



Deeply Connected


2 0 2 3 W E E K O F P R A Y E R



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**Seven devotional reflections on
faithful figures in Scripture who
model a posture of prayer**

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The Evangelical Covenant Church



Dear Covenant Friends,

As we begin a new year together, let us be rooted in prayer. You will hear me extend the invitation to pray together all the time. Prayer is so important! It is foundational to our relationship with our triune God and to our relationship with one another. Prayer keeps us grounded in listening to where God is leading and how we get there. This week of prayer is an intentional time for the church to come together in collective prayer. Throughout the week you will read about faithful people throughout the Scriptures who model a life of prayer. This prayer resource can be used in your home for a time of personal prayer or in a group setting. However you plan to use it, please do plan to use it and join the whole of our denomination as we, together, seek to listen and wait upon the Lord. Your prayers make a difference! They are powerful! Let us call upon God as an essential part of our faith and fellowship, and may we be bold enough to follow where he leads.



TAMMY SWANSON-DRAHEIM, PRESIDENT

Day 1: Paul

BY NILWONA NOWLIN

I came to faith as a child, but I didn't fully understand how to actively live out my faith until my young adult years. One of my biggest challenges was praying aloud in groups. I was uncomfortable with this practice because I didn't think I was good at it, and I didn't like being the center of attention. Thankfully, I had a ministry leader who regularly encouraged me to pray during group prayer time. The more I prayed in front of others, the more confident I grew. I was excited about this growth and began to regularly volunteer to pray at ministry events.

Years later, I encountered my next prayer challenge. While most people tend to squirm during sermons about money, my trigger was any sermon about spending quiet time with God. Every iteration of this sermon I've ever heard usually involves a prescriptive method of waking up at the crack of dawn and spending one to two hours praying and reading the Bible.

I tried that method many times. And failed. Every time. I would usually fall asleep while praying and end up rushing through the rest of my morning routine. On the mornings I managed to stay awake, I was too groggy to remember anything I read. I eventually would give up and walk around under a cloud of conviction until the cycle started all over again. This start-fail-repeat cycle continued until one afternoon when the Holy Spirit pointed out something to me.

I was out walking, going about my day as usual, when I caught myself talking to God. The Spirit pointed out how many times throughout my day I did this and reminded me of three little words from the apostle Paul: "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17, NRSV). I'm an internal processor, so there is always a one-sided conversation happening in my mind. Some of that conversation is with myself, but a lot of it is with God. I never saw it as prayer because the conversation topics were often little things. A lot of our teachings about prayer focus on a great God who does great things on our behalf, but when I reflect on a lot of Paul's writings, I see him suggesting that we talk to God about the big *and* small things:

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

“Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication” (Ephesians 6:18).

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6).

Sometimes I need a financial miracle, but other times, I just want to praise God for the beautiful fall foliage. With this new perspective, I revisited my plan for daily quiet time with God. I created something that worked for me instead of trying a one-size-fits-all approach.

Now I always start my day with, “Good morning, God!” Once I’m more coherent (and usually with a cup of hot tea), I spend a few minutes reading Scripture or a devotion. Then I close that time with prayer, but I keep the prayer connection open as I go throughout my day.


Dear Lord, thank you for being a great God who has done great things for us. Help us to remember that we can come to you about the little things too. Gently nudge us throughout our day, so that we can see you at work and give you praise. Strengthen our spirits, so that we can joyfully pray without ceasing.



NILWONA NOWLIN IS A REDEMPTIVE ARTIST, WHICH MEANS SHE STRIVES TO CREATE ART THAT MOVES OTHERS TOWARD REDEMPTION, RESTORATION, AND RECONCILIATION SO THEY CAN EXPERIENCE GOD’S SHALOM. SHE SERVES ON THE MINISTERIAL TEAM AT KINGDOM COVENANT CHURCH IN CHICAGO, ILLINOIS.

Day 2: Moses

BY STEPHEN SHARKEY

 **T**here the Israelites were, stuck in the desert on their way to a land flowing with milk and honey. They were being led by a God they didn't really know and a man they consistently didn't trust. In many ways their situation was far removed from ours today, but their fears and desires were no different from ours. They wanted to know where their next meal was coming from. They wanted to experience security. They wanted to know there was hope for their children and grandchildren.

