



THE MASTER BUILDER

Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain. (Psalm 127:1)

Prayer and Fasting

When the disciples said, 'Lord, teach us how to pray', it was a genuine, heart-felt cry. It's a cry that needs to echo daily in our own lives as believers. We must cultivate a heart for prayer if we are going to create the lifestyle of a praying believer.

1. What is fasting?

Fasting is simply defined as going without food for a period of time, either entirely or partially. It is a spiritual discipline that has many benefits.

Please note: If you have any health issues please be sure to contact your GP or health professional for advice before committing to any fast, including the Daniel, partial or liquid fasts.

2. Why would anyone starve themselves?

Fasting is a spiritual discipline that has been out of vogue in many churches in the Western world for over a century. So why do we take the time to fast?

We are a church that seeks to not just live a Christian lifestyle, but see our lives, our family, friends, neighbours and co-workers affected by the life and power of Jesus.

We want to become the kind of church God has in mind, the kind of church we read about in the New Testament where times of fasting resulted in a channel of God's power. Fasting disciplines a person's spiritual appetite, aligns their soul with the will of God and opens a channel of God's life and power that perhaps no other activity can.

We want to build momentum, we want to see the Lord move not just in each one of our lives, but the lives of every person that we have the opportunity to influence.

Throughout the Old Testament we see people fasting for a variety of reasons:

- For mourning (Nehemiah 1:4; 1 Samuel 31:13)
- For repentance (1 Samuel 6; Nehemiah 9:1; Jonah 3:5)
- To hear from God (Ezra 8:21)

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- To provoke God to move on their behalf (2 Chronicles 20:3; Esther 4:16; Daniel 9:3)
- To petition God (Acts 10:30)
- To seek the mind of God (Acts 13:2)
- To prepare for ministry (Matthew 4:2; Acts 13:3)
- For spiritual power (Matthew 17:21)

3. What are the benefits of fasting?

Fasting has many benefits but it's not a way to earn God's blessing, or 'get' God to answer our prayers. We need to be obedient, humble and surrender to God's will and purposes in every situation.

- Fasting brings direction from God (Acts 10:30; Acts 13:2-3; Judges 20:26)
- Fasting brings the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:14)
- Fasting brings answers to prayer (Esther 4:16; Nehemiah 1:4)
- Fasting brings action from God (2 Chronicles 20:20-21)
- Fasting brings a spiritual breakthrough (Matthew 17:21)
- Fasting deepens humility (Ezra 8:21, 1 Peter 5:6)

As you begin your fast, focus on the souls of those close to you who need salvation. Do not be discouraged but be persistent. Keep praying!

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:3)

God is the Master Builder of My Life

Our world is changing at a rapid pace, and despite the advances in technology, life is still fragile. The church is the Bride of Christ, God's instrument to bring about His purpose on the earth. Our core conviction is that in everything we do, we put church first. Without that conviction we can be easily swayed by the culture and behaviour of the world. If we build our church with Jesus at the centre it will outlast us all.

1. Time Management

WRITTEN BY SINEAD HOLAS

Key Scripture:

Lord, remind me how brief my time on earth will be. Remind me that my days are numbered—how fleeting my life is. (Psalm 39:4, NLT)

Thoughts:

'Time is your most precious gift because you only have a set amount of it. You can make more money, but you can't make more time... Your time is your life.' – Rick Warren

The older I get, the more I realise how precious time is and how fleeting life can be. We tend to look back on past memories, reminiscing and sometimes dwelling on them as the 'good old days'. At the same time we eagerly await the future and all the big plans we have, but rarely do we embrace the present, the 'now moments'. It is the now moments that make the past memories so precious and our future dreams a reality. We're all given the same 24 hours but the outcome of our day depends on how we choose to use each one.

Notice how Jesus always used His now moments wisely. Often surrounded by crowds, daily followed by His disciples and analysed by religious teachers, yet He always made time for God (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; Matthew 6:33). This happened to be in solitude in the early hours, when there were no distractions, no noise and no people – just Him and God. He made it His priority to manage His time: time for teaching, time for people and time for God.

Make time for God. Don't give Him your leftovers, your remaining time or the end of your day. Instead, give Him your first and your best. Give Him your full attention and make Him a priority. Time is a valuable, precious gift and once you've spent it you can never get it back.

Reflections:

- How could I spend more time devoted to God?
- Are there things I could sacrifice or remove to allow room for Jesus?
- Does how I spend my time show that I live for God?
- Do I give God enough of my time each day?

Prayer Points:

- Seek His Kingdom and His will above your own desires.
- Use time wisely: specifically on God.
- Make room for God in your busy schedule.
- Learn to rest in His presence and be still.

Further Scriptures:

Ephesians 5:15-17; James 4:14; Proverbs 27:1; Isaiah 55:6; Ephesians 2:10

2. Thoughts

WRITTEN BY SINEAD HOLAS

Key Scripture:

We destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God. We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:5, NLT)

Thoughts:

If you continuously snack on junk food eventually you will get full, but it won't be on the good stuff. You won't feel full for very long and your body certainly won't be thanking you for the unhealthy treats. This is what we tend to do with our mind. We fill it with negative thoughts; thoughts from the world, thoughts from ourselves, thoughts from the enemy, and then it becomes full. It damages our mind and then our heart, which in time begins to affect our life. We have gone and filled ourselves with thoughts that are not from God.

The Bible says to combat this by 'taking every thought captive'. Don't allow those thoughts to fester, to grow and to take root. Take them captive before the seed turns into a plant that produces bad fruit. Submit your thoughts to God in prayer (2 Corinthians 4:18) because once the enemy's got your mind, he's got you! Ask God to transform your mind and the way you think, and then focus your eyes on the unseen.

Give yourself a healthy meal, one that fills you up and nourishes your body. Do this by feasting on God's Word. Soak in His presence. Bow down at His feet and worship His holy name. Take your attention off yourself and focus on God. Allow Him to transform your old ways of thinking because once God's got your mind, he's got you!

Reflections:

- What does setting my eyes on Jesus mean? How would this help take my thoughts captive?
- What areas of my thought life need restoration?
- What is a recurring toxic thought that I need to take captive?
- Are there things that I watch or listen to that are affecting my thoughts?

Prayer Points:

- Ask God to cleanse your mind by going deeper in His Word.
- Ask God to help you fight your battles in worship and prayer.
- Ask God to guard and protect your mind.
- Ask God to help you get rid of the thoughts that are causing destruction.

Further Scriptures:

Colossians 3:2; Proverbs 3:5-6; 1 Corinthians 14:33; Isaiah 26:3

3. Emotions

WRITTEN BY SINEAD HOLAS

Key Scripture:

Answer me when I call to you, O God who declares me innocent. Free me from my troubles. Have mercy on me and hear my prayer. (Psalm 4:1, NLT)

Thoughts:

Have you ever read a bunch of psalms in one sitting and experienced the whirlwind of King David's emotions? One chapter he's up, next chapter he's down. One page he's praising God, next page he's questioning His existence. One paragraph starts off in dismay and despair, next paragraph ends in praise and victory.

Do you ever have days like that? It starts off so well, singing – dancing and smiling away – but then you receive some bad news or someone says something that changes your day. It affects your attitude, your emotions and then your behaviour. We let our emotions not only control our day, but control our perspective, our conduct and our response.

David was human and honest. He never denied what he felt, but he always took his emotions to God. We live in a world where we are led by our emotions as if they are a guide, a map or a compass. But the problem with emotions is that they are temperamental, influenced by our thoughts, our day, our circumstances and even the people around us. Emotions don't have to be denied but they do have to be controlled and surrendered to God, otherwise they could lead you down the wrong path.

King David poured his emotions out to God. He fought his battles through worship and prayer. He turned to the one that gives everlasting peace. He knew that ultimately his strength and joy came from the Lord, despite how he felt. Yield your emotions to God today.

Reflections:

- Are emotions controlling my moods and behaviour?
- How is rejoicing a choice? What does it look like to rejoice in the Lord?

- How confident am I that God is in control?
- What emotions will I ask God to intervene in today?

