

WHY?

QUESTIONS WITH NO (GOOD) ANSWERS

Ecumenical Devotional Guide

Fall 2024

SMU Student
Affairs

Office of the Chaplain
and Religious Life



welcome

2024 FALL ECUMENICAL DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

The Office of the Chaplain & Religious Life at SMU is excited to provide the 2024 Fall Ecumenical Devotional Guide to the SMU community. Christians across the world participate and grow in their spiritual lives in a variety of ways. Through prayer, communion, confession, music, art, nature, readings, and much more, we all explore ways of deepening our faith, and connecting with God. The OCRL believes that the exploration of your spiritual life is vital not only to your faith but also to your education, personal growth, and overall well-being during your time at SMU. In light of this belief, we offer this Devotional Guide as a resource for the SMU community in order that it might be a reflective tool for your own exploration in your journey of faith.

The Christian tradition is deep and wide. The word "ecumenical" refers to this collective body of Christian traditions throughout the world. To say something is "ecumenical" is to say that it strives after unity within areas of common ground amidst differences in thought and practice. Without ignoring these differences, to be "ecumenical" is simply to aim towards a collective expression of a shared faith. We hope that this guide will reflect this goal. The SMU campus features a diverse community of Christian traditions. In this guide, you will find devotionals written by students, staff, and faculty representing the variety of traditions found at SMU. Wherever you find yourself on your faith journey, we hope their words may not only guide you in prayer and reflection but also encourage and challenge you along the way.

As an ecumenical resource, this guide is a collaboration from across the university. No one viewpoint is meant to be representative of all Christians or all traditions. Instead, we hope it is a reflection of the wide story that God is telling amongst our communities. If you have questions or want to get connected with a specific community on campus, please reach out to chaplain@smu.edu.

USING THE GUIDE

This guide contains devotionals around our theme for the semester, Why: Questions with no (good) answers. The college setting is unique for many reasons, but perhaps one of the most important is that it provides an opportunity for people to ask big questions of meaning. Who am I? What is my purpose? How should I live? In the OCRL, we believe that these “meaning-making” questions are crucial to the life of faith. We all come to know more about God and ourselves when we are willing to wrestle with these kinds of questions. However, these important questions do not always have clear or easy answers; and sometimes, our life experiences continue to challenge the answers we thought we had. It is often referenced that Jesus asked more questions in the Bible than he provided direct answers. As such, this devotional guide will explore a who, what, when, where, how, and why question asked in scripture. Each author of an entry will not seek to answer these questions; instead, they will offer their reflections on how they have wrestled and lived out these questions within their own life. We ask you to consider the same.

This guide is broken up into 6 sections with a total of fifteen entries. Each section will begin with a reading from scripture and the entries will reflect on this passage. Devotionals will include prayers, a reflection, and a guided practice for you to explore. There is no prescribed way to use this guide. Use it daily and start the guide over afterwards. Meet weekly with a small group of friends and read along together. Or even simply take note of a few spiritual practices and try putting them into your normal routine. Ultimately, allow the Holy Spirit to guide you in prayer and reflection, and allow this guide to be a simple tool along the way.

Grace and peace to all this semester as we reflect on “Why?”

Note: Unless otherwise noted excerpts from Scripture are taken from New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition. 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Who is my Neighbor?

READING: LUKE 10:25-37

25 An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” **26** He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” **27** He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.” **28** And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

29 But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, “**And who is my neighbor?**” **30** Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. **31** Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. **32** So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. **33** But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. **34** He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. **35** The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ **36** Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” **37** He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most recognized stories from the Bible, and asks us the question, “Who is my neighbor?” At first glance, Jesus’s response is quite straight forward, suggesting that all people are neighbors regardless of who they are. Yet, loving our neighbors, especially those we do not like, have done us harm, or are difficult to love, is no easy task. If our neighbor is the person hardest to love, then perhaps this question becomes much more difficult to live out.

entry one

OPENING PRAYER

God be in my head and in my understanding
God be in mine eyes and in my looking

The prayer is part of the Sarum Primer 1558

<https://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/poetry-prayers-visual-arts/sarum-primer/#:~:text=Sarum%20Primer%20is%20a%20collection,the%20Latin%20word>

REFLECTION:

In the book of Luke, the story is told of Jesus' encounter with a nameless expert of the law. The core of the conversation went beyond knowing and hearing the law to seeing and doing. The expert of the law came with credentials to "test" Jesus. Jesus in response to the expert's query, "Who is my neighbor?" tells the parable of the good Samaritan.

What I find interesting in reading this parable, is that there are no names mentioned, we are introduced to the characters by their deeds, titles, and circumstances. As I read Luke 10:30-37 for the "umpteenth" time, I wonder when I have looked for loopholes to justify excluding others. This would be because they seem, nameless, distant, and not like me, rather than looping them into conversation, care, and community.

I know in my life there have been occasions when I may have felt left out and ignored. Yet, there have been times, that I have been too intent on getting on with my life that I have overlooked the "neighbor" and not wanting to take the initiative to be friendly, start a conversation, or even help. Yet, I know how fulfilling it is when I have gone out of my way to include others and make them feel welcome in my neighborhood by offering to help the family that has recently relocated and joined our school community. To smile and compliment the "stranger" who happens to sit next to me on the long-haul flight. Or even roll up my sleeves and allow my schedule to be disrupted because I am going out of my way to simply care, not by my words but with real action.

CLOSING PRAYER

Drawing on the inspiration of the Sarum Primer I often pray:

God open my eyes, help me to see and be truly present yet alive to your care and love for me and others...in the smile of a stranger, in the kind word spoken to me, help me to smile in return and share some kindness.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor reflects on spiritual practices that we can incorporate into everyday life. In her chapter entitled, "The Practice of Paying Attention," Taylor suggests the importance of practicing reverence for the world around you. Reverence is the recognition of something greater than self—something that is beyond your control and understanding. It is easy to view our lives as the center of the story. Yet, we are one line in the grand story God is shaping in the world. To practice paying attention, to practice reverence, is "as simple as looking twice at people and things you might just easily ignore." This week, find a space to stop and sit for 20 minutes or so and simply notice what you see. Reflect on your surroundings. Pay attention to the people that pass you by. Recall that each of them is made by God, loved by God, and sustained by God. Offer a prayer for all that you notice and thank God that your story is being told amidst the story that God is telling.

*Devotional compiled and written by Abby Olufeyimi
Perkins Class of 2025*

entry two

OPENING PRAYER

Dear Mother, Father, Friend:

Teach us to love others as you have loved us. Help us to look at others and find what is good, right, and just. Help us to look at ourselves and find what is lovable, loving, and neighborly. Amen

REFLECTION

My partner is a good neighbor. She knows everybody on our street, and they know her. For years, I had a stressful job, and that was my excuse for just smiling and waving but never getting to know our neighbors. She stayed home with our son and took him outside to play. I told myself that's how she got to know everybody. But then our son grew up, she went back to work full-time, we moved to a different neighborhood, and I took a much less stressful job. Still, it seemed she knew all the neighbors. It became a joke between us: she is the nice one. Even as we joked, I had to grapple with the implications. Does that mean I'm the mean one? Does that mean I'm the bad neighbor?

