

Bearing Fruit in Prayer

GALATIANS 5:22-23



WEEK OF PRAYER

A Guide for Individuals and Small Groups

ABOUT THE WEEK OF PRAYER

Greetings from the Make and Deepen Disciples team! For more than 60 years, the Evangelical Covenant Church has provided materials for a week of prayer during the month of January. Whether you choose to use this resource at the beginning of the year or at some other time, we want to both challenge and equip followers of Jesus to live a life of prayer and to continually seek new ways to develop this life-giving practice. The Week of Prayer can be used by individuals or groups, over one week or over the course of seven weeks. Each day/week of the resource includes reflection and prayer prompts, but we encourage you to use these as starting points. Feel free to customize the resource for your purposes—adding your own prompts to further enhance the discussion and enrich the time of prayer. The Week of Prayer is available in English and Spanish. You can download from CovChurch.org/resources or order copies at CovBooks.com. If you have any questions, feel free to contact the Make and Deepen Disciples team at mdd@covchurch.org.



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GALATIANS 5:22-23, NRSV



INTRODUCTION

"By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things" (Galatians 5:22-23).

By faith we receive these virtues that belong to Christ's nature. Through prayer we develop the ability to live them out in our relationships. When these fruits of the Spirit manifest in our relationships with others it is a sign of our deep connectedness to Christ. But how many of us have convinced ourselves that we can grow these fruits of the Spirit by our own righteous merit? Truth is, there is a warring in our souls between our human weakness and God's Spirit. Our human flaws and resident Spirit of Christ are opposed when we are attempting to move toward righteousness and virtuous living. As we strive to live by the Spirit, remember we are human and can't achieve the righteousness of God without God's help. Together, as a church body, let us begin this season bearing the fruit of Christ's Spirit through prayer.

BEARING FRUIT IN PRAYER: LOVE

Read: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

Devotion: Benita, who has begun dating again after a painful divorce, now realizes the difference between the "love" she was shown by her ex-husband and the authentic love she is experiencing with her current boyfriend. The difference between the two is action. Her husband often *said* he loved her, but was simultaneously abusive to her. Her current boyfriend *shows* his love way more than he actually says, "I love you," but she is learning to appreciate the difference. The difference is that love is better shown through action than spoken words. The good news of the gospel is God so loved the world that God displayed love through sacrificial action. While we do not have an all-encompassing script of every word Jesus uttered on earth, we know his love was not primarily spread by magical encounters of saying, "I love you" to hurting people on the margins of society. Instead, he touched their brokenness, healed them, welcomed them, accepted them, affirmed them, lived among them, prayed for them, had meals with them, fed them and then died for them. He loved them in action. Likewise, when Jesus sent his disciples on short-term missionary journeys in two-person teams, he directed them to share God's love by mimicking his compassionate ways of caring for people. Love in action is a picture of the gospel message being manifested in the kingdom of God on earth. Let love speak through the way you treat your neighbor.

Prayer Practice: *Lectio Divina:* Take some deep breaths, acknowledging God's presence with you. Read John 21:15-17 twice (if in a group setting, have 2 different voices read it aloud). As you read, listen for a word or phrase that captures your attention. How might that word or phrase connect with God's calling to love through action? (If in a group setting, share your response with the group.) Linger with your response to God. Envision yourself living out this action. Rest in God's presence.

Prayer: God of Love, help us reflect your image in the way we show others we love and cherish their presence in our lives. May this charity begin where we live as we display love to our family and neighbors. Amen.



BEARING FRUIT IN PRAYER: JOY

Read: “And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Isaiah 35:10).

Devotion: Shontell loves to throw parties and host family get-togethers. She loves celebrating so much that she will create reasons to have a shindig at her house. Beyond your normal retirement, birthday and holiday celebrations, for her, *any* cause could be a reason for a house party...her child's first day of kindergarten, the end of summer, her child's first poop in the potty, completion of another semester of school, successful planting of her new shrubs... She chooses to make what could potentially be ordinary moments an occasion for celebration by entering the joy of the moment and inviting others to join in her delight. Spiritually speaking, Shontell's inclination to celebrate meaningful moments mirrors a theology from ancient times that encouraged celebratory feasts to mark occasions of deep joy and gladness. The Feast of First Fruits for an example, celebrated among the Israelites, signified gratitude to God for the harvest. God established this feast so they would remember to express thanksgiving and joy for the gift of food from the land. In this passage, Isaiah prophesies about the moment those who were disconnected from God are reconnected and experience “joy and gladness.” It speaks of a deep spiritual joy that surpasses ordinary happiness about ordinary delights. Our connection to God, our relationship with Jesus, our fellowship with the Holy Spirit ought to be sufficient reason to cause us to experience deep joy in our soul.

Prayer Practice: *Gratitude Journaling:* Take 3 deep breaths as you silently reflect on the last 7 days. In your journal, take 5-10 minutes to list ordinary moments, experiences and encounters you are thankful for. Choose 1-2 of these gracious moments to dialogue with God about expressing your thankfulness, praise, and gratitude.

