

Program Transcripts

For May 2014



IN
SEARCH
OF THE LORD'S WAY [®]

SEARCH PROGRAMS

May 2014

Topics subject to change without notice

MAY 4 – SALVATION IN CHRIST

Jesus asked, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” Jesus brings salvation and forgiveness and eternal life. How precious is our salvation!

MAY 11 – STAYING RIGHT WITH GOD

When we become Christians, we take up our cross for life. There is no turning back. How can we as Christians remain true to our faith and commitment to Christ Jesus and not lose our salvation?

MAY 18 – ASK, SEEK, KNOCK

From time to time, all of us feel the need to re-enroll the school of prayer. Recently a friend asked me to help him learn to pray more effectively. As I thought about it, I realized I need to improve my prayer life.

MAY 25 – HOPE

Hope is as necessary to the soul as oxygen is to the body. The Lord Jesus came into the world that we might have hope. Our hope in Jesus Christ is living and will not put us to shame. Let us hope in Him.

Salvation in Christ

Jesus asked, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” Today we’re looking at what it means to be saved. We turn to the Bible, because we know the Bible is truly from God. We can’t trust feelings, opinions, or the speculations of men. We want to build our house upon the rock by listening closely and obeying the words of Jesus. These words are found in Scripture.

Some think of the Bible as merely a book of morals and stories that teach us good lessons, but they don’t take God or sin seriously. Nearly forty percent of Americans say that “sin” is an obsolete word and they don’t fear God. But what if the Bible reveals the truth about sin, about our accountability for sin, and God’s merciful plan to save us. Romans 6:23 says, “the wages of sin is death.” God will punish sinners who reject Him, but He sacrificed His Son to save us. First Timothy 2:3-4 says, “This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Everyone needs the forgiveness of sin and eternal life. Those who have salvation have everything. These are the only things that really have lasting value. Our salvation came at a great cost. The apostle Peter said, “you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18-19). Salvation is the gift of God, but we must never cheapen that gift or take it for granted.

Our reading today comes from Titus 3:5-7. “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” Whether you follow Jesus Christ affects your eternal destiny. Without Christ, people are in great peril. Paul described the peril of the Gentiles before they became Christians. He told them to “remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). Eternal life, a home in heaven, and the favor of God come in Christ. In fact, we possess all spiritual blessings in Christ, according to Ephesians 1:3, so whether we follow Christ is the single greatest decision of life.

Once we become Christians our whole lives change. Paul describes the Gentiles once they come in to Christ. “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household (or family) of God” (Ephesians 2:19). When we become Christians, we cease to be people without God and without hope and become members of the family of God!

Becoming a Christian is a new birth. The Lord Jesus said, “‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is

born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, You must be born again” (John 3:3-7).

Becoming a Christian, being born again, brings newness of life. Paul said, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation (that is, a new creature); old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). In Christ, people can change and start fresh new lives, freed from the old ways of sin. Christ gives us hope; we don’t have to be trapped in sin. The old things can pass away!

We ask, “When is a person saved? When does he have this newness of life? When are his sins forgiven?” First, we must recognize that salvation comes by the blood of Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross so that we might have this change. Paul explains, “In Him (that is, in Christ), we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace” (Ephesians 1:7). Revelation 1:5 says the Lord Jesus “loves us and released us from our sins by His blood.” Truly we are redeemed from sin by the blood of Jesus.

This redemption opens the door to our salvation. Revelation 22:14 says, “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city.” People who enter heaven and have the right to eat of the tree of life have washed their robes. How did they wash them? Revelation 7:14 says, “they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

When and how do people come into contact with the blood of Jesus Christ? Romans 6:3 answers that question. It says, “Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ, have been baptized into His death?” Baptism into Christ means baptism into His death. Jesus shed his blood on the cross. First Peter 2:24 says, “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.” Baptism is the time when we unite with Christ in His death, and that’s the time when His blood washes us clean from sin.

Some say they are freed from sin before baptism. They say Saul of Tarsus was saved on the road to Damascus. Let’s read Acts 9:3-6: it says, “As he was traveling, it happened that as he was approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And he said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.’” This passage doesn’t say the Lord saved Saul; instead Jesus sent Saul into the city, where he would be told what he must do. Saul went into Damascus and did not eat or drink anything for three days. Acts 9:11 says that he spent his time there praying. But Saul was still in his sins. How do we know?