I'm an academic, so I could just pretend that I would have nothing to talk to neighbors about. But I am not really that heady. I can talk to a wall. Ok, then, I'm busy, and I could just pretend that I don't have time for idle chatter. But who am I kidding? I love to talk on the phone, and I have the time to binge-watch *Mind Candy* on television or to read all the fiction I want. I have to face it; the truth is, I am afraid. We are a lesbian couple, and my internalized homophobia has taught me to reject others before they have a chance to reject me.

This all began to change when my brother-in-law sent us a flag for our favorite football team (Geaux Tigers). Our neighbors soon hung an Alabama flag. Our house is 100% ABB (anybody but Bama).

Our neighbor and I started friendly ribbing over the fence. Then he invited us over for a big game, and he was kind when his team crushed ours. In years to come, he would be equally gracious when our team eked it out over his. What started as football turned into Friday nights around their firepit talking.

Scott and Melanie voted differently from us, believed differently from us, and raised their kids differently from us. But they became some of the closest neighbors, indeed, true friends, we've had in town. We checked on each other's kids, we loved on, and then wept over each other's dogs. We knew how to get into each other's houses, and knew each other's preferred beverage. We grew to care for and ultimately love each other. I think of them often. They have moved, and we don't see each other much anymore. But when we do, it is sheer delight for me. Still, I know that if I didn't know him and ran into him in a grocery store, I would steer clear because of my assumption that he would reject me, and that he and I could never be friends.

When we first started the football rivalry, I jokingly said to our young son, "We don't like them. They are for Alabama." A few months later, as I was heading next door, I said to Read, "I'm headed over to Scott's." He looked confused and said, "I thought we didn't like them." I explained to him that I had been joking those weeks back, that Scott and Melanie were safe people in our circle. But what if I hadn't had that moment to explain? What if my kid had held onto my words or, worse, to my internalized fears, about neighbors? What if he did likewise?

When I read this passage in Luke, I've always been pointed toward the Good Samaritan. But I find myself wondering about the doctor and the Levite. What kept them from stopping to help? Were they too busy? Too self-absorbed? Too biased against the man who needed help? Or were they afraid of difference? Could they, too, have been afraid of rejection for any number of reasons?

CLOSING PRAYER

God, teach me to lean away from my assumptions about other people and into openness. Teach me to stop and help and, just as importantly, to accept help from others. Remind me that you've made this world with all of its diversity and splendor. Amen

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Take a meditative walk around your neighborhood or even at work. Learn the names of at least one person a day for a week. Hold those names in the light, remembering that each of those people are reflection of the divine.

*Devotional compiled and written by Paula Garrett
Perkins Class of 2027*

entry three

OPENING PRAYER

O Lord,

Send out your light and your truth;
let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy hill
and to your dwelling!
Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy.

Amen.

(Prayer adapted from Psalm 43:3-4a, ESV)

REFLECTION:

My family moved from Canada to the United States in the middle of my sixth-grade year. As an intimidated, helpless eleven-year-old trying to adjust to a new school in a new country, I was met with incredible kindness through a fellow sixth-grader, Nathan. He voluntarily showed me around the school, making sure I knew where each of my classes was. He took the time to help me open my faulty locker whenever it got stuck. When I went to the wrong place for recess, he found me outside and showed me where to go. And at lunchtime, he welcomed me without hesitation into his friend group. He quickly became my first friend in the United States.

In Luke 10, the Samaritan not only spends a whole day taking care of the injured man but also gives much of his resources and money. Not only was the man a stranger, but presumably a foreigner – a Jew – during a time when there was deep hostility between Jews and Samaritans.

In Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, we see the ultimate example of selfless love. We weren't lovable at all, sinners who deserved no mercy in the eyes of a holy God. Yet Jesus chose to do the unimaginable – he “emptied himself” and “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death” (Philippians 2:7-8), so that through faith we are welcomed into the family of God as his children, where we belong forever!

Especially during the Fall semester, we are given abundant opportunities to meet new people from all kinds of backgrounds and lovingly bring them into our lives. One of the easiest ways to introduce people into a welcoming community and to show them God's love might be to invite them to our campus ministries and churches. The joy and transformation that God's saving grace causes in our own lives can empower us to love those around us. As John Piper writes in *Desiring God*, "Love is the overflow of joy in God that gladly meets the needs of others."

CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Fill me with the joy of knowing you,
and remind me of those who still need you.
Help me to see them as you do,
and teach me how to love like you.

Amen.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Think of at least one person you recently met that you could invite to the campus ministry or church you are a part of. Pray for them, and plan to ask them to join you at the next event.

*Devotional compiled and written by Miles Chen
Class of 2026*

What must I do to inherit eternal life?

READING: LUKE 18:18-25

18 A certain ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, **what must I do to inherit eternal life?**” **19** Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. **20** You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. Honor your father and mother.’ ” **21** He replied, “I have kept all these since my youth.” **22** When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” **23** But when he heard this, he became sad, for he was very rich. **24** Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! **25** Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

What score do I need on the SAT to get into my dream school?
 What extracurriculars do I need on my resume to get the job?
 What do I need to practice in order to win the game? Our lives are filled with the same kind of question asked by the rich ruler in this passage, questions that ask “what is the to-do list that I need to complete in order to get what I want.” These questions are not bad questions to ask ourselves because they push us to achieve, learn, and grow, but they also reflect our results-oriented culture. When our lives are narrowed down to a to-do list, we become pre-occupied with these questions. In the life of faith, we find ourselves asking, “what must I do to earn God’s love?”

entry four

OPENING PRAYER

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord, open the eyes of my heart. I want to see you.

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord, open the eyes of my heart. I want to see you.

REFLECTION

One hot day this past July, my son and I were at a Wendy's drive-through to get some Frosties. A young man was standing next to the menu with disheveled hair, dirty clothes, and a blanket around his shoulders. As I pulled up, he waved at me, gesturing to his mouth to indicate that he wanted something to eat. He didn't ask for much: just a Frostie and a burger. After I handed the man his food and we said goodbye, my son asked why we kept seeing unhoused people in our neighborhood. "Homes and food cost more than people can afford," I replied. Then he asked, "Are we lucky because we have a house and enough food to eat?" "Yes," I said, "We are. That's why we never say no when someone says they want something to eat."

I live in Austin, where the unhoused population continues to increase. Of money, John Wesley said, "It is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked. It gives to the traveler and the stranger where to lay his head. By it we may supply the place of a husband to the widow, and of a father for the fatherless; we may be a defense for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick... a lifter up from the gates of death." In other words, persons with more than they need should share with those who lack. Where the Holy Spirit gives life, when we share, we offer life-giving sustenance.

The question of flourishing is similar to what the rich man asks Jesus from the passage in Luke. What must we do to have what we need? It is no coincidence that God's Reign is often compared to a banquet; no one goes without. In this moral life, one can do everything "right" and still end up without a roof over their head.

I recently had a conversation with a teacher who couldn't pay rent after a catastrophic medical emergency and had to live in their car. In a housing desert, our responsibility to care for neighbors in need is paramount.

We can't earn eternal life. It is a freely offered gift of God's unconditional love and grace. No one is worthy of it, yet we are all equally loved in God's eyes. If God offers eternal life to all, it is right for us to give to those in need. This offers a glimpse of God's Reign, a balm of love and hope, an offering of justice and mercy in a merciless world.

