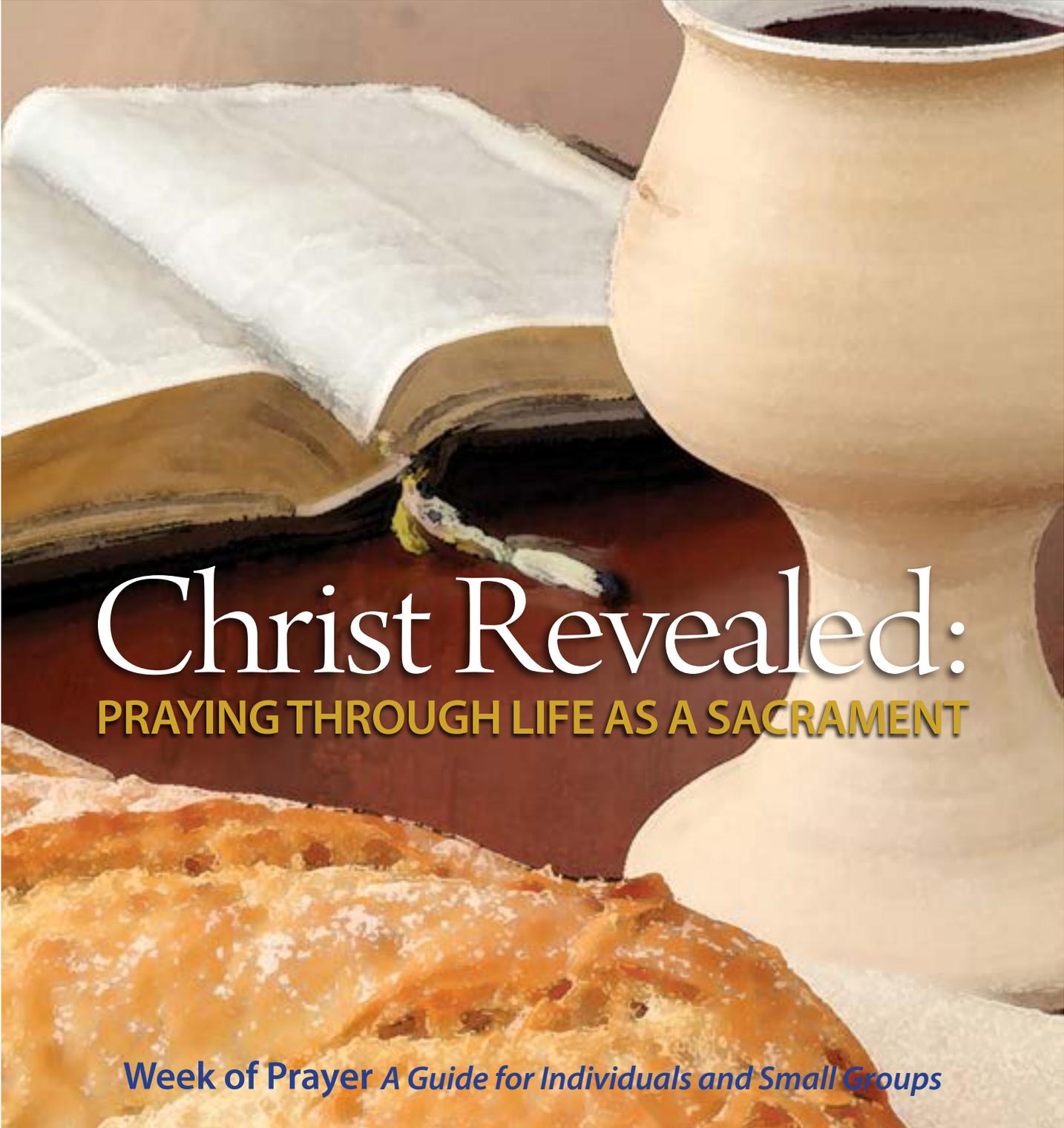


A DISCIPLE-FORMING RESOURCE

A close-up photograph of a communion table. In the foreground, there is a large, golden-brown loaf of bread. To the right, a white ceramic chalice is partially visible. In the background, an open book with white pages lies on a dark red surface. The lighting is warm and focused on the bread and chalice.

