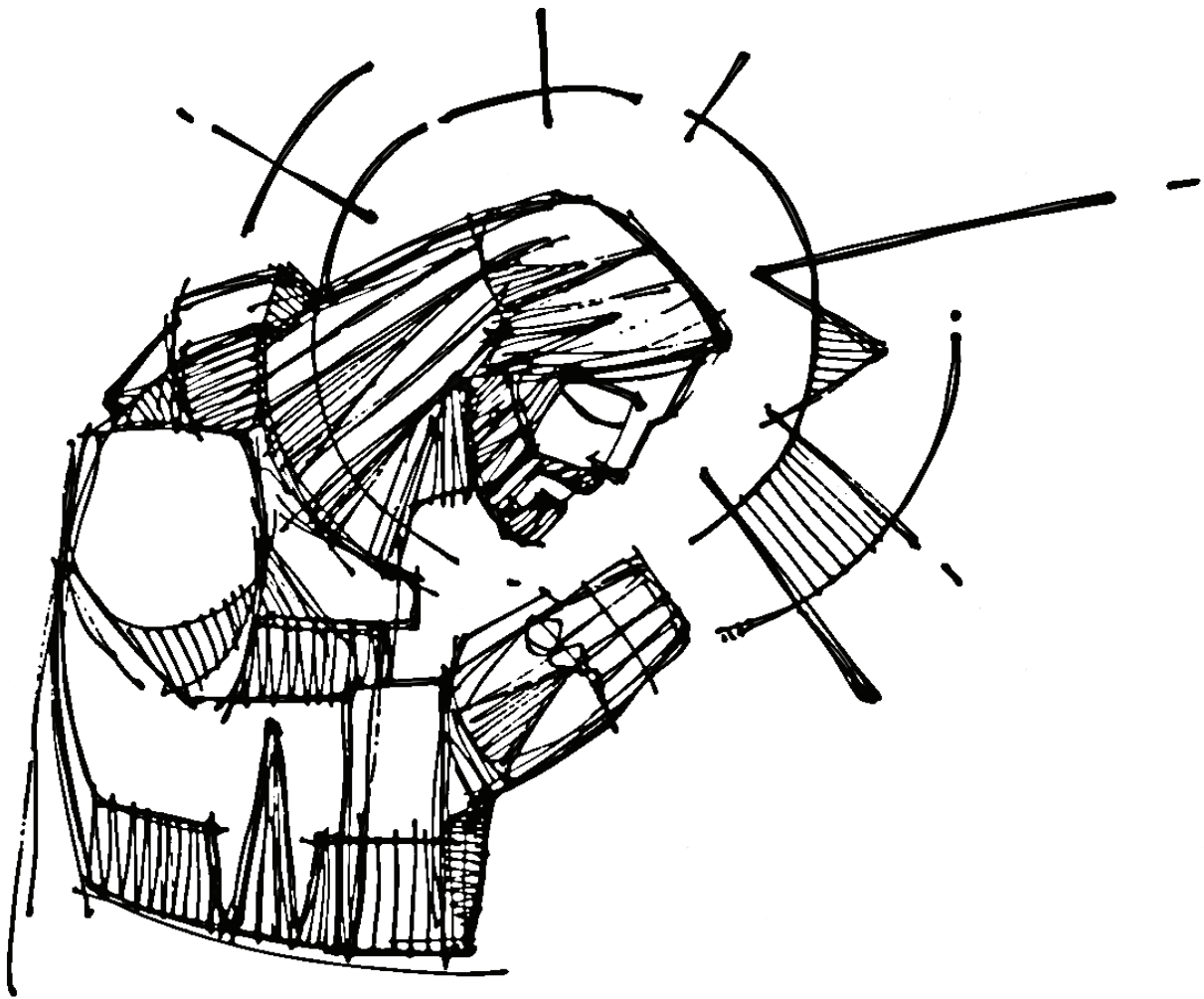


WEEK OF PRAYER 2025

JESUS' PRAYERS



CLIFFORD HEYS

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FOREWORD

Dr. Clifford Heys, a well-known and beloved pastor, has concluded his ministry as pastor of the Stellenbosch Dutch Reformed Church. He currently enjoys retirement in Hermanus, where he fills his days with hiking and writing. He also continues to preach regularly. “Uncle” Clifford’s new book on retirement and getting your affairs in order will soon be available from CLF.

This Week of Prayer series focuses on Jesus’ prayers. Clifford addresses deep and meaningful themes and concludes the week with the Lord’s Prayer. We are excited about this series and trust that, as every year, it will bear spiritual fruit and be of value to congregations’ annual Week of Prayer, where they begin the year with prayer times, worship services, gatherings, and Bible studies. Each sermon concludes with questions for reflection that can be used by cell groups, families, Church Councils, or individuals.

Good luck for 2025, and enjoy the journey through Jesus’ prayers through the eyes and wisdom of Clifford Heys.