In an effort to satisfy those very basic human desires, they fashioned the infamous golden calf. It's easy for us to look at that moment and wonder how they ever could have allowed it to happen. It's even easier to think, *I would never have done that*. But let us not be too quick to remove ourselves from the realities of that moment. The golden calf was simply a physical representation of the things they wanted most—food, security, beauty, and prosperity. Those are good things. They are things that we want too. And they are things we often want more than we want God. It begs the question, “What do you want most?” In a world filled with so many good things, what's at the top of that list?

I love the contrast we have in the person of Moses. He wasn't perfect. He struggled with speech. He was impatient, disobedient—he was even a murderer! But one thing in Moses's life shined through above all the sins and shortcomings: Moses wanted God.

Exodus 33 is perhaps one of the most beautiful examples of what it looks like to want God more than everything else. God's people had just blown it in the worst way by creating an idol, and they paid for it dearly. Three thousand people died that day after Moses came down from the mountain, and a plague fell over all God's people.

But the consequence was to be even worse than that. God told Moses, “You can still take the people into the land I promised, but I'm not going with you.” Wow! They could still have all the things they want, just without God?

Moses wouldn't have it. “If your Presence does not go with us, do

not send us up from here” (Exodus 33:15, NIV). Those are the words of a man who wanted God. But he didn’t stop there. In verse 18, Moses boldly asks God, “Now show me your glory.”

Do I want God like that? Do you? There is a whole promised land worth of good things for us to want, but do we want God more? Whenever we don’t, it’s just another golden-calf moment that pushes us away from the amazing God who wants us to want him. Not because he’s needy, but because he jealously wants his children—that’s you and me! Today I encourage you to join Moses’s prayer in asking God to give us the very thing he wants to give us, his very self.

God, I want to want you most, hear my prayer. One thing I ask from you, LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in your house all the days of my life, to gaze on your beauty and to seek you in your temple. Hear my voice when I call, LORD; be merciful to me and answer me. My heart says of you, “Seek his face!” Your face, LORD, I will seek. Amen. —Adapted from Psalm 27



STEPHEN SHARKEY IS THE FOUNDING PASTOR OF GRANITE CITY COVENANT CHURCH IN QUINCY, MASSACHUSETTS, WHERE HE LIVES WITH HIS WIFE, KATHLEEN, AND THEIR THREE BOYS. AN ORDAINED MINISTER AND LIFELONG MEMBER OF THE EVANGELICAL COVENANT CHURCH, HE ATTENDED NORTH PARK SEMINARY, NORTH PARK UNIVERSITY, AND EVEN NORTH PARK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL. FOR THE PAST 10 YEARS HE HAS SERVED ON THE COVENANT WORLD RELIEF & DEVELOPMENT ADVISORY TEAM.

Day 3: Elijah

BY TINA TENG-HENSON

In one of the busiest seasons of my life, when I had taken on too many commitments and extra involvements, centering prayer was my saving grace. I needed this way to simply be with the Lord—wordlessly, without needing to produce anything or help anyone. God used centering prayer to teach me to clear my mind and entrust myself to him. I experienced his simple presence and let him love me in that stillness.

For those who have never experienced this, let me first say that Matthew 6:6 roots this contemplative prayer practice from the Desert Fathers as a way to “go into your inner room, close your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret” (NAS). Elijah’s experience of the Lord in 1 Kings 19 in “the sound of sheer silence” (NRSV) is the other anchor Scripture I reference when describing how the Lord speaks through this quietness of heart.

After a charged encounter with King Ahab and a standoff with all the prophets of Baal—whom he ends up slaughtering—Elijah receives death threats of his own from Queen Jezebel. Justifiably afraid, he runs for his life, and according to one source, that meant running 100 miles south to Beersheba (which would be more than four marathons’ worth of running!). No wonder he arrives exhausted, depressed, and asking God to end his life.

In his mercy, God sends angels instead—twice—to provide Elijah bread and water and sends him to take several naps. When Elijah finally awakes, they can have the honest conversation they need wherein God hears the legitimate complaints of Elijah’s heart. God shows up for him, but not in the powerful wind, nor in the dramatic earthquake, nor in the intense fire. It is in a gentle whisper. Elijah repeats his fearful lament of lonely despair, and God not only listens; God gives him the strategic plan for what to do next. He tells him who to anoint to succeed as king over Aram and Israel—and which prophet should take his place in enacting justice and righteousness in partnership with these leaders. He gives Elijah permission to go home and be done. Finally, he reassures him that he is not alone. He has preserved a remnant seven thousand strong,

who have also remained faithful to Yahweh Elohim.

What a good, tender God who loves us tangibly, concretely, quietly. Who shows up in stillness to push out all the noise and allay our anxious, restless hearts.

