

Daily Devotions

Monday September 4

Jeremiah 15:15-21

¹⁵O Lord, you know; remember me and visit me, and bring down retribution for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance do not take me away; know that on your account I suffer insult. ¹⁶Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts. ¹⁷I did not sit in the company of merry-makers, nor did I rejoice; under the weight of your hand I sat alone, for you had filled me with indignation. ¹⁸Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail. ¹⁹Therefore thus says the Lord: If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth. It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them. ²⁰And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the Lord. ²¹I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.

For Reflection

Jeremiah's call as a prophet was deeply painful for him. He was given words of warning and judgment about Judah's unfaithfulness that fell on deaf ears. His message was rejected and he himself faced ridicule and ostracism. Jeremiah's life teaches us that faithfulness to the Lord will often put us out of step with the culture around us. But his response to that reality has important lessons for us. Over the last several decades, Christians of both "conservative" and "liberal" leanings (and really, how helpful are those terms, anyway?) have too often entered into what I will call a "culture war" mentality. Christianity has been viewed, and used, as a tool to further political or social ends, while people (including other Christians) who hold different political or social convictions are portrayed as "the enemy." This is, first of all, idolatry. The Gospel is not a servant of any political party. And while faithfully living out love for God and for neighbor will shape how we view social issues, the Gospel is never a "religious"

means to a political end. The Gospel is God's gift of new life in Christ Jesus. People transformed by this gift will make a transforming impact on the world around them. But that's a consequence, not the main purpose. Second, this mindset leads to unnecessary conflict, contention, and condemnation. How can we love, or evangelize, or serve people we view as enemies?

Jeremiah gives us a different way. He is angry and frustrated about his position. So he takes that anger to God. He doesn't inflict it on his neighbors. He does want the Lord to strike them, but he leaves it to God. If we feel anger towards others, the safest thing to do with it is to give it over to God. Ideally, should we want others to face "retribution" from God? No! But if we do, bringing that desire to God is much better, spiritually, than taking matters into our own hands (the "culture war" mentality)!

Also, Jeremiah expresses his anger *at* the Lord. He is angry because he suffers insults for the Lord's sake. We should expect the same. A worldly mindset will be offended at the idea of God, and will take offense at us when we act in faithfulness to God. So we should not be surprised if we face similar reactions as Jeremiah did. Rather than rant about this on social media, it is much healthier to bring our anger to God in prayer. But notice that Jeremiah doesn't just vent his anger, he asks God to do something about it. And the Lord promises that "they shall not prevail over you." He does not say that the conflict will vanish, only that Jeremiah will not be defeated. We can find the same strength when we are dealing with rejection or ridicule for our faith. It is painful to be out of step with the world around us; but standing in the will of the Lord is precisely where we need to be, and he will not abandon us.

Questions for Reflection

1. What is a way you feel "out of step" with others because of your faith? How does Jeremiah's example lead you to handle that experience?
2. Do you ever encounter the "culture war" mentality? How can Jeremiah's story help you to respond to that mindset in a way that is faithful and loving?

Read Psalm 119:33-72

Today's Prayer Focus: Pray for those suffering from wildfires and extreme heat in our country and around the world. Pray for God to strengthen those who have lost their homes and businesses in Maui, and for all who do the good work of restoring their communities and caring for their neighbors.

Tuesday September 5

Read Psalm 119:73-104

Today's Prayer Focus: Pray for students, teachers, and schools staff beginning a new academic year. Pray for God's wisdom and joy to fill all those who work with young people in schools, day care centers, and other youth activities. Ask God to bless Reformation's Kids' Inc. program and the work of our Growing Young Team, that we might touch the lives of the young people in our day care and our congregation with the love and hope of Jesus.

Wednesday September 6

Psalm 26:1-8

¹Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.

²Prove me, O LORD, and try me; test my heart and mind.

³For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you.

⁴I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites;

⁵I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked.

⁶I wash my hands in innocence, and go around your altar, O LORD,

⁷singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, and telling all your wondrous deeds.

⁸O LORD, I love the house in which you dwell, and the place where your glory abides.

For Reflection

This is a gutsy psalm. "Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind." Do we really want to pray that? I for one am not confident that the Lord would find nothing at all wrong if he were to test and try me. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor and theologian who was a leader of resistance against the Nazi party in Germany, gives us a good

way to understand how we can pray this prayer. The Psalms, Bonhoeffer points out, are *Israel's* prayer book. Since Jesus is the consummation of Israel's hopes and dreams, the Psalms are perfectly prayed by him alone. Gentile Christians properly pray the Psalms only because we are in Christ.

Jesus can pray as a perfectly righteous person. And as Christians, we rely on, and receive as a gift by faith, his perfect righteousness. What this prayer does, then, is not boldly claim that we are somehow without sin. Rather, it helps us to remember that our righteousness comes from Jesus. And it should lead us to consider what sins do remain in our hearts that we need to confess to the Lord. We do not need to come up with vain boasts about our supposed sinlessness (that would always be a lie), nor do we need to be afraid of acknowledging our need for grace. This psalm challenges us to rely on Christ's goodness and to humbly confess our sins to God, who has promised always to forgive.

