

“With My Whole Heart I Seek You”

21 Days of Prayer and Fasting

Day 1: May 3, 2018: “The Lord is With Us; Do Not Fear Them”

Numbers 13:30; 14:6-9: But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it”... And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes ⁷ and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, “The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. ⁸ If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. ⁹ Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them.”

In this situation the people of Israel stood upon the edge of a knife. The Lord had brought them out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and to the very edge of the Promised Land. Now, in this moment, Israel rushed toward the edge of rejecting God and all that he had done for them.

The twelve spies whom Moses had sent to explore the land of Canaan had returned (Num. 13:1-25). The majority of the spies brought a report which instilled fear in the people and dissuaded them from going up to take possession of the land. The essence of their report was: “The people of the land are too big and too strong for us! Their cities are too large and too well fortified! We are not able to go up against them! We will be devoured like grasshoppers!” (Num. 13:28-29, 31-33).

The people’s fear at this “bad report” quickly turned into open rebellion:

Numbers 14:1-4: Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ² And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³ Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” ⁴ And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

To go back to Egypt would have been for the Israelites to reject their identity and purpose as God’s people, to reject God’s promises to Abraham, to reject everything God had done for them in delivering them from slavery, to reject their role in God’s mission in the world, and ultimately to reject God himself.

Against this headlong rush into disaster, Joshua and Caleb raised their voices. They told the people that the land of Canaan was an “exceedingly good land” (v 7), and that the Lord would give them this land to be their home “if” He delighted in them (v. 8). They urged the people not to fear the Canaanites and not to rebel against the Lord. They reminded the people that the Lord was with them and they therefore had nothing to fear (v. 9).

How often do we let fear stop us in our tracks? How often do we say of the obstacles or challenges which are in front of us: “They are too big! They are too strong! I can’t face them! I can’t do that! I’ll be devoured like a bug!”? How often have we refused to move forward in God’s purpose for our lives because we were afraid? Or, because we just did not think that we had what it was going to take?

Our faith will fail if we take our eyes off God and focus instead on the problems, enemies, or obstacles we are dealing with. Our faith will fail if we take our eyes off God and focus instead on our own weaknesses. This is what happened to the Exodus generation of Israelites. They had seen God’s mighty power in action in the ten plagues that fell upon Egypt, in the wondrous deliverance at the Red

Sea, and in the way God provided for them in wilderness by bringing water out of rocks and sending down bread from heaven. Yet instead of keeping their attention focused on God, that generation of Israelites consistently focused on their problems (Num. 11:1-3; 11:4-35; chapter 12; chapter 16; 20:1-13; 21:4-9). Thus, their faith failed, and they rebelled against God. Thus, they were “unable” to enter the Promised Land “because of unbelief” (Heb. 3:19).

The journey of wholeheartedly seeking God begins with fixing our thoughts on him. Let us dwell on the biblical truths about the identity and character of our God. Let us meditate on the biblical stories of the “wondrous works” of our God (Ps. 111:4). Let us remember all the ways in which God has proven himself faithful in our lives. Let us look to Jesus “the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2). Let us remember – especially when we are afraid, intimidated, discouraged, or doubting ourselves – that the Lord is with us, and that He is far greater than any problem we might encounter, any enemy we might face, or any weakness we might have.

Take a few moments now to confess your fears and to ask God to strengthen your faith. This prayer can help you get started:
“Heavenly Father, I confess my fears to you. I confess that too often I focus on the problems which seem so big, and on my abilities, which seem so small. I confess the times I have not obeyed you because of my fears. Help me, Lord, to remember who You are and what You have done. Help me to trust in You. Lead me by Your Spirit, that I might move forward in Your purpose for my life. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

Day 2: May 4, 2018: “He Followed Me Fully”

Numbers 14:20-25: Then the Lord said, “I have pardoned, according to your word. ²¹ But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, ²² none of the men who have seen my glory and

my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, ²³ shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it. ²⁴ But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me fully, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it. ²⁵ Now, since the Amalekites and the Canaanites dwell in the valleys, turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea.”