Warm regards,
Mias van Jaarsveld
Editor

DAY 1

JESUS PRAYS A THANKSGIVING PRAYER FOR THE SIMPLETONS

Scripture Reading:

Matt. 11:19-20 and 25-26

Text:

"I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (Matt. 11:25-26).

Message:

Jesus also sometimes grew discouraged with people who had their eyes shut. In Matthew 11:20, we read how He reproaches the people and faults them for a great mistake. But Jesus was not alone in His disappointment. Throughout history, we see many examples of people who wore blinders or made disastrous decisions:

- In 1975, Steve Sasson, an engineer at Kodak, designed the first digital camera. However, the company decided there was no future in digital photography and stayed with film. A mistake!
(They could not foresee that this decision would lead to great losses for Kodak.)
- In 1936 and 1937, Stalin had thousands of preachers in Russia either exiled or summarily executed. Then Khrushchev made it illegal to share the gospel with children. The Communist regime wanted to keep the ideology pure from the Gospel, which Karl Marx had called the "opium of the people." A mistake!
(They could never have imagined that Boris Yeltsin would admit in 1991 that Christianity had survived the Communist ideology, thanks to grandmothers – the "babushki" – who illegally taught their grandchildren the gospel.)
- In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party declared China an atheist state. Believers were persecuted, and it seemed the Church's end had arrived. A mistake!
(Today, there are at least 68 million Christians in China. Mao Zedong could never have imagined that the countries where the Church is currently growing the fastest include Nepal (10.93%), China (10.86%), and even Muslim countries like the United Arab Emirates (9.34%) and Saudi Arabia (9.27%).)

Even Jesus was not acceptable to everyone – despite His good deeds and miracles. It was the scribes and Pharisees, the learned spiritual leaders of the time, who rejected Him. They, the respected men of renown, were expecting a Messiah, but Jesus did not meet their expectations. To them, He was just a glutton, a wine-drinker, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners. They saw Him as someone in the wrong company (Matt. 11:19). However, it was much more than just a mistake – it was a tragic misunderstanding of who He truly was. They wore blinders and actually understood less of God’s grace than the “simpletons” they so easily condemned.

Jesus’ disappointment was tangible, and He reproached the people for not repenting (Matt. 11:20). Yet, in this moment of disappointment, He turns to His Father and prays: *“I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children”* (Matt. 11:25-26).

This prayer of Jesus is one of the lesser-known prayers. It is spontaneous and born from the moment. Jesus did not go up a mountain to pray alone – right among the people, He calls out His gratitude: “Thank You, Father, for the simpletons among us.”

Instead of isolating Himself after disappointing results in His ministry, He thanks His Father for the “simpletons” who come to Him. This attitude is a powerful lesson for all of us.

Now, the word “simpletons” (many English translations use the words “little children”, which actually emphasises this idea) may sound demeaning but actually, it refers to the “normal” person on the streets, the humble, faithful people whose faith could also be considered as naïve. They are salt-of-the-earth type of people, those who often go unnoticed. They are people who make a difference on grassroot level.

There is a special power in the simpletons – the lowly, the insignificant, the people from the margins. Someone has remarked that they are like snowflakes: on their own, they are small, but together they can bring traffic to a standstill. And Jesus knew this.

An example of this can be seen in Bloemfontein at the Two-Tower Church whose cornerstone was laid in 1878 by President J.H. Brand. Once, it was the church of the city’s elite – members of parliament, ministers, businessmen, and academics. But as the city became more dangerous, the middle class moved to the suburbs, and the church lost its traditional members. Many thought the congregation would close its doors. But then, the snowflakes fell... Today, the Two-Tower Church is a dynamic and active congregation, open to all. The members are people from the state – the broken, the homeless, and the unemployed. These people have now found a home in the pews. The work of simpletons – the people whom others routinely underestimate – has made a great difference. Today, the church is known as “Towers of Hope”!

This is something we see all throughout the Bible: It is the ordinary, simple people to whom the treasure of the gospel has been entrusted; it is the humble people, underestimated by others, who have faith with impact and who truly grasp Jesus’ message.

The pastor prays, just like Jesus: “I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to us, who live in simplicity” (Matt. 11:24-25), to the little children whom will inherit the kingdom of God.

This brings us to deep questions:

What does a *Cross-Church* look like?

What does a *Bread Church* look like?

What does a church that makes disciples, baptizes converts, and teaches Jesus’ children look like?

What does a *Christ Church* look like? (Matt. 28:18-20).

How do we pray spontaneous prayers of thanksgiving?

1. Praise the Father for His revelation to the simple and humble:

We praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to us, who live in simplicity (Matt. 11:25).

2. Think of congregations that are struggling:

Think of congregations that must survive in difficult times. As you stand in front of such a church building, look up at the church tower, which silently yet loudly points to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church. Pray and thank the Lord that He maintains His Church, even when circumstances are challenging.