CLOSING PRAYER

Loving God, we give you thanks for the gift of life. As we move through this broken world, in the midst of poverty, war, and political strife, may we find opportunities to be life-givers to others. In your son's name, we pray, Amen.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

What does God's Reign look like to you? Gather your favorite art supplies or your journal and compose a clay structure, painting, sketch, or poem to express your vision of eternal life

*Devotional compiled and written by Elizabeth Hoffman
Perkins Class of 2025*

entry five

OPENING PRAYER

Divine Wisdom
dwell among and within
Guide, inspire, and illuminate
in this blessed hour

REFLECTION

"Never answer a question you don't want to know the answer to."

The man should have seen it coming. It probably wasn't a secret that the itinerant teacher and wonderworker from Capernaum was suspicious of wealth and acquisitiveness. After all, one did not have to look far in the Galilee to see the fruit of economic injustice.

Did Jesus tell this man something he didn't already know? Or, in his quest for spiritual perfection, had the man simply refused to be honest with himself?

Sometimes in our spiritual journeys, we are genuinely blind to parts of ourselves that need growth. Other times, we know, we just don't know. That is, we just aren't yet ready to accept that now is the time to step into the sanctification of all of ourselves.

This story reminds us that the journey toward holiness is hard. Growth is hard. Change is hard. Transformation is hard.

Accepting and letting in the Divine so that every last bit of ourselves is bathed in the light of Perfect Love is hard.

And the journey is never done.

CLOSING PRAYER

Divine Wisdom
grant me vision to see
and to accept
every aspect of the soul bereft of light
That I might enter into the
Kingdom of God

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

On a cool morning, afternoon, or evening consider taking a mindful walk. It could be somewhere on campus, or a hike, or the Habito Labyrinth. As you walk mindfully, consider whether this is a season for transformation with regard to attitudes, ideas, or dispositions that you have been putting off for a more ideal time. And, if so, consider some concrete steps you might take to begin a practice of transformation.

*Devotional written and compiled by Jon Carman
SMU Religious Life Coordinator*

entry six

OPENING PRAYER

God teach me to be generous, to serve you as you deserve, to give without counting the cost, to toil and not to seek rest, to labor and not ask for reward, but knowledge that I am doing your will. Amen.

Prayer adapted from St. Ignatius of Loyola

REFLECTION

One of my favorite quotes from the renowned sociologist Brene Brown is “clear is kind, unclear is unkind.” In her book, *Dare to Lead*, Brown reflects on the importance of setting clear expectations and being honest as a leader even if doing so might cause strife or conflict. She suggests that we ultimately do more harm than good when we are unclear to those who we lead.

Perhaps this Rich Ruler show how got his hands on an advanced copy of *Dare to Lead* (a very advanced copy!). With Brene Brown’s words in mind, he asks Jesus an understandable question: what’s expected of me. It is a question that we ask often in everyday life. From class assignments to professional responsibilities at work, clear expectations help us navigate busy and demanding lives. So, we can relate to the ruler’s question and if you are like me, you’ve found yourself asking the same question to God. What’s expected of me?

Jesus’s response to the ruler is quite clear, but it does not feel too kind. there is no sugar-coating or caveats for the ruler. Does Jesus respond similarly to our question? The answer is assuredly yes, but I might suggest you read Jesus’s response to you in the context of your own situation. Most of us are not “rich rulers” of our day. And Jesus had much to say about the hoarding of wealth, but there is another layer to this story beyond the commentary on the ruler’s financial wealth.

The author of Luke only gives us two descriptors of this man in the story: he is a ruler and he is rich. Jesus’s answer to this man’s question asks him to leave behind the only two things that define him: his status and wealth. What must this man do to inherit eternal life? He must give all of himself up to Jesus. Laying down the descriptors of rich and ruler, the man would simply become a follower of Jesus.

So, what is expected of us? I might suggest that Jesus answers the same way: give all of ourselves up to Jesus. We hold onto a variety of descriptors every day: Honor Student, Athlete, Leader, Chaplain, Smart, Witty, Funny, and so on. We hold onto these things because they help provide us a clear sense of who we are, but Jesus simply wants you to be a follower of him. Of course, letting go of those things is much easier said than done. For me, the expectations might be clear but meeting them is a challenge I must face each day.

CLOSING PRAYER

God teach me to be generous, to serve you as you deserve, to give without counting the cost, to toil and not to seek rest, to labor and not ask for reward, but knowledge that I am doing your will. Amen.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

There is an ancient form of Christian meditation called, “Centering Prayer.” During this exercise, practitioners typically spend several minutes in intentional meditative prayer focusing on a verse, a word that describes the character of God, or even simply their own breathing. The goal of the exercise is simply “to be.” In the midst of our hectic pace of life, centering prayer offers a moment to pause and open our hearts and minds to God.

This week take a moment to practice centering prayer with a particular focus on a descriptor of yourself that you need to give away to God.

Find a quiet spot to sit with your back straight to ease your breathing. Relax your body and sit in such a way that nothing will hurt, go numb, or be otherwise uncomfortable. Then meditate on the following phrase: “I am not only (fill in your word here), I am a child of God.” Simply sit in silence for a few minutes focusing on this phrase. It may help to follow the rhythm of your breathing. As you breathe in, say the first line. As you breathe out, say the second.

As you try this form of prayer, your mind may wonder. That’s okay! Let the thought wash over you and return to your practice. Set a time on your phone or simply finish when you are ready. At the end, offer one final prayer of gratitude to God.

*Devotional written and compiled by Kaleb Loomis
SMU Associate Chaplain*

(When) How long, oh Lord?

READING: HABAKKUK 1:1-4

1 The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

2 O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,

and you will not listen?

Or cry to you "Violence!"

and you will not save?

3 Why do you make me see wrongdoing

and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me;

strife and contention arise.

4 So the law becomes slack,

and justice never prevails.

The wicked surround the righteous;

therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

This passage provides us with a question to God that is decidedly quite different in nature. Rather than a question about living out our faith lives, the passage from Habakkuk is a question of lament to God, a question of despair. As we look around at pain, violence, and injustice in the world, we can easily join in Habakkuk's question: How long God? When will you intervene? While we might be tempted to offer a simple platitude or easy answer about God's redemptive work in the world, we might be challenged instead to acknowledge the injustice, sit with the pain, and cry out to God.

entry seven

OPENING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, I come before your throne of grace in a stance of surrender—surrendering to Your majesty and sovereignty. Lord, I look at a world riddled with chaos and confusion every day. There is no compassion for one another, no trust, and no love. How do we stand strong in this wicked and unloving place? How do we continue to move our lives and existence through all these things that cause us pain, anxiety, and frustration? Show us, Lord, guide us, and strengthen us. Amen.

REFLECTION

I think about times when I have had to sit still and wait on God to fix it. Whenever upheaval comes into my life, it seems to be after the calm, when everything is going so well and there is peace. One particular time, the storm came rolling in, surprising me. I was being personally attacked by an individual who was dealing with their insecurities and decided to use me as their dumping ground. It became so bad that others began to advocate for me. This was one of the most challenging times in my life. It took me by surprise because I would never have imagined this individual was so malicious based on how they presented themselves. They presented themselves as a welcoming, caring, and supportive person when they were the total opposite of each of these things.

