



guide to prayer and study | week of October 3, 2021

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

MONDAY 10.04.2021

Read: Luke 9:1-36 <https://bit.ly/3Fjlnol>

Reflect: Everyone, it seems, loves a TV quiz show. Sometimes the contestants get it right, and come out smiling. Other times, they either forget something they know perfectly well or reveal that they didn't know as much as they had hoped they did. But at least the only things that hang on their getting the right answer are the prize and the glow of satisfaction.

But there are some questions that, depending on your answer, will change your life for ever. 'Is this the path we should take to get down the mountain?' Get the answer wrong and you could be heading for disaster. 'Is this the person I should marry?' Get that one wrong – either way – and you face lasting unhappiness.

Jesus' question about who his followers thought he was is a question like that. It wasn't just a quiz, sitting around the campfire one night and seeing what people think. He needed to know that they had gotten the message, that they had worked it out.

It wasn't an easy question, because 'God's Messiah' was supposed to do various things that Jesus hadn't done. The coming Messiah, the 'anointed king,' was supposed to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. He was supposed to defeat the enemy armies, the pagans. And he was supposed to bring justice and peace to the world by establishing a new rule, a new way of governing God's people and God's world. And though Jesus had done many remarkable things he hadn't actually done any of those.

What would you say, sitting around the fire with his followers? You might play it safe, and agree with the people they quoted. 'People say you're a prophet, like one of the great ones we've read about in the scriptures.' Or are you ready to take a deep breath and blurt out the conclusion that Peter and the others were coming to? 'You're God's Messiah!' You're the King, the Coming One. You're not just a prophet. You're the one we've been waiting for!

That answer has immediate consequences. If you think Jesus is the Messiah, then you are committed to following him, even when he tells you he's off to the big city to die. This wasn't just a quiz.

Are you ready for that? Many people today, even many Christians, really do believe that the point of life is 'to be true to yourself' or 'to find out who you really are' and then try to live like that. But Jesus stands all that on its head. 'If you want to gain your life, you have to lose it.'

Pray: Imagine you are sitting around the fire and listen to Jesus asking you, 'Who do you say I am?' Tell him your answer. Tell him how much you love him, and what things you find difficult. Ask him to give you a share in his courage, to follow him wherever he leads and whatever it costs.

TUESDAY 10.05.2021**Read: Luke 9:37-62** <https://bit.ly/3FegddH>

Reflect: A student once gave his professor a book called The Penguin Book of Excuses. It was supposed to be a lighthearted reminder of all the times when the student arrived late for class, or not handed in an essay on time, and had come up with more and more wonderful 'reasons' for why things hadn't worked out. Sooner or later, most of us who know in our heart of hearts that we want to follow Jesus find ourselves coming up with excuses as to why his particularly sharp demands don't really apply to us.

God knows we're human and need a rhythm of rest and refreshment. But God also knows, and Jesus obviously knew, that once we start down that road it's easy to make exceptions to all the rules when it comes to our own case. So the demand goes out. Now in this way, now in that way, Jesus is saying, 'Look! This is God's kingdom we're talking about, not a comfortable way of being religious that will let you settle down and take life at your own pace!' Are you up for that?

Yes, those were special circumstances. Jesus' public career was short, and he needed people to get on with the job at once. And yes, many of us are called to get into a longer-term mode, not to burn out with frenetic activity in a short sprint. But, again, you can't use that as an excuse for avoiding the sharp edges of God's call. Jesus never said, 'Come with me and all your happiest dreams will be fulfilled.' He said, 'Take up your cross and follow me.' Don't expect an easy time; having nowhere to call 'home' may come with the job. Don't expect that you will be able to fulfil all your social obligations: 'burying your father,' whether literally or metaphorically, was one of the highest obligations in Jewish society, and Jesus says that the demands of the kingdom come before it.

Pray: Talk to God about the excuses you make and ask God to help you follow Jesus wherever he leads, and to give you strength not to look back.

WEDNESDAY 10.06.2021**Read: Luke 10** <https://bit.ly/3uFHK2I>

Reflect: The danger is that we think we know the story of the Good Samaritan by heart. Today, read it slowly, again and again, and allow yourself to stand by the side of the road and watch what's happening.