Christ Revealed:

PRAYING THROUGH LIFE AS A SACRAMENT

Week of Prayer A Guide for Individuals and Small Groups



The Evangelical Covenant Church



What does it mean to pray through life as a sacrament? In Holy Communion we share in the taking, blessing, breaking and giving of Christ. As bearers of the image of God, we believe that something of Christ is revealed through us—as chosen, blessed, broken, and given people of God. This week of prayer resource provides an opportunity to reflect on the sacramental nature of our lives.

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DAY 1: A Living Sacrament

READ: Galatians 2:20

It’s not unusual for a child to ask, “Where is God? How can I see God?” To which we might respond, “God is in your heart” or “We see God in the acts of love and kindness around us.” It’s a difficult and abstract concept to relate, this mystery of God’s presence; abstract, and yet at the same time, so concrete. For God did come to earth in the form of flesh and blood. God was present in Jesus, our *Immanuel*, our *God with us*. But now in these latter days through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, Christ lives in us. We are the living expressions of Christ on earth.

As Theresa of Avila wrote, “Christ has no body now on earth but yours...” This mystery of God made flesh is now communicated through us. The Apostle Paul affirms this when he says in his letter to the Corinthians, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own” (1 Corinthians 6:19).

As such, we become a living sacrament of God’s presence on earth. The word *sacrament* has been used as a translation of the Greek word *mysterion*, meaning something hidden that has been revealed. It has come to be defined as an *outward sign of an inward and invisible grace*. When we think of sacrament we often think of the two practiced sacraments of the Church: baptism and Holy Communion. Not in any way to diminish these significant rites of the Church, we can also understand our ordinary lives—broken, forgiven, and redeemed as we are—as outward signs of God’s present reality. Something of God is disclosed or revealed through us and every human encounter provides us with an opportunity to encounter the living God.

REFLECT: (individually and/or as a group) When or through whom did you experience something of the reality of Christ’s presence this last week? What challenged you or kept you from accepting or expressing something of “Christ in you” today?

PRAYER: Lord, help me to live sacramentally, revealing something of Christ in all I do and say. Help me to see and expect something of you revealed in those I encounter today.

DAY 2: Holy Communion

READ: 1 Corinthians 10:16-17

There are many names used for this meal that Jesus gave us: the Lord's Supper, Eucharist, the Lord's Table, the breaking of bread. In my church we choose to call it Holy Communion. *Holy* signifies that it is *other* or *different* than our ordinary times of gathering together. *Communion* derives from the Greek word *koinonia*, meaning *sharing* or *fellowship*. As the Apostle Paul says, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:17). It is a communal meal, shared with our brothers and sisters in Christ and in communion with our God.

Holy Communion is the one central Christian act that connects us to that upper room with Christ and his disciples, to the early church and their weekly morning gatherings around the table, and the global Church today. It is also the central Christian act that links us to Christ, his historic death, his miraculous resurrection, and his imminent future return to make all things new. In that sacramental moment of the meal, past and present merge and we are mysteriously wrapped up in it. We are present to God and God is present to us.

Holy Communion draws us into God's primary pattern of ministry to this world. At that first meal Christ took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it; a pattern witnessed in his own life. Henri Nouwen describes these as the four movements of the Spirit in our lives. He says, "These words also summarize my life as a Christian because as a Christian I am called to become bread for the world: bread that is taken, blessed, broken, and given." (Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*.)

As Christians, this pattern of Holy Communion becomes our sacred reality and rhythm. We share in the taking, blessing, breaking, and giving of Christ for the sake of our neighbor and world.

REFLECT: (individually and/or as a group) What is your experience of Holy Communion? How is it *holy*, *different*, or *sacred* to you? What does it mean to you that it is a *communal* meal, together with Christ and with Christ's Body, the Church?

PRAYER: Practice the physical movements of the hands as you imagine them involved with the actions of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving. Pray through each gesture, thanking Christ for his model of each of these for our sake. Practice this throughout the week.

DAY 3: Chosen

READ: Ephesians 1:3-6, 1 John 3:1-2

Christ took the bread... Yes, a mere description of the act that precedes the blessing of the bread. Yet it is pregnant with meaning when understood in light of the *taking* or *choosing* of our lives by God. One may be reminded of the traditional wedding vows that say, "I take you to be my lawfully wedded husband." In marriage one takes or chooses the other to be united through a lifelong covenant. The witness of Scripture is that God has chosen us to belong to him eternally and be his witnesses to the world.

