



guide to prayer and study | week of September 26, 2021

Gospel of Luke with daily reflections from N. T. Wright

MONDAY 09.27.2021

Read: Luke 5 <https://bit.ly/3omejC3>

Reflect: Imagine being that fisherman, going about your ordinary everyday business when one day someone comes up to you and tells you he's going to borrow your boat. You've seen him before, but frankly, prophets have been coming and going all your life and so far, nothing has changed. So, even though it's a bit of a bother, you shrug your shoulders and decide to help him row out to the bay so the crowds can hear. Try as you might, you can't help but hear what he's saying. He's talking about God becoming king, about everything being different, about a new day dawning in which the poor are going to be helped up out of the mud. Well, if he could change a few things around here he'd be most welcome to try, but we're not holding out that much hope.

Finally we make it back to shore. It's been a long day with nothing to show for it. But what's this? He says he wants us to go fishing again! Doesn't he realize that nighttime is the best time for that, and I've already been at it most of the night? But something about the way he says it makes you do it anyway...

And the next thing you know, it isn't just the fish that are caught... it's you! He seems to know something that goes deeper than everything else. He seems to have a purpose, a plan. He wants helpers. But why me? There's something about him I've never seen before. Maybe this is for real. Maybe *he* is for real. Maybe he thinks *I'm* for real. That's a scary thought. In fact, if he's really a prophet, and if he wants me to work with him, my life might have to change... and I'm not sure I want that.

But now he's laughing as he tells me, 'Get up Peter. You're going to be catching people from now on.'

Who me? You can't be serious, Lord. But he is. Very serious. Come on, Peter. This is the first day of the rest of your life.

Pray: *Lord, help me to hear your call and be ready to respond. I'm not perfect but I'm ready to have you take charge.*

TUESDAY 9.28.2021

Read: Luke 6 <https://bit.ly/2XR9Xbb>

Reflect: How old were you when you first learned some nursery lines? Probably quite young. In fact, many children can sing a few rhymes before they understand what half the words mean. It's a great way for kids to start learning things, exercising their young brains with music and words and rhythm and rhyme.

Now imagine yourself in the crowd listening to Jesus telling you all kinds of things about God and his kingdom. There's so much to take in, so much to think through, so much to try to remember... but wait, he's teaching us in a way we can learn quite easily. It kind of has a swing and a flow.

'Blessings on the poor; blessings on the hungry; blessings on the weeping, blessings when they hate you. Woe betide the rich, woe betide the full, woe betide the laughing, woe betide the popular!' *Now repeat after me...* and soon the whole crowd joins in.

But what does it all mean? Well, we're working on that. It's a bit like the words they say his mother sang when she knew he was on the way: the rich getting brought down and the poor getting a leg up. God turning the world the right way up at last. Promises, promises... But it does seem to be coming true, at least for some people. That old lady down the road – the fisherman's mother – looks twenty years younger since he prayed for her when she was ill the other day. And as for that poor young man with the withered arm – will, I don't care what day of the week it was, anyone who can cure someone like that gets my vote. And they say if you get near enough to him in the crowd, you can sense a kind of healing aura all around him. So if he's saying that the world is being sorted out, straightened out, then maybe at last it's true.

But not everyone is going to like it. There are already mutterings and mumblings in the background. I wonder how long he'll survive if he keeps this up – the occupying forces have eyes and ears everywhere... and Herod isn't exactly going to like it, either. In fact, maybe that's what the rhyme means. Maybe it's not just a general truth we have to learn. Maybe we need to think about who exactly Jesus has in mind...

Pray: Read again slowly and prayerfully the words in verses 20-23.

Lord, help me to learn your new song, and to find out what it means in our world today.

WEDNESDAY 9.29.2021

Read: Luke 7:1-17 <https://bit.ly/3zJzCPP>

Reflect: How good are you at wailing? In many countries in the world to this day, people attending funerals are expected to weep and wail and make as much noise as they can. Most people in the West don't do that kind of mourning. But suppose you're there, in the crowd, that day at Nain.

