

Isaiah 1 – Judgment and Hope

These opening chapters act as an introduction or overture of all that's to come in Isaiah's spectacular book. The appeal to the heavens and the earth in v2 is to the witnesses of God's covenant with Israel. The nation is keeping its formal religion in place but their hearts are far from true worship of the living God. That is seen in their injustice towards the weak (e.g. v17) and in their wicked rulers (e.g. v23). As such, their worship is repugnant to the LORD and he will not accept it (e.g. v13). Yet all this is a call to repentance and blessing, to forgiveness and hope (v18, 27). It should not surprise us, then, to see Christ's work prophesied in this book.

Holy God, there is none like you and yet we are quick to turn aside to other gods even while carrying on with a performance of religious ritual. Forgive me, Lord. Keep me in repentance and faith, ever coming to you in spirit and truth.

Isaiah 2 – Mountain of the LORD

Chapters 2 to 4 form a mini unit, bookended with visions of a glorious future. Mountains are an important image in the Bible, where the hill/mountain of the LORD is the place of his presence (e.g. Sinai, Mt of Transfiguration). So v2-4 point forward to the "last days" when people from all over the world will enjoy peace with each in the presence of God. But v5-22 contrast that future hope with the present reality of a nation steeped in sin and idolatry – a world such as ours today. We do well to repeat Isaiah's call to our own rebellious generation, inviting people to "walk in the LORD's light" (v5) in view of the coming Day of the LORD's judgment (v12). Unbelieving people will even reject the LORD on that day (v21).

Holy God, who may ascend your holy mountain to approach your holy presence? Truly Jesus has opened the way, torn the curtain, and made is possible even for me to come to you. Keep me from sin and temptation. Help me to walk in your light, warning others of their sin.

Isaiah 3 & 4 – Unjust Leaders

The words of judgment in Chapter 2 continue, now with the LORD bringing societal collapse through the introduction of young, unstable leaders (v4). It is a judgment against Jerusalem's leaders who have plundered the poor instead of caring for them (v14-15). The judgment on the women in v16-26 is brought by their habit of flaunting wealth with expensive clothing and jewellery while others starve – a state of affairs still unchanged today in our designer label culture, though now on a global scale. But Isaiah 4:2-6 is a message of hope: God will one day bring cleansing to his people, even to dwell among them as he did at Sinai and in the wilderness in blessed fellowship.

Lord Christ, you have brought the kingdom of heaven to earth, and to serve you is life. Thank you for cleansing me so that I can know you and that the Spirit may dwell in me. Help me to care for others as you do, not lining my own nest but rather having compassion on the poor and needy.

Isaiah 5 – Vineyard and Woes

In v1-7, God's people are described as a vineyard, carefully prepared, tended, and nurtured by the LORD. But the only fruit it bore was "worthless" (v2), despite all the advantages of having the LORD as farmer. Verses 8-23 spell out six "woes" for Israel: They were greedy instead of generous (v8-10), pleasure seekers in the world, rather than worshippers (v11-17), mockers of God without humility (v18-19), twisters of morality (v20), self-sufficient in pride (v21), denying justice for money (v22-23). So v24-30 spell out the distressing judgments that will fall on them as a result of God's wrath. And yet the vineyard imagery reminds us that his anger is only the outcome of his love so shabbily rebuffed.

Holy Father, thank you for this reminder that my sins – even my 'secret' sins – are unbecoming for your children and despicable in the light of your love. While I know there is no condemnation against me in Christ, yet I pray for a heart to live as I ought in delighted holiness.

Isaiah 6 – The Holiness of King Jesus

In 2 Chron. 26, King Uzziah had failed to see that the temple was the earthly seat of the true king, the LORD of Armies who filled the temple with the very *hem* of his robe (v5). For sinful Isaiah to see God in all his resplendent holiness was devastating, and our own lack of awareness of our sin has much to do with our dim grasp of the LORD's holiness. Yet God is gracious and provided atonement for Isaiah (v7), enabling him to speak to and to serve God. The task given to Isaiah would be to continue to preach to a nation who refused to hear (v10), though by God's grace there would be a living remnant who survive (v13). Jesus applied v10 to his own teaching (Matt. 13:14-15), not least as he is the Lord on the throne in Isaiah's vision (John 12:40).

Lord Christ, majestic in holy splendour, forgive me that my meditations on your holiness are so slight that I downplay my sin and unworthiness. Thank you that all my sins are wholly atoned for. Help me speak truth even to hard hearts for your glory, confident that you will save some.

Isaiah 7 – Who Will You Trust?

King Ahaz is here faced with the question, "Who will you trust?" He stands by the aqueduct that brings water into Jerusalem – a strategic vulnerability in the event of a hostile siege. Two neighbouring countries are allied against him. Isaiah arrives with a promise that God will deliver Jerusalem and destroy those nations, inviting Ahaz to ask for a sign. In unbelief and mock piety, Ahaz refuses to ask (v12). But God's grace is unstoppable, and he himself will provide the most remarkable sign – a boy called Immanuel, whose ultimate fulfilment is Jesus (Matt. 1:23). His promised appearance marks judgment against unbelief (v20-25) as well as bringing salvation.

Lord Christ, Immanuel, you are glorified in both judgment and salvation, perfectly achieving justice and forgiveness in your death for me. Thank you for sending the Spirit to lead me to you. I trust in you now for the ever and ever you grant.

Isaiah 8:1-9:7 – A Light Has Dawned

King Ahaz's Judah was under threat from Damascus in Aram (Syria) and Samaria in Israel. We know from 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28 that, rather than trust in the LORD, Ahaz asked the Assyrian empire for help. Here in v1-8 the LORD says that Assyria will indeed come like a flood from the North, bringing gloom and affliction starting at Galilee and working South, with Judah "up to the neck" in trouble (v8). There's a call to fear the LORD only (v13-14), even when trouble comes. Why? Because he will cause a light to shine in the gloom, starting at Galilee (9:1-2), bringing a surprising deliverance more powerful than Gideon's over Midian (v4, Judges 7). Verses 6-7 are one of the Old Testament's highest descriptions of Christ, worthy of deep meditation.

Holy Jesus, Eternal Son, you became that child. The government of the universe is on your shoulders, and your reign over us is good. Forgive me that am so often as untrusting in you as Ahaz was, and help me to know you in your splendour and glory every day.

Isaiah 9:8-10:4 His Anger, His Hand

Everything so far has been spoken against Judah and her king, Ahaz. But Isaiah lived through the end of the northern kingdom of Israel at the hands of the Assyrian empire's invasion. Here, he gives four judgments against Israel, each ending with "In all this, his anger has not turned away, and his hand is still raised to strike" (V12, 17, 21, 10:4). Importantly, judgment will fall because God has been abandoned by the whole nation. So they will be invaded (v8-12), will lose both leaders and led (v13-17), will self-destruct in in-fighting (v18-21), and ultimately end far away in exile (10:1-4). It is clear that the LORD takes no pleasure in all this: He would always have sinners repent and return.

Righteous, holy God and Father, how my sin must grieve you. Forgive me that I simply don't take my sin seriously enough. Father, I would much rather live a life pleasing to you, for which I ask the Spirit's help.

Isaiah 10:5-34 – A Remnant Will Return

Judah's king Ahaz turned down the LORD's help in the face of Assyrian invasion, but here we see that the Assyrians were also under God's command – his chosen instrument of judgment on Israel. But Assyria will also be subject to his wrath for daring to think their success is their own work, defeating Israel and the LORD (e.g. v10-11, 13). In the face of God's promised covenant curse, a remnant of Israel's people will return – not to the land, but to the "Mighty God," the promised son of Isaiah 9:6. As for Judah and Jerusalem, Assyria will sweep across the land right up to Jerusalem's neck (8:8) but won't prevail. The LORD God of Armies will always fight for his own glory and honour and the good of his people.

Mighty God, Saviour of all, you will always have a remnant of humanity who will call on your name. Thank that although by nature I am as rebellious as anyone, yet by grace you called me to turn to you for life and peace in Christ.

Isaiah 11-12 – God is My Salvation

When Ahaz rejected the LORD's word through Isaiah, we read that the LORD would give a sign of salvation anyway: Immanuel, born to a virgin. So again, after chapters of judgment on Israel and Assyria, we read that a "shoot will grow from the stump of Jesse" (i.e. from King David's father). Isaiah was looking ahead to the coming of Jesus, born into David's line, and some of his Eden-like prophecies are yet to be brought about at Christ's return (v6-9). This Christ is the banner around which his people gather from all over the world in happy unity (e.g. v11, 12). We will praise him who is our strength, song, and salvation (12:2, Exodus 15:2), and by his grace we will rejoice that the Holy One of Israel is Immanuel, God with us and among us.

Holy One of Israel, you are indeed the great Banner to which your people gather – because you live. I will give thanks to you, Lord. Your anger against me has turned away and you have comforted me. Help me to make this known to others for their very great blessing.

Isaiah 13 – Babylon Will Fall

Despite the glorious anticipation of Immanuel and God's rule throughout the earth, we can still be overawed by the world around us. In the following chapters we'll see God's mighty judgment on the nations of the world – and draw comfort. But why start with Babylon, since it wasn't the primary aggressor in Isaiah's day? From Genesis 11 to Revelation 19, Babylon is a symbolic representation of worldly opposition to God, reflected in the cosmic language of v4-5. But that symbol is realised in specific, particular times, so Isaiah predicts the fall of Babylon under the Medes (v17, Daniel 5:30-31). Likewise we must recognise that God's judgment will be visited on the ungodly and unbelieving folk of our time.

Lord Christ, sometimes I read these things as if they only apply to other people in other times. Help me to have true spiritual eyesight to see the awful truth about Babylon all around me. Help me to point lost rebels to repentance and faith in you.

Isaiah 14 – The LORD is Over All

The bulk of this chapter is a "song of contempt about the king of Babylon" (v4), a position that would become the most powerful in the world after Isaiah's lifetime. The language used of him is cosmic, alluding to a wicked one far greater even than the king of earthly Babylon (v12-13), and may well be a reference to Satan (see Luke 10:18, Rev. 12:7-9), "ruler of the power of the air" even now (Eph. 2:2). Yet no matter how high and mighty a king or president might become, the grave awaits them all (v9-11) while the LORD continues to reign. Philistia rejoiced when Judah's king Ahaz died (v28-29), yet they would be wiped out by Assyria at the LORD's command (v31-32). We trust not in earth's rulers, but only in the LORD.

Great King of kings, your reign is eternal and far beyond challenge. As I see world leaders strutting about, I'm reminded here that they will all one day face you. Have mercy, Lord, and restrain their wickedness now. May the leaders of this country learn to bow the knee to you.

Isaiah 15 – The LORD's Heart Cries Out

After the pronouncements against Babylon (13:1) and Philistia (14:28), we have a third against Moab (v1) spanning this chapter and the next. Isaiah didn't travel to these places to deliver the messages; they are written for our benefit: (a) They assure us that the LORD is powerful and just and will hold all the earth's nations to account; (b) They remind us not to copy Ahaz who put trust in people rather than God; (c) We glimpse the awfulness of coming under God's judgment; (d) We also glimpse the sorrowful heart of God even as he executed divine justice (v15). In these things we understand yet more of God's passion in sending Christ to suffer wrath for us, and marvel at Christ's loving determination to save.

Holy God, you are righteous, good, and just, and you leave no sin unpunished. How my sin must grieve your compassion and love, and how much you must love me to have done so much to save me. Lord Jesus, thank you for your terrible suffering in my place.

Isaiah 16 – The LORD's Tears

We have the rulers of Moab sending gifts to Judah (v1) in return for refuge from Assyrian invasion (v2-4a). But Judah's refuge is the LORD, so the terms on which Moab may come include being under the LORD's chosen king in covenant love (v4b-5, ultimately speaking of Christ). But Moab are too proud! They want salvation but not lordship (v6), and the result is judgment under Assyria (v7-8). The LORD never takes delight in judging those who reject him, and his own tears mix with those of the Moabite town Jazer (v9, literally "I weep in the weeping of Jazer"). We can expect similar rejections today as we call people to find refuge in Christ; we must therefore pray for his compassion in us.

Father of mercies and God of all compassion, thank you for revealing your heart in this way. There are so many tears in the world, so much pain. People point the finger at you, not seeing your grief at our sin. Lord, give me compassion, and a passion for lost to find their refuge in you.

Isaiah 17 & 18 – Plotting in Vain

This fourth pronouncement is against Damascus, the capital city of Aram (Syria) and also against Ephraim (the largest northern tribe, often used as a synonym for Israel). They were allied against Judah (Chapter 7) and against Assyria, but since Assyria was the LORD's instrument of judgment against Israel this coalition was doomed (V1-3). On "that day" of Assyrian invasion (v4, 7, 9), there would be terrible destruction, though some would return to their Maker rather than their hand-made idols (v7-8). *Any* coalition of nations will fail before the LORD (v12-14) and when envoys from Cush tried to form an alliance against Assyria the LORD proclaimed their grim failure (18:5-6) as sure as Aram/Israel's. "Why *do* the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?" (Psalm 2:1)

Great King of kings, your rule for us is good since you are good and you do good. Countries and cultures conspire against your good purposes but I'm grateful that none can prevail. Lord God, help me to move with your purpose, not against it.

Isaiah 19 & 20 – Unity Only in Christ

By virtue of geography, wealth, and power, Egypt might seem a good ally for Judah and neighbouring countries against the brutal Assyrians. But this fifth pronouncement against them condemns them for their idolatry (v1-3) and predicts their collapse (v4-15). Remarkably, there is still a message of hope and grace "on that day" (v16, 18, 19, 23, 24), when a fear of the LORD will unite Egypt, Judah, and Assyria in true worship. Such unity could only come under one God, united in Christ, while rejection of him will always promote disunity and even enmity. So Chapter 20 describes how Isaiah acted out a prophecy that Egypt and Cush would fall to Assyria, along with Ashdod who trusted them (20:1), leading to captives in dismay and naked shame (20:4-6).

Gracious, Holy God, your word constantly paints a picture of peace, hope, and love for all who will turn to you, along with despair and enmity for those who won't. Yet we so naturally choose rebellion. Thank you for your grace to me. May the Spirit continually turn my heart to you.

Isaiah 21 – Will It Ever End?

After five pronouncements against Babylon, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, and Egypt, we begin another five, the titles of which are more vague. Isaiah's prophecies will broaden out in time and space which is being reflected in his style of words. That said, digging in to each of these pronouncements here we do identify them as being against Babylon, Edom, and Gentile Arab tribes. The background is still Assyrian dominance, and Babylon's fall (v9) is its brutal destruction under Assyria with no help from their powerless idols (v9). Will it ever end? Verses 11-12 call for 'wait and see.' And again, the third pronouncement reveals Arabian impotence under Assyrian invasion. All of these visions are based on the question Ahaz faced in Chapter 7: Who will you trust?

Living God, if it's folly to trust in anything other than you then how doubly foolish to trust in an enemy. You know the future because you hold it in your hand, so I thank you for calling me to such eternal security.

Isaiah 22 – Valley of Vision

Despite the enigmatic title in v1, it's soon clear that this chapter related to Judah at a time when its leaders have left the city after a siege. The best fitting event is the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, long after Isaiah's time (2 King 24-25). Those left in the city celebrated their survival (v2, 13). Jerusalem had trusted its walls and water supply rather than the LORD (v9-11), but they fell. Seeking short-term self-sufficiency, they had the breadth of vision of someone in a valley, failing to see the long-term effects of abandoning the LORD. The upstart Shebna would be removed, and even godly Eliakim would not be able to bear the weight of government on his shoulders. We need Immanuel.

Lord Jesus, you said that apart from you we can do nothing and yet I go about things as if that weren't true. I stumble in the valleys when I should ascend your holy hill in prayerful dependence. Lord, forgive me such foolishness.

Isaiah 23 – Wealth is No Refuge

This second cycle of pronouncements ends with Tyre. The other four had enigmatic titles, being to the Desert by the Sea (21:1), Dumah (21:11), Arabia (21:13), and the Valley of Vision (22:1). The enigma in this pronouncement against Tyre comes at the end. Tyre was a wealthy seaport controlling trade routes from Tarshish in Spain through inland passage to the east. All its power and assurance was founded in its wealth, but the LORD would use the Assyrian invasion to bring it low (v8-9) just as had happened to Babylon (v13). So Tyre was devastated in 701 BC by Assyria, only to revive around 630 BC when Assyria fell before the Babylonians (v17). But since everything comes from the LORD, so everything must go back to him (v18).

Great God of mercies, there is no security in human power, wealth, guile, or even religious passion. There is no place of refuge from your wrath against my idolatry except in you. Forgive me that I am guilty of so many of the same sins as those nations you judged. Guide my paths.

Isaiah 24 – A Polluted World

The five pronouncements of chapters 13 to 20 were tightly bound to specific nations in the light of Assyria's threat. The next five in chapters 21 to 23 were a little more enigmatic, hinting at events in broader time and space. All is under the LORD's command. Now the vision expands wider still, with judgment coming to the whole earth "polluted by its inhabitants" (v5). Even the sun and moon (so often objects of worship) will be put to shame and disgraced (v23) in a day when the LORD is revealed. Amid it all, some will sing praises to God (v14-16a). As New Testament readers we see that Isaiah is looking even into *our* future as we anticipate Christ's return, and it's crucial for evangelistic urgency that we grasp the awfulness of judgment.

Lord Christ, it is sobering to read these words as a description of what is to come to the world around me here today. Thank you for saving me. Lord, may I have an appropriate urgency and intent in evangelism.

Isaiah 25 – Death Swallowed Up

The praises of the remnant of God's people who survive his world-wide judgment (24:14-16a) are given here in Chapters 25 and 26. In language rooted in the events of his day (v1-5), Isaiah's vision soars far beyond our own lifetimes to the day of Christ's return: We will feast with the LORD (v6); he will "swallow up" death's curse (v7-8a, 1 Cor. 15:54) and come to us in gentle intimacy as he wipes away our tears – once, forever. All the praise is to "our God" who saves us: "Let's rejoice and be glad in his salvation" (v9). Back in Chapter 16, Moab's pride prevented them from coming to the LORD for salvation and so they're mentioned here again as representative of all who will miss out (v10-12). The LORD will weep for them (16:9) even as he dries our tears.

Living God, abounding in mercy and forgiveness, thank you that my salvation is all your work of grace. It could only be so, since I am so undeserving of any good thing from you. Thank you that in forgiving me you will welcome me into that great feast, a day of unparalleled joy.

Isaiah 26 – Close Your Doors Behind You

Isaiah's view of the end times at Christ's return continues with a call to "open the gates" to the "strong city" (v1-2). The proud will be brought low (v5-6), but the godly will wait patiently for the LORD (v7-9). Yet no-one may boast in the kingdom of God for we were once as ignorant as any (v10-11) and live only by God's grace to us (v12-13). Isaiah knows that Israel sinned like any other nation and yet, for the faithful, there is anticipation of resurrection to eternal life with Christ (v19), granted from above like dew. The gates of heaven will open (v2) and we will enter and close the doors (v20) – an eternal echo of Noah's ark and the Passover salvation events, safe from God's wrath.

Lord Christ, you give us such strong images of eternal security. I don't deserve such grace or kindness, and you are greatly glorified. Preserve me from ever taking such hopes for granted, Lord, so that I might praise you rightly for the salvation you give.

Isaiah 27 – The Perfect Vineyard

It is no surprise that these visions of our future include a reference to the utter destruction of the sea-serpent Leviathan, that ancient near-eastern symbol of evil and a biblical metaphor for Satan (v1). God's people were a failed vineyard in Chapter 5, but in v2-6 the LORD is at peace with his perfect vineyard, his people perfected in Christ. The LORD disciplined his people, but did not wipe them out as he had other peoples (v7-11). Rather, we will be free of all sin and idolatry with all sin atoned for (v9) in Christ, while all others will be eternally excluded (v11). Verses 11 & 12 use the language of Isaiah's time to speak of the return of Christ at a great trumpet call, when he will harvest all his people to himself to worship the LORD forever.

Holy God, it's amazing that you should plan such things for us. How good it will be to be free from sin and idolatry, free of Satan's temptations and accusations, with sins wholly atoned for and our holiness perfected in Christ. Lord, give me grace to live in that reality now, shining for you.

Isaiah 28 – Cornerstone

Isaiah listed six 'woes' in Chapter 5 and begins a longer cycle of six here. This woe begins with Samaria, the capital city of Israel (referred to here, as often in the prophets, as Ephraim). It is a prophecy of swift destruction under the invading Assyrians (v1-4). Ephraim preferred drunkenness (v7-8) to a sober contemplation of Isaiah's "childish" preaching (v9-10). Judgment would come (v11, 13), and yet in the future great grace also (v5-6). Those in Jerusalem should take note (v14), being so confident that calamity would not come (v15). But God will build his people from the Cornerstone of Christ (v16, 1 Peter 2:6) in dimensions of justice and righteousness (v17), as a farmer ploughs, sows, and harvests as he will.

Lord Jesus, great Cornerstone of your church, building us in justice and righteousness according to your own will, forgive me that I am so frequently inadequate and weak in your kingdom. Lord, help me to take my place as a living stone in the church you are building.

Isaiah 29 – Lip Service and Rebellion

Two more 'woes' are given (v1, 15). "Ariel" means "altar hearth," the place of continual fire for burnt offerings to God. So Jerusalem will actually become a place of burning wrath from God despite their festivals "year after year" (v1-4). God would quash Judah's enemies (v5-8, 2 Kings 16), but they are so spiritually sleepy that they can't perceive the LORD's hand (v9-12). Jesus used v13 to condemn the lip service of Jerusalem in Mark 7:6-7, and Paul quoted v14 to distinguish worldly wisdom from spiritual in 1 Cor. 1:19. The third 'woe' (v15) is against those who think they can hide their plans from God, not knowing that he will turn everything upside down (v17-21) in great blessing to those who honour and worship the Holy One of Israel.

Lord Christ, I know that I am often guilty of going through the motions of worship without truly engaging my heart and mind on you. Please forgive my unworthy lip service and fuel me with a spiritual vitality in both personal and public worship – as is due to your greatness.

Isaiah 30 – Faithless Judah, Faithful God

As we come to this fourth 'woe' we're reminded again of the question Ahaz faced in Chapter 7 and we all face at some time: "Who will you trust?" In v1-7, Judah are condemned for choosing to go back and trust "completely worthless" Egypt (v7). In v8-17 they reject God's word, preferring messages of their own choosing (v10-11) over trusting in the LORD (v15). Yet the LORD is full of mercy and compassion, waiting for his people to turn (v18). When they do, he'll shower them with covenant blessings (v19-26). Isaiah again grounds these truths in the urgent reality of his day and the impending threat of Assyria. For those who trust the LORD, Egypt will be no help (v1-7) and Assyria no danger (v27-33).

Faithful God, you know how often I turn to family, money, work, and all sorts of things for the kind of deep peace that can only truly come from you. Teach me what it means to remain in Christ, and to experience ongoing trust in you.

Isaiah 31 – Like a Lion or a Hovering Bird

The fifth 'woe' takes up Chapters 31 and 32 and continues on the theme of who trust. Faced with an Assyrian threat, Isaiah says it would be disaster to look to Egypt for help instead of the LORD (v1-3). He explains why with two images from nature to describe the LORD's relentless focus on his people: He is like a lion that won't be separated from its prey (v4), or a hovering bird over Jerusalem, watching and protecting it (v5). There will be a supernatural end to Assyria's threat to Jerusalem (v7-9) which we'll see in Chapter 37. But v7 remains key for us: We still look to sources of help that will let us down, failing to perceive the spiritual warfare dimension of our troubles, forgetting the focussed, passionate power of the LORD to protect us from evil.

Heavenly Father, thank you for these images of your passion for your people, your special possession. Forgive me that I repeatedly fail to contemplate or appreciate the intensity of your love for me, even to the point of neglecting time with you and forgetting my utter dependence.

Isaiah 32 – The King and the Spirit

The fifth 'woe' continues to urge us both to anticipate disaster for relying on human sources and to look ahead to the blessing of the kingdom of heaven. Verses 1-8 speak of transformations personally and culturally under the coming King, Immanuel. But v9-14 call on the complacent of Jerusalem to shudder at the horrors their unbelief will result in – Assyrian invasion of Judah. But grace must have the last word, so v15-20 give a picture of Immanuel's kingdom, a place where "the Spirit from on high is poured out on us" (v15), a world of justice, righteousness, and peace. While we live in Christ's kingdom today, indwelt by this Spirit, we must strive to live out this justice, righteousness, and peace every day.

Heavenly Father, your discipline is always good and wise, always pointing towards hope and forgiveness in Jesus. Thank you for kingdom life now, and the prospect of being with you in heavenly perfection forever. May the Spirit urge me to live in that frame every day.

Isaiah 33 – The LORD is our King

Isaiah's six 'woes' conclude here with a message to Assyria (v1), the great threat to all nations in Isaiah's lifetime, along with an assurance of salvation for Judah (v6). Just when Assyria has its peak devastation in Judah, then at just that moment ("now" x 3 in v10) God will act. Such deliverance ought to lead to fear of God even among those who are saved (v14), along with a call to holy living (v15). Ever since Ahaz's trust in Assyria in Chapter 7, Isaiah's words have made the same point over and over: The LORD is king over *all* the nations and will judge all, even destroying death (25:8) and Satan (27:1) in the future. God alone is our hope against all that would oppress us, saving by his gracious forgiveness in Christ (v22-24).

God of all wisdom, you are wise and kind to show us the folly of trusting in worldly powers, systems, and people when we ought to trust in you. You are to be reverently feared, served, honoured, and loved for choosing to save me by the death of your eternal Son.

Isaiah 34 – A Day of Vengeance

Chapter 1 began with a call to the heavens and the earth to act as covenant witness against Judah, and yet in spite of their repeated unbelief God still determined to save through a promised Immanuel. Here, the LORD's judgment is pronounced against *all* the nations of the earth! It's surprising, then, that the little country of Edom should be singled out in v5-17 until we recall that Edom was founded by Esau, the brother of Jacob (renamed Israel). Edom's destruction is a 'type' or model of what will come to all nations who are 'not Israel' (see also Obediah v1, 15, 18). So v8 gives a glimpse of all that will happen at Christ's return, but the victory will be the LORD's, not ours, since we will only be saved by grace, not merit.

Almighty God, you have the might and the right to judge the whole earth. You would be just and good to condemn me for my sin, and yet you chose to save me and for your own glorious Son to be punished in my place. Father, forgive me. Spirit, help me life a life worthy of Jesus.

Isaiah 35 – The Holy Way

Chapters 34 and 35 are two sides of the same coin. The judgment on the whole world in Chapter 34 is matched by the renewing of the earth when God shall come (v4). Since Christ is Immanuel, God With Us, it is no surprise that he quotes v5-6 to the disciples of John the Baptist in Matthew 11:4-6. Jesus is the one who has redeemed us from sin (v9) and who calls us to walk in the Holy Way to unending joy in the city of God (v8, 10). Jesus has begun the last days of earth as we know it, and his return will bring both eternal judgment and eternal life, depending on our knowledge of him in this life. The way of holiness is joyful communion with God, and therefore a good way to live our lives today.

Eternal God, you are gracious to provide a perfect Redeemer who has saved us by grace. Thank you for Jesus, the very way of holiness himself. Thank you for the prospect of unending joy with you. Help me in the way of holiness today, and give me an urgency to point others to you.

Isaiah 36 – "What are you relying on?"

The events of Hezekiah's reign in Isaiah 36-39 have already been given in 2 Kings 18-20 and 2 Chronicles 29-32, but their inclusion here is vital to Isaiah's overall design. Back in Chapter 7, King Ahaz had stood by "the conduit of the upper pool, by the road Launderer's Field," and now the Assyrian official stands on the same spot to parley with those locked in Jerusalem (v2). The Assyrian asks the very question that threaded through the first half of the book: "What are you relying on?" (v4). He weaves truth and lies in an enticing offer, but receives no reply. Hezekiah has already learned to trust the LORD, and in spite of terrible odds against him, he will continue to do so.

Heavenly Father, your word asks, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" I understand the logic, and yet I'm weak and don't always feel the truth of it. Thank you that you are utterly faithful, and teach me to trust you always – in the small things and the large.

Isaiah 37 – "Because you prayed to me…"

This is a spectacular example of faith, grace, and salvation coming together. The situation was as dire as it could have been, with the brutal Assyrians ready to take Jerusalem. But unlike King Ahaz, King Hezekiah was ready to trust the LORD. He openly acknowledged his helpless dependence when he spread that letter before the LORD, while also grieving the potential harm to God's own honour among the nations if Assyria were to take the city. God binds his sovereign purposes in salvation to the prayers of his people, so his word to Hezekiah begins, "Because you prayed to me…" (v21). As ever, Israel's salvation means terrible judgment against those who mock Israel's God (v35-38).

Heavenly Father, how many blessing from you have I missed out on simply by not praying? Forgive my foolish, independent heart, and help me to remember who I am as your child. I can do all things in Christ but apart from him I can do nothing. Lord, help me to keep close to you daily.

Isaiah 38 – Wellbeing and Bitterness

With a little arithmetic, it's possible to work out that this sickness in Chapter 38 happened before the dramatic deliverance of Chapter 37. Hezekiah's near-death illness led him to learn dependence on the LORD so that he could say, "it was for my own wellbeing that I had such intense bitterness" (v17). The king's trust in the LORD then led to the nation's salvation, and in this he became a model of faith for all the people: Faced with the question of who we will trust, we must put our faith in the LORD. Christ's obedience to his Father was unshakeable, and since we are incorporated into his life through union, he is both our example and our enabler in our life of faith.

Lord Christ, you wisely give us trials so that we will learn the obedience of faith, preparing us for the inevitability of hard times in a broken world. Lord, strengthen my faith by your gracious work in me. Help me to live by faith every day.

Isaiah 39 – Faith Subverted

The connection between Hezekiah's illness and the visit from the Babylonian envoys is likely the reason that this material is placed after the deliverance of Chapter 37. Hezekiah saw the threat of Assyria for what it was, but by not consulting the LORD here he failed to see the danger in the Babylonian flattery. Isaiah's attention, then, is switched to Babylon, the nation that will take Judah into exile a hundred years or so after his death (v6). In fact, the tone of Isaiah's book switches so that he is looking into the future more and more, envisaging a coming Servant and Messiah, leading all the way to a new heavens and a new earth. The devil will attempt attack, diversion, and subversion to trip us up, but we must keep looking forward to all that God has in store for his church.

Lord Jesus, this world is full of things that will entice me away from you. You are the First and the Last, and you know my future. Lord, help me to keep my focus on you, trusting you in everything, wise to the schemes of the devil who would trip me up to discredit you.

Isaiah 40 – Comfort, Comfort

The devastating prophecy of exile to Babylon (39:6-7) is met immediately with words of "Comfort, comfort" (v1). Three voices cry out the grounds of comfort: (i) God himself will come to the earth for all humanity (v3-5); (ii) His promises and covenants will stand whatever nations rise and fall (v6-8); (iii) the LORD will come to bring justice and to tenderly care for his people (v9-11). The fulfilment of these words is only truly found in Christ (e.g. see Matt. 3:3), and our "comfort" is often amid turmoil, confident that our God will carry us (v11). Can he do it? The meditation of v12-26 reminds us of who God is in his power and glory. Doubt not his grace: The Strength of Israel will strengthen you (v27-31).

Heavenly Father, all my hopes and fears are answered by the comfort you command. In Christ, you have given us an assurance of the certainty of Isaiah's words. I'm comforted by your immeasurable power applied to my salvation, and by your tender grace to me in Jesus.

Isaiah 41 – Tell Us the Future

The comfort of Chapter 40 ended with the promise that "those who trust in the LORD will renew their strength" (40:31), and here in v1 "the people" of the world are invited to do the same. In a world subject to Babylonian rule, v2 speaks of another ruler from the end who will bring a new power and reign. Unbelieving nations encourage one another with manmade idols (v5-7), but the LORD's message to Israel is full of hope. He calls Israel "my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen… my friend" (v8), promising help and restoration to covenant blessing (v8-20). All this is prophecy and the unbelieving nations are invited to state the case for their idols (v21-24). But the LORD not only knows the future, he *directs* it (v25-29) – and that is real comfort for all who will trust in him.

Living God, while we make plans about this or that for our futures, it is truly comforting to know that my days are in your hands. You are good and you do good, and you work all things for the good of those who love you. Lord, renew my strength today.

Isaiah 42 – Song 1: Light for the Nations

Chapter 41 ended with the emptiness of idolatry, but here v1 responds immediately with news of a "servant." Verses 1-4 are the first of four Servant Songs in Isaiah, though his identity is initially enigmatic. He will bring justice and goodness to the nations, but will do so with a gentleness we don't typically see in world leaders. Verses 5-9 are the LORD's words to the servant, this "light to the nations." He will be the object of song (v10-13) and hope (v14-17). In 41:8, the LORD called Israel "my servant" but here v18-25 make it clear they were not to be the servant of this song, this light to the nations. Matthew 12:16-21 quotes the song in full, identifying Jesus as the servant who will bring justice to the whole world.

Lord Christ, your rule is perfect in righteousness and comes to us with such gentle compassion. You are the light of the world and the only hope for us all. Forgive me that I don't shine for you before others as I ought. Help me to make you known and to walk in your light today.

Isaiah 43 – Redeemer and Saviour

The chapter divisions in this part of the book aren't as helpful as they might be. Israel are described as slaves both to Babylon and to idolatry (political and spiritual slavery), and the LORD is Redeemer and Saviour. Israel's sin would lead them to impoverished slavery (42:18-25), but the LORD's words of redemption, salvation, and gathering from Babylon are some of the most beautiful words in the book (v1-21). But then v22-28 speak of Israel's neglect of the LORD and how they weary him with their sins (to be met with grace in the next chapter). The LORD is relentlessly gracious towards us, despite our ungrateful, neglectful, forgetful idolatry.

Heavenly Father, how patient you are, how gracious and forgiving. Despite all you have taught me about the blessedness of walking in your righteousness, my head still gets turned by transient follies. Lord, have mercy. Keep me close in the Spirit's strength.

Isaiah 44 – Bow Down to a Block of Wood?

Israel's neglect of the LORD in 43:22-28 is answered here by the reminder that they were his chosen servant (v1) and by promises of rich blessings in relationship with the LORD (v2-3). The LORD is our maker, our living King and Redeemer (v8), and v8-23 highlight the utter folly of serving a manmade God rather than the God who made man (e.g. v16-17). We still serve the things we have made: For many, that means being at the beck and call of our tech notifications; others are dominated by sports results; some fret over investments; others fill days with unending home improvements. And all the while the LORD calls to us, "Return to me, for I have redeemed you" (v22). Life to the full comes to us from the only God who has life in himself.

Living God, I confess that I do still look to all manner of manmade things for the peace, security, and contentment that can only be found in knowing you. I allow so many things to distract me. Lord God, help me to remain in living fellowship with you today.

Isaiah 45 – Every Knee Will Bow

Isaiah 44:24-28 is one long sentence on the sovereignty and power of the LORD to *be* the Redeemer of Israel, notably here to redeem them from exile in Babylon. Remarkably, he planned to use the Gentile ruler King Cyrus to achieve it, even calling him "my shepherd" and "anointed" (44:28, 45:1). No-one can question the LORD's good plans (v9, 10) since he is our Maker, our Creator (v12). All this was written before Cyrus was even born and then happened in the days of Ezra (see Ezra 1). We can draw enormous confidence in God from seeing such prophecy fulfilled as we await the return of Christ. The emphasis in the declarations beginning in v14 and v18 is that the LORD will call all the nations (v22) as he does now, and will do once for all at Christ's return (v23-25).

Sovereign Lord, not only do you know all things but you determine outcomes for your glory and our good. Thank you for the Bible's examples of your promises fulfilled, giving such confidence in salvation.

Isaiah 46 – “I will bear you up”

The comparison between the LORD and the Babylonian gods Bel and Nebo is graphically displayed here. As Babylon will fall, its gods will be carried away on carts pulled by animals (v1-2). But the LORD will carry his people all the days of our lives, from the cradle to the grave (v3-4). Can the living God possibly be compared to gods and idols we form with our hands (v5-7)? It’s a ridiculous idea. But this isn’t armchair spectator theology – it’s a warning to all who transgress his laws that the LORD will achieve his plans for judgment (v10-11), while also being a word of encouragement for his people awaiting salvation (v13).

Heavenly Father, in your arms I am safe. What’s more, you carry me all the days of this life and forever. Help me to keep my hands empty of idols, and to raise my thoughts to you when tempted to idolatry.

Isaiah 47 – Fire for Babylon

Although Assyria was the dominant force in Isaiah’s lifetime, he continues his prophecies relating to Judah’s exile in Babylon (aka Chaldea) a century or so later. Here we see that although Babylon was the LORD’s instrument of judgment for rebellious Judah (e.g. v6), Babylon itself would be judged for its own idolatry and wickedness. Portrayed as a woman, twice she says, “I am, and there is no-one else” (v8, 10) – language the LORD has used to speak of himself (e.g. 44:6). Babylon worships herself. No wonder John uses such imagery in Revelation 17 and 18 to describe the world we live in as Babylon, similarly prophesied for judgment (see v 7-8, Rev. 18:17). Isaiah’s prophecy has a double time horizon, both true, and we await the second fulfilment.

Heavenly Father, I sometimes wonder if I am so much part of the Babylon world around me that I don’t really see the extent of its wickedness. Show me the idolatry around me and within me, so that I can flee it and cling more tightly to you.

Isaiah 48 – Leave Babylon

King Ahaz trusted in politics rather than the LORD and we saw how the LORD delivered Judah for his own sake – while also demonstrating power over the nations (Chapters 7-20). Hezekiah did trust the LORD and saw Jerusalem saved from Assyrian invasion – a clear lesson to Judah to trust in God. But as their rebellion would lead to Babylonian exile, so too God would bring about the downfall of Babylon. Such prophecy was meant to cause Judah to see the spiritual dimensions of their captivity and release (v5-6), to return to covenant peace in obedience (v18-19), escaping the fate of the wicked (v22). Exodus and exile imagery (v20-21) combine also for Christians, all called out of the world (Rev. 18:4).

Living God, I know you have not saved me and united me to Jesus only for me to continue to live in the sinful ways of the world around me. Help me to live as a citizen of your heavenly Jerusalem even while I live in this Babylon, bringing praise and glory to you.

Isaiah 49 – Song 2: Light to the Gentiles

Babylon gets no further mention in Isaiah, and we come to a renewed focus on the people of God. Verses 1-6 are the second 'servant song' and again the servant's identity is enigmatic. He says, "listen to me" (v1), as only the LORD does in Isaiah's book. Yet he is clearly human too. This divine man is identified in the New Testament as Jesus, the light to the Gentiles (Luke 2:32, Acts 26:33), and v4 can only be truly understood at the cross. The salvation Christ brings is described beautifully in v7-12, ending in worldwide praise (v13). But as the gospel goes global, Jerusalem feels abandoned (v14)! The LORD answers graciously with promise of blessing as the world will honour the land where the saviour trod (v22-23).

Lord Christ, you were despised and abhorred as you became the servant of all, the ransom for many. You are the light of the world, the hope of us all. Thank you for saving me, and for giving me such hope that I yearn to see you as you are: King of kings.

Isaiah 50 – Song 3: Trust the Name of the LORD

The first 3 verses complete the LORD's words to Israel as he answers their complaint of being "abandoned" (49:14). Israel was an unfaithful wife to the LORD, but he never divorced her (v1): Her exile was due to her sin. Verses 4-11 form Isaiah's third 'servant song': Christ was instructed and obedient to the Father (v4-5), even in the face of cruel treatment (v6-7). Christ's face was set on his crucifixion (v7, Luke 9:51), certain of ultimate vindication and victory (v8-9). So the Servant gives us a choice in this dark world: We can fear the LORD, hear the Servant, walk in his light, and trust in the name of the LORD (v10), or light our own pathetic torches and walk by their light all the way to hell (v11).

Lord Jesus, Son of God, your determined obedience in order that I might be saved is humbling to me even as it glorifies you. Teach me to face my obstacles with such trust, ever obedient, ever confident in you.

Isaiah 51 – Wake Yourself Up

Isaiah 50:10 calls us to listen to the Servant and trust in the LORD. This chapter is a resulting dialogue between the LORD and his people. We're to listen and remember Abraham's faith credited to him as righteousness (v1-3); we're to listen and meditate on the LORD's universal dominion (v4-6); we're to listen to the LORD, not taunts of the wicked (v7-8). The people reply by asking the LORD to "wake up" and bring about the promised Messianic era (v9-11, 35:10). He replies with a reminder of who he is: Our Creator, Saviour, and Sustainer (v12-16), and then tells them to "Wake yourselves up" to the fact that their judgment is over, soon to come to their oppressors (v17-23). We're fools not to listen and trust in the God who rules time and space.

Lord God, it's easy to see wickedness in the world and to be overwhelmed by it. Help me to listen to you in your word and to trust you in your world, confident of your goodness, wisdom, grace and righteousness.

Isaiah 52 – Your God Reigns

Again the LORD tells Israel to "wake up," this time to realise who they are (v1): Though they have known slavery in Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, they remain the LORD's chosen people. Their sin demeaned the LORD's name (v5, Romans 2:24), so they are to wake up and know that the LORD is with them (V6). More still, they are to hear the good news of salvation grounded in the universal truth, "Your God reigns!" (v7). So God's people are to rejoice and be comforted at the LORD's display of "his holy arm in the sign of all the nations" (v10), and having experienced his salvation we too must purify ourselves in union with Christ (v11-12).

Reigning Lord of all, you have chosen me to be part of your people. Forgive me that I slumber in forgetfulness of your greatness, and too often I dwell in a fog of compromise with sin. You have saved me from that, so please help me to live my salvation and adoption out today.

Isaiah 53 – Song 4: Pierced for Us

The fourth and longest 'servant song' runs from 52:13 to the end of Chapter 53. The song has five stanzas. Stanzas 1 and 5 (52:13-15, 53:10-12) both speak of universal victory coming through the Servant's suffering in the divine purpose of God. Stanzas 2 and 4 (v1-3, 7-9) are more personal, highlighting the nature of the Servant's suffering, rejection, and submission to death. The song is structured to draw attention to the theological heart, the very centre of the gospel in v4-6: The Servant's death would provide substitutionary atonement for our sins. By his works, "the punishment for our peace was on him" (v5) – and yet he will live after his anguish (v11). In Acts 8, Philip used this song to proclaim Christ; our own hearts must likewise rejoice to be reminded of Jesus' saving work in the eternal plans of God.

Lord Christ, your work is simultaneously cosmic and personal. You have accomplished all you set out to do but you did so at terrible cost to yourself. I'm sorry for my sins that caused you the pain of punishment. Lord, help me to live in the light of the future your kingdom is bringing.

Isaiah 54 – Covenant of Peace

Each of the servant songs has been followed by a response from God, and both Chapters 54 and 55 are the response to Song 4. This chapter spells out the blessings to come to God's people as a result of the work of the Suffering Servant: First, Isaiah writes of an explosion of growth (v1-3) such as happened after Pentecost (Acts 2). Second, he writes of the deep love and compassion the LORD has for his people with an intimacy unknown under the Old Covenant. So the "covenant of peace" (v10) is the New Covenant in Christ, utterly unshakeable. Lastly (v11-17), the description of Jerusalem's fortunes is so lofty it must refer in its fullness to the heavenly Jerusalem (v12, Rev. 21:19-21).

Lord Christ, Isaiah wrote that there is no peace for the wicked and yet you have bound me into your covenant of peace. Truly the punishment for my peace was on you, in the Father's will, to bring me into intimacy as a child of God. Saviour, thank you.

Isaiah 55 – Seek the LORD

The growth of God's kingdom in Chapter 54 resulting from Christ's work of atonement in Chapter 53 is now expressed in the gospel call to the whole earth. Since Christ has paid the price of our salvation, we may "buy" without cost and enjoy the fullness of blessing Christ brings us in his "permanent covenant" (v2-3). Such salvation is not by our efforts, but by repentance of sin and faith in his work (v6-7). It must be so, based solely on trust in the LORD whose thoughts and ways are so much higher and fuller and wiser than ours. The LORD's gospel is powerful and brings life to the dead, like rain on dry ground (v10-11). And his gospel is joyous good news for the redemption of God's people and all creation. Such a chapter warms our hearts and fuels our evangelism.

Holy Saviour, we seem so wired to think that we must earn our salvation in some way. Thank you for the clarity of your word, revealing how salvation is all your work from beginning to end. Thank you for bringing life to me, and help me to take your gospel to others.

Isaiah 56 – A House of Prayer for All Nations

The startling, far-reaching implications of the coming Messiah are being spelled out here. The law explicitly excluded eunuchs from approaching the LORD or gathering with his people (Deut. 23:1), and yet here they are promised blessing that outstrips parenthood. Further still, "foreigners" (non-Israelites) who love the LORD will also be able to come to him (V6), and the LORD's house "will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (v7). This vision of a future blessing to all nations was what enraged Jesus in the temple (Matt. 21:13), since their trade was excluding non-Jews from worship. This makes the salvation of the foreign eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 so beautiful and remarkable: The gospel comes to us all.

Holy God, no-one but Christ has ever approached you in their own righteousness, and yet by grace you enable us to come. My own sin would exclude me, and yet here I am, in your presence, able to call you Father, being heard because I am loved. Lord, thank you.

Isaiah 57 – The Spirit of the Lowly

The theme of peace has been running through these chapters, not least in Song 4 where we read that "the punishment for our peace was on him" (53:4). Here, those who are declared righteous by faith will go to their graves in peace, though the ungodly don't take that to heart (v1-2). The ungodly will trust in false religion, paganism, and politics (v3-11), but those will prove worthless when finally faced with the LORD (v12-13). Verses 14-21 contrasts (a) the peace that comes to the contrite, repentant sinner who is saved by the gracious condescension of the God who came to save us, with (b) the utter lack of peace that comes to the wicked who refuse God's grace. Only those at peace with God in Christ now will truly rest in peace in death.

Great Prince of Peace, all I see in the world is turmoil and anxiety. Lord, thank you for reconciling me to God by your substitutionary death. I pray for peace of heart and mind every day, and that the Spirit would keep me in that peace to the very end.

Isaiah 58 – Delight in the LORD

It's tempting and easy to have transactional expectations in our dealing with God. We read, we pray, we attend church, we even do good works – all in expectation of blessing from the LORD as if he is obligated towards us. So Israel wonder in v3 why God has ignored his people's requests despite their outward religious effort in fasting. But the LORD corrects them, pointing out the inconsistency between outward their religion and inward devotion to the LORD (e.g. v4-5). He then teaches us how true goodness flows out from a heart for God, delighting in time spent with him rather than seeing his day as wasted opportunity for other things (v13-14). True religion flows out from this God who saves us. You can't hoodwink the LORD.

Holy Saviour, I know I will spend eternity amazed and awestruck in your presence. I also know that too often I go through the motions of private or gathered worship – to my shame, my loss, and your dishonour. Lord God, Spirit, help me to find ever greater delight in your presence.

Isaiah 59 – His Own Arm Bought Salvation

These chapters are preparing us for the revelation of the Messiah so that we will understand the nature of his salvation for us. The LORD is hardly unable to save (v1), but we must see the sin in ourselves and those around us that robs us of peace (V2-8). Some *do* lament their sinfulness, growling like bears and moaning like doves (v11), and then crucially they confess their sins to the LORD without excuse or defence (v12-13). But repentance alone won't save us – we need saving by God, and so Christ came with decisive aggression to destroy the works of the devil (v15b-18, 1 John 3:8). This is our salvation. And what a salvation it is: No less than the gift of the Spirit to us and his words in our mouths.

Saviour God, Holy Father, I am too quick to defend my sin, to point out extenuating circumstances, to make excuses. Lord I sin, and I choose to sin. Father, forgive me. Thank you for the work of Jesus in my life. Thank you for the Spirit in me.

Isaiah 60 – Everlasting Light and Splendour

The four servant songs (Ch 42, 49, 50, 52-53) had us anticipating a servant who will come to bring salvation to the nations through his own substitutionary death and yet see his own length of days. Entrance into this worldwide, expanding kingdom would not be through religious rites but rather through repentance and faith (Ch 54-59). This chapter could potentially fuel a vision of the kingdom that is too literal and far too small: The language of v17-20 is more reminiscent of the heavenly Jerusalem ushered in by Jesus (see Heb. 12:22-24, Rev. 21:23-26). So the flow of these chapters is building for us a wonderful picture of our Saviour whose death brings atonement and forgiveness, and whose life lights up an eternal kingdom.

Great Saviour Jesus, the kingdom over which you reign is glorious precisely because it is yours. Lord, help me to live the holiness of life that marks your city's splendour, and to keep my eyes forward when the issues of this life loom large.

Isaiah 61 – The Messiah

After reading these verses in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus sat down to teach: "Today as you listen, this Scripture has been fulfilled" (Luke 4:16-21). The Father anointed him by the Spirit at his baptism, as the Spirit descended on him like a dove. The Hebrew word for 'anointed' is where we get the word 'Messiah' so this is a real high point of Isaiah's book. The Suffering Servant is the Messiah saviour and we are now in the (figurative) "year of the LORD's favour" until "the day of our God's vengeance" at Christ's return (v2). His people will be lifted up in joy to his glory, renewed and restored by his work in us (v3-7), growing more like him in justice, righteousness, and holiness in union with Christ.

Mighty Messiah Jesus, anointed by the Father to bring good news, thank you for this year of favour, this season of mercy and grace. Forgive me my many sins, Lord, and help me to live as someone in union with you in your holy splendour.

Isaiah 62 – Neither Silent nor Still

The words of the Anointed One (Messiah) in 62:10-11 continue into this chapter. He will keep neither silent nor still as he builds his holy city (v1), and so Jesus intercedes for us as he builds his church today (Heb. 12:22-24, Rev. 21:23-26). The promised exaltation of God's people in v2-5 could hardly be higher as we receive new names and splendour as the bride of Christ. But our calling is high too: We are also called to intercede without rest, giving the LORD no rest until his church is built (v6-7). Such intercession is in line with the LORD's own plans to bless his people (v8-9), to call us out of our Babylon world of sin and idolatry (v10), and to have Christ proclaimed in all the earth until he comes in triumph (v11-12).

Interceding Saviour, it is humbling to be reminded that you pray to the Father for us, and that the Father delights in us because we are in you. I pray that the Spirit will ever prompt me to pray for the growth, holiness, and passion of your people as we live in this fallen world.