Acts 22 answers that question. God sent Ananias to Saul to tell him what he must do. Ananias said in verse 16, “Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.” Wash away your sins? Yes! People wash because they’re dirty; Saul wasn’t clean and holy, but was still in his sins. Saul was in sin on the road and even during the three days of fasting and praying. Seeing Jesus didn’t save Saul; praying and fasting didn’t save Saul. Saul had to be washed, and Saul was washed in the blood of Jesus when he was baptized. When people suggest one can be saved by saying a sinner’s prayer, they have to face the fact that Saul was still in his sins until he was washed in baptism.

When we come to the Lord, our baptism is always accompanied with faith. Hebrews 11:6 says, "And without faith it's impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." The gospel unites our faith with baptism. The Lord Jesus said in Mark 16:15-16, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned." Baptism into Christ and His death must include faith. One who loves the Lord will be happy to confess his faith to everyone.

The New Testament describes baptism as a burial in Romans 6:4, and also in Colossians 2:12. In fact, the word baptism (baptizo) in the New Testament refers to an immersion in water. The New Testament never describes baptism into Christ as sprinkling or pouring. The New Testament uses other words for those actions. According to Mark 1:9, "Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." John immersed Him in water. John 3:23 says, "John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there." Sprinkling and pouring water on someone doesn't require much water, but immersion does. Clearly, the baptism that makes a Christian is an immersion in water.

When we come to the Lord, our baptism must be accompanied with repentance. Second Peter 3:9 says, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." When the guilty Jews who had crucified Jesus asked the apostles what they should do, Peter responded in Acts 2:38, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Faith, repentance, confession of Christ, and baptism are all loving responses to the grace of God, who gave Jesus for our sins. They're not works of merit, those things that earn salvation by themselves, but are how the Lord asks us to respond to the gospel of grace. These are what the Lord expects those who follow Him to do to obey Him. They are the conditions that He gave for how we are to respond to the gift of His grace. They do not deny grace; they receive and accept it.

Paul said, "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness (no we didn't earn it), but according to His mercy, and it's done by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:5-7). Paul's "washing of regeneration" is a reference to baptism. Baptism is that washing that brings new life in Christ that causes us to be born again. God exercises His mercy and His grace through baptism, so that we might be justified and have the hope of eternal life.

Galatians 3:26-27 teaches that when one is baptized, he becomes a child of God. It says, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." When a person is baptized (that is, immersed in water in the name of Jesus Christ upon his repentance and the confession of faith, and he does that for the forgiveness of his sins), the Lord then washes away his sins, the Lord adds him to the church; the Lord causes him to be born again; the Lord makes him His child; the Lord buries him with Christ (that is, God buries him with Christ), and raises him up with Christ, and gives him newness of life. God works on us in baptism. God is the active one, and we receive His blessing. When someone says one doesn't have to be baptized to be saved, they're actually

saying this person doesn't have to have God working on his soul to be saved. Baptism is necessary to salvation!

In responding to the grace of Christ we come to Him on His terms, not ours. It's presumptuous to think that we can develop our own way to God without a thought to what He requires of us. Grace is not a license to pursue our faith any way that we please. His grace and love calls us to love Him and to obey Him. Throughout the New Testament, people treated their need to become a Christian with great urgency. When the people heard what they needed to do to have the forgiveness of sins on the day of Pentecost, 3,000 gladly received his word and were baptized that very day (Acts 2:37-41). Philip preached Christ to the city of Samaria; and "when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized" (Acts 8:12). When the Ethiopian eunuch saw water, he immediately asked, "What hinders me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:36). When the Philippian jailer heard about Jesus and salvation, he was baptized the same hour of the night, even though it was midnight (Acts 16:29-34). When the twelve disciples of John learned of Jesus Christ, they were immediately "baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 19:5). When Ananias came to Saul of Tarsus, he said, "And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16).

In each of these cases, those who heard and believed the good news were baptized into Christ that very day. They realized being baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus was necessary to obey the gospel and to receive the forgiveness of their sins. They didn't wait for a more convenient season. They obeyed immediately because they wanted to be saved right there and then. We pray you'll do the same. Today's the best day to get right with God.

Please stop for a moment and think about the sins that you have committed in your past. "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). A person sins when he has ignored or violated God's commandments and laws and does as he pleases. Our sins have not only offended God, they're also the reason Jesus endured the agonizing pain of the cross. Jesus bore the punishment that we should have received. Consider what harm your sins have done to Him, to yourself, and to others. It's urgent that you come to the grace of God to deal with your sins.

Jesus endured an agonizing crucifixion and shed His blood so we might have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. He went to great lengths to show His utterly amazing love for us, hoping that we would respond to His love and His grace with a commitment to follow Him. The Lord doesn't force us to obey Him; He allows us to choose whether to follow Him. The reasons to serve the Lord are so many and so worthy and noble that I can hardly imagine why someone would say no to Jesus Christ.