The dead man was the last best hope of his mother. In the days before social security benefits, and before most women could earn a living wage all by themselves, a widow depended on her son to look after her. And now he's gone. The whole village has turned out to grieve with her, to help her express, in that heart-rending fashion, the sorrow and fear that now seem to wrap themselves around her and cling to her like a cold, wet cloak.

As you are walking slowly along, to the burial-place outside the city, you're aware of a change in the mood over the other side of the crowd. It's that prophet and his followers, the ones who've been going

around saying that it's time for God to become king! Now he's coming up to the dead man... What's he doing? He should know you can't touch dead bodies – it'll make him unclean!

And then it happens. Jesus doesn't just touch the dead man. He speaks to him. Tells him in no uncertain terms to get up, like a parent telling a sulking child it's time to wake up and get off to school. What does he think he's doing?

And then.... Terror! Amazement! Fear! Tingles down the spine. The funeral wailing stops in its tracks and changes to the sort of celebration-noises people make at a wedding. He's alive! He's getting up! Jesus is smiling and laughing and handing him to his mother. She can't believe it. She doesn't know whether to laugh or cry or faint. She just hugs her son and then hugs Jesus, and it's laughter and hugs all around while the procession disperses with more buzz than fifty beehives put together.

What's happening?? God has come to rescue his people! God has raised up a prophet! It's all true! God is becoming king!

But then Jesus, making his way back through the crowd, stops beside you. You half wanted this, but were half afraid of it too. What's he going to say?

Pray: Pause, and think, and listen. Jesus has a particular word for you today. You can turn away if you like, and pretend he isn't talking to you. But you might be far better listening to what he says. Then think and pray about what it means for his life-giving kingdom to come into your village, your family, your life.

Lord, wake me up and give me life that is truly life.

THURSDAY 9.30.2021

Read: Luke 7:18-50 <https://bit.ly/3EVM9mV>

Reflect: If you've ever seen a politician being interviewed on television, you know how it goes. The interviewer presses home the questions, and the politician says something different – changes the subject, never gives a straight answer. They wriggle and squirm, because they know if they say it straight it will be all over the papers the next day.

Jesus faced the same problem, and it will help us understand the kind of conversation he has here if we imagine people standing around waiting for Jesus to say something that, whispered to the authorities, will get him into trouble.

So he answers the question not by saying something but by doing something; doing, in fact, what the Bible said the Messiah would do when he came: open blind eyes, unstop deaf ears, even raise the dead. 'Draw your own conclusions,' he seems to be saying. 'And think about this: God's blessing will fall on those who are not shocked by me, not ashamed of the fact that I'm not exactly what they were expecting.'

Then Jesus asks a question: ‘When you went out to see John the Baptist, what were you looking for? A king in the ordinary sense? No. You’ve had enough royals and celebrities with their fancy ways to last you a lifetime. No, what you wanted was a prophet – someone who would announce that God was coming to put everything right at last. And you were right, because that’s exactly what John was.’

Jesus appears to be talking about John, but listening closely, we realize that he is talking about himself and his work as well... but still in a way that won’t allow any spies listening in to get any hard evidence of what he is really claiming. For those with ears to hear, Jesus is claiming that he is indeed the One Who Was Coming, the one who changes everything.

Pray: Verse 23 can also be translated, ‘blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me’ or ‘a blessing on the person who isn’t shocked by me.’ Try to be quiet a moment and think about Jesus saying this to you... Do you find yourself shocked or offended by what Jesus says or does? Talk to him about that.

Lord, give me the courage to understand what you really want to do for the world, for my community and for me.

FRIDAY 10.01.2021

Read: Luke 8:1-39 <https://bit.ly/3kK0g6K>

Reflect: How do you pray inside a story like that of Jesus calming the sea? Or of Jesus casting out demons?

It’s easy enough to imagine yourself on that little boat, towed this way and that by the sudden storm that sweeps down on the lake. Some may even have experienced a storm like that, and those who haven’t can imagine it, or use it as a picture for the times when life is troubles and turbulent, with disasters, horror stories, tragedies and personal anxieties bearing down on us like ten-foot waves.