Prayer Points:

- Ask God to fill you with His Holy Spirit and that you would be led by Him and not your emotions.
- Ask for strength and peace to get you through the day.
- Ask God to restore your joy again.
- Pray for those who have hurt or wronged you.

Further Scriptures:

Philippians 4:6–7; 1 Peter 5:7; Psalm 23:1–6; Romans 12:2; Psalm 119:105

4. The Church

WRITTEN BY SINEAD HOLAS

Key Scripture:

Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means 'rock'), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it. (Matthew 16:18, NLT)

Thoughts:

When Jesus walked the earth over 2000 years ago, many doubted Him. Religious leaders ridiculed Him, unbelievers questioned Him and emperors persecuted Him. Yet here we are in 2021 still worshiping His name. What they tried to destroy failed because you cannot destroy our God or His plan. He trained up 12 unqualified and unknown men who went out and boldly proclaimed the name of Jesus and the church began to grow.

For years the church was persecuted, and it still is today. Yet the more the church is persecuted, the more believers begin to flourish. God shows up in His splendour and inspires Christians to rise up in faith and in boldness. Why? Because you cannot stop God's plan! Jesus said, 'I am building my church and the gates of hell will not prevail'. Take a moment to understand how powerful that statement is: The church belongs to Jesus; He is the one that builds it, therefore it cannot be destroyed or built my human effort or skill; and nothing can or will stop it. Wow!

The church has been attacked and criticised, but here we are as one body still standing strong. Not because of us or even our pastors, but because of Jesus. He is building His church and nothing can stop it. If He is building it and it won't be destroyed, I want to be a part of it. Don't you want to be part of the thing God is working in, building and using?

Reflections:

- How can I help the church flourish?
- What does church mean to me?
- How could God use me to bring glory to His name?
- Am I doing enough for His Kingdom?

Prayer Points:

- Ask for boldness to witness and evangelise.
- Ask to be used to fulfil God's purpose in building the church.
- Ask for passion for God's house.
- Ask to serve faithfully and wholeheartedly.

Further Scriptures:

Ephesians 2:20; Hebrews 10:24–25; 1 Corinthians 3:17; Romans 12:5

5. Finances

WRITTEN BY TANYA GOFFIN

Key Scripture:

Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. "For God loves a person who gives cheerfully. And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others. As the Scriptures say,

"They share freely and give generously to the poor. Their good deeds will be remembered forever."

For God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you.

Yes, you will be enriched in every way so that you can always be generous. And when we take your gifts to those who need them, they will thank God. So two good things will result from this ministry of giving—the needs of the believers in Jerusalem will be met, and they will joyfully express their thanks to God.

As a result of your ministry, they will give glory to God. For your generosity to them and to all believers will prove that you are obedient to the Good News of Christ. And they will pray for you with deep affection because of the overflowing grace God has given to you. Thank God for this gift too wonderful for words! (2 Corinthians 9:6–15, NLT)

Thoughts:

Jesus spoke about money and material possessions more than any other subject, including prayer. He always based His teaching on the assumption that all material things belong to God (Psalm 24:1). As Christians, we are therefore stewards – not owners – of everything God has given us, and we’re responsible to Him for how we use our possessions and what we do with our money.

In the above passage, the Apostle Paul reminds us that Jesus is God’s inexpressible gift to us, resulting in God’s surpassing grace. Our heart response should be cheerful generosity, not giving out of compulsion or legalism. One of the main ways we can show God that we genuinely trust Him is by putting Him and His church first with our tithes, firstfruits and offerings when looking at our monthly outgoings. In his book, 'The Blessed Life', Robert Morris discusses how our money and possessions are a daily test from God to show where our heart really is. Jesus said you cannot serve God and money (Matthew 6.24). The striking thing in this passage is the huge blessings that result from a lifestyle of cheerful generosity: building up the church, meeting the needs of others, and bringing glory to God. It’s a true delight to Him and allows Him to bless us so that we can bless others even more.

‘He calls to each one of us to minister to Himself in caring for the least of His brethren. We can only really help people when we impoverish ourselves, but in the end we are not losers. God will be in no man’s debt. What we keep we lose; what we give is like scattered seed that comes back in bountiful harvests. Lay your heart against the heart of Christ, until you become filled with His love and spirit, and are content to call nothing your own. Be the steward of everything you possess for His glory and the help of others.’ – FB Myers

Reflections:

- Do I tithe?
- Is there something I need to change in how I spend my money?
- Are there more ways I can use my money and possessions to bless those in need?

Prayer Points:

- Thank God for His financial blessings in your life.
- Ask God to give you an increasing revelation of the principle of stewardship.
- Commit your finances to Him and ask His blessing and provision as you obey Him in this important area.

Further Scriptures:

Malachi 3:1–8; Matthew 6:19–21, 25–34; Mark 12:41–44; Proverbs 3:9–10; Luke 6:38; 1 Timothy 6:10; Philippians 4:19

6. Career

WRITTEN BY TANYA GOFFIN

Key Scripture:

There was a believer in Joppa named Tabitha (which in Greek is Dorcas). She was always doing kind things for others and helping the poor. About this time she became ill and died. Her body was washed for burial and laid in an upstairs room. But the believers had heard that Peter was nearby at Lydda, so they sent two men to beg him, "Please come as soon as possible!"

So Peter returned with them; and as soon as he arrived, they took him to the upstairs room. The room was filled with widows who were weeping and showing him the coats and other clothes Dorcas had made for them. But Peter asked them all to leave the room; then he knelt and prayed. Turning to the body he said, "Get up, Tabitha." And she opened her eyes! When she saw Peter, she sat up! He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then he called in the widows and all the believers, and he presented her to them alive.

The news spread through the whole town, and many believed in the Lord. (Acts 9:36–42, NLT)

Thoughts:

History has many examples of Christian men and women who had illustrious, influential and even glorious careers in a secular environment. Some are well-known Bible characters like Joseph, David, and Daniel, others include politicians like William Wilberforce, who was instrumental in the abolition of the slave trade. Even today there is a group for Christian MPs from all political parties who meet regularly for prayer. In fact, on the floor of the central lobby of Parliament is Psalm 127:1: 'Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain.'

Equally, there are many examples of Christian men and women who gave up opportunities for the sake of the Gospel, like famous missionaries Eric Liddell and CT Studd, who gave up lucrative careers in athletics and cricket respectively in obedience to Christ.

Through all these examples, the Bible teaches us that it is good to study hard and learn as much as we can (Daniel would have learnt languages, maths, science, etc. at the university of Babylon), however it is the 'career of our soul' that matters the most.

In the passage above, Dorcas' career was so important to God that when she died, He raised her from the dead so she could carry on doing it! Dorcas never travelled, never wrote a book, never appeared on a platform. She focussed on what she had, not what she didn't have and she didn't compare herself with others. She could make clothes, so she used that gift to build the church by making clothes for those in need. What a great example for us to follow!

Reflections:

- Am I thankful to God for my present job and do I honour God by doing my best?
- Am I using the time I have wisely?
- Am I focussed on using what I have to serve the church or am I preoccupied with what I don't have?
- Do I put God first when it comes to my career choices?

Prayer Points:

- Thank God for the job you have.
- Pray for a good attitude to your work and for God to use you in your workplace.
- Pray for God's direction to make the right career choices for His glory, for building the church and for your soul's health.

Further Scriptures:

Ecclesiastes 9:10; Colossians 3:23; Proverbs 3:5-6; 12:27; 18:9; 18:15; 19:15, 24; 20:18; Ecclesiastes 5:10; Philippians 4:11-13; Matthew 6:19-21; Jeremiah 10:23; Psalm 27:11

7. Future

WRITTEN BY TANYA GOFFIN

Key Scripture:

Then someone called from the crowd, "Teacher, please tell my brother to divide our father's estate with me."

Jesus replied, "Friend, who made me a judge over you to decide such things as that?" Then he said, "Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own."

