

Bible Challenge July 24-30, 2016

Advent's weekly Bible Challenge is based upon the readings assigned for each Sunday. The basic challenge is to re-read the texts that were read on Sunday morning and included in the Sunday bulletin. The Adventure and Explorer challenges are suggestions of different ways to deepen your knowledge of the Bible. The challenge is organized as one reading for each of five days, but find a pace or style that fits your schedule.

INTRODUCTION

Persistence in prayer evoked the admiration of Jesus and wins the attention of the Lord when Abraham intercedes for Sodom. The life of the baptized — to be rooted and built up in Christ Jesus the Lord — is to be rooted in prayer. God hears and answers prayer and so strengthens God's own. "When I called, you answered me; you increased my strength within me."

DAY ONE: Genesis 18:20-32

In today's reading, Abraham undertakes the role of a mediator between God and sinful humanity. Appealing to God's justice, Abraham boldly asks for mercy for the city of Sodom, for the sake of the few righteous people who are in it, including Abraham's nephew, Lot.

²⁰Then the LORD said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know."

²²So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. ²³Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?"

²⁴Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?"

²⁶And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." ²⁷Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the LORD, I who am but dust and ashes.

²⁸Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there."

²⁹Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it."

³⁰Then he said, "Oh do not let the LORD be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there."

³¹He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the LORD. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it."

³²Then he said, "Oh do not let the LORD be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it."

Adventure Challenge: Genesis 18:16 – 19:29 (the larger Sodom and Gomorrah story)

Explorer Challenge: *Option A:* If you did not do so last week, read a summary of Abraham's life and his importance for Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Option B: Genesis 18:19 (the verse immediately prior to this reading) explains God's purpose for Abraham: "to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice." Identify elements in the Sodom and Gomorrah story that reflect ancient Jewish culture about righteousness and justice which you, as a twenty-first century reader, find unusual.

DAY TWO: Psalm 138

This song of thanksgiving and praise for God's steadfast faithfulness concludes with a prayer to be united with God's purposes.

¹I will give thanks to you, O LORD, with my whole heart;
before the gods I will sing your praise.

²I will bow down toward your holy temple and praise your name,
because of your steadfast love and faithfulness;

for you have glorified your name
and your word above all things.

³When I called, you answered me;
you increased my strength within me.
⁴All the rulers of the earth will praise you, O LORD,
when they have heard the words of your mouth.
⁵They will sing of the ways of the LORD,
that great is the glory of the LORD.
⁶The LORD is high, yet cares for the lowly,
perceiving the haughty from afar.
⁷Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you keep me safe;
you stretch forth your hand against the fury of my enemies;
your right hand shall save me.
⁸You will make good your purpose for me;
O LORD, your steadfast love endures forever;
do not abandon the works of your hands.

Adventure Challenge: Read Psalm 138 out loud at least two times; try to find an appropriate tone of voice for verses that seem loud and those that are soft or quiet.

Explorer Challenge: *Option A.* Use available references to determine what the Psalmist had in mind by the phrase “before the gods” in verse 1.

Option B. Compare the tone of Psalm 138 with that of Psalm 126, another short psalm. Which psalm expresses better the song that is in your heart at this time?

DAY THREE: Colossians 2:6-19

Paul warns his congregation in Colossae about "the empty lure" of philosophies and traditions that compromise faith. Through the gift of faith, the church is mystically connected with Christ in his death and resurrection, which is enacted in baptism.

⁶As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. ⁹For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. ¹¹In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; ¹²when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, ¹⁴erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

¹⁶Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. ¹⁷These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

Adventure Challenge: Colossians 2.

Explorer Challenge: *Option A.* Read an introduction to Colossians to learn the background and main themes of this letter. (Colossians 2: 1-5 states the purpose of the letter.)

Option B. Colossians 2 is based on contrasts; make a list of those things listed as good and those listed as bad (or irrelevant) for “growth that is from God.”

DAY FOUR: Luke 11:1-13

In teaching his disciples this prayer, Jesus also reminds them to focus on God's coming reign, God's mercy, and

the strengthening of the community. Jesus encourages his disciples to child-like trust and persistence in prayer.

¹[Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ²He said to them, "When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial."

⁵And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' ⁷And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' ⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

⁹So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Adventure Challenge: Luke 11.

Explorer Challenge: Review what Luther wrote about the Lord's prayer in his Small Catechism (available on the web if you don't have a copy handy).

DAY FOUR:

PRAYER OF THE DAY. Almighty and ever-living God, you are always more ready to hear than we are to pray, and you gladly give more than we either desire or deserve. Pour upon us your abundant mercy. Forgive us those things that weigh on our conscience, and give us those good things that come only through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION. Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. (*Luke 11:9*)

Explorer Challenge: *Option A.* Explore what different spiritual leaders have said about prayer.

Option B. Experiment with different way of praying; examples: pray while walking, a labyrinth prayer, a prayer chant such as a Taizé prayer, pray with your eyes open, a singing prayer, a wordless prayer, a dancing prayer, etc.