At times like that, there’s no shame in praying, ‘Master, we’re lost.’ If it seems like Jesus is asleep, then wake him up. That’s what the Psalms do, after all: ‘Wake up, God! Why are you asleep? Something needs doing around here!’ If you believe in a living God, pray with a little holy boldness.

In this instance, Jesus answers their request and inquires ruefully about their panicky lack of faith. ‘What came over you? Didn’t you trust me?’ The answer is, ‘Well, we did, or we wouldn’t have woken you up; but I guess we didn’t, or we wouldn’t have panicked.’ That seems a fair position for a follower of Jesus to be in...

But the other story – which Luke puts together with the previous story, as he often does, to make a natural set – is harder yet. Most of us haven’t had much experience with demon possession, and probably don’t want to. People who know about these things will assure us that there is a dark, sad reality behind this language, even if we can’t fit it into today’s scientific categories. Just because some people go to the other extreme and imagine demons hiding behind every bush doesn’t mean that there isn’t a realm of spiritual activity that can only accurately be described in something like those terms.

In this instance it seems that the poor man in the middle of the story was overwhelmed from within by what he calls 'Legion' – the Roman legion was a troop of four or five thousand soldiers, well equipped, professionally trained killers. Some have speculated that his condition had been brought on by the trauma of seeing soldiers trampling through his country, polluting it with their pagan ways, crushing rebellions with casual brutality. We might compare his experience to others who have physically survived trauma, but are still suffering from PTSD – post-traumatic stress disorder.

So how do you pray inside a story like *that*?

Pray: Sit with the scene in front of you for a while and pray for all those who, today, see violence sweeping through their village or their region.

Pray for all those whose anger and fear have turned in on themselves until they have forgotten who they are and can only think of the terrible enemy.

Pray for the power of Jesus to dispel the demons, whatever they are, that grip so many people in struggles of trauma or anger or fear.

Ask for wisdom to look into the depths of your own heart and tell Jesus what names or situations are haunting you just now.

SATURDAY 10.02.2021

Read: Luke 8:40-56 <https://bit.ly/2XNUS9Q>

Reflect: Luke has presented another double story. This one may be easier to live inside and make our own. We in the modern Western world are used to comparatively sedate behavior and crowd control, but there was nothing sedate or controlled about people when Jesus was around. We have to imagine a seething, pushing crowd, like people spilling out of a football stadium or like shoppers at the beginning of Black Friday sales. Everyone wants to get close to where they think the action is. And here you are, in the middle of that crowd, a bit nervous of being pushed off your feet, but determined to get close to Jesus if you can.

Then suddenly, he wheels around and asks a question. 'Who touched me?'

Well, you think, I wish it had been me because I was trying to get close enough... but his followers are protesting, shaking their heads at him, shrugging their shoulders. 'What do you mean, who touched you? Everyone's touching you! What part of "this is a crowd" don't you understand?'

'No,' says Jesus, 'I want to know who touched me. I felt power go out from me.'

That is the point in the story, or rather the first point in the story where we ought to pause and pray. Even those of us who have been Christians for many years find it easy to lapse back into thinking of Jesus as basically just another great teacher, even as the one who died for us; but the thought that he had that kind of power, and was conscious of it going out from him... that's hard to imagine. But worth pondering, because it's still true – and you never know when you are going to need it. Better to stay close to him all the time...

So the woman comes and confesses. She had been afraid because, with her ailment, she was 'unclean,' and she must have known that by pushing through the crowd like that she had made everyone she had touched 'unclean' as well. Particularly Jesus. But with Jesus it didn't work like that. Here's the thing, the point at which our prayers should be focused: By ordinary rules, we should make him unclean, pressing upon him with our messy and muddled lives. But when we come to him in faith, it works the other way. His power makes us clean again.

Come in faith! That's the challenge. We go with Jesus to Jairus' house. We hear the servants saying there's no point, the little girl is dead. We wait outside as Jesus goes in. And then it happens again... Power and glory. New life.

Pray: 'Don't be afraid,' Jesus had said. 'Just believe.'

Is this the moment to stop in your tracks, to face your fears and give them to Jesus? Trust him, and his power can and will bring new life where it's needed.