

The Way of Love

50 Day Bible Challenge

SAMPLE

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Edited by Marek P. Zabriskie

FORWARD MOVEMENT

Cincinnati, Ohio

Foreword

I pray that...Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.
—Ephesians 3:16-19

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians invites us—urges us—to seek to learn and understand the love of Christ, a love that surpasses our earthly comprehension with its width and depth and magnitude. But how can we even begin to grasp this awe-inspiring love? How can we take the first steps on our path to the Way of Love?

The deep roots of our Christian tradition may offer some direction. For centuries, monastic communities have shaped their lives around rhythms and disciplines for following Jesus together. Such a pattern is known as a “Rule of Life.” With the help of spiritual leaders across our church, we have pulled together a similar framework for a Rule of Life for the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement.

This framework—*The Way of Love*—offers seven spiritual practices for a Jesus-centered life. These practices are: **Turn - Learn - Pray - Worship - Bless - Go - Rest**. How you live out these practices is up to you. They are designed to be both spare and spacious, so that individuals, ministry groups, congregations, and networks can flesh them out in unique ways and build a church-wide treasure trove of stories and resources. There is no specific order you need to follow. If you already keep a Rule or other spiritual disciplines, you might reflect and discover how that path intersects with this one.

Yet with all of its flexibility, the framework still has some core components. Central to each practice is reading and studying God's Holy Word. It's easy to see how Bible study supports the practice of *learn*, but what does the Bible say about *worship*? About *prayer* or *rest*? About *turning* toward God's love or *going* forth in our lives so that we might be a *blessing* toward others? As you might imagine, God has a lot to say! I'm delighted for this offering that can help us better understand each Way of Love practice through the lens of scripture. Over the course of fifty days, a passage from the Bible is paired with a reflection, questions, and a prayer written by faith leaders from across the Episcopal Church. What better path to understanding the glorious love of Christ than through divine scripture?

I am thankful to these faith leaders for sharing their reflections on the Way of Love and to Forward Movement and Bible Challenge editor Marek P. Zabriskie for their commitment to engaging scripture as a critical, life-giving component of the Jesus Movement.

Turn - Learn - Pray - Worship - Bless - Go - Rest. As we enter into reflection, discernment, and commitment around these practices, I pray we will grow as communities that follow the loving, liberating, life-giving way of Jesus. His way has the power to change each of our lives and to change this world.

The Most Rev. Michael B. Curry
XXVII Presiding Bishop
The Episcopal Church

Getting Started

Welcome to The Way of Love Bible Challenge. We are delighted that you are interested in learning more about the practices of the Way of Love through the lens of scripture. Here are some suggestions to consider as you get started:

- You can begin The Way of Love Bible Challenge at any time of year. You can also begin with any practice. They are not in a particular order, so feel free to start with whichever practice is speaking to you. That's why the practices in this book are numbered days one through seven for each week, instead of days one through fifty. Because of the nature of the practices and the Way of Love, any time of year is appropriate for this Bible Challenge, from the fifty days of Eastertide to the summer or fall, or throughout Advent or Lent. You decide what works for you!
- Each day has a manageable amount of reading, a meditation, questions for thought or discussion, and a prayer, written by a host of wonderful authors.
- We suggest that you try to read the Bible each day. This is a great spiritual discipline to establish.
- If you need more than fifty days to read and prayerfully consider each passage, we encourage you to move at a pace that best suits you.
- Many Bible Challenge participants also enjoy reading the Bible on an iPad, iPhone, Kindle, or Nook or listening to the Bible on CDs or on a mobile device using Audio.com, faithcomesbyhearing.com, or Pandora radio. Find what works for you.

How to Read the Bible

Because the Bible is holy scripture, read it with a reverent spirit. We advocate a devotional approach to reading the Bible rather than reading it as a purely intellectual or academic exercise.