We're asking you what will you do? Will you say no to the Lord and reject His offer of love and grace? Some people say no to the Lord again and again through the years, and they eventually harden their hearts altogether. Will you remain in sin? Will you wait until another day? Or, will you respond to God's love by repenting of those sins, confessing Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and by being baptized into Christ. I say to you what Ananias told Saul in Acts 22:16, "And now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name." Come to the Lord today; don't let anything keep you from serving the Lord.

Staying Right with God

When we become Christians, we take up our cross for life. There is no turning back. Today we're exploring how to stay right with God. The all-sufficient Word of God gives us the wisdom and the knowledge of God. The written Word grants "to us all things that pertain to life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). God gives us the instruction and the assurance that we need in order to take up our crosses and follow Jesus in this life and to inherit eternal life in heaven. God's Word contains His precepts and principles that transform our lives from sinners to saints and it gives us hope. We thank God that He has revealed His will to us in Scripture.

Salvation is God's gracious gift, but we must never take it for granted. We can't presume upon the grace or blessing of God. God's love is undeniable and precious, but we can spurn that love even as Christians. If we aren't careful to remain close to God, we can become apathetic or even harden our hearts against the Lord. The Lord Jesus complained against the church in Ephesus that they had left their "first love" (Revelation 2:4). Paul wrote, "for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica" (2 Timothy 4:10). Our enemy, sin, can cause our hearts to grow cold toward God and toward other people. Paul warned, "But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience with a branding iron" (1 Timothy 4:1-2). We must not fall to evil.

Our reading today comes from the epistle to the Hebrews 2:1-4. "For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will."

Some theologians in the sixteenth century began to tell people that once they were chosen for salvation by God, they could never be lost. This new and strange doctrine was certainly a departure from the Scriptures. Does the Bible teach that a Christian once saved can lose his salvation? We want to know what Scripture says.

The answer is clear and abundant that a Christian can fall from the grace of God and lose his salvation. Hebrews 3:12-14 says, "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you (brethren) an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day (brethren), as long as it's still called 'Today,' so that none of you (brethren) will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we (as brothers) have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end." Clearly a Christian brother can fall away from his faith, can be hardened against God by the deceitfulness of sin, and can quit believing. Christians must hold fast to their assurance firm to the end, if they wish to be saved.

Again, 2 Peter 2:20-21 says, "For if, after they (that is, Christians) have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and they are again entangled in them (that is, those sins) and are overcome, the last state has become

worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed to them.” People who have escaped the defilements of the world by knowing the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ are saved people. But if they get entangled and overcome by sin, they are in a worse condition than before they were saved.

God expects His children to remain faithful and involved in the church. When Christians abandon the practice of assembling with other saints and involving themselves with other Christians, they sin against God. How do we know that? Hebrews 10:26-27 says, “For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.” Here are people who willfully keep on sinning against God and they will face the judgment of God. We’re speaking here of people who willfully quit the Lord, not of sick folks who can no longer go to church but still love and serve the Lord. We don’t want to sin against God; we love Him and we want to serve Him. What we’re asking is “how can I avoid losing my faith and my soul by hardening my heart against the Lord?”

This is basically what the book of Hebrews is all about. In chapter 11 the Hebrew writer gives us a list of believers who held fast to God in spite of incredible challenges. Hebrews 12:1-2 says, “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

These witnesses urge us to remain faithful and to stay close to God. They’re saying it’s worth it to follow Jesus. If we fix our eyes on Jesus, we’ll run with endurance the whole race. Christianity isn’t a hundred-yard dash; no, it’s a marathon, lasting all of our lives. We can’t let anything or anyone or any sin separate us from God. We can’t live in rebellion or apathy and expect that at the end all will be okay anyway.

If we hope to stay saved, we must remain faithful. The apostle John said, “If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we’re deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us” (1 John 1:6-10). Walking in the light means walking with the Lord according to His teaching.

Sometimes people fool themselves into thinking they can live according to the world’s standards and still be close to God. But John said they are lying to themselves. Walking in the light means living according to God’s will. All Christians are imperfect, we know that; and even those who walk in the light still need the blood of Jesus to cleanse them. There’s a difference between a Christian who purposely walks in the light and one who purposely walks in darkness. One sets his heart on doing what is right but occasionally sins; he hates his sins and he repents of them. The other sets his heart on pleasing himself and doesn’t intend to follow Christ. He sins and he doesn’t care. He may do some good things, but his

life is set on pleasing himself. How you deal with your sin matters. John promised, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." We can find forgiveness as we keep the Lord close and we confess our sins to Him. It's when we abandon God, that we abandon His grace.