Isaiah 63 – You, LORD, are our Father

We have rejoiced to read of our Suffering Servant and Messiah saviour whose work has ushered in a new kingdom of peace, though we still await the final outcome at Christ's return. Here, v1-6 show this same Lord having completed the other side of his salvation work – the final judgment on the world on the day of his vengeance (v4, 61:2). As we come to the end of the book, Isaiah first reminds us of the LORD's great love and acts towards his people (v7-14), and then leads Israel in prayer from v15 into the next chapter. Isaiah calls on God to look down on Israel with mercy, as he freely acknowledges how far they have turned. Verse 14 reflects how God gives us over to our sins; only grace *could* save us.

Lord Christ, this portrait of you is majestic and terrifying – a timely reminder of who it is I'm speaking to and who has saved me. You are gracious and faithful, and I thank you that you intervened to soften my hard, unbelieving heart. More, I thank you that I am now a child of God.

Isaiah 64 – Righteous Acts like a Polluted Garment

Isaiah's prayer for Israel continues with a desperate desire to see the LORD doing wonders for his people as he did at the time of the Exodus (v1-4). Yet Isaiah is under no illusions about the nation's sin that has made them so unworthy to be near God (e.g. v6). He confesses their sins without caveat or excuse, knowing that the LORD is right and just in his actions. But Isaiah also knows that God is gracious, that he loves his people, and that he makes and keeps covenants, so in v8-12 he begs for the LORD's compassionate mercy on an undeserving people. After the glorious vision of all that Messiah would bring, Isaiah's lament over Israel's sin is passionate and appropriate. We do well to pray likewise.

Lord Jesus, so often I feel that even my best efforts for you are tainted with unbecoming self-interest and pride. At other times, I linger too long over sinful thoughts. If you counted this against me, I would have no hope. You are my hope, my strength. Forgive me once again I plead.

Isaiah 65 – New Heavens and a New Earth

The LORD answers the prayer of the previous two chapters and it's a key text behind Romans 9-11. In Romans 10:20-21, Paul applies v1 to the Gentiles as the kingdom of heaven is extended worldwide under Christ, but he applies v2 to Israel who rejected his covenantal love (later the Messiah) over and over (v3-7). Yet within Abraham's blood descendants there will always be a remnant saved by faith in Jesus, though unbelievers will remain condemned (v8-12). The difference between believers in Christ and unbelievers irrespective of ancestry is spelled out in v13-16. So Isaiah reveals the spectacular future that God has in store for his believing people: A new heavens and a new earth (v17), eternally secure, joyful, and peaceful in perfect relationship with the LORD (v24).

Wise and holy God, you are to be worshipped and revered for your great patience and perfect justice, your infinite grace and beautiful promises. Saviour, thank you for including me among your people who will one day walk with you on that new earth. Help me to walk with you today.

Isaiah 66 – Peace Like a River

This final chapter is a call to honour the LORD as he truly is: Our Creator and Lord of the whole earth. No manmade temple could hold him (v1), and pagan manmade religions are abhorrent to him (v3). We do well to tremble at his word (v2, 5), since he is as sure to bring about salvation for his people *and* judgment against the wicked as a pregnancy will end (v6-11). His tenderness to his own (v12-14a) is matched by his fury against all unbelievers (v14b-16). The final universal state is spelled out in the vocabulary of Isaiah's time in v18-24: Peace and security with the LORD himself for all his people from all nations in a new Creation, but eternal torment for all others. We choose our destiny in this life.

Great Holy One of Israel, you have promised so much in these words, and yet I know the reality will be bliss beyond imagination. You are life; you are the end of the journey. Gracious God, thank you for Jesus – Immanuel, Suffering Servant, Messiah Lord and Saviour.

Jeremiah 1 – Appointed by God

There are three things we'll note in this opening chapter of Jeremiah, the longest book in the Bible after the Psalms: (a) Jeremiah lived through Jerusalem's worst times and the three kings of Judah in v2-3 are key components in the history of the times. In fact, Jeremiah keeps circling back to key moments in time rather than presenting his material chronologically; (b) That said, v10 outlines the overall shape of the book with much included to tear down Israel's idolatry and apostasy before later chapters begin to bring a message of hope in Christ; (c) Lastly, we can hardly fail to see Jeremiah's reluctance to take up the role the LORD appointed him to before the prophet was even born (v5-6). Likewise, we don't get to choose the times we're in; we're to witness where we are.

Living God, the idolatry and lostness around me is no different from your ancient people. You knew me before I was born, and you placed me here, with these gifts, in the place and time of your choosing. I confess to sharing Jeremiah's hesitancy: Help me to witness for you where I am.

Jeremiah 2 – Fountain of Living Water

After a brief recollection of Israel's early blessings as "holy to the LORD" (v1-3), the LORD spells out Israel's spiritual bankruptcy in Jeremiah's time. The LORD's special possession had made themselves "worthless" by following "worthless idols" (v5). The situation is summed up by the vivid imagery of v13: "They have abandoned me, the fountain of living water, and dug cisterns for themselves – cracked cisterns that cannot hold water." It's the double tragedy of apostasy and idolatry, fuelled by a lusty passion for novelty (v22-25) and spiritual ignorance (v26-28). So they will receive covenant curse instead of blessing, even to exile (v37-38). We must be more watchful for the idols we build for ourselves today.

Living God, great Fountain of Living Water, I know it must grieve you to see the idols I have built and how I choose to be ignorant of my idolatry. Saviour, keep me in close dependence and fellowship, ever delighting in your presence, conscious of your love and help.

Jeremiah 3 – Return, Return, Return

The LORD's relationship with his people is described with the images of father/son and husband/wife. These are powerful, relational terms, highlighting that our sins are not like impersonal parking offences; they are the deep betrayal of wayward children or a promiscuous wife. Young King Josiah was a godly man who brough great reform to Judah and into Israel (2 Chron. 34-35), but we see here how most of Judah didn't turn in heart (v10). What does the LORD require of them? That they "acknowledge [their] guilt" (v13) and return to him (v12, 14, 22), and he will bring a future where no-one will need the ark of the covenant (v16) since the LORD will made his throne among his people (v17, Rev. 21:22).

Holy God, how gracious and patient you are, how loving and faithful to wayward sinners like me. Thank you that as I confess my sin here now, you are faithful and just to forgive me. I thank you as much for what you have saved me to as all you have saved me from.

Jeremiah 4 – The Earth Will Mourn

These opening chapters are early prophecies of Jeremiah, given before the tumultuous events of invasion and exile ever happened. Judah was at peace, at ease, and Jeremiah's warnings would have sounded hysterical nonsense to many in Jerusalem. But to his later readers in exile, such unheeded warnings would have sounded like heart-breaking missed opportunities for Judah to turn to the LORD (e.g. v1-4). No doubt plenty of false prophets proclaimed "Peace," prompting Jeremiah's own confusion in v10 (he would confront false prophets later on). The words of judgment here are almost 'un-creation' (v23-26) reflecting the depth of punishment, while we also see the LORD's grief expressed in Jeremiah (v19-21). Must we likewise *see* Christ's return before we truly believe it?

Eternal God, your word shows over and over how you accomplish all your holy will – both in judgment and grace. Forgive me that I don't live with the pressing reality of your judgment on those around me at Christ's return. Help me, as you helped Jeremiah, to speak your truth.

Jeremiah 5 – An Appalling, Horrible Thing

These ancient words of judgment resonate pointedly and powerfully with our own society. The LORD's name is used lightly (v2), our leaders don't fear him (v5), and our culture is filled with competing passions for anything but God (v8). The LORD's question, "Why should I forgive you?" (v7) is terrifying in pitiless logic: All judgment is deserved. Rich and powerful people love their riches and power, with greed and deceit used to maintain social inequality that is abhorrent to the compassionate heart of our God (v27-29). But even more terrifying is this: "My people love it like this" (v31). Jeremiah's role was the same as ours today: We're to declare and proclaim God's honour to a sinful world (v20-23).

Holy God, you must surely grieve at all you see in this sinful society of ours. I'm uncomfortably aware that I'm not as appalled at cultural wickedness as I ought to be. Lord, give me greater spiritual sensitivities, and fire me up to speak to others in your name.

Jeremiah 6 – "Find Rest for Yourselves"

While Jeremiah's preaching was for those in Jerusalem to come to repentance for their idolatry and apostasy, the written book was compiled for the benefit of the exiles in Babylon. It spelled out for them the reason for the exile in devastating clarity, and they must have deeply regretted not heeding the LORD's calls to "find rest for yourselves" (v16). Likewise, there will be many who regret ignoring Christ's invitation to find rest in him (Matt. 11:28). But unbelief is a choice: "We won't listen!" (v17). By Chapter 6 our heads might already be spinning with Jeremiah's dark message, but we must see that warning of judgment is a gracious call to repentance from the LORD who grieves over rebellion and unbelief.

Holy Father, all you do is righteous and good, and your warnings of judgment demonstrate great patience and grace. Thank you for calling me to your rest. Help me to be clear about sin and grace for others to come to Jesus for rest, to your glory.

Jeremiah 7 – The Temple Sermon

Jeremiah's words so far date from his early ministry in the time of King Josiah, but we leap forward 18 years into the reign of King Jehoiakim for this Temple Sermon in 609 BC (an occasion we'll return to in Chapter 26). He preached against their moral failure and sham religion; their trust was more in the Temple and ritual than in the LORD who dwelt among them. The tabernacle's place at Shiloh was long abandoned – and that would happen to Jerusalem's temple too. Jeremiah was not to pray for them in their systematic, domestic idolatry (v16-19); it was too late for them. The imagery of judgment in 7:27-8:3 would be unbelievable to the first hearers, but heartbreaking to Jeremiah's readers in Babylon. The crowd's response to Jesus quoting v11 was no less furious (Matt. 21:13).

Gracious Lord, still no-one wants to hear your warnings or turn to know you. Still there is false worship and lip service. Have mercy, Lord, and revive your church so that we will be bolder and more effective in making you known. Help me to see and to smash the idols in my own life.

Jeremiah 8 – "My Joy has Flown Away"

After the Temple Sermon in Chapter 7, Chapters 8-10 continue in the prophetic tone of Chapters 4-6. Yet here we see the pain, hurt, and distress that arise from idolatry – with a particular emphasis on Judah's leaders. They thought themselves wise, yet "rejected the word of the LORD" (v9). In the end, all they have is hopelessness as they await their destruction (v14-17). But theirs is not the only distress. Their cry brings pain to the heart of God and to his prophet Jeremiah, just as the rebellion of later Jerusalem would bring tears to Jesus as he approached it on Palm Sunday (Luke 19:41-44). The real fruit of idolatry is grief.

God of all compassion, how my sin must grieve you. You have saved me from sin's curse, united me to Jesus, and brought me into familial intimacy. Gracious Father, please forgive the idolatry I continue to cling to. Help me to live in joyful dependence on you alone.

Jeremiah 9 – Boast in the LORD

Jeremiah is sometimes known as the weeping prophet on account of his many tears shed. But as in v1 here, it's not always clear who is speaking – Jeremiah or the LORD. In v7-10, we can see that it's the LORD who speaks, declaring both his just action against Israel's sin (v9) and his deep grief at the necessary judgment (v10). Again and again the Bible is at pains to reveal the horrors of judgment, and v22 is a horrible summary of all that's been said. Yet the Bible also affirms the boundless grace of the LORD, and if this life holds any opportunity for boasting it is in a knowledge of the love, justice, and righteousness of the LORD – a knowledge granted by grace, worked in circumcision of the heart (v25-26).

Saviour God, if you asked for only outward religion you would be worthy of our best, and yet you have stunningly completed all that is needed to satisfy your love, justice and grace at the cross of Christ. May I lean always to share your terrible grief at the sin in me and others.

Jeremiah 10 – The LORD is the True God

This lively chapter has two parts, the first of which is a poem oscillating between images of idols and the LORD. Idols are as powerless as "scarecrows in a cucumber field" whereas the LORD's "name is great in power" (v2-7); idols are manmade objects but "the LORD is the true God" (v8-10); idols waste away and perish, but the LORD "is the one who formed all things" (v14-16). Our own blindness to our idolatry cuts us off from enjoying deeper knowledge of the LORD. Verses 17-25 switch to a scene of miserable exiles gathering their belongings to troop out of Judah, lamenting their condition and praying for the LORD's judgment on the nations. Such misery is the fruit of the idolatry of v1-16.

True God, Living Creator, it has been said that our hearts are idol factories, and I know it to be true for me. Lord, what joy of experience of you have I missed out on through leaning on lies and promises no stronger than a spider's web? Teach me more of you.

Jeremiah 11 – Conspiracies

Chapters 7 to 10 dismantled Judah's misplaced trust in its temple and idolatry. In Chapters 11 to 20, we read Jeremiah's own personal dealings with the LORD, firstly on covenant themes in Chapters 11 to 17. The LORD commanded Jeremiah to preach the warnings of covenant curse to Judah (v1-8) and then spoke of judgment to come on them for their conspiracy of apostasy and idolatry (v9-13), a judgment from which there will be no relief (v14). In v18-20 we read the first of six so-called "confessions of Jeremiah" – laments to the LORD. Jeremiahs' own neighbours and kin have a conspiracy to silence him (v21, 1:1, 12:6). If we speak the LORD's truth to a world hostile to God, we should expect to feel the pain of the LORD's rejection through us.

Lord Christ, your word rightly identifies our natural inability and unwillingness to submit to your holy rule. Saviour, you have called me to serve in your kingdom, so I pray that you will equip me to hold out your truth faithfully and strongly, even as you work through me.

Jeremiah 12 – Wrath and Compromise

Verses 1-4 are Jeremiah's second lament and it hold the deep-rooted pain that many believers have felt: "Why does the way of the wicked prosper?" – not least because Jeremiah suffered for preaching truth. The LORD's response actually warns Jeremiah of worse to come (v5-6) and then spells out the tension between the LORD's justice and his compassion. His people have sinned and made themselves his enemy, earning his covenant curse (v7-13), so they are already suffering some of the judgement Jeremiah longed to see. Yet the LORD is slow to anger and full of grace, so his patience provides time for repentance. He will always welcome anyone who turns to him (v14-17, 2 Peter 3:8-9).

Holy God, I thank you for your patience and grace towards me. Father, as I see the wicked prosper I know that that grieves you and I praise you for the patience that stays your hand of judgment. Lord, use me to speak your compassion to the lost.

Jeremiah 13 – Unwearable People

Rather than being underwear, the garment Jeremiah bought was probably a splendid, close-fitting item to be worn as a status symbol for all to see, such as a priest or a king might wear. He would look smart to everyone. But once it had rotted by burial it became unwearable. The key observation is in v11: Israel were to be such a garment to the LORD himself. Israel were to be intimately bound to the LORD for his "fame, praise, and glory" (v11), just as the church is to be today (Eph. 1:12,14). Do we make the LORD attractive to the world? Or are we so like the world that the LORD would regard us as unwearable? As v15-27 show, the LORD will not tolerate sin in his people forever.

Living God, every revelation you give of yourself is perfect, and yet my sin and selfishness warp the display of your glory from your church to the world. Spirit of God, help me and our church to live in such union with Christ that unbelieving people would turn and praise you.

Jeremiah 14 – Do Not Pray

In v1-6 we read of the effects of God's judgment on both man and beast in Judah, and in v7-9 the people cry out to the LORD. But the verdict in v10 is, "the LORD does not accept them." Worse still, in v11-16 Jeremiah is told not to pray for Jerusalem and that their false prophets of peace will come under the city's destruction. The pattern broadly repeats, with lament and petition in v17-22 being met with a refusal from the LORD to listen: It is time for judgment (15:1-9). Why? Because the sins of the people have reached full measure. Even the LORD is moved to say, "I am tired of showing compassion" (15:6) in the light of their idolatry. To have a day of judgment, there must be an end to patient compassion.

Lord God, you are the Father of mercy, abounding in compassion, and yet you won't be mocked by anyone perpetuating a life of sin. If not for your mercy, I would have no hope, so I thank you for the great compassion you have shown me in Jesus.

Jeremiah 15 – "Like a mirage"

Back in 2:13, Jeremiah recorded the LORD describing himself as the "fountain of living water," and yet here in v18 Jeremiah says to God, "You truly have become like a mirage to me." It's one of the most shocking prayers in the whole Bible, coming in Jeremiah's third lament (v15-18). Although he had once found the role of prophet to be a joy (v16), being constantly rejected and abused for years has brought him to emotional rock bottom. He is angry with everyone (including God) and calls for vengeance (v15). Though his words may appal us, he is at least still praying. We thank God for his reply: He calls Jeremiah to repent of his self-pitying verbal attack, and to keep going in the same assurance of protection that the LORD gave him at the start (v19-20, 1:18).

Holy Father, you are good and wise and kind, even when we say foolish things to you. When I grow weary or want to shirk the works you have prepared for me, call me back to Jesus, to the start, to your promises. Lord, hope of Israel, give me strength.

Jeremiah 16 – Withdrawal From Judah

In the culture of his time, it was unthinkably strange for Jeremiah not to marry (v2). It was also unspeakably rude not to attend funerals or weddings, and yet the LORD instructs Jeremiah to stay away (v5, 9). Jeremiah's conduct mirrors his message from God: "I have removed my peace from these people as well as my faithful love and compassion" (v5). The people still claim ignorance of their sin and Jeremiah has to recount their intergenerational idolatry and apostasy yet again (v11-12). Yet Jeremiah can speak of a time when "the nations" will come to the LORD, though Israel rejected him (v19). In our union with Christ, our message and conduct should unify as we take his gospel to all nations.

Lord Christ, forgive me that my sinful self-centredness means that I fail to live out your commands to love. I pray for the Spirit's help to change me so that there is alignment of gospel message and conduct, and so that others will be attracted to you as they experience you through me.

Jeremiah 17 – Hearts of Deceit

This book of Jeremiah is a collection of sermons and prophecies edited into one volume, and this chapter demonstrates that well. The connecting theme is the heart, which in Hebrew is more about the human *will* than emotions. So human will is locked onto idolatry (v1-4), determined to trust itself (v5-8), and utterly deceitful (v10). Yet the LORD cannot be deceived, and he alone knows us truly (v11-13). Jeremiah's fourth lament (v14-18) is a prayer for vindication of his message: It may sound harsh to us, but he's praying in line with what God has said through him. Why draw attention to the Sabbath in v19-27? Again, it's a heart/will matter: Will you love the LORD? Will you love your neighbour? Or do you love yourself and your money more?

Holy Spirit, truly you know my heart far, far better than I know do. You must be grieved so often as I try to deceive myself and others as I choose to sin. Help me to fully experience the joy of union with Christ, living a life wholly incorporated into him who is Truth and Life.

Jeremiah 18 – The Potter and the Clay

A potter may find one lump of clay more suited to one shape than another. The outcome is the potter's choice, but the decision is related to the properties of the clay. So with God as the potter and the nations his clay, the response of a nation to God has a part to play in his dealings with it in his sovereign purposes (v1-12). Israel were stubbornly opposed to the LORD and locked into their "worthless idols" (v15), leading to a societal rejection of God's words through his prophet, and so to "plans against Jeremiah" (v18). After all Jeremiah's prayers for Judah (v20), he now prays the LORD's own words of judgment on them in his fifth lament. Still we must pray for our enemies; vengeance is the LORD's alone.

Sovereign Lord, you are free to deal with this country as you see fit in your perfect justice, wisdom, and goodness. It's clear that this is not good clay. But I will follow Jesus, not Jeremiah, and pray for your mercy and forgiveness in our community, region, and country.

Jeremiah 19 – Shatter the Jar

Somehow, Jeremiah gathered a band of the very elders and priests who were now plotting against him (18:18) at Jerusalem's rubbish dump, the Ben Hinnom Valley. While chapter 18's image of the potter and the clay suggested hope for Israel, their complete apostasy, idolatry, and wicked practices had become locked in and hardened, like a finished clay pot. Smashing the pot in Jeremiah's hand, he pictured the irreparable damage that would come to the unrepentant nation. It was a devastating message, and a very sad day. Worse yet, he then went to the courtyard of the LORD's temple to cry out the same message for everyone to hear. It was a dangerous thing to do, but obedience to God sometimes is.

Holy God, your judgments are true and just. Your power is terrifying, and yet your grace and mercy are abounding. Lord, I pray for your grace to my unsaved loved ones, that you won't count them as hardened pots, but will yet work them to bring them to repentance and faith.

Jeremiah 20 – Fire Burning in my Heart

Chapters 11 to 20 chart Jeremiah's personal dealings with God as he fulfils his role of God's prophet. His graphic potter/pot imagery landed him in stocks at the temple, seemingly making a mockery of his preaching. Such excruciating humiliation underpins the last of his six laments to the LORD in v7-18. Once again, Jeremiah holds nothing back in his raw prayer. He feels he can't win since he suffers from people if he preaches but suffers within if he doesn't (v9-10). Although Jeremiah knows that God is worth our "Hallelujahs" (v13), he still feels the sharpness of rejection and shame. He is a shadow of the man of sorrows to come, though Jesus' loving purpose never drove him to self-pity.

Saviour, if I'm honest I rarely experience the need to tell others your gospel as a fire burning in my heart. Forgive me for my sloth and dullness of spirit. Holy Spirit, show me more of the grace that has been extended to me in Christ so that I might be more fervent in sharing it with others.

Jeremiah 21 – Arrogant to the End

Zedekiah was Judah's last king before the final exile to Babylon (1:3), so we've got quite a change of scene in Chapter 21. In fact, 21:1 to 23:8 is a collection of sayings against kings of Judah in Jeremiah's lifetime after the godly King Josiah. Why start this section with the last king? Because it highlights the blind arrogance of Judah's attitude to God, ridiculously hoping for a miracle despite their apostasy and idolatry (v2). But the warning of v5 is devastating: The LORD himself will fight against his people. Yet despite the kings, priests, and prophets and their wicked godless leadership, there was still a choice of life or death offered to the people (v8, Deuteronomy 30:15).

Living God, it is comforting that while we are part of a godless society yet you have mercy on us individually. My sin would put me at enmity against you, and yet you have brought gracious and complete reconciliation to me in Christ. Saviour, thank you.

Jeremiah 22 – The End of David's Line?

Verses 1-9 could have been spoken against any of the kings of Judah after the godly king Josiah's death by the Egyptians. So Jeremiah speaks specific words to each of the kings: Josiah's son Shallum (aka Jehoahaz) was deported to Egypt and never returned (v10-12). Pharaoh Neco installed Jehoiakim who was selfish and godless and doomed for judgment (v13-23), so very unlike Josiah (v15-16). Coniah (aka Jeconiah or Jehoiachin) reigned briefly between Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, and was part of the exile to Babylon in 597 BC. He had many sons, but none would reign as king again in Jerusalem (v30). For us, however, he is of supreme importance as he carried David's line to Jesus (Matthew 1:11).

Sovereign Lord, Jeremiah served you through such turbulent times and yet it's clear that you accomplished your purposes with wise precision. Thank you that I can know whatever goes on in the world today you remain sovereignly in control, and that evil rulers will give account to you.

Jeremiah 23 – The LORD is our Righteousness

The previous two chapters have condemned Judah's kings after Josiah, and the finality of 22:30 seemed to put an end to the promise of a king to rule forever in David's line (2 Samuel 7). But here that promise is amazingly reinstated – and he will be a king even better than Josiah (v5, 22:15). Zedekiah's name means "The LORD is My Righteousness" but Christ is "The LORD is Our Righteousness" since we live before God in union given by credited righteousness (v6). Such radical spiritual transformation must necessarily result in moral newness of life, so v9-40 condemn the false prophets and priests whose teachings were not from the LORD and did not call for turning from sin (v22). We need church leaders who know and obey God's word before daring to teach it.

Lord Christ, your appearing was never in doubt, though it often seemed so unlikely in human terms. Thank you that my righteousness – my very grounds of hope of life with you – is actually from you. I pray that I might live out that righteousness, and that our church leaders would teach it.

Jeremiah 24 – Good Figs and Bad Figs

Chapters 24 to 29 all begin with an identifying date, but as ever with Jeremiah they're not in chronological order. The scene in this chapter is 597 BC. Jehoiakim has died (quite possibly murdered) and his son Jehoiachin (aka Jeconiah or Coniah) promptly surrenders Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar. This is a good strategic move after Jehoiakim's foolish rebellion against Babylon. The royal family and over 10,000 of Jerusalem's elite are deported to Babylon, leaving others with Jerusalem and its temple pilfered but still standing. The shock of this chapter is that God's grace and blessing go with the exiles (good figs), while his curse remains on those in Jerusalem (bad figs). Newly appointed Zedekiah will continue their wickedness (v8-10).

Heavenly Father, we're so quick to interpret your actions for our own favour instead of humbly waiting on you. Spirit, grant me an ever-deepening wisdom to know myself and your will for me in Christ.

Jeremiah 25 – Glimmer of Grace

Chapters 7, 25, 36, 45, and 46 are all set in this pivotal year, the "fourth year of Jehoiakim", the "first year of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon" (v1). It was 605 BC and the land was under Egypt since Pharoah Neco killed Josiah in battle in 609 BC. Jeremiah had prophesied to a wilfully deaf nation for 23 years as just one of God's "servants the prophets" who had called Israel/Judah to repentance (v4). So now the LORD would send "my servant Nebuchadnezzar" (v9) to be a voice that Judah could not ignore. Judgment would come to Judah and all the godless nations (v17-25) and crucially to Sheshak (Babylon) too (v26) – even to "the ends of the earth" (v31). Yet news of limited exile is a glimmer of grace (v11-12).

Sovereign Lord, your goodness and wisdom aren't compromised even as you fulfil your purposes through men like Nebuchadnezzar, Pilate, or Judas, and they are no less culpable for their sins. Lord, I pray for glimmers of grace in this country, even as it drifts further from you.

Jeremiah 26 – Back-to-Front Court

We're back in 609 BC, Jehoiakim's first year as king (v1). The land is under Egyptian rule, Jehoiakim having been installed by Pharoah Neco. Verses 4-7 are an abbreviated version of the 'Temple Sermon' recorded in Chapter 7. The response shown here is absolute outrage. A court is hastily convened (v10) and Jeremiah is on trial for his life. But what is really in the dock is whether he speaks the word of the LORD or not. Using case law from Micah and Hezekiah (v17-19), they decide not to execute Jeremiah (though Uriah's fate in v20-23 shows that the threat was real). They agree that Jeremiah spoke God's words, but they refuse to apply it. Jeremiah leaves court free, but the court condemns itself.

Lord Christ, there was a day when you, the Judge of all the earth, stood trial in Jerusalem. It's easy to see the hard-hearted self-deception and unbelief that blinds us from truth. So I thank you for the Spirit's work in me, without which I'd have remained as lost as anyone.

Jeremiah 27 – Wear the Yoke

Jehoiakim is dead, and his son Jeconiah (Jehoiachin) has been exiled with thousands of others in 597 BC. Nebuchadnezzar installed Zedekiah as a puppet king. But here, four years later (28:1), Zedekiah has called a conference with envoys from neighbouring kingdoms – almost certainly to organise a rebellion against Babylon (v3). But Jeremiah's message is unmissable and missional: The LORD God of Israel is the one who "made the earth" (v5) and governs all nations (a shocking idea to those foreign envoys). Babylonian rule is God's decree, and to resist Nebuchadnezzar is to resist God himself. Jeremiah gives the same message to the king (v12-15) and to the priests and people (v16-22). We must learn to be bolder in proclaiming God's universal majesty.

Eternal Son, glorified as King of kings and Lord of lords, it is comforting and encouraging to know that you reign over all humanity. I'm reminded that since you have such authority I'm to go and make disciples, teaching them all you have said. Spirit, give me such clear boldness.

Jeremiah 28 – Test the Spirits

In 26:20-24, the prophet Uriah was put to death by men for preaching the truth from God. Here, Hananiah is put to death by God for preaching the lies men want to hear. It is easy in hindsight to see who we would rather be, but in the moment of preaching Uriah was hated while Hananiah was honoured. We must be clear-sighted when we speak of Christ, seeking to please him and not people. But what of their hearers? Hananiah (like other false prophets) used the same language of declaration that Jeremiah used, so the only way anyone could tell who was right was to wait and see. There are still too many Hananiahs around today. We must test the spirits and hold tight to God's words.

Holy God, you have spoken to us so clearly through your Son revealed in your word. Help me to speak with boldness in the face of rejection and opposition. Help me to hear your word preached well so that it changes my heart, mind, and will.

Jeremiah 29 – A Future and a Hope

Jeremiah's attention is being drawn more to God's grace in the future than his current judgments in Jerusalem. The letter in v4-23 is to the Israelites in Babylon while Zedekiah was in Jerusalem (597-587 BC). The letter would have been shocking: Not only will exile last 70 years, but the exiles are also to settle down and even pray for Babylon's prosperity (v7). Verse 11 is a classic 'fridge magnet' verse, but it's often understood only as comforting words that one's problems will soon be over. In context, the exiles were to embrace their situation and to be a blessing where they were. The New Testament identifies the church as exiles in Babylon (this world of sin, e.g. 1 Peter 1:1, Rev. 18). In difficulties, we often act as if there's some kind of mistake when we ought to embrace our situation and proclaim Christ where we are.

Lord Christ, you are my future and my hope, and by your grace I have you now even in my toughest days. Forgive me for wanting easier times; help me to proclaim you in my weakness.

Jeremiah 30-31 – A New Covenant

Chapters 30 to 33 are often referred to as the Book of Consolation and are rich in promise for exiled Israel, for today's church, and for our future hope. As ever, Israel's suffering was a direct result of their sin (30:15), but God promises both the destruction of enemies and the restoration of Jerusalem. Why? Because the LORD can say of his bride, his people, "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (31:3). His people will grieve the world's evil (31:15), but Matthew's gospel quotes that verse to point us to the hope we have in Christ (31:15, Matt. 2:18). And so Christ ushered in the New Covenant for us, where our knowledge of God is founded on sins forgiven (31:34) and the unshakeable, unbreakable promises of the eternal God (31:37).

God of promise and consolation, the covenant you have brought me into is beautiful and secure in your eternal goodness. Thank you for the complete and utter forgiveness you have granted me in Christ.

Jeremiah 32 – Planted in the LORD

The scene at v1-2 is awful. The Babylonian army had taken all of Judah and lain siege to Jerusalem. Jeremiah was in the palace prison for prophesying these very events. He had a visitor, his cousin Hanamel, inviting him to redeem some family land. It was a ridiculous thing to do under the circumstances, but Jeremiah bought the field from his prison with little expectation of ever even seeing it. Yet he bought it because the LORD told him to. In v16-25, Jeremiah prays humbly to the LORD, ending with an implied "Why?" The LORD's answer from v26 is that although terrible judgment is coming to Jerusalem, yet he will extend grace and restore them: "Fields will be purchased" again (v44). The language of v38-41 find ultimate fulfilment only in Christ.

Living God, your perspective of time and events is so clear and good, yet I know I so often share Jeremiah's short-sighted confusion. Thank you that the future you have planned for your people is so secure. Help me to learn humility and trust when things aren't as I'd choose.

Jeremiah 33 – Joy, Praise, Glory, Righteousness

Chapters 30 to 33 form Jeremiah's so-called Book of Consolation and here we have restatements of earlier promises of both judgment and blessing. But notice the emphasis on covenants: (a) with day and night (Creation) in v20; (b) with Abraham to have descendants as numerous as stars in the sky and sand on the seashore (v22); with Moses (v6, see Deut. 26:18-19); with David to have eternal reign in his descendants (v21, 2 Sam. 7); and with Levi (v22, Num. 25:13) to have an everlasting priesthood. Also notice that all this is focussed on the "Righteous Branch" (v15) who will come to his people to be named "The LORD is our Righteousness" (v16). Jesus is our righteousness, the root and goal of God's covenants, and our joy, praise, and glory (v9).

Lord Christ, in whom all the promises of God are Yes and Amen, thank you for the utter security of credited righteousness resulting in joy, praise, and glory. Your sovereign grace is astonishing.

Jeremiah 34 – Covenant Failure

After the covenant-soaked hope of Chapter 33 (fulfilled in Christ), we have a pair of chapters on Judah's inability/ability to keep a covenant at all. Israel had been slaved in Egypt, so it's no surprise to see laws on slavery and freedom prominently placed in the Old Testament law (e.g. Ex. 21, Lev. 25). It's not clear why Zedekiah made a covenant with Jerusalem's people to free all slaves (v8-9), especially at a time of such dire opposition (v1). It pleased God (v15), but then they reneged on the release so quickly it was as offensive to the LORD as it was cruel to the poor and oppressed. Zedekiah's repentance had been an opportunity for blessing (v4-5), but Judah's inability and unwillingness to submit to God's covenant was consistent with centuries of rebellion and idolatry.

Heavenly Father, I can't get on my high horse and condemn anyone for abuse of the poor. I am part of a society geared towards ease for the rich at the expense of others, and my heart is drawn in selfish sympathy. Give me the practice and compassion of Christ, my servant king.

Jeremiah 35 – Covenant Success

The editor of Jeremiah's great book (quite possibly Baruch, 32:12) takes us back more than ten years into the reign of Jehoiakim (v1) to complete this pair of chapters on covenant keeping. Jeremiah held a wine reception in the temple for the Rechabites, a family of teetotal tent-dwellers taking refuge in the city. They politely refuse the wine on the basis of keeping the command of their ancestor. They have obeyed him for generations, which the LORD holds up as a direct contrast with the inter-generational refusal of Judah to keep the LORD's commands. Moses said in Deut. 30:11, "This command… is certainly not too difficult" but hearts without love for the LORD will never sustain obedience.

Gracious God, you are utterly faithful in all you do, perfectly keeping your perfect covenant promises. I am rather more like Judah than these Rechabites. Help me to live out the reality of life in you, based on a vital, living communion with you in Christ.

Jeremiah 36 & 45 – Rejected and Dejected

It's the year 605 BC again, the year of the Temple Sermon (Chapters 7 & 25), and Jerusalem is soon to fall under Babylonian rule. Jeremiah dictates as Barch writes, and the first to hear the words read are greatly affected. But when the words are read to king Jehoiakim, his wickedness beggars belief. It is not a whim; his destruction of the scroll in columns is as systematic and hard as his rebellion against all God's grace. As for the messengers of God's word, the focus here is Baruch. He had hoped for a cosy career (36:5) but finds only the misery of working for an outcast prophet (36:3). But we don't get to choose the times we're in or the tasks we're given, and neither do we deserve God's lavish grace.

Gracious God, you have prepared works for me to do. Forgive me that I so often complain like Baruch. Help me to find joy in serving you rather than myself, and to humbly submit to your will even when I'm stubbornly fixed in the wrong direction.

Jeremiah 37 – Is There a Word?

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (Chaldea) had made Zedekiah king in Jerusalem in 597 BC. When Zedekiah rebelled against him, the Babylonian army laid siege to Jerusalem in 588 BC. When the Eqgyptians rose up, the Babylonian army withdrew to engage them in battle (v6-11). They would return victorious to take Jerusalem in 587 BC. So in 588, Zedekiah is pathetically and hypocritically asking Jeremiah to pray for Jerusalem (v3) and asking if there was a (different!) word from the LORD (v17). Jeremiah has been unjustly imprisoned, so pleads his case while also reminding the king of how his prophecies have proved true – and other prophets made liars. As with the burnt scrolls, speaking truth to power is rarely appreciated or heeded.

Lord Jesus, it's easy to point the finger at unbelievers who only turn to you in vague, desperate hope when in dire trouble. But Lord you know that I so often tend that way too. Help me to stay in warm daily communion with you in times of ease as much as times of pain.

Jeremiah 38 – Last Chance

This might be an expanded version of the conversation in the previous chapter or a separate occasion, but either way it's the last conversation between Jeremiah and Zedekiah before Jerusalem's fall. The stinking slime Jeremiah had been left to die in must have been awful, but in his rescue by Ebed-Melek Jeremiah was still crystal clear and passionate in his urging of the king to surrender to Babylon's siege works. The appalling scenes of the next chapter could have been prevented if only Zedekiah had feared God more than people (v5, 19). Despite even the very personal warning of v23, Zedekiah would not make a decision. The fixed pot of Jerusalem is about to be smashed – and smashed *hard*.

Living God, my own heart was once so hard and unable to turn to you. Thank you for the Spirit's work to call me to repentance and faith. Thank you that you have saved me from sin and its consequences. Give me Jeremiah's gospel passion, even in the pits of life.

Jeremiah 39 – Jerusalem's Fall

Jerusalem was always going to fall under Babylonian rule since that was what the LORD had decreed. Yet the brutal severity of all that came to Zedekiah, his sons, and the royal officials had been entirely preventable if only they'd heeded the warnings from God given through Jeremiah. The fact that Jeremiah was singled out for better treatment by Nebuchadnezzar (v11-12) shows that the Babylonian siege was supplied with military intelligence from within Jerusalem. This is the justice and mercy of God on display, singling out the faithful and separating them from judgment to others (as with Noah, Lot, and others). In the end, blessing comes to the poorest (v10) and a faithful foreigner (v16-18) – the very people God's laws said Zedekiah should care for.

Lord Jesus, you spoke of a narrow way that few find, and I know I would never have even sought it if you had not sought me first. Saviour, thank you for including me in your kingdom and for the promise of life with you on the Day of your return.

Jeremiah 40 – New Beginnings?

As thousands of Judeans made their miserable march to Babylon in chains, and with Jerusalem and its temple reduced to rubble, there were the beginnings of a new kind of peace in the land. Jeremiah declined the surprisingly gracious offer from the captain of Babylon's guard (v4), choosing instead to remain in Judah under the new governor Gedaliah (v7). This may well be partly because of Gedaliah's godly family (e.g. see 2 Kings 22:10-12, Jer. 36:10), or partly because of the wise policy of serving the Babylonians as Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Chapter 29. As we read of Judeans returning from neighbouring lands and harvesting "a great amount of wine and summer fruit" (v11-12), things are looking up. Sadly, ungodliness and unbelief are always destructive.

Holy Jesus, you are king and good to provide godly leaders for your churches. Give our church leaders the grace, love, and wisdom that they need; protect them from those who would do them harm.

Jeremiah 41 – Assassination

For the Judeans who escaped exile and settled in Mizpah under the new governor Gedaliah, their brief spell of peace was brutally shattered. Ishmael had been one of Zedekiah's chief officers (v1) so would have been livid to see Gedaliah (a Jeremiah sympathiser) appointed by Babylon to rule. His actions defy all that Jeremiah said and stood for and are therefore further rebellion against the LORD. We should not be surprised; passions run deep, often rejecting plain truth, especially when hardened by unbelief. The poor people of Mizpah are briefly taken to Ammon but are then rescued by Johanan. But where can they go? They're in limbo, in fear of everyone, but still not fearing the LORD.

Heavenly Father, you gave your people so many wise prophets, judges, and leaders who were so roundly rejected. It's no surprise that when you sent your Son he was and is also rejected. Living God, have mercy and send your Spirit to open blind eyes for many to turn to you.

Jeremiah 42 – Exodus Reversed

At the end of the previous chapter, the last of Judah's population paused near Bethlehem as they fled to Egypt in fear of Babylonian reprisal after Gedaliah's assassination. So here they come to Jeremiah, rightly asking for guidance from the LORD through his prophet, and boldly promising to obey whatever he said. But ten days (v7) is long enough to break their nerve and by the time Jeremiah speaks their hearts and minds are already set on Egypt. If they stayed, then just as Nebuchadnezzar had been the LORD's instrument for judgment he would now channel the LORD's compassion (v12). In hoping for relief from war (v13), their disobedience would overtake them in judgment. In a reversal of the Exodus, they would never see Judah again.

Gracious, patient, compassionate Father, you know how prone we are to rash promises and good intentions, only to disappoint and disobey you. Father, help me only to move forwards in your will, ever attentive to your word and the witness of the Spirit in me.

Jeremiah 43 – Jeremiah Exiled

What a spiritual shambles. Despite Jeremiah being proved true in everything he has prophesied for decades, this band of refugees still refuse God's words. It's often easier to affirm the truth of God's word when it clearly applies to others than when it directly affects us. We might not call it "a lie" (v2), but disobedience is no less sinful if we wrap it up in politeness and pragmatism. Having escaped exile to Babylon, the people make their way to Egypt – forcing Jeremiah and Baruch to go with them (v6). But neither the LORD nor his servants are limited by human boundaries: The words came to the Judeans in Egypt that God rules over all nations; judgment would overtake them there.

Lord Christ, you were rejected for speaking truth that sinners didn't want to hear, and you wisely set the expectation for us that we can expect no different. Help me to live in bold, humble obedience to your word wherever that may take me, and to speak that word to lost sinners.

Jeremiah 44 – Handed Over to Idolatry

The places mentioned in v1 are up to 400 miles apart, so it seems we're seeing Jeremiah speaking to now settled Judean communities across northern Egypt. After all these years, his message is unchanged. In fact, events have only served to prove his prophesies to be true (e.g. v2). But the continued idolatry in Egypt will bring further wrath there, and the LORD asks them, "Why are you doing such terrible harm to yourselves?" (v7). In shockingly hard-hearted unbelief, the people reply, "we are not going to listen to you!" (v16). They even try to argue that their troubles came because they stopped their idolatry (v18). We are so quick to justify sin. This is the last we see of Jeremiah the man, no doubt still in pain to see his countrymen cut themselves off from God's blessings.

Living God, I get shocked by seeing hard faced rejection of your grace, forgetting that I was once no different. Thank you for the Spirit's work in me. May I be as constant and as clear as Jeremiah in my witnessing.

Jeremiah 46 – Oracle Against Egypt

Chapters 46 to 51 are often known as Jeremiah's 'oracles against the nations' containing judgments against a range of nations beginning here with Egypt. The ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) has these chapters immediately after Chapter 25, but our Bibles follow the Hebrew manuscripts with them here at the end. There are two words against Egypt: First, Pharaoh Neco's defeat by Nebuchadnezzar in 605 BC is by God's hand (v2), and second (from v13), Babylon would soon come to the very Egyptian towns the Judeans settled in much later. Yet grace would come even to Egypt (v26, Isaiah 19), and Israel would be preserved. The LORD may be provoked to wrath but is gracious by nature.

Holy God, you are mightily over the nations of the world in all times. You tear down and build up in your own wisdom and purpose. Thank you that in all this you have extended your grace to me, though I deserve only the same as all the unbelievers in the world.

Jeremiah 47 – Oracle Against Philistia

Although no specific sins or idolatries of the Philistines are spelled out, it's no surprise that this ancient enemy of Israel are to be caught up in the turmoil of the times. Pharaoh Neco swept through in 609 BC but then Nebuchadnezzar took the whole area from the north (v2) soon after. The destruction of Philistia is again attributed to God's hand (v6-7). There seems to be no hope for them, though Psalm 87:4 says that both Egypt ("Rahab") and Philistia will one day be counted as if born in Zion. Those who were once enemies of the LORD will be born again and adopted by God. We must always remind ourselves of our natural enmity against God lest we look down on the lost without compassion or empathy.

Heavenly Father, I deserve no good thing from you, but rather I have earned your righteous anger and condemnation. How astonishing that Jesus should bear that for me, so that I should be called your child in salvation granted by grace, received by faith.

Jeremiah 48 – So Close, So Far

The Moabites were descended from Abraham's nephew, Lot (Gen. 19:36-37) and relations between Moab and Israel were always strained but geographically close. There had been an attempted alliance with Zedekiah's Israel against Babylon, but that was based on false hope in Moab's strength and their god Chemosh (v7). Their idolatry and rejection of the LORD (v42) brought on Moab the same destruction that came to neighbouring Judah. We might feel content to condemn Moab too, but the LORD calls you to mourn (v17) as he weeps (v32), ultimately ending in a word of hope for them (v46). We do well to weep over our neighbours and colleagues who are so close to us, but so far from the LORD.

Saviour God, it is easy to condemn others and be forgetful of your grace to me. May I have your own grief and compassion towards the lost around me, even to leading some to faith in Christ.

Jeremiah 49 – Nations and Individuals

Like the Moabites, the Ammonites were also descended from Lot (Gen. 19:36-37) and their land had been allocated and protected by the LORD (Deut. 2:19). Similarly, although they would come under judgment there was the same hope of grace to come (v6). This chapter is a reminder that the LORD himself causes nations to rise and fall and, if he chooses, to rise again. Yet God's concern drills down into the detail of individual lives, having compassion for the fatherless and for widows (v11), bringing encouragement to us all in the midst of turbulent world affairs. It's also worth noting that some of the nations and places were represented by visitors at the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2:9-11. The LORD keeps his word.

God of all the earth, it is amazing that you should be so concerned with the detail of our particular lives. Thank you for your care for me, and for calling me to faith in Jesus at a particular moment in time.

Jeremiah 50 – Judgment and Hope

Given the way Babylon has dominated Jeremiah's book, it's appropriate that it is the subject of this mammoth oracle spanning Chapters 50 and 51. Babylon was to be under the LORD's condemnation for her idolatry and arrogant pride, and in particular for her contempt of Israel (e.g. v11). As Babylon was Israel's enemy from the north, so will Babylon's destruction come (v9); their punishment will match their crimes. This massive oracle was sent to the exiles in Babylon after the first deportation (51:59-60), giving them hope of return (e.g. v19-20) and of divine justice against Babylon. Israel were to settle in Babylon and pray for it (Chapter 29), but it would not be their forever home.

Sovereign Lord, you truly reign over all the nations of the world. As I see idolatry, greed, and cruelty worked out on the international stage, I am comforted to know that you are just. More, as a citizen of heaven by grace, I rejoice that this world is not my home.

Jeremiah 51 – Babylon Will Fall

As this colossal oracle concludes there's no doubt in our minds that Babylon will be completely obliterated. More, it's clear that Israel will be extracted and preserved. But to limit our reading to ancient history is to miss out on a much bigger Bible picture. Babylon has been a symbol of rebellion since Babel (Gen. 11), and the New Testament describes this current world as Babylon. Revelation 18 describes the end of this wicked world as the fall of Babylon: God's people are to "Come out from among her" (v45, Rev. 18:4) before she sinks like a stone (v64, Rev. 18:21). We have confidence that the LORD is just and powerful to carry out all he has said, prompting in us an urgency in mission and a passion for holiness.

Holy and Righteous Father, I can scarcely imagine the scale and terror of that final Day. And yet I know that you are good and wise, gracious and loving. Lord, in the light of Christ's return, give me an urgency in mission and a passion for holiness.

Jeremiah 52 – Hope at Last

We read at the end of the previous chapter, “The words of Jeremiah end here.” The book’s editor (Baruch?) has added this chapter as an epilogue with text almost word for word from the end of 2 Kings. Back in 1:10, Jeremiah was told that he was appointed “to uproot and tear down, to destroy and demolish, to build and plant.” We have seen how the first four have been comprehensively fulfilled. Chapters 30-33 (the ‘Book of Consolation’) held out promise of a new hope, a New Covenant, but there has been little concrete evidence of building or planting. So ending this book with a ray of hope in the restoration of Jehoiachin must have been hugely encouraging to its first readers that David’s throne would yet get its eternal occupant.

Living God, over and over you are demonstrably seen as one who fulfils all that you have said. Thank you for preserving the line to Jesus through such times as Jeremiah’s. I know you will continue to reign and rule perfectly through these godless days.

Lamentations 1 – The Broken City

We use poetry and music to convey emotion in a way that prose can’t often match, and Lamentations is raw pain. It is also carefully expressed and constructed: The 22 verses of Chapter 1 are an acrostic of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each chapter is a Hebrew poem with a definite theme, and Chapter 1 paints an image of Jerusalem’s awful state after the final exile of 587 BC. (Lamentations is sometimes attributed to Jeremiah; it is certainly contemporary to him.) It is a terrible taste of hell: “She never considered her end” (v9); “The LORD is just, for I have rebelled” (v18); “there is no one to comfort me” (v21). Hell must be full of such hopeless, comfortless clarity.

Holy God, I know I don’t take seriously enough the awful, urgent reality of your just judgment. So I know that I also underestimate both the depth of my sin and the reach of Christ’s love. Spirit, show me myself more truly so that I might worship Jesus and adore him all the more.

Lamentations 2 – The LORD is Like an Enemy

This chapter is another Hebrew acrostic poem and its theme is terrifying: "The LORD is like an enemy; he has swallowed up Israel" (v5). The description of Jerusalem's destruction is awful, reaching even to the suffering of infants (v11-12). In Romans 8:31, Paul asks, "If God is for us, who is against us?" And yet Lamentations 2 reminds us that if God is against us then his power and fury are beyond refuge or hope. Our sin puts us at enmity against God (Rom. 8:7, Col. 1:21) so this chapter's imagery should open our eyes both to the predicament of the lost and to the astonishing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, on whom was poured the full cup of God's fury in our place. We're reconciled by him (Col. 1:22).

Lord Christ, Eternal Son, you are glorious in your own nature, divine and wonderful in essence. How amazing that you should become human to suffer the full cup of judgment for my sins. Lord, there aren't enough words in any language to express my thankfulness or your glory.

Lamentations 3 – Hope in the LORD

This is yet another acrostic, but now v1-3 all begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, then v4-6 begin with the second, and so on: 3 verses per letter, 66 verses in all. The poet skilfully leads us into hope even in the depths of despair. He begins with his intensely personal sufferings (v1-18), and yet there's a turning point in v19-21 where he calls to mind truth about God which gives him hope. The LORD is a faithful, merciful, and good Saviour to all who humble themselves before him (v19-33), so there's a call to confession (v34-39) and repentance (v4-45), before the writer then appeals to the LORD in prayer (v46-66). If we try to defend our sinful actions we will never take the necessary steps towards confession, repentance, and restored fellowship with God.

Righteous and holy Father, you know how I so often justify my sin with exceptions and excuses. Spirit, show me my sin so that I will keep coming to Jesus, and lead me into holiness of life to become more like him. Living God, all my hope of eternity is from you and in you.

Lamentations 4 – Dehumanised and Hopeless

The five poems of Lamentations are structured to focus on the hopeful movement of Chapter 3, so here we return to the theme of suffering in yet another 22-verse acrostic. All the things people might hope in in life are gone: Wealth, status, government, religion, even foreign aid. In the midst of siege and famine, the people resorted to conduct we find appalling even among animals (v10). We take so much for granted in life, neglecting to see the common grace of God in good society. What we see in this chapter is the awful absence of God's grace in lives that have only hopelessness and pain left. It's a scary vision of hell on earth.

Gracious God, you are light, love, and life. You are good, and kind, and compassionate. Naturally, we are far from what we ought to be and yet we are given glimpses of your grace in so many ways. Have mercy on this country, and may many come to Jesus, the one who is full of glory, grace, and truth.