- Before reading the Bible, take a moment of silence to put yourself in the presence of God. We then invite you to read this prayer written by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in 1549.

Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

- Consider using the ancient monastic practice of *lectio divina*. In this form of Bible reading, you read the text and then meditate on a portion of it—a verse or two or even a single word. Mull over the words and their meaning. Then offer a prayer to God based on what you have read, how it has made you feel, or what it has caused you to ponder. Listen in silence for God to respond to your prayer.
- We encourage you to read in the morning, if possible, so that your prayerful reading may spiritually enliven the rest of your day. If you cannot read in the morning, read at a time that suits the rhythm of your life.

Have fun and find spiritual peace and the joy that God desires for you in your daily reading.

Sharing the Way of Love Bible Challenge with Others

One way to hold yourself accountable to reading God's Word is to form a group within your church or community. By participating in The Way of Love Bible Challenge together, you can support one another in your reading, discuss the Bible passages, ask questions, and share how God's Word is transforming your life.

- Ask to have a notice printed in your church newsletter that you are starting a group to participate in The Way of Love Bible Challenge. Invite others to join you. Visit the Center for Biblical Studies website (thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org) to see more suggestions about how churches can participate in The Bible Challenge.
- If you form a Bible Challenge group, consider holding a gathering or meal to celebrate your commitment.
- If you do not want to join a group, you may wish to invite a friend or family member (or two) to share The Way of Love Bible Challenge with you.
- After participating in The Way of Love Bible Challenge, you will be more equipped to support and mentor others in reading the Bible.

Next Steps

After completing The Way of Love Bible Challenge, we encourage you to accept the challenge to read the entire Bible in a year. Reading the Bible each day is a great spiritual discipline to establish. The goal of the Center for Biblical Studies is to help you discover God's wisdom and to create a lifelong spiritual practice of daily Bible reading so that God may guide you through each day of your life.

- Forward Movement's website, www.ForwardMovement.org, offers many resources for learning more about the Bible and engaging scripture. This includes several books in the Bible Challenge series, including each of the four gospels and the Book of Acts as well as *The Social Justice Bible Challenge*.
- In addition, you can find a list of resources at www.thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org. The Center for Biblical Studies also offers a Read the Bible in a Year program and reading plans for the New Testament, Psalms, and Proverbs.
- Once you've finished one complete reading of the Bible, start over and do it again. God may speak differently to you in each reading. Follow the example of U.S. President John Adams, who read through the Bible each year during his adult life. We highly advocate this practice.

We are thrilled that you are participating in The Bible Challenge. May God richly bless you as you prayerfully engage the scriptures each day.

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Turn

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Mark 2:13-17

¹³Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them.

¹⁴As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. ¹⁵And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many

who followed him. ¹⁶When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

¹⁷When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Reflection

As people of the twenty-first century, we spend much of our lives building a resume of accomplishments and achievements: where we've studied, the jobs we've had, the goals we've achieved. If we work hard enough, we can accomplish anything. We can earn approval, success, even the love of others. And that "resume" can also include the work we do to be good people. We volunteer our time to help others; we advocate for those who are marginalized; we strive to be good examples to those around us.

But Jesus' call is not something we can work toward; it's not something we earn. Levi, a tax collector whose work was based on taking advantage of other people, clearly doesn't "earn" his call. Jesus doesn't require that Levi clean up his life first or prove anything or bring anything. Jesus simply calls, and Levi responds, turning away from his old life and toward Jesus. In that simple call to "follow me," Jesus points to a new way, and Levi begins living his life in response.

Jesus does not wait until we are ready, or prepared, or perfect. He does not call us because of our resume, or accomplishments, or good works, or even our potential. He calls us to turn toward him, and he gives us what we need to do and to be in response to that call. Levi embodies what it means to repent—to change direction when we are going down the wrong path and to turn toward a life of following Jesus. We, too, are called. We may not feel ready, or worthy, or up to the task. But if we respond and turn toward him, Jesus will give us what we need.