Then he told them a story: "A rich man had a fertile farm that produced fine crops. He said to himself, 'What should I do? I don't have room for all my crops.' Then he said, 'I know! I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll have room enough to store all my wheat and other goods. And I'll sit back and say to myself, "My friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!"'

"But God said to him, 'You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?'

"Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God." (Luke 12:13-21, NLT)

Thoughts:

Jesus tells a story about a rich man making choices to plan his future. He makes his riches the source of his future security and happiness (my crop, my barn, my grain, my goods, my soul). Jesus' audience would have been aware that many hundreds of years before the prophet Isaiah had been used by God to warn their ancestors against the same disastrous way to plan for the future (Isaiah 5:8).

In the parable, the rich fool realises he has made a lonely (and ultimately fatal) choice when he suddenly discovers that his soul and his wealth were not his but on loan from God who could demand the return of that loan at any time.

As He often did, Jesus told a story in answer to a question. The question that prompted this story was a young man who felt his future had been put on hold due to a personal injustice – his older brother had inherited their father's wealth and refused to share it with him.

Jesus wasn't in favour of injustice or against planning for the future, but He was making the point that the route to true security and contentment lies in a person – Him – and not in wealth (Matthew 11:28-30).

At the end of his life, the Apostle Paul talked about his own devotion to Jesus Christ. Paul's joyful experience was that the most important thing in life, death and eternity was the reality of Jesus – both His presence and His Lordship (Philippians 1:20-21).

Reflections:

- Do I choose to serve God or money when I make life choices?
- Do I have an eternal perspective?
- Am I trusting in God for my future needs?
- Am I seeking advice from my church leaders before making important decisions?

Prayer Points:

- Ask God to deal with any pride and bitterness in your heart which is proving a barrier to your future.
- Tell God about your needs and your dreams.
- Praise God for your present blessings. Ask Him to show you more of Himself and bring rest and peace to your soul.

Further Scriptures:

James 5:1-3; Proverbs 15:16; Proverbs 11:24-25; Matthew 6:24; 1 Timothy 6:10; Ecclesiastes 8:6-8; John 10:28; John 14:1-3; Psalm 37:25; Philippians 4:19; Isaiah 26:3; Proverbs 11:14; Proverbs 12:15; Proverbs 15:22; Proverbs 24:6; Matthew 6:25-34; Psalm 42:1-2

God is the Master Builder of My Relationships

When we walk together, we must do it in a spirit of love and with a measure of grace. We must see each other as brothers and sisters – regardless of age, race or any other natural difference we may have. Believers who focus on love and harmony over riches and legalism flourish, moving beyond the natural into the supernatural.

Such grace is a God-ordained moment that is only possible when Jesus is at the centre of everything we do. Indeed, He commands a blessing!

1. Family: Stay Connected

WRITTEN BY SARAH KAWALSINGH

Key Scripture:

'Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived...' (Deuteronomy 11:16, NKJV)

Thoughts:

It's so easy to stay connected these days. Just 20 years ago the idea of sending a letter electronically seemed slightly far-fetched but now it's a daily thing. With the increase in mobile phone use no one is out of reach. This can be a blessing and a curse. A family can gather together and be pre-occupied with what's on their phone, iPad or other device of choice!

In Deuteronomy 11:16, God was speaking to the children of Israel and warned them, 'Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them...' With so many things that can distract us from serving God, have you ever thought that those things can distract you from serving one another? We have to 'take heed to ourselves' (or, as the Message translation puts it, 'be vigilant'). The Hebrew for 'heed' means 'to guard; generally, to protect.' We need to be intentional about connecting with each other as a family (blood related or church family/friends) and protect our relationships by taking time to talk, listen and just be there for each other.

Timothy Keller says, 'God made us in such a way that we couldn't even enjoy paradise without friends... Adam had a perfect quiet time every day for 24 hours a day. Yet he needed friends.' Communication has always been high on God's agenda. He so desperately wants to connect with us as He knows how important it is for us to have that relationship (Revelation 3:20). It's vital that we nurture healthy, loving relationships with our family members and those who belong to the household of faith.

Reflections:

- Look at your schedule over the next few weeks. Is there time that you can plan to catch up with your family or those closest to you?
- Can you highlight any distractions that can be put on hold so you can make time for family?
- What goals do you have for 2021? Do they include your loved ones and those who mean a lot to you?

Prayer Points:

- Ask God to help you make time for those closest to you.
- Ask God to give you creative ideas to help build connections with your family and friends.
- Thank God for the people in your life and the new friendships you will make in 2021.

Further Scriptures:

Romans 14:19; Romans 15:24; Psalm 133

2. Marriage: To Have and To Hold

WRITTEN BY SARAH KAWALSINGH

Key Scripture:

Then the Lord passed by in front of him, and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth (faithfulness)." (Exodus 34:6, AMP)

Thoughts:

Do you remember the first time you saw your spouse? You may have felt like you'd just won the lottery, or felt the excitement of realising you'd found 'The One' (if you're still looking, hang in there and read on!). You might even remember where you were or what you were wearing. However it happened, I'm sure it was a memorable moment. Over time though, those fond memories of one another can quite easily diminish as the bombardment of life – work, health, kids, hobbies (to name a few) – takes its toll, and before long you only remember the shortcomings rather than those positive qualities that once attracted you to one another.

The day you walked down the aisle to make that lifelong commitment you may recall saying the words 'to have and to hold, from this day forth'. In other words, you made the choice to cling to each other through the highs and lows, through the mundane and the joy that life brings your way. In Exodus 34:6, God describes Himself to Moses as 'The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving kindness and truth (faithfulness)'. If we are to model ourselves to be more like the Lord (that's the goal!) then those feelings of love, faithfulness and compassion should continually be working out in us, giving us the ability to cherish what we have instead of dreaming of days gone by when feelings were more favourable.

If 2020 has taught us anything it is to take the time to cherish what you have. Remember the commitment you made to one another and demonstrate it once again by holding onto and appreciating what you have.

Reflections:

- When was the last time you prayed for your spouse? Commit to remembering each other in prayer.
- What things can you change in yourself to become a better spouse?
- When was the last time you went on a date? Lockdown aside, when was the last time you spent quality time together? You can live in the same house but be worlds apart. If it's been a while, why not put a date in the diary, put the kids to bed early and make it happen! Enjoying a special home cooked meal (without interruption!) still counts as a date.

Prayer Points:

- Pray for unity in your relationship.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal any hidden area in your life that would hinder unity in your marriage.
- Ask God to help you use your words wisely, to build up and not tear down.

Further Scriptures:

Ephesians 4:2-3; Psalm 143:8; 1 Peter 4:8

3. Children: One Last Time!

WRITTEN BY SARAH KAWALSINGH

Key Scripture:

Gentle words cause life and health... (Proverbs 15:4, TLB)

Thoughts:

If you heard the words 'That's it young lady/man, one last time...' when you were a child, you knew when you were in trouble! You had pushed some invisible boundary and gone too far, caused a high level of irritation and received your final warning. Children have a way of pushing their parents' buttons, right? They can even catch you off guard and unleash another level of irritation on an already stressful day.

When I heard that warning from my parents, the chances were I was heading for trouble because I deserved it. But there are times when our children fall foul to strong words just because we are already juggling so much in life. It might be your job, family matters, financial worries, not to mention being in lockdown! Jesus told His disciples, 'In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world' (John 16:33). Trouble can find its way into all kinds of different places – and especially our homes – so it's important that we bring Jesus into our parenting.

When your child messes up and you need to bring discipline you should respond appropriately: kids need to know boundaries. But when you're under pressure and the last thing you want to hear is shrieks, cries, tears and tantrums, why not ask the Holy Spirit to help you to find a response that offers them a bit of grace. Don't overreact, respond. Your child needs to see your love, feel your embrace and be given the chance to hear 'One last time...'

Reflections:

- When was the last time you told your children you love them? Today is a good day to start.
- How does your child see you respond when pressure in the home is high? Do you need to make an adjustment? Remember, your children watch and learn from you.
- Do your children see or hear you pray and worship? Show them that Jesus has an important role in your home.