Prayer: God of Joy, help us treasure moments we can easily run past and not acknowledge as opportunities to experience deep joy. Remind us to be grateful for your kindness to us. From the flow of gratitude and awareness of our connection to you, may we experience your deep joy and gladness. May we express this joy and share it with others. Amen.

BEARING FRUIT IN PRAYER: PEACE

Read: “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14).

Devotion: For years Yasmine's weekly diet included extra-strength painkillers, when her head felt like it would implode from the pulsating pain of a migraine. She never consistently sought medical attention because over the years this formula worked for her. Yasmine told herself she was fine and it was not a very serious matter. She later discovered those weekly debilitating migraines were warning signs that her blood pressure was dangerously high, putting her at risk for heart attack or stroke. She treated her wound carelessly, telling herself “peace, peace,” when there was no peace in her body. There are times in life when we would rather speak false peace over a situation than name it for the dysfunction, sickness, pain, abuse, neglect, trauma, epidemic, or crisis it really is. In this passage, false prophets were trying to keep the Israelites calm and comfortable by using peaceful rhetoric. The people of God thus continued in sinful and destructive ways of living that would lead to their demise. They ignored the harsh decrees of the divine prophets and trusted the smooth words of the false prophets because they were easier to accept. But authentic peace, the “peace of God that passes all wisdom, knowledge, and understanding,” is born when we accept the truth of our painful reality and seek to find peace in the midst of it...the kind of peace that transcends the chaos in the storm swirling around us.

Prayer Practice: *Prayer of Examen:* Invite God's presence. Allow a place of distress that you regularly ignore to rise to the surface of your mind. Pray for God's authentic peace to saturate the circumstance. Recall a moment of encountering God's peace this week. Offer gratitude for the experience of God's peace. End with a time of silence.

Prayer: God of Peace, in the midst of (pray for yourself and/or someone else who is suffering) _____'s suffering, grant _____ the comfort and grace of your supernatural peace. Giver of Peace, help us see you as the peace we need in the chaos of our broken lives. Restorer of Peace, we pray for families that violently oppose each other. Lover of Peace, let there be reconciliation where racially diverse peoples and nations are divided against one another. Amen.





BEARING FRUIT IN PRAYER: PATIENCE

Read: “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O LORD my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, ‘I have prevailed’; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken” (Psalm 13:1-4).

Devotion: “How long, O Lord?” From a biblical perspective, this is a typical lament of one crying out in the face of God, calling for the vindication of God. The long suffering ancient peoples who recited lamentations from Scripture were those who had been crushed under the weight of continual oppression. In their moments of lament, the veneer of patience weakened amidst the grief, anger and frustration they had been holding back. “How long, O Lord?” In lament, they ask how much longer they must endure suffering because their strength has weakened while waiting for God’s deliverance. “How long, O Lord?” They requisition the Holy hoping to hear a retributive “No longer!” “How long, O Lord?” Through the lens of this lament, I experience the pain of my reality present in God’s story. These words of bitter grief give voice to the unquenchable pain in my soul as an African American in our country. The woundedness in my soul is perpetually tender when violence towards black bodies recalls for me the diminished value of our historically commoditized bodies. At times, this reality causes hopelessness to embrace me. My reality may be difficult to hear, accept, or understand but as Christians we are called to rejoice with the joyful and mourn with those who weep. “How long, O Lord?” When I reach the place where my patience has evaporated under a facade of justice, when your life encounters a place where pregnant patience has delivered stillborn hope, the Spirit must take over the emptiness of our souls and “intercede with sighs too deep for words...”

Prayer Practice: *Centering Prayer:* For 10-15 silent minutes invite God’s presence by reflecting on a sacred word or image. Recall it when your mind wanders. Patiently rest in the presence of God without asking for anything. Be still before God.

Prayer: God of Patience, One who is slow to anger, One who is the ultimate vindicator of the righteous, One who sends the Spirit to stand in the gap for the weak, we request your mercy and grace because our spirit is willing to wait on you, but we admit our strength is shattered and we are powerless to actively wait in patience. Amen.

Further reflection: Romans 8:24-27; Revelation 6:9-11

BEARING FRUIT IN PRAYER: GENEROSITY

Read: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:44-47).

Devotion: Ordinary people in concert with an extraordinary God multiplied the number of people who believed in God’s power. As the believers shared their material possessions, spent intentional time with people in their community and sat down at the table and shared meals, people’s faith in God was discovered or deepened. Through these simple acts of generosity God was able to add more people to the first church in antiquity. God wants to use us, ordinary servants, to cause the spirit of generosity to flow among the people, cities, nations, and communities God has sent us to. Our generosity and God-presence should cause people to notice something distinct about our good deeds and the opening of our hands and hearts to them. What if these encounters could cause people to trust and believe God in a deeper, more committed way? What an amazing gift of God to us that we would be able to open our hands and our heart to another in such a way that they would experience the very hand and heart of God opening to them. These simple acts of generosity caused the kingdom of God to be expanded then and it can cause the kingdom to be expanded now. This is a call for us to listen for how the Holy Spirit wants to use us daily as a display of God’s kindness to God’s people.