3. Thank the Lord for service-oriented believers:

Lord, we thank You for the many believers who, often unnoticed, give their time, talents, and love to serve others. They are like the women who supported Jesus in His ministry – like Joanna, whose husband worked for Herod and may have even used the king’s resources to provide for Jesus and His disciples (Luke 8:3 – “*These women provided for Jesus and the twelve out of their own means*”).

4. Thank for missionaries and their work:

We praise You for missionaries and cross-planters who go across borders to bring the light of the Gospel. Just as You planted a cross on Golgotha, they plant cross-testimonies that change the world. We think of the Roman soldier who, after Golgotha, exclaimed: “*Truly this man was the Son of God*” (Matt. 27:54).

5. Thank for mercy in action:

We thank You for every soup kitchen, where the love of Christ is shared through bread and soup. Thank You for every person who supports this ministry, for they are the hands and feet of Jesus in a broken world.

In the words of Matthew 11:25-26:

*“I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,
that You have hidden these things from the wise and learned,
and revealed them to the humble of heart.”*

And encourage each other with this blessing:

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all!” (Rev. 22:21).

Questions for Reflection and Prayer:

1. How can I be a bearer of hope and encouragement today?
2. What humble calling is the Lord placing in my heart right now?
3. How can I practically help build God’s Kingdom in my community?
4. Who might I have unknowingly overlooked, and how can I support them in love?
5. What does it mean for me to live and share the Gospel in simplicity?

Themes for Prayer:

1. Pray for the perseverance of congregations that are experiencing difficult times.
2. Thank the Lord for believers who selflessly serve in their communities.
3. Pray for missionaries and their families who faithfully spread the Gospel.
4. Pray for healing and mercy in areas where physical and spiritual needs are great.
5. Thank the Lord that He brings light through the simplicity and humility of ordinary people’s lives.

DAY 2

JESUS PRAYS THE HIGH PRIESTLY PRAYER

Scripture reading:

John 17:1-2 and 20-23

Text:

"I pray that they will all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me." (John 17:21)

Message:

John 17 is known as Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer."

Why is it called the "High Priestly Prayer"?

Or rather: What does the High Priest do?

The High Priest is recognised by his attire:

- On his shoulders, the High Priest carries two onyx stones, with the names of the 12 tribes inscribed on them. This symbolises that he carries the burdens of the people on his shoulders.
- Near his chest, there is a breastplate with the names of the 12 tribes engraved in precious stones. This shows that he carries the people close to his heart.

The High Priest is the bridge between God and His people. He listens to the people's sighs and complaints, then goes to God, holding the people's concerns up to Him. The High Priest is the intermediary between God and humanity. Jesus was such a perfect High Priest (Hebrews 7:28).

And now, Jesus prays the High Priestly Prayer:

- First, Jesus prays for Himself (17:1-5). He realises His time has come, and He prays that the Father will glorify Him because He has faithfully completed His mission. His task is finished. (The Message by Eugene H. Peterson translates it as "Father, it's time. Display the bright splendour of your Son.")
- Then, Jesus prays for His disciples (17:6-19). He prays for their protection, asking that they be kept safe from the evil one.
- Lastly, Jesus prays for the Church (17:20-26). He prays for the unity of the Church, and He qualifies that the Church must be one, just as He and the Father are one.

Why is the unity of the Church so important?

Jesus prays for unity “so that the world may believe that You have sent Me” (17:21). The *unity* must be visible to the world. The world must be able to see and experience this unity. The great Mahatma Gandhi, although a Hindu, regarded the Bible as a sacred book. He faithfully read Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and was nourished by it. However, when someone asked him why he did not join the Christian Church, his response was, “Which Church?”

How important is the unity of the Church?

Firstly, *unity is God’s will*. It is not an ideal – it is a given; it is the essence of the Church. We profess our faith in *a holy, universal Christian Church, the communion of saints*. And this is exactly what Jesus prays for. Paul wrote a letter to the believers in Rome. If Paul were writing a letter to the believers in your town or city today, which congregation would the letter be delivered to... (This makes one think, doesn’t it?)

Today, we see how divided the Church is. It’s as if the Evil One has used scissors to tear apart the Church of Jesus into many “splinter churches,” which now slander one another out of theological hatred. One group has baptism, another believes in the rapture, another holds to election, and yet others focus on pietism and the Holy Spirit. And today’s fragmented churches bring shame to the King of the Church! The division within the Church is a shame that should bring us to tears, for in 1 Corinthians 12:12, Paul says that despite the division, we must still be one.

And what do we do with the differences that divide us?

Paul answers this question by saying that for the sake of unity, he will become like a Jew to win the Jews, and like the weak to win the weak (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). In this way, he will win both Jews and the weak for Christ!

There is a beautiful story that connects here. During World War II, in the mountains of Italy, three soldiers escaped from a camp. One of them was seriously wounded and died. The two remaining comrades saw a small church in the mountains and knocked for help. They asked the priest, “Will you please bury our friend?”

The priest asked, “Is he Catholic?”

His friends replied, “No...”