The Hebrew writer said, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:23-25). God knew that Christians need each other. We need that time to worship with each other, which helps us to stay strong spiritually. Those who quit attending church are like those who quit eating. They stop nourishing themselves. We need the church; we need to worship with others. We need their love and their encouragement.

We assemble together to stimulate one another to love and good works, to encourage each other, to learn from each other, to bless each other, and to grow with each other. When tough times come, there's no better place than the church to find that strength and encouragement. There will always be someone there who understands what you're experiencing and what you're going through, and they can help you. Staying faithful to God means staying close to His people, staying close to prayer, to singing hymns, to communion, to the Word of God, and to the hope that we share. We do that when we assemble together. We don't need to face life alone without the help of brothers and sisters who will stand beside us.

Jesus said to the troubled church in Smyrna, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). The promise of Jesus is for those who won't give up, who won't give out, who won't give in. The promise is the "crown of life," which is eternal life in heaven with Him. Staying faithful is worth it. Those who quit the church and quit the Lord regret it, but the faithful won't have any regrets. They'll rejoice forever that they stayed close to God, that they loved God more than their own lives. They would suffer again and again if they had to do it over; because they know they made the right choice.

I think about Paul and how he suffered greatly for his faith; he was willing to give up everything to follow Jesus Christ. He revealed in 2 Corinthians 11:24-28, "Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I've been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches." Even with all this, Paul could say, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18).

If we want to stay saved, we must remain willing to obey the Lord even if it costs us. People go to heaven because they deny themselves, and take up their crosses daily, and they

do it because they follow the Lord. Paul said, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13). Many people will lose their souls because they've hardened their hearts against God, saying what they will and what they won't obey in His Word. They end up rebelling against God, because they choose to follow their own experiences or their own will or their own thinking, rather than follow His will.

Whatever we might think, God is still God. He created us and gave His Son for us. If we rebel against Him we must pay the price for our sins. We cannot remain in His grace and favor while we live in opposition to His will. Jesus will only be our Savior if He is also our Lord. It's foolish to think we can have all the blessings of God and eternal life while we serve ourselves or we serve our own desires. Jesus is the author of eternal life to those who obey Him. According to Hebrews 5:8-9 we need to know that He will allow us to be saved if we obey Him. There's no promise of life for those who rebel, or unwilling to obey His teaching. Romans 8:12-13 says, "So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, then you will live." Have you humbled yourself before God?

If one is to stay saved, he must keep himself in the love of God (Jude 20-21). God loves us and nothing can separate us from God's love. But we can leave the love of God by our own choice. I never want to grow out of love for God, and for the Lord Jesus, or for the church. Love never fails and doesn't quit when things are hard. That means forgiving others; it means going the second mile; it means loving others the way that Jesus loved us. I know that without love in my heart, I'm just like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Without love in my heart I'm nothing. Without love, everything I do "profits me nothing." Keep yourself in the love of God. Keep your spiritual fire strong. Don't ever give up.

To become a Christian, one must believe with all his heart that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, that He is Lord. In faith and love, one must repent of his sins, turning away from sin and to the Lord. He must confess the name of Jesus before others, must be baptized (that is, immersed) in water as a penitent believer for the remission of his sins. Peter's instructions to the lost people on the day of Pentecost is still the message today. Acts 2:38 says, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." When you're baptized, the Lord washes away your sins and adds you to His church.

It's not how you start your walk with God that matters; it's how you, and whether you, finish. Decide in your heart that you'll never give up on God; you'll never give up your faith in Christ, and never give up on your conviction that His words are the words of truth. Jesus the Lord and Savior said, "the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:13). The devil will tempt you with sin and he'll lie to you. The devil is not your friend. He wants to cause you to lose your soul and endanger the souls of people that you love. Don't let the devil get a foothold in your life. Stay with the Lord Jesus; don't quit on God. Never, never, never give up! Keep studying your Bible; keep praying; keep going to church; and keep staying free from sin. Stay with the Lord who loved you enough to die on the cross for your sins. You'll never regret staying close to God.

"Ask, Seek, Knock"

A friend asked me to help him learn to pray more effectively. As I thought about it, I realized that I too need to improve my prayer life. The Bible always gives us the help and the encouragement that we need, and that's why we turn to Scripture for answers. We speak to God in prayer, but God speaks to us today through the written word. God gave the Scriptures for all people for all time.