This person tried to break me and destroy my reputation. I had to maneuver this person in a very delicate way. It took everything within me not to respond in anger, but I responded with a sense of empathy because I knew it was not me that was the issue, but it was something inside of them. I think when I responded in this way, they didn't understand why I didn't come at them with a fist balled up and ready to knock their block off, and it would cause them to soften and maybe even reflect on what they were doing. I also prayed every day to not only remove this thorn of frustration and pain but also to soften the heart of my tormentor.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, we will never know your timeframe, but we know that those who wait on You will renew their strength, and I stand in that when life and the world go crazy. We may not know when, but we know that You will, and in that I find peace. Amen.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Although you can never fully prepare for life's overwhelming moments, I invite you to build up your spiritual arsenal by being intentional in your spiritual journey. Carve out time in your day to read, focus, and pray.

*Devotional written and compiled by Jennifer Jones
Executive Director of Student Development and Engagement
Office of Social Change & Intercultural Engagement*

entry eight

OPENING PRAYER

Come, Holy Spirit;

Open my mind to your wisdom, warm my heart with your presence, and soften my temper with your gentleness; As I wrestle with these words, bring me a renewed sense of patience, so that I may be fully present in the places where you meet me.

Amen.

REFLECTION

I think this week's question is one that we actually don't want answered. What about you? If God gave you a specific answer to the question, 'how long,' do you think you would feel better? I wouldn't. I am much less patient when the clock is counting down toward a known deadline. I start worrying too much about how to spend the time between, so much so that I don't fully show up.

So, if we've set aside our desire to have this question answered, what should we do instead? I think we should think of waiting times as opportunities. What is available to us while we wait? What might be possible between now and whatever it is we are waiting for? Whom will God form us to be in the meantime? I can best identify with this question through my prolonged experience of temporary blindness. I was treated for a retina condition before starting high school, but the consequences of the treatment took away my eyesight for the time being. I can reasonably hope to see again someday once medical innovations are more powerful, but that timeline is a lot longer than I once thought. When 5-10 years became 13 and those innovations didn't get much closer, I found myself asking different questions. I'm wondering how to make the most of this situation instead of how to get out of it. But you should know that such a mindset shift didn't come for several years. This kind of reflection is not about a quick fix, it's about the long view.

However, I think real growth can happen when we are willing and able to look outside ourselves and ask these questions. For someone in ancient Israel like the prophet Habakkuk, prayer concerns were usually much more collective than individual. Notice what Habakkuk is so upset about: violence, destruction,

injustice, and perverse judgment (Hab 1:3-4). Habakkuk is torn apart not about personal grief or struggle, but the collective suffering of all God's people. If we want to relate to Habakkuk, we are better served to imagine the collective human suffering of 2020 and not the private individual disappointment of middle school dating. Although I know my complicated mixed feelings about blindness are important to God, I also have to remind myself that I'm not the only character in the story. What- or who- does God need me to be more aware of in the world around me, for to be who God has called me to be?

While Habakkuk waits for God to answer his prayers, God makes him a much more patient disciple. He offers a beautiful prayer in chapter 3 of this book, where he says he will give thanks to God even when he doesn't get results. In addition to patience, what might God be preparing to do in you during a season of waiting? How can you make the most of what God has laid before you?

CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious and ever-present God,
Calm my anxieties about the past and the future and give me the grace-filled reminder that time is in your hands. Show me the joy of the world around me, so I can love you and your creation more deeply,
Amen.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

The practice I'd like to offer you is far from conventional, but I hope you will try it anyway. I invite you to stop wearing a watch during the most meaningful moments in your day. This is especially important for those of us held captive by smartwatches. See what fully present enjoyment and reflectiveness can be available to you when you stop worrying about what's next. Good luck!

*Devotional written and compiled by Rev. Tripp Gullledge
Perkins Class of 2025*

entry nine

OPENING PRAYER

How long, O Lord? How long will you stay away?

God, we cry out to you on behalf of ourselves and those around the world who feel need reprieve. Our question is not an indication of a lack of faith but a plea to make your presence known.

Amen.

REFLECTION

Her name is Grief. She has sat beside me like a close friend. Her silence has been deafening. She has held my hand and taken me to places that seemed beyond return. There have been times when my soul rang out with pain that became masked as a soothing, lingering lullaby. She became a part of me.

I am thankful for my relationship with Christ. Apart from Him, there, wrapped in Grief, I would have remained. Violent acts entered my eye gate and my ear gate, even when not summoned. Injustice tried to mask herself as Truth. Stifled in fear, frozen I stood. Salvation. Salvation is here. I now stand. I now await. I now receive the salvation of the Lord. I am thankful that Grief doesn't live here anymore. I'll allow her to visit, but she cannot reside.

I am thankful that I know Grief. She has her place. I am even more grateful that I know Hope and Peace because they reside in Jesus. [end]

Know that the Lord sees and knows all. He desires to heal our hearts from the pain that also breaks His heart. Find solace and hope in these lyrics, as you cry out to Him.

CLOSING PRAYER

Song: Thou, Oh Lord
The Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir

Lord, how are they increased that troubled me
Many are they that rise up against me
Many there be which say of my soul
There is no help for him in God

But Thou, oh Lord are a shield for me
My glory and the lifter of my head
Thou, oh Lord are a shield for me
My glory and the lifter of my head

I cried unto the Lord with my voice
And he heard me out of His holy hill
I laid me down and slept and awaked
For the Lord sustained, for he sustained me

Thou, oh Lord are a shield for me
My glory and the lifter of my head
Thou, oh Lord are shield for me
My glory and the lifter of my head

Song: I Opened My Mouth To The Lord
Spiritual
I opened my mouth to the Lord
And I won't turn back.
I will go.
I shall go.
To see what the end will be.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Take a moment this week to journal a prayer of lament. Feel free to begin as Habakkuk does with "How long, O Lord?" What do you need to ask of God? Afterwards read, Psalm 23.

*Devotional written and compiled by Beth Bentley
Perkins Class of 2025*

Where are you?

READING: GENESIS 3:1-10

1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” **2** The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, **3** but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’ ” **4** But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die, **5** for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” **6** So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. **7** Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

8 They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. **9** But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” **10** He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.”

After exploring three questions directed towards God, we now shift to a question asked by God to us. Adam and Eve resort to hiding from God in the garden after eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In similar ways, we often hide ourselves from God. Whether it is feeling like we have done something wrong or that we are unworthy, we hide ourselves, ashamed to be vulnerable. Yet, God still shows up in the garden and provides.

entry ten

OPENING PRAYER

Father, at times we hide ourselves from you and your love, yet you show up anyway. How great a love that you are not human, but in your divinity, you still see and love us though we attempt to hide from you. May we learn to live exposed in your presence to experience the fullness of abundant life. Amen

REFLECTION

Genesis 3 gives us one of the saddest moments in scripture. After enjoying the Garden of Eden provisions and walking with God, we find Man (Adam) and Woman (Eve) fallen, ashamed, and hiding from God in the nature he created for them to enjoy. What a sad depiction of humans and a beautiful picture of shame hiding itself with the beautiful creation of God. So I wonder, even when we hide, we can never outrun the love of God. In asking the question, where are you? We are asking where you are hiding from God in His world. You may think that you are hiding in various vices or addictions, but in reality, He created all, and in all nature is God. Wherever you find yourself, he is there.

It's the purpose of general revelation that God reveals himself to us even when we don't know where we are. David depicts this truth in Psalm 139 when he states, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" David knew that even though he was hiding from those who sought to take his life, God still saw him because He created all the places he could hide; even David himself was created by God, known in the womb. For some, this idea can be unsettling as we wrestle with our humanity and all that comes with living in a fallen world, but take heart, for the Creator is well aware of where you are.