“Then I will bury him just outside the churchyard, not inside,” said the priest. So, it was done.

After the war, the two friends went to visit their deceased friend’s grave, but they couldn’t find it. The priest was still there and welcomed them warmly. He took them to the grave – now inside the churchyard! The two friends didn’t understand. The priest then confessed that he was ashamed of his church’s behaviour and had moved the boundary of the churchyard to include the Protestant’s grave.

“We are one family,” said the priest apologetically.

I want to conclude with this thought: There is no commandment for unity in the Bible, *but there is a prayer for unity*. And this is Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer.” And for this, we must pray:

How do we pray High Priestly Prayers?

1. We must first confess our sins.

We cannot pray Jesus' prayer for unity without confessing our own guilt. There has been so much sad division in the Church (let's call it what it is: theological hatred, the so-called *odium theologicum*). If this is still relevant today, confess it before the Lord and send a representative from your church/community to ask for forgiveness on behalf of your congregation. Offer one another the brotherly handshake.

2. Pray for new eyes.

Pray that the Holy Spirit will guide us to look at one another with new eyes. Pray that we will see our fellow humans not as people with a past, but as people with a future together with Jesus!

3. Read the Bible with new eyes.

Pray that the Holy Spirit will lead us to read the Bible with new eyes, for a Bible that divides believers and drives them into separate camps is not the true Word of God.

4. Promote community.

At the next communion, invite your neighbouring church or congregation to join you in partaking together.

5. Redefine the Church.

Pray for your denomination. The denomination is not the Church. The Church is the born-again Christians who, though strangers on this earth, are walking together in the footsteps of Jesus. The denomination consists of born-again believers, but born-again believers who have particular needs for certain forms of worship and spiritual ceremonies, but never superior ones.

6. Pray like Jesus.

Pray like Jesus, that we may all be one, just as the Father and the Lord Jesus are one.

The division of the Church is a reality, but also an invitation to live out Jesus' prayer. Let us pray, work, and hope that the Church will become one again, to the glory of Christ and a light to the world.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all!" (Revelation 22:21)

Questions for reflection and prayer:

1. How can I actively work for unity in my faith community?
2. What does it mean to be a bridge-builder between believers with different convictions?
3. Where do I cling to my own rights instead of serving the greater cause of unity?
4. How can I make Christ's love practically visible to people outside my own faith group?
5. What does the example of the priest in the mountain church teach me about reconciliation?

Themes for prayer:

1. Pray for reconciliation and unity among different church groups.
2. Thank the Lord for leaders who build the Church toward unity in Christ.
3. Pray for those who, because of church divisions, feel they belong nowhere.
4. Ask that the world may see the light of Christ through the unity of believers.
5. Thank the Lord that He builds the Church, despite our shortcomings.

DAY 3

JESUS PRAYS FOR RECONCILIATION

Scripture Reading:

Luke 23:33-39

Text:

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)

Message:

As you read the story of Jesus' crucifixion, you want to read it with closed eyes. You want to look away, because in your mind's eye, you see the bloody Son of God lying on the rough wood of the cross, powerless. He, who was welcomed into the city on Palm Sunday with *"Joyous Hosannas,"* is now driven out of the city with *"Away with Him! Crucify Him!"* He, who is without sin, is now made a sinner. He, who is holy, is cursed as unholy. The One with all power now lies powerless on a cross. By the Prince of Peace stand Roman soldiers, armed with hammers and nails. He gets what He does not deserve. You must look away.

You look away, but your ears still hear. You hear the sound of pain in the hammer blows. You hear the horror of the crowd. And then there is a voice. You must hear it. It is a voice familiar to many. It is the voice of the Man who is now nailed to the cross. But unlike the others, He does not curse, spit, or scold. He prays. And He prays unheard of. He does not ask His Father to send a legion of angels to rescue Him. No, He prays the opposite. He prays: *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"* (Luke 23:34).

This is one of the hardest prayers to pray. You do not pray for vengeance or retribution. No, you pray to be able to forgive. You pray for reconciliation. You do not ask for walls and bars. You ask for open doors and bridges. Such a prayer was written and prayed in the concentration camp in Ravensbrück. It was in 1945, when news of the end of the war was already spreading. A Jewish prisoner wrote this prayer:

*I pray, Lord,
for peace for all wicked people and nations
I pray
for an end to all vengeance and talk of punishment and retribution*

The atrocities we have seen here are more than any person can understand

Therefore I pray:

*Do not demand from them the terrible reckoning that is due them,
make other calculations...*

(P. Naude, Prayer)

... Father, forgive, make other calculations.

Now think of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). The men stand ready with stones in their hands. The law of Moses says such women must be stoned! And Jesus? No, Jesus forgives her. And notice: she never confessed her guilt or even said "sorry." Jesus does not want to see her past; He wants to see her future. Should we not also forgive and make other calculations?

Can I not also forgive like the father of the prodigal son?