What does it mean to seek the Lord with our whole hearts? What does wholehearted discipleship look like? In the midst of the disaster that was Israel’s refusal to go up into the Promised Land, Caleb gives us an example of full devotion to the Lord.

As the people’s rebellion ensued “the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel” (Num. 14:10). Then God said to Moses that he was ready to “strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them” and to build a “greater and mightier” nation from Moses’ descendants (14:12). At this threat of judgment Moses interceded for the people and pleaded with God to forgive them according to his own steadfast love (14:13-19).

In response to Moses’ prayer the Lord announced both punishment and pardon (14:20-35). The pardon was that God did not disinherit Israel. He maintained his covenant relationship with the nation and promised to bring the following generation – which would be born and raised in the wilderness – into the Promised Land (14:20, 31).

The punishment was that the entire Exodus generation would wander in the wilderness for forty years until they were all dead. Not one of them would live to enter Canaan (14:21-23, 28-30a, 32-25). The only exceptions to this judgment were Joshua and Caleb. They alone of that generation would survive the wilderness wanderings and inherit what God had promised. Of Caleb in particular the Lord said, “But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and **has followed me**

fully, I will bring into the land into which he went..." So, God commended and blessed Caleb as one who followed Him completely.

What can we learn about wholehearted discipleship from Caleb's example? First, we can see that wholehearted discipleship requires **robust faith**. Caleb trusted in God's presence. He knew that God was with Israel and that this made all the difference for them. Caleb trusted in God's power. He knew that God could defeat the mighty Canaanites just as He had defeated the mighty Egyptians. He knew that compared to God the almighty maker of heaven and earth, the nations were not mighty at all. Caleb also trusted in God's promise. He knew that God had sworn to give Canaan to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and he believed that God would fulfill his word.

As disciples of Jesus we can trust in God's presence, power, and promises just as Caleb did. God is *present* with us in a more intimate and wonderful way than He was ever with Israel. God personally lives inside of us in the Person of the Holy Spirit. Our bodies are His temple! (1 Cor. 3:16, 6:19, 12:13). Further, while Caleb could look back to God's power displayed in the plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea, we can know that the same *power* which raised Christ from the dead is at work within our lives! (Eph. 1:19-23). The God who gave His Son for us, and whose Spirit lives inside us, can "do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, *according to the power at work within us*" (Eph. 3:20). And God's *promise* to us in the gospel – if we will dwell on it and take hold of it – will burst apart our bonds of fear and overflow the banks of our weaknesses. The apostle Paul wrote:

2 Corinthians 1:18-22: As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. ¹⁹ For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. ²⁰ For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. ²¹ And it is God who establishes us with

you in Christ, and has anointed us, ²² and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

Second, we can see from Caleb's example that wholehearted discipleship requires **full obedience**. When the entire nation of Israel was ready to hightail it back to Egypt, Caleb was ready to obey God and go up to take possession of the Promised Land. God saw that Caleb had this obedient spirit and it pleased Him.

The New Testament has this wonderful phrase – "the obedience of faith" (Rom. 1:5) – which captures how our trust in God naturally and necessarily leads us to obey God. Our faith is not biblical and saving faith unless it is obedient faith (Mt. 7:21-27, Mark 3:31-35, John 14:15, Hebrews 11:9-10, James 2:14-26). Often our faithful obedience will be expressed in the quiet ways we go about our daily business as spouses, parents, grandparents, neighbors, and co-workers. However, as Caleb discovered, there will be times when our "obedience of faith" will require us to go against the tide of popular opinion and take a stand for following God that is risky. When Caleb and Joshua urged the people not to rebel against the Lord, the people picked up stones to stone them to death (Num. 14:10)!

Third, we can see from Caleb's example that wholehearted discipleship requires **courageous influence**. When Israel was heading down the path of fear-inspired rebellion, Caleb (and Joshua) sought to turn the tide by calling the people to forsake fear and follow the Lord (Num. 14:6-9). They were leading men in Israel and they were members of the group of spies who had explored Canaan (Num. 13:1-3, 6, 8, 16). They spoke up at the critical time and sought to influence Israel to fully obey God along with them.