God knew where Man and Women were hiding when he asked, "Where are you?" He did not need them to reveal themselves, but the exercise of forcing them to expose themselves. Being fully known by God is for our benefit, not His. Allowing God to know and search us calls for acceptance that He sees us in our wondering. Faith, that even in the knowledge of who we are, He chooses us, and assurance that even when we are hiding, He knows exactly where we are.

Isn't that the beauty of God's interaction with humanity, that he allows us to answer the question "Where are you?" while knowing exactly where we are? I have a three-year-old niece who visited us recently. She would walk through our house saying, "Don't see me." She didn't want us to look at her or acknowledge that she was in the room. Why, I don't know, but I was reminded that we often walk around begging God NOT to see us because we don't want him to see our shame, loneliness, sadness, selfishness, or unbelief, but just as we saw her, He sees us. Flaws and all bids us to find ourselves in His creation and feel loved. So the next time you want to hide from God or are tempted to tell him, "Don't see me," be reminded that not only does he see you, but he loves you. While you may not know where you are, God does and, in his divinity, loves you. You are not lost.

Questions

- What areas of your life do you keep hidden from God?
- How can you give God a word in those areas?
- Who has God given to you to expose areas of your life that need exposure to truth?

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, being known fully is a gift that you give freely. In your divinity, you choose to love and see us in your creation as good and pleasing. Reveal yourself in new ways that expose your desire of how we can live in your creation, not hide.

Amen

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

When you feel like hiding from God, try praying Psalm 139 as a reminder that you are fully seen and can not hide from God.

Psalm 139

1 O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

3 You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.

4 Even before a word is on my tongue,

O Lord, you know it completely.

5 You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.
7 Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
8 If ver me,
and night wraps itself around me,”
12 even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
13 For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
15 My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
18 I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.
19 O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—
20 those who speak of you maliciously
and lift themselves up against you for evil!
21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
22 I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies.
23 Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
24 See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

entry eleven

I am hurting Lord. I want to be alone.”

OPENING PRAYER

Father, in times of despair we may be tempted to hide from those around us. We may even hide from you, Lord. Help us to overcome our shame, fear, and isolation. Open our hearts so we can feel the love of the Holy Spirit and the healing grace of faith of those around us.

REFLECTION

In the seventh month of her long-awaited pregnancy, Melanie discovered cancer in her sinuses. In the flash of an instant, her visions for a blessed home birth with her husband, breastfeeding in the new rocker, and a social media page full of smiling photos of the new family of three were shattered. Instead, she was met with an emergency c-section, immediate chemo, and radiation, the inability to breastfeed or even go home with her baby, and finally the removal of her left eye. Devastated, angry, and afraid, Melanie and her husband, Sam, retreated into their shared anguish.

Melanie did not answer phone calls and did not allow visitors. She did not want even her mother to see her altered face; neither did she or Sam want to explain things to friends or manage their pity. More than anything, they did not want to handle their devastation with grace. They did not want to have to seem faithful.

Later, I asked Melanie how she finally found herself and her God in that dark place. She explained that when she and Sam could not find God, God found them. Through the love and faith of family and close friends, God coaxed the two out of hiding. God would not give up on Melanie or Sam. Little by little, Melanie and Sam began to see God's grace. The hope of each new sunrise, the joy in their baby's giggles, and the comfort from their family's devotion eventually allowed them to be found. Now they are ready to take one day at a time and face what their journey brings – knowing they are not alone.

iGod will always find us, and the Holy Spirit will show us where we can find God. This Fall, as you return to challenging studies, busy schedules, and the noisy chatter of an election year, there may be trouble. You may fall behind in your studies, behave in ways that make you too ashamed, or fail to follow through with commitments. When that happens, we often want to hide from God and others. In these times of trouble, God will grant you courage. Use that courage to call on God; because God has already found you, and God will answer.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Psalm 55:17-18 (NIV):

17 Evening, morning, and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice. 18 He rescues me unharmed from the battle waged against me even though many oppose me.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:

Build a community. Invest in friends and family and share your faith with each other. The Holy Spirit will bind you together; so when one falls into the storms of fear or shame, you will all bring them back with the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

*Devotional written and compiled by Allison Foster
Perkins Class of 2025*

entry twelve

OPENING PRAYER

Open my eyes, Creator God, I want to see you clearly.
Open my ears, Redeeming Christ, I want to hear your voice.
Open my heart, Sustaining Spirit, I want to love you deeply.

REFLECTION

This week's text "packs a lot of punch"!

- Temptation: "Did God really say that you shouldn't eat from any tree...?"
- Risk: Testing God's statement, "Don't eat from it...you will die." Against the snake's statement, "You won't die! ... you will be like God"
- Disobedience: Eve eats the apple and gives Adam some as well
- Clarity and Knowledge: "Then they saw clearly and knew that they were naked"
- Shame: They covered themselves and attempted to hide from God

Where are you? God calls to us. It's a rhetorical question. If this text tells us anything it's that God knows us – God knows where we are, God knows what we are doing and what we have done. God seeks us out! We cannot hide.

So why do we try? This cycle of temptation, risk, disobedience, clarity/knowledge and shame is familiar. We might label these things as "bad" or "wrong". But, I think it's life and God is with us through every step...allowing us to make decisions and loving us each no matter what.

Like Eve and Adam, all of us have taken risk seeking to know what is true. We've knowingly disobeyed or made decisions in conflict with our values. And once we realize it we feel ashamed. We seek to cover it up and don't want anyone to know – least of all God.

I don't know about you, but when I start down this path, I lose confidence in myself. Acting outside my values and covering up my mistakes, I sometime forget who I am, who God is calling me to be. And after a while, I feel lost – distant from God, alone and unsure of everything. While this Genesis text paints a picture of immediately

being “busted” by God, in my experience it can be a long, slow process and I don’t even remember the decisions that got me there.

All along the way, God is whispering, “Where are you?”. Not because God doesn’t know right where you are. But because God is inviting you to remember that God is right there with you.

Where are you? No matter where you hide, no matter what you sew together to try to cover up yourself – You are with God! God will keep calling for you and calling you into all God created you to be.

CLOSING PRAYER

Loving Father, I confess that I have been knowingly disobedient and I am sure, even more often, I have unknowingly distanced myself from your love and grace. Thank you for always walking with me, even when I intentionally ignore You. Forgive me and strengthen me today, as I renew my commitment to a life of holiness – seeking you and trusting in your Word. In the name of your Son, my Savior, Jesus the Christ, Amen.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Walk the Labyrinth at Perkins School of Theology. On Bishops Boulevard, between Prothro Hall and Selecman Hall, you will find the Habito Labyrinth. The Labyrinth is an ancient Christian prayer practice that offers a pilgrimage path in a confined space. While the Labyrinth appears to be a maze, it is not intended to trick you. Instead, the winding path reflects and embodies the journey of faith – sometimes feeling very close to God (our center) and, other times, feeling quite distant – yet God (the center) is always there, and the path will always lead you to God. As you walk the Labyrinth – start at the opening (closest to Prothro Hall) and follow the path until you are in the Center. Walk at your own pace and pray about the ways in which you have/are hiding yourself. At the Center, spend some time with God in silence – listening for God’s still, small voice. When you are ready, follow the same winding path back out of the Labyrinth praying about how you are living, fulfilling the image of God within you – shining the Light of Christ for all to see.