Lamentations 5 – Awful New Reality

After the dust has settled on ruined Jerusalem, this chapter is a communal prayer of lament. Their peaceful, ordered lives have been shattered. Even the poetry has broken down, with this chapter pointedly *not* an acrostic as if to highlight their final disarray. They have become slaves, widows, orphans, and penniless foreigners – just the very people they failed to care for. It's a poem of regret and loss, not least as they know the cause: "Woe to us, for we have sinned" (v16). And yet we must note that they are praying with sincerity and urgency, knowing that their only hope is in God: "LORD, bring us back to yourself, so we may return" (v21). Sometimes, we are brought low to help us see God more truly.

Holy Father, if you dealt with me as my sins deserve I would be crushed. If you had not first brought me to yourself I would never have come. Lead me in paths of righteousness, abiding in Christ, pleasing and glorifying you in everything.

Ezekiel 1 – The LORD Was There

While a handful of Judah's nobles were taken to Babylon in 605 BC (including young Daniel), the main parts of exile happened in 597 BC (Jehoiachin's exile) and 587 BC (the destruction of Jerusalem). So the opening verses here place Ezekiel as an exiled priest, halfway between the two main events, having suffered Jerusalem's humiliation and the depressing walk to Babylon. It is hard for us to grasp the depths of misery and hopelessness surrounding this exiled priest so far from Jerusalem's temple. Yet Ezekiel is given a spectacular, overwhelming vision of God's glory right there on pagan soil. Likewise, our risen Saviour is glorious beyond words, yet utterly present to us in all our moments.

Holy Son of God, it's clear that Ezekiel struggled to put into words the radiance of your glory. Yet how blessed he was to realise that you were with him in such a time and place. Teach me the depths of truth that you will never leave me nor forsake me, wherever I go even this week.

Ezekiel 2 – Hard Faced and Hard Hearted

Ezekiel is being commissioned by God to prophesy to the exiled Israelites in Babylon (even while Jeremiah continued in Jerusalem). But these are the very people whose idolatry and apostasy led to the divine punishment of exile, so the LORD warns Ezekiel that they remain hard-faced and hard-hearted (v4). Ezekiel is not responsible for their response, "Whether they listen or refuse to listen" (v5), but he is instructed to speak. The scroll's sides are full: Ezekiel must speak *all* the words he is given, and *only* those words. This is empowering and liberating truth for us when we speak about the LORD to unbelieving people today: We *must* speak up, unafraid, whether they listen or not.

God over all, you have commissioned your church to preach the good news of salvation in Christ. Forgive my hesitance and fear. Spirit, give me the clarity and boldness to speak, and the love of Christ to compel me.

Ezekiel 3 – Stunned

In Jeremiah 24, God pictured the people left in Jerusalem as 'bad figs' and those exiled to Babylon as 'good figs.' It would be Ezekiel's job to preach to those good figs so that they would repent and return to the LORD. But their starting point was "hard-headed and hard-hearted" (v7), so God would strengthen Ezekiel for the work. For his part, Ezekiel was "left in bitterness and in an angry spirit" (v14). He was 'supposed' to be in priestly ministry at the temple, and after seeing Jeremiah's rejection there he'd have known how lonely and humiliating his role as prophet in Babylon could be. But that was the LORD's firm plan, and Ezekiel would be held accountable for his obedience to it.

Sovereign and Gracious Father, we don't get to choose the times we're born into or the tasks you prepare for us. Thank you for the life of peace and ease that you have placed me in, and help me to face up to the works you would have me do.

Ezekiel 4 – Siege, Sin, and Rations

As long as Jerusalem and its temple still stood, the exiles in Babylon hoped that their nightmare would soon be over. Ezekiel's acted-out prophecies would shatter such false hopes. In v1-3 he shows how Jerusalem will come under siege, with the LORD (as it were) on the other side of an iron wall, impervious to their cries. In v4-8, Ezekiel would in lie down every day for all the exiles to see: 390 days for the 390 years since Solomon's heyday; 40 days for the sins of the current generation. His diet in v9-16 was balanced but very meagre: After a year of that he'd have been a gaunt shadow, a visible prophecy of what the people of Jerusalem would soon become. We must beware the idol of religious experience and rejoice that God is with us personally where we are.

Lord Jesus, you know I sometimes have hopes of escaping situations, dreaming of easier times and places. Forgive me that I forget that you truly are with me where I am, and that you will strengthen me to do your will today.

Ezekiel 5 – A Sword and a Shave

After a year of physically wasting away as he acted out the impending siege of Jerusalem, Ezekiel acts out the final scene. As a priest, he was not to shave his head or beard, and to do so with a sword would have been a messy, painful, slow, and bloody process. A crowd of exile onlookers would have formed. Ezekiel's first spoken words in over a year are to explain the illustration: The sword is the LORD's (e.g. v12) and the triple destruction to come to Jerusalem will be devastating and will shave them of their role as a kingdom of priests to the nations. Instead, they will be "a warning and a horror to the nations" (v15). Why? Because Israel's idolatry and sin had become worse than the nations they were supposed to teach.

Lord Jesus, you call us to live holy and distinct lives of love so that others will see you. Forgive me for when I am too worldly in thought and words and conduct. Help me to live for you, to make you known, to glorify you.

Ezekiel 6 – Prophecy to the Mountains

For the exiles near Ezekiel who longed for a return to their homeland, this prophecy against its mountains and hills, ravines and valleys must have been distressing. But the presence of pagan shrines on the hills of Judah and Israel was an idolatrous desecration of the Promised Land. Far from being a witness to the nations, this country had become as idolatrous as any. Everything in this book up to Chapter 24 is preparing the exiles for the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. They must understand the theological dimension of their catastrophic circumstances. Much later, in Chapter 36, Ezekiel will prophesy an altogether more promising message to the land, but the gospel is only good news when judgment is understood.

Lord Christ, I'm reminded that just as the sins of Judah defiled the land, so too my own sins overflow and affect more than I realise. Spirit, please help me to know myself more truly to praise Jesus for his great grace.

Ezekiel 7 – The End Has Come

The LORD is slow to anger and graciously patient, but he won't be mocked, manipulated, or taken advantage of. There's an overwhelming sense of finality to this chapter (v2, 3, 6, 7, 10, 12) as the final curse of the covenant terms listed in Leviticus 26 is to be applied. There will be no hope left in wealth (v19), religion (v24), or government (v26-27). Calamity will come because of institutional idolatry (v20) and violence (v23). The outcome is that "Then they will know that I am the LORD" (v27), something they could have learned through the rich blessing of covenant obedience. The LORD is both Saviour and Judge, and it comes to every person at some point to see him.

Great God, Saviour and Judge, surely here is a glimpse of the day of Christ's return, when every eye will see him and know that he is Lord. My sin would earn me only judgment, and I thank you that all your righteous wrath was fully spent on Jesus.

Ezekiel 8 – Deeply Offensive Idolatry

Once again Ezekiel sees the glory of the LORD and is taken in visions of God to Jerusalem. He's led to the temple's outer courts and shown foreign idols. Digging through a wall, seventy elders are seen in secret Egyptian worship. Going further in, women weep for the god Tammuz (possibly a Babylonian god). Surely the LORD is honoured in his own temple? No, most shocking of all he saw 25 men in front of the temple bowing "to the east in worship of the sun" – and showing their backsides to the LORD in his sanctuary (v16). Their ecumenical idolatry was deeply offensive, but what idols do we nurture in the secret places of our own hearts?

Living God, it is easy for me to point the finger at such crass idolatry and yet choose to deny or deceive myself about the idols I set up in my own heart. Saviour, forgive me and help me to nurture living dependence on you.

Ezekiel 9 – Judgment and Grace

The appalling, offensive idolatry of the previous chapter is here met with final judgment. But first, someone is dispatched to put a mark on some people to be preserved. What marks them is not sinless perfection or religious effort, but hearts that "sigh and groan" (v4) over all they see. God will not be mocked, and no sin goes unpunished, yet he is merciful to all whose heart is turned to him. Ezekiel's response is noteworthy too: He doesn't rejoice at all, and is own immediate action is to intercede for the lost. As a kingdom of priests, our hearts should be so inclined. Lastly, we must see our own sin in the light of such chapters and work to put sin to death in our lives daily (Matt. 18:8-9).

Holy God, I'm reminded of the blood of the lamb at Passover, and how Jesus' blood now atones for me. I'm also deeply grateful for the mark and seal of the Holy Spirit in me. Lord, give me Ezekiel's passion for intercession in the light of all that is coming on the day of Christ's return.

Ezekiel 10 – Departing Glory

The story arc of the whole Bible is how God will dwell on the earth with his people. The system of sacrifice at the tabernacle and temple was given so that sinful humanity could approach a holy God as he dwelt among them. So Ezekiel 10 is a shocking, devastating moment in Old Testament history: In a reversal of the glory of God descending on Solomon's temple in 1 Kings 8, here the LORD's glory actually departs from it. Israel had abandoned the LORD, so he abandoned them. It's no wonder that the siege of Jerusalem provides us with images of hell on earth. But notice that the images of God's glory here are the same as Ezekiel saw in Babylon in Chapter 1. God is with his chosen people.

Living God of all, Solomon said his temple could not begin to contain you, but neither are you limited by our ideas of worship (whether true worship or false). Thank you that Jesus is the radiance of the Father's glory; please help me to see more and more of him.

Ezekiel 11 – Reversals

In those days the very best meat was cooked in a pot, so the proverb in v3 suggests that the leaders still resident in Jerusalem saw themselves as special. The exiles, by inference, were waste offal, along with the poor left in the land. More, those in Jerusalem were taking over the homes and land of the exiles. Yet in a total reversal of spiritual fortune, judgment would come to the wicked in Jerusalem as the glory of the LORD left the city (v23), while the LORD himself would be the sanctuary for his people in exile (v16), promising hope, life, and restoration in gathering (v17-21). This vision from Chapters 8 to 11 is related to the exiled leaders in Babylon (v24-25) who would have known and once participated in the same idolatry. Faced with truth, we must confess and repent.

Holy Father, it is deeply shaming and troubling to reflect on my sins, and yet I must thank you for the convicting work of the Spirit who leads me to repentance and forgiveness in Christ. Thank you for all your grace and mercy, without which I would have no hope.

Ezekiel 12 – Acted-Out Exile

There's no date to the events of this chapter but it seems likely that Ezekiel's prophetic ministry was being so closely observed that these acted-out messages had an audience. First, Ezekiel acts out the hasty, undignified exit of someone going into exile having first attempted to escape through a wall by night. It's a prophecy of King Zedekiah who would be blinded before being taken to Babylon (fulfilling v13). Ezekiel's second 'act' is to eat and drink trembling with fear as those in Judah would (v17-20). Still, the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel were ignored and ridiculed: "The days keep pressing by, and every vision fails" (v32). The LORD's reply: "The message I speak will be fulfilled" (v28).

Loving God, your gospel is as unheeded and ridiculed now as then, with people still going about their business as in the days of Noah. Help me to be effective in communicating the truth of your word and the certainty of judgment.

Ezekiel 13 – False Prophets

There's a particular kind of wickedness in portraying spiritual realities in a falsely secure way. Some in Israel were prophesying "'peace' when there is no peace" (v10), and making things look far more rosy than they really were (rather like whitewashing a wall to cover up decay). The danger is that the seriousness of sin is played down and the gracious warnings of God's calls to repentance go unheeded. Who goes to God for forgiveness if they believe they've not sinned? Sadly, exactly this kind of false hope is found in many places today, giving a false sense that all will be peace even for those who have denied and rejected God all their lives. We must know and live out the truth.

Living God of truth, I don't claim to have a perfect knowledge of all that you have revealed in your word, but I thank you for what you have enabled me to grasp: I have sinned against you, but in love and grace Jesus has been punished in my place. Lord, help me make such good news known to others.

Ezekiel 14 – Repent from Idolatry

Some of the elders of Israel came to enquire of Ezekiel, the prophet of the LORD. Yet these very elders have idols in their hearts which are spiritual stumbling blocks to truth (v1-5). So Ezekiel speaks: "Repent and turn away from your idols" (v6), lest the LORD send a false prophet who will speak the falsehood their itching ears want to hear, condemning both the prophet and his hearers (v9-10). But Ezekiel's words will be proven true by the fourfold judgment of "sword, famine, danger animals and plague" (v21) on sinful Jerusalem. The idolatrous conduct of the remnant who will join the exiles in 587 BC will justify the LORD's righteousness, bringing strange consolation to Israel in exile (v23).

Holy God, all your actions are wise and righteous as you deal with humanity in all our idolatrous weakness. Show me my idols more clearly, Lord, so that I might repent and cling ever more tightly to you.

Ezekiel 15 – Burn the Useless Vine

When the vine is used as a metaphor for Israel, the emphasis is usually on the fruit. Here, however, Ezekiel draws attention to the quality of the wood itself, pointing out that it has no intrinsic worth or usefulness other than as firewood. It's a deliberate re-statement of the judgments spelled out in the previous chapter. It seems likely that this image underpins Jesus' words in John 15: He is the vine and we are the branches. We have no intrinsic worth or usefulness in his kingdom, and we will only bear fruit if we remain rooted in him. This is an urgent and radical wake-up call for anyone relying on nominal religion: Salvation is in Christ alone.

Lord Jesus, it is humbling to realise that I can contribute no good thing to my salvation or your ongoing kingdom, except that which you work in and through me. And yet I rejoice, because this is glorious and liberating truth! Salvation is of the Lord!

Ezekiel 16 – Stunning Offence

The Bible often speaks of the people of God as his bride, but this chapter stands out for its graphic language. The LORD chose Israel from helpless infancy, raising her to fame and beauty, wealth and honour among the nations. That, at least, should give us pause for thought as members of Christ's bride, the church: None of us is here by our own merit or worthiness. In going after other nations, their gods, and their wicked practices, Israel were abusing and rejecting the love that the LORD had lavished on them. In judgment, he gave her over to her lovers. Yet the LORD never divorced her (Isaiah 50:1), remembering his covenant of love and grace to be fulfilled in Jesus.

Lord Jesus, you love your church with a passion I can hardly grasp or imagine. Lord, I'm sorry that I sin in such ugly, offensive disregard for your covenant love and faithfulness. Lead me into righteous ways so that I might enjoy full and joyful communion with you.

Ezekiel 17 – Two Eagles and One Majestic Cedar

Ezekiel speaks yet another parable in his illustrative style in v1-10 and then immediately provides an explanation in v11-21. The exiles around him would be very familiar with the first huge eagle, Nebuchadnezzar, bringing the exile of Jehoiachin and many others in 597 BC. Zedekiah was "planted" (v5-6) but spread his roots to another great eagle, Egypt (v7). This would fail utterly, and Zedekiah would die in Babylon (v20). As Ezekiel spoke these words they were predictive prophecy, soon to be worked out in practice in 587 BC. The effect of that is to draw attention to the altogether different prophecy in v22-24: God will plant a new king, a new tree, to rule over the whole earth.

Mighty Jesus, great King of kings, the earth is yours and your dominion is universal. Thank you that such passages remind me that your word is true and that you know the beginning from the end of all things – including the details of my life.

Ezekiel 18 – Repent and Live!

Ezekiel's forensic, pedantic style is in force in this chapter. There was a saying among the Israelites, "The fathers eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge" (v2), suggesting that God was not being fair on Ezekiel's generation in bringing calamity on them for their predecessors' sins. Ezekiel's word is instructive: (a) Each of us is personally accountable to God for good or evil, and the godliness of wickedness of our parents acts as neither merit or excuse; (b) While our sin provokes God's wrath and righteous judgment, he takes no pleasure in that since it is not his natural disposition; (c) the LORD would much rather call us to repentance and life (v32), and so came to save us.

Gracious and Compassionate Father, all your actions glorify your perfect love and righteousness, seen most of all in your Son and the salvation you have extended to me. Forgive me my sins, Lord. Thank you for the Spirit's convicting work in my heart, leading me to repentance in Christ.

Ezekiel 19 – Lions, Branches, and a Sceptre

Ezekiel now turns to poetry to give us a lament for Judah's kings. In Genesis 49:9-10, Judah was called a lion and the tribe from which "the sceptre will not depart." So Ezekiel writes of two of her cubs, one taken to Egypt (king Jehoahaz, taken by Pharaoh Neco) and another to Babylon (scholars differ on whether that was Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, or Zedekiah). Ezekiel switched to vine imagery in v10, with Israel as a vine whose branches bore the sceptre of rule. But now the whole vine has been uprooted (v12) and "planted in the wilderness" (that is, in Babylon). But the devastating news is in v14: No strong branch is left. Has the sceptre been lost forever? What of David's line now?

Mighty God, there are moments in your word when all seems lost and evil appears to have triumphed, only for you to demonstrate your sovereign power and faithfulness as events unfold. Thank you that this is as true of the details of my life as it is of world events.

Ezekiel 20 – Rebellion DNA

Two years after he began his ministry, Ezekiel is approached by the elders in exile "to inquire of the LORD" (v1). In reply, they get an extremely unflattering theological history of Israel in four parts: Most unusually, Ezekiel highlights Israel's idolatry while they were in Egypt (v5-9) before mentioning the golden calf generation in v10-17. Even the generation after them angered the LORD in their idolatry (v18-26). So has Israel fared better in the age of kings? Have these very elders before Ezekiel remained true to the LORD, or are they part and parcel with an obstinate, idolatrous nation? The relentless teaching of these chapters emphasis both God's justice *and* human culpability in the coming fall of Jerusalem.

Holy God, I confess that I am often like these elders, quick to see fault in others while blind to my sin and presumptuous of your grace. Heavenly Father, forgive me. As the Spirit works in me, may I bear good fruit in your name.

Ezekiel 21 – A Sword is Coming

The previous chapter ended with people complaining that Ezekiel's prophecies were riddles or parables, so here he spells things out in graphic detail. The LORD's own hand will draw a sword against his own people (v3-4), bringing calamity to the whole nation, even the royal family (v13). Since we know that the sword would come through Nebuchadnezzar, it's interesting to see exactly how: The scene from v18 pictures Nebuchadnezzar using pagan divination to decide to attack Jerusalem rather than the Ammonites (though they will later come under judgment, v28-32). Great outcomes often hinge on tiny moments, and the LORD uses them all for his good and glorious purpose.

Righteous Father, surely your same sword of judgment is raised over this world still, ready to fall at Jesus' return. Saviour God, work in the small moments of my conversations with unbelieving people to call them to life in Christ.

Ezekiel 22 – The Fire of my Fury

The full devastating news of Jerusalem's fall is coming in Chapter 24, so the sense in this chapter is of the gathering of violent storm-clouds of judgment. Judah's sins are spelled out in forensic clarity using specific references to the law. Some of the indictments are about abuse of power instead of care for the poor and vulnerable, some relate to family breakdowns and sexual ethics, while others speak of pagan idolatry. The references to profaning Sabbaths is more significant than we might realise: They were spurning the gift of rest with the LORD in favour of other pursuits. Even the priests paid no regard to the holiness of God (v26). Israel had become a pagan nation.

Holy and Righteous God, all your judgments are just and true. Saviour, as you have called me into your kingdom of priests I pray for a greater awareness of your holiness and a bolder heart to express it before others. I pray it for your glory and praise.

Ezekiel 23 – Two Adulterous Sisters

Two sisters are presented to us: Oholah representing Samaria (the capital city of Israel) and Oholibah as Jerusalem (the capital city of Judah). The unified people of God are often portrayed as the LORD's bride and his love for her is passionate, strong, sacrificial, and eternally faithful. This chapter describes the two sisters in crude and graphic detail as they go seeking cheap and sleazy pleasure with other lovers (pagan nations). In truth, they are abused and hated by those lovers, and the ultimate exiles are in fact the result of God handing them over to their sinful lusts. The fullness of tragedy here is not only the terrible punishment but also the loss of the rich blessing of the loving tender fellowship of the LORD.

Holy God, you alone know what is best for us in every way, and in your goodness you gave us good laws and called us into relationship in Christ. Saviour, lead me in good and righteous paths so that I might remain in joyful fellowship with you.

Ezekiel 24 – The Delight of Your Eyes

The opening verses pinpoint the date as when Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army laid siege to Jerusalem in 588 BC. The parable of the boiling pot leaves no doubt about God's intentions, but the question still hangs in the air: Would God really do it? Would he really allow the destruction of beloved Jerusalem and its temple, the delight of the people's eyes? The death of Ezekiel's wife shocks us; we weren't expecting that. But it was given to the exiles as a sign of how inescapable and final God's judgment had become: Jerusalem would fall. More, their expected grief would be tempered by (a) realisation of their idolatry, (b) humility before the sovereignty of the LORD, and (c) news of coming hope from God delivered by Ezekiel.

God only wise, you are gracious to speak so powerfully through our misconceptions and unbelief. Forgive me that I don't prioritise my time or activity in a way that reflects the absolute certainty of Christ's return.

Ezekiel 25 – The Nations Will Know

Ezekiel will keep us in suspense over Jerusalem's fall until Chapter 33, but in the meantime we have these carefully written oracles against the nations. Although king Zedekiah attempted to form a coalition of nations against Babylon (Jeremiah 27), these neighbours abandoned Judah utterly when Nebuchadnezzar's forces arrived for the final siege. These first four neighbouring nations are taken in geographical order and come under judgment for their opportunism and delight at Judah's fall. A repeating theme in the book so far is that Judah will know that the LORD is God, seen in both judgment and grace; the nations will learn it too by experiencing God's judgment and witnessing his grace to his people.

Living God, you reign in power and justice, in love and grace. Your rule over the nations brings great peace of heart to us. Lord, I pray that many people would yet know you and praise you as Saviour, so help me as I witness to my friends and family so that they might know and praise you.

Ezekiel 26 – Against Tyre

Chapters 26-28 all relate to Tyre, which at that time was an island city in the Mediterranean coast about 100 miles north of Jerusalem. The text has 7 sections beginning with "this is what the Lord GOD says (v3, 7, 15, 19 in this chapter). As an island city, some of the formulaic siege-work language could never be literally fulfilled, but that doesn't diminish the force of the message of judgment. It's notable that the charges here are not about idolatry directly: Tyre was delighted when Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar because they hoped it would open up freer trade routes (v2) for the sea-based imports and exports. But the LORD is God of all nations, and every nation will know his power at some point.

Living God, there remain plenty of people who are quick to celebrate any kind of setback for your people, ignorant of their mocking of your reign. Father, I was once among that mocking crowd but you called me. Please extend that same mercy to my unsaved friends and family, though they remain enemies of your gospel.

Ezekiel 27 – Tyre is Sunk

This curious chapter is a lament for the island city of Tyre. It is pictured as a ship, carefully and skilfully built, carrying strong and capable men from many countries (v4-11). The trade through Tyre in v12-25 is full of expensive luxuries sourced from all around the Mediterranean as far away as Spain (the likely location of Tarshish). Tyre's downfall is like a sinking ship (v26-27), and the remaining verses record the shock and horror of everyone who came to hear of the city's demise. It seems unthinkable to us that the technological and financial institutions of our time should ever fall, but that was how it seemed to every now-lost civilisation. In the end, only one kingdom remains forever.

Great God of all, your reign is from everlasting to everlasting, whereas the culture I'm in will one day pass as they all do. Thank you that my citizenship is in heaven and that nothing on earth will ever challenge that.

Ezekiel 28 – Lament for Tyre's Ruler

Three more sections beginning "This is what the Lord GOD says" (v1, 6, 11) conclude the oracle against Tyre, here focussing on its ruler. He considered himself a god (v2, 6) and yet he would soon be reminded of his mortality (v9). Just as he did for Tyre in Chapter 27, Ezekiel turns to poetic imagery for a lament for Tyre's king. The language is typical of lofty ancient near-easter poetry, reminding us of how richly God blesses those he appoints to high authority in the world – and also how he then holds them to account. After a very brief word against a 6th nation, Sidon, we have a word of encouragement for Israel in v24-26, right at the centre point of these oracles against the nations. We will see him as Judge, but we will know him as Saviour.

Heavenly Father, you are good to us in appointing governments and rulers to limit the evil in the world. Yet you know how so much of that power is abused. Lord, have mercy, and call our world leaders to repentance. Thank you for the promise of eternity under your rule.

Ezekiel 29 – Against Egypt

This seventh oracle against the nations is as long as the first six combined. Like the oracle against Tyre, it's in seven parts, each beginning with "the word of the LORD came to me" (e.g. v1) and usually precisely dated. Egypt had been a feeble hope to Judah (v7, Jeremiah 37) and had ridiculous claims to divinity for Pharaoh (v9); judgment was just. Verses 17-21 are by far Ezekiel's latest words, and they seem to contradict the utter devastation of Tyre prophesied in the previous three chapters. Yet warnings of judgment are conditional: Jonah's doom on Nineveh was averted by repentance; the destruction of Jerusalem could have been prevented by Zedekiah if only he'd listened to God through Jeremiah. Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.

Great God of All, your words says that the wages of sin is death and I know that that is all I deserve. Thank you for the Spirit's work, calling me to repentance and faith in Christ, my Saviour and Redeemer.

Ezekiel 30 – Misplaced Hope

In Jeremiah 37:5, the siege of Jerusalem was paused briefly when Nebuchadnezzar's forces withdrew to oppose the Egyptian army marching to Judah's aid. Those in Jerusalem (not least King Zedekiah) and the exiles with Ezekiel felt that Egypt was their last hope. But it was no hope at all. So the oracle against Egypt and Pharaoh speaks of one broken arm (likely the failed attempt to reach Jerusalem), later to become a second, signifying a total loss against Nebuchadnezzar's sword. All Egypt's power, wealth, and false gods would be destroyed and its people scattered. Israel's hope should have been in the word of the LORD, not in Egypt. Misplaced hope is the essence of idolatry.

Heavenly Father, your word is truth. Your promises are abounding in grace and mercy. Your gospel brings life, hope, peace, and rest in Christ. While I thank you for the many material blessings you have showered on me, may I always rejoice in you, the Giver, far more than in the gifts.

Ezekiel 31 – Egypt Like Assyria?

In this chapter and the next Ezekiel continues his oracle against Egypt using the cosmic imagery of ancient near eastern mythology, beginning here with an enormous tree. Who would Egypt like to compare themselves to? Assyria, perhaps? Assyria had been a vast empire, a great 'tree' dominating the forest of other nations in its power, beauty, and grandeur. The LORD himself gave it its splendour (v9), but it grew proud and corrupt and was handed over to Babylon (v10-11). Would Egypt still want to be like Assyria? The message is clear: Egypt will indeed become like Assyria, "brought down to the underworld" (v18). There's nothing inherently bad about power or splendour, but humanity always twists and abuses them, as seen in every modern super-power.

Lord God, we so often compare ourselves to others and want to be like them, coveting all manner of worldly things. Lord, keep me focussed on Jesus in all his beautiful perfections, conforming me to his likeness as I look to him with the eyes of faith.

Ezekiel 32 – The Grave

The oracle against Egypt concludes with these final two images from ancient near eastern mythology. Pharaoh is likened to a vast crocodile or monster, caught by God and dragged to die on dry land. Apocalyptic imagery (e.g. v7, 8) causes us to think beyond even Egypt and to see in their destruction a foretaste of the Day of the Lord to come at Christ's return. The final section (from v17) emphasises this perspective by listing one pagan nation after another in the land of the dead, soon to be joined by Pharaoh. (This is poetic vision, not a literal description of the afterlife.) So the oracles against the nations end with them in the grave.

Lord Christ, passages such as this remind me of the utter difference between the hope that you give your people and the desperate hopelessness of those who face the grave without you. Saviour, thank you for calling me; please hear my prayer for unsaved friends and family.

Ezekiel 33 – Turning Point

Back in Chapter 3, God appointed Ezekiel to be a watchman over the exiles. Here, Ezekiel is told to explain that role to the people, reiterating the forensic analysis of culpability for sin that we saw in Chapter 18. But this chapter is a key turning point in the book, since as the people finally acknowledge "our sins" (v10) they are powerfully called to "Repent, repent" (v11). The pause for the oracles against the nations mirrored the two-year wait for news over Jerusalem, finally reported in v21 in full vindication of Ezekiel as a true prophet of God. So v23-29 cancel any notion that the tiny remnant still left in Judah might be blessed; they will suffer for ongoing sin (see Jeremiah 40-44). Lastly, Ezekiel himself is warned about flattery in his new celebrity status from those who hear his words with delight, but heed none of them.

Living God, you are gracious to us to speak of your greatness and mercy, your truth and justice. You are more gracious still to cause my heart to turn in repentance. Give me a teachable spirit, Lord, so that I might apply all I read and hear of you in my life, not simply agree with it in my mind.

Ezekiel 34 – The Good Shepherd

What's left of Israel is now in exile in Babylon. Jerusalem is in ruins. The nation is at rock bottom. Yet here in Ezekiel 34 we get hopeful news: God still regards Judah as "my flock" (e.g. v6, 8, 10), holding their shepherds to account for years of abuse (centuries of ungodly kings and rulers). God himself will seek out his flock and be their perfect Shepherd (v11-16). He will *also* appoint David as one shepherd over them (v23). So in deliberate contrast to the bad shepherds of this chapter, Jesus identified himself as God and heir to David's throne when he said, "I am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11) over "one flock" (John 10:16).

Great Good Shepherd, Lord and Saviour, thank you for coming to seek out and save me. I had gone astray and would have remained lost but for you. Lord, give grace and gentle strength to those who serve you as under-shepherds in our church.

Ezekiel 35 – Justice on Edom

Much of our personal identity is bound up with our nationality and home country. It's hard for us to imagine the dispiriting anguish of exile, of seeing one's home ransacked and taken over by others. The Edomites were Judah's neighbours (to the South East), descended from Esau, and permanent opponents. They rejoiced over Jerusalem's fall (as Obadiah makes clear). So the word of judgment on Edom's hills here is actually a word of encouragement to the Judean exiles; the LORD will put things right. The first 15 verses of the next chapter complete this unit, being a word to Israel's hills that God would bring restoration in a reversal of the prophecy of Chapter 6 and in contrast to Edom's condemnation. Despite the darkness, there is hope in God's promises.

God of Covenant Promise, your word is truth. You have put hope in our hearts of a blissful eternity with you on your earth. Thank you for the comfort and encouragement this brings when all the world is so chaotic and evil.

Ezekiel 36 – New Heart, New Spirit

Verses 1-14 are part of a unit which includes the previous chapter: God will restore Israel's land to the people of Israel. But will the people be any less sinful or idolatrous than before? Will they continue to downgrade the holy name of the LORD (v22)? God himself will act in them to give a new heart (new thoughts) and a new spirit (new wills), and it's only through this inward change that there can be any lasting renewal. So we get the gracious promise of God's own Spirit to cause us to obey him (v27). Israel's sins in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah show that God's promise was fulfilled later than that. We rejoice in the gift of the Holy Spirit to every believer since Pentecost.

Holy Spirit of God, how blessed I am to have you dwell within me, renewing me daily, convicting me of sin, prompting my conscience, leading me in truth and wisdom, and showing me more of Jesus. You are worthy of worship and praise, my great God.

Ezekiel 37 – Raised to Life

This is probably the best-known chapter in Ezekiel, and the key to its meaning is in v11-14. The exiles felt dead and buried in Babylon, completely without hope. But as Adam was formed and given life, this valley of bones was reconstituted into corpses by the word of God and then given life by the Spirit of God. Similarly, the exiles would be 'resurrected' from their graves of exile. Inasmuch as Christ was literally resurrected from his tomb and we are united to him by faith, we are likewise raised from the dead, alive in him. The political reunification suggested in v15-28 is only a picture of the spiritual oneness that defines the true Israel of God today: "There will be one flock, one shepherd," said Jesus (John 10:16).

Lord Jesus, risen and glorified, you smashed death once and for all. Thank you that I am raised in you, alive in you already. Thank you even that such life came to me by your power and grace alone, knowing that only in you can the dead receive new life.

Ezekiel 38 – Looking Ahead

The wonderful chapters of restoration 33-37 end with God dwelling among his people forever and all nations knowing that the LORD sanctifies his people (37:28). Ezekiel's visions turn to the future in 38-48, beginning with the nations in Chapters 38 and 39. There is no firm historical identification of a king called God or a land of Magog, so it's helpful to see this prophecy as a pattern to be repeated many times over as evil regimes gather together to oppose the people of God. Seven sections begin with, "This is what the Lord GOD says" (e.g. v3, 10, 14, 17), reminding us that (a) opposition is certain, (b) God is in control, and (c) the enemies of God's people will fail.

Sovereign Lord, as ever it is reassuring that you are governing and judging humanity with perfect knowledge, power, and justice. Give me strength to stand up and stand out for you, confident that you will always do good.

Ezekiel 39 – God and Magog

The prophecy against King Gog of the land of Magog concludes in grim fashion. Having gathered all the nations together against the people of God, defeat comes from God himself. Their final state is a brutal reversal of the valley of dry bones. This patterns of opposition has been and will be repeated many times, to culminate in a single ultimate battle when Gog is finally identified as Satan leading a cosmic assault against "the encampment of the saints, the beloved city" (Rev. 20:7-9), the people of God. Satan and all his work will be destroyed, removed forever from God's new earth. That is the end *we* deserve for *our* sins, and it's what we are saved from in Christ so that we might know the LORD.

Lord Christ, I don't know if your return is in the near or distant future, but I know it will be a complete and final victory over darkness, sin, and death. Thank you for calling me to life in yourself, so that I might stand in the Day of your return.

Ezekiel 40 – Temple Dimensions

The next three chapters are filled with measurements of a visionary temple set "on a very high mountain" (v2). The physical city of Jerusalem certainly isn't on a very high mountain, but mountains are an ancient near-eastern symbol of the place of God's dwelling. Since Ezekiel had seen a vision of the LORD's glory leaving the physical temple in Jerusalem twenty years earlier, he would have been thrilled at the prospect of a new dwelling place for God among his people. The only reference to height in the measurements is in v5; any attempt to model this temple soon has to fill in gaps with guesses. It is more helpful simply to marvel at the symmetry, precision, and peace of God's dwelling place.

Lord God, it is beyond gracious of you to choose to dwell among your people. Thank you for Jesus, our only sacrifice, our perfect High Priest, and our place of atonement and worship. Saviour, keep me coming into your presence daily.

Ezekiel 41 – The Most Holy Place

The measurements continue, with the silence only broken once as the strange man explains to Ezekiel, “This is the most holy place” (v4) – a reminder that it was out of bounds to Ezekiel even in a vision. When Moses was given instructions for the tabernacle, there were repeated commands that it should be built exactly as shown. There are no such commands here. The whole image is of a new temple to be established as God’s dwelling place among his people – a place of utter perfection. The New Testament specifically identifies Jesus as our temple: He is the atoning sacrifice, our High Priest, our entrance into God’s presence. Ezekiel’s strange vision gave hope to the exiles and points us to Jesus.

Lord Jesus, you are exalted and beautiful in all your holy perfection. Where Ezekiel could not enter the most holy place even in a vision, you take me there in union with you in your death and resurrection. Lord, reveal to me afresh the astonishing spiritual realities you have brought me to.

Ezekiel 42 – Shadows of Temples

The temple actually built after the exile in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah was nowhere near as perfect or as grand as this one in Ezekiel’s vision. It was, however, the place of worship as God’s dwelling-place among his people. In addition to Jesus being identified as the ultimate temple in the New Testament, the church is also called a temple since the Holy Spirit of God dwells in every believer. The church, like Nehemiah’s temple, might be far from perfect but we are immeasurably blessed to have God dwell among us. The perfect symmetries of Ezekiel’s temple would cause Judeans to long for future perfection, just as we yearn to be with Christ, free from sin and imperfection forever.

Lord Christ, we are blessed to have your presence with us in this broken world, yet how we look forward to seeing you and being with you forever. Saviour, help me to live that kingdom life now, experiencing you every day, rejoicing in holiness of life.

Ezekiel 43 – Glory and Shame

Back in Chapter 8, Ezekiel was shown visions of abhorrent idolatry in the temple complex at Jerusalem. Men and women, elders and priests, were all engaged in pagan worship in the very place the LORD should be most honoured. So in Chapter 10, the glory of the LORD abandoned the temple. Here, then, we see with relief and delight that the glory is to return (v2). This time there will be no shared space with pagan idols. As Ezekiel gave this vision to the exiles they were to ponder everything it meant and all they had done and "be ashamed of their iniquities" (v10). As walking, talking temples of the Holy Spirit, we do well to do likewise, ashamed of our indwelling sin, grateful for his purifying work in us.

Holy Spirit, it is a privilege beyond words or understanding to have you dwell in me. When I reflect on my sinful thoughts, desires, words, and actions, I am ashamed to think how they are on display to you, grieving you. Lord, continue your purifying, sanctifying work in me.

Ezekiel 44 – Serving the LORD, Serving the People

The system of approach to worshipping the LORD given in Leviticus was based on separating the holy from the common, and recognising that common things were either clean or unclean. But all this was forgotten in the idolatry brought into the temple (v6-8), so the Levites could no longer serve in the holy things but they would serve the people (v11). The faithful Levitical priests descended from Zadok would stand before God to serve him (v15). They were to teach, obey, and apply the law of God, dedicated to him with no income other than the offerings of the obedient nation. This mutual material and spiritual dependence is maintained by churches paying their pastors appropriately today.

Lord Jesus, you are wise, good, and kind to provide deacons and elders for godly administration and spiritual leadership in your churches. May those set apart for teaching be diligent students, obedient disciples, and holy examples. May they also be provided for by your people.

Ezekiel 45 – Worship

The architecture and sacrificial system at the temple emphasised both the lofty holiness of the LORD and his grace in dwelling among sinful humanity so that we might approach him. The “prince” here denotes the civil head of state, and whereas Israel’s kings had often thought of themselves too highly, the allocation of land and limits on access to the temple for the prince make it clear that Israel was to be a theocracy; the head of state would not be holy (like the priests) but would be subordinate to God as king. That said, the prince had special responsibility for worship and the provision of sacrifices for the people. In this, civil authorities are to be lead worshippers, examples for us all of our dependence on God.

God of Grace, you are infinitely kind to provide a means for us to come to you. Lord, you know how our civil authorities are opposed to you. May I be a lead worshipper at home, in church, in work, in life, so that others would follow you.

Ezekiel 46 – Rhythms of Worship

In these temple chapters we have been shown a huge, perfect, unblemished temple complex ready for worship which was then occupied by the glory of the LORD. Now we have instruction for regular worship at the temple based on the Levitical system (but with some variation). So many regular worshippers are expected that a simple form of crowd control is envisaged (v9). Their worship is to be under the leadership of the prince, the civil head of state. The whole image is of a society that revolves around true worship of God in its weekly, monthly, and seasonal rhythms. As the Spirit of God dwells in us, we also ought to have our lives built around such rhythms of worship.

Living God, it’s lovely to hear the antidote to your ancient people’s idolatry was to reset and reorient their lives around your personal dwelling with them. Lord, help me to be constantly conscious of your presence, living in holiness and peace and joy in you.

Ezekiel 47 – The River of Life

Ezekiel's temple imagery has shown us how the LORD has returned to dwell among his people, who themselves are reoriented towards worship. But this vision of a river highlights how the blessings of God flow out from him in supernatural abundance. There is no expectation of a literal fulfilment: This is visionary, symbolic imagery. For Ezekiel's co-exiles, the image brought hope of life and restoration in their own land. Jesus, so clearly identified as a new temple in John 2:21, used Ezekiel's river image to promise "streams of living water" – the Holy Spirit from deep within every believer (John 7:38-39). Rev. 22:1-5 takes the river image to its conclusion where it flows bringing life and healing to all, eternally flowing out blessing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.

Life-giving God, everything that exists is either of you or from you. You enable us to come to you only that we might know you and experience your abundant life. Lord, may I not be a still pool, but rather a conduit through which the life and blessing of the Spirit will flow freely to others.

Ezekiel 48 – The LORD is There

The setting of boundaries and allocations of land begun at 47:13 and into this chapter are highly idealised. Nothing like them was ever achieved, and with the loss of the northern tribes to Assyria 150 years or so earlier such allocations were impossible. Yet for the exiles, the vision of a restored Israel must have been comforting. As we note the remarkable inclusion of foreigners having ownership and inheritance rights, we see the theological point of Ezekiel's geography: By God's grace, even Gentiles like us are "grafted in" to the people of God (Romans 11:17). The high point of the vision is a city of all God's people with God present among us, all dwelling in holiness (Rev. 21:10-12).

Lord God, you dwell with your people where we are and call us together as one in Christ. Help me to live out that oneness with all your people, even those so unlike me. Help me to live consciously aware of your presence for comfort, help, and holiness of life.

Daniel 1 – Immersed in Babylon

It was 605 BC, the year Jeremiah's book returns to so often, the year Nebuchadnezzar swept through Judah and took Jerusalem. Daniel, aged perhaps 14 or 15, was taken with others "from the royal family and from the nobility" to be trained for leadership in Babylon. For 3 years they would study commerce, religion, geography, astrology, divination, politics, and much else. Despite being immersed in Babylonian culture, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah retained personal conviction and devotion to the LORD. Their polite and reasonable request to abstain from the king's meat and wine was a simple, private statement of identity and solidarity with the people of God – and the LORD honoured their faith.

Lord God, I'm barely aware of the extent to which I am immersed in this Babylonian world around me. Grant me Daniel's wisdom to live well for you in the world while retaining a clear conviction and devotion of heart for you.

Daniel 2 – Nebuchadnezzar's Dream of a Statue

If Nebuchadnezzar had described his dream to his wise men it's likely they'd have identified him as the rock that smashed the statue and went on to fill the earth. His challenge to them was as shrewd as it was unreasonable. Daniel's interpretation actually spells out that Nebuchadnezzar's glory would pass – a bold thing to say to such a man. The kingdoms of the statue were probably Babylon first, then the Medes & Persians, Greece (under Alexander the Great), and then Rome. The rock that established an everlasting kingdom is Christ himself, the true King of kings. Daniel and his friends then engaged with and benefitted the pagan society they were part of while publicly honouring the LORD. We have so much to learn from them.

Lord Christ, kingdoms and regimes come and go. Even the dominant world powers of today will fade. And yet you will reign for ever and ever! Lord, give me wisdom to live as a citizen of heaven bringing good news and blessing to the world around me.

Daniel 3 – Faithful to Death

Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were renamed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as part of their immersion into Babylonian culture. They were talented and held responsible positions in Babylon itself. Yet their refusal to bow down and worship a gold statue showed that their faith in God remained unchanged; they would choose to serve God rather than men when circumstances demanded a choice. They knew that God *could* save them from the fire but they didn't presume it: Their faith wasn't conditional on being rescued. In joining them and preserving them from the flames, the Lord brought glory to himself. Likewise, he is present with us in every situation whether he rescues us or not.

Lord Jesus, you have already rescued me from the fires of hell – their heat and smoke will never reach me. It is further reassuring and comforting that you will never leave me nor forsake me whatever fiery trials come to test me. Thank you.

Daniel 4 – Ruler Over Human Kingdoms

The Old Testament was written almost entirely in Hebrew. Chapters 2 to 7 of Daniel, however, were written in Aramaic, the 'global' language of its time. These chapters are to be proclaimed to the whole world. They are carefully constructed and balanced to pivot on 4:34-35 where the greatest world leader of the day praises God whose dominion is everlasting and global. Chapter 4 builds up to this gradually in 3 sections, each of which says that the living will know that "the Most High is ruler over human kingdoms" (v17, 25, 32). God has the might and the right to rule over us as our Creator and Sustainer, though like Nebuchadnezzar we often need to be humbled before we acknowledge him.

Great God in heaven, when I consider you majestic power and rule I realise again how absurd I am to choose go my own way rather than yours – yet I do it over and over. Lord, forgive me. Thank you that in granting me forgiveness you call me to be your child. That's amazing.

Daniel 5 – Writing on the Wall

This brilliant narrative reveals information to us that clearly shows the passage of time. Nebuchadnezzar has been succeeded by Belshazzar who does not share his predecessor's knowledge of God. Rather, Belshazzar shows utter contempt (v3-4). The hand writing on the wall killed the party, terrified the king, and baffled the magicians. Daniel has clearly been demoted from high office but is brought back to memory by the queen (probably the queen mother). Belshazzar tries to assert authority in his gestures (v16), but Daniel rebukes him for not choosing to submit to the LORD as Nebuchadnezzar eventually did. Belshazzar would pay for his deliberate unbelief with his kingdom and his life. Head knowledge of truth isn't enough; we must believe with our hearts.

Living God, it is far better to know and serve you than to be ruled by allegiance to idols. You number our days and weigh our offences with perfect knowledge. If you counted our sins against us, none could stand. So I thank and praise you for your mercy to all who will turn to you.

Daniel 6 – Daniel's Faithfulness

Daniel spent his whole life in the administration of Babylon's government and yet his enemies "could find no charge or corruption, for he was trustworthy, and no negligence or corruption was found in him" (v4). He was in his eighties. His enemies could only devise a scheme where doing *right* became *wrong*, confident that he could continue. Sure enough, Daniel maintained his life-long personal devotion to the LORD his God (v10), since any temptation to abandon the LORD would be more dangerous to his soul than the lions could be to his body. Darius, the most powerful man alive at the time, was unable to save Daniel. But we don't put our trust in men or armies; we trust in the LORD.

Holy Father, I can hardly compare my prayer life with Daniel's. Lord, help me to develop such regular intimacy with you that I would never be tempted to shy away from dependence on you or to own you publicly. Keep me from putting my hope in people instead of you.

Daniel 7 – One Like a Son of Man

In the balanced structure of Daniel 2-7, the four beasts here match the four kingdoms represented by the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream. But the fourth beast introduces a complex development, suggesting a succession of evil powers with a single wicked ruler over them all (the little horn, v8). Yet their arrogance is no match for the majestic ascension of Jesus, the one like a son of man, given all power and glory by the Father following the work of the cross. When all we see is the violence and self-loathing of the world around us, dominated by godless ideologies and influences, we do well to recall that Jesus is already and eternally reigning over all.

Lord Christ, majestic and glorious beyond my imagination, powerful and reigning beyond all challenge, thank you for including me in your kingdom. May the Spirit ever give me desire to serve you and protect me from the devil's schemes.

Daniel 8 – I Know Who Hold the Future

The interpretation of Daniel's vision is that it's about a sequence of coming kings. Daniel himself was "overcome and lay sick for days" (v27), but a glance at the history books enables us to see clearly how the vision was fulfilled. Belshazzar's reign was ended by the Medes and the Persians (v20) who were then swept away by Alexander the Great of Greece (v21). After him came the particularly unpleasant Antiochus Epiphanes IV (v23-25). Some of Daniel's prophecies are so specific and verifiable that the reader is forced to decide what to think of Scripture itself: Is this book a deceitful work written after the event, or is it the work of God who really is outside of time and who knows the future?

Eternal God, you are from everlasting to everlasting and you know the beginning from the end. All my days are in your hand. This encourages me greatly, both as I consider the chaotic power struggles in world events and as I know your hand on the details of my life.

Daniel 9 – Treasured by God

In Jeremiah 25 and 29 the prophecy was given that the exile in Babylon would last 70 years. Daniel's magnificent prayer takes that promise back to God in godly humility: He acknowledged that the exile was deserved, and that return is still undeserved. The basis of Daniel's prayer is therefore the LORD's own honour (v17) and compassion (v18). Though this is a long prayer, an answer went out as soon as he'd started (v23) because he was "treasured by God." The enigmatic prophecy of 70 weeks answers his prayer: They would indeed return to Jerusalem and, at some point in the future, the Anointed One (Messiah, Christ) would come, atoning for iniquity.

Lord Christ, how blessed we are to know something of your greatness and your atoning sacrifice for our sins. Thank you for your compassion, without which I would never have been saved. Thank you for hearing my prayer and for loving me as someone treasured by God.

Daniel 10 – The Full Armour of God

In the first year of King Cyrus, he decreed that the Judean exiles could return to their own land. They went and rebuilt the altar in Jerusalem but were discouraged form rebuilding the temple itself. This loss of blessing is likely the reason for Daniel's three weeks of mourning (v2) and prayer (v12). Alarmingly, this angelic visitor had been prevented from reaching Daniel for the whole of the three weeks, highlighting a spiritual battle of which we mortals are barely aware. We know that Jesus has already secured victory, but Satan remains a hate-filled liar in violent opposition to the LORD and his people. Our hope is in Christ and the armour of God we've been given (Eph. 6:10-18). May we know, like Daniel, the reality of sustained fervency in prayer.

Lord God, my prayers are so scant and shallow. Worse, I live as if I were not in a spiritual battle and therefore I neglect the armour you have given. May I know more and more of the preciousness of your presence and power in prayer.

Daniel 11 – King After King

It's possible to trace through this chapter alongside the history books and identify the various kings and their reigns. While we marvel at the prophecy given to Daniel ahead of time, the actual contents feel remote to us. But we do well to note that no matter how awful each reign was, it did not last forever. The final king from 11:36 to 12:3 is like the "man of lawlessness" who Paul mentions in 2 Thess. 2, suggesting that Daniel's prophecy reaches even into our own future today. So we expect that reign also to be cut short – this time by Jesus himself at his return. This chapter then becomes important to us: All that God has spoken will come to pass, both the coming of wicked rulers *and* the final victory of Christ.

Messiah Jesus, King of kings, your eternal reign is beyond challenge or question. This encourages me as I see lawlessness in society and still feel it in my own heart. May your kingdom come, not least in my own obedience of faith, subject to you in joy.

Daniel 12 – Resurrection Hope

We naturally have many questions of a chapter like this, and it's notable that so did Daniel (v8). But the LORD tells us all we need to know when we need to know it, knowing that we lack the capacity to know all things. What we do see here is one of the Old Testament's clearest teachings on the resurrection (v2) and what that will mean for believers like Daniel (v13). The fuller understanding of life beyond the grave came at the resurrection of Christ, and the fuller revelation of this age came when the sealed-up scroll in God's right hand was opened as Christ's ascension (Rev. 5:5). We are immeasurably blessed to have the full revelation of God's word, rejoicing in the resurrection of Jesus, the firstfruits from among the dead (1 Cor. 15:20).

Living Saviour, all my hope of life is in you. You alone were worthy to open up the Father's plan for this age by your death, resurrection, and ascension. How blessed I am to be able to approach you, knowing something of your gracious welcome.

Hosea 1 – Love Rejected

The twelve “minor prophets” from Hosea to Malachi have much to say about God’s wrath, but they begin by grounding all God’s actions in his love. He loved his people, but the continued idolatry of northern Israel meant a declaration of a broken covenant and judgment to come at the hand of Jehu and others (1 Kings 19:17). But Jehu was over-zealous and cruel, delivering a bloodbath at Jezreel (2 Kings 10:6-11). In telling Hosea to marry a promiscuous woman, we glimpse God’s own heart at promiscuous Israel. Of the three children born to Gomer, only the first is Hosea’s. the others are symbols of unfaithfulness and memories of spurned love. And love rejected becomes wrath.