Whenever I take groups through centering prayer, I am amazed at how specifically and particularly the Lord speaks to each heart. He'll give one a word to "listen...don't just hear." He'll beckon another to "deep roots." He'll tell me, "I am pleased with you, I am proud of you." I've watched faces change, visibly lightened, calmed by five profound minutes of silence. Each one comes away having heard from God. Even children have had profound encounters with God in stillness. One heard a song. Another was reminded of her family's losses in the past year. God met them in those moments.

The Lord speaks to us in silence. Praise be to our God. Thanks be to God for his still, small voice.

May today there be peace within.

May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be.

May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith

May you use those gifts that you have received, and pass on the love that has been given to you.

May you be content knowing you are a child of God.

Let this presence settle into your bones, and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise, and love.

It is there for each and every one of us. —St. Teresa of Avila



TINA TENG-HENSON IS AN ASSISTANT PASTOR AT GRACE COMMUNITY COVENANT CHURCH IN LOS ALTOS, CALIFORNIA, WHERE SHE LEADS WORSHIP AND PREACHES REGULARLY. SHE IS TRAINING TO BE A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR THRU PAX CENTER FOR CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL FORMATION.

Day 4: Job

BY LENORE THREE STARS

I was an adult when I decided to follow Jesus. As a Lakota woman, I saw Christianity as the religion of the colonizers, but Jesus loved me through that barrier. Through a long, relational learning process, I was able to trust that Jesus is who he says he is and did what he said he did, all from love.

As a new Christian, I learned that prayer is “just talking to Jesus.” I could do that. I subconsciously developed a way of talking with Jesus about everything as I went about my day. It was informal and unstructured, and I felt heard.

In church, I observed a corporate model of prayer that included praise, confession, thanksgiving, and petition. It was more formal and structured and seemed to lean toward talking about God rather than to Jesus. Speaking prayer in this setting became an acquired skill for me, rather than a time of sharing the way I talk with Jesus.

In the Hebrew Bible, Job has a very interesting story. One tradition holds that the book of Job could have been part of an oral tradition that was later written down, which resonates with me because the Lakota have an epistemology of oral tradition. I also noted that Job was not an Israelite—he was a man from the East, in the land of Uz. In the first chapter, the storyteller characterizes Job as a very wealthy man of righteous character, a man who was “blameless and upright” (Job 1:1, NIV).

The story describes the appalling disaster and suffering that evil brought upon Job, who had no understanding as to why it was happening. God looked on, interceding just enough to keep Job alive. Job’s wife also had no understanding and told Job to “curse God and die.” Job’s friends silently sat with him in his spiritual and physical torment, but they didn’t pray to God for him. They gave him terrible theological advice that misrepresented God. Job did not agree with his friends, but rather, he poetically cursed the day of his birth out loud.

At first, he didn’t pray directly to God, but then he shifts to

confronting God, honestly and fully expressing his complaints and questions. At the same time, Job maintained his humble heart and contrite spirit, and God responded with a magnitude of restoration.

This story speaks to me of my ancestors who endured, with no understanding, suffering upon suffering, inflicted by evil in this world through colonization. Yet every generation of Lakota continues to go into ceremony to talk with Creator, not about Creator. We recognize that every life holds the spirit of Creator within and, as such, we try to hold ourselves as sacred beings so that all that we do or say are prayers.

Lakota holy man Nicolas Black Elk recognized Creator in a prayer of humility: You have been always, and before you nothing has been. You are older than all need, older than all pain and prayer. Teach us to walk the soft earth, a relative to all that live.



LENORE THREE STARS (OGLALA LAKOTA) RETIRED FROM A FEDERAL CIVIL RIGHTS CAREER IN SEATTLE, MOVED ACROSS WASHINGTON STATE TO BE UNCI (GRANDMOTHER) TO HER TAKOJAS (GRANDCHILDREN), AND BEGAN A JOURNEY TO DECOLONIZE HER THEOLOGY. SHE EARNED A MASTER'S DEGREE FROM PORTLAND SEMINARY IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE NORTH AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF INDIGENOUS THEOLOGICAL STUDIES, AND SHE HAS FACILITATED MANY JOURNEY TO MOSAIC TRIPS WITH THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST CONFERENCE, SERVED AS A COMMISSIONER FOR THE WASHINGTON STATE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION, AND SITS ON BOARDS RELATED TO HER INTERESTS IN INDIGENOUS ISSUES, JUSTICE, AND CREATION CARE.