God intends for our lives of faith-filled obedience to influence our families, our neighbors, our community, and even the nations. The image which the apostle Paul used for Christian influence is arresting. It is the image of what we smell. His words are "fragrance" and

“aroma.” What we smell can have a powerful influence on us, for good or for bad. The aroma of freshly baked bread is inviting and appetizing. The fragrance of a rotting corpse is repulsive and may induce reactions such as vomiting. Paul wrote that God was using his ministry of the message of Christ to “spread the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere” (2 Cor. 2:14). Paul was a missionary to the Gentiles. Today we are missionaries to the people around us. Today, if we will live our commitment to Christ in an open [public] and loving way, God will use our lives to “spread the knowledge of him” to others. Then what was true of Paul and his companions will also be true of us:

2 Corinthians 2:15-17: For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? ¹⁷ For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

Wholehearted discipleship will influence others toward the salvation that is in Christ. If we fully follow the Lord, we will – through our words, deeds and relationships – bring others along with us.

Take time now to ask God to help you grow in robust faith, full obedience, and courageous influence. This prayer can help you get started: *“O Lord, thank you that you are wholly committed to us. You gave your Son to make us your own, and you have given your Spirit to live within us. What more could you give? Lord, help me to follow you fully as Caleb did. Help me to trust in your presence, your power, and your promise. Help me to walk in obedience to your commands, especially when it isn’t easy or popular. And Lord, make my life a fragrance of Christ to others. Use me to influence them to come to fully follow you as well. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”*

Day 3: May 5, 2018: The Word of God Guards our Way

Psalm 119:9: How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.

If you are anything like me, you look back on your teenage years with some regret. I was raised by loving Christian parents who brought me up “in the training and instruction of the Lord.” My home church was filled with genuine followers of Jesus who were both good examples and encouraging voices to me and the other young people in the congregation. Yet, despite these incredible blessings, I most certainly did not keep my way pure as a young man. Instead, I aimlessly, and yet intentionally, wandered into all kinds of sinful habits. Only when I was on the verge of adulthood, at the age of nineteen, did I begin to turn my way back to the Lord. That change-of-direction occurred because God really got my attention through a very special young lady who was later to become my wife.

It is worth considering, why does the Psalmist specifically address himself to “young men” (and by extension young women) in this verse? The great reformer John Calvin gave two answers to this question in his commentary on Psalm 119. First, Calvin observed, youth “puts men where two ways meet, and renders it imperative for them to select the course of life which they mean to follow.” That is, youth is the time when people make the decisions which will shape the rest of their lives. If a young person does not carefully consider the direction of his or her life and does not intentionally choose to follow the Lord Jesus, the course of their life can be set on a path which will lead only further and further away from God. In Calvin’s words as we mature we “become hardened” in our “vicious practices.” It is therefore essential for young people to begin guarding their way according to God’s word before these vicious practices set in and take hold.

Second, Calvin saw how great the temptations of youth are, and how vulnerable young people are to them. He wrote that “the carnal

propensities” are “very powerful in youth” and that they require a “double restraint.” How strongly our desires and emotions grow, and even rage within us, in our teenage years! How appealing the enticements of the world appear! Yet, when we are young, our faculties of reasoning and decision making are not well developed enough to give us the strength to resist these temptations. It is therefore essential for young people to begin finding in God’s word the powerful resources for saying “no” to sin and “yes” to Christ’s way.

What then of the application of this verse to those of us who have passed from youth into adulthood (perhaps long ago)? Does this verse have less relevance for us than for teenagers? By no means. To begin with, no matter what age we are, we can place ourselves in a position of humility before the Lord. We can receive the Lord’s word to us with the openness, eagerness, and teachability of youth.

Second, we can recognize that we never outgrow our need to guard our way according to God’s word. If the years of youth are when change is easier and formative decisions are made, then the years of experience are when change is more challenging and decisions even more complex. If young people need the power and truth of God’s word to guide them, then how much more do we adults need the power and truth of God’s word to enlighten and transform us? Our need for God does not lessen as we mature. Rather, that sense of dependence and gratitude by which we cling to Him grows only deeper.

