

A decorative wreath made of dark brown, thorny branches, possibly representing the Crown of Thorns, is covered in clusters of small, light purple and white lavender flowers with green leaves. The wreath is set against a light purple background.

2021 *Lent* DEVOTIONALS

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE DURING LENT

The Presbyterian
OUTLOOK

As a Lenten devotional discipline this year, you are invited to pray with Scripture as a way of discerning what God is calling you to be and to do during this season.

John Calvin spoke of the Bible as the “lens of faith,” likening it to a pair of eyeglasses that enables us to see the world with clearer vision as God’s creation. As theologian Serene Jones notes in “Inhabiting Scripture, Dreaming Bible” (a chapter in “Engaging Biblical Authority”), this was Calvin’s way of saying that Scripture “brings clarity and focus to all aspects of our lives” and “lets us see what we otherwise would not.” In short, once we have these eyeglasses on, “there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that escapes their vision-framing power.”

PRACTICES:



- **Scripture as prayer:** One of the ways we can “put on” Scripture is by praying or meditating contemplatively on a biblical text — slowly and contemplatively reading it as a prayer to God. Indeed, this is an ancient and robust practice of prayer. When we pray with Scripture, we ponder deeply the words and images of the text. Using our imaginations, we can even enter into the world of the text in order to discern God’s wisdom.



- **Movement of God:** Praying with Scripture in this way can be an aid – a focusing lens – to help us discern the movement of God in our personal lives and in the life of the world around us. Throughout the season of Lent, you will be invited to pray with one passage from Scripture each day and prompted to reflect on what it is disclosing to you about *movement toward God* and *movement away from God* in your life.



- **Prayer journal:** You may find it helpful to keep a journal in which you briefly note what surfaces in your prayer time, so that over the course of the Lenten journey you can track the movements of God’s Spirit in your midst. Also, consider the **prayer focus** of the week as you journal and pray.



- **Bringing the Bible and hymns to life:** Each week, a **hymn** will be suggested for worship and reflection. During your devotional time each day, read the words (or sing or play the hymn!) and reflect on the truths the text reveals to you. (If you don’t have a hymnal, you can Google the hymn or visit hymnary.org.) Likewise, consider the **action** prompt each day and note how the Spirit nudges you to fulfill it.

Praying Scripture

FEBRUARY 17 – 20, 2021

Forgiveness leads to life

by Roger Gench



HYMN OF THE WEEK: “Be Thou My Vision”

PRAYER FOCUS: Daily examen — reflect on the events of the day and discern God’s presence in them.

ACTION: Connect with a friend or family member each day. Via phone, text, email or social media, say: “I don’t say it often enough, but I love you” or “I’m grateful to you.”

Ash Wednesday, FEBRUARY 17, 2021

PSALM 51:1-10

The first biblical text for our Lenten journey is Psalm 51, which is traditionally read on Ash Wednesday. Psalm 51 is striking not only for its honesty about sin, but also for its confidence in God’s merciful love amid the brokenness in our lives and in the world. The psalm is a prayer – a penitential prayer – and you are invited to pray Psalm 51:1-10 in a translation of your choosing.



Practice: Read the psalm slowly two or three times and ponder deeply its images, noting which ones capture your attention. Such images can be points at which God is speaking to you and focusing your attention. Reflect on the images for at least five minutes (longer if you desire). As you do so, sense the movements of your spirit and the emotions that they evoke — both movements *toward* God and *away* from God. Movements toward God could include, for example, a sense of hope, peace or love that surfaces. Movements away from God might include a sense of guilt or despair.



Journal: Note these movements in your journal so that you can review them during your Lenten journey.

**HAVE
MERCY
ON ME,
O GOD.**



Thursday, FEBRUARY 18, 2021

ISAIAH 55:1-5

Isaiah 55 invites us to ponder the abundance of life in God, in marked contrast to the scarcity we experience in a world that so often seems short on resources. While in Babylonian captivity, exiled Israelites were faced with the scarcity of basic necessities of life, as are many people around the globe and in our own country, especially amid a pandemic.



Practice: You are invited to pray Isaiah 55:1-5. Ponder deeply the images in this text and sense the movements toward God and movements away from God in your life that your reflection evokes. Where is there scarcity in your life? Where is there abundance?



Journal: Take note in your journal of movements away from God and movements toward God that surface in your awareness.

Friday, FEBRUARY 19, 2021

JOHN 4:1-14

"Eternal life," a key concept in John's Gospel, refers not just to life after death but to a rich quality of life available *now* in relationship to God in Christ — life that partakes of the goodness and joy of Godlife that is full and enduring. Fullness of life, symbolized by the vivid imagery of living water, is God's intent for us in the present, as well as the future. However, many realities can keep us from the fullness that God intends — realities such as fear, anxiety, self-hatred or social conditions of oppression on account of racism, classism or sexism, to name but a few.



Practice: You are invited to pray John 4:1-14 in light of your particular circumstances. Slowly read the story two or three times and ponder deeply its images. You might even imagine that you are present at the well in the story as Jesus converses with the Samaritan woman. What do you observe? What movements of your spirit and emotions emerge as you ponder this story? Are they movements toward God such as liberation, hope or joy? Or movements away from God such as anxiety or even despair?



Journal: Note what surfaces in your prayer with this passage in your journal.

Saturday, FEBRUARY 20, 2021

ISAIAH 43:1-5

Isaiah 43 is written to exiles in Babylon who long for homecoming, thus it is a potent word for exiles in our own time and place who long for the same. This passage is one of the most powerful expressions of God's love for Israel – indeed, for all people – in Scripture: "You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." Isaiah 43 is perhaps especially poignant in our present pandemic moment, when so many are feeling isolated and alone.