The Rev. Dr. Bill Lupfer
Rector
Trinity Church Wall Street
New York City, New York

Questions

We often believe we are “not ready” to respond to God’s call, that we’re incapable or inexperienced or unworthy. What gets in your way of answering God’s call?

Have there been times in your life when you have truly repented and turned away from the wrong path and toward God?

What led you to “turn,” and how did you respond to God’s call?

Prayer

O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light rises up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in your light we may see light, and in your straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

—*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 832

Psalm 34

- 1 I will bless the LORD at all times; *
his praise shall ever be in my mouth.
- 2 I will glory in the LORD; *
let the humble hear and rejoice.
- 3 Proclaim with me the greatness of the LORD; *
let us exalt his Name together.
- 4 I sought the LORD, and he answered me *
and delivered me out of all my terror.
- 5 Look upon him and be radiant, *
and let not your faces be ashamed.
- 6 I called in my affliction and the LORD heard me *
and saved me from all my troubles.
- 7 The angel of the LORD encompasses those who fear him, *
and he will deliver them.
- 8 Taste and see that the LORD is good; *
happy are they who trust in him!
- 9 Fear the LORD, you that are his saints, *
for those who fear him lack nothing.
- 10 The young lions lack and suffer hunger, *
but those who seek the LORD lack nothing that is good.

- 11 Come, children, and listen to me; *
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.
- 12 Who among you loves life *
and desires long life to enjoy prosperity?
- 13 Keep your tongue from evil-speaking *
and your lips from lying words.
- 14 Turn from evil and do good; *
seek peace and pursue it.
- 15 The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous, *
and his ears are open to their cry.
- 16 The face of the LORD is against those who do evil, *
to root out the remembrance of them from the earth.
- 17 The righteous cry, and the LORD hears them *
and delivers them from all their troubles.
- 18 The LORD is near to the brokenhearted *
and will save those whose spirits are crushed.
- 19 Many are the troubles of the righteous, *
but the LORD will deliver him out of them all.
- 20 He will keep safe all his bones; *
not one of them shall be broken.
- 21 Evil shall slay the wicked, *
and those who hate the righteous will be punished.
- 22 The LORD ransoms the life of his servants, *
and none will be punished who trust in him.

Reflection

There's a stooped, elderly man I've watched for years on the corner of Market Street in downtown San Francisco, among the tourists and shoppers, who hoists a hand-lettered sign announcing that God saves. He paces up and down the sidewalk by the cable-car line scowling, shouting at people, particularly "homosexuals and fornicators and evildoers," and calling them to repent, by which he means that they should admit they are hopelessly wicked and deserve punishment unless they change their ways. I have a sort of strange affection for this man, despite his unhappiness and anger: He is a kind of prophet—a cracked one, like many before him—and he's not alone in misunderstanding what scripture means by repentance.

To repent is to turn. The psalmist sings: *Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.* The invitation to repent is a call to turn away from everything that imprisons us—laziness, busyness, nostalgia, self-loathing, greed, blame, fear—and turn toward God, and toward other people, with desire and joy.

Turning and turning and turning again is a life's work. And the good news is that God is to be found at every turn. Repentance means going after good, pressing on, seeking peace: It can never be about being threatened into obedience, or feeling guilty, or acting sorry. *Taste and see that the Lord is good,* promises the psalmist. *Happy are they who trust in him.* When we turn in repentance, seeking joy, we can trust that we will never be let down.

Sara Miles

Author and Social Justice Activist

San Francisco, California

Questions

What do you turn away from? What do you turn toward?

How have you experienced repentance as joy?