When the father embraces his son, the son still wants to ask to be made a servant. But the son cannot complete his confession because the father kisses him and reconciles with him. The father does not want to hear about the past. He wants to see his son's future (Luke 15:11-24). The father forgives and makes other calculations.

Think also of Amy Elizabeth Biehl. She was a 26-year-old student at Stanford University in the USA. As an anti-apartheid activist, she came to South Africa on a Fulbright scholarship. On August 25, 1993, she was dragged from her car and stabbed to death by youths in Gugulethu, outside Cape Town. The result? Four youths were found guilty of murder. But the Truth and Reconciliation Commission acquitted them, and Amy's parents approved of the acquittal. Her father came to South Africa to meet the killers of his daughter. He forgave them with a handshake. Peter and Linda Biehl established the *Amy Biehl Foundation Trust* to promote the education of South African youth. Peter and Linda Biehl forgave and made other calculations.

I may be wrong, but I think it was Mark Twain who spoke of forgiveness as a pleasant fragrance: "*Forgiveness is the fragrance the rose geranium sheds on the heel that has crushed it.*" And it is true. Pick a leaf of the Cape coast mallow, rub and break it between your fingers, and it gives the most wonderful scent.

How do we pray the Prayer for Reconciliation?

- 1. We pray first for our fellow human beings**, because we owe them a debt. The greatest debt you have to pay is Divine love. Debt is rather money than love!
- 2. We pray for our marriages.** Marriage is the closest you will come on earth to either heaven or hell. A difficult man once pointed to his wife and said, "It is through her that I have seen a piece of heaven." Make it a heaven for each other!

3. **We pray for our parents.** Our homes should reflect something of heaven. Our children should be accepted by us, despite the foolish things they sometimes do (like the prodigal son).
4. **We pray for our children.** Sometimes we disagree. Pray that your children will understand that the advice (and even criticism) of parents is meant to free them from peer pressure so that they can make their own decisions.
5. **We pray for ourselves,** that we will also make other calculations. Pray to be able to pray like Jesus: *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”*

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all! “(Rev. 22:21)

Questions for Reflection and Prayer:

1. How do I respond when I am confronted? Am I prone to seek revenge, or do I seek reconciliation and peace?
2. Who in my life has hurt me, and how can I learn to forgive them? Am I willing to make other calculations like Jesus did?
3. How does my behaviour towards others reflect the grace and forgiveness I have received from God?
4. Am I holding on to unnecessary grudges or bitterness that hinders my spiritual growth? How can I surrender this to the Lord in prayer?
5. What area of my life is the Lord asking me to shift boundaries and embrace new perspectives?

Themes for Prayer:

1. **Forgiveness:** Pray that God will help you forgive others as He has forgiven you, and experience the freedom that comes with it.
2. **Reconciliation:** Pray for healing in broken relationships, for open hearts, and for opportunities to build bridges where there is division.
3. **Grace:** Thank God for His abundant grace and ask for the same grace to be shown to others.
4. **Peace:** Pray for inner peace in your heart and for peace among people, communities, and nations.
5. **Responsibility:** Pray that you will have the courage and wisdom to do your part in promoting justice and building a hopeful future for others.

DAY 4

JESUS PRAYS THE PRAYER OF GOD-ABANDONMENT

Scripture Reading:

Mark 15:33-39

Text:

“My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Mark 15:34)

Message:

The Lord Jesus is in the process of dying. He was crucified at 9:00 AM (the third hour) and dies six hours later, at 3:00 PM (the ninth hour). From this darkness comes an inexplicable cry: *“My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?”* (Jesus’ mother tongue was Aramaic, and now He prays in His mother tongue: *“Eloï, Eloï, lemá sabagtani?”* – Mark 15:34).

Look again at the cross. The man hanging on the cross is God-forsaken. Note that Jesus does not hang high above the ground, but neither is He standing or touching the ground. This position, between heaven and earth, shows us that He is forsaken by both man and God. The earth rejects Him, so He cannot die on the earth. The heavens reject Him, so He cannot die high in the heavens. He hangs and dies between heaven and earth. He is forsaken. Nowhere is there a refuge for Him.

He is God-forsaken. And now you begin to understand something of our confession that Jesus descended into hell. The cross tells Him: *“Away with you, off the earth!”* But also: *“Away with you, out, out, out of the heavens!”* In other words: *“To hell with you!”*

Forsaken by God. Yes, we call this hell. The church reformer Martin Luther experienced this hell. He described it as a great darkness and doubt. He called it the devil. Billy Graham also experienced it.

During the Week of Prayer, we should think of the many people who also pray this Prayer of Abandonment. Jesus was not the first, nor the last, to pray like this. Before Him, poets prayed: *“My God, my God, why have You forgotten me and remain far when I call for help?”* (Ps. 22:1 & 42:10). After Him, others, like C.S. Lewis, prayed the Prayer of Abandonment, when he married Joy Davidman and found heaven on earth, but after four years lost her. He also prayed this Prayer of Abandonment:

“Meanwhile, where is God? Go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away...” (A Grief Observed, p. 4).