Practice: You are invited to read Isaiah 43:1-5 slowly, two or three times, taking time to meditate on images that most capture your attention. What do they disclose to you about movement toward God, and away from God, in your life at present?



Journal: Note what surfaces in your journal.

Week 1

FEB. 21-27, 2021

God is our creator and our shepherd

by Roger Gench



HYMN OF THE WEEK: “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need”

PRAYER FOCUS: Reception — How can I receive God’s forgiveness for my own weaknesses and failures? In what ways is God speaking healing and grace into my heart?

ACTION: Pay attention to creation this week. Go for a walk and observe the Creator’s handiwork. Look out a window and take notice. Look for photos of landscapes in regions far from where you live and give thanks for the beauty and variety of creation.

Sunday, FEBRUARY 21, 2021

PSALM 46:1-11

Psalm 46, one of the most beloved of the Psalter, inspired Martin Luther’s celebrated hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” It articulates deep trust in God amid turmoil and chaos — realities with which we are all too familiar in our current historical moment. There are many ways to pray with this psalm.



Practice: You may wish to follow the practice of reflecting on images that compel you, or you may want to focus on certain lines of the psalm, such as the words from verse 10: “Be still, and know that I am God.” Suggestion: Repeat these eight words eight times, each time omitting the last word until you are left only with the word “Be.” This is a powerful, contemplative way to pray this psalm.



Journal: Note in a journal what surfaces in your awareness, what thoughts or emotions are evoked as you engage this Scripture in prayer — movements toward God or movements away from God. Whichever the case may be, rest assured of the loving presence of God.

**BE STILL,
AND KNOW
THAT
I AM GOD.**



Monday, FEBRUARY 22, 2021

PSALM 8

Psalms 8 invites us to consider our place in God's creation — a lofty place, "a little lower than God." Though we are not God, the psalmist affirms human dominion over God's good creation. It is important to note that the word "dominion" does not connote domination, much less exploitation. It conveys, rather, that we are caretakers of God's creation, who care for it as God does. We play a representative role that carries responsibilities for stewardship on God's behalf; thus, exploitation is hardly in view. As Clint McCann writes in his essay on Psalms in "The New Interpreter's Bible," "God and humans are partners in the care of creation, because God has made a risky choice to share power!" A risky choice indeed!



Practice: Pray this psalm with special attention to our stewardship of God's creation.



Journal: As you meditate on this psalm, attend to movements toward God and away from God that surface in your awareness, and note in a journal what the psalm evokes.

Tuesday, FEBRUARY 23, 2021

PSALM 36:5-9

Psalms 36 is a profound affirmation of God's unconquered, life-giving power amid the brokenness of our lives and of all of creation — "you save humans and animals alike." This affirmation is foundational for our prayers throughout the season of Lent. It undergirds the movements of our spirits that we discern — movements both toward God and away from God. It is important to affirm God's life-giving power even as we recognize movements away from God, because it is especially during experiences of despair, fear or anxiety that we need this psalm's assurance of God's steadfast presence. The promise of resurrection out of death is foundational to our faith as we journey through Lent toward Easter.



Practice: You are invited to pray with Psalm 36:5-9.



Journal: Note what surfaces in your awareness in your journal.

Wednesday, FEBRUARY 24, 2021

PSALM 104:14-26

Psalms 104 is a majestic creation psalm, describing the interdependence of the creatures of the earth and God's manifold wisdom in creation. The psalm evokes a sense of wonder and awe as we consider the creation that surrounds us.



Practice: Read Psalm 104:14-26 slowly, two or three times, and consider its many references to the creation around us.



Journal: Note in your journal any movement toward God or away from God that is evoked as you pray this psalm.

Thursday, FEBRUARY 25, 2021

ROMANS 8:26-35

In this passage from Romans, Paul assures us that even when we do not know how to pray, the Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us with groans too deep for words. Have you ever prayed with audible emotions — groans, deep humming or sighs? We do not necessarily need words when we come before God in prayer.



Practice: Read Romans 8:26-35 slowly and open yourself to become aware of God's Spirit as it prays for you in the depths of sighs and groans — stay with this awareness for several minutes.



Journal: Note in your journal what surfaced in your awareness during this prayer time.

Friday, FEBRUARY 26, 2021

MATTHEW 6:7-13

Today's text is Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer — familiar to every Christian around the world. You probably know it by heart, but you are encouraged to read it slowly and prayerfully, pausing over each line, in order to see and hear it anew.



Practice: Pray this passage slowly several times in the manner we have been practicing. Note phrases and images that shimmer for you, asking how God might be speaking to you through them.



Journal: Note in your journal movements away from God or toward God that surfaced in your awareness as you prayed this Scripture.

Saturday, FEBRUARY 27, 2021

PSALM 42:1-8

This psalm is rich with imagery for prayer, especially in times of difficulty, distress or even in the midst of aridity — dry spells in our spiritual lives. The psalm may be especially poignant in the midst of the isolation, social distancing and loneliness we experience in a pandemic stricken world. God, too, may seem distant from us.



Practice: Pray the psalm slowly at least three times, then set your Bible aside and meditate on the images that come to mind, trusting that the images or words that you are most in need of will be present to you.



Journal: Record in your journal what happened in this prayer time. Note especially any images that stood out for you, and what you think they may convey with respect to movement toward God or away from God in your present experience.



**MY SOUL
LONGS
FOR YOU,
O GOD.**