How then do we guard our way according to the word of the Lord? The basic idea of the verb translated “guard” in this verse is “to exercise great care over.” To guard our way of life then is to use the word of God to exercise great care over what we desire, what we plan, how we think, what we say, and why and how we act. It is to use the word of God to exercise great care over the goals we set and

the habits we develop. In order to use God’s word to guard our way we must diligently read, study, meditate, and act upon it.

This kind of intentional and comprehensive submission of our lives to God’s word will produce in us the purity that is freedom from evil. When Isaiah called the people of Judah and Jerusalem to repentance he used the word translated ‘pure’ in our verse: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil,¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause” (Is. 1:16-17). How can a person of any age keep his or her way “clean” of evil? We can use the word of God to exercise great care over all that we are and do.

Take time now to ask God to help you guard your way according to his word. This brief prayer can help you get started: *“Heavenly Father, that you for the power and truth of your word. I want to walk in purity before you, but I cannot do it on my own. Help me to use your word to exercise great care over what I think, what I say, and what I do. Lord, by your Spirit make my way of life clean from all evil. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”*

Day 4: May 6, 2018: The Tension of Faith and Weakness

Psalm 119:10: With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments!

There is tension in this verse. The first line – “with my whole heart I seek you” – is a declaration of intense devotion to the Lord. The second line – “let me not wander from your commandments” – is an acknowledgment of how fleeting and frail that devotion can be. We can be energized with passion for Jesus in one moment, and in the very next we can be wandering off into yelling at our kids, cutting ethical corners at work, or looking up that porn website again.

One of my favorite scenes from *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* is when Aragorn stands before the Sword that was Broken in the House of Elrond. The sword lays in pieces on a table. It was a symbol of both great triumph and great failure. It was once wielded by Aragorn's ancestors Elendil and Isildur. In a great war for Middle Earth Elendil, then the king of Numenor, was struck and killed by the Dark Lord Sauron. Immediately his son, Isildur, took up his father's sword and cut off the hand on which Sauron wore his One Ring of power. This Ring gave Sauron the strength to dominate all life. The blow to Sauron's arm shattered Isildur's sword, but it also separated Sauron from the Ring. Without the Ring Sauron and his army were defeated, and Middle Earth was saved.

It was then that Isildur's greatest failure followed on his greatest triumph. He had the opportunity to take the One Ring and cast it into the fires of Mount Doom. This was the only place it could be destroyed. However, Isildur succumbed to the temptation of the power the Ring offered. He decided to keep it for himself instead of destroying it.

Now, thousands of years later, the Ring had been found again and the spirit of Sauron had returned. He was seeking to regain the ring and with it the power to rule all Middle Earth. Aragorn knew that, as the descendant of Elendil and Isildur, it fell to him to prevent Sauron from ever regaining the ring. However, he deeply feared that he would repeat Isildur's failure. In the scene Aragorn is standing in the darkness in front of the broken sword when the Elf princess Arwen quietly enters the room. "Why do you fear the past?" she asks him, and then continues, "You are Isildur's heir, not Isildur himself. You are not bound to his fate." Aragorn answered her by saying, "The same blood flows in my veins. The same weakness."

When we stand before the commands of God we also tremble with fear, for the same weakness which flowed in the veins of our ancestor Adam flows also in us. The desires for pleasure, power, fame, wealth,

control, and revenge which have moved human beings to horrible actions throughout history also live in us. We know the power of those desires. We know how easy it is for us to follow these desires and forsake the commands of God. We know that the words of the hymn perfectly describe us: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love..."

This propensity to wander is why we must live in the tension of Psalm 119:10. We must declare our devotion to the Lord: "With my whole heart I seek you." At the very same time, we must remain aware of the weakness which flows in our veins. So, we must also cry out to God to keep us from wandering. We must ask His Spirit to give us the strength to live our wholehearted devotion in daily obedience: "Let me not wander from your commandments."

Take time now to confess to God both your allegiance to him as well as your need for grace to keep you from wandering away from him. This stanza from *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing* is a prayer which can help you get started: "O to grace how great a debtor Daily I'm constrained to be! Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, Bind my wandering heart to Thee. Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love; Here's my heart, O take and seal it, Seal it for Thy courts above."