Faithful God, I feel the unfaithfulness of my own heart, less than wholly devoted to you. Father I confess that I rarely meditate on the grief my sin must cause you as a perfect loving Father. Spirit, please continue your convicting and sanctifying work in me.

Hosea 2 – You Are My People

Hosea 1:10-2:1 promises restoration for the people of God in language rooted in Genesis 22 but ultimately fulfilled in Christ’s church (1 Peter 2:9-10). Verses 2-13 are a sustained rebuke for Israel’s idolatry, acting like a promiscuous wife going after other lovers. It will only bring her disaster. In v14, the LORD is emphatic: “Therefore *I* am going to persuade here.” He will woo his beloved and speak to her heart. The Valley of Achor (v15) was where Achan stole some of Jericho’s forbidden wealth (Joshua 7:20-21), so here God is calling his people to repent and go back to the start. Verses 19 & 20 are spectacular, especially as we understand the bride of Christ to be his church, loved for all time.

Gracious God, you called me from my idolatry to faith, and you did so because of your own great love and patience. Forgive me that my head is still often turned away to idolatry, and keep my heart tuned to your faithful love and holiness.

Hosea 3 & 4 – Love Her Again

Chapters 1-3 form a powerful introduction both to Hosea and the Minor Prophets as a whole. God's love for us is on display, seen most beautifully in 3:1; Hosea wasn't simply to tolerate his promiscuous wife, he was to buy her back at cost and love her again. So too God bought the church at the cost of Jesus' sacrifice, making v5 gloriously true for us. Chapters 4 & 5 combine to describe the promiscuous idolatry and apostasy of the world around us: "There is no truth, no faithful love, and no knowledge of God in the land" (v1), a sadly perennial statement. The parody of religion on v7-11 and the false faith of v12-14 stem from a worldly, truthless, godless spiritual leadership failing to know or teach about the LORD (v6).

God of grace and love, I was very much part of the godless world around me until you called me. Lord, I know I slip into sin every day. Thank you for your faithful love, choosing to love me again and again and again. Lord, help me to know that love and to express it to others.

Hosea 5 & 6 – Faithful Love, Not Sacrifice

Chapter 5 completes the unit with Chapter 4, spelling out the spiritual barrenness of Israel. It is summed up by the phrase in v7: "They betrayed the LORD." Hosea 6:1-3 sounds like a lovely prayer of repentance, but the short-term expectation of blessing in v2 shows that their turning to the LORD is a paper-thin veneer in the hope of securing divine blessing. It's just sham religion. The LORD replies with a lament over the people, and Jesus quoted v6 to the Pharisees of his day (e.g. Matthew 9:9-13). The LORD calls us to relationship, not religion. As Christians we naturally have religious practices (worship, prayer, etc), but they are to be an expression of living faith in Christ, not a substitute for it.

Living God, you are gracious to call me to faith in Christ so that I might know you. Forgive me for the times when I go through the motions of devotion but neglect the reality of relationship. Saviour God, help me to know you more and more in my life.

Hosea 7 – "I Want to Redeem Them"

Hosea uses a string of similes to describe Israel's spiritual mire. In v3-7, they're an oven that can't cool down, such as when you're so entangled in your own sin and the sins of others that you can't escape the fire. In v8-10 they're like bread on a grill, half raw and half burned; their dependence on the world is burning them though they can't see it, while they have no spiritual comfort within. Going to Egypt and Assyria for aid in v7-12 is like asking bullies for help; they will only abuse you. Israel was a silly dove to flit that way. And in v13-16 they're a faulty bow, always off target, moaning to God but never really crying out to him. And in all this, God's response is compassion: "I want to redeem them" (v13).

Gracious, patient Father, you know the restlessness that often traps my heart when I ought to be knowing the grace, peace, and rest that Christ brings. Lord, forgive my sinful forgetfulness. Keep me close to you, trusting in you, putting sin to death.

Hosea 8 – Reap the Whirlwind

This chapter sounds a dire warning to anyone who deceives themselves that they are right with God when they aren't. Despite Israel's transgression, rebellion, and rejection (v13), they would still say, "My God, we know you!" (v2). Verses 4-6 spell out their false worship of the LORD through golden calves at Bethel and Dan. Israel's "altars for sin" became "altars for sinning" (v11), since parody worship is as offensive as pagan worship. The tone of v7-14 reminds us that rejection of the gospel is a personal offence against the LORD. He has given us so much, and by the death and resurrection of Christ he holds out to us life with himself. To reject that love is to "sow the wind and reap the whirlwind" of God's wrath in eternity (v7).

Holy God, thank you that the whirlwind of your righteous anger at me was directed with full force on Christ in my place. Thank you for graciously calling me to know you. Help me to worship you truly in word of truth and spirit of life.

Hosea 9 – "The Prophet is a Fool"

In times of abundance and prosperity, both individuals and whole societies revel in their worldly pleasures without giving glory, thanks, and praise to God. But Israel's blessing was very much from the LORD who loved them with covenant love. Over and over, God sent prophets to warn them of the consequences of their unfaithfulness, but they mocked his prophets as insane fools (v7). So the prophecy here is doubly chilling: They can expect exile to Egypt and Assyria, and their descendants will be cut off. Sure enough, northern Israel never recovered from the Assyrian invasion and exile. As the gospel of Christ goes out today, v17 is still sadly repeated: "My God will reject them because they have not listened to him."

Lord God, today you speak to us still, through Christ as revealed in your word and applied to us by your Spirit. Father, if you had not first chosen to give me life, I would never have listened to your word. Thank you.

Hosea 10 – It is Time to Seek the LORD

Jeroboam son of Nebat installed golden calves at Bethel and Dan to prevent people going to Jerusalem to worship the LORD. He established a wicked parody of true worship. Hosea calls Bethel ("House of God") Beth-aven (v5, "House of Empty Idolatry") and speaks of its coming destruction in judgment. A yoke of exile is coming, but God calls them to plough the hard ground of their own hearts and "seek the LORD" (v12). It is likely that Jesus had these verses in mind when he invited us to "Come to me… Take my yoke… find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:28-30). Israel's rebels would discover they'd rather have mountains fall on them than face God's judgment (v8), and so it will always be (Rev. 6:16-17).

Lord Jesus, it seems absurd in the light of these verses to reject your gracious invitation to rest. It's clear just how hard-hearted we naturally are until you work in us by grace. Lord, keep me from sham, dry, ritualistic worship; keep me in close daily communion with you.

Hosea 11 – My Son

Once again Hosea reveals to us the open heart of God, oozing compassion and love for his rebellious people. He had called Israel his son when he had chosen and redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, and through he cared for them with parental love they did not acknowledge him (e.g. v3). Though the LORD's justice brings covenantal judgment on them (v5-7), his love and mercy stay his hand from wiping them out entirely (v8-9). We end the chapter with hope of restoration in the future (v10-11). The early chapters of Matthew's gospel show how Jesus' life mirrored Israel, and Hosea 11:1 is applied to Jesus' return from Egypt (Matt. 3:14-15). But where Israel failed in covenant unfaithfulness and idolatry, Jesus triumphed in holiness and love.

Holy Father, you are gracious indeed to call anyone other than Jesus your son or daughter. We are not worthy of such exalted privilege. Thank you that you gave your Son up to death so that my sins would be atoned for and all that I have done may be forgiven. Thank you for Jesus.

Hosea 12 – Return to Your God

Hosea reminds us of Jacob who wrestled with God in Genesis 32. It was a hard, night-time struggle at the end of which God changed Jacob's name to Israel. But by Hosea's day the people of Israel had forgotten all God's care and had become idolatrously independent of him (v8,9,11). Yet in grace and justice, the LORD sent prophets to call them to repentance (v10, 13) as he continues to do in the gospel message through his church today. And the message is the same: "You must return to your God. Maintain love and justice, and always put your hope in God" (v6). We are grateful we have this message written down for us; we must proclaim it.

Living God, you know how often I grapple with problems instead of grappling with you in prayer. Forgive my independent heart, and help me to develop a close, dependent spirit. Teach me what it is always to put my trust in you.

Hosea 13 – Inescapable Judgment

Judgment was coming on Israel, just as we proclaim the judgment to come to the earth when Christ returns. The unbelieving response of Israel is similarly echoed in the rejection of the gospel today: They contented themselves with idolatry (v2-3), became self-satisfied and self-sufficient (v4-9), and trusted in human rules (v10-13). An atheist will rebel against God confident that they will escape justice in death. But v14 says that death itself is no escape, since nothing can have victory over God. Paul applies v14 to Christ's resurrection in 1 Cor. 15:55; Jesus will raise everyone from the grave to be judged and death itself will be thrown into the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:14).

Risen Saviour, you are glorified in your resurrection and are victorious over death. You will judge every person, every sin, with perfect wisdom, knowledge, and power. Lord, help me to point lost sinners to life and hope in you.

Hosea 14 – Take Words to God

In Hosea 13:4 God said, "no Saviour exists besides me" and in v9, "you have no help but me." As we recall Hosea 6:6 (which was so much in Jesus' mind) we do well to consider our approach to this Saviour God. Shall we go with more vibrant worship? A more diligent approach to love and holiness, perhaps? No, 14:2 spells out the simplicity of it all: "Take words of repentance with you and return to the LORD." The promises of covenant blessing that flow to Israel in v4-8 are in response to their repentance, their abandonment of idolatry, and their turning to the LORD. And as Hosea was to love Gomer again (Hosea 3), so God "will freely love" all who turn in repentance and faith.

Gracious Lord, you call us to come only with words of repentance and a sacrifice of praise. You yourself have atoned for all my sin in Christ – as perfect and complete a demonstration of your love for me as there could be. Saviour, thank you.

Joel 1 – Locusts!

We don't know who Joel was or when he lived, but he was the first prophet Peter quoted at Pentecost in Acts 2. In Joel's day, the land had been utterly devastated by locusts (as still happens today) and all crops were ruined. "Has anything like this ever happened?" asks Joel in v2. In fact, it has, and Joel uses language taken from the plagues of Egypt in Exodus to describe the events of his day. The inference is that the locusts are from God, sent as a call to repentance. The only right response is not merely to lament, but to gather together and lament to God (v13-14). Further, this terrible day is a foretaste of the "day of the LORD" to come (v15), echoing down the years until Christ's return.

Holy God, you graciously give us so many calls to repentance – so many of which are ignored, unheeded. Thank you for the Spirit's work in me, causing me to lament my sin and to cry out to you for forgiveness. Father, thank you for choosing to save me in love.

Joel 2 – Sound the Alarm, Call an Assembly

"Blow the ram's horn… sound the alarm…" (v1) because something worse than a swarm of locusts is coming: A fearsome foreign army bringing devastation in the LORD's day of judgement. Is there any hope of escape? Yes, v12-14 remind us of God's nature, calling us to repentance, to turn to the LORD. So for a second time, "Blow the ram's horn" (v15), this time to call an assembly of everyone before God in prayer (V17). So v18-26 describe a return to the LORD's blessing, crowned with the promise that he will be "present in Israel" (v27). Later still, v28-32 were quoted by Peter at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came on all God's people, present with us forever. "Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved" (v32). Such grace!

Living God, you are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in faithful love towards me. Thank you for so great a salvation in Jesus and for the unchanging presence of the Holy Spirit. Lord, use me to sound the alarm of judgment to others.

Joel 3 – The Day of the LORD

Joel 1 spoke of locusts and how difficulties in life are often a call to repentance, foreshadowing the Day of the LORD. Joel 2 said that God's people are to sound out alarms for coming to judgment and assembly for turning to God, now enabled by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Joel 3 looks ahead event our future, to the great and final Day of the LORD. God himself will gather the nations for final battle (v9-11), summoned to the Valley of Jehoshaphat (not a known place, but Jehoshaphat means "the LORD judges"). All the LORD's enemies will be trampled decisively (v13-15), "But the LORD will be a refuge for his people" (v16). We will be made holy, dwelling with the LORD forever, a forgiven people.

Holy God, I don't always read such prophecy with the urgent compassion for the lost that I ought to have. Surely that Day to come will be beyond awful for those who don't know you or honour your name. Lord, help me to proclaim your salvation, your Good News in Christ.

Amos 1 – Every Sin Counted

Amos was from Judah, sent by God to prophesy to Israel in the north. His message is not a happy one, as "The LORD roars from Zion" (v2) calling out sin. The book begins with these prophecies against the surrounding nations. The formula "for three crimes, even four" is a Hebrew idiom, here indicating that the nations' specific sins are known, counted, and brought against them in perfect justice. As we're taken through the surrounding nations we read of specific events – some known to us in Scripture and others not. But they are all known and recorded by the LORD who brings perfect justice. We praise God that the charge sheet against us has been nailed to the cross (Col. 2:14).

Holy God, your knowledge is perfect and your justice unquestionable. Thank you that every single sin of mine – in word, thought, and action – is wholly known and fully atoned for in Jesus' sacrifice. Spirit, help me to put sin to death.

Amos 2 – Judgment Comes Home

In each of the five judgments against the nations in Chapter 1, God said he would "send fire" against them, and so it continues here. Fire speaks of God's righteousness and wrath. It's not a surprise to see Moab as the sixth nation listed, but Amos's hearers in Israel would have been delighted to hear of fire against Judah. Yet the most pointed charge sheet against any nation is for Israel itself who trampled the poor, turned away from the afflicted, abused women, worshipped other gods, exploited the poor, forgot the LORD, and defiled Nazirites and prophets (v6-12). Yet in all this, they believed they were the LORD's people. If we say we are without sin, we deceive ourselves. But you can't kid the LORD.

Holy God, by grace you have declared me righteous, counting my sins against Jesus instead of me. Forgive me that I still sin, still give in to temptation, and even look down on others in their lives of sin. Father, forgive me. Spirit, change me.

Amos 3 – A Lion Has Roared

Chapters 3 to 6 contain five oracles (or pronouncements). The first three begin, "Listen" and the other two begin, "Woe." The first oracle opens with a series of simple but inevitable cause-and-effect images, emphasising the certainty that God will speak (indeed, "a lion has roared", v8) whenever and wherever there is evil. So, given the cause that is Israel's perpetual sin in v9-10 then the effect of God's word in v11 is just and inevitable. Even so, the LORD won't wipe Israel out completely, and a tiny remnant will survive (v12). But the system of false worship and self-serving government will be destroyed (v13-15). Given the evil in our world, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah is bound to roar again.

Holy God, all your judgments are right, true, and appropriate. Your wrath is as great as your love, and so I thank you that in love you spent all your wrath against me on your Son, Jesus. Help me to take this news of your love to unbelieving people.

Amos 4 – Prepare to Meet Your God

A second oracle begins with “Listen” (v1), said this time to the “cows of Bashan” – women of wealth and ease who cared nothing for the poor and needy. Judgment would come to them in ugly exile (v2-3). There is a somewhat sarcastic call to worship in v4-5, spelling out specific ways in which their religious practices were so very different from what the LORD had comanded in Leviticus. False worship of the true God is never acceptable; it is just another form of rebellion. Under the covenant terms of Leviticus 26, the LORD had sent hunger, drought, plagues, and war as calls to repentance, and “yet you did not return to me” (v6, 8, 9, 10, 11) – so he comes to them in judgment: “Prepare to meet your God” (v12).

Lord Christ, I long for your coming. I can’t wait to see you in your glory and power. Even so, I know it will be overwhelming. Lord, at your return there will be many who won’t be prepared to meet you. Use me to warn and to witness today.

Amos 5 – Seek the LORD and Live

A third oracle begins with “Listen” in v1 as Amos cites a lament over Israel. He calls them to “Seek the LORD and live” (v4, 6) – to abandon their idolatrous worship and the godless morality it produces. Two key Old Testament words are spoken against Israel in v7: “Justice” has the sense of putting wrongs right, while “righteousness” is about doing right things – but Israel had rejected both when they rejected the true worship of the LORD. They are urged to “Pursue good and not evil… Hate evil and love good” (v14-15). The fourth oracle begins with “Woe” in v18 since Israel expected a “day of the LORD” when he would be victorious over his enemies but they didn’t realise that they were included. Again, they are called on to let justice and righteousness flow (v24).

Holy God, you are gracious to call us rebel sinners to you, to life with you forever. Help me to live for you now, looking to do right things and to put wrongs right whenever I can in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of the Son.

Amos 6 – The Pride Problem

The fifth and final oracle is another “Woe” (v1). Israel are urged to see how God has dealt with neighbouring pagan nations. The problem in Israel was pride (v8) so that they believed that no judgment from God would come on them. But the question in v2 condemns them: “Are you better than these kingdoms?” It’s easy to look at other churches that are in decline or struggling to survive and think that that could not happen to our own church for some reason. Are we better than those churches? Even as individual Christians we can become full of pride, forgetting the grace that saved us, comparing ourselves favourably with others. The remedy is always the same: “Seek the LORD and live” (Amos 5:4, 6).

Heavenly Father, the salvation in Christ you have brought me to leaves no room for pride or boasting. And yet I do find myself comparing with others and finding fault in them. Lord, forgive my foolish pride and keep me in humble dependence on you.

Amos 7 – Visions and Opposition

Chapters 7 to 9 contain five visions, the first three of which are here in v1-9. Locusts and fire would be devastating judgments that could wipe out Israel, and Amos’s prayers were heard. The plumb line measured Israel and found them tilted, skewed, far from upright. Amos did not intercede this time at the judgment against Israel’s false worship and ungodly rule. The record of visions is interrupted by the opposition of Amaziah, priest at Bethel. He deliberately misrepresents Amos’s words as if they were words from a man and not God; he sends a false message to the king when he ought to listen to the word of God for himself. As we witness for the Lord, let us intercede even as we expect opposition.

Lord Christ, you have made us a kingdom of priests to teach others about you while also interceding for them to you. Lord, forgive my negligence in both roles. May I be more like your servant Amos, even in the face of direct rejection and opposition.

Amos 8 – Devastating Famine

The fourth vision of Amos is a basket of summer fruit where all the fruit has ripened and been harvested. The Hebrew word for summer fruit is similar to the word for 'end' – and the end has come for Israel (v2). The LORD is patient and slow to anger, but he won't be mocked by shoddy, vacuous shows of religion that only mask hearts of idolatry, greed, and injustice (v4-6). The famine to come is particularly damning for Israel: "not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD" (v11). It is an act of judgment when God delivers us over to the desires of our hearts, no longer calling us to repentance.

Patient, Gracious God, your word is truth and life in that as it shows me my sin and calls me to salvation in Christ. Lord God, may your word be preached and lived out by everyone in our church, not least in me.

Amos 9 – David's Tent Restored

The final vision of Amos is of the LORD standing by the altar declaring extensive judgment against Israel. The searching language of v2-4 reminds us that the judgment against the nation would be felt and experienced person by person, not in some vague sense but in individual, personal suffering. We need to remember such specificity in our prayers and evangelistic efforts. The book ends on a surprisingly positive note: "In that day I will restore the fallen shelter of David" (v11), followed by Old Covenant imagery of God's blessing. James quotes v11 at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15; the promised royal descendant of David is Jesus, and the inclusion of Gentiles in his kingdom fulfils v11.

Lord Jesus, risen and reigning, I am beyond blessed to be included in your kingdom. You know how I repeat the sins of ancient Israel that Amos spoke against. Lord, help me to live for you truly, living out holiness in every aspect of my daily life.

Obadiah – Do Not Gloat Over Your Brother

Abraham's son Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Jacob was renamed Israel and became the father of that nation. Esau became the father of the neighbouring country, Edom. There was inter-generational animosity between the two nations, despite being 'brothers'. When the Babylonians exiled Jerusalem, the Edomites mocked the exiles, stole their possessions, and even handed over surviving refugees (v12-14). Obadiah is a word of prophecy against Edom, promising their complete destruction from the LORD's hand in judgment. Return from exile is promised, but should Israel then rejoice over Edom's destruction? Not at all. Verse 12 swings both ways. We who are saved by grace have no grounds for boasting or gloating.

Gracious Saviour, I have no grounds for rejoicing over the fate of the lost since I know I deserve no better. As ever, it is humbling that you took the mockery, rejection, shame, and punishment that I do deserve. Lord, grant me great compassion for the lost around me.

Jonah 1 – Disobedience and Hypocrisy

Of all the minor prophets, none has as much narrative as Jonah. As a man, he often depicted in comic fashion but in truth his actions are despicable. The LORD gave this prophet a clear command to go east, inland to Nineveh, but Jonah went west across the sea. We won't see why until Chapter 4. What we do see here is the empty, hypocritical way he describes himself as someone who fears the LORD (v9) and yet has so little concern for the lives of others. The sailors work hard to preserve life and they only reluctantly agree to throw Jonah overboard. When they do, their fear transfers from the storm to the God who sent it and then calmed it, just as the disciples did so much later on Galilee in Mark 4.

Lord Christ, you have given your church clear instruction to go and make disciples. Forgive me for my disobedience painted over with excuses. Forgive me for my lack of compassion and my judgmental heart even as I give thanks to you for forgiving me.

Jonah 2 – Out of the Depths

Despite common perception, this little book isn't really much concerned with the fish (or, possibly, whale). The focus is on Jonah's obedience to God when it comes to making the name of the LORD known to Gentiles, and how Jonah is very much a representation of Israel. In Jonah's prayer here in Chapter 2, the LORD is greatly glorified in preserving Jonah and answering his prayers. The image of death and resurrection is striking and one Christ used of what was to happen to him (e.g. Matt. 12:30). The negative description of Jonah being "vomited" onto dry land alerts us to something amiss in his prayer: There is no mention of repentance or of making good on his commission to go to Nineveh.

Lord God, how often do I pray for relief from a situation for my own sake rather than for the good of your kingdom? Help me to keep your purposes and proclamation at the forefront of my hopes, prayers, and actions.

Jonah 3 – Nineveh Repents

The opening two verses are almost identical to the first two verses of Chapter 1; Jonah's standing is reset, starting again. The LORD is gracious to use us over and over as we fail him and then return to him in the obedience of faith. The outcome in Nineveh was remarkable. Despite Jonah preaching only condemnation rather than repentance, the people of the city were greatly affected by what they heard. We're told in Chapter 4 that there were 120,000 people in the city, so how did the entire population hear so quickly? Jonah simply could not have spoken to them all, nor would he have met with the king. We must take great encouragement that God's Spirit is on display here in the power of the message, not the messenger.

Lord God, I'm often too timid and hesitant to speak your good news to those who really need to hear it. Lord, I'm so sorry. Help me to have confidence in the power of the gospel, and please lead those unbelieving people closest to me to faith in Jesus.

Jonah 4 – Selfishness on Display

Now we see why Jonah disobeyed God's command to go to Nineveh: Jonah wanted the city to come under judgment, not grace. He knows that the LORD is "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in faithful love, and one who relents from disaster" (v2), yet Jonah wanted fire and brimstone, not compassion and grace. But there's worse: His attitude to the loss of the plant's shade shows that he felt that he somehow deserved better on account of being a Hebrew. He forgot what grace is. Jonah preached condemnation instead of repentance, prayed only for himself without interceding for the lost, and found fault in the LORD's gracious compassion. He is uncomfortably like us.

Loving God, so rich in compassion and grace, if you were not so then I would have no hope. Forgive my judgmental heart when I see sin in the world, and give me the warm compassion of Christ himself towards the lost.

Micah 1 – Lament

Verse 1 places Micah at the time of Assyrian dominance and threat, and it would be the Assyrians who would put an end to northern Israel in exile. Israel were to make the LORD known to the nations through covenant blessing, but their disobedience led to the sad reversal of v2. As Bible readers we sometimes skim such chapters as we have read so much of this before. But notice (a) the LORD will always act for his glory because it is humanity's good to see the glory of God; (b) there is no joy in judgment for the LORD, only lament; (c) the aptness of the Hebrew play on words in v10-14 (e.g. Beth-leaphrah means "House of Dust") highlights the just, targeted, specific nature of judgment on particular people for their own sins.

Holy God, I sometimes lose sight of the certainty and grim reality of the judgment to come, even though I so often praise you for my own salvation. Thank you that you have sent us Jesus; help me to speak more of him so that others might know you.

Micah 2 – Quit Your Preaching

Rebellion against the LORD is the heart of a heart of sin. We just want to choose for ourselves and take what we want. The words of the prophets are calls to repentance, to return God's blessings, and so they are full of grace and mercy. The response in v6 is typical of what we'd hear today: "Quit your preaching." The sins listed against the people are all to do with abuse of power and lust for wealth, so very different from the way Jesus reigns and rules for the good of his people. To preach the gospel of Christ is to proclaim the goodness of God (v7), but people often choose to follow preachers and influencers who reflect their own ungodly desires (v11). But we will choose the LORD to lead us (v13).

Lord Christ, you are gracious to speak truth to the world – both in warning of judgment and in calling to salvation. Spirit, keep our church as a place where this true gospel of Christ is proclaimed, heard, and lived out, to the Father's glory and pleasure.

Michah 3 – Sinful Self-Delusion

A core aspect of government is to be just, acting without favouritism or bias, and yet the leaders of Isreal were anything but just (v1-3). So where they ignored the appeals of the abused, so too the LORD will ignore the leaders' cries in their day of trouble (v4). The prophets were to speak truth and justice from the LORD, not lead people astray with false hopes (v5). So where they would not speak the LORD's words, he would now no longer speak his truth to them (v6-7). An alarming dimension of all this is the self-delusion of the leaders, priest, and prophets in v11: "Isn't the LORD among us? No disaster will overtake us." Likewise many will say to Jesus, "Lord, Lord" but he will turn them away at his coming (Matt. 7:22-23).

Holy God, you are gracious to speak to us, merciful to hear our prayers. Saviour, may I never take your salvation for granted, but rather humbly keep turning to you personally in joyful dependence. Keep me from taking grace for granted.

Micah 4 – God's Glorious Reign

In contrast to the grasping, greedy, unjust rule of Israel's leaders so condemned in Chapter 3, here we're given a glimpse of the future world-wide reign of the LORD. His mountain (symbolising deity, power, and rule) will be above all others. Nations will approach him (v2); he will instruct goodness in his word (v3), rule in justice and peace (v4) and bring great blessing to his people (v5-8). Clearly, we still await this future. So Micah speaks of harder days to come first, beginning with Judah's exile into Babylon (v10, still 100 years in Micah's future) though with hope to come (v13). As citizens of heaven, we must live under our rulers well, but serving the risen Jesus gives us a taste of the glories to come.

Lord Jesus, risen and resplendent in glory, ruling in justice and peace, thank you for including me in your kingdom. Grant me wisdom to live well in this world, and may I taste heaven itself by living for you now, obedient to your word.

Micah 5 – Bethlehem Ephrathah

The images of Chapter 4 (e.g. that nations "will never again train for war," v3) are so far off, we might wonder how they could come about. Here, v1 opens with Jerusalem in trouble, not peace. But v2 heralds the coming Messiah, God's chosen ruler over his people, to be born in insignificant Bethlehem (as the chief priests later told Herod in Matt. 2:4-6, quoting v2). Jesus, the promised Messiah, brings strength and security for his people (v4) and is himself our peace (v5). He blesses us all by removing idolatrous confidence in things of this world, along with our idols, purifying us for his work. We are then to be "like dew from the LORD" (v7), bringing his blessing to the whole world.

Saviour Jesus, born into David's line and fulfilment of royal promise, you are gracious to do your saving and purifying work in me. Thank you that you are my peace with God. Help me to live at peace with others.

Micah 6 – What Does The LORD Want?

The opening "Now listen" of v1 introduces us to the third section of Micah's book (see 1:2, 3:1), and it begins with a scene common in the prophets: A courtroom. The LORD is arguing his case against his people, reminding them of how he rescued them, sustained them, and gave them victory. Verses 6 and 7 reveal Israel's heart of reluctant, begrudging religion with ridiculous and offensive escalating questions about what the LORD wants of them. The answer is given in v8: "to act justly, to love faithfulness, and to walk humbly with your God." The LORD calls us to know him, to walk with him, and to be like him, and the Spirit within us works to that end.

Holy, Righteous Father, it's amazing that you call us to know you. Thank you that Christ walks with me and that the Spirit dwells in me. Forgive my cold routine of religion, and keep me in vibrant, humble relationship.

Micah 7 – "Who is a God Like You?"

Verses 1 to 7 are Micah's own sad reflections on the sinful state of society around him, yet concluding with a renewed determination to "wait for the God of my salvation" (v7). Verse 6 highlights the family breakdowns that sin brings, and yet Jesus applied it to how families can fracture when some do as Micah did and follow Jesus (Matt. 10:34-36). Verse 8 onwards is a poem speaking of the discipline and restoration that Israel will experience, ultimately ending in the shame of God's enemies and glory to the LORD. Micah ends with three majestic verses rejoicing in the forgiving, loving, compassionate nature of God, words that are only further amplified when we consider Christ and his incarnate sacrifice to save us.

Lord Christ, if you had not called me I would still be among the lost, ignorant of my sin and condemnation. You are glorious in your compassionate nature, delighting in faithful love. Saviour, thank you that all my sins are cast into the sea, all my iniquity forgiven.

Nahum 1 – Only Judgment

An unusual feature of the book of Jonah is that he actually went to Nineveh. Mostly, prophets' oracles against foreign nations were spoken for Israel's ears so that they would see the justice of the LORD. So Nahum's prophecy against Nineveh is only judgment: There is no call to repentance. The LORD had used Nineveh's Assyrian forces as an instrument of judgment on northern Israel following years of apostasy and idolatry. But that does not mean Nineveh would themselves escape justice. God acts in unchallengeable sovereign power to do all his holy will for his own glory. This is humbling for those of who have been chosen to receive his mercy revealed in Christ.

Holy and Righteous Father, it is only by your grace that I have been called to know you, called from death to life in Christ. Forgive me for ever feeling like I have any spiritual merit; use me to proclaim life to others.

Nahum 2 – Desolation, Decimation, Devastation

This chapter describes an overwhelming attack on the city of Nineveh. It was highly fortified and considered impregnable, but it's believed that it was its river that proved to be a fatal vulnerability (v6). For those of us who have only ever known peace, we can barely imagine the horror and terror of invasion by hostile forces. The cinematic descriptions in v3-6 help us visualise the invasion somewhat, while v7-10 provide images of agony: "Desolation, decimation, devastation! Hearts melt, knees tremble, insides churn, every face grown pale" (v10). There is nothing light or vague about judgment from God: It is traumatic, physical, and very real. This should fuel urgency in our mission to the lost.

Holy and Just God, forgive me for having so a low view of your holiness that I downplay the reality of judgment in my mind. Thank you for Jesus, who took the full cup of your wrath against me. Saviour God, give me a heart of urgency in mission.

Nahum 3 – Woe to the City of Blood

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, and the Assyrian army spilled much blood on the pages of our history books with their brutal cruelty. This chapter hints at their wickedness, but also makes it clear that the judgment to come on them is proportionate to their crimes before God. There will be no-one to rescue them and no-one will mourn. It's easy for us to join in their condemnation, and certainly there will be a day when we sing Hallelujahs over God's victory over this sinful world (Rev. 19:1-3). But we must never lose sight that it is only by grace that the LORD has called us out of that world of darkness into his kingdom of light.

Holy Saviour, Lord Jesus, you have extended grace to me that I don't deserve, calling me to share eternal bliss with you because you took my punishment on yourself. Forgive my judgmental, condemning heart towards others and help me to point them to life in you.

Habakkuk 1 – How Long?

Habakkuk chapters 1 and 2 form a dialogue between the prophet and God. Verses 1-4 show us this man of prayer: (a) He is bold and direct; (b) He laments the long-term sinful state of the nation around him; (c) Habakkuk has clearly been diligently praying for the LORD to act even though the reply doesn't seem forthcoming. The LORD's reply in v5-11 reveals much about God: (a) He is the God of all nations, not just ancient Israel; (b) His plans cross boundaries of time and space beyond what we might imagine in prayer; (c) He can use the wickedness of men to achieve his good purposes. Habakkuk's reply in v12-17 shows that he could not grasp the power, range, and goodness of God's sovereignty.

Living God, you know that I lack the prayerful passion and diligence of your servant Habakkuk. Yet I thank you that I can see that you can use Nebuchadnezzar, Pilate, and Judas to accomplish your good purposes. Lord, help me to move with your will, not against it.

Habakkuk 2 – Faith, Life, and Woes

Habakkuk was dismayed and confused that the LORD would use wicked Babylon as an instrument of judgment on Israel. But God speaks five "woes" against Babylon and all cities like it: Woe (v6-8) to nations who steal and stockpile (they'll lose it all); Woe (v9-11) to nations who isolate themselves (they'll be cut off from life); Woe (v12-14) to empire-builders (only the LORD's glory covers the earth, v14); Woe (v15-17) to crude and drunk nations (they will drink God's wrath); Woe (v18-20) to those who worship created things (they'll learn that God lives). How we must pray for our own nation! Paul quotes 2:4 in Romans 1:16-17 – we are saved by faith in Christ, and Habakkuk is broader still: We live by faith every day in this wicked world.

Holy God, the society I'm in doesn't escape these woes but is content in its spiritual ignorance, oblivious to its eternal jeopardy. Lord, have mercy. Saviour, please save. Thank you for the faith you gave me; help me to know what it is to live by faith every day.

Habakkuk 3 – Yet I Will Celebrate

This chapter is different from the previous two in that it's a song, a psalm (v1, 19), and yet it is similar in that it's a prayer to the LORD. Habakkuk was shocked that the LORD would use wicked Babylon to execute God's judgment on Israel, but here he prays with humility and awe that God would indeed act. He says, "I stand in awe of [literally, 'I fear'] your deeds" (v1), knowing that a Babylonian invasion would affect everyone including himself. He boldly prays, "In your wrath, remember mercy" (v1). Verses 3-15 spell out the devastating power of God when he acts in judgment. So Habakkuk's final words in v16-19 are a powerful statement of faith: When everything's stripped from us, we still have joy in the LORD.

Eternal, Powerful God and Judge of all the earth, it's no surprise when you hand a nation over to its own sinful desires in acts of judgment. As your child in this godless world, help me to live in the strength you give and in the joy of my salvation.

Zephaniah 1 – The Day of the LORD

The prophet Zephaniah's primary focus is the Day of the LORD, a double-edged sword of devastation and hope. In 1:2-2:3 he speaks judgment against Judah in apostasy, then in 2:4-3:8 against the nations and Jerusalem, and then 3:9-20 bring a message of hope. The striking thing is that he brings such a strong condemnation during Josiah's reign, a godly king who drove spiritual renewal throughout the land. It was during Josiah's reign that the book of the law was rediscovered in the temple (2 Kings 22). But neither the zealously religious leadership of a godly king nor the forthright preaching of the prophet Zephaniah were enough to change the hearts of unbelieving people. We must pray for the Spirit to prepare hearts to receive Christ.

Holy Spirit, the Day of the LORD draws nearer, that great Day of Christ's return. Unless you work in the hearts of the lost then no effort from your people can bear any fruit. Spirit, have mercy. Revive your church and lead many lost souls to repentance and faith in Jesus.

Zephaniah 2 – All Nations

Chapter 1 ended with the news that the "whole earth will be consumed" on the Day of the LORD (1:18), and so this chapter opens with a call to the whole earth to "Seek the LORD… Seek righteousness, seek humility" (v3). The reason is given from v4 (which begins, "For…"): God will judge all the nations, both near (e.g. Ammon, Moab) and far (e.g. Assyria, Cush). Jerusalem will be included in this list of nations under judgment in the next chapter. So while there is no nation, power, or authority that can escape the judgment of God, yet he remains graciously committed to anyone who seeks him, seeks righteousness, seeks humility. Again, we must pray for the Spirit to turn sceptics into seekers.

Holy Spirit of God, the people of this world invest hope in all manner of passing powers and will continue to do so unless you move hearts. Lord, please have mercy and call lost people to Jesus, not least those unbelievers I bring before you so often in prayer.

Zephaniah 3 – A Warrior Who Saves

Zephaniah is a good example of how prophets' words often have multiple time horizons. Certainly, his words applied to the sins of Jerusalem in his day (v1-4), to her impending doom (v6-8), and to restoration after exile (v9-20). But the apocalyptic language has a much wider application too, just as the phrase "Day of the LORD" puts us in mind of Christ's return. So v8 suggests the final battle between Jesus and all those opposed to him (Rev. 19:11-21); v9's reference to "pure speech" hints at an undoing of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11) and possibly looks to Pentecost (Acts 2); and Rev. 14:15 alludes to v13 with the removal of deceit. On that day we will sing Hallelujah, but what joy to hear our warrior saviour God sing over us (v17)!

Holy, righteous God and Saviour, we have surely barely begun to understand your majestic power. What a day it will be when I see you and hear your voice! May by voice ever be one of praise to you in song and speech.

Haggai 1 – Priorities

Haggai and Zechariah were preaching at the same time in Jerusalem after the exiles had returned from Babylon. Their primary task was to reinvigorate the spirit of the people to rebuild the temple since work had halted under pressure from pagan neighbours (Ezra 4). It's clear that the LORD was displeased with their lack of urgency, but why? Three reasons: (a) They had prioritised their own comfort over the rebuilding of the temple; (b) Though the LORD needed no temple for himself, he knew that it was for the good of the nation that he should dwell visibly among them again; (c) They would be blessed greatly to gather to him. Such thinking should help us to prioritise gathered Sunday worship.

Lord Jesus, Head of your church, we are blessed to be able to gather together in your name to come before you for worship. Forgive me for ever having wrong motives and attitudes, and keep me thrilled about church on Sundays.

Haggai 2 – “I Will Bless You”

The rebukes of the LORD are so often loaded with promise and hope for those with the humility of heart to listen. The returned exiles are given a command a promise: “Work! For I am with you” (v4). Who will pay for the work? The LORD will shake the nations for their gold (v6-9, Ezra 6:8-10)! The people are to reflect on how things have not gone well so far because of their lack of rebuilding progress, but their faithful obedience now has a promise of blessing to come (V13-19). The success that God will give to Zerubbabel, descendant of King David, will be the LORD’s own signature of blessing. The fullness of these promises began when Jesus entered the temple, yet to be wholly realised (v6, Heb. 12:26).

Saviour, you came into this dark world as light, yet people still prefer darkness. You have given me tasks to do within your own great work of sovereign mercy and divine glory. Help me to hear and obey your commands, certain of your strength and presence.

Zechariah 1 – Night Visions

It’s immediately clear that Zechariah was prophesying in the same time and place as Haggai, and the focus here is the same: Rebuilding the temple after returning from exile in Babylon. The people are called to return to the LORD and so not repeat the rebellion of earlier generations (v1-6). Zechariah has eight night visions, the first two of which are here in this chapter. The first vision is of horsemen who have patrolled the earth and found it to be “calm and quiet” (v11). This is a complaint because the earth is at easy in its sin and idolatry and the shining witness of Israel is dimmed. So in mercy, the LORD has returned to Jerusalem (v16). The enemies of Israel will be scattered by craftsmen (v18-2) rebuilding the temple of the LORD.

Holy Spirit, deity dwelling in me and in the church, forgive me that the name of Jesus is not proclaimed loudly, and that unbelievers around me are left comfortable in their sin and idolatry. Lord, work through me to make Jesus known.

Zechariah 2 – Think Big!

In this third vision, a man was halted from measuring the width and length of Jerusalem. The priority for the returned exiles wasn't to rebuild the city walls but to get going on the temple. Two reasons are given for not building the walls: (a) The LORD says, "I myself will be a wall of fire around it, and I will be the glory within it"; (b) The city will be too small anyway for the vast numbers of people the LORD will call to himself. When we think of the church of Christ today all over the world we see how Zechariah's prophecy is truly fulfilled in Christ. It is natural and necessary for local churches to have a passion for both local and international mission.

Lord Christ, you are building your church right now all over the world. Forgive me for my small thinking, as if to constrain your gospel by fixed measurements of buildings and places. Help me to see your glory among your people.

Zechariah 3 – The High Priest

This fourth vision has Jeshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD. The key thing to recall is how the high priest represents the whole people of God in the LORD's presence, most notably on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). The silencing of Satan's accusations and the clothing of the high priest in clothes fit for the presence of God are significant both for the high priest himself and for the whole people of God. The restoration of true worship at a rebuilt temple would be a sign from the LORD of his greater works: "I am about to bring my servant, the Branch… I will take away the iniquity of this land in a single day" (v8, 9). And so Jesus is the great atoning sacrifice for our sins, our ruler and high priest, and silencer of Satan.

Risen Jesus, great king and high priest, ruling and interceding with goodness, wisdom, righteousness, and justice, thank you for silencing all Satan's accusations against me by your complete atoning sacrifice. Help me to wear this righteousness you give and to bring glory to you.

Zechariah 4 – By My Spirit

This fifth vision is richly encouraging as we contemplate how God enables us to do his will. The lampstand is unlike any ever unearthed from antiquity, with its sevenfold lamps each with seven spouts, all fed with oil by two living trees. The trees signify “two anointed ones” (v14) meaning Jeshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the governor and descendant of King David (see Matt. 1:12). The oil flowing through them is no less than the Holy Spirit of God (v6). The nation will achieve the rebuilding of the temple and its worship under their Spirit-filled leaders. It's a picture of how Christ fuels his church with the Spirit today.

Holy God, I still try to achieve things seemingly in your name but really in my own strength. How foolish I am, how quick to forget the rich blessing of seeing you work through me. Lord, keep me in deliberate dependence on you to your glory.

Zechariah 5 – Away With Sin

These two visions continue to prepare Judah for the rebuilt temple and the presence of the LORD among them. Both visions are about cleansing from sin. The vision of the scroll reminds us that every sin of every person is known and recorded. While the new clothes for Jeshua the high priest promised atonement for sin, the flying scroll condemns those who refuse to repent and choose a life of secret sin. The vision of the woman in the basket is chosen because sin is attractive and alluring to us, so is best put away and sent away. The basket goes to the land of Shinar, also known as Babylon, the place where the Tower of Babel was built. The world adores its shrines to sin, but we will gather to the LORD in purity.

Holy God, I have no righteousness or holiness of my own. My motives are never entirely pure, and my desires are never without sin’s taint. Help me to put sin to death, to send it away, and to separate from the world’s values. Spirit, sanctify my heart in growing likeness to Jesus.

Zechariah 6 – Chariots and Crowns

After all these visions about rebuilding the temple, atonement, and purification, this last one relates to the LORD dealing with his enemies. As Solomon's temple had two bronze pillars, these bronze mountains suggest chariots going out from heaven itself. Chariots were the tanks of the ancient world, so this is an image of war – a war the LORD will win. The message to Jeshua the high priest is most unusual as there is no situation where a man would be both priest *and* king over God's people (other than Melchizedek in Genesis 14 and, of course, Jesus). So the temple spoken of here is a shadow the all that's to some at Christ's appearance – now a spiritual reality in his church.

Great Lord Jesus, these images cause me to raise my thinking about your kingly and priestly perfections. What a ruler you are. Help me to live under your good reign in a way that both honours and pleases you.

Zechariah 7 – Not So Fast

Two years on from the visions, and with the temple itself now half-built, thoughts now turn to religious practice. It seems the Israelites not exiled to Babylon have been holding an annual fast in memory of the exile. They want to know if they should continue now that exiles have returned. The answer comes in four parts, two here and two in Chapter 8. So v4-7 makes the uncomfortable charge that their fasting wasn't really out of devotion to the LORD (just as many people now make their annual trip to church at Christmas). Worse still, v8-14 highlight the hypocrisy of anyone who will make a show of religion while rejecting God's Spirit and harbouring sin. Nominal religion actually draws God's wrath (v12).

Lord Jesus, it's very easy for me to point the finger at people with part-time, nominal acquaintance with matters of faith. Yet you know of often my own worship and private devotion is routine and ritual. Lord, keep me in close, living relationship. And may that overflow healthily into life.

Zechariah 8 – Love Truth and Peace

Verses 1 & 18 mark the 3rd & 4th parts of the response to the question relating to religious practice in Chapter 7. In v1-17, the LORD promises a return to blessing, calling on his people to speak truth and act justly (v16-17) – effectively a call to display the LORD's own character. This is at the heart of true worship: Daily godliness. So the promise in v18-23 is that times of fasting will be replaced by times of feasting under the LORD's favour. In this, Judah would become a beacon of God's light and glory to the nations which is why they must "love truth and peace" (v19) even as God does. It's a tragedy to have the name of the LORD sullied by the sins of his people, but those around us are blessed by our holiness.

Holy Father, by grace you have united me to Jesus and caused the Holy Spirit to dwell in me. Lord, may I know such a joy in you that even in difficult times others might praise your name for what they see. Bless others through me even as you do your sanctifying work in me.

Zechariah 9 – King of Peace

The rest of the book comprises two pronouncements (oracles), the first of which takes up Chapters 9-11. The temple is rebuilt and the matter in hand is who leads God's people and how. First, v1-8 speaks against neighbouring kingdoms, a reminder that all nations ultimately come and go at God's command. But v9 speaks of a new king, a king of peace riding a donkey rather than a chariot or war-horse. He will rescue his people because of the blood of a covenant (v11), lifting them and causing them to "sparkle" (v16)! Yet the salvation of his people requires victory over his enemies to their cost. When Jesus publicly fulfilled this prophecy on Palm Sunday he grieved over the consequential condemnation of all who reject him (Luke 19:41, John 12:15).

Lord Christ, in my natural sinful state I was very much at enmity against you. How gracious you are to save your enemies, grieving over my sin and rebellion. Lord Jesus, help me to live out your kingdom of peace, loving even those who deny you.

Zechariah 10 – Pray for Rain

The theme of leadership continues with God's people described as a flock of sheep and they leaders as shepherds. Since God alone sends blessing (v1) and "idols speak falsehood" (v2), we need rulers who are devoted to God. The LORD will punish the awful leaders of his flock, those who lead them astray (v3). He will be their shepherd himself, transforming them from silly sheep into a strong army gathered around God himself as the true Good Shepherd. His motivation is not any intrinsic merit in the sheep since we all go astray. The LORD is clear: "I will restore them because I have compassion on them" (v6). Confident of the compassionate heart of Christ (Mark 6:34), we pray for the life-giving rain of his blessings as we follow him.

Great Good Shepherd of your sheep, thank you that you sought me out when I was astray. Thank you for bringing me into your flock. Saviour, thank you for laying down your life for me and leading me all my life long.

Zechariah 11 – 30 Pieces of Silver

Again the theme of leadership of God's people continues in the metaphor of shepherd and sheep, though some of the details here are a little obscure to us. Zechariah was a prophet, not a king, so it seems he's told to act out certain prophecies (rather like Ezekiel). In response to the bad shepherds (leaders), he's told to shepherd the people with these two staffs of Favour and Union (v7) and he quickly removes three bad shepherds. But the sheep "detested" godly rule (v8), bringing an end to both covenant and union as the LORD handed them over to the foolish rulers of their choice. They dismissed godly rule for just 30 pieces of silver, the price Judas was paid for handing Jesus over (Matt. 26:15). We do well to embrace our Good Sheperd's perfect rule.

Lord Jesus, you have the words of eternal life and there is no rule or authority that compares with your goodness and power. Forgive me, Lord, for going astray daily, forgetting your gentle kindness and wise rule. Lord Christ, keep my heart tuned to you.

Zechariah 12:1-13:1 – In That Day

The second pronouncement of Chapters 12 to 14 is so filled with phrases quoted or alluded to by the New Testament that its heartbeat phrase “In that day” can only mean the time of Christ’s work. The scale of these chapters is staggering and quite out of keeping with ancient Judah under Persian rule. So the events of Jerusalem in v1-9 that will have such far-reaching impact are explained by v10-14 viewed from a New Testament perspective. God himself – in human flesh – was pierced at the cross (v10, John 19:37, Rev. 1:7), the Spirit poured out at Pentecost (v10, John 16:7, Acts 2), and the emphasis on individual mourning is grief over our own sins that caused Christ’s suffering.

Convicting Spirit of grace and prayer, thank you for your work in me. Lord Christ, I am so sorry for my sins that caused you such pain and punishment. Holy Father, thank you for including me in your great plan of salvation for the world.

Zechariah 13:2-9 – Strike the Shepherd

Verse 1 is a rich promise of a sanctifying, purifying work of God in his people. But holiness always requires the eradication of falsehood, so v2-5 speak of the removal of idols (false gods) and prophets (false gospels). The sleazy business of prophecy for profit will be ashamed into retreat. The poetry of v7-9 continues the purifying theme as an unidentified shepherd is removed from office in an act of judgment that has painful repercussions for God’s flock. Even so, some of the flock will be purified, and refined, calling on God’s name (v9). Jesus quoted v7 on the night of his betrayal (Matt. 26:31, Mark 14:27) – a reminder of both his fulfilling of Zechariah’s “in that day” and the disciples’ dependence on the Good Shepherd.

Saviour Jesus, you are the Good Shepherd who laid down your life for me. Thank you for the purifying, living water of the Holy Spirit in me. Help me to put away idols, to live only in truth, and to experience dependence on you.

Zechariah 14 – Holy to the LORD

This complex chapter is using words to convey a future beyond human language to explain, though as we read this side of the cross we do have added insight. The LORD fights for his own people while providing them with supernatural safe haven (v1-5). There will be a day of extraordinary darkness and then light, with living waters flowing from Jerusalem to the world in imagery of a new creation (v6-8). Jesus owned these images for himself at the Feast of Shelters (booths, tabernacles) in John 7 & 8, and it is he who determines those who will receive grace or punishment. "Holy to the LORD" (v20) was originally only on the high priest's clothes (Ex. 28:36), but Christ's kingdom will be holy in every corner (v20-21).

Holy Saviour, as I live in this world of sin and feel the sinful desires of my own heart, I can barely imagine dwelling with you in perfect, sinless holiness. Thank you that such hope is yours to give and that you give it so freely. Lord, help me to live worthy of so great a salvation.

Malachi 1 – "I Have Loved You"

Malachi's book is in a 'disputation' style of question and answer. We're right at the end of the Old Testament timeline, but those re-settled in Jerusalem and Judah have slipped into loveless and mediocre religious routine. When the LORD says, "I have loved you" in v2, the people display staggering ingratitude by asking, "How?" God's reply could be a thousand things, but he simply reminds them of their status as his chosen people. Their love for God has grown cold, shown in their make-do, substandard offerings that would be unacceptable even to a human governor (v8). These are challenging words for us in settled times and we must examine our heart attitude to the God who has loved us.

Eternal God of love, you chose to love me and you loved to choose me, all simply in your own pleasure and grace. May the Spirit ever be turning my mind to contemplative gratitude and my heart to devoted love.