*Devotional written and compiled by Rev. Lisa Garvin
SMU Chaplain and Minister to the University*

How many times shall I forgive my brother?

READING: MATTHEW 18:21-35

21 Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, **how often should I forgive?** As many as seven times?” **22** Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

23 “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. **24** When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, **25** and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. **26** So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ **27** And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. **28** But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ **29** Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ **30** But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. **31** When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. **32** Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. **33** Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ **34** And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. **35** So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

This section’s question also appears to have a simple answer. Jesus’s response suggests that we should continuously offer forgiveness, but this act is much easier said than done. We can relate to Peter’s question when we think about people who have hurt us deeply. Do I really need to forgive them? What if it feels hard—even unbearable to do so. Offering forgiveness is not always as simple as speaking a few kind words; instead it is a challenging, perpetual choice, one that asks us to wrestle with it.

entry thirteen

OPENING PRAYER

God open my mind so that I can learn to forgive my brother or sister when they sin against me. Strengthen my heart so that I can apply your wisdom and love them, regardless of the pain they cause me, as you did for me on the Cross.

REFLECTION

I learned the most about forgiveness working as a prosecutor, helping survivors give victim impact statements. When someone commits a violent crime, their victim can address them after they are sentenced. The point is to promote healing. Some victims say, “I curse you!” and “I hope you suffer!,” but others say, “I forgive you.” My favorite example involves a young woman named Pricilla who embodied Christ’s teachings in Matthew 18:21-35 on forgiveness.

After Christ explained how to confront those who sin against us, Peter asked what everyone in earshot probably wondered, “How often must I forgive my brother or sister, SEVEN times?!” Christ answered, “No, seventy times seven.” That is 490 times! Christ expounded by telling the parable of the unforgiving servant. In it, an indebted slave begs for mercy. His master grants it, forgiving his debts entirely and releasing his right to sell the slave, his possessions, and his family for payment. But when a fellow slave asks that same slave for mercy, he denies it, throwing his debtor into prison. When the master learns this, he orders the unforgiving slave to be tortured until his debt is paid. Christ warns that the same will happen to everyone who is unforgiving.

Pricilla’s mother was killed by a drunk driver driving on the wrong side of a highway. When I asked her, “Please tell us about your mom?” She said, “My mom was the most annoying person I ever met! At my volleyball games she screamed louder than every other mom, ‘GO PRICILLA! I LOVE YOU!’ On prom night she took pictures until I screamed, ‘MOM, WE HAVE TO GO!’ And when I graduated, she hugged me until I cried my makeup off.” Then she told the defendant, “You killed the most important person in my life who I loved more than anyone—but I am forgiving you.” When I

asked her how she found the strength to forgive, she said, “I didn’t forgive, I am forgiving—every time my heart aches.” I am sure that is someplace north of 490 times.

CLOSING PRAYER

God, when my brother or sister wrongs me, please give me the strength to forgive them every time I remember the pain of my loss and my heart begins to harden so that I can heal from my pain and be made whole.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Pricilla helped me understand how to apply Christ’s parable. Though Peter asked about loving relationships, brothers and sisters, Christ pivoted to transactional relationships, debtors and creditors. Christ also focused on tangible harm, debt, not intangible harm, emotional pain. Debts are measurable and creditors have the right to collect to be made whole. Therefore, forgiveness begins with clearly defining how we were wronged and what is needed to make us whole. This is hard when something is taken from us that cannot be returned, like a loving mother. However, the mechanics of forgiveness do not change; we simply have to execute them more than once.

Think of someone you need to forgive. Answer these questions in a journal:

- Can you define their sin against you?
- If not, what does that say about your forgiveness journey?
- If so, what will it take to make you whole?
- What steps can you take towards forgiving them today?

*Devotional written and compiled by David Henderson
Perkins Class of 2028*

entry fourteen

OPENING PRAYER

When hope feels lost, you are found. When darkness feels overwhelming, you are light. When love feels distant, you are near. Be near me, oh Lord, when hopelessness, darkness, and hate seek to hide me from your love.

REFLECTION

“When I hate myself, Christ still loves me.” My professor prompted each of us to write what our relationship to Jesus is in eight words as an exercise, and this was my response. This summer had been brutal...I was as low as I’d ever felt, swamped by school and work and a crumbling personal life. I woke up each morning feeling terrified and filled with rage, at the world, at God, and at myself. How could I allow such disarray into my mind? Clearly it was all my fault—this damage being done to my mental health—therefore, I deserved punishment for whatever wrongdoings inspired this devastation.

Angry and hopeless, I confessed the hate I held in my heart, earnestly waiting for Jesus to reveal himself to me. As human beings, we are created in God’s image to love God. Yes, we, as human beings, are imperfect, sinful, and unable to love God perfectly. God, unchanging and all-powerful, knows this and loves us still, so much so that God sent God’s own son, Jesus, to live among us. In Christ, God took the form of God’s own creation...and through Christ’s great sacrifice, we humans are able to fully embrace God’s love because Christ took on the sin of human beings.

If God so loved the world that God sent God’s only son, how then, shall I hate? If the Son who walked this earth over two thousand years ago died for the love of people in the perfect love of the Father, what room do I have in my life for scorn? Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. describes such opposing forces, explaining, “We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.” Sometimes our enemies take the form of others, sometimes it’s who we see in the mirror. The beauty of being a child of God is that the love available

to us through Christ is accessible universally...we need only develop and maintain the capacity to forgive.

CLOSING PRAYER

God of almighty power, instill in us the desire to love. May we harness this great gift you've bestowed upon us to love our neighbors as you love us...and to see ourselves as you see us.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Keep a gratitude list this week, writing down five things each day that remind you of God's love. Lift them up to the Lord as reminders of God's great faithfulness, and ask to be released from the things that feel disconnecting from this power.

*Devotional written and compiled by Rachel Fisher
Perkins Class of 2026*

entry fifteen

OPENING PRAYER

Father, God – Help me to understand not only the word forgiveness, but the action- of becoming free, free from resentment, anger and the justification. The understanding that we are human, we mess up but because of your forgiveness that you have bestowed upon our lives over and over- help us to forgive our brothers and sisters in Christ when they do wrong. Father, God give me discernment and courage to forgive when it is needed. In Jesus' Holy Name Amen.

REFLECTION

Forgiveness—what a profound word, what a powerful action, and what a significant decision between two people: the forgiver and the recipient. I have been in both roles, as I imagine most of us have. Each perspective is unique; both require courage, and both have the potential to be transformative. On one side, there's the bravery in accepting forgiveness, and on the other, the grace in offering it. Let's explore both.

In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus tells a parable that illustrates the beauty of mercy, humility in receiving, and the grace in offering forgiveness. We have all stood in the shoes of the servant, seeking forgiveness—taking responsibility for our missteps and wrongdoings, which in itself is a courageous act. Acknowledging our faults with a promise to make them right is not just a promise to others, but a vow to ourselves to live a better, more righteous life. Receiving forgiveness for our wrongdoings can be nothing short of life-changing—it brings a sense of renewal, trust, and restoration, much like the servant in the parable must have felt, with everything he nearly lost returned to him. It's a moment of wholeness.