In Luke 11:1-4 the Bible says, "Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' And he said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.'" Jesus was trying to teach the disciples a prayer, not a ritual; but a prayer that they could say, helping them to know what to pray in addressing God, the Father. Like the disciples, we all need to know how to pray to our Father.

Most of us have heard the Lord's Prayer. Luke's version is a little shorter than the one we read in Matthew 6, but there are many of the same points. Jesus taught us to pray in this way. This passage deserves a close examination. Let's go to the Bible to find what Jesus, our Lord, desires from us. Our task is to please God and to pray in the way that He desires. Worship to God takes place when holy people praise a holy God in a holy way. We should be such people.

Our reading today comes from the words of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:7-11. "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" Let's pray together. Father we're thankful that You hear our prayers and that You answer them. Help us to ask, and to seek, and to knock, and to approach You out of love. And Father we're grateful for the love You give us through Jesus our Lord. It's in His name we pray, Amen!

I sometimes feel the need to re-enroll in the school of prayer so that I can deepen my relationship with God. Prayer is not a useless ritual; it's the personal means by which we lay our hearts out before God. If we want our prayers to be meaningful, we must first realize that we're praying to God, our Father. God is occasionally called a father in the Old Testament. He's called the Father who created us in Isaiah 63:16 and Malachi 2:10, but the Old Testament rarely speaks of God as a Father the way that Jesus does. The Lord Jesus teaches us to pray to God as "our Father who is in heaven."

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus refers to God as "our Father who is in heaven." When we pray, we're not talking to a peer, or an acquaintance, or even a boss. We're speaking to someone greater than a governor, a king, or the president. We're speaking to the God who created us, who rules the universe, and who is in heaven. We should humble ourselves in prayer and give Him our utmost respect.

Jesus was indeed the Son of God, and He called the God of heaven "My Father." The relationship of father and son is intimate. God is not some strange and distant "Force" out in

the universe; He is close like a father to his children. When we become Christians, we also become children of God. John said about Jesus, "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:11-13). Through Christ, we can call the Almighty God of all creation, "our Father." He is indeed "our" Father in Christ.

Second, we need to consider the phrase, "Hallowed be Thy name." The word "hallowed" is an old word that means to make holy or to consecrate as sacred. I fear we've lost the sense of the sacred in our day. We're speaking to our God, who knows all things, who is all-wise, all-loving, and entirely pure and holy. When Isaiah came into the presence of God in Isaiah 6, he saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. The seraphim called out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" When you pray, do you think of the holiness of God?

Isaiah then said, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:5). When we consider the greatness of God, then look at our own sinful lives, we realize that on our own none of us can stand righteous before God. We're all lost without Christ. We too are a sinful people living in a sinful land; but because of Jesus and His blood, we can be cleansed from sin. God's grace should encourage us not to take God for granted but to appreciate Him even more.

When Nadab and Abihu offered up "unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them," Leviticus 10:2 says, "fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord." They presumptuously took the incense pans and got fire from a strange or unauthorized place. They acted on their own without any instruction from God. By acting on their own rather than listening to God, they failed to give God His rightful place. In Leviticus 10:3, Moses told Aaron what God said about the matter. "By those who come near Me (that is, near God) I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored." God wants us to worship Him according to His teaching; and that's how we honor and treat Him as holy. When people today act on their own authority and worship God in ways that are not commanded by Scripture, they dishonor God. For this reason, we don't use instruments of music in worship in the church; we don't dance or burn incense; and we don't turn our worship into entertainment. Why? Because we have no authorization in the New Testament. Our God is holy; and we must listen to Him.

Furthermore, holy worship must be accompanied by a holy life. Approaching God in prayer has much to do with how we live. God wants us to pray to Him with reverence in our hearts and in our lives. James 1:26 says, "If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet he doesn't bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless." Reverence isn't merely to be in our tone of voice; but it must also be in our lives.

Third, Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The kingdom of Jesus, of course, is the church. Paul said, "He (speaking of God) has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13). The kingdom, or the church, is where the King Jesus rules. Jesus taught us to pray that the will of God be done

on earth as it is in heaven. How I wish that were true! Can you imagine how much better this world would be if everyone followed God's will?

This would be a world without crime or war or violence, that honored father and mother, honored Biblical marriage, and valued children. People would treat others the way they wanted to be treated. People wouldn't be so selfish and self-centered, but would care for the poor and the downcast. We'd give much thanks and stop complaining; we'd trust much and not deceive; we'd be genuine and not phony, and we'd lift God up rather than tear Him down. It's easy to want everybody else to live out the prayer "Thy will be done"; but what about me and you? Are we willing to live by the will of God?