Malachi 2 – Truth Taught

A core function of Jerusalem's priests was to teach and Malachi gives a beautiful description of how godly, spiritual teaching should happen: First, the priests have reverence and awe of God (v5). Then they speak true instruction, walking with God in peace and integrity, turning others from iniquity (v6). But when pastors and teachers lose their personal awe of the LORD it often leads to personal and church ruin. The condemnation of Judah's attitude to divorce (v10-16) is because their slack ethics betray their ignorance of the spiritual dimension of marriage; ignoring the union of a man and a woman in marriage shows contempt for the God who united them. Truth taught by godly leaders is never optional for a healthy church.

Lord Jesus, you have given evangelists, pastors and teachers to nourish your church through your holy word taught and applied. May the leaders of our church never lose their reverence and awe of your holy name, and may the Spirit give them truth and fire.

Malachi 3 – Preparing the Way

Mark 1:2 quotes v1 as referring to John the Baptist, preparing the way for Christ's coming by preaching a message of repentance. So "the Lord you seek… the Messenger of the covenant you delight in" is Christ himself. Jesus refines and purifies in holy judgment (though few see him that way). So v7 is a call to repentance, though the people claim not to know their sin (v8). The LORD's response reminds them that he is a loving and generous God who longs to bless, not curse. Lack of tithing was a symptom of a lack of love for God. So we note that the LORD's book of remembrance (v16) is not filled with the obedient (there are none), but those who fear and revere his name.

Holy God, if you counted our sins against then none would stand. My heart would not naturally turn towards you either, and yet the Spirit caused me to hear your command to turn to you and your invitation to life in the living Saviour. Thank you for this rich salvation life.

Malachi 4 – Sun of Righteousness

When an angel spoke to John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, in Luke 1:17, he said that John would be the Elijah of Malachi 4:5-6. As Israel awaited its Messiah, they were to remain true to the LORD and his covenant given through Moses at Horeb (Sinai, v4). And what a Messiah! No less then the sun of righteousness, a burning fire to consume his enemies but a sun of healing for his own people. Ancient near-eastern art pictured the sun's rays of warmth and light as 'wings'. Christ's people will be healed of sin and curse, doubt and fear, worry and grief. We will leap like calves released from a stall after a long winter, worshipping him in the warmth and light of the radiance of the Father's glory.

Saviour, as your ancient people were to remain true to your commands awaiting your first appearance, so would the Spirit please help me to live as we await your return. Sun of Righteousness, thank you for the prospect of being eternally healed in mind, spirit, body and soul, dwelling in your presence for ever.

Matthew 1 – The Promised Saviour

The genealogy from Abraham to Jesus is the perfect way to start Matthew's gospel and the New Testament. We are about to read of the fulfilment of God's promises and the continuation of his plan of salvation for humanity. Abraham was promised that his descendants would bring blessing to the world; David was promised that his descendants would reign over God's people forever. Both promises are met in Jesus, God's Messiah (anointed king, Christ). Yet Jesus is even more: Conceived in Mary of the Holy Spirit, he's the Son of God born into David's line. More still: His name is Jesus, meaning "He saves" – he's God With Us, born into humanity as promised, and has come to save us from our sin.

Mighty Jesus, Son of God, born into the line from Abraham and David, fulfilment of promise, I thank you and praise you for coming to save me. It's amazing that this plan of salvation stretches so far back in time yet includes me, here in this moment. Lord, help me to see more of your glory in the pages of Scripture that I might praise and live for you today.

Matthew 2 – Wickedness and Worship

In the light of the arrival of distant travellers looking for a newborn king of the Jews, it would seem natural for some of the priests and scribes to go with them on the 5-mile journey to Bethlehem. Adherence to religious form blinded them to what God was doing. Herod's act was pure wickedness. Where love seeks good for others, evil is so often self-focussed. We do well to check our own motives by such measures. As for the wise men, their reaction to seeing Jesus is pure worship. They ask nothing of him, lay gifts before him, and worship him on their knees with joy. The presence of the living Jesus always trumps empty religion and worldly power.

Lord Jesus, by your grace you enable me to come into your presence and worship you. You are beautifully worthy of my worship by your own glorious nature, and all the more for coming into the world to save me. Lord, keep me from empty ritual, and keep me close to you always.

Matthew 3 – Preparation and Commission

John the Baptist was a voice crying out in the wilderness making straight roads for the Messiah. How? By preaching a message of repentance of sin (symbolised in baptism's washing) since repentance is required if we are to come to Jesus, the Messiah. The religious Pharisees came only to see, not to repent. For that, says John, they are a family of serpents excluded from the kingdom of heaven; religion never saved a soul. Why was Jesus baptised? Firstly, having been brought from Egypt and now passing through water, we see re-tracing Israel's steps but in full obedience to God. Secondly, his baptism is his moment of commission, the start of his ministry, his public anointing as Messiah.

Great God and Saviour, your mercy is displayed in how you save us by faith, with all that is necessary for our salvation accomplished by you. Thank you for Jesus the Messiah king, and for the Spirit's work leading me to repentance and faith. Father God, lead me daily to repentance.

Matthew 4 – Mission Launch

Newly commissioned by the Father, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness specifically to be tempted by the devil. He will succeed where Adam failed, refusing temptation and remaining true to God's commands (quoting Deuteronomy 6 and 8). His 40 days mirror Israel's 40 years in the wilderness. Jesus is taking on evil and doing God's will in everything. It's a spiritual re-set, a reboot for humanity. And from the outset we see these two things: (a) Where the kingdom of God comes there is blessing, joy and life; (b) From the very outset, Jesus was building a foundation for his church and planning for growth (by fishing and teaching to fish).

Lord Jesus, I thank you that you came into the world to destroy the works of the devil. Thank you that you lived a perfect life, wholly without sin, to be a perfect sacrifice for me. Thank you for calling me into your kingdom; help me to live a life of godly obedience and wise evangelism. Lord, grow your kingdom in me.

Matthew 5 – Blessed in Repentance

In Matthew 4:17 we're told that Jesus preached, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near." Chapters 5-7 form the Sermon on the Mount, the first of five sermons in Matthew's gospel. The beatitudes describe the heart state of those entering the kingdom, namely a heart of repentance (as in 4:17). Those in the kingdom are to live in a way that displays God's goodness to the world (as salt and light). Jesus goes through key areas of Old Testament law showing how superficial, external obedience is not enough: Sin of the heart, mind, and imagination is still sin. The right response isn't "try harder"; it's "repent."

Heavenly Father, you are good and holy in ways I can't comprehend. Your law is perfect and displays your own beauty and glory. It also shows me up for the sinner I am. Father, forgive me my sin, and teach me right paths from your word so that I might be salt and light in the world today.

Matthew 6 – True, Private Worship

In Chapter 5, Jesus point out that sin isn't merely an external act, but internal desire and evil thoughts too. Likewise, true goodness, giving, prayer and fasting aren't to be external performative acts, but private moments between you and God alone. Our ability to turn good things into self-glorification is shameful. But we are to make God our treasure and our audience, seeking to trust him and life to please him. He knows how to care for his creatures, and we can trust him to care for us, his children. We find it hard because we're more attached to this world than we admit and for this we must repent.

Father in heaven, I confess I do like to be seen and heard in a way that others admire. I do put too much emphasis on the here and now, and my tendency to worry is a lack of faith in your goodness and generosity. Forgive me, Lord, and help me to trust you and live for you in a way that brings you great glory and delight.

Matthew 7 – Life Built on Christ

How awful to be so confident of one's own righteousness that we look down on others and condemn them. We will never repent as long as we our blinded to our own sin by the planks we refuse to see. But God is good, and will hear all who come to ask, seek, and knock in humble repentance. This is how we come to Jesus, the narrow gate. We need Bible teachers who will point us to Jesus by way of repentance of sin, not wolves who will lead us astray away from him. Having not repented, false teachers remain unforgiven lawbreakers – and so do those who follow them. We can have no confidence in ourselves, but every confidence in Christ, the bedrock on whom we build our lives.

Gracious and compassionate God, you know all I have done and will do, yet you love me anyway. More, you are willing to forgive. So Lord, please forgive my pride, my judgmental heart, and my wilful blind spots of sinful desire. Teach me, Lord, and lead me in righteousness.

Matthew 8 – What Kind of Man is This?

After recording a series of miraculous healings, Matthew summarises by quoting Isaiah 53:4. Jesus is for more than healer; he is the servant who will be punished by God for the sins of his people. Some people started to follow Jesus but without really understanding who he is or why he came. We then see his supernatural authority in his ability to command nature (the wind and the waves) and demons. While the disciples were amazed in their part-understanding, the demons were terrified as they knew the truth: Jesus is the eternal Son of God, born into humanity to redeem us from the clutches of evil. Devils do well to tremble.

Lord Jesus, eternal Son of God, existing outside your Creation yet entering into it to serve us, thank you for your great sacrifice. Thank you for the assurance that in you all our hurts will be healed, and that evil will forever be removed from within us and around us. Help me to have that centurion's faith in your authority, goodness, and compassion.

Matthew 9 – Sheep Without a Shepherd

We see in this chapter our greatest problem and our greatest need. Oddly (to us), the paralysed man's greatest problem wasn't his physical condition but rather his sin before God. Jesus forgave him his sins, and only healed him to demonstrate his power to forgive. Jesus calls sinners, and his healings are pictures of lives transformed by his touch. All who come to him in humble faith are greatly blessed, while those who scoff or pass by with never know his forgiveness. So our greatest problem is sin, and our greatest need is Jesus. He tells us to pray for workers in the harvest field not to swell the numbers in church, but because unbelievers are lost sheep without a shepherd, distressed and dejected.

Compassionate Christ and Saviour, thank you that you came to atone for my sins. Thank you that you have called me, a sinner, to follow you and enter your great company of believers. Our area is filled with sinners, all distressed and dejected by a confusing, shambolic world. Lord, have mercy, and send workers that will point lost people to you.

Matthew 10 – "I am Sending You Out"

This is the second of five sermons in Matthew's gospel and the theme is discipleship. Having just told the disciples to pray for workers in the harvest field, he immediately sends them out. We need to be prepared to be the answer to our own prayers. We can also be greatly encouraged that he equips us to do all he sends us out to do; you are empowered by Christ to obey him. The gospel you share will divide people and might even divide your own family; you will face opposition to the gospel everywhere. But we are to fear God, not people, strong in the knowledge that we're precious to him. More, Christ is at work through you in his work.

Great Author of hope, God of my strength, forgive me that I always seem to try to do your works in my strength. I so often forget even to pray for help. Lead me into places where I must speak for you and give me the grace, wisdom and strength to stand up in your name, pointing to Christ.

Matthew 11 – “Come to Me”

On the basis of Isaiah 35 and 61, the coming of the Messiah was to be evidenced by the blind seeing, the lame walking, the dead being raised, and much more! But it was also to be marked by God’s vengeance on a wicked world, so John the Baptist might well wonder if Jesus is “the One” or is there another to follow? Jesus honours John, saying that John was indeed the long-awaited herald of the Messiah (the Christ). But people rejected John’s message of repentance and so were unprepared to hear the good news from Jesus himself. Towns of the day were condemned, and surely our own society fares no better. And yet, still, Jesus graciously calls us all to come to him alone for rest for our souls.

Lord Jesus, long-promised Messiah and Saviour, thank you for calling me in the time of your favour. Surely your day of vengeance will come, when every eye will see you, and but for your gracious effectual call by the work of the Holy Spirit I would be swept away justly on that day. So, Lord, thank you that I can know you and find true rest in you alone.

Matthew 12 – Mercy, Not Sacrifice

The opening scenes are about matters of the Law of God. A heart truly for God loves him and loves one’s neighbour. Religious people often love the law itself and make an idol of it. Hence Jesus’ reference to Hosea 6:6, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” – a heart for God, not just external ritual. Again, Matthew identifies Jesus as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah’s prophecies, the Messiah who will die for the sins of his people. The Pharisees and religious types accused him of being an agent of Satan and asked for signs. But Jesus won’t be drawn – he’s on his own mission, not theirs. His death and resurrection and calls to repentance are all the signs anyone should need, and to reject those is to reject life.

Living God, it’s easy to slip into ritual and routine without truly engaging with you, or without actively living for you. Thank you for Christ’s death and resurrection, his tender Servant heart, and his love for me. Help me to truly live as your child, doing your will, working your love into the world.

Matthew 13 – The Kingdom of Heaven

This is the third of five of Jesus' sermons recorded in Matthew's gospel, and its theme is the kingdom of heaven. He spoke in parables which combine to give an overall impression of the kingdom; we see a strong emphasis on growth, happening organically and richly. There's also a clear message of separation of humanity into those inside the kingdom and those outside. The way the parables were delivered adds to this forcefully: The parables were spoken to everyone publicly, but the detailed explanations were spoken privately only to the disciples. Thus the point of separation of humanity (in the kingdom or not) is whether or not you draw near to Jesus himself.

High King of heaven, I know that left to my own devices I would never have come to you. I'd never have gone past a vague interest or curiosity. Thank you for the Spirit's work, drawing me closer to you, leading me to repentance and faith and life. Lord, then, help me to be one who will bear much fruit of godliness in your name.

Matthew 14 – Grief, Compassion, and Prayer

Herod's bravado and cowardice display a spineless wickedness. What a shambolic king to have a godly prophet's head served up on a platter. Not so with Jesus. He served up life-giving food to thousands in a barren place, a picture of the work of Bread of Life still today. The moment of walking on water was for the Twelve only, that they would truly grasp his deity and power to save. These are powerful displays of Christ's identity and purpose for us all; the world only offers brutal injustice. But notice Christ's true humanity here: He needed solitude in prayer in grief for John (v13). Compassion for others delayed it, but it came (v23).

Heavenly Father, I love the blessing of praying with others and thank you for the freedom to do so. I also thank you for private time with you, sharing griefs, worries, joys, needs, and gratitude. Thank you for your presence, comfort and help, communicated through your Spirit. Thank you that I can come because of Christ's work for me and in me.

Matthew 15 – Galilee of the Gentiles

There are some important geographical pointers in this chapter highlighting how Jesus was rejected by the Jews but sought by Gentiles (non-Jews). The Pharisees came from Jerusalem and challenged Jesus' adherence to Jewish tradition. In turn, Jesus shows how strict adherence to tradition can mask a heart that's cold to God. We should consider what comes out of our heart more than what food goes in our mouths. In contrast, the Canaanite woman has no claim on Jesus but only begs for mercy – and receives it. The 4,000 fed were probably Galilean Gentiles who (unlike the Jerusalem Pharisees) gave glory to the God of Israel on seeing the healings that Jesus performed.

Gracious God, forgive me for the days when I put religious routine in place of true time with you. Thank you that I come as that Canaanite woman, with no other plea but your own mercy and grace. Thank you for the spiritual nourishment you bring and help me to keep close to you in vibrant fellowship.

Matthew 16 – The Messiah

All we've seen from the Pharisees and Sadducees in Mathew's gospel is unrepentance, opposition to Jesus, and dry religion. In contrast, Jesus has brought wisdom, authority, healing, restoration, and joy. He now calls allegiance to him into focus, ensuring his followers know him to be the Messiah. Messiah (Hebrew) and Christ (Greek) mean the same: "The Anointed One." Where we now crown kings, the ancient world anointed with oil. Jesus is God's king, anointed with the Holy Spirit himself. The disciples were to keep this momentous news to themselves until they understood the way of the cross – both for Jesus as sacrifice atoning for our sins, and for his followers denying our selfish natures.

Lord Christ, now risen and exalted above the heavens, you are worthy of all worship and adoration, thanksgiving and praise. Forgive me that I still fail to deny my own desires and will, failing to submit wholly to your will. I pray for the Holy Spirit's help, changing me into your likeness.

Matthew 17 – The Transfiguration

We only hear the Father's voice twice in Matthew's gospel: First at Jesus' baptism, anointing him and announcing him as Messiah, God's Son. And here, again showing Jesus to be the Son of God and also the foundation of the New Covenant. The whole scene is awash with Old Testament imagery and the outcome is clear: The New Testament (Covenant) people of God are built on Jesus, Son of God, our living Cornerstone and covenant king. Even Jesus' words to the faithless people at the foot of the mountain echo Moses' words to idolatrous Israel at Sinai (Deuteronomy 32:5). Like the disciples, we can only serve Jesus by his strength and not our own, living as model citizens on earth below.

Heavenly Father, in love you sent your Son to us to save from sin and to bring us together in him. Unless you had done so, we would be helpless and hopeless. Lord Jesus, you are glorious – so much more than I know. Help me to face each day by faith, living in the strength and hope you bring.

Matthew 18 – Christian Relationships

This is the fourth of five of Jesus' sermons in Matthew's gospel. The concern is relationships between Christians, especially in the context of the local church. No-one is to seek to be the greatest; everyone is to be humble and to build one another up. No-one is more precious to God than anyone else; all are equally valued lost sheep. And yet, of course, we sin against one another. The goal then is to have sin removed and relationship restored, so we go to the one who sinned against us to give them the opportunity for repentance and you to forgive. And since God forgave you, you *must* forgive the repentant.

Gracious, forgiving Father, I barely understand my sinfulness against you. Neither do I truly grasp your love for me. Give me a holy boldness to deal with sin in me and others, and a gracious spirit to forgive all who repent of sin against me. Holy Spirit, please make me more like Jesus.

Matthew 19 – Hard Hearts and Treasure

It's interesting that a discussion about divorce follows teaching on forgiveness. Marriage of two sinners will always need grace from both. Divorce is just one of many topics about sexual ethics in our society, and Jesus' reply is a model of how to think about them all: He goes back to how God created us (male and female) and how marriage is both physical and spiritual. Like all relationships, breakdowns come from sin – unrepentant or unforgiven. Also side-by-side in the text are the freedom of children to approach Jesus as they are so unhindered by wealth and love of the world, and the rich man who finds it hard to give up the world for Jesus. We struggle so much with sin in our hearts.

Gracious God, you know how hard-hearted and unforgiving I so often am. You know how tied I am to this world of sin. Forgive me, Lord, for being so ungodly. Help me to be gracious and forgiving, truly treasuring Christ more than the things of this world.

Matthew 20 – To Be The Greatest

As we read Jesus' parable of the vineyard workers, we do feel a bit sorry for those workers who toiled all day. Our sense of 'fairness' is based on a feeling of obligation on the landowner that isn't really there. God isn't obliged to be gracious to anyone, so no-one has a greater or lesser claim on him than anyone else. In fact, it's ungrateful to accept Christ's cross but refuse your own. That the request from James and John comes after the parable is doubly appalling. Better to be like the blind beggars, calling out for sight. Jesus could easily have healed at a distance, but graciously went to them and touched them. True joy is to make Jesus our treasure, service, and habit.

Father, you have been more gracious to me than I deserve, more even than I know, more than I could dream or imagine. Forgive me for ever envying the gifts and blessings you give to your other children. Help me truly to celebrate and delight in your grace to others, and to love and serve others in true Christlike humility.

Matthew 21 – Hosanna!

It's the first day of the week before Passover. Thousands of people are streaming from northern Galilee to Jerusalem for the feast. Spirits are high! Jesus, openly referring to himself as "Lord" (v3), enters on a donkey in a deliberate and public declaration of his Messiah status (fulfilling Zechariah 9:9). The children sing the Passover Psalm 118, crying "Hosanna" which means "Please, save" (Psalm 118:25-26). The fig tree is a symbol of what the Jerusalem temple has become: Promising much, bearing no fruit, condemned to shrivel and die. Jesus warns the Pharisees of their false trust in religion, again quoting Psalm 118 to them in a way that points to himself. We join the children in praise of our Saviour, Messiah, and king of peace.

Lord Christ, gracious saviour, you roundly condemned false, lifeless, external forms of worship over and over. You call us into true worship, to fellowship with you, in the righteousness you clothe us with, by the indwelling Holy Spirit in us. I rejoice and am glad in the day you have made! Hosanna!

Matthew 22 – Open Conflict

Now in Jerusalem in Passover week, there is open conflict between Jesus and the religious elite. Since 4:17, Jesus has preached, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near." Everything he has done and said is an invitation to blessing. His parable speaks of a king who has invited all and sundry to his son's wedding, ending with an imposter at the feast. The Bible is our invitation from God to enjoy his Son's blessing. No wonder Jesus strongly refutes his opponents' false understanding of Scripture, giving clear correction and inviting them to reconsider the identity of the Messiah, Son of David. He is so gracious.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the Bible, this declaration of your grace in the face of our sin. Thank you, Holy Spirit, for moving my heart to believe and respond to the word you inspired men to write. Thank you, my God, for calling me to truth by your grace in Christ.

Matthew 23 – Seven Woes to Hypocritical Leaders

Continuing his verbal attack on the religious elite in chapter 22, Jesus commends biblical teaching but not unbiblical leaders. He pronounces seven "woes" against hypocritical leaders. They display what his *true* leaders should be like: (1) Saved, inviting the lost to the Saviour they know; (2) Striving to point people to Jesus; (3) Understanding the true nature of holiness; (4) Characterised by justice, mercy, faithfulness; (5) Knowing daily repentance, renewed by the Holy Spirit; (6) Having consistency between personal holiness and outward life; (7) Realistic about sin and weakness, depending on the Lord for everything. Through such leaders will Jesus' gospel be proclaimed and the lost saved.

Lord, I know that you work through the weak to call the weak. We all need your strength to do the works you've prepared for us. I pray that the Holy Spirit would conform our church leaders in genuine and lovely Christlikeness so that we all might live out our walk with you in holy integrity and spiritual dependence.

Matthew 24 – The Son of Man Will Return

In the previous chapter, Jesus condemned the religious elite with seven woes. Here, he says that the temple will be utterly destroyed. The disciples ask two questions: When will the temple be destroyed, and what will be the sign of Jesus' return? He says trouble and persecution will be commonplace until he returns, and the fall of Jerusalem (v13-22 in particular) will be a terrible foretaste of God's judgment to come. For those caught up in it in AD70, it was a taste of hell on earth. Jesus will return, but we don't know when. We do know that it will be unmissable. In the meantime, we are to be faithful servants of our living master.

Living Lord and Messiah, you are gracious to warn us of such times. Your words make sense of our own days, the birth-pains of worse to come. Help me, Lord, by the power of the Spirit, to be alert and living for you well today. With so much at stake, give me opportunity and boldness to speak to a lost person today.

Matthew 25 – Share Your Master's Joy

This chapter completes Jesus' fifth sermon recorded in Matthew's gospel. There are three images given to us of aspects of what it will be like when Jesus returns. Of the 10 virgins (bridesmaids), 5 were ready but drowsy. The other 5 simply weren't ready at all, though they knew the groom was due. Many religious people will be like that at Jesus' return. In the parable of the talents, we see that faith in Christ will always bear fruit, though we're not all the same. Those who never really knew the Master will be thrown out. The final image of sheep and goats reminds us that Jesus knows the detail of our lives, and what we do now impacts our eternity. Saved by faith in Christ, his people always serve him.

Lord Jesus, Messiah, Son of God, you are just and right to stand in judgment over humanity. Thank you for your grace to me, calling me to faith by the power of the Spirit. Teach me, Lord, how to love and live in a manner pleasing to you, happily anticipating the day of your return.

Matthew 26 – "My Father"

It's the night before the crucifixion and the failures of humanity are laid bare. The disciples consider the expensive perfume poured on Christ to be a "waste". Judas considers 30 pieces of silver to be an appropriate sum of money to betray the Lord of Glory. Peter, James and John can't even stay awake and pray at Jesus' greatest moment of need. And when push comes to shove, Peter even disowned Jesus before a harmless servant girl. Yet Jesus never once played the victim; he was in control of events throughout. And he didn't depend on any human for assurance or comfort. In his darkest hour, his consolation was his Father.

My Father, by your grace you have called me to faith in your Son, and the Spirit of adoption in me brings me to you in Christ. Thank you that in any and all situations I can come to you in confidence, in Christ, knowing that you will hear me and do me good.

Matthew 27 – The Crucifixion

No-one in this chapter grasps who Jesus is or what he's doing. Judas's remorse might have become saving repentance and faith if he'd known Jesus truly. Others say many things in cruel mockery that are ironically deeply true, such as, "He saved others," and "He trusts in God." But it's all God's plan being worked out. Matthew has emphasised Old Testament fulfilment many times for us, and the events of the crucifixion are littered with too many Old Testament references for him to draw attention to. The tearing of the temple curtain is perhaps most significant, undoing the exclusion of Adam and Eve from God's presence in Eden and for ever after. Now we all have access to God through faith in Christ.

Holy and eternal God, you have granted rebellious sinners access into your presence and accomplished it through the careful and deliberate incarnation, perfection, and sacrifice of your Son. What a cost to save me. Forgive me my sins, Lord, and keep me in your presence for ever.

Matthew 28 – The Resurrection

If the resurrection of Jesus Christ seems hard to believe for us today, we can take comfort that it was hard for some to believe at the time. Yet the women and the disciples, faced with the physical presence of the risen Jesus, ceased to doubt and went on to serve him and keep his commands. They *knew* that Christ is risen – the fact that changes our understanding of life and death, heaven and earth, time and space. Hard-hearted unbelief will always act like those chief priests, refusing the realities of spiritual facts put before them, in a spirit of self-preservation that actually dooms them. Christ's authoritative command to "Go" remains as relevant as ever.

Living Saviour and Lord, risen and ascended and glorified, thank you for opening my understanding to these spiritual realities. Thank you for the glimpse of your heavenly authority. Please help me to "go" and to tell others of the gracious, saving work you have accomplished, leading people to know you for themselves.

Mark 1 – Moved with Compassion

Almost all of Mark's gospel appears in Matthew or Luke (or both), yet it has a style and structure of its own. Most strikingly, Mark keeps the action moving apace: e.g. "As soon as" (v10, v29); "immediately" (v12, 18, 20), and more. Jesus Christ, the Son of God (v1) was on a mission, and nothing could halt, impede, or deflect him. The mission had ancient roots and it would be fulfilled and accomplished by Jesus. Part of his mission would be to establish the church, so it's no surprise that gathering close disciples was an important early element. Yet for all this, the great King of all humanity would pause in great compassion to the heartfelt plea of one sick man and heal him.

Gracious and compassionate Saviour, as your own psalmist said, "This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him." Forgive my small understanding of your great compassion, Lord. Thank you that I'm not a distraction from your work of mission, but rather a beloved object of it.

Mark 2 – Who But God Alone?

If we think, like the scribes and the Pharisees, that Jesus is merely a religious teacher or leader then we'll struggle to understand his actions. A regular teacher couldn't forgive sins, wouldn't eat or mix with sinners, or challenge thinking about fasting or the Sabbath. But Jesus does these things to demonstrate that he is both Son of Man (human) and Son of God (deity). He can forgive sins because he will absorb the cost of forgiveness at the cross. He calls sinners to repentance and to feast with him, not to lament and fast. He is Lord of the Sabbath, since to come to him is to find peace and rest for our souls. He is God our Saviour, to be worshipped.

Son of Man, Son of God, you are worthy of the worship now proclaimed in your presence in heaven. Thank you for coming to save sinners, and for the work of the Holy Spirit convicting me of my sins. Help me to walk in Levi's footsteps, following you, wherever you go.

Mark 3 – To Be With Him

The scene with the crowds pressing in, and Jesus having to teach from a boat, highlights the chaotic, desperate need to get to Jesus for healing. In fact, many didn't want Jesus; they only wanted healing. In preaching from the boat, Jesus is focussing their attention on his message: "Repent, and believe the good news" (1:15). Neither the Pharisees nor his own family understood who Jesus was, but the demons did: "You are the Son of God" (v11). He would soon send the twelve disciples out to preach and drive out demons, but they also first needed to know him truly. "He appointed twelve… to be with him." That alone is how we can know and serve him.

Lord Jesus, Son of God, this daily time with you is precious, nourishing, and all too short. Strengthen and help me, Lord, to know you and to do your will today. Help me to do your work in your strength, conscious of your presence and guidance.

Mark 4 – "Who then is this?"

Having appointed the twelve apostles to be with him and to go out to preach, Jesus gives the parable of the sower to set expectations for them. Many people will ignore their preaching, some will hear but only unconvincingly respond, while others will wholly grasp the good news and flourish. He spoke in parables so that only those who draw near to him would come to know the full meaning. For those who do, he gives images of living, organic growth in the kingdom of God. Still the twelve needed more fully to know Jesus and the storm at sea was shocking: One moment they feared the storm, the next they feared Jesus. No mere man, he is the Son of God with us.

Heavenly Father, unless the Spirit had drawn me to repentance and faith in your Son I would have remained forever outside the blessing of your good news. Thank you for your grace. Show me yet more of Jesus, that I might know both myself and you all the better.

Mark 5 – Lives Transformed

Jesus grants four requests in this chapter. Three are wonderful, one is horrifying, and all reveal much about him. The bleeding woman would have been excluded from Jewish society as 'unclean' so her healing was life-changing physically, emotionally, and socially. Jairus's daughter was dead, yet even the dead respond when Jesus commands life! And the torment of the man among the tombs can only be guessed at until Jesus exorcised the demons. Jesus' power over demons, sickness, and death led to drastic and wonderful transformations for those who came in faith. Yet the townsfolk were terrified of Jesus and begged him to leave – so he did. His departure was an act of judgment against unbelief.

Gracious Saviour, you who hear the pleas of broken-hearted, broken-bodied people, thank you for your transforming grace and powerful salvation. Thank you for hearing my pleas, my cries for forgiveness and help. I pray that I might be as effective a witness for you as that man you healed that day became to his family and town.

Mark 6 – The Good Shepherd

The disciples went out preaching a message of repentance and doing wonders in Jesus' name. They were prepared by Jesus to expect some rejection, just as Jesus himself had in his own home town. The execution of John the Baptist is a shocking reminder of just how much people naturally hate being told of their sin – we prefer our own morality over God's. Jesus, in the compassion of the Good Shepherd he is (v34), served up a better feast than Herod. Ezekiel 34 condemns rulers like Herod and promises that God will come as a Good Shepherd. If the disciples realised Jesus' deity, they would not have been so shocked when he walked on water!

Lord Jesus, Great Good Shepherd of your sheep, you graciously prepare us for the works you give us to do, enabling us as you work through us. Forgive me my failings, please. Thank you for your great compassion; lead me as you have promised all my days through.

Mark 7 – Rules, Law, and Grace

Many things in Old Testament law were 'unclean,' but not necessarily sinful. Cleanliness was about preparedness for temple worship; all society was to remain clean wherever possible. The Pharisees had taken such laws and elevated and expanded them to the neglect of true, godly, loving ethics towards others. With temple worship becoming obsolete, Christ declared all foods clean to us – though without dropping any *moral* obligations. His own compassion is then seen in his dealings with the Syrophoenician woman and the deaf man. He responds to the woman's faith with instant release for her daughter. Then the Lord of Glory took the man aside privately to heal him – a gracious, tender moment.

Living, holy Saviour, you have sanctified me by the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, causing me always to be prepared for worship in everything I do. Help me, then, to live a life of holiness to high moral standards, always ready to reach out in loving compassion to those in need of help.

Mark 8 – You Are The Messiah

Did Jesus really need two attempts to restore sight to the blind man? No, it was a deliberate illustration. The events of Mark 6 & 7 all have references to food in some way. Everything from the Pharisees and Herod is brutal, selfish, proud and ungodly. The food from Jesus is abundant, nourishing, and free. The disciples were getting partial sightedness about Jesus, even to the point of identifying him as the Messiah. Full sight – full understanding – can only come when we grasp the sacrificial nature of his work. He entered the world to give his life for us, to die to take the punishment we deserve.

Messiah, Saviour, Lord, you are so powerful over your creation, over evil, over death, and yet so tender towards your people. You know my weaknesses and my dim understanding. Lord, give me ever greater vision of your glory so that I might face this and every day in your strength. Thank you for fullness of salvation and redemption.

Mark 9 – Help My Unbelief!

Now that the twelve apostles have identified Jesus as the Messiah (the Christ), they need to know more of his work and what it is to follow him. It's a learning curve we all need to be on: They glimpse his glorious true nature as the Son of God, founder of head of the New Covenant (New Testament) people of God. In failing to heal the boy, they learn that Christian maturity is really a deepening dependence on God. They don't yet grasp that Christ came to die to save us, and they need to learn the true nature of service and humility. Lastly, they need to develop a generous open heart for partnership in the gospel with others, and a mortal abhorrence of sin.

Gracious Master and Teacher, I still have so much to learn from you. Lord, show me more of your glory and help me to depend on you more and more. Help me to serve others with your grace, love and humility, living a life of godliness befitting your covenant love to me.

Mark 10 – A Ransom For Many

Still, by Mark 10, Jesus' identity and mission aren't understood even by those closest to him. The Pharisees think they can trap him; his disciples seek glory. But v45 is key: Jesus came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. The point comes into focus for the rich man when Jesus told him he lacked "one thing." Standing there, facing Jesus, the man lacked the understanding that there is no mountain of treasure in heaven or earth that compare with the abundant life Christ grants to all who follow him. The obvious joy of the man who was released from blindness is a pale shadow of the joy awaiting followers of Christ.

Lord Jesus, you have ransomed me from death and the consequences of my sin. You have ransomed me from slavery to sin and the dominion of darkness. That you should do so at so great a price is astonishing, and I will need endless years to thank you. Lord, help me understand your greatness more and more.

Mark 11 – True Worship

For distant travellers going to Jerusalem to worship, the role of the money-changers was crucial, enabling people to buy animals for sacrifice and to pay the temple tax. But this whole trade had reached a level where it covered the outer courts of the temple, actually *preventing* worship (especially for Gentiles). We benefit from people and resources that enable gathered worship, but we can be distracted by them too. Better to join with the delighted crowds who look to king Jesus and cry, "Hosanna!" He is the delight of our worship and praise, and we can come to him by faith in the most humble or spectacular of locations. He alone is glory.

Glorious Saviour, mighty king, help me to keep you the focus of my worship when I gather with your people or here alone with you. As I look to you, the radiance of the Father's glory and the exact representation of his being, help me to fall in true joyful worship at your feet.

Mark 12 – Listening to Him with Delight

After arriving at Jerusalem openly claiming royal identity, Jesus speaks against the Pharisees a parable that places him as the Son of God, to be rejected by them to death. They hate that, and yet they proceed to attempt to trick him and cause him trouble by his words. Jesus' stunning wisdom and sure handling of the Scriptures dumbfounds them, while also reminding us of the eternal power and truth of God's word. By asking about Psalm 110 (in v36), Jesus causes his hearers to think again about the Messiah: Yes, he is born into David's line, and yet is greater than David. As Mark 1:1 tells us, this is the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God.

Great God and Father, you who sent your Son into the world in compassion and love, you are greatly to be praised. Thank you for your illuminating and powerful word, and for displaying your love for me in Christ. Give me grace, love, and gratitude in abundance, that I might freely give my all to you.

Mark 13 – Be Alert

The temple in Jerusalem was where the glory of God dwelt on earth among his people. Back in Ezekiel 10, after years of unrepentant sin throughout Israel, the glory of the Lord moved eastwards, out of the temple. That paved the way for the Babylonian army to flatten Jerusalem and destroy the temple. Here in Mark 13, Jesus, Son of God, has been consistently rejected by those who should have welcomed him. He goes east, and here prophesises the destruction of this temple by the Romans in AD 70. All acts of judgment like this in the Bible point forward to the final judgment when Christ returns to the earth in glory. His people are to be ready in holiness and witness.

Lord, these images of judgment are, of course, terrible to contemplate. Yet you are gracious to warn us of what will be. Have mercy, please, and give me opportunity and boldness to tell others about your gospel, your good news. Help me, Lord, to point others to the blessing of knowing you while there is still time.

Mark 14 – Intentions

Judas was consumed with bad intentions. He agreed to hand Jesus over for cash and then went and joined him at the meal. He left early, only to catch up in the garden with a mob in tow. It's awful. Peter was full of *good* intentions! "Even if all fall away, I will not!" But he couldn't stay awake to pray for Christ and ended up disowning him in fear. Peter was more like Judas than he knew. The woman with the perfume was intent on Jesus, and the simple devotion she showed was beautiful. Amid the apparent chaos, Jesus was intent on his own death, bringing salvation to us.

Lord Jesus, loving Saviour, we let you down both by sinful intent and by failed good intent. Help me to be more like that woman, knowing the blessing of time with you. Remembering how you later transformed Peter by your Spirit, work in me a clear boldness to own your name before everyone.

Mark 15 – Crucifixion

For a method of execution designed to be slow, painful, and humiliating, the six hours from 9am to 3pm was relatively short. But the darkness tells of a greater pain than the Romans imagined. Jesus, our Saviour, the very source and author of life to us, died. He didn't look like a king just then, and yet the Roman officer could see the truth that Jesus truly is the Son of God. Why did they beat and crucify a man who made the blind see, the deaf hear, and the dead rise? Because they hated his words and refused his deity. It would be the same today, and in many ways it is. Thankfully, so too is his love for us. Hallelujah! What a Saviour!

We do not know, we cannot tell, what pain you had to bear. Great Saviour, Son of God, thank you for your love for me that drove you with such holy determination to die for me, to take the punishment my sins deserve. Lord, forgive me my cold heart and my tolerance of sin. Help me to walk worthy of the life you have granted me.

Mark 16 – He Has Risen!

It's highly likely that anything after verse 8 was not written by Mark. That means he ends his gospel with an air of confusion and bewilderment. Those women saw Jesus die, watched him buried, and bought spices to anoint his corpse. Jesus had died. The news that Jesus rose shocked them to the core – and so it should; the dead don't rise. It's the most spectacular supernatural event of the whole gospel. As instruction is given to the women, we immediately realise that Christ's resurrection is not simply for consolation in grief, but rather instruction for mission. We go too, not in his memory, but in his strength.

Risen, Conquering Son, your resurrection changes our perception of life and death, time and space. You live! You know me. I serve and live for you, not in memory of you. Thank you for sending the Spirit to open my eyes to this reality, and help me to live each day with you, to you, for you.

Luke 1:1-38 – Preparing the Way

Luke opens his gospel making it clear that he has carried out diligent research to get to the facts. He will present them to us in an orderly sequence. It's as well he says so because the events he writes about are supernatural and extraordinary. The angel Gabriel's visit to Zechariah in the temple is unique even in the Bible and it's no wonder Zechariah struggled to believe his eyes and ears. The news to Mary was even more shocking: This young virgin would become pregnant with the Son of God Most High, the most unique and wonderful child the world has ever known. A heart closed to spiritual things will know none of this.

Great and Almighty God, thank you that we have such sure and certain written accounts of these amazing events. Thank you for the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus, the divine becoming human at conception, entering the world to save me. Lord, help me to delight in the spiritual, supernatural strangeness of your dealings with us.

Luke 1:39-80 – Joy and Surprise

It's hard to escape the sense of joy and surprise in this chapter. Long-awaited events are happening right before their eyes. Elizabeth and Zechariah were somewhat ahead of the others, but their delight is clear too. Both Mary's and Zechariah's songs are rich in Old Testament language and imagery, inspired by the Holy Spirit to bring joy and hope to all God's people. The birth of John the Baptist heralded a new era for humanity as he would be the one to prepare the way for the coming Messiah and Saviour. May our hearts re-live and capture some of this joy as we look to Jesus today.

Living God, you know how weak our faith is and how often we're unprepared and surprised by your intervention in our lives. Lord, grow in me a heart of expectancy in you, always full of joy. Help me to know you and delight in you every day.

Luke 2 – Glory to God!

The glory of the Lord shone around the angel that night, and the shepherds were terrified. We see that glory now by faith, not by sight, as we contemplate Jesus: Glorious in how the Son of God Most High became a fragile human, born into poverty. Glorious in purpose, choosing to enter this world to save us. Glorious in grace, being made known to lowly shepherds in fields, not to princes in palaces. Glorious in promise, fulfilling Old Testament type and prophecy in delivering and executing God's eternal plans for us. Glorious in tender mercy, speaking love to us in our weakness.

Glorious Lord, you are glorious in your very nature and in what you have done. You are the radiance of the Father's glory, and you desire for us to see your glory. Help me, Holy Spirit, to see more of Jesus, and in him to gaze and marvel at the Father.

Luke 3 – A Voice in the Wilderness

John the Baptist's role was to be a voice crying out in the wilderness, preparing the way ahead of the Messiah. He did that by proclaiming a baptism for the repentance of sins (v3). He preached how Jewish descent and religious pedigree offered no automatic standing with God: The people were sinful, and sin excludes us from him. Until we acknowledge our sin we will never repent of it, and without repentance we will not turn to Jesus. That is how John prepared the way. And we've all sinned, and the church is now that voice speaking truth to the world, even if we follow John into troubled opposition. A repentant heart is one ready to call to Jesus for forgiveness.

Holy and righteous God, thank you for the work of the Holy Spirit convicting me of my sins and causing me to turn to you for forgiveness. I ask again, Lord, forgive me of my sins this week, this day. Help me to be bold and loving in opposing sin and injustice, pointing people to your perfect goodness and forgiveness in Christ.

Luke 4 – Son of God, Messiah

At the end of Luke 3, both Jesus and Adam are called sons of God (3:22, 38). Will Jesus do better than Adam? Jesus went out into the wilderness to take Satan on. Jesus came "to destroy the devil's works" (1 John 3:18), undoing the failure of Adam for all who will come in repentance and faith. He quoted from Isaiah 61:1 to make it clear that he is the Messiah ("anointed"), and that the year of the Lord's favour has come. Those from his hometown thought they knew him, and couldn't see him as Messiah, the Son of God. But for those who would come, there was release from Satan and healing and more: The good news is Christ.

Good Saviour, Lord Jesus, thank you that you came to destroy the devil's works: Sin, death, pain. Thank you that you, the eternal Son, took on flesh to save us. Thank you that you send the same Holy Spirit by whom you were anointed into me, to bring me to you. Help me, then, to know his power at work in me to do your will.

Luke 5 – Calling

Looking across Luke 5 and 6, we see the calling of Peter, then two joyous healings, the calling of Levi, then two disputes, and the calling of the twelve apostles. Notice: (a) Jesus has been fishing for Peter already, and the miraculous catch is aimed specifically at him. Jesus "reels us in" over time; (b) Peter's awareness of his sin in Jesus' presence is remarkable and speaks of deity; (c) The calling of Levi reminds us that no-one is beyond Jesus' call (he chooses, not us); (d) The healings and Levi's feast remind us of the joy of coming to Christ; (e) The disputes remind us that many will hear, but many who do will reject; (f) Above all, we follow not a religion or an ideology, but we follow Jesus himself.

My Lord and my God, how I thank you that you called me and that the Holy Spirit gave me life and faith to hear your call. Lord Christ, thank you that since you live, it is you I follow. Lead me into grace and righteousness, Lord, and keep me close. Help me to enter into the joy of your presence.

Luke 6 – Deep Foundations

When Jesus' all-night prayer is mentioned (v12), we're given a beautiful example: Jesus is demonstrating how we are to express our dependence on God in prayer when we face challenging moments in life. Jesus' teaching is incredibly demanding and searching for us as his disciples, learning to love our enemies (which includes the enemies of Christ), and having a natural compassion and bias for forgiveness to those who offend or hurt us. How can we possibly live like that? In our own strength and will, it's not possible for long. But we are to be trees, rooted in Christ; houses, built on him. He is our rock and our strength to do his will.

Lord Jesus, I can do all the works you have prepared for me to do only in the strength you give by the power and encouragement of your Spirit. Lord God, keep me close. Keep me thirsty for the living water you bring, that I might bring you great glory and delight.

Luke 7 – Reversals

A common thread in Luke's gospel is that Jesus brings about surprising reversals. He is the Son of God Most High, the Messiah who has come to the nation of promise. Yet who is most blessed by him? In Luke 7, a Roman centurion is praised for his faith, a Gentile woman receives Christ's compassion and the resurrection of her only son, and a sinful woman has her sins forgiven as she wipes Jesus' feet with tears and perfume. But the Pharisees and Jewish religious elite reject him. No matter what John preached or Jesus did, hard-hearted unbelief will always find fault and always refuse to believe – often while being as polite as that Pharisee!

Saviour, I thank you for the reversal you have worked in my life. I am not what I was, not what I would have become. Thank you for the Spirit's sanctifying work, bringing me closer to you in times like this every day. Lord, grant me the Centurion's faith, the widow's joy, and the sinful woman's love for you, unashamedly owning you for all to see.

Luke 8 – Power and Grace

The Parable of the Sower is a lesson for Jesus' disciples, setting expectations for us as we hope to tell others about Christ. And we must tell of him, like lampstands in the darkness. That means we must know him truly. The disciples feared Jesus' power over the storm; the demons feared Jesus, knowing his deity; the pig farmers feared his power. But the restored man, the healed woman, and Jairus were overjoyed to receive his power and blessing, to experience his grace. His deity and credentials as Messiah (Christ) are on display, but unless we grasp his work of salvation at the cross and empty tomb we will never truly experience his grace today.

Lord Jesus, thank you for the Parable of the Sower. I can see it in action in people around me, and you protect my heart by setting true expectations. Still, Lord, I pray for mercy, that those near to me would experience your grace and power in full salvation, redemption, transformation, and hope.

Luke 9 – Glory in the Cross

This long chapter shows the twelve apostles being trained and prepared for the future. They're sent out to proclaim the good news and to heal, with power and authority given to them by Jesus. Then, they provide bread to the 5,000 from Jesus' hand, and the 12 baskets for the 12 apostles shows the overflow of blessing to those who serve Christ's nourishment to others. But when Peter correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah (the Christ), Jesus speaks to them of his death and resurrection – and the need for all disciples to know the way of the cross. Christ's transfiguration is a revelation of his true glory, not to be seen again until he has passed through death. Greatness is seen in service and love.

Heavenly Father, your words on that mountain were few but precious. You gave your Son to lead us in a new exodus, a new redemption from sin and a new unity centred on him. Forgive my pride, Lord, and show me how I need to take up my cross for you, dying to self, glorifying you.

Luke 10 – Pray, Go, Love

The 72 disciples Jesus sent out are something of a model for us, the church today. Before anything else, they were to pray. Then they were to go and speak about the kingdom of God. They didn't rely on programmes, systems, or training, but rather on speaking and acting in Jesus' name – consciously aware that Christ was working through them. Acceptance or rejection wasn't "success" or "failure" for the disciples – all that was required of them was dependent obedience. That can only work when you know God in Christ – which is his gift to give. We will then love (as he loved) those in need of a neighbour's love, and we will enjoy sitting at his feet in his presence.

Lord Jesus, thank you for revealing the Father to me by the gift of faith worked in me by the Holy Spirit. Help me to remain consciously and actively dependent on you as I seek to live for you. Help me, Lord, to tell other people about you. Prompt me and help to love those around who so desperately need your love.

Luke 11 – Lamp of the Body

Jesus said your eye is a lamp of your body. It's as if we're dark and hollow, and we need our eyes to let light in. What, then, should we look at to fill ourselves with light? God, as revealed to us in Christ. This chapter has so much about inward change for us. We pray truly, to our Father, who knows us and loves us and gives the Holy Spirit to comfort, encourage and empower us. The crowds wanted signs rather than repentance and change. The Pharisees loved external shows of religion though their hearts were far from God. And yet Christ's rebuke to falsehood is also an invitation to truth, to life, to himself, for all to come.

Loving heavenly Father, you are gracious to everyone who comes to you truly, seeking to know you, repenting of sin, and claiming no righteousness but that which you credit to us by faith in Christ. Forgive me, Lord, that I ever seek favour or merit in my own action – even the good I do in your name. Holy Spirit, keep my eyes on Jesus for life and hope, I pray.

Luke 12 – Treasures & Possessions

The simple truth weaving its way through this chapter is this: You don't exist only in this life. We live as if we do, building up earthly wealth, devising bucket lists, fearing death. But life is not in the abundance of your possessions (v15). Our heavenly Father knows us and cares for us, providing all we truly need. He has given us life in his Son, and one day Jesus will return to gather his people to himself – suddenly, and forever. We're to live now knowing that our treasure is Christ, being ready for his return in witness and holiness. That might cause upset for us, even with unbelieving family. But to point lost sinners to Jesus is the greatest love.

Gracious Father, thank you for revealing the nature of eternity in ways we can grasp. Thank you for the gift of your Son, and the Holy's Spirit's work leading me to him. Forgive my attachment to his world where that's idolatrous or unhelpful. Help me to be content in Christ, living this life with eternity in view.

Luke 13 – Unless You Repent

When bad things happen to bad people, we feel they've got their comeuppance. When bad things happen to good people, we wonder why. Yet Jesus reminds us that we are all undeserving sinners: "Unless you repent, you will all perish as well" (v5). His healing on the Sabbath demonstrated the release he brings in contrast to the rules-based coldness of uncaring religious rulers. There will be many very religious people who face Jesus on the last day, shocked at their exclusion from heaven. Yet Jesus' teaching here is plain: The way is narrow; repentance is necessary. And still, Jesus grieves over all who reject him.

Righteous and holy Father, unless you had given us a narrow way to come to you then no-one could. Unless you sent the Spirit to convict me of sin, I would never have repented. Unless you had sent Jesus to die in my place, I would be lost forever. Forgive me, Lord. Thank you for so great a salvation.

Luke 14 – God's Banquet

If you put chapters 13 and 14 side-by-side, you can see strong structural similarities. Luke is arranging his material to show you what keeps people from the kingdom of God, and what it's like to enter. In Chapter 13, a lack of repentance keeps people out; in Chapter 14, it's attachment to the things of this world. In Chapter 13, the way is narrow but there *is* a way; in Chapter 14 we see God portrayed as a generous, welcoming host inviting all who will come to his feast. To come to God in Christ is to enjoy him and to enter into his delight as his adopted child. But following Jesus will mean death to self and carrying one's own cross daily, living in true dependence on him.

Generous Lord, forgiving and gracious, thank you for calling me to come to you and enabling me to hear your call. Thank you for helping me see that joy with you is the end of this journey, though the way feels hard at times. I pray that the Spirit would give me ever greater joy in you daily, even as I carry my cross in all of life.

Luke 15 – Rejoicing in Heaven

The man who finds his lost sheep rejoices with friends. The woman who finds her lost coin does likewise. Such is the response in heaven when anyone repents of sin, turning to God. In the third parable here, the younger son eventually repents and makes his way to the father. The father runs out to him and receives him with great joy: The lost son is found! The older brother grumbles and refuses to go in. His hardness of heart leaves him outside, rejecting the feast. He is as lost as the younger brother had been. Again, the father goes out to welcome him in in love. We must also share our Father's joy when any sinner repents.