God calls us to extend the same forgiveness that He continuously grants us to those around us. It's not always easy—especially when we feel wronged or unjustly treated. But therein lies the beauty of forgiveness. I've experienced moments where I didn't feel deserving of God's mercy, yet God forgives, rooted in love. This is the example we are to follow, forgiving with love. In the parable,

after being absolved of a massive debt by the king, the forgiven servant immediately encounters a fellow servant who owes him a small sum. The second servant pleads for patience and forgiveness, mirroring the very plea the first servant made to the king. Yet, the forgiven servant refuses to show the same mercy and has his friend imprisoned. When the king learns of this, he is furious, asking, “Shouldn’t you have shown mercy to your fellow servant as I showed mercy to you?” The king then commands that the unmerciful servant be punished until his original debt is paid. Jesus vividly illustrates the consequences of withholding forgiveness after having received it countless times ourselves.

If you are struggling with forgiveness, remember that God repeatedly forgives us, past and present. We are called to do the same for others, especially when forgiveness is sought. Offering forgiveness is freedom for the forgiver, and being forgiven is life-giving for the one who receives it.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, I come before You, weighed down by my past sins. I acknowledge my mistakes, and I ask for Your forgiveness. Help me to also forgive those who have wronged me, as carrying the weight of resentment harms me more than it affects them. Let Your love wash over me, and cleanse my heart from all that taints it.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

When I am ready to embark on the journey of forgiveness, I find a quiet, private space and close my eyes to picture myself in a place where I feel at peace. For me, that’s often outside anywhere on campus, my favorite spot is on one of the benches at the Val & Frank Late Fountain, in front of Dedman Life Sciences Building. In my mind’s eye, I picture Jesus sitting across from me or beside me, with his arms open wide, much like the illustrations from the Bible stories of my childhood. I speak to Him as I would to a Father and a Teacher—someone who loves me deeply and knows far more than I do. After pouring out my heart in prayer, I take time to listen. I turn to the Gospels and reflect on the parables Jesus shares about forgiveness, as well as the commandments He gives us on extending forgiveness to others. Comments restricted to single page.

*Devotional written and compiled by Jenna Stegemoller
SMU Office Coordinator OCRL*

Why have you forsaken me?

READING: PSALM 22:1-31

1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

2 O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night but find no rest.

3 Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.

4 In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.

5 To you they cried and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

6 But I am a worm and not human,
scorned by others and despised by the people.

7 All who see me mock me;
they sneer at me; they shake their heads;

8 “Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!”

9 Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.

10 On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

11 Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near,
and there is no one to help.

12 Many bulls encircle me;
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;

13 they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.

14 I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;

- 15** my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.
- 16** For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they bound my hands and feet.
- 17** I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
- 18** they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.
- 19** But you, O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
- 20** Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
- 21** Save me from the mouth of the lion!
From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
- 22** I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
- 23** You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
- 24** For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me
but heard when I cried to him.
- 25** From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
- 26** The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live forever!
- 27** All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord,
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
- 28** For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.

- 29** To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.
- 30** Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord
- 31** and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it
-

Finally, we return to another question of lament. You may recognize the first words of this Psalm as the words that Jesus repeats during his crucifixion. Of all the questions asked in this devotional, this question might be the most difficult to address. We might offer the simple answer that God does not forsake us, but this does not acknowledge the reality that sometimes we feel God forsaken, just as Jesus did in that moment. The full Psalm is included because the first words should also be read with the rest as the Psalmist goes on to also express that God is still faithful. The presence of both lament and faith in the same Psalm is significant. Our challenge is to grapple with both in the midst of everyday life.

entry sixteen

OPENING PRAYER

My God, my misleading heart tells me you have forsaken me, that you don't hear my cries. But if I know you as a loving Father, then I know you can never forsake your child- it is not in your nature. Lord, remind me of your faithfulness and caring hand over my life. Take my hurt and sorrow and replace it with hope.

REFLECTION

I love that God is big enough to handle all of our emotions. He doesn't require only hope from us. For our praise to be authentic, we need to be real and honest about our hurt. Psalm 22 is a lament Psalm- it holds hope and grief together simultaneously. But don't let its sorrowful mood fool you, because without Psalm 22 there is no Psalm 23. Without "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me," there is no, "He leads me by still waters, He restores my soul." Psalm 22 is the storm before the sun; it's the lament before the peace and praise.

Next to Psalm 22 in my Bible, I wrote, "I feel" ... these were the only words I could muster up the courage to write. There was a time in my life when I was abandoned and left, on a health journey that concluded that I am unable to have biological children after two surgeries. Why, God? Haven't I been faithful to follow and trust in you? How is God good when I'm suffering, crying out for help, and feeling alone without an answer from God? I resonated with these first couple verses in Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night I find no rest" (v. 1-2, ESV). I wanted to live in these two verses of anguish. I wanted to stay in a state of loneliness and hopelessness. I wanted to wallow forever.

In God's goodness, he always gives us a BUT GOD or a YET in our sorrow. He allows us to be honest with our hurt and comforts us in it- after all, Jesus suffered on Earth so who are we to skip out on suffering? God is too good to let us stay in the pit. Have you noticed in the Bible there is always a BUT GOD or a YET? He reminds us of who He is and what He has done. Although there may not be a booming answer from Heaven of why this is

happening and when it will pass, there is a reminder of the God that walks with us through it. After crying out a prayer of feeling forsaken, verse three says, “YET, you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our Father’s trusted, and you delivered them” (V. 3-4, ESV). God is holy and He has been faithful to generations. He was faithful then and He’s faithful now. Not only that – He’s faithful today, and He will be faithful tomorrow, too. But He doesn’t just deliver us eventually; He carries us and hears our cries in the midst of our storms.

Verse 26 says, The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord” (ESV). God is going to provide what we need and then some. He’s not just going to do the bare minimum to meet our needs, but He is going to satisfy us. He hears our cries, He is with us, and He gives us what we need in abundance. We don’t know how long this hurt will last or even the outcome of the storm, but we can hold fast to God’s promise to never leave us, to hear our cries, and to respond with an abundance of blessings.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, thank you for hearing me when I call out to you. Thank you for being a God who sees, hears, and acts on my behalf in the midst of my pain. There are moments that I struggle to have faith and trust in you through my grief. In those moments, remind me of who

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

St. Therese of Lisieux had a specific approach to her spiritual life, what she referred to as “the little way.” Rather than focus on grandiose achievements or striving to make a significant change or impact, St. Therese sought to do the ordinary, simple tasks of life with extraordinary love. She saw the smallest of tasks as the greatest acts of love. As God provides for us, God also provides through us to others. Challenge yourself to incorporate “the Little Way” in your own life this week. Make a commitment to always picking up trash when you see it outside. Or carry around extra pens and paper in case someone in class forgets theirs. Regardless of what it is, choose a small task to be your act of love taken alongside God. Seek God in prayer each time you perform this “mundane” task.

*Devotional written and compiled by Maitlan Wade
Perkins Student*

entry seventeen

OPENING PRAYER

Almighty God, there is nothing you do not know. You know our getting up and our lying down, you know our thoughts and our dreams, our hopes and fears, and you even know when we feel hopeless and forsaken and alone. Lord, meet us there, in the low place, in the hardest parts of our hearts and lives. Meet us with your kind and compassionate presence, your knowing and caring disposition, your gracious and loving encouragement. In Jesus' name, Amen.