Prayer Points:

- Thank God for the wonderful family He's given you.
- Ask God for wisdom to help you nurture and teach your children in the ways of the Lord.
- Ask God to protect your children and that He will use them for His glory.

Further Scriptures:

Isaiah 54:13; Ephesians 6:4; Deuteronomy 6:6-7

4. Friendships

WRITTEN BY NEIL GALLAGHER

Key Scripture:

A man who has friends must himself be friendly. But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. (Proverbs 18:24, NKJV)

Thoughts:

We are not made to be alone. God, the master builder, designed us to be relational: not just marital and family relationships, but friendships as well. Friendships fill the gaps in our lives, providing us with a wide variety of support, love and entertainment.

Though not everyone in life (even in church) will be your best friend, we are to have a friendly attitude towards those whom we come across. The Bible has much to say about friendship and provides great examples of godly relationships that we are to pursue and emulate.

David and Jonathan stand out as a great example of what an authentic friendship should consist of: love, loyalty and transparency. 'The soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul' (1 Samuel 18).

Moses and Aaron formed a great bond that complimented each other's weaknesses. By working together they accomplished one of the greatest rescues of all time.

Elisha wisely yoked himself to Elijah to form a holy and devoted friendship with his mentor. Elisha responded to Elijah's declaration that he was leaving for Bethel by stating, 'As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you' (2 Kings 2:2).

Ruth's friendship with Naomi was built on loyalty, unconditional love and self-sacrifice (Ruth 1:16-17).

The ultimate example of friendship comes through our Lord and Saviour's relationship with mankind: 'Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends' (John 15:13).

Reflections:

- My friends will ultimately shape my future, whether good or bad. 'Show me your friends and I will show you your future'.
- We should base our friendships not upon where we are from, but where we are going.
- Are my friends adding value to my life?
- We can't afford to entertain friendships which are divisive towards the place of our planting. Choose to invest in friendships with likeminded people who have a desire to build God's house.
- To attract great friends one must first become that great friend.

Prayer Points:

- Pray that people who are new to church find good friends within the house.
- Pray that friendships formed in church will grow broader, deeper, stronger and more resilient. Pray that they will walk together in the house of the Lord for life.
- Spend time bringing your friends before the Lord in prayer.

Further Scriptures:

Proverbs 13:20; Proverbs 12:26; Titus 3:13; Proverbs 18:24; 1 Samuel 18:1-4; Proverbs 18:24; Proverbs 27:5-6; Proverbs 27:17; 1 Corinthians 15:33; 2 Corinthians 6:14; James 4:4

5. Church Family

WRITTEN BY NEIL GALLAGHER

Key Scripture:

'I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you.' (Genesis 12:3, NLT)

'God places the lonely in families; he sets the prisoners free and gives them joy. But he makes the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.' (Psalm 68:6, NLT)

Thoughts:

The family unit is God's masterpiece plan and design, both in the physical and in the spiritual. The New Testament refers to the church not as an organisation, society or group, but rather as a household and family (Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:19; Ephesians 3:14-15).

Harvest City Church consists of people from different countries, diverse languages, tastes, and walks of life, yet the glorious truth that unites us is that we all have the same Father, and this makes us a church family.

I'm sure you've come across the saying, 'blood is thicker than water', which implies that the physical family you are born into should take the highest precedence. However, the spotless spiritual covenant bloodline of Christ that unites us as a church family is far thicker and greater than any natural bloodline. When Jesus was informed that his mother and brothers were waiting for Him, He clearly defined His family as 'those who do the will of God' (Matthew 12:46-50), emphasising the fact that spiritual family takes precedence.

'Your spiritual family is even more important than your physical family because it will last forever. Our families on earth are wonderful gifts from God, but they are temporary and fragile.' – Rick Warren

Where we are going is far greater than where we came from. I have many blood relatives who I am totally unconnected to in the spiritual sense. It is only through my church family that I find the common spiritual kinship that connects me to life in the Kingdom of God.

Reflections:

- Do I honour and obey my spiritual parents by listening and heeding their wise counsel and instruction? As in any family unit there has to be parental headship.
- Do I endeavour to be there whenever and however my church family meets? We should never choose to miss any church family gatherings, regardless of whether or not they are our particular style or taste. Lay aside your preferences for the good of the whole family. It is of paramount importance that we come together as a family to build God's Kingdom each and every time we meet.

Prayer Points:

- Pray for our spiritual parents, Pastor Chip and Sarah. As the head of the family is blessed, so will the rest of the family be blessed.
- Pray for our church family to grow deeper and stronger in relationship and fellowship with one another.
- Pray God's blessing and favour upon the groups of people in church – married couples, lone parents, single people, children, etc.
- Pray for more people to come and find their place to belong and serve within the church family.

Further Scriptures:

Ephesians 6:1; Hebrews 10:25; Ephesians 2:19–22; Hebrews 13:17; Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:19; Ephesians 3:14–15; 1 Timothy 3:15; Ephesians 6:1–2

6. Neighbours

WRITTEN BY NEIL GALLAGHER

Key Scripture:

'Love your neighbor as yourself...' (Mark 12:31, NLT)

Thoughts:

The word 'neighbour' can be simply understood as being someone who is 'neigh' (near) your 'bour' (dwelling). We all have neighbours, people we come across in our daily lives who dwell in close proximity to us.

Jesus defined what a true neighbour is through the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37). Remember that there were distinct racial and social strains between the Jews and Samaritans, but like the man on the side of the road, our neighbour is anyone in need that we are in a position to show mercy to and help, irrespective of race, colour, creed or social standing.

Jesus concludes this well-known parable by laying down the mandate for us to do likewise. We are called to the best of our ability to love, to show mercy and to assist those we encounter in our daily lives, whether that is a stranger in need who we're meeting for the first time, a co-partner within our church family, a colleague at the next desk, or simply those who live next door to us.

Reflections:

- Am I the neighbour that I would like to have?
- Do I show concern for the wellbeing of my neighbours, without being intrusive?
- Do I show consideration, patience, grace and understanding? Do I gracefully offer constructive criticism when required?
- Do I look for opportunities to bless my neighbours? You could cover work for a colleague who's struggling or needs to leave early, or offer your services to someone who finds it physically hard to maintain their garden. You can contribute to Acts of Kindness, offer lifts (when safe to do so), make phone calls and pray for one another.
- Do I look to build a good rapport with those who are not of the faith to make it easier to connect them to the Lord? Ruth and I are thankful that we were able to build a good practical rapport with our next-door neighbour, Jenny, which helped us to lead her to the Lord in a local hospice where she was seeing out the last few days of her life.

Prayer Points:

- Pray that the neighbours you come across at work or school, and the people who you regularly interact with will come to know Jesus as Lord and Saviour.
- Pray for opportunities and openings where you can share your faith with your neighbours who don't know the Lord.
- Pray for peace and protection for your neighbourhood. God has called you to stand in the gap.

Further Scriptures:

Matthew 7:12; Proverbs 25:17; Proverbs 11:12; Proverbs 27:14; 1 Corinthians 10:24; Proverbs 3:28; Romans 13:10; Mark 12:31; Galatians 6:10

7. Work Colleagues

WRITTEN BY NEIL GALLAGHER

Key Scripture:

So that no one can criticize you. Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people. (Philippians 2:15, NLT)

Thoughts:

We spend approximately a third of our time at work to earn a living, most often with a diverse range of people from different walks of life who we have to relate to in order to achieve our employer's goals. I firmly believe that God has placed us in our jobs and businesses not just to earn money, gain provision and for career accomplishment, but also for the purpose of making an influential difference by shining the light of Christ to the people with whom we work, serve and trade.

One of the most unfortunate things I have ever witnessed in the workplace occurred several years ago when a colleague who would openly confess his Christian faith behaved unethically by disappearing from the office floor for several consecutive Friday afternoons, leaving others to pick up his work. A couple of other colleagues – who had no interest in Christ – justifiably questioned: 'I thought that so-and-so was meant to be a Christian, so how can he do this?'

The most powerful witness for Christ within the workplace is the way we conduct ourselves, as often our lifestyle is the only Bible our colleagues will ever read. The people around us watch and mark what we say and do to see if it aligns with our Christian confession.