Joyful, welcoming Father, you graciously called me to life in your Son, and your call brings me joy and peace. You call me for your own glory and pleasure, and I thank and praise you that you give union with Jesus, entry into bliss. Help me to share your joy at everyone who comes to you and protect me from grumbling and favouritism.

Luke 16 – Think Ahead

The shrewd manager isn't commended for his dishonesty, but rather for his shrewd forward thinking. Knowing his future prospects are poor, he has cleverly planned ahead. Jesus has been teaching for many chapters about how to enter the kingdom of God and about what will keep us out. So we are to be shrewd, wise, smart. If not, we end up like the rich man in hell, full of the clear knowledge that hell is deserved and that opportunities to come to Jesus in this life were missed. Luke's orderly account puts these together for us so that we will look ahead – both for ourselves and for the lost souls around us every day.

Son of God, gracious Saviour, how good you are to teach us of things to come, and of the narrow way, and of the Father's welcome. Forgive me, Lord, that my thinking is so oriented towards things in this life. Help me to think and to order my life around eternal realities – in family, work, church, free time, all of life.

Luke 17 – The Obedience of Faith

We find it harder to forgive others than we admit. Rather than absorbing the cost of the offence (as God did for us), we keep score and remember. Faced with Jesus' teaching, the disciples ask for more faith. But faith isn't a super-power; it's often obedience in action. We have faith, so we act. In fact, obedience is expected of all who follow Jesus. The leper reminds us that the obedience of faith leads to joy in Christ as we return to give thanks and praise him. As we live and serve him in faith and obedience, we are ready for his return, speaking and living hope into an unready world.

Good and perfect Master, suffering servant King, forgive me for my weak faith and consequently poor obedience. I ask for the Spirit of power to work in me a strengthening and more joyful faith and obedience, ready to stand for you and make you known. Use me, Lord, to bring hope to my unsaved family, neighbours, colleagues, and friends.

Luke 18 – Like Infants

The parable of the persistent widow highlights the generous justice of God who hears our prayers. The parable of the rich man and the tax collector reminds us that we aren't heard because of any righteousness of our own, but only by God's mercy towards us. So we come like infants, needy and dependent. But our attachment to worldly possessions reduces our *sense* of dependence, and our idolatry is stronger than we know. The "one thing" the rich man lacked was the knowledge that Christ truly is worth giving everything up for. The blind beggar had nothing to give up and wouldn't be stopped from crying out to Jesus. Jesus heard him, called him, and saved him completely.

Gracious, living, and listening God, thank you that you hear me when I call to you. Thank you for the righteousness I'm credited with by faith, that I might come to you as your child. Forgive my attachment to the world that I so often hold more tightly than my love for you. Lord, show me more of your glory; help me in my cold unbelief.

Luke 19 – Enter: The King!

As Jesus approaches Jerusalem for his own crucifixion, opposition and misunderstanding abound. The restoration of Zacchaeus was opposed by some, though he was a sinner in need of grace like anyone else. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is rich with kingly imagery (largely drawn from the prophet Zechariah), but Jesus tells a parable speaking of his own departure, being crowned fully at his ascension to heaven. The kingly allusions weren't missed by the Pharisees, but they rejected the idea that Jesus could be the Messiah. Even as the Son of God approached Jerusalem he was rejected yet again, and his sorrow and anger are there for all to see.

Lord Christ, you are still rejected by most, of course. I am sure you are no less distressed and angry today than you were then. Give me that same passion, Lord, so that I might be a faithful servant and steward of the gifts you have given me, until you return. Help me live for you today.

Luke 20 – Minds Made Up

When Jesus asks his questioners about where John's baptism was from, it becomes clear that their question to him was not a search for truth, but power. Jesus exposes that in his parable, but because their minds are already made up about him their response is to plot against him. Jesus' reply about taxes displays exemplary wisdom, while his reply concerning the resurrection of the dead shows his high regard for Scripture (while also exposing the poor Bible knowledge of the apparent experts). When Jesus goes on the front foot, he brilliantly focusses the conversation on Scripture's identification of the Messiah as Son of David. Pointing to Jesus trumps winning arguments every time.

O God, there are so many people around whose minds are made up about Jesus, so confident in themselves. Help me to witness as Jesus did, with wisdom, clarity, confidence in your work, pointing people to him and undermining false logic. I pray that the Spirit would use me today and this week to take every opportunity winsomely for you.

Luke 21 – Anguish on the Earth

The widow's offering is a powerful statement in two ways: First, her whole-person devotion to God is clear and commendable. Second, she is something of a victim of the loveless religion of the scribes condemned by Jesus at the end of the previous chapter. Christ's work abolished the old temple system, but the temple's destruction would be an act of divine judgment against loveless religion and their rejection of the Messiah. The sacking of Jerusalem in AD 70 was horrific, but Jesus' teaching here make it clear that it's only a foretaste of the Day of Judgment when he returns. As his people, we are to be ready for that day, eagerly anticipating our full redemption.

Lord, these images are truly terrifying. If you counted our sins against us, who could stand? Thank you that you took the punishment I deserve and help me to spread your good news to others. Lord, have mercy on my unsaved family members, friends, and colleagues.

Luke 22 – Passover

One of the notable features of the original Passover is that instruction regarding its commemoration was given even as it was about to happen. Christ, our supreme Passover lamb, has given us instruction that we remember his service and sacrifice. We need this because we are no better than those disciples who discussed "greatness" instead of service, who promised fight but then fled, who announced loyalty but then denied him in fear. But Jesus knows the hearts of us all and kept to his own plans to save us – relying only on the wickedness of men intent on taking his life. How much the risen Jesus changes us by the power of the Spirit!

Lord Jesus, I know I would have let you down just as badly as your apostles did, if not worse. I know I let you down still. Lord, forgive me. Help me, by the power of your Spirit in me, to live in holiness of life, to stand out in your name, and to bring you delight and glory today.

Luke 23 – Trial and Crucifixion

These scenes are chaotic, brutal, and horrible. Pilate, the judge, let the guilty go free and the innocent be executed. Though all seems out of control, the disciples in Acts 4 reflect on Pilate, Herod and others fulfilling Psalm 2 as nations and rulers plotting in vain against the LORD and his anointed. Through the wickedness of evil men, God was working to save all who will come to him. In his suffering, Jesus' intention and purpose to save us is clear and unwavering. The two other men also suffered terribly, but the simple faith of the one man brings great glory to Christ, always gracious and compassionate.

Holy and righteous Father, your love for your people is on full display here in the humiliation and execution of your Son, the Author of Life. This is what it took for you to forgive me and yet remain a truly just judge. So, Father, please forgive me my sin, my unbelief, my cold heart. Show me your glory in Christ over and over again.

Luke 24 – Burning Hearts

Luke could have closed his gospel with a record of the amazing testimony and eyewitness accounts of the universe-altering truth that Jesus is alive! But he included the relatively lengthy account of the travellers on the road to Emmaus. Why? The gospel began in Jerusalem's temple, showing how everything is rooted in God's dealings with his people Israel. It closes with Jesus teaching "everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Every aspect of the gospel of Christ was planned in eternity, foretold and then executed in time, and written down for us to know God.

Gracious, Sovereign Lord, it is a mystery that you create us with moral autonomy yet remain sovereign over the details of our lives. Thank you for your eternal plan of salvation, and for including me. Help me to bring glory to you and give me boldness to do the works you have planned in advance for me to do.

John 1 – The Word

There is an abundance of titles given to Jesus in John 1: Lamb of God, Rabbi, Son of God, King of Israel, Messiah, Son of Man. These are titles ascribed by those first disciples, along with John the Baptist, and they mostly describe who Jesus is in relation to us. The titles "Son of God" and "Word" speak of who Christ is in his own eternal being, independent of Creation, glorious in deity, eternally one with the Father and Spirit. The disciples were dazzled by a glimpse of Christ's glory – but much, much more was to come. And so it is still for us: We can't ever stop trying to know more of him.

Eternal Son, for whom and through whom everything was created, Light of the world, Lamb of God, we have barely glimpsed your glory and yet we can see that you shine more brightly than the sun. Thank you for graciously becoming human to save us. Show me yet more of your glory, and help me to live a life worthy of you and pleasing to you.

John 2 – Newness

There are no parables in John's gospel, and his miracles are always referred to as "signs". These signs point to his glory, though the hour for his glory to be displayed is yet to come in John's gospel. The water-to-wine sign speaks of a newness, a richness, to be brought in by Jesus as the old Jewish rituals and customs will be superseded. The state of the temple as a marketplace instead of a house of prayer heightens the sense of need for something newer and better. Christ came into the world to save us; he isn't dependent on us (he knows how sinful we are), and yet he is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters by grace.

Lord Jesus, you veiled your eternal glory when you became human, and yet your grace and power are on display and are part of that glory. Help me to see more of you, Lord. Help me to live for you today, and not let rituals and habits replace a living, vibrant dependence on you.

John 3 – Born Again

The language of being "born again" seems as absurd to us today as it did to Nicodemus that night. Yet Jesus speaks as if Nicodemus ("Israel's teacher") should have already understood. When we are born, we are given life. Born in flesh, we are utterly passive recipients. As we look to Christ for salvation, the Spirit gives us *spiritual* life as we are born again, born of the Spirit. This was promised in Ezekiel 36 and visualised in Ezekiel 37's valley of dry bones (as Nicodemus ought to have understood). Since this is the only God-given way of salvation, we join John the Baptist and point people to Christ alone.

Holy Father, everything here speaks of your power and grace, giving a salvation to us that would be otherwise impossible. Forgive me when I take your grace for granted. Forgive me for not marvelling at your grace over and over in your word. Help me to see more of Jesus, living daily by the Spirit who gives me life.

John 4 – Amazing Grace

The woman was amazed that a Jewish man was speaking to her. Jesus was crossing religious, ethnic, and social boundaries and she couldn't understand why. In truth, the scene is a scale model of all Christ came to do: He is our Creator and Sustainer, Son of God Most High, the eternal Word, and he still comes to helpless sinners offering the free gift of living water, eternal life, today. What's more, he delights to save today as much as he did that day by the well. So we worship him everywhere and anywhere, in Spirit and in truth, because he is now our risen Lord. And as the official's son learned, Jesus brings life.

Glorious Saviour, Son of God Most High, thank you for becoming human to save us. How lovely the scene is to us of that woman that day, and how it still speaks to us of your amazing grace. Help me to be like that woman, speaking of your deity and grace, your loveliness and rule, to my friends and family.

John 5 – Life in the Son

The miraculous healing of a man disabled for 38 years ought to be an occasion for celebration and praise to God, but some there objected to him carrying his mat on the Sabbath. Jesus responds shockingly: He is working on the Sabbath because his Father is working, and Jesus does all the Father commands of him. In fact, his miraculous signs demonstrate that the Father has sent him; they are God's own testimony about Jesus, the Son. This 'sonship' isn't simply conceptual; it describes the eternal essence of God. Jesus is humanity's divine judge, and our only life-giving saviour.

Eternal God, there is no life apart from you. Sin cripples and ultimately kills us all, and yet by grace you give the life-giving command to come to Christ, enabled by the Spirit, and we come. Holy God, your essential nature is beyond my understanding, but I thank you that in Christ I can approach you in the intimacy and dependency of a child.

John 6 – Bread of Life

People will come to Christ (or, rather, to Christianity) to have all sorts of needs and wants met. Some seek peace, others happiness, others healing. In John 6, they went to him for bread. But Jesus came at the will of the Father to save his people by bringing us eternal life. And Christ is himself the very bread of life, the eternal unending nourishment for all who will come. All who do come to the Son are drawn to him by the Father (v44) so none will be turned away (v37). Our salvation is rooted in the will of the Father, accomplished by the Son, and applied to us by the Spirit. Now *that* is assurance of faith.

Lord Jesus, while some turned from you that day, Peter surely spoke truth when he asked, "to whom will we go?" The revelation that our salvation is rooted in eternity is too much for us to take in. All I can do is praise and thank you, taking up daily nourishment in your presence.

John 7 – Living Water

The Festival of Shelters (or booths or tabernacles) was Israel's most joyous – a festival of light, giving thanks to God for another year's blessing. Zechariah 14 speaks of a day of endless light when streams of living water will flow, and all nations will celebrate the Festival of Shelters before God. In full anticipation and fulfilment, Jesus stood in Jerusalem at the Festival of Shelters and shouted above all the confusion and speculation: "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink." He is the source of living water, and he is the one all nations gather to for the light of life. Only when we know him to be the Word made flesh can we grasp the wonder of it all.

Glorious, life-giving Son, your invitation for all to come to you for life is a grace that none of us deserves. The day of endless light in your presence is a prospect we can barely imagine. Thank you that in this life of ups and downs you have given me a hope of the most joyous, light-filled festival of thanksgiving that there can ever be – with you, forever.

John 8 – I AM

In Chapter 6, Jesus said, “I am the bread of life,” and in Chapter 7, “I am the light of the world.” There are 7 of these “I am” self-descriptions in John’s gospel, each hugely profound and worthy of meditation. Here, opponents challenge Jesus’ claims and it leads to a discussion on where Jesus is from. They claim Abraham as their father, while Jesus speaks of God as his Father. They’re shocked he would use such language of God, but then Jesus goes further and says that their ‘father’ is really Satan, since he is a liar by nature and they have believed a lie; Jesus speaks only truth. And the big truth, the big shock, is in v58 when Jesus says, “before Abraham was, I am.” He claims God’s name (as God gave his name “I AM” to Moses in Exodus 3:14).

Holy Son of God Most High, eternal Word made flesh, forgive me for having too small a view and concept of who you are. Thank you that you are the light of the world and the light of life, and that by grace you shone truth and life into me. Help me to walk in your light, living for you.

John 9 – “Now I See”

Before Jesus, there was no-one in the Bible who had sight restored to them. This man had been born blind, but as an example of how Jesus is the light of the world he gave this man his sight. There is confusion and outright disbelief from the Jewish authorities – the evidence before them didn’t match their beliefs or understanding about who Jesus is. Isaiah 35:5 promised sight for the blind when Messiah comes, but they rejected the evidence. For all their objection, this beggar could say, “One thing I do know: I was blind, and now I can see!” Our personal testimony about Jesus is far more powerful than we realise.

Light of the world, unless you had caused my eyes to be opened, I would still be lost in the dark, grasping at shadows. Thank you for saving me. Help me, Lord, to bring glory to you as I speak about what you have done to me and for me.

John 10 – The Gate, The Good Shepherd

In John 9, the blind man's parents feared being excluded from the synagogue. Here, Jesus makes it clear that it's *he* who says who is in the Kingdom of God – he is the gate. The religious authorities wanted power and prestige, and they were shepherding Israel astray. In imagery from Ezekiel 34, where God himself promised to displace bad shepherds (leaders) and to be a good shepherd, Jesus is the divine Good Shepherd who came to lay down his life for us. The Jews understood Jesus' claims to divinity but refused to believe him, even trying to stone him for blasphemy. We do well to hear our Good Shepherd's voice, and to follow him.

Great, Good Shepherd of your sheep, I know I'm prone to go astray and to wander away in wrong directions. Lead me, Lord. Through dark valleys, in green pastures and still waters, your guiding presence brings me joy, peace, and reassurance. Lead me, in particular, in paths of righteousness for your own sake.

John 11 – The Resurrection and the Life

It should be obvious to us that Jesus could have prevented Lazarus's death. Certainly the sisters thought so (v21, 32). Yet it's also clear that Jesus delayed specifically so that Lazarus *would* die and be buried in a tomb. Jesus' hour of glory is near, and this scene is orchestrated to bring him great glory and to lead many people to belief (v42). The climax is Jesus' self-declaration, "I am the resurrection and the life." All matters of life and death are in him. Yet this moment also reveals Jesus' heart to us: "Jesus wept" (v25). He was deeply moved at the sorrow sin and death has brought, and we find him just as sympathetic to us today.

Great Hope of eternity, I expect to die of something one day – and yet I will live. My confidence is in your own resurrected life and the power you have displayed. Thank you that you know what grief is. Thank you that in you there will one day be an end to sin, death, and mourning.

John 12 – The Hour Has Come

Mary's anointing of Jesus with expensive perfume is entirely appropriate. Jesus is the Son of God, and he was about to die. The joyful entry on the donkey is right too – Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, come to save and rule. The quote from Isaiah reminds us that opposition and unbelief were to be expected, though Judas's greed and the Pharisees' desire to kill Lazarus still take us by surprise. The turning point of John's gospel comes in v23: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." At such a crucial moment, it's fitting that we hear the Father's voice of confirmation too. Christ's glory is his cross, and we glorify him as we trust in his finished work.

Lord, it is still counterintuitive that your hour glory is your hour of pain and death. Thank you for your great work, for saving me. You are rightly praised and glorified for so great a salvation, so I pray that my life might be as pleasing to you as that expensive perfume poured out and spent in your honour.

John 13 – Foot-Washing

In the ancient middle east, where most travel was by foot, foot-washing was a common part of society. Peers didn't wash one another's feet, and there is no record of anyone ever washing the feet of someone of lower social standing. So Peter simply couldn't bear to have Jesus wash *his* feet. But salvation isn't about what we do to serve Jesus, it's about what he has done to serve us. Unless we accept that, we rob him of due glory and have no part in his humiliation at the cross. To follow Jesus includes following his example, loving and serving others as he did. That was his glory, and we now glorify him with every act done in his name.

Great God and Saviour, I know it's easy for me to pretend humility and service in a way that actually seeks to glorify myself. Lord, help me truly to be like you, serving others in humble submission to your will, doing the works you have prepared for me. Lord, I pray for profound heart-change in me by the Spirit's grace and power.

John 14 – The Way, The Truth, The Life

Jesus speaks words of comfort to his disciples at the Last Supper as he is about to leave them. They're distressed, not knowing where he's going or how to follow. His words of comfort are that they *do* know the way because he *is* the way. He is the truth, as the revelation of the Father, and he is the life – our very destination. We are promised the Holy Spirit too, bringing help, strength, and encouraging comfort to the church. He mediates Christ to us, so that Christ is in us as he is in the Father, and we are in him. Jesus gives us his peace, the calm assurance of his presence, purpose and help in all of life.

Great God of comfort, our peace is with you and from you. You are gracious to send the Holy Spirit to us, that we might know you and experience your empowering, encouraging presence. Lord, you know that sometimes I drift and feel troubled, and not at peace. Keep me close to you, Lord, that I might know you always.

John 15 – The Vine

In these Last Supper chapters of John's gospel, we have aspects of comfort and commission. Our comfort is our union with Christ, the Vine. We are to remain in him, bearing fruit in his name, living by the life and nourishment he alone brings. In this, we are to love one another, by which we accomplish something of our commission to make Jesus known to the world. Our union with Christ will also guarantee opposition to us since the world is opposed to him. And so he sends us the Holy Spirit to comfort and encourage us, and to advocate for Christ through us to the world.

Lord Jesus, head of your church, Vine who nourishes and sustains, thank you for revealing something of our union with you. Forgive my lack of love for your people and lack of urgency for the lost; help me to bear fruit in keeping with your love and commission. Above all, Lord, help me to remain in you, close to you every day.

John 16 – Convicting the World

Jesus breaks the surprising news that it's to the disciples' benefit that he goes away (v7), so that the Spirit may come to us. The Spirit glorifies Jesus and convicts us of our need of him. We're convicted of our sin so that we might turn to Jesus in repentance and faith. We're convicted of our shoddy righteousness, since *only Jesus* is worthy of going to the Father and his teaching has exposed us. We're convicted of judgment, knowing that this world's values and idolatries are condemned and we do well not to be of it. In all this we are driven to Jesus – as is the Spirit's joy and the Father's gift. Better to have suffering in the world and peace with God than vice versa.

Comforter, Counsellor, Advocate, Holy Spirit of God, thank you for convicting my heart of my sin, of the shoddiness of my righteousness, and the rightness of my judgment. Thank you for leading me to repentance and life and faith in Jesus. Show me more of Jesus' glory, and work through me to continue your work in the world.

John 17 – Glory

John chapters 1-12 are sometimes called the "Book of Signs" and chapters 12-21 the "Book of Glory." Jesus' hour to be glorified has come, and in John 17 Jesus prays for his disciples that we might see his glory. He has returned to glory, so how can we see his glory? We see by faith, not by sight, as we meditate on him. But more, we display his glory in the world by our oneness, since we are all in Christ, and he and the Father are one. Christian unity isn't an optional benefit of the gospel, but a theological reality and missional essential.

Lord Jesus, you prayed that I might see your glory and it is something I yearn to see with my eyes. In the meantime, help me to see by faith, and to live in such unity with your people that I glorify you and make you known in the world.

John 18 – “What is Truth?”

It’s clear from Jesus’ manner when arrested that he was completely in control of himself and the events around him. He submitted willingly and had no need of violent defenders. The trial before Annas was shambolic at best. The charges when they hand Jesus over to Pilate are non-existent (v30). Pilate’s job was to judge the case, hear the evidence, weigh the facts. Instead, he asks, “What is truth?” To the world, truth isn’t absolute but rather something to be manipulated and abused for convenience (or politics). Pilate has since been judged by the risen Jesus.

Lord Christ, thank you that you are truth and that your word is the only fixed truth here in spiritual matters. Thank you, Spirit, for opening my eyes to see truth. O God, forgive me my sins, fully exposed in your perfect knowledge as the only true and perfect Judge of all the world.

John 19 – “It Is Finished”

It would be easy to regard Jesus as a victim in these events. The chief priests condemn themselves (v15), and Pilate is more concerned with politics and power than truth and justice. John draws our attention to how a number of details expressly fulfil Scripture (v24, 28, 36, 37), reminding us that all these events were foretold by God, being part of his plan to save us by the death of his Son. A sinless life lived? *Finished.* All Scripture fulfilled? *Finished.* A sacrifice in full atonement for the sins of his people? *Finished.* Jesus came to destroy the devil’s works, and when he said, “It is finished” it was a statement of eternal triumph.

Living Saviour, how can I thank you for the spectacular success and dreadful cost of your finished work of atonement for my sin? What love you display! Forgive me that I don’t praise you every single day for so great a salvation.

John 20 – “My Lord and My God”

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the historical fact that defines all our hope and belief. It is the cornerstone of all our understanding about heaven, earth, hell, and spiritual realities. And that news was broken ever so gently to a woman, a disciple who loved him. It quickly reached the apostles: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” When all eleven were together to see Jesus, Thomas could only say, “My Lord and my God!” Worship is the appropriate response to the risen Saviour, the Word of God now returned to his glory. But John is clear: All this is written that you might believe in Jesus and have life in his name. More than a story, this is news of eternal life.

My Lord and my God, thank you that these things are written down. Thank you for the convicting work of the Holy Spirit opening my eyes and leading me to truth and life and faith in you. Thank you that you live, bringing hope of resurrection and eternal life. As my body ages away, thank you for this promise of eternal life with you.

John 21 – Restoration

John finishes his gospel saying that he could have written so much more. He has written about Christ’s deity and glory, stretching our hearts and minds in awe and wonder. Why, then, write so much about this catch of fish? Three times Peter had denied knowing Jesus, and so Jesus asks three times if Peter loves him. It’s a painful process for Peter, and yet it’s restorative too. This man – this impetuous, hot-headed letdown – will be used greatly by Jesus in his early church. This final chapter gives us all hope: When we let Jesus down he is consistently gracious and restoring. He picks us up.

Living Saviour, gracious Lord, I could not count how often I have let you down, though I know you know it. So I can’t count how often you have forgiven me, though I know you know. Thank you for your boundless patience and grace, and make me, like Peter, a useful instrument in your kingdom for your glory.

Acts 1 – Ready to Follow, Ready to Lead

Daniel 7 gives an astonishing view of heavenly glory at Christ's ascension, but seen from earth in Acts 1 the scene is less dramatic. From heaven, Jesus will send the Spirit to the disciples to begin his church. But before we get to the birth of the church in Acts, we need a "complete" Twelve apostles – a complete foundation with no gaps. Here we get a surprise. At least two disciples had also been there following Jesus the whole time, even witnessing his resurrection. Suddenly, Matthias was called by Jesus to be the twelfth apostle. The Lord had ordered it so from the start and Matthias rose to the Lord's calling. Jesus prepares us for the work he prepares for us.

Lord, as Peter and the others prayed for your will to be made known and followed, thank you that you still hear our prayers today. You prepare us in advance to do works prepared in advance. I pray for the power of the Holy Spirit for help and for strength to do your will in all you call me to do.

Acts 2 – The Power of the Spirit

Jesus promised his apostles the power of the Holy Spirit to take the gospel to the whole world. Peter's sermon is a demonstration of that enabling power, and the ability to speak in other languages is an indication of the global gospel enterprise. Joel spoke of the Day of the Lord, repentance, forgiveness, the Spirit coming to all God's people, and of judgment on the nations. As the gospel of Jesus is preached it brings life *and* death. Life to all who receive it and death to all who refuse it. For us, his people, we must speak of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, knowing that God will call some who hear.

Merciful God, thank you for calling me, showing me my sin, and leading me to repentance, faith, and life in Christ. I pray for the powerful help of the Holy spirit to speak of Jesus clearly, winsomely, and lovingly, so that you would call others as you called me.

Acts 3 – In the Name of Jesus

The image of this man walking and leaping and praising God is joyous. The key point is that Peter commanded him “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” to stand. An ambassador speaks for his or her head of state; anyone can authorise others to act on their behalf in all manner of day-to-day situations. But, to act in someone else’s name, that person must be alive. And that’s Peter’s point: Why are you amazed at what was done in Jesus’ name? Jesus lives and continues to exercise power! But Peter doesn’t then call all the sick people to come for healing; he calls everyone to repent and be blessed by God.

Lord Jesus, even as your own people we’re quick forget your activity and presence among us. We do things under our own steam rather than in your name and power. Lord, keep me close. May the Spirit ever prompt me to turn to you that I might do your will in everything.

Acts 4 – Continuity of Rejection

Peter stood before the same court that had tried Jesus just a few weeks earlier. His defence is entirely grounded in the resurrection of Jesus and makes it abundantly clear who was responsible for Jesus’ death. Within that, there is also a call to come to Jesus for salvation. The court rejects Peter and in doing so rejects the Holy Spirit’s word and the salvation to be found in Christ. The believers gather not to pray for freedom from persecution but rather for boldness to continue doing the Lord’s work, speaking his word. Bolder still, they ask the Lord to stretch out his hand to heal and create signs and wonders in the name of Jesus. It’s quite a prayer!

Living God, even as you dwell in unapproachable light beyond sight and imagination, yet you dwell among your people by your Spirit. Give me boldness to speak for you and stretch out your hand to save to transform lost and wayward people I speak to, that they would turn and praise you as is right. Lord, have mercy.

Acts 5 – Life and Death

The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira are a reminder that we serve the living, holy God. We might fool ourselves, but never him. Their deaths were supernatural – a judgment from God. The remarkable healings in Jerusalem (signs and wonders) were also clearly supernatural. The apostles' release from prison was also supernatural and achieved right under the High Priest's nose, as it were. Yet the court didn't weigh any of this. They just wanted not to be found guilty of Jesus blood (v28). Peter struck back with their guilt, but also reminded everyone that Jesus died to bring repentance and forgiveness. As long as we deny our sin, we won't confess it, and can't expect to be forgiven it.

Gracious God, you who sent your Son to us to bring us repentance and forgiveness of sin, thank you for opening my eyes to my own sin. Forgive me, Lord, for my dead ignorance and wilful disobedience, and help me ever to remember your great holiness and grace – that I might fear and love you as I ought.

Acts 6 – Serving

We might think that this fledgling church would be a sea of harmony so it's more than a little surprising to learn of complaints so early on. Not about the preaching, worship style, etc, but a wholly practical matter. This itself rings warning bells for us. The remedy is a lovely example of servant leadership. The apostles determine a wise path and explain both the plan and the rationale and then everyone is happy with it. The apostles underline their authority without lording it. The seven will "serve at tables" while the apostles will devote themselves to prayer and (literally) "serving the word." Church leaders must serve to lead.

Lord Jesus, you who came not to be served by to serve, who laid down your live for us, thank you that you are greatly to be praised for your condescension, humility, and service. Only in you do I have any hope. Help me then to learn to serve others. Work in me that I might do your work in your strength and grace.

Acts 7 – Theological Geography

Stephen's speech is long but highly selective in the material he covers. He's charged with speaking against the Temple and against Moses so those are the charges he tackles. Three things stand out: (i) The big events he recounts happen mostly far from the Promised Land. God is not constrained by geography. (ii) Whether it's the Patriarchs or the Israelites under Moses, there's a track record of Israel resisting God's work. (iii) While Moses promised a successor, is it a surprise that the Jews rejected him as they had all God's prophets? Whatever our religious heritage, we can make such an idol of it that it actually keeps us *from* God.

Living God, omnipresent and sustaining Creator, where you are is holy perfection. By your grace, you dwell in me by your Spirit. Grant me the living boldness of Stephen to speak your truth wherever I am and to live a life of holiness in your presence every day.

Acts 8 – Magic and Scripture

Simon the Sorcerer was clearly impressed by the signs and wonders being performed. He believed the gospel and was baptised. But when he offered the apostles money for the gift of bestowing the Holy Spirit we discover something previously unseen: He believed the truth but hadn't actually turned to Jesus. He had to ask the apostles to pray for him because he hadn't done so himself. He was attracted to Christianity but not to Christ. The Eunuch saw no signs or wonders. He read Isaiah 53 and understood what Jesus had done for him. It is Christ himself who is the object or our worship and source of our delight.

Lord Jesus, how could any sign or wonder eclipse the glory of what you have done for us in your death, resurrection and ascension? You gave the Holy Spirit to all your people gratuitously, liberally, freely. And you call us to know you. Lord, help me to keep my eyes fixed on you that you will be my heart's deepest desire.

Acts 9 – Fear and Encouragement

Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus is rightly famous. He met the risen Jesus! It would change him forever. All Saul's upbringing and training would be perfect preparation for what was to come (as it was for Moses, Ezra, and many others before him). But when he moved from hunter to preacher, he became hunted: Two immediate threats to his life are avoided. The impact of Saul's conversion on the early church must have been enormous, realising that the Lord can save *anyone* he chooses. That emboldened them both to risk their lives to help brother Saul and to continue to proclaim Christ themselves. In the fear of the Lord and encouragement of the Holy Spirit, the church grew.

Lord Jesus, you reveal much of your own purposes and grace in Saul's conversion. You work and prepare us for your service long before we come to you. You are greatly to be feared, revered, honoured and worshipped, even as the Holy Spirit gives great encouragement to do your will. Lord, work in and through me for your glory.

Acts 10 – Crossing Divides

The events of Acts 10 are spelt out slowly, carefully and precisely. The repetition is deliberate, and we'll hear the account again in the next chapter. It's a huge moment. In Acts 1:8 the apostles were told the gospel would go to the ends of the earth. Here in Acts 10 they're learning what that means as they move from Old Covenant distinctiveness to New Covenant unity. God does not show favouritism and the gospel is open to all who will come. It's sad, and not a little shameful, when one Christian 'tribe' looks down on another for their style of worship, culture, etc. Christ calls us to oneness in him.

Lord Jesus, as we are one in you, and have fellowship with the Father and each other with you, forgive me that I still have distinctions in my mind of different 'kinds' of Christians based on unhelpful categories. Help me to be more open and more gracious, joyously receiving all your people in warm fellowship.

Acts 11 – “Christians”

The Holy Spirit is drilling a lesson home to us readers by repeating the account of Gentile Cornelius and his household receiving the Holy Spirit – even repentance resulting in life. Underlying it further still, we read of Antioch with its range of Jewish and Gentile believers. All are saved by faith in Christ, and all receive the same Holy Spirit. Antioch becomes a crucial fixture in Acts precisely because it’s not a Jewish city. What should its believers be called? The Way? A pseudo-Jewish sect? Jew and Gentile are one in Christ and proclaim him. They’re happy to take his name.

Lord Jesus Christ, it’s fitting that we should be publicly known as yours. We’re not defined by law or creed but by the salvation you have granted. I pray for the Spirit’s help to live a life worthy of the name “Christian.”

Acts 12 – Life and Death (again)

There’s great sadness and comedy in Acts 12. Herod had James executed and planned the same for Peter. Such a waste of life, so brutally cruel. Later Herod had the guards executed out of petulance and a need to reassert his authority, having lost face at Peter’s escape. Herod was too proud to see the truth and lost his own life as a consequence. Meanwhile we’re told that many people had gathered to pray for Peter. Yet, when he was released and the hapless Rhoda left him outside, no-one believed her. They either weren’t praying for release (unambitious) or they weren’t expecting prayer to be answered (unbelieving).

Lord, it is clear that you permit terrible things to happen to your people in your own goodness and wisdom. Your glory is seen in the grace extended to Herod and others, if only they had turned. Help me extend your grace to others. And help me have an expectancy and faithfulness in prayer, knowing that you are always present and active.

Acts 13 – On Mission

The Holy Spirit set apart Paul and Barnabas for mission. Paul in particular was an exceptional Jew who had spent time in Antioch, a place where believers were neither Jew nor Gentile but rather known as Christians. Barnabas was from Cyprus. They were superbly prepared by the Lord to do the work he had for them. They boldly and clearly proclaimed Christ to the Gentiles in Cyprus using signs and wonders to convince those ignorant of God. At the synagogue, however, they reasoned from the Scriptures. Jesus is not “something new” but rather the fulfilment of all they ever knew.

Lord God, your good news is for all to hear, all to understand, all to come to you. Give me a sensitivity and wisdom to speak your truth with bold creativity depending on who I speak to. Help me today with those people I meet, that I may speak of you.

Acts 14 – Growth and Opposition

The visit to Iconium ends in deadly peril. Paul’s life is in danger. Things seem to go much better at Lystra until the people decide Paul and Barnabas are gods. Paul’s response is clear and robust, trashing their pagan worship and pointing to the grace of God. Under Jewish influence, the same crowd then stone Paul, thinking him dead. Finally they visit Derbe. It sounds an awful tour until we read of the return leg. There are believers and churches in each of the towns. Despite terrible opposition, the Lord has saved many and his church is growing.

Gracious Lord of truth and grace, there are no physical boundaries to your kingdom and no opposition that can halt your purposes. Thank you that your purpose is grace to us to your glory. Give me boldness to speak your word of grace to others, and grow your church to your glory. Help me to encourage and strengthen your people.

Acts 15 – Grace and Sensitivity

Some men had gone north from Judea to Antioch and were preaching the need for circumcision for Christians to be acknowledged as belonging to God. A delegation then went to Judea to check at source. The Council at Jerusalem aired differing views that were answered by Peter and Paul: The Holy Spirit had been given to Jew and Gentile alike on repentance and forgiveness of sin. James concluded the discussion showing from Amos that the gospel would always go to Gentiles. So why these 'rules' in the letter? They show sensitivity to others, both for fellowship and evangelism. Freedom from the law generates grace to those under the law.

Lord, every church has a culture of its own and ours is no different. Help us to live out faith in openness and grace, welcoming others who are 'not like us,' graciously accepting all your people irrespective of culture or background, reaching out in love to all your people.

Acts 16 – Gospel Progress

As Paul's new journey progresses West, he's joined by Timothy in the towns of such strong opposition last time round. The Lord Jesus then prevents them going North and the Holy Spirit prevents them going South. Instead of *waiting* for guidance, they keep going West. They end up in Philippi and Lydia's conversion is a beautiful confirmation and blessing from the Lord. When the demon was cast out of the slave girl *in Jesus' name*, Paul knew that what happened next was *also* in the Lord's will. He was beaten and imprisoned *so that* the Lord could call the jailor and his family. Christ's plans are not always what we'd choose.

Living God you will grow your church with unstoppable purpose and power. And yet you use such weak people to convey your precious gospel. Help me to be as aware as Paul was to your hand on my life, seeing gospel opportunities and open doors where I would only naturally see pain, darkness, or rejection.

Acts 17 – Always Opposed

There are a number of standout thoughts in Acts 17. Famously, it's a lovely example of how Paul varied his style depending on his audience. For those versed in Scripture, he *always* preached Christ from there. For more pagan hearers, he started where they were with their experiences of life and spiritual things. But notice also that whoever he spoke to he called people to repentance and salvation in Christ, always based on the certainty of the resurrection. That's the message everyone needs. Lastly we notice the varied opposition in return: Physical danger from zealous Jews, public ridicule from philosophers.

Lord Christ, your message of salvation has always been ridiculed and rejected – along with those who bear it. Foolishness to many as it once was to me. Many more are simply ignorant of your gospel too though they oppose it anyway. Help me, Lord, to keep the central things central when I speak about you, pointing lost people to you.

Acts 18 – Time and Travel

Paul's work rate in Acts 18 is remarkable. He travels hundreds of miles, spends some time as a part-time, self-funded missionary, and works hard in devoted ministry when enabled. We read much in one chapter and it's hard not to skim time. For Paul, these events took plenty of time and effort. Beautifully, the Lord gave Paul great encouragement to continue, confident of gospel success. Crucially, that spurred Paul on to work, not to sit back and see what the Lord would do.

Living God, you have prepared me to do the work you have prepared in advance for me to do. Give me wisdom to work well, without wasting time and energy on things of no benefit. Lord, I desire to be usefully doing your kingdom work for your glory.

Acts 19 – Riot in Ephesus

Again we read of Paul spending considerable time teaching and exhorting, in both synagogue and lecture hall. He was so effective “all the residents of Asia… heard the word of the Lord.” Christ was proclaimed and did wonderful things through Paul with many being saved – and many others fearing God. The craftsmen who made idols of Artemis were in losing their goddess and their business. To lose such for Christ is eternal gain, but they don’t engage with him at all. The riot is for a manmade god, against a man, refusing Christ the God man.

Lord, unbelief and rebellion take many forms and your word prepares us for that. Nonetheless, I pray that I and all your people would have the effectiveness of Paul to make you known far and wide. Help us and strengthen us in the face of opposition, Lord.

Acts 20 – The Whole Plan

Paul’s departure from the Ephesian elders is clearly a moving moment. There were many tears. For his part, Paul is satisfied that he had taught the whole plan of God, described as “preaching the kingdom” and testifying to everyone “about repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus.” The simplicity of the message is hugely encouraging, as is the language used to explain how far reaching it is. In speaking to others of repentance and faith, we give the very essence of the whole plan of God.

Gracious Lord, your gospel is beautiful and rich, simple and profound, and powerful enough to save all who will hear. Help me to proclaim it and live it for all to see, even to living in repentance every day, and living by faith for every need.

Acts 21 – Heading for Trouble

Again, the sense of travel is strong in this chapter, perhaps more so than before because of the added details recorded by Luke, travelling with Paul. Our attention is strongly drawn to the warnings given to Paul by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: There will be trouble in Jerusalem. Our inclination would be the same as his friends: “Paul, don’t go!” But the Spirit didn’t say that. He merely warned Paul in preparation for what’s to come. That way, when the time came, he’d be ready. Sure enough, though the riot did take hold Paul knew what he would say and how.

Eternal God, dwelling outside time and space and acting within it for us, you prepare us by your word for opposition and trouble. In grace, you also equip us to face these things in the armour we wear and weapons we bear – your own presence and promises. Feed and strengthen me to be always ready in your name.

Acts 22 – Objectionable Objection

The Jerusalem crowd listened in silence to Paul’s explanations. They respected his learning pedigree, and some may have remembered his involvement in persecuting and hunting Christians in the early days. They listened to his remarkable Damascus Road account without interruption, even possibly wondering if this really is news of the Messiah. The explosion point is unexpected. While Jerusalem Christians rejoiced that Gentiles were being saved, the Jews there became the latest generation to fail to understand their missional purpose to make God known to the nations. They were elitist when they should have been evangelistic.

O God and Saviour, you who provided a gracious means by which we may approach you, and who has a world-wide church to reveal your grace to everyone, forgive me my prideful elitism and reticence to share your gospel. Lord, have mercy, and grow your church. Help me to be truly missional for you.

Acts 23 – Your Will Be Done

Paul's true claim that the basis of his situation in court stems from a belief in a general resurrection is deliberately aimed. He makes it so that, suddenly, half the room is onside. But there are still plenty who want him dead. Forty men take an oath before God not to eat or drink until they've killed Paul. There's no doubting their zeal. Yet it is the very God they pray to who has already promised Paul protection and preservation all the way to Rome. "Lord, bless our plans" is easy to say, when in truth we ought humbly to pray the much harder prayer, "Your will be done."

Living God, it is clear that your plans for humanity are vast in scope and intricate in detail. Your sovereignty is dazzling in light of human actions and responsibility. Lord, give me humility and wisdom to do the work you have prepared for me, and preserve me from the folly of trying to exert my will on you.

Acts 24 – On Trial

One of the structural literary features of Acts is how events in Jesus' life have echoes first with Peter, then with Paul, and (by inference) with the church. Trials are such a feature: Opposition from religious people on trial in a secular court – all within the Lord's own plans and purposes. We might lament time lost in productive ministry. Paul has travelled so much and established so many churches and yet here we find him languishing in prison for two years having occasional pointless discussions with officials hoping for bribes. Paul's wings were clipped but he was far from idle. Patience and self-control are fruits of the Spirit.

My God and Father, there have been times of spiritual richness and other times when I've struggled with impatience for answers to prayer. May the Spirit produce patience in my heart, ever confident of your certain promises, purposes and plans. May this be true in my life and in your church.

Acts 25 – Roll With It

When we're in a bad place we naturally find it all-consuming. We put other things on hold. It's tempting to think something like, "I can't wait for this to end so that I can carry on with God as before." The unjust system that executed Christ was the very means God used to accomplish our salvation. Likewise, Paul's predicament in Acts 25 doesn't make him a victim; he takes charge of the process, owning his task before the Lord where he is. When we find ourselves in grief, illness, unemployment, or struggling in any way, the Lord knows and has plans for our good.

Good and gracious Father, who cares for your children with infinite love, wisdom and tenderness, help me humbly to serve you in all the circumstances of life. Help me not to play the victim but rather to be victorious in Christ, overcoming all that is before me in his name.

Acts 26 – Who's Listening?

Once again, Paul is standing before the authorities speaking his case. As ever when addressing people with Scriptural knowledge, he explains how Jesus is the foretold fulfilment of all God has said and done. He also explains the inevitability of the resurrection of Christ and how by faith we can repent of our sin and know forgiveness. The core matters of the gospel are always proclaimed. Paul is addressing the king but knows that many others in the room are listening and he indirectly appeals to them too.

Sovereign Lord, I know you orchestrate events to bring about your plans for your glory. Help me to be mindful of my indirect witnessing, that others may see and hear truth from me in ways I didn't plan – but you did. Help me then to be holy, good, and wise in all my interactions whether in person, online, or by any other means.

Acts 27 – Faith in a Crisis

It's interesting to ask why Luke devotes so much time to describing the shipwreck. If we put the gospel of Luke alongside Acts there's a kind of climactic event here echoing the cross and tomb. In a sense, Paul's trust in God leads to a kind of 'death' and 'resurrection' leading to many souls being saved from destruction. The main observation for us though is how Paul's firm conviction and public testimony in dire crisis swayed others to act in trust. Rather than praying quietly in a corner he stood up and spoke of hope and a future.

Lord, there are so many storms in life! Some are large and some are small and we're often in them with unbelieving people. Give me both Pauls' own conviction of security in you and the bold clarity to point others to you. I pray that many would experience death to self and resurrection to eternal life in you.

Acts 28 – The Gospel Goes On

The epic journeys and events for the apostles and early church end here in Rome. We're not told how or if Paul got to Caesar as that's not important. We do find Paul with a freedom to teach Jew and Gentile the good news which he does with energy. As ever, there's a mix of opposition and acceptance. But now the gospel proclamation is happening in Rome with all its international travel, technology and infrastructure. In our own witness we do well to embrace and subvert that which useful for effective communication, even as we continue to meet locally together in the Lord.

Great God of all humanity, thank you for these modern communication opportunities we have to spread your fame and make known your goodness and grace. Have mercy, Lord, and use the power of your own words to speak into hearts. Not least, O God, help me to hear you always.

Romans 1 – Powerful Good News

Paul opens his letter warmly saying that he hopes to visit the church in Rome, having heard so much about it. As we look closely at his logic we see something of what drives him. People in general, he says, have rejected God in favour of idols in Creation, and God in turn has handed them over to their desires. It's an act of judgment. It's all displayed in the general societal/cultural rejection of God worked out in godless lifestyles. But for Paul, all this is reason to go to Rome to preach the powerful transforming gospel, the power of God.

Gracious Saviour God, so despised and rejected by so many of your creatures, you are of course just in all your judgments. How merciful and gracious of you to offer life to anyone. How remarkable and powerful that salvation should come by faith in Christ, and that you call us by grace to him. Help me boldly to proclaim this powerful gospel in word and action.

Romans 2 – All Under Law

This is one of Paul's more technical chapters. He's laying the foundation for Chapter 3 which explains how the gospel is for all humanity. Some are blessed to be born with access to God's written laws. Sadly, they don't keep those laws even while they look down on others who don't have them! And yet, even those without access to God's written word do still express common moral codes showing how we are all made in God's image, created as moral creatures with God-given consciences. We are morally equal, all across the globe.

God of all the earth, you know the bias to favouritism in my heart. You know how we see people of other nations, ethnic groups, colour, ages, social and educational backgrounds as 'different'. Not everyone registers with us as equally urgent for gospel work. Help me to see all people as you do: Precious souls, equally in need of a saviour.

Romans 3 – All Saved By Faith

Verses 20-28 are the heart of Romans and truly the heart of the whole gospel. Paul first levels all humanity together: All have sinned. But the response is that God has provided one Saviour and all may come, saved by faith, credited with righteousness by grace. God himself is vindicated at the cross, shown still to be just since justice is met in the punishment of Christ in our place. If salvation could be won or lost depending on our observance of the law, we'd all be lost. But faith in Christ, all may be saved.

Lord God, the vast scope and genius and wonder of your gospel is beautifully spelt out for us here. Thank you for Christ. Thank you that salvation is your gift to give, received by faith in Christ. Have mercy, then, Lord, and extend this grace further still to my unsaved family and friends, that they might praise you too.

Romans 4 – Always by Faith

It's possible for someone born into strict religion to think that salvation by faith is an alternative to works. Paul is at pains to show that righteousness before God has only *ever* been credited in response to faith. Even Abraham and his sons were only circumcised as a seal and sign of faith in God's promises, not as a work to secure God's favour in the first place. This is a beautiful, liberating truth. The gospel is for all people in all places of all cultures in all languages, irrespective of age or ability. We do a disservice by limiting evangelism by our own bias.

Lord God, it is beautiful to see how your gospel touches lives of so many very different people around the world. Your gift of salvation by faith glorifies you, humbles me, and liberates me from the debt of sin and weight of guilt. Help me to speak of you freely to all. Free those I know trapped under cultural and religious burdens far from you.

Romans 5 – Peace with God

Faith, peace, grace, and hope. Such great and precious words all intertwined and given to us in Christ. It's clear that life is hard in many ways, but the Christian's life has a sure foundation given by the grace of God, received only by faith in Christ, bringing peace with God now and forever. Therefore we have hope, knowing that God has already given us his love in Christ, confident that he'll finish what he's started. This is hope for life even when the day-to-day experience sometimes feels hopeless and lacking peace altogether.

O God, how much more could you possibly love us? You gave us Jesus, the most clear and powerful demonstration of love that there has ever been. How much more will you then lavish on us, completing the work you've begun! Heavenly Father, help me to keep this hope in sight when faced with problems and temptations this week.

Romans 6 – Newness of Life

It is sometimes argued that if we're saved by faith and not by keeping the laws of God then sin doesn't matter. Romans 6 addresses this head on. By faith we have union with Christ. He died for us, so we died with him. He was raised to life to God and we have newness of life in him. The life of sin's control is dead and buried. Now, in Christ, we are new and alive to God so that carrying on in sin makes no sense. The motivation to kill sin isn't one of obligation or payback but comes from a new character in union with Christ living in us.

Lord Jesus, what depths of shame and heights of gratitude are mine to contemplate how you suffered for my sins. Thank you for this miracle of grace whereby I died to sin with you and now have newness of life in you. Lord help me to live that life, to know the power of that union with you in me day by day.

Romans 7 – Conflicted Conviction

We clearly have a natural sense of justice, being created in God's image, even if our moral compass is twisted and often off course. God's written laws provide an absolute measure for us, clarifying sin and goodness. Its effect is to show us how sinful we are! Even as Christians we can grow in maturity, knowledge and experience in a way that increases our pride and sense of superiority. We remain sinful even though freed from sin by our union with Christ in his death. We will continue likewise until Christ himself frees us from these bodies of sin.

Lord Jesus, you know me so much better than I know myself. Even the best I attempt or do in your name is tainted by sin and pride. Oh Lord, help me to live in the newness of the Spirit, with desires and motives in step with your own. Live in the members of my body that I might do your will, your works.

Romans 8 – Abba, Father

What joy and privilege to know that the Holy Spirit of God dwells in us. What assurance of salvation he brings! He is the Spirit of adoption, in whom we pray even as Jesus himself did at Gethsemane: "Abba, Father." He knows us, feels and understands our emotions, and even conveys our wordless groans to the heart of the Father. My own sin cannot convict me for there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. The world cannot break or sever me from God because I am in him and he is in me. Such is the joy of the indwelling Spirit.

Holy Spirit of God, your presence is precious and I'm grateful beyond words. Thank you. Please, as is your delight, show me more of Jesus. Lead me always to the Father in the Son that I might ever cry out, "Abba, Father" in the joy and dependence of adoption. Lord, grant me to know your love and presence always.

Romans 9 – Electing Mercy

After everything read so far it might be reasonable to ask some key questions: If saving faith is to everyone in Christ, are Israelites not God's chosen people after all? Worse, if God turned his back on them will he do the same to others? Paul will have none of it. The true Israel, the true children of Israel, are those who share Abraham's faith, not his DNA or ethnicity. Despite all the honour and privilege of the Old Covenant revelation of God, most people only paid lip service and remained outside the true Israel. In fact, everyone would remain outside except for the electing mercy of God who calls his own people.

Merciful God, I know that unless you had called me I would never have come to you. It's clear the privilege of upbringing is no guarantee and there is no scope for boasting or pride. Instead your electing grace brings you great glory as our rightful Creator and righteous Redeemer. Thank you for your grace to me.

Romans 10 – The Blessed Law

Paul continues his thoughts on the nation of Israel. How blessed they were to have the law of Moses! Yet even in the law there is an acknowledgement that we all sin: No-one can achieve righteousness by keeping the law. Rather, it highlights our sin to us and points us to God as we cry out in faith for his mercy and grace. His response is Jesus, the one the law points to. He alone kept the law, and he is the perfect sacrifice and High Priest to bring atonement for our sins. He is the fulfilment of the law, delivering salvation by faith to all who believe.