Fourth, Jesus teaches us to pray, "Give us each day our daily bread." Have you considered how dependent we are on God? All that we possess comes from His hands. Many forget what God has done for them, that "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17). God gives us the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe, the shelter we enjoy.

The Psalmist David reminds us, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Psalm 103:1-5). We must never forget his benefits. Prayer reminds us of our own weakness before God.

Fifth, we should pray, "forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us." Many today ignore their sins, and yet the Lord calls us not only to confess our sins but to ask God to forgive us. Some say there is no such thing as sin, but our consciences tell us differently, and they tell us when we've done wrong. We're asking God not to hold the things that we've done wrong against us. None of us want to be enemies of God, because God one day will hold our souls in His hand. We want the grace and love of God, but sin stands in the way. We need forgiveness, freedom from sin. Christians must confess and repent of their sins and ask God's forgiveness.

First John 1:9-10 says to Christians, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." Confession of sin takes away the deceitfulness. We're no longer hiding from God but revealing to Him not only that we've sinned but also our sorrow for our sins. Our godly sorrow should lead us then to repentance. Repentance is a change of heart that leads to a change of behavior. Just because we admit to God that we've sinned doesn't mean that we have repented. Repentance turns away from sin (because we love God) and it turns to God's ways. It's self-deception to ask God to forgive our sins and then just keep on repeating those very sins. We must both confess and forsake our sins.

But forgiveness is not just one way. God expects us to forgive others who sin against us. If we're unwilling to forgive others, we can't ask God to forgive us. If God's love hasn't touched our lives enough to make us open to others, how can we expect God to remain open to us? Jesus said, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, then your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15). Really meaningful prayer comes from hearts that are

willing to live what they pray. God knows our hearts. When our hearts and our lives match our words, God hears our prayers; but when we rebel against God's will, God closes his ears against us.

Isaiah prophesied, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear" (Isaiah 59:1-2). The most important step in praying effectively is to get our souls right with the living God. Remember what James said, "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16). God will hear our prayers if we put Him first in our lives, if we love Him, and if we stay away from what is sinful. God invites us to pray and He wants to hear from us. But let's live for the Lord and take our requests to His throne out of pure lives.

Abraham Lincoln said, "I've been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day." Many people cheat themselves by failing to pray. They cheat themselves out of a relationship with God, out of the help of God, and out of the blessing of God. We can never be good at praying if we never take time to pray. Those who pray in the sunshine find themselves able to pray when dark days come, but those who never pray until trouble comes hardly know how to pray. Jesus began the agony of the cross praying "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He ended his time on the cross, praying, "Father into Your hands, I commit my spirit." Jesus prayed at the hardest moments of His life. He knew how much He needed His Father. We too need our Father's love and His ear. We need God as much as we need air to breathe, water to drink, and food to eat. We can't do without Him, and we don't have to. Let's pray together. Father we're thankful that You love us and You hear our prayers. Help us to love You and to devote ourselves to you. Help us to show You how much we care for You. This is our prayer in the name of Jesus, Amen!

Many Christians wonder why God seems distant, why He doesn't answer their prayers immediately. They don't consider whether they are living in a way that pleases and glorifies Him. Nor do they consider whether they stand in God's grace. When people fail to live for the Lord, they shouldn't be surprised that God might not hear their prayers. God loves His family and will not abandon them, but sometimes children of God pull away from Him. When Christians quit the Lord, quit the church, and quit living righteously, they push God out of their hearts. They desert God. The Lord would love to have you come back to Him. He wants to be close to you, but you have to be willing to draw close to Him. Won't you do that?

We can have God in our lives helping us every step of the way. If you're not a Christian, I hope you'll not waste another day waiting to become one. If you believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God; if you repent of your sins; if you confess the name of Jesus before others; and if you'll be baptized in water in the name of the Lord, and do it for the forgiveness of your sins, you'll become a Christian. When you're baptized, the Lord will wash away your sins (Acts 22:16). The Lord will add you to His church (Acts 2:41); and God will make you His child (Galatians 3:26-27). You'll be able to enjoy the grace of God and know your Father in heaven hears your prayers.

Why not become a Christian today and enter into a loving relationship with the Lord Jesus? Why not turn from sin and be obedient to His will? God will draw close to you, if you will draw close to Him. Do it today. Nothing is more important!

