

My Prayer Journal

Use this weekly prayer to help you begin your time with God each day.

Prayer of Confession:

O Lord of compassion and mercy, we confess that one of Your greatest gifts to us has so often been the source of our greatest trials. You have given us the gift of choice. We can choose between right and wrong, between love and hate. We can take the high road or the low road. We can reach out in Your Name or we can retreat in the name of selfishness. O great God of grace, help us to choose with clarity, compassion, and commitment. Cleanse us from every wrong and give us the joy of making choices that bring honor to the Name of Christ.

My Prayers this Week:

Family Time:

How do you decide whether or not to do something you want to do or that someone else asks you to do? Sometimes, if we know someone really well, like a parent, we trust them, so we do what they say. Sometimes, though, we know someone really well, and we've learned, by the way they treated us before, that they CAN'T be trusted, so we decide NOT to do what they say. Sometimes, we don't do something because we think we'll get in trouble, and sometimes we DO do something because we think we might get a hug or even a reward! And sometimes we do something just because we think it will be FUN! God wants us to grow up knowing that we can trust HIM, so that we can make really good choices along the way!

MONDAY 1.10.22

Genesis 12:1-9

As we begin our journey into the basics of Christian belief, it's important to begin with the question—"just what does it mean to believe in God?" In English, we often use the phrase "believe in" to mean "give intellectual assent to". For many people, then, to say we "believe in God" is akin to saying we "believe in Santa Claus" or we "believe in UFO's". That is, believing in God is no more than affirming that God exists. But for Christians, saying "we believe in God" is saying far more than simply "we believe that God exists". There is also a marked difference between believing IN God, and believing something ABOUT God. The story of Abram in Genesis demonstrates that in the Judeo-Christian tradition, believing in God is ultimately about trusting God. The fact that Abram did what God asked him to do, without argument and without question, implies that Abram had an absolute trust that this God who had asked him to pick up and leave his homeland had his best interest at heart. In the core of his being, he *believed* that he should be obedient to this God. The story demonstrates this truth: the actions we take are the result of what we believe.

- Do you agree that deeds are determined by beliefs? What non-faith-related examples can you think of in your life?

TUESDAY 1.11.22

Job 42:1-6

The story of Job is the story of a man and his friends whose understanding of God was too limited. They believed that when good things happened to someone, it was because God was pleased with them, and that when bad things happened to someone, it was because they had done something to displease God. Life was essentially a system of rewards and punishments for pleasing or displeasing God. They firmly *believed* this was how God interacted with humanity—so when Job, a completely righteous man (God says so in Job 1:7), suffers inconceivable loss, the only explanation available is that Job has done something horribly offensive in God's sight. Job knows he has done nothing offensive, but his friends' belief system about God forces them to reject Job's insistence upon his innocence, and for Job himself to demand an explanation from God. When God answers Job, Job's belief system about God utterly changes, as we see in today's reading—"I have spoken about things I didn't understand." How Job's friends treated Job arose from what they believed about God. If we are not guided by right belief, we may well end up hurting the very people we claim to care about the most.

- Do your beliefs about good and bad things happening look more like Job's friends, or like Job after meeting God?

WEDNESDAY 1.12.22

John 20:24-31

While Christian belief involves more than mere intellectual assent, intellectual assent *does* still enter the picture. Thomas, who came to be known in history as "doubting Thomas," refused to believe the other disciples when they said they had seen the risen Jesus—in the sense that he didn't think it had really happened. "Until I see it for myself, I won't believe it," Thomas insisted. Of course, when Jesus DID appear to Thomas, he immediately worshiped Him as Lord and God. John, the author of the Gospel, knows that we humans want some kind of proof. It is hard for us to realize, after 2000 years, that John was a trusted voice to the people he was writing to. But he tells them, "These things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in His Name." John wants his reader to believe him—to trust him—when he says that these events really occurred. But what he wants us to believe, intellectually, is that the man Jesus, who was crucified, was God's Son who rose from the dead and that if we believe in (trust in) that reality, we will have "life in His Name."

- Do you have friends whose word you trust implicitly? Who do you choose to "believe"? When do you want more proof?

THURSDAY 1.13.22

Hebrews 11:1-6

In the language of the Bible, there is a strong linguistic connection between the words translated "faith" and "believe". The Greek word translated "faith" is *pistis* while the Greek word translated "believe" is the same root word, in verb form, *pisteuo*. Thus, in the original language of the New Testament, to "believe" and to "put faith in" are the same thing—English just didn't give us a verb form of the noun "faith", so it had to be translated with the word "believe"! Coincidentally, you will rarely find the word "belief" in English translations of the Bible—because the better translation of the Greek is the word "faith". In his tribute to "faith", then, the writer of Hebrews is writing about the same kind of implicit trust in God—belief in God—that we have looked at earlier this week. The point the writer makes in verse 6 is that faith is a prerequisite for pleasing God because we must first have faith (believe) that He exists, and that He follows through on His promises to His people (that he rewards them). The rest of chapter 11 (read it if you have time) provides an exhaustive history of how some very specific actions of Old Testament characters were informed by their faith—by their belief—in God.