Gracious God, unless you acted towards us in grace and mercy no-one would be saved. Yet it is clear from your laws that it was always your good plan to call a people to yourself – people from every tribe, tongue, and nation – a world to praise you. Saved by faith, we will sing the saviour's praise for all time.

Romans 11 – Kindness and Severity

Paul himself is evidence of a remnant of the true Israel within the political nation of blood descent Israel. God has not abandoned them, though in his justice and wisdom and jealousy for his own honour and glory he has dealt decisively and severely with them. Since we Gentiles are no better, our salvation can only be attributed to God's kindness – though we do well to recall he is unchanging in kindness and severity. In the end, all we can do is join in the praise and wonder at God's infinite, sovereign, good, wise will.

Living God, Creator and Sustainer of all, you who redeem sinners according to your own will and pleasure, you are greatly to be revered, worshipped, and loved. Thank you for granting me repentance and faith in Christ, and adopting me as your child.

Romans 12 – Sincere Love

The ethics of Christian living flow out of the grace and mercies of God. Saved by grace, we have no grounds for boasting or thoughts of superiority. United to Christ, we're dead to sin and in newness of life and so we must be conformed more and more to his likeness. We are to be renewed in our minds; that is, in our knowledge, thoughts, and desires. This in turn must show in lives without hypocrisy. If we say we belong to Christ and his church, people ought to see our union lived out whenever they are on the receiving end of our conduct or words. Love is active goodness, not merely the passive abstinence of evil.

Gracious God, you have already transformed me into a new creature in union with Christ. As the Spirit is in me, I ask for his transforming work to continue, bringing sincere love in all I say and do, using the gifts you have given me to build your people up.

Romans 13 – Put on Christ

Everything here is an outworking of what it means to present our bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1). It may seem odd that being a model citizen might be an act of worship, and yet such diligent honesty is actually counter-cultural, not conformed to this age. As ever, we are urged not simply to avoid wrongdoing but to go much further, loving our neighbour. All this comes from "putting on" Christ and living in union with him. While we will still sin, we ought never to make plans to sin. Make plans to do good and to love with sacrificial sincerity.

Holy God, it is clear that you govern the affairs of empires, nations, and individual lives. You have called me to yourself in grace, that I might walk in the light of your presence for ever. Help me to walk that way today, keeping my thoughts from lingering over sin, but rather planning to do good in your name.

Romans 14 – Law of love

Elsewhere in the New Testament Christians are exhorted to urge one another to holiness and call out sin in the church. But what if someone is *more* strict that the Bible demands yet they do so for godly reasons before the Lord? Romans 14 says they must not judge other Christians, no more than they themselves are to be judged. Yet we do just this over things like Sunday/Sabbath observance, Bible translation preferences, music styles, and more. Paul gives us a better path: Love. Don't do anything that will cause another to stumble. Make concessions in love. Love always takes the initiative.

Lord Jesus, you know how much we identify differences with other Christians, often using these to determine who's 'right' or 'best'. Thank you for this reminder that the best path is love. Give us discernment, Lord, to be wise regarding secondary matters yet firm regarding more fundamental gospel issues.

Romans 15 – Welcome One Another

The Christians in Rome were a multi-ethnic mix of Jews and Gentiles (seen not least in the range of names in the next chapter). It's natural for us to gather together in cultural groups, but Paul has been at pains to show how we're all equal before God – both in sin and in salvation. So to overcome our real-world, lived-out differences takes deliberate effort from us and ongoing grace from God. Paul prays for harmony from God (v5-6) and urges them to welcome one another (v7) – all to the glory of God.

Glorious God, you are glorious in yourself and yet you grant creation and your church to be the visible theatre of your glory. Help us to be truly welcoming to all who come, celebrating your salvation having reached so many people. Help me to see, to love, and to welcome all your people in a truly Christlike way.

Romans 16 – Applied Theology

This is the kind of chapter that it's easy to skip past. To the original readers, Romans 16 was probably thrilling! For us, too, the list of names is exciting: Jewish names, Latin names, Greek names. It was a multicultural church in a cosmopolitan city – Rome, the centre of the western world at the time. The church had already embraced the theology of which Paul wrote: We are all sinners, all only saved by the same faith in Christ, to live in harmony together in union with Christ. By crossing ethnic, cultural, and even religious boundaries, the church brings glory to Christ.

Lord Jesus, you know how mono-ethnic and mono-cultural many of your churches are both in constitution and outreach. Forgive our narrow mindedness and give us grace to cross boundaries for your glory. May our local church bring you great joy.

1 Corinthians 1 – Power and Wisdom

If Romans 16 suggests unity in a multicultural church in Rome, 1 Corinthians 1 is a disappointment. In Corinth, the church is split into factions built around leaders. Paul highlights the pointlessness of that since no leader is anything at all. Paul wasn't as impressive as some other orators but who cares? There's no value in being the best speaker, but rather in pointing people to Jesus. Jesus is the power of God and the wisdom of God and he alone saves. That is foolishness to those who value highbrow speech and complex ideologies, but it's life to all who will humble themselves to hear.

Lord Jesus, your gospel is powerful enough and simple enough for a young child to grasp, yet lofty enough that we can never scale the heights of its glorious wonder. Thank you for saving me, and help me to be effective in pointing lost people to you.

1 Corinthians 2 – Spiritual Wisdom

The gospel of Christ is so simple a child can understand and be saved. So why do so many intelligent adults dismiss it? They think it's foolishness, but why? And, equally, why do some believe? Spiritual things can only be discerned by spiritually alive people and such life can only be granted by the Spirit of God. He is God, one with the Father and the Son, infinite in glory and divine in essence, and it is he only who opens hearts and minds to the power and wisdom of God, that is, to Christ and to salvation in his name.

Holy Spirit of God, you who bring life and understanding and lead us to Christ, you are worthy of thanksgiving and praise. Have mercy, O God, and open the eyes of those I love who do not know or love you. And help me more and more to know the mind of Christ in my life.

1 Corinthians 3 – God's Temple

Factions and divisions within churches are never healthy. At Corinth, they formed around leaders but they can form anywhere about anything. Paul wants us to understand how awful that is. Picture a local church as a temple built by God for God, indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The foundations are secure: None other than Christ himself. Should we then build separate sanctuaries and sections on that foundation? Is the Spirit not more honoured when we are openly one with one another, giving him room to grow us, bless us, and shape us as he wills?

Lord Jesus, help me to see unhelpful factions and divisions in your church where you have placed me. Help me actively to work for unity and love among your people. May the Spirit grow us, bless us, and shape us in your likeness.

1 Corinthians 4 – Imitate Me

Our church culture is rather more like that of Corinth than we'd like to accept or own up to. Whether it's Keller, Piper, Stott, Lloyd-Jones or Spurgeon, we love our celebrity pastors. We also (by implication) rather look down on lesser mortals! At Corinth, they even thought they'd progressed beyond Paul, not least because he was so unimpressive in his public speaking. Paul answers them with two things: First, he won't be judged by them; he serves Christ, and Christ alone will judge his ministry. Second, they should imitate Paul, learning humility and service instead of seeking greatness and reputation. Counter-cultural stuff then and now!

Lord Jesus, you examine our hearts and see the pride within. You know how I rank and measure others when I should be listening and submitting to you. Help me to live and speak as someone accountable to you, not to others. And may I be someone who serves in humility and love, seeking your greatness – not my own.

1 Corinthians 5 – Expel!

If we expelled every Christian who still sins from our our local church there would be no-one left. We all sin and are all called to daily repentance. But what if someone openly, brazenly adopts a sinful lifestyle in the name of progressive gospel 'freedom'? The Lord does not change and he has spoken. Beware those who call evil good and good evil. We must expel open, unrepentant sin from among us. The aim, however, is purity not condemnation. Anyone so expelled is always welcome back provided they abandon their sin in denial of self. We wish the sin to be expelled and left outside, not the person.

Holy God, sometimes these things are obvious, sometimes more subtle or hidden, and other times hotly debated among your people. Give me great wisdom among your people. Grant me a holy compassion knowing that we are all sinful. And help me to see the sin in my own life that I might grow in holiness and Christlikeness daily.

1 Corinthians 6 – Think (Theo)logically

At Corinth, some Christians were suing other Christians in secular courts. Others, claiming freedoms in the gospel, were using prostitutes for sex. Our reaction to Christians sinning is often a blunt, "Bible says 'no'." But while Bible prohibitions are for our good, it's always helpful to go further and contemplate the theology behind them. That's what Paul does here. You who will judge angels shouldn't take one another to secular court. You who have union with Christ ought not join your body to a prostitute. Be who you are in Christ – a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Gracious God, you who have forgiven all my sin, help me to be who I am in Christ. Help me to understand more of your law that I might see the good you have planned for me. May all I say and do be pleasing in your sight, deliberately acting only for your glory.

1 Corinthians 7 – Holy Union

This chapter is the longest and most comprehensive treatment of marriage and divorce in the New Testament. It's a series of cases with teaching for each one. The most critical observation is to grasp the theological basis and priority which is union with Christ. For example, if an unbeliever is married to (in union with) a believer who is in turn in union with Christ, the unbeliever is sanctified, lest Christ be in union with unbelief. Whether married, single, engaged, divorced or widowed, our priority for eternity is union with Christ. Our choices, desires and relationships should all be governed with self-control rooted in union with him.

Lord Jesus, you graciously and wonderfully call us into union with yourself. We died with you and are now alive in you. Help me to grasp this truth as a governing priority for my life, desires, conduct, and self-control.

1 Corinthians 8 – Knowledge and Love

Suppose you try to persuade me to do something truly permissible for a Christian, but my background leads me to feel it's wrong. If I do it, I'll act against conscience (even though my conscience is misguided). To go against conscience involves a terrible step: "I think this is wrong but I'm going to do it anyway." That displays a willingness to do wrong, to rebel. Paul says that if your knowledge puffs you up to do that to me then you have sinned against me (and therefore against Christ) when you should have loved me. A little compassion, gentleness and self-control from you would have kept us both from sin!

Lord, it's clearly good to grow in knowledge so that we might be pure and blameless in your sight. Forgive me for when my knowledge is greater than my love. Help me to live and act with sensitivity towards others, promoting purity, holiness and fidelity to you; building up, rather than knocking down.

1 Corinthians 9 – Free to be a Slave

It seems that the Corinthians had been raising questions about how Paul was funded, what he ate and drank, and even about his apostolic credentials. Paul asserts his rights as an apostle but then remarkably waives them. That leaves him completely free from all actual or perceived allegiance to a benefactor which might undermine his witness to various groups. For Paul, his compulsion to witness overrides any sense of rights. He becomes a slave to everyone in the hope of witnessing to everyone and he does so with a very deliberate plan.

Lord God, you know our witnessing is very often to people very like ourselves. Thank you for Paul's example of putting himself out to cross cultural divides to be an effective witness for you. Give me that evangelistic sensitivity and zeal that I might widen the range of people I witness to.

1 Corinthians 10 – Participating in Christ

We're reminded of a number of events early on in Israel's existence when they came under God's judgment for idolatry. We're also reminded of the privilege they had of enjoying fellowship with God in the offerings brought to the altar. In a similar way, food sacrificed to an idol is fellowship with the demon that promoted its existence. More positively, those who share in the Lord's table participate with him. We need to avoid flirting with religious practices that are actually idolatry and be very deliberate about worshipping Christ in Spirit and in truth.

Living God, we make idols out of all sorts of good things. We're often oblivious to the demonic lies that draw us in. Help me to maintain true worship in Christ in living fellowship with him always.

1 Corinthians 11 – The Lord's Table

Paul commends the Corinthians for keeping with traditions regarding head coverings, but he has a stern rebuke regarding Lord's Table instruction. The key to the problem is in v29 where they're not "recognising the body" – that is, each person only thinks of himself when he ought to use the occasion to celebrate the whole body of Christ, the local church (see 1 Cor 10:17, 12:27). In Exodus 24, the elders of Israel ate a meal together on Sinai in the presence of God having sprinkled the people with the blood of the covenant. This New Covenant meal is no less a communal meal with God. It is the *Lord's* Table.

Lord God, it is a remarkable privilege to come to your table with your people and enjoy communion with you. Forgive my own individualistic tendencies and how quick I am to think and behave independently from your body, the church. Help me to grasp the full 24/7 reality of being part of your church.

1 Corinthians 12 – Spiritual Gifts

Why doesn't the Holy Spirit distribute spiritual gifts evenly? Why must we all be different? It is because we are a body, a unit, meant to function as a whole and yet with every part dependent on all the others. The Spirit distributes gifts of his own good free will. We all need and belong to our local church, celebrating diversity and unity in one body. There are no spare parts and no redundant members of this body. No-one is so important they don't need the others. No-one is so unimportant that they're not needed. Our culture of individualism must be overcome if our churches are to be truly in step with the Spirit.

Lord Jesus, thank you for your local church and the body of which I am a member. The Holy Spirit is to be praised for the gifts he has given me and others for our edification, for the proclamation of your gospel, and for the magnification of your glory and honour. Help me, then, to use these gifts in your name, in your church, for your kingdom.

1 Corinthians 13 – Love is…

In the previous chapter we reflected on the diversity of gifts across the church. Some people obviously have more gifts than others. We might use those gifts in all sorts of ways, but it would be a mistake to measure how 'spiritual' you are by how religiously active you are. The goal and purpose of these gifts is love. And love is always other-person-oriented. The object of our love need not be lovely or deserving, and our love seeks no reward other than the benefit of others. 1 Corinthians 13 wasn't written to be poetry – it's a stinging rebuke to unloving, self-serving, individualistic Christians.

Lord God you have blessed me with spiritual gifts but I confess I don't make use of them as I ought. In particular, I don't love others as I ought. You love me with a powerful, sacrificial love I don't deserve. Help me to love others in actions for their benefit and your glory.

1 Corinthians 14 – Building Up

It's clear from what Paul writes that 'speaking in tongues' is speaking in languages that can be translated and understood. It was an important sign of the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts and no doubt very dramatic to witness. But God speaks to be heard, and Paul says that even that gift is of little value without interpretation or translation. Better by far is a word of prophecy for all to hear. Now, with Scripture complete, we have all God's needful prophetic words written down for our building up. And whatever gifts we seek to have or to nurture, the goal of building others up must always be the focus. Gifts not directed by love are nothing.

Lord God, often we desire the gifts you've given to others, but all too often our motives aren't love but pride. May the Spirit of Christ in me promote love for others. And help me to grow in wisdom that I might apply these gifts well for your kingdom, in your will.

1 Corinthians 15 – Man of Heaven

Christians are to shun evil, put up with hardships, and suffer rejection in the name of Jesus. What a joyless existence that would be if we ceased at death. But, just as Christ is raised so too all his people will be raised to be like him – bodies without failing sight or hearing, with limbs that don't break or ache, and skin without lesion or blemish. Incorruptible, eternal, physical, spiritual bodies – like Jesus, the firstborn from the dead. What a comfort this is as we age and fall ill. What a prospect as we grieve the world and mourn our lost. Truly, we are raised with Christ.

Lord Jesus, we are conscious of death and decay every day all around us. It's hard to imagine not changing, ageing or decaying. You must be so glorious to see! And you are breathtakingly gracious to grant such hope to a sinner such as me.

1 Corinthians 16 – Everything in Love

This letter has contained correction and rebuke throughout but perhaps its most important point is this: Paul wrote everything in love. He wants the very best for the Corinthian believers and the very best is holy Christlikeness lived out in love for one another. He even makes a point of mentioning how he'd urged Apollos to go to them, showing that he disregards notions of factions built around leaders and dismissing any sense of competition. No church belongs to any of us on earth, though we all belong to the church simply because we are Christ's bride. And so, do everything in love.

Lord God, once again Paul is seen to live out his theology in heartfelt love for you and your people. Thank you that by your word I can grow in knowledge, but help me also to love with a steadfast, experiential love. Lord, forgive my selfish cold heart, and may the Spirit be pleased to make me his own.

2 Corinthians 1 – Comfort

We're given the beautiful phrase "God of all comfort." When we suffer pain, grief, or persecution, God himself is healing balm. Not necessarily escape *from* affliction but always comfort *in* it. When we're faced with someone in pain, we often try to bring comfort along the lines of, "I know how you feel." But we bring the comfort of God not by sharing our pain but by sharing the comfort we have received from God (v6-7). Paul had despaired of life itself (v8) but then praised the God of all comfort for the deliverance received and the greater deliverance yet to come. God is our comfort.

God of all comfort, you know that I'm too quick to seek comfort elsewhere and to fail to point others to you in their times of dire need. Help me to be neared to you and to point others to you and to bring the comfort you bring in Christ – our only hope for peace and deliverance.

2 Corinthians 2 – Forgive and Comfort

Christ's commission to his church is to go and make disciples, not just converts. Paul is Christ's apostle to the Gentiles and he is as concerned about discipling existing churches as he is about church growth. Even in Troas (v12-13) where he enjoyed gospel growth he was distressed about the state of things in Corinth, awaiting news via Titus. Paul was concerned about many things, one of which was a man rightly excluded from the church. On the man's repentance, the church must "forgive and comfort" the man – restoring him fully into the heart of the church. That would mean wounds healed, unity restored, Satan's schemes thwarted.

Lord Jesus, your church is precious to you. We measure success in numbers far too much, when we ought to take care of love, forgiveness, comfort, and discipleship. Help me to love your church with deliberate action, to see our joint edification and sanctification as disciples in the same way you do.

2 Corinthians 3 – From Glory to Glory

The Corinthians seemed to want speakers to come with endorsements – letters of recommendation. Paul says the church *is* his letter, all the proof anyone needs of his genuineness in Christ. This is because we are only saved by the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, not by external recommendation or legal observance. Moses saw the glory of the Lord directly, spiritually, and seeing the church in Corinth is an indirect way to see the Lord's glory (as in a mirror). We ought not to rely on human endorsements and recommendations, but to gaze at the Lord's glory all we can in as many ways as we can – and that will transform us into glory too.

Glorious God, thank you that the Spirit has lifted the veil from my heart so that I can see Jesus. Thank you for glimpses of glory as I contemplate him. Help me to reflect his glory for all to see, even as seeing his glory transforms me to his likeness.

2 Corinthians 4 – We Do Not Give Up

The truth that hearts can only be unveiled by God is liberating for our evangelism. There's no need for gimmicks – we are to tell people about Jesus. Whether someone hears that news well or badly is not down to our giftedness or eloquence. That *is* liberating for those of us who aren't super-evangelists or speakers! In fact, us being as fragile as jars of clay actually glorifies God – if anyone is saved by something we say or do it can't be because *we're* brilliant, but rather because the gospel is powerful. If we spend all our energies and resources, lose all our friends, and waste away outwardly, our eyes are on greater glories ahead.

Gracious God, forgive me that I so often try and fail to do things in my own steam. Worse, I often hold back, sensing my own shortcomings and inabilities as if they mattered. Help me to trust the gospel that saved me to save others. Help me to speak truth simply, honestly, and earnestly for your glory.

2 Corinthians 5 – Compelled by Christ's Love

As we get older and feel our bodies age and decay, thoughts of a perfect resurrection body bring great hope. More than that, we will receive those bodies when we see Jesus and it is the hope of life with *him* that thrills us most. As we know and experience more of him now by faith and long to worship him by sight, it is his love for us that compels us to want to please him and make him known to others. He has reconciled us to God (such joy!) and given us a ministry of reconciliation to take out as his ambassadors. This is an honour, privilege, and joy only achieved in him.

Lord Jesus, thank you for bringing reconciliation through your death and resurrection. Thank you that in union with you, you make me a new creation. Help me to fulfil the privilege of being an ambassador for you, bringing truth boldly, pointing others to you and the hope of eternal life that only you can bring.

2 Corinthians 6 – Open Your Hearts

Paul has given so much of himself for the benefit of the church in Corinth. He has been poured out for them over and over. This wasn't some dry obligation though, as if caring for Corinth were some kind of work task or objective. Compelled by Christ's love for Paul and the church, Paul loved the church deeply and longed for richer, holy partnership with them – actually for the good of the church itself. How great his grief, then, to see them partnering with the world rather than with Paul. How many church leaders grieve to see their church members looking outside the church for help that really ought to be sought within the fellowship?

Lord Jesus, you know how little we truly open our hearts to your people in our local churches. Forgive me, Lord, for not opening my heart to your people to share their burdens and have my burdens shared with you through your people. Help us to truly love one another.

2 Corinthians 7 – Happiness and Joy

This might well be Paul's most happy chapter in all his letters! In his inner being, Paul's joy in Christ never wavered but that doesn't mean he was always happy. He suffered a great deal in life. His happiness comes through fellow believers: First, there's the simple pleasure of reunion with Titus. Second, the news that Corinth had received Titus so well. But mostly, Paul's happiness came through the news that the church had received Paul's "severe letter" (now lost to us, but between 1 & 2 Corinthians) very well. Rebuke led to repentance, repentance to salvation and rejoicing. Is that what makes us happy, too?

Thank you, Lord, that we are so often greatly encouraged by Christian friendships. It is a thrill to hear of spiritual progress being made. I pray for warmer friendships and fellowship across our church, that we might experience and display your love to all.

2 Corinthians 8 – Give Yourself

Paul is raising money for a problem among the churches in Judea. The Corinthians had promised to contribute and are now being urged to fulfil their commitment. The Macedonian churches gave abundantly out of poverty. What drove them to such generosity? "They gave themselves first to the Lord" (v5). We find giving hard when we believe we own our possessions but when we give ourselves to the Lord then all we have is his already. Giving is easy when you know that what you give is the Lord's already. You no longer skim off surplus, but rather lay it all at Christ's feet. The more we "have" the harder this becomes.

Lord Jesus, you who left riches and honour beyond imagination and came to such humble poverty, you who lavishes heaven's grace on us, forgive me that I don't always see my possessions as wholly yours. Help me more and more to give myself to you, to be used for your kingdom and glory.

2 Corinthians 9 – Give Cheerfully

V7 has the well-known phrase, “God loves a cheerful giver.” But where does this cheerfulness come from? If you think that your money is your own then you will always see giving as losing. But Chapter 8 reminded us to give ourselves to the Lord first, in which case ‘giving’ becomes ‘sowing’. If giving is sowing, what’s the harvest? It’s not more money, but rather righteousness (v10). It’s a sign of righteousness in Christ and an overflow of his grace extended to us. Recipients of our giving will, in turn, give thanks to God and have deep affection for you because of God’s work in you.

Lord God, you know my giving to Christian work is often limited by my own unspiritual thinking and worldliness. Help me to truly see giving as sowing, so that your kingdom righteousness may be spread abroad to the blessing of many and the honour of your name.

2 Corinthians 10 – Boast in the Lord

There’s a significant change in tone as we come to Chapter 10. Maybe some new information or report has prompted Paul to have to defend his apostolic ministry. It seems that some other, more impressive speakers have arrived and while Paul’s letters are strongly worded the man himself appeared less impressive. But comparison is so often unhelpful. Paul refuses to measure his ministry against others. He will only measure himself against the tasks the Lord has assigned (v13). Whether our church is small or large, our gifts many or few, all that actually matters is obedience to Christ where we are.

Lord Jesus, obedience to you is liberating in so many ways. Forgive me for comparing my output with others. Help me to serve you with grace and diligence where you have placed me.

2 Corinthians 11 – Foolish Comparison

It seems that some men, calling themselves “super-apostles”, have come to Corinth. They are more talented at public speaking than Paul and receive payment from the church (Paul served at no cost to the church which was frowned upon, since any “decent” leader would demand a fee). Paul responded by highlighting the foolishness of comparison. But instead of boasting about gospel triumphs and successes, he lists how much he’s suffered for the gospel. Satan exalts himself and so do his followers. Christ serves and lifts up the poor and lowly, willing to suffer for others. Don’t compare yourself even to Paul, but serve Christ where you are.

Once again, Lord, I must ask for forgiveness for comparing myself to others. There is so much jealousy and idolatry in that path. Give me wisdom and diligence, compassion and love, that I might serve you well for your glory, doing the work you have prepared for me with the gifts you have given me.

2 Corinthians 12 – Sufficient Grace

Paul writes of “a man” who had been caught up in a vision of heaven itself. It’s clear he’s writing about himself, but to prevent pride and self-exaltation the Lord permits him to have a “thorn in the flesh” – probably a painful physical condition. The Lord refuses to remove it even though it weakens Paul. In Scripture, Christ’s grace means both his undeserved kindness to us and his active divine assistance in the Spirit. In Paul’s weakness, Christ is glorified in the divine assistance so visibly present in Paul’s ministry. This must impact on how we view our own illnesses, disabilities and problems in life.

Lord God, you are the author of all that is good and you only ever do good to us. Sometimes your providences are painful and confusing, yet even as they drive us to you in prayer they do us good. Help me to know and to experience your divine assistance, your grace, and to bring glory to you in my weakness.

2 Corinthians 13 – Grace, Love, and Fellowship

The church in Corinth had chosen to listen to more gifted public speakers than Paul with the result that they'd drifted into godlessness and immorality. 1 & 2 Corinthians weren't Paul's only letters to them. He poured both love and strong words into them. Here in this last chapter we're reminded of his hopes for them: Holiness of life in union with Christ, Christian maturity, unity and love. It was never about Paul or winning arguments. His final words to them are a true blessing that the church would reflect the triune God who saved them. May we be gracious (as Christ), loving (as the Father), and in fellowship and partnership together (as the Spirit).

Holy God, you know all the imperfections in all your churches. Forgive me for my part in the shortcomings of our church. Help me to see your people as you do, to live out my union with Christ as an active reality, to be gracious to all, loving to all, fellowshipping with all your people.

Galatians 1 – A Different Gospel?

There is one God and one mediator for all humanity by whom we may be saved, Christ himself. We're saved by faith alone in Christ alone by grace alone. This salvation is revealed to us and in us by God himself. So, here in Galatians 1, Paul is angry and distressed that churches in the region of Galatia have begun to accept a "different gospel" – which is no gospel at all. He makes it clear from verse 1 that what he teaches is from God himself in Christ, not some kind of manmade religious pick 'n' mix. Salvation is the revelation of Jesus to us and in us (v16) and nothing could possibly compare.

Lord Jesus, the salvation and redemption you accomplished for us is gloriously complete. I know that if there were some sin I could commit to jeopardise my salvation I'd do it. Thank you, then, for perfection. Thank you for your supernatural revelation, and may that extend to you revealing your grace to others through me.

Galatians 2 – By Faith in Jesus Christ

The Galatian churches were being swayed by teachers who said that even Gentile (non-Jew) believers needed to be circumcised (under Jewish law) if they were to be counted as God's people. Even Cephas, the apostle Peter, was persuaded. The gospel revealed by God to Paul is that we are saved by faith in Christ alone and emphatically not by any work of law. Does it matter how we live then? Very much so because of our union with Christ. We are united to him in his death – crucified with him even – and our union with him means he now he lives in us and we live for God.

Living God, what a change you have brought about in me! Forgive me my sin, Lord, and even the great sin of not living conscious of your indwelling in me when my thoughts drift off and linger in darkness. Help me to know and experience you, being alive in you and living life for you and to you always.

Galatians 3 – Children of Abraham

To claim Abraham as your "Father" was to claim to be one of the children of God. The Gentile Galatians were beginning to impose the law of Moses on themselves in order to be truly counted as children of Abraham. Paul points out how foolish that is for two reasons: First, the law didn't even appear until 430 years after Abraham. Second, Abraham believed God and his faith was credited to him as righteousness. The law serves to highlight sin and transgression and curse. It causes us to turn in faith to Jesus, the fulfilment of the law, and our faith is credited to us as righteousness exactly as it was for Abraham.

Gracious God, you know our weaknesses and our failings. Your word highlights them so that we might more fully grasp our condition before you. Your grace in this is beautiful, not least as you point us to Jesus. Lord, forgive me my sin and count Christ as sin for me. And may I praise your grace for all eternity.

Galatians 4 – Children of God

In the previous chapter, Paul argued that those who have faith in Christ are the true children of Abraham. He ends this chapter with an allegory explaining how we are children of freedom, redeemed from slavery to law by the work of God. But our greatest, truest parentage is described in 3:25-4:7. We are children of God. Adoption is transferred parenthood. It's permanent. We call God "Abba, Father" just as Jesus did in Gethsemane. His Father is our Father. The "Spirit of Adoption" (Romans 8:15), the "Spirit of the Son" (v6) is in us, sent by God. Our redemption from sin takes us into the family of God.

Heavenly Father, holy God, your grace to me is astonishing and boundless. It is stunning that you should forgive my sin at all, and yet you have gone so much further in calling me to adoption, sending the Spirit into my heart that I might know you as Father. Thank you, thank you.

Galatians 5 – Walk by the Spirit

The Galatians were being urged by someone to go back to Jewish regulations to be counted as God's people. But Paul has argued that we're free from the law. So how are we to live? Lawlessly? No, now we are free to love one another, not to live to sinful desire. In Christ, by faith, we are made new. The Holy Spirit of Adoption, the Spirit of the Son, is in us. Though we're not perfect, we are to walk (to live) by the Spirit in us with our lives bearing the fruit of his indwelling in us. The list of nine fruit is not exhaustive (v22-23) and is biased towards our dealings with others. We honour the Spirit as we serve one another in love (v13).

Holy Spirit of God, Spirit of adoption, please continue your work in me to produce fruit of sanctification and righteousness in action and words of love to others. May Christ himself be experienced and known by others as you work in me to the glory and honour of the Father.

Galatians 6 – Reap What You Sow

To walk by the Spirit is to walk in love, and love is always towards others. We are to bear one another's burdens, actively trying to help one another. Love doesn't boast, though, so we don't love for audience applause. Rather, we carry our individual load of accountability to the one who saved us. So we sow in acts of love looking to reap a harvest of righteousness and eternal life in the Spirit by grace. With that in mind, don't give up loving others. Encourage and build up everyone – including even those who teach and lead. Consciously nurture the growing harvest of the fruit of the Spirit in you.

Lord God, you know how individualistic I am, like so many in our culture. Thank you that your word makes it clear that your people are one in union with Christ. Thank you for the Spirit's life in me. Work in me to bring you honour as I sow works of love and righteousness today. When I tire, help me not to give up.

Ephesians 1 – Praise to the Father

This is a spectacular chapter where every verse is worthy of meditation on its own. God our Father is praised for his eternal love for us, determining our glorious future with him since ages past, knowing we would need to be saved by him in Christ. It is astonishing to learn that one's own salvation is a specific element in God's eternal plans. Paul is thrilled that the Ephesians are counted in and his prayer for them is that somehow they can grasp the wonder of salvation, praise the triune God, experience his power, and live in anticipation of glorious inheritance.

Gracious Father, who chose me in Christ before the foundation of the world, and who then called me to salvation in him by your own good pleasure and will, granting me the Holy Spirit as security of inheritance, you are greatly to be thanked, praised, worshipped and adored. Forever isn't enough time to praise your greatness.

Ephesians 2 – One in Christ

We were given a glimpse of God's eternal plan to save us in Chapter 1, and here we see how it came to us. We were dead in sin and were children of wrath until God, by grace, made us alive in Christ. Corpses don't raise themselves to life. We are saved by God's grace and power. Here's the key point: We are *all* saved the same way. In Ephesus, Gentile Christians might have felt second-class compared to Christians from a Jewish background. But no, we are all members of the one household of God, saved by Christ, with access in one Spirit to the Father. There are no second-class Christians.

Loving Father, you know our fickle hearts. In the company of some we do feel second-class, while in the company of others we look down. Help me to see all your people as you do, all made alive in Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, adopted by you. Thank you for who I am in Christ.

Ephesians 3 – The Riches of His Glory

God's wisdom is like a spectacular, multi-faceted diamond turning this way and that, radiating God's glory in the heavens. How is it made visible? Through the church. The administration of God's grace is not a divine side show in God's plans for his creation. It is centre stage for all to see. No wonder Paul isn't put off by challenges (v13) if it means Christians have access to the Father. So, as in Chapter 1, Paul prays that we might grasp the riches of God's glory and love lavished on us in Christ. And we do that as Christ takes full residency in our hearts and we experience his strength and power in the Spirit.

Eternal, gracious and wise God, how you are glorified in redeeming a people for yourself. You are worthy of all praise. Triune God, whose sacrifice, power, grace and life utterly transformed me into a new creature, thank you for the access you grant me now and the promise of inheritance to come.

Ephesians 4 – Walk Worthy

So far in Ephesians we've seen how all believers were chosen by God before the foundation of the earth to be one church bringing glory to God in the heavens. It is essential, then, that we all walk worthy of such a calling in order that God be glorified in us. How? First, work at unity with other Christians in humility and love. Second, submit to godly teaching from biblical church leaders and use what you learn to build other Christians up. Third, cast off sin from your words, thoughts and actions and live in a holiness of life consistent with the Holy Spirit who dwells in you.

Holy God, it is frankly unsettling and humbling that your glory and honour are in any way at stake in the conduct of your people in your church. Forgive me my lack of love for your people, seen how infrequently I determine to build up and encourage others. Lord, in word, thought and action, help me to walk worthy today.

Ephesians 5 – Children of Light

The Christian life isn't characterised by do's and don'ts. We are in union with Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, children of the Father. We must imitate our Father, then, growing in Christlikeness, filled with the Spirit. How are we filled with the Spirit? Paul lists four ways: (i) Singing to one another. (ii) Singing to the Lord. (iii) Giving thanks always. (iv) Submitting to one another. So you need to be with other Christians if you are to be filled with the Spirit. No doubt the Lord is gracious to those who are unable to gather with others, but for those of us who can, walk as children of light with others.

Lord God, thank you for your church. Thank you for the love and fellowship of other believers. Help me to make the most of this means of grace, being filled with the Spirit as we sing and give thanks. Show me what it is to imitate you, to be a true child of light.

Ephesians 6 – Be Strengthened

The instruction to put on the armour of God is quite well known, but why is it just here in Ephesians? We've seen how the church is God's wisdom on display in the heavens and how necessary it is to live a life in consistent holiness, united to Christ and indwelt by the Spirit. The enemies of Christ also inhabit unseen realms and are working to trash the church through temptation, division, and persecution. Not all our enemies can be seen. We are all tempted and all do battle with sin and opposition every day. But we don't fight unaided or alone. So we pray to be strengthened by the Spirit (3:16), clothed in God's armour every day.

Gracious God, you know the hand-to-hand combat your people are engaged in against sin, temptation, unforgiveness, and opposition. I pray for the Spirit's strengthening, that Christ might reign truly and wholly in my heart, helping me to walk worthy of so great a salvation – a salvation authored in eternity past and to be rejoiced in forever.

Philippians 1 – To Live Is Christ

This warm and loving chapter ends by saying that the Christians at Philippi will suffer for Christ. But notice the build-up: (i) Paul is thankful about them and joyful. He prays not for preservation from persecution but for growth in righteousness of life. (ii) He points out that even though he's in prison, his situation has advanced the gospel as Christ is widely proclaimed. (iii) Whatever persecution comes is *ultimately* irrelevant since to live is Christ and even the worst-case outcome of persecution (death) brings us to Jesus. As partners in the gospel, he wants them to share in the living hope of Christ, even as they suffer persecution.

Lord God, you know we rarely actually see life from this perspective. We look forward to happier times when our troubles will be behind us, rather than seeking to live and witness for you in those troubles. O God, help me to know in my heart and bones what it is to say "to live is Christ" and help me make him known where I am.

Philippians 2 – To Live As Christ

Since we have union with Christ it is natural that Christians ought to have unity with one another, actively working together as one. We do that by adopting the self-emptying, other-person-orientation of life that Christ displayed in coming from heaven's glories to save us. Our salvation works outwards towards others; in fact, it's God working in us to grow his kingdom. We must, therefore, live as children of light. Timothy and Epaphroditus are held out as true examples whose genuine love and concern for others is beyond doubt, showing that such love is achievable as we live as Christ.

Lord Jesus, your self-emptying love brings you great glory and is the grounds of all my hope and joy for eternity. I confess my own self-centredness and lovelessness. Help me to work my salvation outwards, to love others with sincerity, and so shine for you in this dark generation.

Philippians 3 – Press on

As a devoutly religious man, Paul had once felt confident of his standing before God. But when he came to know Christ, all that self-confidence was shattered and worthless. Now all his hope and joy is "Christ Jesus my Lord." Jesus is all he wants to know and all he hopes in. There's a deep yearning for the bodily resurrection of the dead, to be with Christ forever. Not only is there no eternal life without Christ, Jesus is the focus and prize that makes eternal life so glorious. No-one will enter that on their own merits, but all will glorify Jesus forever. And *that* is worth pressing on for.

Lord Jesus, risen Son of God, Lord and Christ over all, it will be thrilling to see you as I stand in your new creation with a resurrection body. I love the fact that I will claim no merit of my own on that day but will only ever praise, thank, glorify and worship you forever. Lord, in these days of mine, help me to press on.

Philippians 4 – Rejoice in the Lord

The more we truly understand our eternal security in Christ, the more content we will be in all of life. So Paul urged those two women to end a dispute and urged the church to help them too. Don't worry about issues, but rather take them to God in prayer and trust him to hear and act with love and wisdom. Don't dwell on things that lead to earthly anxiety, but dwell on higher thoughts in the peace of God. Paul thanks the Philippians for a financial gift just delivered to him, while also making the point that he has learned true contentment. Eternally secure in Christ, he is no more content with wealth than anxious in poverty.

Gracious God, our lives are so filled with material things we barely know the anxiety of true poverty. Yet we find other things to worry about and dwell on, things that rob us of joy in you. Help me, then, to contemplate and meditate on things that bring me to thank and praise you. Help me always to bring any worries to you, trusting you wholly.

Colossians 1 – The Kingdom of the Son

The church at Colossae had fallen into some sort of doctrinal error (it's not clear to us exactly what) which Paul answers with glorious truth. Saved by faith, we respond to God's love and have hope for eternity. Paul says that that very hope then fuels a life of faith and love (v4-5). How right, then, that we live a life worthy of the Lord since we have been transferred to the kingdom of the Son he loves. And what a Son! Verses 15-20 describe Christ as supreme over Creation and the Church, having reconciled everything to God through the brutal cross. With an inheritance of hope secured by him, we walk by faith and love.

Gracious Father, who transferred us from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of the Son you love, thank you for the hope of glorious inheritance you grant by grace. Lord, help me to live a life worthy of such a saviour, a life of faith and love, pleasing to you, for your glory, and to the very great blessing of others.

Colossians 2 – Living in Christ

How can we become more godly and spiritual than we are today? How do we make Christian progress? For some, and certainly for those at Colossae, the answer lies in stricter and stricter lifestyle. Paul points out that that won't curb sinful desire, only sinful action (v23). Maturity and godliness come through continuing to live in Christ, rooted and built up in him (v7) and nourished by him (v19). He is the fulness of God and you are filled by him. The record of your sin has been nailed to the cross – you don't have to try to atone for your own sin. So your motivation for growth is Christ himself, living for him, in him, with thankfulness.

Living Lord Jesus, Son of God, fulness filling me, thank you for the completeness of my salvation. Thank you that my life and hope are grounded in your life and not in any sense of duty or law-keeping for me. In you, I am free to live as you please, and as you reorient my desires and pleasures towards godliness. Thank you, Lord.

Colossians 3 – Things Above

Our earthly conduct should be governed by our union with Christ summed up in this remarkable phrase: "Your life is hidden with Christ in God." That is who, what, and where you are. Christian ethics are not a set of do's and don'ts but rather a shedding of the old earthly nature and a growing conforming to our heavenly one. But notice that Paul uses active language: You have to be deliberate. Put sin to death and put on love, forgiveness, and other facets of Christ's own character. And we do these things together, illustrated by our gathered singing as we literally breathe in and out as one body all together.

Lord Christ, with whom my life is hidden in God, it is a staggering privilege to contemplate my life already above with you. Help me to live that heavenly life now. Help me to recognise and fight temptations, to put sin to death, and to put on righteousness in my whole person.

Colossians 4 – Wrestling in Prayer

While we set our thoughts on things above, we then also live out our godliness at home and at work. It's easy for the things we see with our eyes to dominate our minds, so Paul exhorts us to devote ourselves to prayer, whether planned or spontaneous, individual or gathered. Pray for gospel opportunities for ourselves and others and then live out your faith wisely among unbelieving people. Epaphras is an example of someone who "wrestles" in prayer for the maturity of other Christians. Wrestling is close, hand-to-hand, sweaty combat – hardly a comfortable armchair experience. We barely know what devotion to prayer really is.

Gracious God, you call us to prayer, and you enable us to come into your presence. My words, my voice – heard in heaven! Forgive my negligence in prayer. I neglect the gift of being with you. I neglect praying for opportunity to speak for you. I neglect praying for your people to grow in maturity. Lord, have mercy. Teach me to pray.

1 Thessalonians 1 – Ringing Out

We see in Acts 17 that Paul only spent three weeks or so in Thessalonica before being run out of town. So when he speaks of persecution, they know what that means. Yet this fledgling church has quickly become known across Greece for their faith, love and hope worked out in practical works and endurance. It can be tempting to wait for easier days for our evangelism, but not so for the Thessalonians. Having turned to God, "the word of the Lord rang out" from them all over the country. No wonder Paul gives thanks to God for them – they are God's miracle and are being used by him to grow his kingdom.

Living God, the situation in Thessalonica seemed so unpromising and yet you caused the church to flourish in a way that brings glory to you alone. I pray that your word would ring out from me and our church – both for the glory and praise of your name and for the sake of so many who are hurt and confused at the world about us.

1 Thessalonians 2 – Dear to Us

There are a few themes to notice in this chapter. It begins and ends noting opposition and persecution which actually binds and identifies gospel churches together. Another theme is how the gospel is from God, which means (a) it may be spoken without gimmick or embellishment, and (b) when it is received the glory is God's alone, both for hearer and messenger. Perhaps the dominant theme is Paul's own love for the church. They aren't some kind of "gospel project." Paul and his colleagues shared both the gospel of God and their own lives with the church, tenderly caring and nurturing like loving parents. Do we share our lives with our church?

Lord God, we do often think of evangelism in broad terms, not seeing people as individuals as you see them. Help me to truly love and care for the unbelieving people in my life, and to exhibit the same caring, sharing tenderness among your people.

1 Thessalonians 3 – Faith and Love

For Paul's own safety, he had fled Thessalonica and gone to Athens (Acts 17). Would the young church survive persecution? Paul sent Timothy back to find out and the report he brought back thrilled Paul. It was news of their "faith and love" grounded in hope in Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:3). Paul's earnest desire is to see them again to grow their faith (v10) and love (v12). We can't get more *saving* faith, but as troubles come in life we do grow in day-to-day faith, trusting in the Lord more and more for help and strength. And we can all clearly grow in love for one another. Such growth leads us to Christ (as we can't grow apart from him) and to increasing holiness of life.

Lord Jesus, I wonder if a report of our church – or of me – would tell of "faith and love" or have some other emphasis. Help us to be what you would have us be. Help me to grow in faith and love, in both comfortable days and difficult ones. May the Spirit be pleased to work increasing holiness of life in me, to your pleasure and will.

1 Thessalonians 4 – Holiness, Love, Hope

People often wonder what God's will is for their lives. At the least, it is given in verse 3: Sanctification (holiness). God has sanctified us by the Spirit's indwelling and our union with Christ, and yet we are to grow in outward holiness every day. Add to this the compulsion to love one another in visible ways, we see the Christian life to be one of active progress. Some in Thessalonica seem to have been utterly unprepared to see Christians die since Christ is alive and we live in him. Paul acknowledges that we do grieve, but we do so with hope that those who die in Christ will return and we will all live together in him. *That* is encouraging.

Living Lord Jesus, to live for you and in you is true life. Help me, Lord, to grow in holiness and love for your people. Help me to live in the light of your return and to see everything – joys and griefs – in that eternal context, and to encourage others with that hope too.

1 Thessalonians 5 – Encourage One Another

It's interesting that such a young church would have Christ's return as a major theme – a demonstration, perhaps, of the emphasis of Paul's preaching and of how struck they were at Christ's resurrection as the first fruits from among the dead. Paul points out to us how Christ's return affects us now: Since we will be with Christ on that day we are to live as children of light today. He goes on to describe how we do that together: Speaking warnings, comfort and encouragement as people need it; living in patience and forgiveness with everyone; clinging to God in prayer and thanksgiving; staying away from every kind of evil. In this way, we prepare for Christ's return.

Living Saviour, you have told us not to concern ourselves with dates and times and the good wisdom of this becomes ever clearer as the years pass. Help me, then, to live a life of love and contented prayerfulness, clinging to you and hating sin, ever ready to face you with a blameless heart and life.

2 Thessalonians 1 – Worthy of His Calling

Just as Paul noted in 1 Thessalonians, the church's faith and love continue to grow and flourish. And yet, so does their experience of being afflicted in persecution. Paul puts that in a surprising context: God's righteous judgment. When Christ returns, those who persecuted God's people and opposed the gospel of Christ will be self-evident and justly afflicted with punishment. Meanwhile, Christians will marvel and thrill at Christ, even being glorified with him. All this prompts prayer – not to avoid persecution, but rather to glorify Christ now by living a life worthy of him.

Lord Jesus, your return will be breathtaking. I can't wait to be among those who marvel at your glory. Forgive my tendency to compromise and avoid standing out for you. Give me boldness and grace, growing in love and faith, walking worthy of you, bringing you glory even if it costs me in the here and now.

2 Thessalonians 2 – Man of Lawlessness

In Chapter 1, Paul gave hope that persecution of Christians would end and be judged at Christ's return. How awful, then, that someone should tell the church that Jesus had already returned! No, says Paul, you'll know when he does. First, the "man of lawlessness" will be released and dupe many, even claiming divinity himself. But who is he? We simply don't know so speculation is of little value. But it's clear we'll recognise those times. Society will become ever more wicked and even the church will be largely compromised and spineless. All the more reason to pray and give thanks for true believers now, praying to Christ for hope, encouragement, and strength.

Lord Jesus, Peter wrote about how some of Paul's letters are hard to understand and surely the Spirit has wisely only revealed to us what we need to know today. Keep us close, Lord. May the Spirit of truth convict and clarify. Keep me and our church in good hope, warm encouragement, and bold effective strength – to your honour and glory.

2 Thessalonians 3 – Discipline

No-one is so competent or spiritual in themselves that they don't need prayer and even Paul asked for it. He knew that strength and perseverance are of the Lord. He also wrote about some people who were idle busybodies in the church. With no welfare system, idlers could only survive by exploiting the generosity and love of others. With time on their hands, they were disruptive in the church – the very opposite of peaceful or loving. That is *so* un-Christian, Paul commands church discipline; those people are to be removed from membership. As ever, repentance and restoration is the goal. The church must honour the Lord of Peace.

Lord Jesus, in our culture of pleasure and self-centred happiness, we often choose ease over work even for you. Help me to balance rest and work in a way that is wise yet responsive to the urgency of the gospel task. May your word spread rapidly, faster than fire or gossip.

1 Timothy 1 – To Save Sinners

Timothy was, it seems, the pastor at Ephesus. Paul wrote to him about having the right focus in ministry and how to establish a gospel-centred church. There are too many people who want to be church leaders, pastors and vicars who don't focus on the gospel of Christ but get drawn into side-topics and hobbyhorses, while still others mis-handle the law of God. But the law is for lawbreakers (v9) to restrain evil and apply punishment. Better, the law points out that we are sinners. Better still, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," and if he could save Paul then he could save anyone. This good news in Christ is to be the bedrock and proclamation of any true church.

Lord Christ, your revealed goodness and holiness as shown in your law demonstrates the sin in my heart and mind and desires. The Spirit graciously opened my eyes to see you and the forgiveness of sin you bring. Help me, Lord, not to get drawn into unhelpful side issues but only to point people to you with a testimony that honours you alone.

1 Timothy 2 – What God Wants

It's easy for us to get drawn towards the controversary over the roles of men and women in the church in this chapter. Yet there are two calls to prayer for us to heed (v1 & v8) and the focus of those prayers is the gospel proclamation. Pray for governments around the world, for regimes that will permit open proclamation of Christ without fear of imprisonment, torture, or execution. God has given just one mediator for all humanity so all humanity must have opportunity to hear. This is because God our Saviour wants everyone to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

God our Saviour, thank you for sending Christ Jesus into the world to save sinners. I pray for freedom of speech and religion here and abroad, especially in those countries most closed to the gospel. Strengthen and encourage your people in such places, and give increased success to organisations looking to do mission works there.

1 Timothy 3 – Pillar and Foundation

The New Testament describes two roles in church leadership: Overseers (also known as elders) and deacons. An overseer has authority and accountability for the welfare of those they lead. A deacon is, literally, a "servant." For each, Paul lists requirements that are mostly character traits rather than skills, though both are required to have organisational and leadership ability. Overseers (elders, pastors) are also to be able to teach. All this matters because the church matters. We have a crucial role in the world. As Nelson's column displays Nelson to the world, the church is the pillar displaying God's truth: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; God wants everyone to be saved.

Lord Jesus, please bless, strengthen, encourage and protect the leaders in our church. Help the whole church to listen and do what is taught from your truth. Keep us as a sure, godly, worthy pillar and foundation, displaying your gospel, so that many would be saved.

1 Timothy 4 – Train Yourself in Godliness

When is a church not a church? When it is characterised by rules and abstinence rather than faith, hope, love and the nourishment of Christ revealed in his word. Timothy, as pastor, is to train *himself* in godliness first, feeding daily on the word of God in communion with Christ. He tastes heaven himself as he does so. In that, he becomes an authentic teacher and a living example for the whole church to follow, since we are all to grow in holiness, faith, love, and purity. More, we are all to grow daily closer to Jesus, reflecting and meditating on him, trusting and knowing him. That has promise both for this life and the next.

Lord Jesus, thank you for this written word that nourishes me as it reveals you. Keep everyone in our church in true communion with yourself, and keep us from empty legalism as a dead parody of living holiness. Gracious God, I pray for the Spirit's help to train regularly for godliness, to your glory and honour.

1 Timothy 5 – Devoted and Supported

Two groups of people who are dependent on the church for income are mentioned: Widows and employed teachers/elders. In each case, the church is to be generous but wise, careful not to be taken advantage of. Widows (and widowers) can struggle for money in our society and are even more likely to be starved of company. The church can certainly give time, love, and community. Church leaders have the double honour of both a decent pay and a recognition of their accountability to the Lord. Spurious accusations are to be dismissed, but true failings publicly dealt with for the Lord's own honour.