Day 5: May 7, 2018: Storing God's Word in our Hearts

Psalm 119:11-13: I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. ¹² Blessed are you, O Lord; teach me your statutes! ¹³ With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth.

The verb translated "have stored up" in verse 11 means to "conceal something with a definite purpose, either for protection or for sinister reasons." Moses' mother "hid him three months" (Ex. 2:2) to protect him from Pharaoh's decree that all Hebrew baby boys be put to death. Conversely, David's enemies concealed themselves so that they could attack him from the shadows: "All day long they injure my cause; all their thoughts are against me for evil. ⁶ They stir up strife,

they **lurk**; they watch my steps, as they have waited for my life” (Ps. 56:5-6). The **purpose** of storing up the word of God within ourselves is plainly stated in the text: **that we might not sin against God**.

What does it mean to store up God’s word in our hearts? How does having God’s word hidden within us keep us from sin? Let’s take each of these questions in turn.

In order for God’s word to have its full effect it cannot only be words on a page, or the sound of the preacher’s voice. Rather, the word of God must settle into the deepest places of our lives. The word of God is a seed, and our hearts are the soil (Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23). Just as a seed must be planted beneath the surface and into the heart of the soil to grow into a flower or tree, so must the word of God be planted beneath the surface of our lives down into our very souls. Storing up the word of God in our hearts is about taking God’s word into ourselves so that it transforms us from the inside out.

How can we store up God’s word within us? We can read it regularly. We can memorize verses and passages of Scripture. We can meditate on the word – prayerfully wrestling with it and turning it over and over in our minds. We can study the Bible with others in a class or small group. We can listen attentively to preaching with open and searching minds. We can read other books which will help us to better understand and apply what the Bible says. All these disciplines involve us in sustained exposure and attention to God’s word. We will successfully store up God’s word in our hearts only if we *treasure* it enough to consistently invest our time and effort in taking it into our lives. Job’s plea of his own integrity before God can be an inspiration for us: “I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have **treasured** the words of his mouth more than my portion of food” (Job 23:12).

Second, there are several ways in which the word of God works from deep within us to keep us from sin and to form the likeness of Christ

in us. To begin with, the living and active word of God discerns the “thoughts and intentions” of our hearts (Heb. 4:12). Our own hearts can deceive us (Jer. 17:9), but the word of God can purify us from the evil things which come from within and defile us (Mark 7:21-23); and the word of God can bring truth to our innermost thoughts, desires, and attitudes (Ps. 51:6). Next, the word of God opens our eyes to the ugliness of sin – so that we are increasingly repelled by it; and also to the beauty of holiness – so that we are increasingly attracted to being like God. This is how God’s word re-orders our distorted desires. Also, the word of God builds up our faith with the knowledge of God’s faithfulness, power, and love. Faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the word of Christ. (Rom 10:14-17). As our faith grows so does our ability to resist temptation and walk in obedience. Lastly, the word of God hidden within us is our powerful resource for saying no to the devil. Our example in this is Jesus Christ. When Jesus was tempted by Satan, he overcame those temptations by means of the word of God which he had stored up within himself (Matthew 4:1-11).

I have personally experienced the power of God’s word at work in me in each of these ways. Many years ago when I was in the midst of a strenuous struggle with sin I memorized 1 Thessalonians 4:7: “For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.” This single verse judged my impure thoughts and desires. It created a longing for holiness in me. It strengthened my faith because I knew that the holiness for which I was longing was God’s will for me. What is more, on many occasions recalling this verse in my mind and reciting it on my lips gave me strength to say no to sin.

Truly the Lord is to be blessed for giving us his word! Let each of us pursue God through his word, that it might dwell richly in us (Col. 3:16), so that we will flee from sin and walk in the ways of Jesus. Take time now to seek God. This brief prayer can help you get started: “O Lord, help me to spend time in your word that I might store it up in my heart. Plant your word in me, O Lord. Let the truth

and beauty of your word replace the impure and unclean things which are there now. Thank you that your word can keep me from sin and help me be pleasing to you. In Jesus' name, Amen."