Reflections:

- Do I appreciate the great privilege and opportunities that God has set before me to make a difference for Christ with the people I interact with daily at work?
- Do my work/business ethics and attitude reflect a good Christian witness to my colleagues?

- Do I work without reproach, with a helpful and kind attitude that refrains from engaging in all manner of gossip, negativity and criticism towards my colleagues, bosses and the firm that employs me?
- Am I concerned enough about the eternal spiritual welfare of those with whom I work to bring them often before the Lord in prayer and seek opportunities to share my faith with them?

Prayer Points:

- Pray that God will give you the strength and grace to deal wisely with difficult colleagues whose speech and conduct can, at times, be perplexing.
- Pray for your work colleagues and managers by name, that they would come to know Christ as their own personal Lord and Saviour.
- Pray and ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom and boldness when the right opportunities arise to share your faith with colleagues and to invite them to church meetings.

Further Scriptures:

Genesis 39:5; Matthew 5:16; Colossians 3:23; Philippians 2:15; 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; 1 Peter 3:15

God is the Master Builder of My Church

The local church is God's instrument of change. There is no substitute for it and it is very important to our core beliefs. Jesus himself laid His life down for the church.

We believe that church is above all other forms of Christian organisation and that God will use the church to accomplish His purpose in our city and nation.

1. Junior Church

WRITTEN BY BIANCA NDLOVU

Key Scripture:

'Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it.' (Proverbs 22:6, NKJV)

Thoughts:

One of the benefits of lockdown and having to home school (as painful as it was at times!) was that it gave us an insight into how our children learn and let us get to grips with what level they are at.

I'm ashamed to admit that until this point we had left educating our kids to the teachers and we were not doing enough at home. For some parents the same can be said about God: we left it to the JC teachers to do the majority of the teaching while we did the minimum at home.

When schools and churches closed it was all left to us. I often heard parents who were finding home schooling challenging say, 'How am I supposed to do this? I'm not a teacher, am I!' Yes, it's true we are not all trained teachers but it made me realise that we should still be able to teach our children. When they learn in a group setting they don't get the quality one-to-one time which we can give them, and that focused attention makes a difference to their learning and development.

We all love quoting Proverbs 22:6, but how much of that training are we actually doing as parents? Making sure our kids get to school and Junior Church is good, but that's not where it ends. The extra work needs to be done at home and when it comes to teaching them about God the bulk of the work needs to be done at home.

For those reading this who are not parents, the role you play as a sibling, auntie, uncle, cousin, family friend, etc., is so important. When children spend time with you, take that opportunity to tell them about your faith and your love for God. Sometimes what you say will have more of an impact on them than their parents.

Reflections:

- Who is training my child? (The answer should be you!)
- What are they training them to become?

- Do I speak to my child regularly about their faith and beliefs?
- Who will teach them how to pray, read their Bible and worship?

Prayer Points:

- Ask God to guard the hearts and minds of the children so they come out of this pandemic with no anxiety.
- Pray God's protection over them, especially when they are in nursery or school.
- Pray against any plan of the enemy to steal their joy for the Lord.
- Pray that they live long and fruitful lives rooted in God's house.

Further Scriptures:

Proverbs 127:3; Matthew 19:14

2. Ignite

WRITTEN BY BIANCA NDLOVU



Key Scripture:

'May our sons flourish in their youth like well-nurtured plants. May our daughters be like graceful pillars carved to beautify a palace.' (Psalm 144:12, NLT)

Thoughts:

It always blesses me to look around our church and see so many young people. Having the next generation involved in church gives me hope for the future, hope that the work we are doing to build God's Kingdom will carry on.

When I gave my life to God at the age of 11, the best thing that happened for me was being rooted in a church with a pastor who believed that young members of the church were just as capable of serving in God's house as the adults were. He truly believed we added value and didn't treat us as misfits. The way he encouraged us is what helped me to be committed to serving in church. My friends and I were part of the choir, stewarding team, set up team and we helped at every event to cook, serve and clean. We fasted when the church fasted and we attended all-night prayer meetings. It was a lot for 11-16 year olds, but we felt like we were part of the church and it helped us build a firm foundation.

I came to Harvest City Church 11 years after my salvation and I was so pleased to find pastors who also encouraged young people to serve and get involved, and who believe we add value.

Young people, serve God and flourish (grow and develop successfully) and be pillars who support the building of God's house.

Reflections:

- As the church, we are here to support the young people through our love and prayers.
- Do we see the potential in our young people?
- Are we encouraging them and showing them that they are part of the church family?
- As a young person, how can you be more involved?

Prayer Points:

- Pray that our young people flourish even through these challenging times.
- Pray that our young people develop strength of character that will help them withstand tough times.
- Pray against distractions and pray that they will remain focused on God and their education.
- Pray against depression and may their days be filled with youthful joy.

Further Scriptures:

Acts 2:17; John 15:5

3. The Pulse

WRITTEN BY BIANCA NDLOVU



Key Scripture:

Don't let the excitement of youth cause you to forget your Creator. Honor him in your youth before you grow old and say, 'Life is not pleasant anymore.' (Ecclesiastes 12:1, NLT)

Thoughts:

For my fellows who have passed The Pulse age group (16-30), I hope you will agree with me that life between those years was exciting. I had a lot of fun with my friends, staying up late talking, laughing and eating whatever we felt like without much thought or care. For those who are a little more organised than I was, you may have gone on holidays with friends and planned fun adventures.

Life in your youth is exciting – and so it should be! – but balance is key. The fun and adventure should happen within the parameters of our faith. What I like about the Scripture above is that it acknowledges that there is excitement in our youth, unlike the old ideas that some believers had back in the day that stopped youth from having fun. It also reminds young people not to get so consumed in the excitement that you become too busy to pray, read the Word, worship and serve God in His house. Finding the balance in your youth will certainly help you when you are older and have a lot more responsibility on your shoulders.

On the other hand, you may be a young person worried about the future. Learn to trust God with your tomorrow, have fun and enjoy being young and all the benefits of it.

For those on the other side of youth, be gracious and humble teachers. Our youth members will have many triumphs but they will also have failures and shortcomings, and we should be their greatest cheerleaders and not their biggest critics. I truly believe the reason I stayed in God's house and continued to believe was because of the prayers of my mum, my youth leaders and other church members.

Reflections:

- There is so much going on in the world – challenges, trends, etc. – but ask yourself, do you need to take part in all of it?
- How can I make sure I am making God a priority?
- What changes do I need to make?
- Who am I living for?

Prayer Points:

- May God give our young people wisdom and strength to overcome the challenges they face in this world.
- Pray that God will remain at the centre of their lives and they will desire to please Him above all else.
- May God grant our young people favour as they study and plan for the future. May doors be opened for them to get into university and find good jobs.
- May they stay planted and rooted in God's house, continuing to grow in the things of God.

Further Scriptures:

Proverbs 1:7; James 1:5; Proverbs 2:7-8

4. DARE

WRITTEN BY TRACEY MANN

Key Scripture:

There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens. (Ecclesiastes 3:1, NLT)

Thoughts:

There are many seasons of life, and there are different challenges to be faced within each of them. God's plan is that church life should reflect these seasons, having people from all age groups walking through life together. With this in mind, church has specific age-related groups, from newborns up!

DARE (Defying Age Related Expectations) is for the 30-40's age group (give or take a few years!). It's a group for singles and marrieds alike, and aims to provide fun social activities, to build and solidify friendships.

It's a generalisation of course, but this time of life is often when we build our families, homes, and our working lives. It's a busy season, where the years can almost slip away unnoticed in the rush of events and

activities. These years can present a challenge to us staying anchored to God and church when distractions could pull us in other directions. The pursuit of money, career success, or even our aspirations for our children, all have the potential to cause us to lose focus. Belonging to church and having our roots placed firmly brings security and wisdom that can prevent us losing our way throughout these busy years.