Prayer

O God, who stays near broken hearts and heals our wounded spirits:
Turn us ever toward you, that we may press on to behold you in
brightness and know you in joy, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Luke 5:1-11

¹Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” ⁵Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” ⁶When they had done this, they

caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” ⁹For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” ¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Reflection

“They left everything and followed him.” This is such a simple statement—a simple, straightforward statement about a handful of ordinary folks who make a choice to stop in their tracks and turn. They could not possibly know that the choice they make will change not only their own lives, in ways too great to imagine, but also the lives of countless people throughout the world for centuries to come.

These fishermen make a choice to turn from all that is clear and familiar and toward the unknown and the unexplored. And they make this decision for one simple, straightforward reason. They choose to turn their lives not because they seek excitement or yearn for adventure but because Jesus calls them to do so. It is certainly not an obvious decision to make. After all, Simon’s life is clear and familiar before Jesus steps into his boat. The same is true for his companions. They know what to do, what to expect. They have all experienced smooth sailing as well as choppy waters. This certainly is not the first time they have worked hard with no great catch to show for it. And yet when Jesus comes along, these rough, hard-working fishermen make a choice to turn and follow him.

That choice does not lead to an easy life for any of those earliest followers or for the many who follow in their footsteps. There will be miracles and celebrations but also struggles and sacrifices. Through it all—the unknown and the unexplored—they find Jesus right there with them, through the Spirit, closer than the air they breathe. And they, and countless others since, find that having Jesus present and trusting him is enough. Indeed, it is more than enough.

The Rev. Canon C.K. Robertson

*Canon to the Presiding Bishop
Ministry Beyond the Episcopal Church
New York City, New York*

Questions

When have you heard or sensed Jesus calling you to turn from the clear and familiar to the unknown and unexplored? How did you respond?

What can you say or do when someone you know is truly struggling and feels like God is far away or unconcerned?

What does it mean to turn and trust Jesus more than yourself? What does that look like in day-to-day life?

Prayer

O God, you call us to turn, to dare to trust and follow you: In the midst of life's hardships and struggles, fill us, we pray, with a sense of your presence, shield our hearts from fear and confusion, and by the power of your Spirit grant us strength to step out into the unknown, knowing that you are right there with us; all this we ask in the strong name of Jesus, our Savior and friend. *Amen.*

John 1:35-42

³⁵The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!”

³⁷The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

³⁸When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” ³⁹He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was

staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. ⁴⁰One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. ⁴¹He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). ⁴²He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

Reflection

One Sunday morning, I asked my youth group if they would be able to leave everything behind and follow Jesus. One said she didn't think she'd be able to leave her parents and her brother and sisters, no matter how irritating they could be. Another said maybe, but how would he know for sure if the person were Jesus? The conversation turned to whether we would be able to identify Jesus. We talked about seeing Jesus in others like the folks with whom we worship, our teachers and classmates, and the homeless children we meet in our service. If we see Jesus in all of these people, precisely whom do we follow?

John knows that he has been sent to prepare a way for Jesus and builds his ministry around that mission. The very ones who become Jesus' followers are two of John's followers. These men have already decided to follow someone, and with the additional information about Jesus, they turn to follow him instead. I imagine this makes John happy.

Like my youth group teens, we must keep looking for Jesus. When we ask ourselves who Jesus might be, we must look in the mirror and at each other. Just as we look for Jesus in others, people are looking for Jesus in us. Each time we turn toward Jesus, we turn away from something or someone we need to leave behind. Simon and Andrew both left their lives as they knew them for something greater. As we turn again and again toward Jesus, we can also turn to Andrew, Simon, John, Mary Magdalene, Dorcas, and other early followers of Jesus to make our lives more like theirs. As we seek transformation in the One who offers salvation to all, we must turn, turn, and turn again.

Miriam Willard McKenney
Development Director
Forward Movement
Cincinnati, Ohio

Questions

What will you turn from today as you turn toward Jesus? What can you turn from in the short term? What can you leave entirely behind to give you more time for Jesus?

How will you turn toward Jesus today? Choose one of the other practices to anchor your turn. Turn toward scripture (Learn). Turn toward prayer (Pray). Turn toward helping others (Go).