To his disciples Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit" (John 15:16), much like the Father chose and anointed him. That same reality applies now to the Church as Peter pronounces, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession..." (1 Peter 2:9).

It is a thrilling thought to realize "I am chosen." It's that feeling of having been "picked" for the team, for God's team. Yet some of us struggle to live the reality that we are chosen, loved and appointed by God. Perhaps we've never been picked or told we are special or beloved. To differing degrees we all wrestle with those demons of doubt, rejection and abandonment. Yet God chose you!

There are too many disparaging messages in this world, messages that do little to affirm or encourage or nurture our new identity in Christ. Our identity as *chosen* individuals is nurtured and sustained by our sharing in the communal aspect of being a *chosen people*. We do well when we regularly find ourselves with other members of Christ's Church who affirm and remind us of our deepest identity, even when we struggle to believe it ourselves.

REFLECT: (individually and/or as a group) What does it feel like to be chosen? In what way do you struggle to believe God chooses you? What difference might it make to someone today for you to remind them of their chosen-ness?

PRAYER: Lord, to know that I am chosen by you is an extraordinary truth; one that is both hard and exciting to receive. Help me to live into that reality of having been picked by you and for a purpose. What might that be today?

DAY 4: Blessed

READ: John 15:9

Jesus took bread and *then he blessed it*. To *bless* means to request God's favor on it and to set it apart for a purpose. Blessings in Scripture are spoken over people, places and things as they are called into God's divine purpose.

Christ knew the blessing and favor of the Father. Ministry for Jesus began in the waters of the Jordan River and after hearing those beautiful words of affirmation: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). Who doesn't long to hear those very words? Jesus offers similar words of blessing and affirmation for his disciples and by extension to us. He loves as the Father loves. What incredible affirmation—to know that Christ loves us with the same measure of love and affirmation he himself receives from the Father.

N.T. Wright says this about Christ's blessing of the bread: "To bless it is to pray that it may become...the vessel and vehicle of God's Jesus-shaped love for each recipient, and so for the world." (N.T. Wright, *The Meal Jesus Gave Us*.) Similarly, we can understand that to be blessed and set apart means to become both a vessel and vehicle for Christ's love to those around us.

Prayer is a wonderful way to reconnect with our blessedness. When we prayerfully listen to Christ we are reminded of his favor and affirmation, that we have God's favor. Through prayer we listen for how we can be the "vessel and vehicle" of Christ's love to others. Nouwen says that one of the great joys of being chosen is recognizing that others are chosen as well. We are given an incredible opportunity, like Christ, to call forth and remind others of their chosen-ness as we pray for and bless them.

REFLECT: (individually and/or as a group) Can you recall the last time someone really affirmed who you are? What was that like? What does it mean to you that Christ loves you in the same way the Father loves him? How might you be the "vessel and vehicle of God's Jesus-shaped love" for someone today?

PRAYER: Lord, I long to live under your affirmation and blessing. I confess it is hard to believe at times that your love is that constant and real, let alone that I am set apart by you to be a conduit of your love. Thank you that your word is trustworthy.

DAY 5: Broken

READ: John 12:23-25

It's hard to imagine what was going through the disciples' minds that first time when Jesus broke the bread and said, "This is my body" (Matthew 26:26). Post-resurrection, the connection is so clear: Jesus' body was broken and his blood poured out as a sacrifice that we might have the fullness of everlasting life. In hindsight the disciples were able to connect the dots and realize this is what Jesus taught all along when he spoke of the need to take up one's cross and follow him. Or when he responded to his disciples James and John's request to sit at his right and left in his glory: "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" (Matthew 20:22). There is an inherent pattern to this life of discipleship and it includes being broken.

"Broken" is also how we describe or understand the chaos of this world and the messiness of life around us. The aching and groaning of all creation is a sign of its being broken, cracked, imperfect. The inward groaning we experience, described in Romans 8, is due to the ramifications and repercussions of sin in our lives. We are broken, imperfect vessels.