HOPE

As a fish without water or a man without air, so is the soul without hope. Today we're going to explore the great hope that we have in Christ. The Lord gave us His Word so that we might have hope. He gives us the truth so that we might put our hope in the truth and not be fooled by half-truths or lies. We can't separate hope from the truth, any more than you can separate faith from the truth. False hope cannot save our souls and assure us of eternal life. That's why we need to know the truth of God's Word and to believe and obey it. This is why from week to week we can't be satisfied with anything less than the truth of God's Word.

Romans 15:4 says, "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." When I consider how morally evil this world is, I remember Noah was righteous and saved his family. When I have a giant problem, I remember David defeated Goliath. When I think I'm alone, I remember that God told Elijah seven thousand had not bowed the knee to Baal. When I hear "people can't change", I recall Nineveh and how they repented at the preaching of Jonah. When I think things can't get worse, I remember the book of Job had an ending. When I walk through a valley, I remember Psalm 23 and the Lord is "with me." When I wonder why I'm here, I remember Joseph; and God had a plan for his life. I remember Moses both as a baby and as a shepherd; and God had a plan for him. God also has a plan for you and me.

Our reading today comes from Psalm 33:18-22. "Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, On those who hope for His lovingkindness, To deliver their soul from death And to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help and our shield. For our heart rejoices in Him, Because we trust in His holy name. Let Your lovingkindness, O LORD, be upon us, According as we have hoped in You."

Let's examine the word "hope." Hope is the confident expectation or belief in the fulfillment of something that God promises and we desire. Present hurts and uncertainty over the future create the constant need for hope. We long for something better than what we have now. In trouble we hope for relief; in war we hope for peace; in sin we hope for forgiveness; in death we hope for eternal life. Hope is not merely expecting something; it is a confident, trusting expectation in God's promises. Faith and hope intertwine. Because we believe, we hope. We believe, because we have the assurance of God. We have it in black and white in His Word, the Bible.

Paul said, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 1:18-20). We need to open the eyes of our hearts. As Christians, we have access to our Father; we can enjoy the surpassing greatness of His power and His blessing. We can hope in our calling as Christians and confidently expect to live forever, because our Father in heaven raised Jesus from the dead.

First Timothy 1:1 says, "Christ Jesus is our hope." In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul speaks of some who were denying the resurrection. Paul explained in verses 17 and 18, "if Christ has not been

raised, then your faith is worthless; you're still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished." Without the hope of Christ in the resurrection, we will perish in our sins and have no hope of life beyond the grave. So, Peter urges us, "Therefore, gird your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought about to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:13). Let being with the Lord and the Father in heaven fill your heart each day. Let hope motivate you to live as a Christian should live.

The apostle John declared, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called the children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who has this hope, this kind of hope in him purifies himself as he is pure" (1 John 3:1-3). Hope for heaven and eternal life leads us to put away sin and to serve the Lord in holiness. If you hope for heaven, are you letting sin grow in your life? Purify yourself; get right with God.

When life becomes difficult and painful, we need hope. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet. Throughout his life people opposed and ignored his prophecies. Israel abandoned the God of heaven and became more and more idolatrous. They brought devastation upon themselves by forsaking God. God promised through the true prophet Jeremiah to destroy Jerusalem, but the people believed the false prophets who prophesied peace. They thought they could continue in sin and God wouldn't care. They were wrong, and God permitted Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon to destroy the city and even the temple. You might ask, where is hope now? How could evil win and righteousness lose? Here we need to see two lessons.

First, though Jeremiah watched the destruction of Jerusalem, his relationship with the Lord remained unchanged. The world was falling down around his shoulders; Babylon had set the city on fire, killed and enslaved his fellow-citizens, and destroyed the house of God. He said his peace and his strength had perished; he felt so hopeless; and he had forgotten happiness. It was at this low point in his life, that he recalled the love and the mercy of God. Jeremiah wrote, "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in Him.' The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him" (Lamentations 3:21-24). If we set our hearts on the Lord, we'll see more than physical circumstances. We'll remember all the good that God does for us each and every day.

Second, Jeremiah learned the present isn't all there is; it isn't the end of the story. When God was about to allow the destruction of Jerusalem, Jeremiah bought a field belonging to his cousin Anathoth and he sealed the deal in an earthenware jar so that it would last a long time. The Bible says, "For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: 'Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land'" (Jeremiah 32:15). Seventy years later, just as the prophecy said in Jeremiah 29:10, the Jews returned to Jerusalem. God keeps His promises in His time. The apostle Paul, even with all his suffering, knew too that God would care for him in the future. He said, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18). God is utterly and ultimately good to us; but He acts in His own time.

Paul asked the question, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35-39).