The God who disappears when you seek Him has a name: “*Deus Absconditus*” (“The God who is absent”). But is He really the “God who is absent”? The Jewish philosopher and writer, Martin Buber (1878–1965), spoke of the absent God and said that it is because God plays a game of hide-and-seek with us.

We know hide-and-seek – we *want* to be found! One day, a grandfather and his grandchildren play hide-and-seek. It is grandfather’s turn to close his eyes and count. As grandfather reaches ten, he gives a warning that he is about to come and search. Then grandfather counts: “Nine, ten! Are you ready?” All the children hide and are very quiet, except for little Danie, who shouts: “Here I am, Grandpa!” And immediately, Grandpa knows where little Danie is hiding. Grandpa tells little Danie to be quiet, but Danie keeps shouting: “Here I am, Grandpa!” And then it dawns on Grandpa: Danie’s joy is to be found. Little Danie wants to be found at all costs!

So do we! But God also wants to be found!

A Jewish boy and his father return from the synagogue. The service was quite empty, and the boy asks his father: “Daddy, why didn’t the people come to the synagogue? There were only a few of us.” And the father replies: “Sometimes God plays hide-and-seek with His children. Then it is His turn to hide, but His children find the game boring and walk away. They don’t search for God, not even in the synagogue.”

God also wants to be found!

How do we pray the Prayer of God-Abandonment?

- 1. We pray for the lonely and forsaken among us:** Simone Weil (1909–1943) had an open hand and heart for her fellow humans. She said there are three ways to make yourself invisible:
 - Live in the lower town where you do not count. They do not see you. You are invisible.
 - Become sick and bedridden, and soon your friends’ visits will decrease. You become invisible. They do not see you. You are invisible.
 - Become old and sit in a room. You quickly become invisible, and they forget about you. You are invisible.

We pray for all who have become invisible.

- 2. We pray for our “neighbours”:** In Luke 10, the Lord tells the story of a man on a journey who is attacked by robbers. The man lies there. A priest passes by, then a Levite, but neither sees him. Then a Samaritan comes by, and he helps the man along the road. Then Jesus asks: Who of these three is the ‘neighbour’? Not the one who is in need, but the one who gives. We pray for each neighbour who sees, goes, and gives.

- 3. We pray for people who no longer pray, because God does not answer their prayers:** The God-forsaken say that God has taken the phone off the hook. What would happen if God answered everyone's prayers and gave what was asked for? The only prayer that is not answered is the prayer that is not prayed.
- 4. If we could pray in French, we would pray for our friends:** *"la joie du Christ"* ("the joy of Christ"), because Jesus experienced joy three days later. We will too!

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all!" (Rev. 22:21)

Questions for Reflection and Prayer:

1. How do I experience God's nearness in times of darkness? Can I continue to trust, even when He remains silent?
2. What does Jesus' abandonment by God on the cross teach me about my own struggles and prayers? How can I apply this truth in my life?
3. Who in my surroundings feels lonely or rejected? How can I be a proof of God's love and presence to them?
4. What does my search for God look like? Am I willing to continue seeking, even when it feels like He is hiding?
5. How can I encourage others who also feel as though God is absent?

Themes for Prayer:

- 1. Loneliness and Abandonment:** Pray for those who feel they are alone, rejected, or cut off from God and people.
- 2. Divine Nearness:** Thank God that He is always faithful, even when we do not experience His presence.
- 3. Open Eyes and Hearts:** Pray that we will be sensitive to the needs around us and willing to carry others' burdens.
- 4. Perseverance in Prayer:** Pray that our faith will not waver in times of silence or hardship.
- 5. God's Light in Darkness:** Pray that those going through difficult times will experience God's light and hope, even when He seems far.

DAY 5

JESUS PRAYS HIS FINAL PRAYER

Scripture Reading:

Luke 23:44-49

Text:

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” (Luke 23:46)

Message:

Today we look at Jesus and we look death in the eyes. Death is the number one enemy. Death is feared. Death is a terror. Death robs us of our time, while there is still so much we want to do. We cannot escape death. Death does not discriminate either. Death is not closer to the old man than to the young person. We can only fight death with pills and operations, but we still eventually retire towards the grave.

And yet... and yet, we can dare today to say that the fear of death is much worse than death itself. I think of the well-known German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. When he was taken from his cell for his execution at the end of World War II on April 9, 1945, his last words to his fellow prisoner were: “This is the end, but for me, it is the beginning.”

Luke takes us back to that Friday. We speak today of Good Friday, but that Friday was a Dark Friday. Jesus hung on the cross. He was dying the painful death of a martyr. An unprecedented darkness descended upon Jerusalem. The curtain of the temple was torn from top to bottom. And then came His last prayer. With His last breath, He cried out loudly enough so that God (who would have forsaken Him) could hear and come. And Jesus prays to God: “*Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit.*”

And that is how it is to die. No, you do not lose your life. You give it over into God’s hands for safe keeping. That is exactly what Jesus did. That is why He could triumphantly shout, even while dying: “*Tetelestai, It is finished!*” (John 19:30).