- What distinctions would you draw in your understanding of faith, belief, and trust? Which most guides your actions?

FRIDAY 1.14.22

Matthew 13:1-23

Jesus' parable of the seeds points to a perhaps uncomfortable reality about belief in God. For a variety of reasons, not everyone who hears about God, or who hears about how God wants people to act, will incorporate what they hear into their belief systems. This has always been true, but the challenges in the modern world are, in some ways, unprecedented. For most of human history, until quite recently, the existence of objective truth was universally held. People may have disagreed about the content of that objective truth, but its existence was not questioned. Not so today. Ambiguity about truth—and the idea that “what is true for you might not be true for me” - is part of our contemporary context. The fracturing of God’s Church into innumerable expressions of Christianity, each with its own set of dogmas (essential beliefs), doctrines (important but not essential beliefs), and opinions (relatively unimportant beliefs) only add to the impression that even in the church, truth is relative. But historic Christianity affirms that objective truth exists—it is “the way things really are from God’s perspective”. Our goal is to become more able to see that truth, and to incorporate that truth into our lives.

- What do you think about the concept of absolute truth? How does that affect your sharing of the gospel of Jesus?

SATURDAY 1.15.22

Acts 17:16-34

The story we read in Acts today is a perfect example of Jesus' parable of the seeds being played out in a real-world setting. Athens was the center of philosophical thought in the first-century world. The text itself refers to both Epicurean and Stoic philosophy, but many others were present as well. Into this mix of thinkers comes Paul, with the message of Jesus' resurrection. The responses Paul received varied from outright ridicule and rejection to an interest in continuing the discussion to learn more about these new ideas Paul was proposing. This is the real-world reality of how our believing in God evolves, and grows. Paul was not afraid to engage others in discussion, and even debate, about his belief in what God had done in Jesus Christ. We can have a simple faith, a simple trust, a simple belief in God—but that faith can be deepened by pursuing a better understanding through dialogue and discussion. Saint Anselm, in the 11th century, referred to this as “faith seeking understanding.” The goal is not to *prove* but to *understand*. We may not be able to prove what we believe about God. But we should have a basis for our belief ... which we will begin to look at more deeply next week.

- Do you desire to understand your belief? Or simply to accept ideas about God that are laid before you? Why?



Daily Study Guide

January 9—15, 2022

Sermon Series: Christian Basics—How Do We Learn About God?

Week One: “What Does it Mean to Believe in God?” - Rev. J. David Israel

Scripture for Sunday, January 9: Mark 9:17-27 (CEB)

“Someone from the crowd responded, ‘Teacher, I brought my son to you, since he has a spirit that doesn’t allow him to speak. Wherever it overpowers him, it throws him into a fit. He foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and stiffens up. So I spoke to your disciples to see if they could throw it out, but they couldn’t.’ Jesus answered them, ‘You faithless generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I put up with you? Bring him to me.’ They brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a fit. He fell on the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked his father, ‘How long has this been going on?’ He said, ‘Since he was a child. It has often thrown him into a fire or into water trying to kill him. If you can do anything, help us! Show us compassion!’ Jesus said to him, “‘If you can do anything’? All things are possible for the one who has faith.’ At that the boy’s father cried out, ‘I have faith; help my lack of faith!’ Noticing that the crowd had surged together, Jesus spoke harshly to the unclean spirit, ‘Mute and deaf spirit, I command you to come out of him and never enter him again.’ After screaming and shaking the boy horribly, the spirit came out. The boy seemed to be dead; in fact, several people said that he had died. But Jesus took his hand, lifted him up, and he arose.”

Things that really impacted me from today’s sermon:

Prayer Requests:

- Glenda Mertz
- Gary Mertz
- Holly Buck
- Nancy Davis
- Jerry Primm
- Mitch Mitchell
- Josh Luter
- Charlotte Ottley
- Bob Vincent
- Sophia Miller
- Judy Hoffman
- Nini Schneider
- Bill Reichter

Thibault Family
The Mulholland family on the passing of Brad's father, Paul "Mike" Mulholland

Everyone affected by rising numbers of covid cases

The victims of the recent fires in Colorado

Share prayer requests online at livingwordumc.org