Hard times happen to everybody and some things we’ll never understand. We shouldn’t imagine, however, that hard times mean God has forgotten or abandoned us. I treasure a promise of God that I’ve seen fulfilled frequently. “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). Paul says, “we know!” It’s not “we think,” or “we feel,” or “we imagine”; but “we know.” Not everything, of course, is good; but God is able to make our most difficult circumstances “work together for good.”

Tornadoes, earthquakes, fires, and hurricanes aren’t good; but the devastation they bring touches the hearts of people and calls them to do good to ease the misfortunes of others. We’re called as Christians to “love our neighbors.” Galatians 6:10 says, “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” Many do loving acts of kindness for people they don’t even know, because their hearts of compassion, trained by the love of God and the cross of Christ, lead them to act. God’s love moves people to demonstrate their love. “We love, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

We can have hope even when we have sinned. We have hope because Jesus Christ came to save His people from their sins. Sin is real and it’ll cost you your soul. If you try on your own merits to overcome, you won’t succeed; you’ll have no hope because you can’t earn salvation. The Lord must save us because we cannot save ourselves. Some, looking at their sin, begin to imagine they are beyond saving. Remember: the Lord came to earth to save us.

The apostle Paul was once Saul of Tarsus, the persecutor of the church. He was “formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor.” The blood of the Lord Jesus, however, cleansed him from sin because he “acted ignorantly in unbelief.” So, Paul said, “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:15-16). Those who humble their hearts and follow the Lord can have hope, because of the abundant grace of Christ, which is greater than our sins.

When I consider the brevity of life, I have hope in the Lord. The Lord’s love is not only for today; it lasts forever. We are more than flesh and blood, and the Lord wants us to live with Him through eternity. Jesus has made the way. Jesus said, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms (or dwelling places). And if it were not so, I would have told you but I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself, that where I am there you may be also” (John 14:1-3). Because God raised Jesus from the dead, we can have true hope in eternal life.

Hope is a great blessing, but we must exercise our hope in the Lord by taking our faith and obedience to Him seriously. Peter said, “Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:10-11).

I'll never forget my first ride on a commercial airplane. It was bitterly cold and icy at the airport in Memphis, Tennessee. Dark gray clouds filled the skies. Jackie and my four precious daughters had already gone to Oklahoma for the holidays and to be with family, and oh, how I missed them. A friend told me about a new airline that had great prices so I booked a flight over the phone. When I got to the airport I discovered the plane was quite old. The workers were de-icing the plane which caused me some concern. When we finally boarded the plane, there was no heat inside, and the plane was shaking up and down. That was no comfort.

I was feeling down as we waited to take off, since everything seemed so dark. When the plane took off I gripped the armrest as we ascended. I didn't expect what I was about to see. We entered dark clouds; but when we burst through them, the sun was shining brightly! I had never been above the clouds. No matter how dark and dreary it is on the ground, the sun still shines above the clouds. God is still in heaven.

We humans are limited by space, time, and intelligence. We see what's happening around us and we forget there is a greater sense of reality. It's so easy to lose sight of God. An unchanging and unchangeable God created us and made us some unfailing promises. When you think all is dreary and lost, remember the Father is still on his throne; the Holy Spirit is still speaking through the written word; Jesus is still coming again; the gospel still has power to save; and prayer still reaches the ear of the Father. In an Appalachian art gallery sits a picture of an old burned-out mountain shack. All that remained was the chimney. In front of this destroyed home stood an old man with a small boy crying, clutching at his pair of patched overalls. Underneath the picture was the simple caption, "Hush child, God ain't dead!" That vivid picture of a burned-out mountain shack, that old man, the weeping child, and those words “God ain't dead” keep declaring hope. Instead of tragedies being a time to despair, God gives us hope!

No matter how difficult life becomes, don't give up on God. Fix your hope completely on Him! Serve Him! Love Him! Wait for Him! Psalm 43:5 says, “Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why are you disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him, The help of my countenance, and my God.” Why should we hope in God? Because God is still on the throne of heaven, and nothing can change that. No army can conquer Him, and no group can vote Him out of office. Jesus is Lord over all!

That's why we must yield our hearts and our lives to Him. We must take up our crosses daily and follow Him. We do this by placing our utter trust in Him and in His Word, by repenting of our sins, by confessing Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and by being baptized in His name. We're baptized into Christ and into His death according to Romans 6:3. While the disciples baptize people in water, God at the same time unites them with the Lord in His death, burial, and resurrection; and that takes place in baptism. When God unites us with Christ in His death, the blood of Christ does away with our sins according to Romans 6:4-7. Put your trust and your hope in the blood of Christ by being baptized and following Christ for the rest of your life!