Now we may ask: How does one die? And the answer is to look at how Jesus died. This is how we must die. Jesus gave His Spirit to the Father. The famous Henri Nouwen looks at Jesus’ way of dying and compares our death to two tightrope walkers. See how high and gracefully they swing above the circus tent, but then comes the moment when one must let go and the other must catch. One must release the pole and give hands. The other must catch and take the outstretched hands. In this way, Jesus swung from the cross into His Father’s hands.

Dying is, like Jesus, to give your life back to the Father. The day you were baptized, an ownership exchange took place. With your baptism, you became the child of your heavenly Father. You became Father's property. And baptism is the sign and proof of ownership. You belong, and your only comfort is that, in both life and death, body and soul, you do not belong to yourself, but to your faithful Savior, Jesus Christ (Heidelberg Catechism 1/1).

Death cannot rob you of your life because you no longer have a life of your own. It is God's life. And in Romans 8, we read that death has no hold on you. You need not fear death. Neither life nor death, nor angels nor powers, nor anything else can separate you from the love of God. No, certainly not death (Rom. 8:38-39). A famous theologian named Bavinck knew Romans 8 well. On his deathbed, his last words were: *"Now it is just me and Jesus."*

A next question is: What happens when you die? Henri J.M. Nouwen again provides a good image. Imagine a twin still in the mother's womb. Sister says to Brother she believes a wonderful life awaits them. Brother says it's nonsense. Sister says to Brother that she believes there is a loving mommy and daddy waiting for them. Brother says it's nonsense because she can't prove it. And after nine months, the birth pains come. There is pressure and squeezing, and Brother complains: "Why am I suffering so? Why is this happening to me? Why am I being punished?" And then the birth happens. And there is a mother and a father welcoming Sister and Brother. There is new life. (And punishment? No, perhaps just a light slap on the bottom so he can breathe.) This is how dying is!

Dying is falling asleep. The Bible also speaks of dying as "falling asleep" (1 Thess. 4:14). When you climb into bed tonight, you fall asleep. You are unaware of falling asleep. All you are conscious of is that you wake up. This is how you fall asleep, that is, you wake up. And so, we may think of death. You will just wake up in a new heavenly dimension. So, we do not speak of people who have died, but rather that they have fallen asleep.

How do we pray for the dying?

- 1. We pray for the sufferers who wrestle with God:** For some, their suffering begins with a complaint about weakness, pain, or worthlessness, but then the complaint turns into an accusation. They reason: Either the Almighty does not will it, or the loving God cannot. Is the Almighty God almighty? Is the loving God love? But – and this is important – sickness and suffering are not God's punishment on us. Jesus came precisely to take the punishment off our shoulders and place it on His own.
- 2. We pray for the doubters, people who want to believe but cannot:** Albert Camus was a French philosopher and Nobel laureate, but also an outspoken atheist. After his death in 1960, they discovered a prayer in his drawer. Camus prays: "Lord, I am lonely. When the day of my final journey arrives, and the ship departs that will never return, You will see me aboard. A person with

only a meager amount of baggage, almost naked... Be merciful, and still agree to help me." (The Great Prayer Book, Piet Naudé). Albert Camus is not alone. There are many others like him.

- 3. We pray for them in their final moments:** May their last prayer also be: *"Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit."*

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all! (Rev. 22:21)

Questions for Reflection and Prayer:

1. How do I approach the idea of death? Am I at peace with the reality of dying?
2. How do I understand death in the light of Jesus' death? What does it mean for me to commit my spirit into God's hands?
3. What is my greatest fear in the face of death? How can I overcome it through God's presence and love?
4. How do I experience suffering in my own life? How can I handle pain and obstacles with faith in God's presence?
5. How can I pray for those in the final stage of their lives? How can I support them with prayer and love?

Themes for Prayer:

1. Peace in the face of death: Pray for the courage to face death and peace in the knowledge that God has ultimate control over life and death.
2. Trust in God's care: Pray for the ability to trust in God's care and ownership of our lives in all circumstances, including in the face of death and suffering.
3. Healing for the suffering: Pray for those in pain or sickness, that they may experience God's presence and understand their suffering in the light of Christ's sacrifice.
4. Faith in the afterlife: Pray for those who doubt or whose faith in God is tested, that they may experience the hope and comfort of the promise of life after death.
5. For the dying: Pray for those nearing the end of their lives, that their final words and prayers will be filled with peace and trust in God: *"Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit."*

DAY 6

WE PRAY THE OUR FATHER

Scripture Reading:

Luke 11:1 and Matthew 6:9-13

Text:

“When He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.’” (Luke 11:1)

Message:

There is one more prayer, the prayer that the Lord Jesus taught us to pray – the Our Father, prayed in 500 languages around the world.