Reflections:

- What are the challenges I face in my current season of life?
- What is God saying to me in these times?
- Are there any changes I need to make to deepen my faith?
- Have I allowed myself to lose focus or become distracted?

Prayer Points:

- Pray for the church members in DARE, that God will strengthen them and encourage them.
- Pray that God will guide them to make good decisions and not allow distractions to take over.
- Pray that God will bless the DARE group in the times they share, and bless its leaders.
- Pray that this group will stay connected to church and grafted in as the fabric and pillars of the house.

Further Scriptures:

Psalm 1:1-3; Proverbs 3:5-6; James 1:5; Colossians 2:2

5. New Horizons

WRITTEN BY TRACEY MANN

Key Scripture:

I will be your God throughout your lifetime— until your hair is white with age. I made you, and I will care for you, I will carry you along and save you. (Isaiah 46:4, NLT)

Thoughts:

This verse from Isaiah encourages us that God is always with us throughout our whole lives. There is no cut-off point where He loses interest in us. He values us completely, right throughout our lives until our hair is white (or disappears completely!).

Church should be a place where our more senior members have a part to play, and we recognise the value of a lifelong walk with the Lord. New Horizons is a group for the over 50's and offers a regular programme of activities with the aim of fostering friendship and fun. Those who attend know the meetings involve lots of laughter and are full of life – in fact, they can be quite loud!

In the Christian walk there is no such thing as retirement. God has a plan for our whole lives and for every season we face. We should bear in mind as we grow older that maturity in age does not always equate to spiritual maturity. Paul encourages us in Philippians to keep pressing on to finish the race set before us. Often the end of the race is the most important part. We may slow down physically, but spiritually we can still run, and run fast! We never reach the age where we know it all. God always has new things to show us to strengthen our faith, understanding and walk with Him.

Reflections:

- What can I learn from others in church who are in a different season of life to me?
- How can I keep pressing on in the faith?
- In the last year, what has God shown me which has deepened my faith?
- How can I develop spiritual maturity in the year to come?

Prayer Points:

- Pray for our over 50's, that they will see all that God has for them in 2021.
- Pray that God will provide them with strength, protection and good health.
- Pray that God will bless New Horizons, their times together, and their leaders.
- Pray that we will all continue to press on with God over the next year and mature in our faith.

Further Scriptures:

Psalm 92:4; Hebrews 5:12-14; Philippians 3:13-15

6. Shine

WRITTEN BY TRACEY MANN

Key Scripture:

Charm is deceptive, and beauty does not last; but a woman who fears the Lord will be greatly praised. Reward her for all she has done. Let her deeds publicly declare her praise. (Proverbs 31:30-31, NLT)

Thoughts:

Society has a lot to say about women, and can place differing expectations and values on them. A successful career, being a good parent and homemaker, having strength, confidence and looking good are all required! Whilst none of these things is bad in itself, Christian women should be careful to remember what God values.

These verses encourage us that God values a woman who 'fears the Lord'. When we live in a way that honours God in all we do, it can provide us with focus to cut out the other voices and expectations of society and in particular social media. We are bombarded with 'social influencers' today but God should be our

primary influencer! Not only is this a valuable lesson for women, but for men too. Their views on women should be influenced by godly values and not worldly ones. When we live in this way, we find not only freedom, but an enrichment in our lives and relationships.

Shine is a group for women of all ages and meets regularly to provide support, encouragement, teaching and friendship. It is a valuable space where women can develop their relationship with God amongst other women, learning to live in a way that fears and honours the Lord. In all the busyness and pressures of life, Shine offers time out to reflect on what God is saying to women in particular. As we have learnt, women today need to find the right path in life, and Shine is a great way to help with this – and build church at the same time.

Reflections:

- How am I influenced by the pressures of society and social media?
- What is an example of living in a way which 'fears the Lord'?
- What damage can listening to the wrong voices do to my relationships?
- What is one thing I could change to put God above others' expectations?

Prayer Points:

- Pray that the women of Harvest City Church will be strengthened and encouraged.
- Pray that we pursue a godly life where we fear the Lord.
- Pray that God will bless Shine, their meetings, and their leaders.
- Pray for us to be influenced by God and not worldly thinking.

Further Scriptures:

Luke 4:18-19; Proverbs 9:10; Deuteronomy 13:4; Psalm 119:45

7. Excel

WRITTEN BY TRACEY MANN

Key Scripture:

For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. (Ephesians 2:10, NLT)

Thoughts:

We have already reflected on some of the damaging expectations on women, but men are equally struggling to find their place in today's society. There is a confusion of messages and expectations: men are to be strong, but show their vulnerabilities; to be providers, but not dominate; to be sensitive, but not weak. Men can understandably find themselves struggling to understand their role and value in life. We see the

effects of these feelings in the latest figures from The Mental Health Foundation that show one-in-eight men are struggling with a mental health disorder such as depression, anxiety, panic disorder or OCD.

Christian men can be encouraged to come back to the Scriptures and see the man that God has called them to be. The key verse shows us that we are valued and unique, and God has given us good things to do that were planned before we were even born! God is calling men to be strong – but strong in Him, and not in themselves. They are to lead their families in God’s ways, and to become faithful builders in His house. When men understand their true worth and place in God it can revolutionise them and set them free from feelings of worthlessness.

Excel is a group for men of all ages and its primary aim is to offer a place where men can connect and chill out with other like-minded guys. It offers a range of activities (more often than not involving food!) that are fun and help to build much needed friendships. Men are helped and equipped to become the builders God is calling them to be.

Reflections:

- How have I struggled to find my role in life?
- What has been the impact of these struggles?
- What is God trying to teach me about my value and worth?
- Do I need to make changes to step up to be who I am called to be?

Prayer Points:

- Pray that the men of Harvest City Church will know their worth and call in God.
- Pray for men’s mental health, that God will bring healing and restoration where it is needed.
- Pray that God will bless Excel, the times they have together, and their leaders.
- Pray for both men and women to be builders in God’s house and find their place in life.

Further Scriptures:

Galatians 1:15; Colossians 1:11; 2 Timothy 1:7; Proverbs 3:7-8

God is the Master Builder of My City

Every local church should have a sense of destiny and mission given by God. At the heart of that call are the commands of Christ Himself to every church. But each local expression of the body of Christ has a specific role to play in extending the Kingdom of God in its city, region and around the world. This focused perspective of ministry is what we mean by our vision and mission.

1. Local Government

WRITTEN BY LEE VENNING

Key Scripture:

‘First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.’ (1 Timothy 2:1-2, ESV)

Thoughts:

As a young man I was deeply political and held very entrenched views. I would not have had any interest in behaving like the Scripture above suggests. At the time my writing and research was strongly ideological and I spent a lot of time discussing ‘matters’ with quite radical, politically motivated staff. When I look back now, I can see how my political beliefs changed before I became a Christian, but more significantly how my attitude towards such things as local and national government have shifted since I have come to understand God’s Kingdom.

Praise the Lord that God is sovereign over governors and leaders! In fact, having a governing authority was God’s idea. It is He who appoints the rulers – even the ones who are not Christians or who we strongly disagree with. God has appointed their rule and He has done so for His divine purpose. For this very reason it is our duty to pray for the people in authority, that they are used by God to achieve His ends and that they make wise decisions.

While the political world may seem a bit frightening at the moment, and local government reflects the world scene, we have no cause to fear for the Lord already knows who He will put in place to rule our country and the regions. We should live obediently to the Word of God and seek to glorify Christ in all things. Your personal views may (or may not) change, but the key in the Christian life is to follow the Lord in all things.

‘For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil but use it as bondslaves of God. Honour all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honour the king.’ (1 Peter 2:15-17)

Reflections:

- Am I focussed on what the Lord wants for my life and those in my community?
- Am I allowing my personal points of view to detract from what the Lord wants me to do for my family and my community?

- Am I allowing my 'likes' and 'dislikes' to stop me thinking in a godly manner?

Prayer Points:

- Pray for the people in authority in our local area, that the Lord would bring them wisdom and strengthen their mental health when making big and difficult decisions.
- Pray that local communities are positively supported to meet the needs of local people in our current challenging circumstances.
- Pray that church finds favour with the local authorities so that we have the resources we need (including a new building) to meet the needs of the communities in Leicester.