REFLECTION

There are few promises as precious to Believers as Deuteronomy 31- "The LORD will be with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you." But what about when it feels like God has left the premises, gone AWOL at the crucial moment, abandoned us in our hour of need? How does "I will never leave you nor forsake you" jive with "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Remember Joseph from Genesis? Favorite son, gaudy rainbow robe, haughty dreams. His jealous brothers sell him into slavery. In Egypt, he is falsely accused of a crime and thrown in a dungeon. Do you remember how long Joseph wasted away in prison? Fourteen years... Fourteen. Years. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Do you think Joseph prayed that prayer in the pit?

Where do you feel like God has forsaken you? What has been your "fourteen years in a pit"? What if God is able to redeem even something as terrible as that?

Had God abandoned Joseph? No. He was with him all the time. God reached down into the darkness of the pit of death and saved Joseph, and exalted him to second in authority in all of Egypt, and used him to save countless thousands from famine. And the LORD even reconciled Joseph to his brothers. "What you intended for evil," Joseph says to his kin in Genesis 50, "God intended for good."

In ancient Israel, the Psalms were sung in worship (and often memorized). The first line of a Psalm evokes the whole. So when Jesus cries out from the cross the first line of Psalm 22- "My God,

my God, why have you forsaken me?” – Jesus is quoting all of Psalm 22 as he is living it. The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is a High Priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses. He knows what it’s like to feel utterly forsaken. In fact, on the cross, Jesus experienced a kind of pain and rejection we cannot imagine, sacrificially bearing the weight of the world’s sin upon his shoulders. As Scripture puts it, he was “cut off” that we might come in. Does it comfort you in your sorrow to know that Jesus was called “The Man of Sorrows”? Can it encourage you in your loneliness that Jesus felt forsaken and alone?

But that’s not where the story– or the Psalm– ends. It begins with sorrow, but how does Psalm 22 end? “He has done it!” Or, as Jesus utters in his final words before death, “It is finished.”

Friends, we are invited to cry out to our knowing and loving God when we feel lost and defeated and alone. But we can have confidence that even when we feel forsaken, He is with us, Jesus has suffered in our place, and by His blood “It is finished” forever.

He knows; He hears; He saves!

CLOSING PRAYER

O LORD God, thank you that you know us, that you hear our cries, that you have come to save us! Thank you Jesus, that you were willing to endure the cross and the shame and the loneliness and the weight of sin, that we might be accepted, forgiven, welcomed in, and saved by grace. Even in our struggles, we cry out to you in the expectation that you are with us, and you will not ever leave or forsake us. But rather, you are calling us, deeper in to community, deeper in to your loving heart, until the day when we are with you forever in a land without pain or sorrow or tears anymore. Lead us there, by the power of Your Spirit, by the grace of God, through the love of Jesus. Amen.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Solitude. Consider what it must have been like for Jesus to feel forsaken. What emotions would he have experienced while he hung on the cross? And consider that he did that for you. In silence, consider how Jesus’ sacrifice comforts those who feel abandoned, neglected, forsaken by God and by others. Consider how you can, as a follower of Jesus, also comfort those who are experiencing suffering around you. And pray– for those who are

hurting that they may experience the relief of the Holy Spirit, for those who are lonely that they may be embraced by Christ's loving community, and for those who feel forsaken and far off that they might come in and receive God's rest for their souls.

*Devotional written and compiled by Conrad Quiros
RUF Campus Minister*

entry eighteen

OPENING PRAYER

God, who hears my praise and my lament, be with me now. Hear and see all of me. All my life. The ups. The downs. The joy. The sorrow. And help me to experience your presence in the midst of the tension between the good and the bad.

REFLECTION

When you were a kid, what were your favorite stories? Maybe a particular book, television series, or movie comes to mind. Like many people, I grew up loving Star Wars. My brother and I once watched *Attack of the Clones*, the second movie of the prequel trilogy, so often that I could almost quote the entire movie line by line from memory. More than the spectacular lightsaber fights and dreams of distant galaxies, I was most captivated when I saw myself in the story or when I could relate to a character. Young Obi-wan Kenobi needing to do things the right way, the anxious fear of Anakin Skywalker leaving home, or the thrill of telling Chewbacca to punch the button to launch us into hyper space. We love to tell and hear stories because they allow us to connect with experiences and others in a myriad of ways.

Psalm 22 is not meant to be a story, but it tells one, nonetheless. As I read the Psalm, I can imagine the anguish behind the writer's pen. I can picture the dissonance the author is experiencing as they oscillate between lamenting over their experiences and offering affirmation of trust in God. When I put myself in their shoes, I relate their pleas, but I have a harder time connecting with their assurance.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? While perhaps not in these exact words, I've looked up to God in prayer and asked a similar question many times in my life. In those times, I've grappled with the experience of feeling abandoned by God. Yet, I've supposedly knew logically that God had not left me. I read the words of the Psalmist and hear my own voice in those moments. This author from thousands of years ago was wrestling with feeling abandoned by God just like me. They also believed in the faithfulness of God. Could I have written those words with the same certainty as this writer? Were they even confident in what they were writing? Did they doubt the words they were wrote as

they navigated their difficult life experiences? Perhaps, they are even more like me than I realize.

Unfortunately, I likely will never know the answers to these questions, but I am reminded that I am not alone in my experience of feeling abandoned by God, not only through the words of this Psalmist but also through the story of Jesus who also quotes these same words. I can place myself in their story and rest in good company. When I can't muster my own certainty that God will come through, I can rely on their assurance because they are like me.

So why does it feel like God abandons us sometimes? The short answer is that God does not but that does not take away the pain of the experience. Instead, we can gather around those in the past and in the present that have felt similar and allow them to be the presence of God for us.

CLOSING PRAYER

God who hears my prayers and my laments, help me to remember that you do not forsake us. And when I inevitably forget, bring those to me that might stand in your place. Help me to do the same for others. Amen.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

The Daily Examen is a prayer practice credited to St. Ignatius of Loyola. In order to grow in awareness of how God was present in his life, St. Ignatius reflected at the end of the day on his experiences throughout the day using a five-step reflection. Each step is listed below. Try spending a week using this reflection before you go to bed and notice how you see God showing up throughout your daily life.

- Consider where you saw God present in your day (and/or potentially where you perceived God to be absent).
- Thank God for those instances of daily communion.
- Examine your thoughts, feelings, and actions. How do they affect where you see God and where you do not.
- Select one feature of your day-either a place you saw God or a reason you did not see God. Spend a few moments in prayer about this feature.
- Finally, pray for the next day that you would see God wherever God is.

*Devotional written and compiled by Kaleb Loomis
SMU Associate Chaplain*

thank you

Thank you for journeying along with us through these reflections on difficult questions to answer. While we could fill many more pages on this topic, we hope these entries have helped guide deeper thinking, prayer, and action for you. We invite you to continue to use this guide in the future. We hope God blesses you and your community as we learn to live out the commands to love God and love one another.

This guide could not have been completed without the hard work of all who contributed to it. We are grateful for those who wrote a devotional for this guide. Special thanks to Raissa Umwali who helped review and edit this guide. We look forward to the ways in the future that the Christian community at SMU will offer shared expressions of our collective faith.

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Need to have a confidential conversation? Or simply interested in connecting with the Office of the Chaplain & Religious Life? See the contact information below to learn about all the ways you can get involved or receive support on campus.

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Website: smu.edu/StudentAffairs/ChaplainandReligiousLife