We all struggle in some way with prayer. Rabbi Alfred J. Kolatch illustrates this dilemma in his *The Jewish Book of Why*. A father and son went to the synagogue for the Rosh Hashanah service. After the liturgical prayer, each person must affirm the prayer with a strong Amen. But the poor son had a speech defect and could not speak, much less say “Amen.” When the congregation said “Amen,” the son took out a whistle from his pocket and blew it! The father was embarrassed and scolded the boy, but the rabbi came to the son’s rescue: “Your son’s whistle is also acceptable to God. It is prayer. God smiles.”

Today, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1). They may have asked how to pray correctly because prayer is universal. Some people pray a lot, like Martin Luther, who reportedly spent 2 to 3 hours praying. Then there were those like John Wesley’s devoted wife. Susannah had no private room; she simply sat at her kitchen table, but with her apron over her head. No rooster or child interrupted her.

And Jesus teaches His followers to pray: “Our Father...” The Our Father prayer was a prayer that the early church prayed with great respect and reverence. In the worship service, the priest (or liturgist) would first pray, asking that the Lord would make them worthy to pray the Our Father. It was not a prayer prayed spontaneously.

The Our Father prayer was a hallmark of the believer. Only those who had made a confession of faith, were baptised, and had access to the Communion table could pray this prayer. Only them.

Father:

The prayer is directed to God as Father. In the Old Testament, God is referred to as Father a few times (14 times), but now Jesus comes and gives us the right to address the holy God as 'Father.' Interestingly, Jesus says we must address God as 'Abba.' Abba is the Aramaic word for Father, and Jesus' first language was Aramaic. Immediately, this prayer brings God and humans very close to each other, like a Father (daddy) and child.

Us:

If God is your Father and God is also my Father, then we are brothers and sisters, family. The children of God are family, and God's family is the church (Gal. 3:28). This requires, as in all families, that we accept each other despite our differences and that we help one another in times of need (Gal. 6:2).

Hallowed be Thy Name:

God's Name is holy. A name tells you who someone is. For example, consider the name Adam, David, Paul, or Tutu Mandela. God's Name tells us who He is – the Almighty, the Creator God. His holy Name should never be used as a curse word. His Name is used only in worship and praise, or when you need God and call out to Him.

Thy Kingdom Come:

When we pray this, we are voting for God's kingdom over any political kingdom or even over my own little kingdom. If God's kingdom is to come, my kingdom must go! God must be King, and He alone. I remain loyal to Him alone.

Thy Will Be Done:

This is a Gethsemane prayer. Jesus asked in Gethsemane that the cup of suffering pass from Him, but not His will, but the Father's will. The Father wants all people to be saved and for the new heaven and new earth to be established once more.

Give Us Our Daily Bread:

Please give us everything we need today. David J. Bosch gives us a fitting quote: "O God, to those who have hunger, give bread; and to us who have bread, give the hunger for justice" (Matt. 14:16).

Forgive Us:

If the Father has forgiven me, who am I not to forgive others?

Lead Us Not into Temptation:

We are just human. We may think we stand, but we can also fall (1 Cor. 10:12-13).

Let us pray the Our Father in the Afrikaans of the Northern Cape, as recorded by P.J. van den Heever:

Our Father
Who is somewhere far above in the blue sky,
On this warm day, I want to kneel and pray to You:
Let Your kingdom come to us,
And let Your greatness be made manifest here among us,
And let Your will be done up there around You,
Just as it is done here on our land in the Bushman's country.
Give us today our daily bread,
And forgive us, our sinful mess,
As we forgive the sins of others.
Lord, let evil take wide turns around us
And please, Lord, let the devil not come near.
People do such ugly things against me,
But please help me not to see it,
So that You may not see mine either.
You are forever and ever.
Amen, my great Crown.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all!" (Rev. 22:21)

Questions for Reflection and Prayer:

1. What does it mean to you to address God as your Father? How does it affect your relationship with Him?
2. How do you experience the idea of prayer as a family bond, and what does it mean to see others as your brothers and sisters in faith?
3. What does it mean to hallow God's Name, and how can you practice this in your daily life?
4. How can you reflect your loyalty to God's kingdom in your decisions and actions?
5. What is the impact of the prayer "Thy will be done" in your life, especially when you don't receive the answers to prayers that you expect?

Themes for Prayer:

1. **Suffering and Peace:** Pray for those who are suffering, that they may rest in God's love and peace, even in the midst of challenges.
2. **Relationship and Community:** Pray for unity and love in the faith community, that brothers and sisters in the faith will support and accept each other.
3. **Sanctification of God's Name:** Pray that our lives reflect the holiness of God's Name and that we call upon Him with respect and reverence.
4. **God's Kingdom and Will:** Pray that God's kingdom may be visible on earth and that His will may be done in our lives and in the world.
5. **Forgiveness and Reconciliation:** Pray for the grace to forgive others, as we have been forgiven by God, and that we may bring peace to broken relationships.