Or, imagine that you were the one going down from Jerusalem to Jericho... the moment of fear as you round the corner by the big rock, a long way away from towns or cities; the moment of panic as they come at you, the sharp, sickening pain as they beat you; then the sense of being too weak either to resist or to pick yourself up from the ditch where they've left you...

Then, with your whole body screaming for help but without the breath to cry out, a moment of hope... Footsteps, coming up the hill. Please, please help! They're coming closer... surely they must have seen me... and then they go on by, fainter and fainter, the footsteps dying away. Despair.

Then it happens again! More footsteps. Surely this time they'll help me. But they don't.

Then another. This time there's a donkey as well. You hear it snuffling. Then a voice. A strange accent. A flowing of oil and wine into sharp, stinging wounds. Strong, gentle arms. The warmth of a donkey's back. Every step a wrench of pain, but at least you're going somewhere. Then, as you drift in and out of consciousness, voices. The chink of a coin. A bed. A sigh of relief.

At one level (and this is a level many great Christian teachers have exploited) that's what the story is about: you and me, wounded by sin and the world, and left for dead by the road; and Jesus as the stranger comes to rescue us. Yes, that's fine as far as it goes. But there is more.

Because the rescuer is one of those dreadful Samaritans. In Jesus' day, that meant (to a Jew) 'the other,' 'those people up there who we hate and who hate us back.' Keep well away, says the world. We are different. So, all of a sudden, I have to think again about who God's kingdom is really for. Is Jesus saying that God's kingdom has all sorts of people in it I never expected? That, certainly, is what the first Christians discovered very soon.

The question, now as then, is whether we will use all that Jesus is telling us here about love and grace as a call to extend that love and grace to the whole world. No church, no Christian can remain content with living life in a way that allows us to watch most of the world lying half-dead in the road and choose to pass by.

Pray: Today, ask Jesus to help you see the people you are passing by on the other side.

THURSDAY 10.07.2021

Read: Luke 11:1-28 <https://bit.ly/3mnvd0f>

Reflect: 'How long do I have to go on praying about it?' I asked my spiritual director. I was faced with a peculiarly intractable problem and there seemed no obvious way out. I had prayed about it already for quite some time, and there seemed to be no change. 'You can never tell,' he replied with a gentle smile. 'Perhaps every day for a month or two. Or it might be a year or two. The timing isn't something we can control.'

That was really frustrating advice, but it turned out to be right. It was two or three more months before anything happened, but when it did it was like a dam bursting. I have no idea why God answers on the 1000th time a prayer it feels like God has ignored for the previous 999 times. One might imagine that it would work more steadily and gradually. But from our point of view, at least, prayer is like chopping at a tree. For 99 strokes of the axe, the main trunk seems to stand firm. Then, on the 100th stroke, suddenly it keeps over.

Of course, we know that the previous strokes of the axe were weakening the trunk, even though we couldn't see it. And that's what prayer is like – NOT that God needs 'weakening' but that, for all sorts of other reasons that we can't see, things have to take the time they have to take. And that leads us to

the shape of the prayer Jesus gave his disciples. However you pray it, the Lord's Prayer starts precisely with the note that says, 'God's way and God's time is best.'

To say the Lord's Prayer demands that you pay primary attention to Godself. It is *God's* name and *God's* kingdom that we care about above all, not our particular problems. But, having said that, the three requests that follow – for bread, forgiveness, and safety from being tempted to destruction – all place our concerns *within* that name and kingdom. That's the clue.

To pray the Lord's Prayer, then, requires an odd combination: complete humility and complete boldness. Once we get the first right, the second can follow cheerfully. Once God's name and kingdom are the framework of all we do and think, we are free to knock on God's door as late at night as we want.

Pray: Try to find some occasions to pray the Lord's Prayer very slowly, as if you were praying it for the first time. Think particularly about the word, 'Hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done.' Imagine what it will be like when God's kingdom is here on earth as it is in heaven. Does that help you to see Jesus' prayer in a new way?