Day 5: Jacob

BY MIKE GUERRERO

Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10, NIV).
“He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters” (Psalm 23:2).

Sometimes prayer is stillness and quietness. Sometimes it is something else.

Jacob, the son of Isaac, deceived his father to gain his brother Esau’s inheritance. When Esau learned of Jacob’s deceit, he vowed to kill him. So Jacob fled and lived in a distant land until God said, “Go back to the land of your fathers.”

Jacob gathered his family and wealth and journeyed to Canaan. When he came to the river Jabbok, he sent his possessions and family across the river. That night a strange thing happened.

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” The man asked him, “What is your name?” “Jacob,” he answered. Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel [struggles with God or, God struggles], because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.”...So Jacob called the place Peniel [face of God], saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.” —Genesis 32:24-28, 30, NIV

Jacob was allowed to wrestle with God. So are we.

Like the prophet Habakkuk, we can complain, “How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?” (1:2). Like the psalmist, we can demand, “How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” (13:1). God is not offended by our complaints or our demands; he does not turn away. Instead, he allows us to wrestle with him.

Just before God ends this unequal contest, Jacob cries out, “I will not let you go.” We may wrestle with God because we do not understand his inaction or his silence, or because we grow tired of pleading with him. But, like Jacob, it matters more that we do not let go of him, that in our uncertainty and frustration we tell God (and ourselves!), “I will not let you go.”

There is another, indispensable, truth about not letting go of God. “When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand” (Psalm 73:21-23).

Jacob shows us the importance of not letting go of God. The psalmist reminds us of the larger prerequisite truth: God does not let go of us.

Lord, thank you for letting me wrestle with you when I feel alone in the darkness of my nights. When my grip of you feels weakened and doubtful, please remind me your grip holds me infinitely more securely than I hold you.



MIKE GUERRERO SERVED AS LEAD PASTOR OF SHORELINE (WASHINGTON) COVENANT CHURCH FOR 40 YEARS. HE IS NOW RETIRED AND HOPES TO REMAIN SO. HE IS A COLUMNIST FOR *THE COVENANT COMPANION*.

Day 6: Elizabeth and Mary

BY VALARIE GRIMES

I am always intrigued by the stories of other people as they walk out their faith. How will they navigate the inevitable challenges that come with life? Who will they become as they draw closer to God? What will they do with the kingdom opportunities presented to them? I have long marveled at Elizabeth and Mary's commitment. Enter their story with me in Luke 1:24-45.

ELIZABETH

A woman advanced in age, married to the prominent priest Zechariah and a descendant of Aaron herself. Yet one word loomed more significant than these things: barren. Elizabeth was barren in a society that revered motherhood, especially of a male child.

I picture Elizabeth calling out to God for a child. Maybe a few times she thought her prayer was answered—only to be disappointed when her body experienced its normal monthly rhythm.

What to make of the news Zechariah wrote on a tablet that night after ministering in the temple? I am sure Elizabeth was bewildered and playing reels of “what could be” in her mind.

Like Elizabeth, I, too, was exposed to my promise late in life. At the age of 50, I said yes to church planting. I already felt late to the party, but it would be another two years before God opened any doors. Elizabeth's faith from centuries past helped me to wait.

MARY

A teenage girl of no renown, poor yet betrothed to be married. This marriage offered her stability and safety in a society that held such in high regard. I can imagine this was an answer to her prayer. I imagine her early childhood, playing with other little girls, longing for a husband, and anticipating her wedding day.

Consider her surprise when Gabriel appeared to her in great splendor with the announcement that everything she knew and prayed for was about to take a turn. His message: The Holy Spirit would overshadow her and she would bring forth the long-awaited Messiah. Her plans would be upended. Yet her answer was, “I am the Lord's servant....May your word to me be fulfilled” (Luke 1:38, NIV).

Many times my plans have slipped through my fingers. I was not as receptive as Mary.

WHEN PRAYERS COLLIDE

Mary packed and went to her cousin Elizabeth. These two women are linked by blood, prayers, and the pending fulfillment of God's plan. Both women had petitioned God and were willing to sacrifice their will for God's timing. When Elizabeth heard Mary's voice, the babe leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:41, NKJV). The two women drew strength from each other. The Lord allowed their prayers to collide in praise.

Who is encouraging you in your wait? Who are you supporting as they lay their plans upon the altar? When we lay down our plans and accept God's divine sovereignty, our lives become conduits for heaven to touch earth. The product of submission and patience is a mighty move of the Holy Spirit.