Questions for Reflection

1. If we pray to God to "try and test" us, then in the love of Jesus he will remove our sin and give us his goodness. The process might be painful for us, but it leads to a deeper faith and a more holy life. What is an area of your life where you need God to do this?
2. As easy as it would be to read these verses as self-righteous boasting, look at how it ends with the second part of verse 7 and verse 8. The focus ends up on the goodness of God and a love for his presence. How can you focus your attention on the goodness of Jesus and a desire for his presence?

Read Psalm 119:105-144

Today's Prayer Focus: Pray for the ministry of Reformation Lutheran Church, that we would be devoted to serving God, bearing witness to the Gospel so that others may come to believe, and serving our community so that we may bless others.

Thursday September 7

Romans 12:9:21

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice

in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

For Reflection

There are a couple of different ways to read this passage. We could read it as a list of demands from Paul, and by extension, from God, that we have to do in order for us to be considered “true Christians.” Or, we could read it as a summary of everything God has already done for us in Jesus. Jesus blessed those who persecuted him, outdid others in honor, and served the Lord, his heavenly Father, faithfully.

That second way of reading this passage is the Lutheran way. Because Jesus died and rose again to free us from sin and death, we are now free to love our neighbors as a reflection of the deep love Jesus has for us. From that foundation of faith and trust in Jesus, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to contribute to the needs of others, offer hospitality, and live in harmony with others. All of Paul’s instructions in this passage present exciting opportunities for us to shape our lives around service to the Lord! What do you want to do to fulfill these instructions in your life?

Questions for Reflection

1. From the first verse of this passage, Paul focuses on love. He declares, “Let love be genuine” (v. 9). In this age of presenting oneself in the best possible light on social media, or feeling like your life has to look as polished as the people in magazines or the actors on television, how do you live and interact with others in a way that is genuine and true to who God made you to be?
2. How do you express love in your life and in your relationships?

3. Read the end of the passage again, especially Paul's instructions for dealing with your enemies. How does Paul urge Christians to put those matters into God's hands? How are his instructions different from the usual ways people deal with conflict today, in person or on the Internet? What can we learn from Paul so we can more readily "live peaceably with all" (v. 18)?

Read Psalm 119:145-176

Today's Prayer Focus: Pray for the spiritual growth of yourself and all our members, that we would be filled with the Holy Spirit, increase in our knowledge of God's will, and overflow in love for each other and the world around us.

Friday September 8

Matthew 16:21-28

²¹From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." ²³But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? ²⁷"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

For Reflection

Jesus' firm words to Peter point to the reason it's good for us to commit to reading God's word every day. Jesus said to his chief disciple, "'you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'" (v. 23). And Peter didn't even have a cell phone, the Internet, or television! How much more difficult is it for us to set our minds on divine things, when we are bombarded with ads and commercials all

day long?

Let's return to God's word and hear Jesus' invitation: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (v. 24). Denying oneself doesn't mean needlessly inviting pain and suffering into our lives. But it does mean making choices each day that put God and our neighbors first. It means orienting our hearts, minds, and actions toward service instead of self. Living that way leads to great rewards: a meaningful life on this side of heaven, and eternal life. Through Jesus' selfless act of dying on the cross for us, we are freed from sin and death, and we can love and serve others without counting the cost.

Questions for Reflection

1. It's understandable that Peter would protest when Jesus said he must suffer and be killed. If you were following Jesus and you heard him say that, how would you respond? Would you be bold like Peter and speak out, or would you stay quiet and see what events would unfold? Use your imagination as you hear Jesus disclose his mission of death and resurrection in this passage.
2. This is a challenging passage about discipleship. Can you recall times in your life when you felt particularly committed to following Jesus and taking up a cross of sacrifice or service? What led to that sense of deeper commitment for you? What resulted from it?
3. How would you like to take a step toward following Jesus more intentionally today? What small actions can you implement to deny yourself and serve Jesus and others?

Read Psalm 120-125

Today's Prayer Focus: Pray for peace in the world, especially in Ukraine. Ask God to sustain those who suffer under persecution for the name of Christ. Pray that all people would have freedom and good government.

Saturday September 9

Read Psalm 126-131

Today's Prayer Focus: Pray for police, fire fighters, all emergency workers, health care workers, and those who serve in the military. Pray for farmers and those who transport food. Ask God to grant well-being to all in our community, and to stir up generosity to meet the needs of those who lack food, shelter, or other needs.

The Mission of Reformation Lutheran Church is to:

Invite our neighbors as Jesus invites us.

Engage in a community of graceful discipleship.

Equip our members to grow in faith and ministry.

Embody the love of Jesus in our world.