Further Scriptures:

Proverbs 21:1; Daniel 2:21; Psalm 29:10; Romans 13:3; 1 Peter 2:13-14; Titus 3:1; Romans 13:1; Romans 13:2; 1 Peter 2:13; Colossians 3:23-24

2. Schools

WRITTEN BY LEE VENNING

Key Scripture:

'Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.' (Proverbs 22:6, ESV)

Thoughts:

A book I often refer to speaks about a 'toxic childhood' and says that the modern world does our young people no favours. It talks of:

- The decline of outdoor play: less independence, risk taking and self-reliance.
- The commercialisation of childhood: exploited by advertisers/early consumerism.
- The 'schoolification' of early childhood: loss of learning by play and independence.
- The decline of listening and communication skills: from shorter attention spans.
- Screen saturation: reducing face-to-face interaction.
- Testing and targets: increases anxiety among children.

Observing young people growing up this would appear to be true, and this is something that pupils have to live with and educators have to contend with. All parents can play their part in offering their children a life which contends with these things and offers young minds an alternative.

The Christian parent, though, needs to consider the spiritual well-being of their young people. Schools are a place where 'British values' are expected to be taught, but this is in no way linked to 'Christian values'. As Christians, parents or not, we need to pray that our young children are not influenced by the system the

Christians, parents or not, we need to pray that our young children are not influenced by the system the world puts upon schools. In the current time, teachers are reacting to changing demands driven by a secular culture and the demands of a pandemic. Their response to some questionable directions that are being imposed is critical to the future well-being of our children. As Christians we need to support the teachers in our schools with kindness, encouragement and a gentle prompt towards where their moral compass should be.

Reflections:

- Am I aware of what is happening with legislation changes that are being imposed upon schools which are not godly?
- Do I support my children (or other children in church) by instilling the truth of God in them through my words and deeds?
- Do I support the young people in church in my prayer life?

Prayer Points:

- Pray that the governing authorities take heed of the needs of Christians when developing legislation for schools.
- Pray that teachers and senior staff are touched with wisdom by the Spirit of God about how they implement sensitive new school materials.
- Pray that our children are strengthened by their parents and the work of the church in JC and Ignite to stand firm in their beliefs, draw closer to the Lord and are not confused by what the world tries to teach them.

Further Scriptures:

Proverbs 1:8; Ecclesiastes 7:19; Proverbs 4:13; Colossians 1:28; Proverbs 9:10; Proverbs 4:6-7; Acts 7:22; 1 Kings 3:12

3. Healthcare

WRITTEN BY LEE VENNING

Key Scripture:

'A prudent person foresees danger and takes precautions. The simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences.' (Proverbs 27:12, NLT)

Thoughts:

Although Scripture does not directly talk about healthcare, there are definitely many biblical principles that we can follow regarding this topic. Health is important to the Lord and it is essential for a healthy walk with Christ. Remember that God created us body, soul and spirit, and when Jesus died, He died for our body, soul and spirit.

Remember everything God makes has a purpose. It is easy to forget that our bodies are made by God and maintained by us to enable us to carry out His plan until that health is threatened or your very life is at risk. At times like this, how we have looked after ourselves comes into sharp focus and we see in full clarity the work of people in the health system.

My father's recent close call with death highlighted both of these things to me: firstly, the incredible care and high-quality medical procedures he received, which have been of such a high standard; but also the feedback that one of the key things that got him through was the high level of fitness he had when he became seriously ill. It was clear that his future health was heavily dependent on the lifestyle he led. I believe all the prayer support lifted towards our God, the ultimate healer, was also critically important!

Reflections:

- Do you look after your own physical health?
- Do you eat and nourish your body appropriately?
- Do you build exercise, such as walking, into your daily routine as a minimum?
- Do you seek your doctor's advice in a timely way or bury your concerns?

Prayer Points:

- Pray that the Lord will give you the wisdom and self-control to eat, drink and exercise in a positive manner for your future health.
- Pray that the Lord will give you the strength to overcome temptations which may be damaging to your physical and mental health.
- Pray for staff in healthcare settings that the Lord will bring them wisdom in their work and they will be open to the Gospel.

Further Scriptures:

Proverbs 6:6-8; Proverbs 14:16; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20; Luke 21:34; Luke 10:34; Matthew 9:12; Colossians 4:14; Genesis 50:2; 2 Chronicles 16:12

4. Law Enforcement

WRITTEN BY KATE GOOCH

Key Scripture:

Justice is a joy to the godly, but it terrifies evildoers. (Proverbs 21:15, NLT)

Thoughts:

In April 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. led a march against racial segregation in the US that would ultimately result in his imprisonment in a jail in Birmingham, Alabama. From his jail cell, he wrote a letter articulating his desire to uphold the law, not to defy it, and added, 'I am in Birmingham because injustice is here... I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' The simplicity of that statement reminds us that it is not law enforcement that we should fear, but injustice.

God loves justice. He is just, righteous, and fair in all He does. Time and time again, God encouraged His people to 'administer true justice' (Zechariah 7:9), to act justly (Micah 6:8), and to seek justice (Isaiah 1:17). Throughout Scripture, we see God's heart moved by the defenceless, the oppressed and the innocent who were falsely accused. God cares deeply about injustice. As we align our hearts with God more and more, we too should have a stronger desire for justice and be moved more and more deeply by injustice. As Proverbs reminds us, 'justice is a joy to the godly'.

Our justice system certainly appears flawed at times. We don't have to look too far to find instances of injustice and inequality, but that doesn't mean that we should abandon the courts and law enforcement agencies altogether, nor does it mean that we should disrespect or dishonour the authority that God has set in place. Rather, we are to honour the authority that God has set in place and uphold justice. God set the legal and justice system in place 'for our good' (Romans 13:4).

Reflections:

- Do we honour those in authority?
- Do we uphold the laws of the land?
- Are we just in how we deal with other people, or do we accuse quickly, jump to conclusions or withhold mercy when it is due?
- How deeply are we moved by injustice?

Prayer Points:

- Pray that those who work for law enforcement agencies would act with justice and integrity. Recognise that they have complex and difficult jobs.
- Pray for the lawyers, judiciary and appeal courts, that they would administer true justice.
- Pray for those who serve as police officers, prison officers, probation officers, youth offending workers and lawyers, that God would bless and guide them in their work, giving them wisdom and discernment.
- Pray for the innocent and the falsely accused, that they would find justice.
- Pray that in our daily actions and decisions we too act justly and honour those in authority.

Further Scriptures:

Psalm 37:28; Romans 13:1–5; Proverbs 18:5; Proverbs 31:8

5. Businesses

WRITTEN BY KATE GOOCH

Key Scripture:

But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today. (Deuteronomy 8:18, NIV)

Thoughts:

John D. Rockefeller was an American businessman and philanthropist who rapidly achieved success in the oil industry nearly a century ago. His net worth was believed to be nearly \$1 billion in 1913 (\$26 billion today). When he left the business world, he gave away millions of pounds to charitable causes and helped establish the University of Chicago, Rockefeller University and the Rockefeller Foundation. Despite his immense wealth, he remarked: 'If your only goal is to become rich, you will never achieve it.'

There is no shortage of resources on how to start a business, but many are predicated on a vision of success that celebrates the accumulation of wealth, on the temporary and superficial. Jesus told the parable of the rich fool who earned a good crop, tore down his barns to build bigger barns and determined to 'take life easy, eat, drink and be merry' (Luke 12:16–21). The parable ends with the life of the rich fool being taken from him and the lesson that 'this is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God.'

Our businesses should have a higher purpose than the accumulation of wealth and possessions. God's desire is that they would be places where business affairs are conducted with honesty, integrity, excellence, fairness, and righteousness. This applies not only to business plans, practices, and decisions, but more crucially to relationships – how workers, clients, customers, partners, shareholders and trustees are treated. For those who own or lead a business, God promises to guide those who commit and trust their ways to Him. For those who work for others, God requires that we work willingly as though working to Him and honour those who are in authority over us, knowing that God sees our faithfulness.