Lord, may we lay down our expectations and seek your will. Your plans are superior to ours, and your timing is perfect. May our trust in you grow daily as we learn submission like Mary and patience like Elizabeth. Jesus, be glorified through our obedience. Amen.



VALARIE GRIMES IS A LICENSED COVENANT MINISTER WHO SERVES AS THE LEAD PLANTER AND PASTOR OF RADIANT CHURCH SAVANNAH, A COVENANT CONGREGATION IN SAVANNAH, GEORGIA. SHE IS ENROLLED AT NORTH PARK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, PURSUING HER MASTER'S DEGREE. ONE OF THE GREATEST JOYS IN HER LIFE IS SPENDING TIME WITH HER TWO GRANDCHILDREN.

Day 7: The Disciples

BY CARMEN BENSINK LEWIS

We prayed for the miracle of healing, but we received the miracle of heaven.

Only the prayers of God's people could have sustained us through the unbelievable circumstances of Mom's sudden death.

On a long-awaited family vacation to Mexico last spring, my mom had a stroke. She died less than three weeks later. Lives entangled through time and love lifted their voices, sustaining our weary minds, exhausted bodies, and broken hearts.

Prayer propels us forward through uncharted territory when we're searching for God's will.

With Mom's death, my soul has landed in a dry, desolate place. The wasteland swallows up my breath. When it comes to prayer, I'm speechless. Words don't come. My present uncharted territory draws me to the disciple's request: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1, NIV). The "us-ness" of the prayer Jesus teaches in response is essential. The us-ness of prayer propels me forward into territory that cultivates space for God to recreate and reshape me.

For most of us, the words of Jesus's prayer fall freely from our lips without effort. I wonder, have we replaced Jesus's words with our own? Has our dependence on ourselves minimized the Lord's Prayer into a mere incantation?

The uncharted territory of life without Mom has crystalized Jesus's words for me.

Father, hallowed be your name...not mine.

Your kingdom come...not mine.

Give us each day...you provide what I need, not me.

Forgive us our sins...I'm not perfect.

Protect us from the evil one...his lies are real.

Prayer propels us forward when the will of God thrusts us into uncharted territory. We must move through this territory, not around it. Movement through clearly reveals who is in control—God. I am not. A humble awakening of one's position within the

kingdom is beneficial for both the individual and for “us.” We are his beloved disciples; nothing less, nothing more.

Having grown up in the Covenant, I’ve experienced this us-ness as time and love knit lives together at Trinity Covenant Church in Salem, Oregon. These are the saints who, compelled by their deep love for Mom, prayed without ceasing. Instinctively, we know prayer is our primary purpose as disciples of Jesus, but prayer often flows out of love. Just as I love my mom, I love the Church. I longed for healing for Mom; I long for healing in the Church.

I love the Church, but I deeply love our denomination. As commitment to the Church is diminishing, dissatisfaction rises and disinterest looms, prayer propels us through uncharted territory, not around it. Historically we’ve had a unique “us-ness” that we refer to as “mission friends.” The phrase rings sweetly in my ears. What will be our unique “us-ness” of the future?

May prayer propel us forward and the will of God thrust us into uncharted territory as we face the future of the Church together.

Lord, teach us to pray.



CARMEN BENSINK LEWIS LIVES IN SALEM, OREGON, WITH HER HUSBAND AND SON. SHE IS PASSIONATE ABOUT CREATING WORSHIP EXPERIENCES THAT ALLOW GREATER PARTICIPATION AND CREATIVITY. SHE ENJOYS COFFEE WITH FRIENDS, A GOOD BOOK, TIME WITH FAMILY, AND CREATING BEAUTY. HER HAPPY PLACE IS THE OREGON COAST.



CALL TO PRAYER

[COVCHURCH.ORG/PRAYER](https://covchurch.org/prayer)

In times of uncertainty and anxiety, we seek the One who is our rock and foundation. And in times of joy and gratitude, we turn to Christ, our focus and center. Through prayer, God speaks, and we listen.

You are invited to join a Covenant-wide Call to Prayer, an opportunity for our denomination to unite together in prayerful dependence upon the Holy Spirit.

Join us as we focus on prayer. Multiple options to engage include:

Midwinter kick-off (January)

Week of Prayer (February)

Virtual monthly prayer gatherings
(February – June)

Sermon series campaign (May)

Serve Globally prayer calendar (June)

Prayer resources, sermon series guides, and updates will be released throughout the first half of 2023. Sign up at covchurch.org/prayer to be notified as resources are released.



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