Who might you choose to be a model for your discipleship? Consider John the Baptist, the early disciples, women who followed Jesus, or more contemporary saints.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, who traveled with the disciples on the road to Emmaus: Be with us on the way, that we may know you in the scriptures, in the breaking of bread, and in the hearts of all whom we meet. *Amen.*

—*Saint Augustine's Prayer Book*, p. 85

Luke 5:27-39

²⁷After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” ²⁸And he got up, left everything, and followed him.

²⁹Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. ³⁰The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” ³¹Jesus answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; ³²I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

³³Then they said to him, “John’s disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and

pray, but your disciples eat and drink. ³⁴Jesus said to them, “You cannot make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? ³⁵The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.”

³⁶He also told them a parable: “No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old.

³⁷And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. ³⁸But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.

³⁹And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, “The old is good.”

Reflection

As Jesus sits down with a tax collector and his friends for this first of ten meals described in Luke's Gospel, his actions cut against the grain of cultural expectations. Jesus' reputation already precedes him. Other teachers and their disciples are known for frequent fasting and prayer. In stark contrast, this rebel rabbi seems to be ever eating and drinking. What those standing in judgment miss, however, is how Jesus reveals the radical love of God in table fellowship that comes before a change of behavior.

Jesus loves people as they are. He enjoys spending time with them. This doesn't alter the fact the he wants something better for their lives. Transformed lives do follow, but Jesus doesn't need Levi or his friends to change in order to love him. We know that the relationship with Jesus will disrupt everything for this tax collector—and hopefully for some of his friends.

Jesus answers his critics, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." He adds a zinger, "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance." Those hearing Luke's Gospel get the dramatic irony that slipped past the ones Jesus addressed—they too are sinners in need of turning back to God. In fact, we all need the Great Physician. This is most true when we judge others and find them unworthy of God's love.

The gospels make the pattern clear that a change of heart and mind *follows* a relationship with Jesus rather than coming first. Our understanding of the ways we need to turn back to God is informed by reading scripture, prayer, worship, and serving in Jesus'

name. Reorienting our life toward God is a natural outgrowth of a relationship with Jesus nourished by spiritual practices. We don't get our lives in order and then connect to our triune God. We find the grace to confront the parts of our lives that don't conform to God's will when we pattern our lives in the Way of Love.

The Rev. Canon Frank S. Logue

Canon to the Ordinary

Diocese of Georgia

Savannah, Georgia

Questions

Why might meals have been essential to Jesus' ministry?

How have your spiritual disciplines led to changes in your life, such as how you spend time or money?

How might you be called now to change a part of your life that does not reflect your faith?

Prayer

Most merciful God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ came to call sinners to repentance: Pour out the grace of your Spirit as we turn to you that our lives may give you glory, and by your mercy we may obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Jonah 1:1-6

¹Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

⁴But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a

mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. ⁶The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”

Reflection

Sometimes the need to turn and follow God's call involves surprise or an abrupt change of insight we associate with great conversion stories, like that of Saint Paul. To turn then is to encounter something completely unexpected, whether or not it is welcome. I suspect however that for most of us, what we have to turn to is not the unexpected but something we have long known yet felt unable to accept.

The prophet Jonah has an extraordinary call from God, but the most striking (and understandable) part of his story is that he knows it but doesn't want it. Jonah finds the turn he has to make, the call to preach to the Ninevites, distasteful, or perhaps just implausible. He has his preconceptions about where his words might be deserved and well-received, and Nineveh—a wicked, pagan center—doesn't fit the bill.

It's not hard to imagine some modern parallels. Jonah was called to share the mercy of God with people whose behavior plainly indicated they didn't deserve to have words wasted on them. Jonah's story goes on; the result is beyond his worst fears. These contemptible people actually listen and receive mercy. No wonder Jonah didn't want to turn—because the people of Nineveh might turn too.