Prayer Practice: *Breath Prayer:* Take 3 deep breaths. Invite God’s presence. Using the name of God you choose, inhale the name of God and exhale the following request. “Generous God (or Holy Spirit or Jesus or the name of God you choose), use me to show your generous spirit today.” Breathe this prayer without ceasing throughout the day. Be open to noticing ways you can be generous to others. Act on these opportunities.

Prayer: Generous God, help us to honor the abundance of love, food, time, land, privilege, knowledge, and resources you have given to us, by sharing it with others. Amen.





BEARING FRUIT IN PRAYER: FAITHFULNESS

Read: "...who struck Egypt through their firstborn, for his steadfast love endures forever; and brought Israel out from among them, for his steadfast love endures forever; with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, for his steadfast love endures forever; who divided the Red Sea in two, for his steadfast love endures forever; and made Israel pass through the midst of it, for his steadfast love endures forever; but overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, for his steadfast love endures forever; who led his people through the wilderness, for his steadfast love endures forever..." (Psalm 136:10-16).

Devotion: The transplant unit at University of Chicago Hospital lines its walls with the portraits and personal stories of its successful transplant patients. The collective journey of narratives can read like this celebratory psalm of God's faithfulness. But when you personally know the person in one of those stories, it can evoke deeper response... faithfulness to the One who has been faithful. The Israelites were known for establishing altars of remembrance to ensure future generations did not forget the goodness of God to their people. This psalm celebrates God's faithfulness to the Israelites for delivering them from places of great suffering and despair. It reintroduces the Israelite practice of setting up altars to honor God's faithfulness at significant places in their communal journey. The psalms, sung as part of ancient religious liturgy, became part of the oral tradition of erecting altars of remembrance. These psalms were introduced with the hope they would inspire the faithfulness of generations of people, to the God of their ancestors.

Prayer Practice: *Psalm Writing:* Invite God's presence to be with you. Read twice, Psalm 136 in its entirety. Write your own psalm that expresses God's faithfulness to you. Let Psalm 136 be a template for the creation of your own psalm. Line by line, use the existing theme to insert your own story. For example, verse 16 might be re-written as "who gave me the strength to endure my season of chemotherapy, for his steadfast love endures forever..." Be creative. Read your psalm aloud as a prayer in solitude or with your group.

Prayer: Faithful God, as I reflect upon my yesterdays I remember you have been present for all my days. Let this knowledge inspire my confidence of your presence with me now. I pray your faithfulness to me deeply roots my faithfulness to you. Amen.

BEARING FRUIT IN PRAYER: SELF-CONTROL

Read: "The men of David said to him, 'Here is the day of which the Lord said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it seems good to you.'" Then David went and stealthily cut off a corner of Saul's cloak. Afterward David was stricken to the heart because he had cut off a corner of Saul's cloak. He said to his men, "The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord's anointed, to raise my hand against him; for he is the Lord's anointed" (1 Samuel 24:4-6).

Devotion: God troubled David's heart when it was focused toward exacting vengeance on Saul, the man who was attempting to destroy his life and keep him from his promised destiny. But David obeyed God's still small voice in his heart in a psychologically intense moment of decision. David's restraint indicated he was allowing God's bridle to guide his heart, yielding righteous action. Bearing the fruit of self-control, in what could have been a deadly encounter between he and Saul, is a result of his welcoming the presence of God to judge his heart and motives. This encounter with his enemy was an opportunity to reveal true character. Saul had proven he would destroy David if given the opportunity. But when David faced the opportunity to kill his enemy, he found God persuading him to offer grace. Our lives can be used as uncontrollable instruments of evil and harm or we can practice self-control with hearts submitted to a God whom desires to display the beauty of God's grace and morality through us (see Romans 6:12-13). You are given over to the depravity of your own heart when you don't invite God's Spirit and wisdom to actively guide your actions towards others in intense moments. When you practice the art of allowing God to collaboratively guide your heart motives and actions, you will experience the fruit of self-control in your life.

Prayer Practice: *Welcoming Prayer:* Today, notice high intensity moments of your day. In the moment, stop and focus on the physical feelings/sensations in your body. Welcome God into the impassioned moment by praying, "Welcome Holy Spirit." Let go of your natural response by praying, "I release control of the situation and ask you to lead me in this moment." Repeat as needed throughout the day.

Prayer: Sovereign God, I welcome you into the present moments of my today. Will you purify my motives and actions, causing me to exercise restraint and self-control? Let me be an instrument of righteousness today. Amen.



About the author: Ramelia Williams is currently in the call process, having recently earned a Master of Divinity degree and Certificate in Spiritual Direction from North Park Theological Seminary. She has been a preaching pastor at New Community Covenant-Bronzeville, a church plant in Chicago. In her previous work as a hospital chaplain in San Diego and Chicago, she offered short-term pastoral care to families experiencing death, trauma, and loss. This work prepared her for her current ministry development of a network of spirituality groups that focus on inner healing for women who have survived physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. At the Seminary, she served on a team of Spiritual Directors who facilitate spiritual formation groups for incoming students. She experiences deep joy when writing, laughing with family and close friends, hiking mountains, riding horses, swimming or taking in breathtaking views of God's creation.



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