Reflections:

- Do we work willingly in our jobs, even if it's not quite what we hoped it might or could be?
- Do we serve those at work eagerly and in ways that reveal more of God?
- Are we motivated primarily by the pursuit of wealth or by being rich towards God?
- Do we build our businesses to ultimately help build the church?
- Do we look for ways to give towards others?

Prayer Points:

- Pray for the growth and prosperity of those with businesses within the church and within our city.
- Pray for the wisdom of those who own and lead businesses, that they may be able to discern the times and seasons and how to build their businesses.
- Pray that God will provide a job for those in need.

Further Scriptures:

Proverbs 16:3; Colossians 3:23; Proverbs 22:29; Colossians 4:1; Proverbs 11:3; Proverbs 14:23

6. Communities

WRITTEN BY KATE GOOCH

Key Scripture:

'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.' (Jeremiah 29:5–7, NIV)

Thoughts:

In Jeremiah 29, the Israelites had been taken from Jerusalem to a place of exile in Babylon. They were many miles away from everything familiar, yet God told them to seek the peace and prosperity of the city, to increase, to expand their family and relationships, to plant, to settle, to build. It might not have been their plan to be suddenly moved to an unknown place, but it was God's plan. In fact, He later reminded them that He knew 'the good plans He had for them' (Jeremiah 29:11). As they sought and prayed for the good of the city they now found themselves in, God promised that they would prosper. When we honour the place of God's planting, He honours us. As Dick Iverson would remind us, you can't reach a city (or community) you don't love.

Wherever you find yourself – whether it is a place of your choosing or not, whether you've never felt so at home or never felt so far away from home – God has planted you there for such a time as this. He has planted you there for a purpose. You are in your community to touch the people around you. Only you have the neighbours you have. Only you encounter the specific people you do on the school run or on the work commute (or online if you're working from home!). You have specific places and routines that only you keep, but that bring you into contact with people who need to know that they are loved by a Mighty God. If you are willing, God can use you to build your community, to help the lonely find a church family, to help the poor and needy, and to speak to others about Christ.

Reflections:

- Are there specific individuals or families within your community who you can speak to, encourage, pray for, or give to?
- Do you regularly look for ways to help those in your community?
- Are there lonely people around you who need to know that God sees them and loves them?
- Do you love the place where God has planted you? Or do you always feel dissatisfied, either longing for a place you've left behind or for something that you don't yet have?

Prayer Points:

- Pray for wisdom, discernment and God-given opportunities to show God's love to those around you.
- Pray for a deeper love for the community where God has planted you.
- Pray for the peace and prosperity of our communities.

Further Scriptures:

Matthew 5:16; Hebrews 10:24; Proverbs 19:17; Deuteronomy 15:11; Romans 15:16

7. Colleges & Universities

WRITTEN BY KATE GOOCH

Key Scripture:

Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility— young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace... But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way... To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds. (Daniel 1:3-17, NIV)

Thoughts:

Throughout the Bible we see examples of many different occupations: farmers, builders, doctors, pharmacists, tax collectors, military men, tent makers, seamstresses, bakers, teachers, cooks, embroiders, fashion designers, businessmen, fishermen, bankers, musicians, lawyers, and – as in Daniel's case – students and scholars.

At different times throughout the history of God's people, those who were skilled in their craft, who were dedicated to their vocation, or who showed an 'aptitude for learning' were called upon. In Exodus 35, those whom God had given 'special skills' and who excelled at that craft were required to build the tabernacle. Daniel was a bright, able and intelligent student, but God also gave him wisdom, discernment, and

knowledge. Note, that in both Exodus 35 and Daniel 1, God gave the talent, but it was the responsibility of the recipients to be good stewards of the gift they had been given – to work hard, hone their skill, develop their craft, and apply themselves to learning.

There was always a purpose in the gift – for the craft, studies and vocational work to be a demonstration of God's greatness and glory. Daniel teaches us an important principle: we apply ourselves to learning – whether that be a craft, a vocation or a subject – but always give God first place.

Daniel never allowed the wealth of the Babylonian king to distract him from God. He was well-informed, able, quick to understand and qualified, but his studies and apprenticeship in Babylon never took priority over his relationship with God. Not only do we want our colleges and universities to be places of excellence, but also places where God is at the centre, where staff and students come to know Christ, and where the good news of Christ is spoken.

Reflections:

- Is God my first priority over and above my studies, work, craft, vocation or career?
- Am I a good steward of the gifts that God has given me?
- Do I seek to use my intellect, skills and abilities for the glory of God, or for my own glory and advancement?
- Do I work willingly as if working unto the Lord, or begrudgingly?
- Do I love wisdom and discipline?

Prayer Points:

- Pray for wisdom and discernment for our young people as they choose their college and university courses, that they would know the direction and guidance of God for their lives.
- Pray that our young people in The Pulse and Ignite would 'remember the Lord in the days of their youth', and that as they do so, He would make them the 'head and not the tail'.
- Pray that our young people in The Pulse and Ignite would have a boldness and courage to speak to their friends about Christ, to stand for truth, and hold fast to God.
- Pray that the colleges and universities in Leicester would be places of excellence, but also places that uphold the truth and are not swayed by fads and trends that are not in keeping with God's Word.
- Pray that there would be more opportunities for the message of Christ to be preached in the colleges and universities.

Further Scriptures:

Job 23:8; Proverbs 18:15; Deuteronomy 28:13; Ephesians 2:10; Proverbs 1:7

First Fruits

Giving our finances – sowing and reaping – should be a normal part of Christian life. Jesus, in the Gospels, commissioned his followers to ‘give and it will come back to you’. We can go as far as to say the mark of a true convert is one who lives the exchanged life: a life that reflects Christianity as Jesus intended it to be; a life of love under-pinned by giving and receiving; a life of generosity and obedience.

1. What is first fruits?

First fruits comes from the Hebrew *bikkurim*: ‘promise to come’

First fruits is an offering given in faith, believing that God will bless and prosper you over the next 12 months. It's a prophetic arrow shot into the new year declaring God's goodness and blessings over your future.

Key Scripture:

"You shall bring the choice first fruits of your soil into the house of the Lord your God. "Behold, I am going to send an angel before you to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Be on your guard before him and obey his voice; do not be rebellious toward him, for he will not pardon your transgression, since My name is in him. But if you truly obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For My angel will go before you and bring you in to the land of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will completely destroy them. You shall not worship their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their deeds; but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their sacred pillars in pieces. But you shall serve the Lord your God, [a]and He will bless your bread and your water; and I will remove sickness from your midst. There shall be no one miscarrying or barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. I will send My terror ahead of you, and throw into confusion all the people among whom you come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. I will send hornets ahead of you so that they will drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites before you. I will not drive them out before you in a single year, that the land may not become desolate and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. I will drive them out before you little by little, until you become fruitful and take possession of the land." (Exodus 23:19-30, NASB)

Promises from Scripture:

- The Lord sends angels.
- The Lord removes opposition from around you.
- The Lord commands a blessing over your food and water.
- The Lord will take sickness away from your surroundings.
- The Lord gives you long life.
- The Lord will increase your inheritance.

- The Lord will repay what was stolen.

2. What is the difference between tithes and first fruits?

The best of all first fruits of any kind, and every sacrifice of any kind from all your sacrifices, shall be the priest's; also you shall give to the priest the first of your ground meal, to cause a blessing to rest on your house. (Ezekiel 44:30)

Tithes vs. first fruits:

- The tithe is 10% of your income.
- First fruits is given in relation to what God wants to do in your life.
- The tithe releases your past efficiency.
- First fruits relates to your future prosperity.
- The tithe protects what you have.
- First fruits protects what you will have.
- The Tithe is given in faith that God will protect your present needs.
- First fruits is given believing for the increase that God will give you in the future.

Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you. (Luke 6:38, NKJV)

For if the first-fruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, so are the branches. (Romans 11:16, NKJV)