The ways each of us is being called to turn today may be less spectacular but still share features of Jonah's call. It's likely that we know, deep down, how and where we need to stop what we're doing and listen to what God is saying. It's also likely that our avoidance of a turn isn't about its mystery but about our resistance. God will change us. That might sound like a threat, but it's a promise.

The Very Rev. Dr. Andrew McGowan
Dean and President
Berkeley Divinity School at Yale
New Haven, Connecticut

Questions

Are there people you would prefer did not turn and hear God's call? Who? And why?

When have you known but resisted God's call to turn?

Prayer

Turn us, O God, and lead us where you will. Let us hear your words to us, and let us be the messengers of your good news in the unlikeliest of places. *Amen.*

Psalm 51

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your
loving-kindness; *
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.
- 2 Wash me through and through from my wickedness *
and cleanse me from my sin.
- 3 For I know my transgressions, *
and my sin is ever before me.
- 4 Against you only have I sinned *
and done what is evil in your sight.
- 5 And so you are justified when you speak *
and upright in your judgment.
- 6 Indeed, I have been wicked from my birth, *
a sinner from my mother's womb.
- 7 For behold, you look for truth deep within me, *
and will make me understand wisdom secretly.
- 8 Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure; *
wash me, and I shall be clean indeed.
- 9 Make me hear of joy and gladness, *
that the body you have broken may rejoice.
- 10 Hide your face from my sins *
and blot out all my iniquities.

- 11 Create in me a clean heart, O God, *
and renew a right spirit within me.
- 12 Cast me not away from your presence *
and take not your holy Spirit from me.
- 13 Give me the joy of your saving help again *
and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.
- 14 I shall teach your ways to the wicked, *
and sinners shall return to you.
- 15 Deliver me from death, O God, *
and my tongue shall sing of your righteousness,
O God of my salvation.
- 16 Open my lips, O Lord, *
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.
- 17 Had you desired it, I would have offered sacrifice, *
but you take no delight in burnt-offerings.
- 18 The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; *
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
- 19 Be favorable and gracious to Zion, *
and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.
- 20 Then you will be pleased with the appointed sacrifices,
with burnt-offerings and oblations; *
then shall they offer young bullocks upon your altar.

Reflection

As the penitential psalm appointed for Ash Wednesday services, Psalm 51 speaks to our turning away from the pain of sin and darkness toward the hope of salvation and light, turning from a life of suffering to the direction of God's love.

When I attended my very first Ash Wednesday service, the litany of Psalm 51 brought me at once to tears and joy. In the throes of divorce and recovery from a painful childhood of sexual abuse, I took to heart the eleventh verse, begging God to “renew a right spirit within me.” It was a profound moment of turning for me. I had memorized an Oswald Chambers line asking God to “walk on the chaos of my life just now,” and years later Eugene Peterson would translate this verse as “God, make a fresh start in me, shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life.”

Framing this psalm in the language of lament and 12-Step recovery is helpful. The twelve steps are clearly defined: admitting we are powerless, coming to believe, making a decision to turn our lives over to the care of God. When someone has a difficult time with a step, they are encouraged to ask God for the “willingness” first.

Turning to God in the midst of my emotional and spiritual abyss meant saying yes to God, believing that somehow, I would be redeemed and restored to a life of joy. I clung to verse thirteen: “Give me the joy of your saving help again and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.” Saying yes to God takes deep courage, and perhaps if we do not have the courage, we might just ask God for the willingness.

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Questions

Name a moment of turning in your journey of faith. Are you willing to share that moment with others?

Is there a wounded place in your life where you've not asked God for healing? Might you turn and simply ask God for the willingness to be healed?

Prayer

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to thee, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly thine, utterly dedicated unto thee; and then use us, we pray thee, as thou wilt, and always to thy glory and the welfare of thy people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

—*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 832-33