FRIDAY 10.08.2021

Read: Luke 11:29-53 <https://bit.ly/3iwgbEn>

Reflect: Here's an exercise to try: Note down, every hour or at least three times a day, the main things you have looked at, gazed at, allowed your eyes to rest on during the day. Quite telling, isn't it? For some of us, alas, a computer screen would be high on the list – but the question then would be, 'What's on the screen?' What images and messages are getting beamed into your whole body, your whole person, but the searchlight that Jesus is talking about?

Listening to what Jesus says here about a lamp, we may find it puzzling. We think of a lamp as something that shines outwards – like a miner wearing a hat with a torch on it so he can see underground. But Jesus seems to be using the picture the other way around. The inner depths of the personality (the word 'body' here really means 'the whole person') are in darkness, and need to be illuminated. And, Jesus is saying, the thing that will illuminate them is the thing on which you fasten your gaze.

So take the test a stage further. When you think about the things you've gazed at today, or in the last few days, how have they affected the person you are? Have you allowed your eye to rest on, and feast on, genuine beauty? The eye is one of our principal means of finding our way within God's beautiful creation; are you allowing your eyes to draw in the light of that beauty to make your whole personality beautiful as a result?

Have you allowed your eye to rest on, to concern itself with, the injustices of the world, the places where people cry out to God for hope and help because they are being trampled underfoot by careless and arrogant people and systems? Or are you allowing yourself to be a mere spectator, looking on as though with a bird's-eye view but without any real engagement with what's happening?

Gazing on the beauty of God's world on the other hand, on its need for justice on the other, will illuminate the body – the whole person – so that it celebrates the glory of God and works for God's kingdom. What would Jesus say if he saw so many of us spending our time, and our sight, on things that are either worthless or actually damaging? How much of our popular entertainment, especially on television or social media, would make Jesus say, 'Didn't I tell you not to put a bucket over the light? How do you expect your whole person to be illuminated if you don't let genuine light come through your eyes into your innermost being?'

In 2000 the National Gallery in London put on an exhibition called "Seeing Salvation," consisting mostly of images of the crucifixion. The newspapers scoffed. But the public came in their tens of thousands, and gazed and gazed.

Pray: What have you gazed on in the last couple of days? What would you like to gaze on today?

SATURDAY 10.09.2021

Read: Luke 12: 1-34 <https://bit.ly/3ous15N>

Reflect: Jesus relished the goodness and beauty of the natural world, and so should we. It's strange, considering just how much beauty is all around us, that the modern world has trained itself to ignore it for much of the time. But not only is it a delight to the eyes and the mind, it is a great school of prayer.

Stand beside a field full of wheat, or corn, or some other great crop. Watch the sun bringing out the color. Watch the wind rippling through and making patterns, and the grain, supple but strong, springing back into shape. Then think of the way we humans are meant to flourish, with the love of God looking down on us and the fresh wind of the Spirit bringing out patterns and meanings in our lives – corporate as well as individual. Reflect on the strange interconnectedness of it all. And, in thanking God for the mystery of our life, learn to trust him in new ways and at new levels.

Or, get the binoculars out and watch the birds. Get to know the way they organize their lives – or, it seems sometimes, disorganize them; and yet, the way in which they flourish. Watch, for instance, the way in which a flock of a hundred or more seabirds will fly in exact formation, and then, dramatically, all turn at precisely the same moment. Reflect on the ways in which God has so implanted a sense of how to be, how to live, how to play even, within these tiny creatures which, Jesus assures us, are not nearly as highly valued as ourselves. And learn, in prayer, the art of recognizing that God the Creator has formed us to live and move and have our being within God's world, and of trusting God in everything.

Learn, in other words, the gentle but powerful secrets of God's kingdom. Much of today's world seems hell-bent on stopping us learning that lesson, on teaching us an 'independence' that turns out to be nothing more than the sulk of a rebellious teenager. Strange as it may seem – though not to those who practice prayer within the rhythms and beauties of God's creation – we are most truly ourselves when we are most truly living under the sovereign rule of God. 'Search for God's kingdom!'

Pray: Try to spend some time looking at something around you more slowly and with greater attention than you normally do. Is there something you don't normally notice that makes you want to give thanks to God? Ask God in prayer how you can be part of God's great purpose of new creation. God will be only too pleased to show you.