Lord Jesus, your hands-on care for your church is evident in so many ways in Scripture and I'm encouraged by it. Lord, guard your church leaders and keep them close to you. And help me to take my place as a loving, fellowship-minded member of your body, the church, especially for those who are weak, lonely, or vulnerable in any way.

1 Timothy 6 – Godliness

It is no more sinful to be rich than to be poor, but riches can be a snare to us. We tend to store it up and draw security from it if we can. We convince ourselves we need it for our phones, petrol, internet, or TV. We find it hard to imagine giving such things up because we're more locked in to this material world than we think. How can we truly grasp that godliness with contentment is great gain? By wrestling every day against ungodly desire, by pursuing godliness, and by taking hold of eternal life. How? By keeping hold of Christ. And then we will be generous; it's good to do good.

Generous God, you have provided me with riches in excess of anything many people in this world can dream of. Thank you. Such things are nothing still compared with the glories of heaven with you. Thank you! Help me to take hold of that eternal life in Christ and to live today with a truly eternal perspective. Lord God, I need help with this.

2 Timothy 1 – Spirit of Power

It seems that young Pastor Tim is somewhat lacking in boldness for the gospel – something we can all relate to. Paul *could* simply demand that Timothy step up and coerce him into action, but he chooses to be much more encouraging. Firstly, we're reminded that we don't do things alone. God has given us a Spirit of power, love, and sound judgement. Second, our work for God is in the context of his eternal plan of salvation in Christ, so our actions are in God's plan both for us and for the people we speak to. So we entrust to God the very things he commands us to do. He will guard his purposes in us. So we hold on to him and to his promises.

God our Saviour, your eternal plan of salvation for sinners like me is so vast and complex you are glorified in every aspect of it. Thank you that by grace you have included me in it. Help me to see that the things you would have me do today are really your plans being worked out, and may I please know the power of the Holy Spirit in me to do them.

2 Timothy 2 – Be Useful

Timothy is encouraged to be strong in the grace that is in Christ and to train other leaders up. That takes time and patience, diligence and skill, with eyes firmly fixed on the long-term goal. Hence the examples of a soldier, athlete, and farmer. More, it's our union with Christ that enables us all to achieve things for God; we live with him and by him. So we're to make every effort to be ready for whatever work the Lord calls us and enables us to do. And readiness is more about godliness of character and manner than ability or skill. How wonderful to be useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.

Faithful God, you have your complex and wonderful plans and purposes and it's amazing that you accomplish them through people like me. Help me to be a useful instrument in your service as I go about my daily life, expressing godliness and holiness in everything.

2 Timothy 3 – Go Equipped

The opening verses describe a world we recognise immediately. That's the environment into which both Timothy and us are to speak the gospel of Christ. But no amount of argumentation or logic will change what people *love*: Self, money, pleasure, etc. Worse, there are counterfeit religions leading people away from the truth in Christ (ancient tradition had Jannes and Jambres as the names of Pharoah's magicians in Exodus). A godly life runs counter to all this and will be opposed to some degree. Do we go unequipped? No, we have the word of the living God. Imbued with his power applied by the Holy Spirit, his words change people.

Speaking God, thank you that you have spoken to us and caused your words of power to be written down and made available in English. Thank you that your words, spiritually applied, are changing my desires towards godliness. Help me to use the equipment of your word to speak truth to others.

2 Timothy 4 – Preach the Word

The solemnity with which Paul charges Timothy to “preach the word” could hardly be stronger. Paul is soon to die, and his godly example will be lost, but the word of God remains – fixed, strong, and powerful. Whatever fads and cultural trends come and go, the word is to be preached. We all need teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness from God’s own words so it’s necessary for us all to hear the word too. Notice two things: (a) Paul worked with others in ministry and depended on them as we all must; (b) even in old age he wanted his scrolls and parchments as Christ is revealed to us in the word.

Glorious God, your glory in Christ is revealed to us in your word, as are both my utter sinfulness before you and your gracious invitation to salvation and redemption. Help me, then, to make the most of your word as it’s preached on Sundays and as I read it day by day. Help me to see more of your glory in Christ.

Titus 1 – God’s Household

Titus was to appoint elders in every town in Crete. The character of an elder is paramount since he is “an overseer of God’s household” and therefore accountable to God for the protection and discipleship of those in his care. The character of an overseer/elder must reflect the character of God, leading the whole church into righteousness and truth. More, his own character must be seen in his own good works in full integrity of faith and action, thereby also leading the church into good works. Sadly, there are some who claim to know God but then deny him by their works.

Lord Jesus, your church is precious to you. You will beautify her in holiness and the sanctifying work of the Spirit is already powerfully under way in us. Gracious Lord, give to us church leaders who are true to you and your word, filled with the Spirit and faith, and abounding in good works. Grow us all in faith, love, and good works that point others to you.

Titus 2 – Eager to Do Good Works

Titus is to teach everyone according to age, gender, and ability, recognising that we're all different. And again, the teaching is much about character: Self-control, respect, love, submission, kindness. But there is a clear goal in mind – that we be eager to do good works. Titus himself is to be an example for others to follow. But what motivates us to be "eager" to do good works, rather than simply obliged? Two things: Jesus has redeemed us from sinful desires and lusts so that we can deny them, and we strain forward to the holiness of life that will be ours on his return.

O God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, you have redeemed us from sin and evil desires so that we can live lives pleasing to you. Lord, I'm nowhere near being the finished article. Help me to grow in you, in godly character, and in an eagerness to do good works in anticipation of your return.

Titus 3 – The Kindness of God our Saviour

We're reminded that we are not what we once were. In union with Christ, our desires have changed from wickedness to godliness. This *must* be displayed in how we live. Godliness in good works is a natural overflow of God's own goodness and kindness to us. Verses 4-7 hold a trustworthy saying and a succinct description of the gospel of Christ – rooted in the kindness of God towards us and worked out in lavish, abundant blessing and hope. Having experienced God's goodness, it's natural for us who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit to devote ourselves to good works in Jesus' name. We thus proclaim him to the world and in this we hope for fruit (v14).

God of kindness and abundant goodness and generosity, thank you for what you have done for me in Christ and for the lavish treasure of the Holy Spirit in me. Help me today to reflect your kindness in good works to others. Help me to <u>plan</u> good works in my life as I seek to live for you.

Philemon – Consistent Christianity

Some of the people mentioned in this letter are also mentioned in Colossians. Onesimus probably delivered both letters from Paul at the same time – one to the church and one to Philemon. It seems Onesimus had been Philemon's slave, but he'd been useless (v11) and then stolen and run away (v18). As we are forgiven by God, so we are to forgive. That means absorbing the cost of the offence and working for complete reconciliation. It's easy to put on a face to convince others, but it can be hard to forgive in private. Paul tells Philemon to "welcome" Onesimus as if he were Paul – warm and hospitable, loving and friendly. Our faith in private is to be as real as it seems to be in public.

Faithful God, who never leaves me nor forsakes me, and who knows my heart and mind better than I know myself, you are gracious indeed to forgive me so completely and to welcome me as a much-loved child. Help me to forgive as I have been forgiven and to be yours in private as I'm perceived to be in public.

Hebrews 1 – The Son of God

Some people brought up as Jews had become Christians and were being persecuted and tempted to go back to Judaism. Hebrews is a letter showing how all the Old Testament was just a shadow of things to come; Christ is the substance. He is the Son of God, higher than all the angels by nature. God is eternal, all-knowing, all-powerful, independent of his Creation, and much else besides. The son is the "exact expression of his nature" and must, therefore, be all these things too – equal in divinity with the Father. For any Christian, tired of their pilgrimage through life, suffering persecution, tempted to give up, we look to the Son of God and say, "I know him."

Holy Son of God, you are declared to be glorious in your divinity, the radiance of the Father. Eternally independent of your Creation, yet you care for us enough to enter into it to save us when we so pathetically rebel against you. Forgive my small thoughts of you.

Hebrews 2 – Many Brothers and Sisters

Since the Son of God himself has come to save us, confirmed by God the Father in acts of the Holy Spirit, it would be folly to ignore or withdraw from such a great salvation. In case that seems too remote for us, the writer reminds us that this great Son made himself lower than the angels, even to becoming human, in order to save human beings. Only as human can he truly represent us to God, and only as a human could he take the punishment our sins deserve: death. This leaves us with no fear of death. But more, as a human Jesus is now not ashamed to call *us* brothers and sisters.

Son of God, Son of Man, your incarnation into humanity is too amazing for me to fully grasp yet I still thrill in it. You gave yourself to death to take my punishment and now represent me in glory. Forgive me for having such low thoughts and help me to live today in the light of the eternity you bring.

Hebrews 3 – Watch Out

It's easy to imagine God angry with unbelieving people and nations, but the warning here is rooted in God's anger at his own people. He had redeemed Israel from Egypt and brought them into covenant relationship with promised blessing for obedience, yet they grumbled and complained against him. In his righteous anger, God withheld his grace though still fed and cared for them in the desert. We are to watch out, lest our unbelief leads us to look backwards, to grumble, to complain against God as if he didn't care or control. In the end, the remedy is to encourage one another daily so that we might all joyfully participate in Christ.

Gracious Father, thank you for including me in the household of your people through Jesus, your glorious Son. Living God, help me to be honest in prayer, both in thanksgiving and lament, and yet faithful too – never doubting your goodness or wisdom or love. And help me to be an encourager to others who may be struggling in their faith.

Hebrews 4 – Promised Rest

Having been rescued from Egypt and brought into a precious covenant relationship with God, the people of Israel lacked faith to enter the Promised Land and so disobeyed God's command. They neither entered Canaan *nor* God's rest (and even when they did enter Canaan 40 years later they still did not enter his rest (v8)). God's rest is his own Sabbath rest of Genesis 2 – a rest from the work of Creation. How do we enter that rest? By faith in God (v2-3) in obedience to his gospel (v11). His word alone defines obedience (v11-12), and also reveals the promise of that rest in Christ (v1).

Gracious God, so many hear your living gospel yet fall short of obeying your call to repentance and faith. Thank you for the Spirit's work in me, showing me both my sin and your salvation revealed in your word. Thank you even for the faith to believe. Thank you for the hope of rest with you – rest from toil, pain, grief, and curse.

Hebrews 5 – High Priest

The Old Testament high priest was a remarkable and unique role. Once per year, on the Day of Atonement, he would enter the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle (later, in the temple), right into the presence of God over the Ark of the Covenant. His role was to represent the entire community before God. He'd offer sacrifices for his own sin and the sin of the nation. Only a human can represent humanity. So Jesus, the eternal Son of God, became human and is now our high priest representing us before God. He understands our griefs, pains, and temptations because he is human. He will help you in time of need.

Lord Jesus, great and holy high priest who represents me and all your people before the Father's throne, thank you for your humanity. Thank you for your gentleness and sympathy. Thank you for your promise of grace and help in time of need. You are greatly to be praised for your gracious incarnation, exalting humanity itself in your own body.

Hebrews 6 – The Soul's Anchor

It's a sad reality that some people who seem to burn so brightly for Christ for a while peter out and drift away from the faith altogether. Having tasted the goodness of the gospel, they walk away. We all stumble and have seasons of weakness, but some actively walk away. This offence to Christ is great and there can be no hope. The writer urges you to persevere, bearing fruit that displays active faith providing you with great assurance. Yet the basis of your assurance is always grounded in the promises of God, not in your works. And the promise is salvation to all who are in Christ – who is already our firm anchor in heaven itself.

Living God, if my salvation depended on me then I'm sure I'd lose it. Thank you that I rest in your promises alone. Help me to live in a life of such godliness that I will know the certainty of your promises. Help me to live in constant awareness of my union with Christ, knowing that his is the life lived in me.

Hebrews 7 – King and Priest Forever

Having mentioned Melchizedek a few times the writer now spells out why he is such an important figure. In Genesis 14, Abraham was blessed by Melchizedek who was king of Salem (Jerusalem) and also the priest. That combination of king and priest is unique in the Old Testament, and he was clearly greater than Abraham. The only other reference to him is in Psalm 110 where God's Son is promised an eternal priesthood in the order of Melchizedek, meaning eternally king and priest. Jesus, the Son of God, is therefore superior to Abraham, being king and priest forever, exalted above the heavens, eternally unchanging, saviour of all. His own sacrifice has accomplished full salvation for us.

Lord Jesus, you are the King of Righteousness, King of Peace, our great high priest exalted above the heavens. Your sacrifice has atoned for all my sin, and in your infinite glory you still hear my prayers, still bring me grace and help, still care for me. Gracious Lord, help me to honour you with my life through a sacrifice of praise.

Hebrews 8 – A New Covenant

The Old Testament system of sacrifice, priesthood and tabernacle were a kind of shadow or scale model of the heavenly reality. Since Christ is the high priest in that heavenly reality, he has made the old covenant obsolete and ushered in the new covenant promised through the prophet Jeremiah. The old covenant was for national Israel where only some had faith, and fellowship with God was mediated through priests. The law was external and imposed. Now, in Christ, all who have faith are under the new covenant, all knowing the Lord and seeking to obey him with hearts renewed by union with Christ.

Gracious and intimate God, though you are incomparable in unimaginable transcendence, yet you call me to know you. Thank you for the Spirit's sanctifying work, changing my desires so that I long to live a life worthy of you, pleasing to you. Help me, then, to live life as a new covenant believer in Christ.

Hebrews 9 – Cleansed Consciences

The writer reminds us of the how the Old Testament tabernacle was set up and how only the high priest entered God's presence in the Most Holy Place once per year. Sacrifices enabled physical cleansing but could never cleanse a person's conscience. But Christ has entered heaven itself to be our great high priest forever. The sacrifice was himself, shedding his blood and giving his life to atone for our sins. As his sinless conscience was pure, so he is a whole-person atonement and substitute for us. His blood has secured and sealed the new covenant once for all, and all who trust in him will one day enter that heavenly presence with him. The Old Testament system helps us anticipate Jesus.

Lord Jesus, Great High Priest, you who have entered heaven and opened a way for your people, thank you that my salvation is so complete. Thank you that this covenant you bring us is secured with your blood. There is nothing for me to do but praise and thanksgiving, along with eager expectation of what is to come.

Hebrews 10 – Encourage Each Other

The writer summarises what he has said so far – that Jesus is a better sacrifice and a better sacrifice of a better covenant than the old one. How does the writer apply it to us? By calling us to perseverance and endurance, and to continuing to gather together to encourage each other and to provoke one another to love and good works. Christ is the new open door by which we enter God's presence; we are eternally forgiven and cleansed by him. We will all feel discouragement at times, or even despair. Anyone can be tempted to give up the race. But we gather to encourage one another to persevere to the end.

Holy Father, by your immeasurable grace you call me into your presence in prayer. Christ, your Son, is my advocate and high priest. The Spirit testifies within me, mediating Christ to me even as I am in you. What an extraordinary and supernatural thing prayer is! Help me to persevere in Christ, and to provoke your church into love and good works.

Hebrews 11 – By Faith

Hebrews was written to Christians under persecution. They were tempted to go back to their old Jewish ways to avoid persecution. But where guilt, remorse and regret look backwards, faith and hope and love look forwards. Hebrews 11 is sometimes called the "hall of faith" as it lists heroes of the Old Testament who took a step of faith and persevered for God. It's an encouraging list for us. First, notice that the people listed were far from perfect and often full of doubt and uncertainty. Second, note that some were blessed in this life while others suffered. Third, they all did what they did by faith – and that is approved by God not least as it brings him great glory and honour.

Heavenly Father, I don't know everything you have planned for me in this life. I do know that I'm weak and often slow to act by faith. Help me to look forward to what is promised in Christ, seeing my life, work, possessions, gifts, time and energy in an eternal context. Help me to live by faith daily, stepping up and out for you.

Hebrews 12 – Run With Perseverance

All those Old Testament "heroes" of faith (Heb 11) were really looking forward and acting by faith in God. We are to be like them, running with endurance, eyes fixed on Jesus (our prize), unhindered by sin. There may be struggling and suffering – a sign of fatherly discipline. Such disciplining isn't punishment; it's training. An athlete disciplines his body to run a race, and our own suffering can be regarded as training as we learn to keep focussed on Jesus, living at peace with everyone, hopeful and joyful at being in God's kingdom, anticipating a glorious future with him. Faith, hope, and love are forward-oriented – and Christ is the prize!

Loving Father, by grace you have called me to know you in Christ. The road seems long and tiring at times, but you continue to be gracious to me every day. I pray for the Holy Spirit to keep me instinctively coming to you in Christ in every moment of need, and to help me keep today's struggles in true eternal perspective as I continue to approach you.

Hebrews 13 – Practical Perseverance

With all the rich teaching spelt out, the writer ends his letter with a chapter on practical perseverance. If faith looks forward, it is to do so every day in real life. Firstly, that means perseverance in holiness of life and love to others. Secondly, we are to persevere in truth in the unchanging Christ. Thirdly, persevere in Christ himself, putting him first in everything even if it leads to being disgraced or cut off by others. Lastly, persevere in praise and witness, expressed through doing good (as God defines goodness) and praying for others. The blessing in v20-21 reminds us that it's Christ himself who enables us to persevere.

Lord Jesus, you are the great prize of my life, the goal towards which I strain. This life requires perseverance, Lord, and I thank you that you know it. Help me today and every day to persevere in holiness, truth, and you, in praise and witness, in love to others in your name, pleasing to you and pointing others to hope in you.

James 1 – The Crown of Life

James is a “general letter” in that it’s not to a specific church but to all Christians everywhere. He begins by saying that we should consider trials to be joy because they produce endurance. Does that sound hard? Yes, it is. But we can pray for wisdom at such times and the Lord will give it. And all who endure to the end receive the crown of life from God himself. Bad things happen and hard days come, but God will never tempt you to sin (as that would be a sin itself) and he does not want you to sin, but rather to persevere in him. God is good, and everything that is good is from him. The rest of the letter is about living such faithful perseverance out in daily life.

Good and gracious God, Father of all Creation and all that is good, thank you for your hand on my life. Give me that promised wisdom to see all the challenges in my life well, and help me to persevere in you in the big days, the mundane times, and in everything I face today.

James 2 – Faith Works in Love

The end of James 1 emphasises the need to put Bible truth into practice and v26-27 has the three themes James will unpack in the rest of the letter: Mind your tongue, love the vulnerable, pursue holiness. So James 2 speaks against showing favouritism and disadvantaging the poor. We need reminding of it as it reflects how we dress, speak, and welcome people at church. Loving your neighbour is a theologically rich and highly practical command. If you have faith in Christ then you are alive in him and he in you, so it’s inconceivable that you completely fail to do good works. If you’re saved by faith, the evidence will be seen in good works.

Lord Jesus, I thank you for your gift of faith and the ongoing sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. I can see that I am not what I once was or what I would have become without you. Forgive my ongoing lack of love, and my inherent biases and favouritism – even in charity and evangelism. Help me to love as you love, that others would experience your love through me.

James 3 – The Tongue is a Fire

Words are powerful. God even created everything by his voice, saying "let there be light" etc. Politics thrives on words, as do business and teaching. But that very power is its danger. All of us say things we shouldn't and don't always appreciate the forest fires we start. In our day, such issues extend to messenger apps, email, and social media. "Not many should become teachers," says James, yet everyone is so free with advice! But in Chapter 2 James said that faith produces good works, and good words are clearly part of that. Those saved by faith should speak words of blessing, not curse.

Holy God and Father, your word is truth. You have had these things written for our good. Forgive me my unkind words, both spoken and typed. Help me to be wise, kind, thoughtful, and a blessing to others when I communicate. Help me to speak up when I ought, and to hold my tongue when I should. In short, make me like Jesus.

James 4 – Wisdom and Peace

Chapter 3 ended by reminding us that wisdom from heaven is godly and full of peace. So if Christians are at war with one another, is that wisdom from above? James says it's adultery, flirting with the world in pride instead of humility, giving in to temptation and the devil's schemes. All is not lost: Repent and draw near to God in prayer, in humility, in holiness of life – which is how we resist the devil. So we are to be very wary of speaking against believers; it's much better to build them up. Better, in fact, to have the Lord direct us every day in every way.

Lord Jesus, in whom are all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom, please give me that wisdom from above and a humility of heart. Forgive me when I have been unkind in word and action against your people; help me to keep close to you in peace with all your loved ones.

James 5 – Perseverance

The opening verses of James 5 are words of condemnation on unjust, ungracious employers. It's based on law such as Deuteronomy 24 which is designed to protect the poor; godliness has no favouritism. In the meantime, Christians who suffer under others are to persevere, knowing the Lord will put all things right and bring blessing. We are also to be diligent in prayer – in joy, in sorrow, in sickness, in love. In particular, we are to pray for one another. That is so much more constructive than finding fault and judging one another. Holiness of life is seen in James's letter to be very relationship oriented.

Gracious Father, it is a lovely and encouraging thing to read and be encouraged to pray for one another. Forgive me that my prayers for your people are so often brief and superficial when you yourself care so deeply about us. May my prayers be pleasing to you, by the help of the Holy Spirit working in me.

1 Peter 1 – Faith and Hope

By faith in Christ, we have been born again into a new family with God as our Father. In Christ we are now heirs of a glorious salvation of blessed holiness and joy. Our blessing is so great that the ancient prophets anticipated it and even angels long to glimpse it, but it has been revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. If that is our glorious inherited future of blessed holiness and joy, how should we live now? In holiness, joy, and a profound love for one another. We have been redeemed from our old way of life and we're to anticipate our future reality in how we live for Christ now.

Holy Father, the hope you have put in my heart by granting me faith in your Son is beyond my imagination, and beyond language to express it even if I could grasp it. I pray for the Holy Spirit to work in me a life of Christlike godliness and love, that my hope would be evident and expressed to everyone.

1 Peter 2 – Strangers and Exiles

Peter describes for us our collective identity, purpose and conduct as God's people. We are citizens of heaven, chosen by God to be a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's possession (as Israel were called to be in Exodus 19). Strangers and exiles here, our purpose is to remain and proclaim the greatness of God as light shines in darkness. Yet we are to do so winsomely, submitting to rulers and authorities where we are despite our heavenly citizenship. We do this by doing good to all, by obeying the law, and respecting authority structures in place (even if they are unfair). Christ himself is our ultimate example of this.

Great Shepherd and Overseer of my soul, I thank you for your grace and care to me. You have called me to a heavenly citizenship, to be an heir of glory. Help me to live here in a way that is pleasing to you and clearly proclaims you to those around me. When I find submission difficult, help me to recall your gracious example.

1 Peter 3 – Devoted to What is Good

As citizens of heaven, husbands and wives are to relate to one another in a consciously spiritual way – in holiness, love, and honour. This is especially true when one spouse is an unbeliever, in the hope that they might be persuaded by a godly life. In every aspect of life, Christians are to do good. With Christ as Lord, we serve him and do good – even when that 'good' clashes with the values of our society and culture. Then it becomes an opportunity to explain our hope in Christ (something we must always be ready to do). We do good even in suffering, united to Christ in death to the old life and raise to life in him, as pictured in baptism.

Good Father, our society calls good evil and evil good. Thank you for you grace to me that reveals to me my sin before you – as you alone are truly good and holy. Help me to live a life of goodness to the blessing of others and the honour of your name. Help me to know the daily reality of Christ as Lord in my heart.

1 Peter 4 – Bear the Name Christian

When we become Christian our desires and pleasures change. We no longer enjoy the old life which means we no longer fit with our old friends the way we once did. In our culture, this strains or splits friendships. Elsewhere in the world, it can end close family ties. But now our heart is for God, our gifts are to him and his people as we work to the glory of God. In all this, we might attract opposition and suffering simply for being a Christian. But there is no shame in standing before *God* and owning his name, so we're prepared to suffer as we do his will, doing what he says is good.

Lord God, you called me out of sin into your kingdom of light, life, and righteousness. You gave me a new heart and new desires, serving you as I love and serve your people. Thank you that I stand before you in Christ, bearing his name. Help me to stand before people likewise with boldness for you.

1 Peter 5 – God Cares About You

There is a kind of leader who wants to issue commands for others to follow, to be seen to be in charge. But Peter has learnt servant-leadership from Christ himself. Leaders are to be worthy of being followed more than obeyed – and that actually takes humility. Unsurprisingly, we are to be humble before God which means, among other things, casting our anxieties on him – since to do so yields self-sufficiency and acknowledges God-dependency. God cares about you. You matter to him. He knows your situation even better than you do. And he will restore, strengthen, establish and support you.

God of all grace, thank you for your daily tender mercy and care. Thank you that you care for me whatever my circumstances. Teach me humility and dependence before you, to live a life of prayer and holiness even in the midst of normal week-to-week activity. May I even be an example for others to follow.

2 Peter 1 – Great and Precious Promises

We are promised something amazing here. Christ, by divine power, has given us all we need for life and godliness. As we take him up on his very great and precious promises we can share in the divine nature. That doesn't mean we become divine, but we become more like him in nature, growing in goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, brotherly affection and love – in short, becoming like Christ. That's good because to be like him is our destiny – so we are to be more like him every day. We trust these promises because they aren't Peter's, they're Christ's.

Lord Jesus, by grace you have destined me to be conformed to your likeness. I ask for the divine assistance of the Holy Spirit to supplement my faith with these characteristics in increasing measure, ever becoming more and more like you now for all to see.

2 Peter 2 – Pigs, Dogs, and False Teachers

Some false teachers are sincere but erroneous, while others are malicious and deliberately deceptive for gain. Either way, they are identified by two things: First, they will have abandoned both Christ and his gospel as described in the Scriptures. Second, unhooked from God's morality they will promote or endorse sinful desire and practice – even going as far as to say that they are good and holy ways of life. Here's the danger: Such people are wicked and bound for hell, and anyone who follows their teaching will follow them to hell too. The benchmark for us is not manmade; we turn to the God-given words of the Bible to see truth in Christ.

Lord God, there are many false teachers and false gospels in the world. No wonder Jesus described salvation as a narrow path. Father, I would never have found that path but for your work in me by the gracious movement of the Spirit in me leading me to Jesus. Teach me wonderful things from your word, that I might remain true to you by grace.

2 Peter 3 – A Thousand Years

For children, Summer holidays seem to go on for a very long time. As we get older, years seem to pass by more quickly. For the eternal God, who exists beyond time and space, days and years and millennia are all the same – all held in his perfect knowledge, goodness and wisdom. So when will Jesus return? At just the right time. He won't be early or late, whether it's today or 100,000 years from now. In the meantime, we have two things to do: First, live holy lives in anticipation of his reign, ready for his return. Second: Tell others about him, since it is the patience of God giving sinners time to repent that holds back his return.

Holy God, the day Christ visits the earth to make all things new will be astonishing and beyond my imagination, and yet by your grace it will be sheer delight for all your people. Help me, Lord, to live a life ready for that day, ever more like Christ in holy preparation. Help me also to make good gospel use of the time you have given me.

1 John 1 – God is Light

John wrote this letter to Christians to give us indicators of a true profession of saving faith, reassurance of eternal life. So he begins by reminding us that he is a witness of all that happened and teaches only what God has revealed in Christ. As you believe in this truth, you have fellowship with God and, therefore, with all God's people. Now God is light – perfect in holiness, knowledge, understanding. It is his nature to be so. Anyone in fellowship with him is to "walk in the light as he is in the light" – that is, by nature, not by external coercion. Of course we sin (stepping into darkness), but as we're children of God that grieves us. But God is faithful and just to forgive us all as we confess to him.

Holy and righteous Father, it is naturally inconceivable that a finite, unrighteous, unworthy sinner like me could dream of fellowship with you. You are light itself, perfect in glorious holiness. What grace, then, for your Son to become like us, that we might have union with him, our very natures changed and sanctified. Thank you for such grace.

1 John 2 – Love One Another

John has a writing style that weaves his themes together into an overall picture. He writes to give you assurance (5:13) especially in the light of false teaching (2:26). All believers are to "walk in the light" – to live as Christ intends, in holiness. By necessity, they must love one another, or else they're not in the light. We must test ourselves closely. Also, though we love the world in wanting to see people saved (as John 3:16), we don't love its values or anti-God ideologies. John speaks of anti-Christs (anything against or instead of Christ), but the Spirit testifies truth to us: The Triune God has saved us and called us into union with himself.

Loving Father, thank you for your eternal, abiding love to me. Lord Jesus, thank you for your love and your command to love. Holy Spirit, thank you for opening my eyes to the truth you have written, and giving me this eternal life in the Son and in the Father. Help me to walk in the light, and especially to love all your children without exception.

1 John 3 – Children of God

All Christians are children of God. In the light of his infinite holy splendour and our finite sinfulness, this is a breathtaking change and an incredible display of divine love. And we're not done changing: The horizon of our vision of Jesus is the Bible, but when we actually see him we will be made like him in sinless purity and holiness. Consequently, we are to grow to be more like him now. We are more than adopted, we're born again. God's seed is in us (v9) and we are truly his children. We might stumble and sin as we walk in the light, but we will not – cannot – walk in darkness again. A key evidence of this is how we love other Christians, our true brothers and sisters in Christ.

Heavenly Father, I have scarcely begun to plumb the depths of meaning in my being adopted by you, of being born again and brought truly into being your child. What joy it will be to see the radiance of your glory in your Son – and to be made like him in perfect purity of heart and mind. Help me today to love and live in a manner worthy of you.

1 John 4 – God is Love

There are plenty of people who consider themselves 'spiritual' but who deny Christ as the incarnate Son of God. But true worship of God can only be through Christ as mediator. John's statement that God is love is profound, but what evidence does he give? Just one thing: God sent Christ to save us (v9-10). His love flows out from him, to us, through us. When you love another Christian, they experience God's love through your love. If you fail to love another Christian, God's love is not complete in the world (v12)! Such love assures us of our salvation as we experience God in love. But love isn't a vague thing: Love is other-person-oriented, often sacrificial, action.

Loving Father, your love for me is plainly seen but too great for me to grasp. I ask for the help of the Holy Spirit to love truly in word and action, so that your people would experience your love through me, and that others would see your love and want it for themselves.

1 John 5 – Three Witnesses

John wants you to have assurance of eternal life in Christ (v13). He provided three tests for you to apply subjectively: Do you worship the right Lord (Jesus, incarnate Son of God)? Do you have right love (for other Christians, coming from God's love to you)? Are you living a right life (in the light, holy to God)? John also gives three objective testimonies for you to believe truly: The water, the blood, and the Spirit. From Jesus' baptism on, his works and teaching confirmed his identity as God's Son. By his blood on the cross (and resurrection), his sacrifice is seen as atonement for your sin. By the Spirit in all Christians, it is clear that Christ is at work in you. Accept no substitute Christ, no false gospel, no idols.

Compassionate God, you understand how we are so often doubtful even of you. Thank you for these reminders of objective witness to Jesus' effective work. Forgive me my sin, Lord, and help me to grow in confidence and assurance. Help me to see the idols I lean on for help and to live for you in love and obedience.

2 John – Truth and Love

The “lady” John is writing to was a church, not a person. It was normal for travelling preachers to stay with church members in their homes (Acts 16:15, Philemon 22). John is commending the church for the love they have shown in such ways (v4) and urging them to continue. But such preachers will inevitably be linked with the hospitable church, so it’s crucial that they are true to the gospel. Any false teachers are not to be welcomed or supported. Churches are to love one another in true gospel partnership, but a church or preacher that goes beyond the gospel of Christ into speculation or falsehood is to be shunned.

God of love and truth, unless you revealed your purposes to us in your word we would be hopeless and lost. You know how few people are true to you so please forgive me for not loving my brothers and sisters in other churches who are true to you as I ought. Lord, grant me wisdom to shun falsehood, and grace to love all who are yours in Christ.

3 John – Co-workers With The Truth

Like 2 John, the context of this letter is that of love and hospitality being shown to travelling preachers and teachers. John warmly encourages Gaius to keep doing what he’s doing. Sadly, Diotrephes, a leader in the in the church who loves power and authority in leadership, has not accepted John’s representatives (thereby rejecting John and the true gospel). Worse, Diotrephes is leading others into lovelessness and falsehood too. Poor character in Christian leadership leads to imbalanced and false teaching which leads to unloving, un-Christlike churches. We need to focus *equally* on truth and love, having gospel truth *and* gospel culture worked out among us.

Lord Jesus, eternal Son, you humbled yourself to serve us. You accomplished our salvation and gave us teaching and example in serving others. Give both me and our church leaders a heart to serve you, to love others, and to cling to your gospel. Help me to imitate your humble, loving, servant heart.

Jude – Mercy With Fear

Jude's little letter borrows much from 2 Peter and is packed with Old Testament and other references. He is warning against false teachers who turn grace into sensuality and even deny Christ as Lord. Such people are like waterless clouds and fruitless trees: They promise much and deliver nothing. But, like their Old Testament counterparts, their judgment is already sealed. Jude's desire, however, is not that we celebrate their condemnation but rather that we contend for the faith (v3) and have mercy on those being led astray by false teaching – being careful not to be led astray ourselves (v20-23). By prayer, faith and love, stay close to Christ and he will keep you to the end.

God of truth, there is so much false teaching around today. It must grieve your heart. I ask for the Spirit's help to be true to your truth, strong in faith, rich in the love of Christ. Help me to be gracious and merciful to those going astray, wisely and winsomely pointing people to you.

Revelation 1 – "Don't be Afraid"

Sometimes you see images or paintings that are really a huge mosaic of many tiny images building up into one greater picture. Revelation is such a picture painted with the palette of the Old Testament. That means the Old Testament is our key to understanding the book. The image we get is glorious: God is sovereignly in control of the universe with Christ as head of the church and executor of divine judgment. Christ walks among his churches in active involvement. Of all the alarming and terrifying images we see in Revelation, there is none so awe-inspiring as Christ himself. Yet, tender and gracious to his own, he says, "Don't be afraid."

Great God and Sovereign Lord of all, thank you for the spectacular and majestic revelation of yourself given to us in this book. Thank you for the assurance of your perfect governance. Thank you for Christ's active work in his churches – in our church. Thank you for his tender touch, his sure hand, his gracious word: "Don't be afraid."

Revelation 2 – “I know”

Chapters 2 and 3 contain seven letters from Jesus to seven real local churches ordered geographically in a loop starting at Ephesus. Each letter begins with a description of Jesus taken from Chapter 1, and each one ends with promises expanded and clarified later in Revelation. The message to these churches is the heart of the whole book: You’re secure in Christ, so keep witnessing, expect Satanic opposition, and be ready for Christ’s return. Since Christ walks among his churches it’s no surprise that he knows the strengths and weaknesses of each one. He lovingly commends those faithful to him, and also lovingly calls wayward believers to repent and return to him.

Lord Jesus, we might well wonder what you would write to our church. It is humbling and reassuring to know you are involved and active among us. Give me strength to do my part in your church, to remain true to you – free from entangling sins, and witnessing to your goodness and love.

Revelation 3 – “I love”

Much is at stake in every local church. We display the power of the gospel through loving relationships and changed lives. In doing so, we proclaim that Christ is risen, ascended, and reigning. It is no surprise that Christ will then come to struggling, hurting churches (that remain true to him) with utter gentleness, tender care, and kind promises. To those churches that have lost their dependency on Christ (whether consciously or not), he has strong words of rebuke and warning. But this, too, is kindness: “As many as I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be zealous and repent.” His honour matters to him, and so do you.

Living Saviour and Lord, apart from you I can do nothing. Please forgive my attempts at holiness, witness, patience, peace, and a thousand other things I have tried without coming to you first. Lord, forgive my sinful heart and my sins. Help me to know you, to find strength in you, to do your work only through union with you, to the honour of your name.

Revelation 4 – God is on His Throne

Revelation paints a vivid picture of the reality in which we live. Foundational to it all is this: God is on his throne. He rules sovereignly and indisputably. The image of the throne room is coloured with biblical allusions that speak of God's holiness, perfection, covenant promises, and mercy. Heavenly beings representing all Creation bow before his splendour and majesty. To be in his presence is to be overwhelmed by his magnificence, consumed by the sight and sound of glory. And this is the God who hears you when you pray, who cares for you, loves you, and is so offended by your sin.

Holy God, how can I begin to ascribe honour and glory in any measure to match the greatness of your worthiness and glory? When those before you, in your presence, are so overwhelmed, who am I to add to their praise? Lord God, show me more of your glory, that I might know and praise you better – and to keep me from sin.

Revelation 5 – The Lion, the Lamb

The scroll in God's hand is his plan for humanity. Only Christ is worthy to open that scroll because it's his death, resurrection and ascension that opened the present era of time that we're in. In fact, Revelation 5 is an account of Christ's ascension and approach to the Ancient of Days foretold in Daniel 7. He is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the promised Messiah King to rule forever. And he is also the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world by his death, raised to live and reign forever. Christ is praised and worshipped and adored in heaven in no small part for what he has done for us, and his role as saviour remains a core part of his heavenly identity.

Lord Jesus Christ, you are worthy of all the honour and praise and worship of all Creation. You are worthy in your own nature, and only further glorified in what you have done for us, your people. Forgive me my inadequate vision of you and help me to join in the chorus of praise that delights in knowing you.

Revelation 6 – Open the Seals

As the first four seals are opened, the four horsemen ride out into the world bringing conquest, war, social injustice, and death. This is not some future event but rather a description of the way things will be for all humanity until Christ comes again. Turn on the news, look at a history book – the riders are out. The fifth seal brings an image of believers in heaven asking how long until the world is put right, and the sixth makes it clear that judgment on the world will indeed come. With a sinful world in such self-destruction and heading for judgment from God, it's only right that the chapter ends with the devastating question, "Who is able to stand?"

Living God, your word is a true picture of the world we live in. Terrible things happen to good and evil people alike. Thank you for the glimpse of those who are with you, in security, and help me to point people to you for hope and meaning in this broken world.

Revelation 7 – The Lamb, the Shepherd

Chapter 6 ended with the question, "Who can stand" in a desperate, broken world? Chapter 7 answers: All who are sealed by God will stand before him in praise and worship. Numbers in Revelation are symbolic. The 144,000 people sealed by God for protection from the world's pain represents a huge but known number. God knows his own and none shall be missed out. Immediately then we get a vision of the same people but to John's eyes it's a vast multitude from all over the earth (lovely if we feel few in number!). Theirs is bliss and peace in the presence of the Lamb of God, who shepherds them to still waters forever.

Lord Jesus, great Good Shepherd, you who know your sheep by name and will count us all in, thank you that all my hope and peace and security is you. This world is so twisted and broken it would be easy to despair of it, but you alone bring peace and hope by the gift of faith and life. Give me strength and guidance every day, Lord, and help me stand.

Revelation 8 – The Trumpets

The seventh seal gives a brief picture of final judgment, of which we'll read more later in Revelation. Then we come to the trumpets. Like a sporting moment replayed from different angles, the seven trumpets cover the same time as the seals – the time from Christ's ascension to his return. They're all simultaneous, not sequential. Why trumpets? They are like the trumpets blown for seven days round Jericho (in Joshua 6), giving time to hear the warning of judgment and to turn to God. The events associated with the first four trumpets are graphic and awful, and they also have allusions to the plagues on Egypt (Exodus 7-11). Much pain in the world is actually a heaven-sent call to turn to God.

Gracious and patient God, your perfect justice demands judgment. Thank you that in Christ you graciously provide a substitute, a sacrifice atoning for my sin. Lord, in a world of plague, war, disease and death, help me to point many to Christ for hope and life.

Revelation 9 – They Did Not Repent

The imagery associated with the fifth and sixth trumpets is terrifying once again. All across the world, people will suffer and groan. But this pain is limited to those who have not been marked as belonging to God. Unbelievers are without hope or purpose, living short feeble lives, and that is a pain that Christians are free from. But notice that these woes are clearly sent from heaven to earth. Their purpose is to highlight the distinction between those who are Christ's and those who aren't in order to prompt unbelievers to turn in repentance and faith. Again, there are echoes of the plagues of Egypt, calling unbelievers to turn to God. But the outcome is heartbreaking: "They did not repent."

Living God, thank you for the mark of the Holy Spirit on me, the faith and hope you have given me that helps me see beyond the mess and pain of this world. Lord, have mercy and send your Spirit again that many would turn to you and cry out for life and hope, praising you. Help me to make my distinction clear, that others would see you in me and turn.

Revelation 10 – The Lion's Roar

A mighty angel is described in terms usually associated with God himself (e.g. wrapped in cloud, with a rainbow). His voice is like a roaring lion, like the Lion of the Tribe of Judah! He is the Angel of the Lord, representing God himself on the earth. John, like Ezekiel before him, is given a little scroll. It's open because it's to be read and make public to everyone in the world. We're still in the seven trumpets – general hardships sent into the world to call people to repent and turn to God. People refuse to repent, so the church is to take the little scroll of the gospel of Jesus Christ out to all nations. Sealed from the judgment on the earth, we are to proclaim hope as we repeat the Lion's roar.

Lord Jesus, your gospel is powerful to save and is our only hope. Forgive me, Lord, that the Lion's roar is not heard loudly or urgently through me. Thank you for the sweetness of the gospel to me and help me to make you known to all around me – in words, conduct, character, and prayer.

Revelation 11 – Witnesses

It's a basic Bible principle that truth is to be acknowledged by the testimony of at least two witnesses. The two here are figurative, reminding us of Elijah and Moses (v6), or the Law and the Prophets. The olive trees and lampstands are an image from Zechariah, how the Spirit pours from heaven to God's people and beyond. The 1,260 days (3½ years) is the time between Jesus' ascension and return (a figurative number). What does it all mean, in the context of the trumpets? The church is to witness to God, proclaiming his word, empowered by the Holy Spirit, even though most people will reject it and refuse to repent. There's no let-up – we're all to witness until Christ comes again.

Holy Spirit of God, you are to be thanked and praised for giving us the Bible. Thank you for moving me to see the truth of the Bible, for convicting me of sin, and for leading me to Jesus. Lord God, forgive me for my inadequate witness, and help me to take my part in your church as an effective witness for you. Help me to witness to someone today.

Revelation 12 – The Defeated Dragon

Chapters 12 and 13 prepare us to understand Satan's hatred of the church and his manipulation of the world we're in. The woman's sun, moon and stars point us to Israel's tribes (Genesis 37), and she represents the people of God on earth. She 'bore' the Son, the Messiah, and his ascension was victory over Satan, the Dragon. Satan spews lies to crush the woman (the church) but she is protected from him. Now, Satan roams the earth in vicious, vivid hatred of all God's people. The seals tell us we're safe in Christ, the trumpets that we're to witness. But all the while, Satan hates you.

Lord Jesus, you are to be praised for your glorious victory over Satan. Thank you for this glimpse of your people over time, and how we are central to your plan and precious to your heart. Lord, help me and protect me from spiritual harm. Keep me from the evil one and lead me in righteous paths.

Revelation 13 – The Two Beasts

The beast from the sea is a composite of animals that appear as symbols representing kingdoms in Daniel 7. The beast from the sea is simply an image of all kingdoms, powers, and authorities in the world. Under the Dragon's sway, the beast is very much opposed to God's people leading to persecution and ungodly laws all over the world today. The second beast promotes compelling lies and deceptions through the first beast. It represents ungodly ideologies, cultures, worldviews, values, and wicked systems of influence leading people astray. The Dragon and the beasts parody the Father, Son, and Spirit in their blasphemy. All this explains why abuse of power and lies upon lies characterise our society today.

Heavenly Father, the images given to us here are alarming and somewhat overwhelming. Thank you that this whole series of visions began with you on your throne. Thank you, Jesus, that you have already secured victory over the Dragon. Lord, help me to live for you in this world that is so opposed to you. Help me to grow in holiness and witness.

Revelation 14 – Engage

The Dragon and the beasts are the first three of a series of seven visions completed in Chapter 14. In vision 4 (v1-5), Christ's people are marked with the Father's name, secure and complete in Christ. Vision 5 (v6-13) is a gospel call to the world to worship him alone, warning that this world is doomed to judgment. Visions 6 (v14-16) and 7 (v17-20) picture a final harvest of humanity where God's people are gathered, and all the rest suffer God's wrath. Despite the terrifying, pervasive power of Satan over the world's authorities and values (the two beasts), we know that Christ has already won, the end is known, God's people are secure in Christ. So we don't shrink back from witnessing. We engage.

Lord Christ, your victory over Satan is supremely victorious and utterly conclusive. Yet that Dragon prowls and works against you and your people. Help me boldly to engage and make known your eternal gospel, pointing others to worship you alone. Lord, have mercy; redeem many.

Revelation 15 – Bowls of Wrath

Bad things happen in this fallen world (the seals); some bad things are calls to repentance (the trumpets) and some are the Dragon's delight (with his beasts). Some, however, are judgments from God, bowls of wrath poured out into the world. Seven angels, seven bowls, pouring out already on this world (all these images overlap in time). These terrors come from the heavenly temple, judgments from God from his own holy morality. People redefine right and wrong on earth, but God's judgment is based on his own perfect, unchanging goodness. And still, his people are secure in Christ and are to keep witnessing into a hostile, unbelieving, duped world.

Holy God, your judgments are right because your are holy, and true because you are just and all-knowing. They are also terrifying to contemplate, while all the more leads me to praise and thank you for Jesus who bore all my sin, taking the full bowl of wrath I had filled with my sin. Lord, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me.

Revelation 16 – The Bowls Pour Out

As with the earlier cycles of visions, all these bowls of wrath pour out on humanity throughout our age (from Christ's ascension until his return). Again we see the imagery of the plagues of Egypt, but these bowls are about judgement, not calls to repentance. The bowls pour on those who are not Christ's since we are secure in him. Christians, then, are to continue witnessing and persevering in Christ, clothed in his righteousness (v15) so that, on that day, while many are swept away in judgment, it should be plainly understood why we aren't. Be ready.

Righteous Father, your justice is unquestionable because you are holy, good, and all-knowing. This world of rebellion displays your bowls of wrath. And yet, Lord, please: Have mercy. Help me to persevere in witness and faith, that some may yet turn to you for grace.

Revelation 17 – The Great Prostitute

As we come towards the end of Revelation, God's people are called the bride of Christ, the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem. This vision of the prostitute Babylon in the wilderness is the exact opposite: A complex image of a complex, twisted world. The many-headed beast represents kingdoms and authorities over the people of the world (the beast over the sea, v15). The prostitute is the world's set of values, ideologies and philosophies, controlling and dividing, attracting and repulsing the nations, loved and hated and fought over continually. But the world's self-destructiveness is God-ordained (v17) so that as his people we must not be astonished or overwhelmed by what we see.

Sovereign God, if you were not the Supreme Lord that you are, seated in majesty and power over your Creation, it would be right to be overwhelmed and distraught at the state of this evil world. Thank you that you are governing with goodness and wisdom, and help me navigate this life under your guidance and love, ever looking ahead to Jesus.

Revelation 18 – Babylon the Great Has Fallen

Chapter 17 painted a vivid picture of the world we're in – Babylon, the city opposed to God. We are exiles here, citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, living for God in a God-hostile world. Chapter 18 speaks of the doom of Babylon and how the people of the world will mourn its loss (rather than praising God even then). The chapter is littered with Old Testament language that pronounced God's judgment on Babylon, Egypt, Tyre, and Sidon to make one important point: God has judged the nations before and their downfall was accomplished. This prophecy on the whole world is secure: God has said it will be so. Christians are in the world but are to 'come out' and be separate from it (v4).

Holy God, Lord and Righteous Judge of all, you have been gracious to me, opening my eyes to your judgment. Thank you that Jesus has taken the full cup of your wrath against me. I pray for the Spirit's help truly to live in this world but demonstrably not of it. Lord, keep me from evil.

Revelation 19 – King of kings

When this world of Babylon falls, we will see Jesus and worship him like never before. That he has a name we don't know (v12) indicates that we will know him like new. We will praise him as we praise God for righteously judging the world and remembering his own people. We will delight in him as he beautifies us to become his truly pure bride, finally wholly perfected in righteousness. And we will marvel at him as he rides out in battle to take on Satan and his beasts and followers, crushing them in an utterly one-sided battle that's over almost as it's begun. "Blessed are those invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb." More than we know.

Lord Jesus, King of kings and Lord of lords, you are truly beyond my imagination or comprehension. Thank you for these images of days to come that whet my appetite for seeing you. Lord, as I despair at the evil in the world around, I thank you that you have given such assurance of justice. But Lord, in your anger, remember mercy and grow your church.

Revelation 20 – Satan's End

This particular thousand-year statement is unique to this chapter in the Bible yet has caused much division between believers. But however it is understood, this chapter has beautiful and encouraging truth. First, we know that one day Satan, death, and curse will be cast into a lake of fire forever. No more temptation; no more accusation. Second, despite all our shame at all our sin being known and recorded against us, as Christians the only book that matters is the book of life, where our names are recorded by faith in Christ. The written charges against us have been nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14).

Lord God, the victory over Satan is not in doubt. You will punish him and destroy temptation and death forever. Thank you that he cannot wipe my name from your book – that no-one can. Help me to live with that eternal security, giving peace of heart and mind as I face things day by day.

Revelation 21 – All Things New

The story arc of the whole Bible is how God will dwell on the earth with his people. Since the Fall in Genesis 3, the plan of redemption has been leading to Revelation 21. God's people throughout history will be brought together as one beautiful bride ready to be with Jesus forever. Worldly Babylon will be gone; the heavenly Jerusalem will be on earth – the city, the bride, the people of God as one. The layout of the city echoes the Israelite camp in the wilderness (Numbers 2) with God dwelling on the earth in their midst. But Revelation 21 is the fulfilment, when God will dwell among us and we will be holy and blessed. We will walk by the light of the radiance of his glory, God's face shining on us forever.

Tender Saviour, the prospect of you wiping tears from my eyes fills me with awesome wonder and rich anticipation. No more pain, death or grief. No more faith or hope even! We will see you and know you as never before. Lord, thank you that this is your work; help me to persevere through pain, death and grief with faith and hope every day. This day.

Revelation 22 – No More Curse

Verses 1 to 5 of Revelation 22 are the culmination of the Bible and of God's plan and purposes for humanity in this present age. Adam's fall undone: No more curse. No more temptation, sin, death, grief, toil, injustice, inequality, hate or tears. We will walk with God. We'll see his face shining on us and bask in his blessing forever. And because that's by his grace alone, we'll praise and thank and glorify him always. It's a good thing we don't know when this will happen. The possibility that it might be any time gives us strength and hope for every day, while also urging us on in daily witness and holiness. Come, Lord Jesus!

Lord Jesus, Saviour and Mediator, High Priest and King, you have given us a glimpse of your glory in these pages of your word, even as you are the radiance of the Father's glory. These pages are truly the horizon of our vision of you, so I thank you for the prospect that I will yet see your face and walk with you forever. Help me, O God, to keep going.