These are two different ways of looking at brokenness. In one case we are victims of and participants in a sin-filled, ruptured life from which Christ is redeeming us and making all things new. In the other case, being broken is understood to be part of the cost and sacrifice of following Christ and living sacramentally in this world.

What is needed is an acknowledgement—and even an acceptance of—our brokenness and suffering in order that new life may come. We must not avoid, ignore or hide from it. Nor do we rejoice in it. Instead, we daily offer our broken selves, chosen and blessed as we are, to the one who creates life out of death.

REFLECT: (individually and/or as a group) What feels or appears "broken" in your life? What needs to be given up in order for new life to form? Where have you observed or experienced new life growing even amidst difficulty?

PRAYER: Jesus, you had incredible trust in the Father that the way of suffering and death would be the path toward life. I offer myself to you today, broken as I am. Renew me and use me for the sake of the world that you created and love.

DAY 6: Given

READ: Matthew 10:7-9

Christ took bread, blessed it, broke it, and then gave it to his disciples. Elsewhere Jesus said, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:48) and “This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (John 6:51).

Christ gave his body as a free offering and gift that we might live and experience “fullness of life” (John 10:10). As we meditate on the pattern of communion as our sacramental and spiritual rhythm in the world we find in it a call to give of ourselves, freely and sacrificially.

Now there is some giving that is not free. There are times we feel like we are supposed to give, should give, have to give. Or we feel in a relationship that giving is expected or manipulated out of us. But giving that is not your choice is not giving in this sense of the word. This giving is the grace-filled choice you make to put someone else before you. A choice that stems from a deep understanding of having been chosen by God, blessed by God and even broken by God. When we know those things to be true we are less inclined to feel a sense of scarcity or lack when it comes to giving. We can give generously and authentically.

When we talk about giving in our churches, it is usually in the context of the giving of our resources or filling a ministry need. These are important opportunities not to be dismissed. But just as important is the giving of our presence. Dropping everything and sitting with an ill or grieving friend. Accompanying someone on an undesirable errand. Attending a school event of one of the youth in your church. Not just delivering a meal but breaking bread together. With regard to giving, Nouwen says, “When I ask myself, ‘Who helps me the most?’ I must answer, ‘The one who is willing to share his or her life with me.’” (Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*.)

REFLECT: (individually and/or as a group) What is it like to receive either a long hoped for or surprise gift? When was the last time someone just showed up at the right time in your life? Who could use a gift of your presence this week?

PRAYER: Lord, you have given so generously. Thank you again for the gift of everlasting life with you. May I give freely and joyfully too, that others might know you.

DAY 7: Revealed

READ: Luke 24:28-32

We began this week reflecting on the sacramental nature of our lives. As bearers of the image of God who are continually being transformed into Christ’s likeness, we believe that something of Christ is revealed or disclosed through us. Teresa of Avila’s prayer written in the 16th century affirms this:

“Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.”

To do so, we draw daily from the rich well of God’s resources: God’s love, grace, forgiveness and truth. The two men on the Emmaus Road were disappointed and perplexed at the recent turn of events in Jerusalem. They did not have answers and headed home. Then Jesus joins them on their journey. He informs, teaches and most incredibly reveals himself to them. It was in the taking, blessing, breaking and giving that their eyes were opened to his presence. To believe that Communion is a sacrament is to believe that Christ is present and available to us in some holy and mysterious way, loving and renewing us.

Likewise, might it be that when we live the rhythm of the spiritual life—as chosen, blessed, broken, and given people of God—we find Christ present and available to us? Through the continued gift of his Spirit he joins us on the journey. He reminds us of who he is, to whom we belong, and inspires us to go and share the news with others. When we walk through the day acknowledging we have been chosen and blessed; when we face difficulty and challenge trusting that in God’s creation new and abundant life springs from death; when we offer ourselves generously and freely; then we proclaim our joy and assurance in our ever-present Savior.

REFLECT: (individually and/or as a group) Has this week of prayer caused you to think of Holy Communion differently? Your spiritual life differently? In the spiritual rhythm set forth—chosen, blessed, broken, and given—where do you need to spend more time and prayer?

PRAYER: Lord, I cannot do this alone. I long to be your hands and feet, and have your eyes of compassion for this world. I need your constant presence to hold, inspire and help. Thank you for the gift of your word and presence this week.