

Following in Word & Prayer

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[0 : 00] Thank you, Barbara. Can I also encourage you to get the St Paul's app open? There is two points to today's message and it would be great if you had it open. If you haven't got the St Paul's app, you might need to get a pen out and a piece of paper to jot down a bunch of stuff, just even Bible references in order to be able to follow through with them and check them out a little bit later. The Appalachian Trail is the longest continuing walking track in the world. It stretches for three and a half thousand kilometres up the east coast of the United States of America and each year around about 2,000 bright-eyed keen bushwalkers set out to tackle this trail and yet unfortunately very few make it. Half of those who seek to tackle it don't even make it a third of the way. I mean, when I say even make it a third of the way, it's a thousand kilometres, so it's still a fair way. But one in ten drop out in the very first week. There have been cases where people have travelled halfway around the world, spent a small fortune in order to walk this trail and lasted only three days. They turn up, it would seem, expecting some kind of a stroll through the woods, sun shining, birds singing, squirrels playing, that kind of stuff.

And instead, they have those things, they do get those things, but they also get rocks to scramble over, mountains to climb, rain, hypothermia, ticks, bears, blisters, physical and emotional exhaustion, plus snakes. A whole heap of dangers and issues along the way. When you set off on a challenging journey, such as the Appalachian Trail, you need the right equipment, you need the right resources, you need the right supplies, but also the right perspective on what this journey is going to be like if in fact you are to reach the destination. Now, if you were here last week, as we kicked off our vision series, we discovered that the Christian fundamentally is what they are, is they are a follower of Jesus Christ, the Lord and the Saviour of all of humanity. A Christian, they are a disciple, they are a follower of Jesus, who we learn from him, we sit at his feet, we listen to his teaching, we obey his teaching, we submit to his teaching and we become like him in all of life. That is, his character becomes our character, his priorities, our priorities, his journey becomes our journey.

And we saw last week that the foundation of that relationship with Jesus is the gospel. It's the good news that Jesus himself has absorbed God's punishment for our sin because we've chosen to walk a different trail in life, chose to determine a different path for ourselves in life and rejected our creator God.

Jesus went to the cross, he died our death, he paid our debt and turned God's anger away from us and has set us free to live a life we were created to live in the very first place and that is following him. He's brought us back onto the path. Christian discipleship is a lifelong journey of following Jesus.

It's not a trip to the train station, it is a lifelong journey of following Jesus. And if you're going to follow well and keep following him until the journey's end, we need the resources that God gives us. That is, he doesn't sacrificially and generously and graciously get us back on the trail and then says, well, there you go, just walk that path there. He gives us all the resources by his mercy day in, day out to continue to walk the path with him. And so over the next three weeks, we're going to focus on those resources and they are the Bible, prayer, the Holy Spirit and companions for the journey, the church. And through these resources, our merciful heavenly father equips us and sustains us to follow

[4 : 29] Jesus to the journey's end. Now, my aim today is to look briefly, even though it might not appear to be brief, but it will be brief given the massive topic that it is on both Bible and prayer. Spend most of my time on the Bible because we did a whole series on prayer this time last year. But I will also, we're planning on doing a whole series on the Bible sometime probably this year as well. But so we'll give a taste of a Bible, then we'll move into prayer. Okay. So first of all, if you've

got the St.

Paul's app open, you'll see there the title God Absolutely Speaks. Now we exist in a culture, in a society here in Australia, as does the Western world that asserts there is no objective and absolute truth that must be understood, accepted and submitted to. That is the finite individual is the determiner of ultimate truth. They become ultimate truth determiners. All claims to any form of absolute ultimate universal truth in our culture is seen as bondage. That is, you must get rid of it if you want to have any sense of freedom. That is, there's a connection and our culture's right. There is a connection between something that is true and something that has authority over your life. It is binding for you. If something is universally true, then it is universally binding. You cannot escape it. So even our secular society understands that.

So what I want us to see this morning, what I want us to become awakened to, is the authority of God's word over our life is binding, but in fact leads to freedom, not bondage. Freedom. Salvation. Biblical truth leads to salvation and freedom. Jesus himself said, the truth will set you free. So let's take a moment, see that connection.

And you might want to take notes because I'll move quick in through this stuff. Psalm 119, 155 to 160, which Barbara just read out for us. Salvation is far from the wicked, for they do not seek out your decrees.

Your compassion is great, O Lord. Preserve my life according to your laws. Many are the foes who persecute me, but I have not turned from your statutes. I look on the faithless with loathing, for they do not obey your word. See how I love your precepts. Preserve my life, O Lord, according to your love. All your words are true. All your righteous laws are eternal. Now what those verses are saying there is, is that God communicates. It's saying, uses terms, decrees, laws, statutes, words, precepts.

[7 : 56] Then in verse 160, what it says here, when God speaks, what he speaks is true, it's righteous, it's eternal. The word all that begins at verse 160 is translated in Exodus 30. It's usually two other places, this particular word in the Old Testament, Exodus 30 and Numbers chapter 1. And in both Exodus 30 and Numbers 1, it's not translated as all, it's translated as census.

So what it's saying here is, if you took a census of the entire word of God, did a survey, investigated the facts, the conclusion is that the sum total of the word of God is true. It's truth.

But the second half of verse 160, it says, all your righteous laws are eternal. It's not just the sum truth, sum total of it is truth, but there might be a few areas in between here and there, but collectively it's okay. It's not saying that, it's saying all the individual parts are also truth. The census would reveal that the whole and the parts are all true.

When God speaks, what he speaks is truth, not an opinion, not ideas, it's truth. Truth is what he communicates and he can only communicate and only ever communicate what is true, what what is right, what is eternal. The reason why God speaks truth, ultimate truth, and is the overruling and final authority on all things is because the one who speaks is true. He is ultimate reality.

There is no one, no thing equal to him. There's nothing beyond him, nothing higher than he is. As Romans 11 says, from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. This is the God who exists from everlasting. From everlasting. Reality is created. It is determined and defined by this God. There is no reality before this God. We are told at the beginning of the Bible that all is void and formless when this God. When this God existed. No beginning, no end. He stands outside of all that he has created. The God of the Bible never had a beginning.

[11 : 06] He's never ending. He's never ending. Never becoming. Never improving. Simply and absolutely there to be dealt with on his terms or not at all.

The one who never had a beginning. The one who never had a beginning, but always was and is and will be, creates and defines all things because he created all things from nothing. When God speaks, he doesn't interpret history. He's not his opinion on history.

It's not his view or viewpoint on history. He creates history when he speaks. It's not his spin on how things works. When he says, when he speaks, it happens. Let there be light and there was light. If I said, let there be light, I have to walk over to the light switches and turn them on. My words in and of themselves do not have creative authority.

They need actions to back them up. And if my actions do not back them up, it's called a lie. It's called hypocritical. But God, when he speaks, it happens.

And so this simply means that what matters above all things is this God. He created all that is. He sustains all everything that is. He directs the cause of all that is because from him and through him

and to him are all things for his glory forever.

[12:41] Reality is created. It's determined. It's defined by an infinite God who is true. Now, truth is a communication of ultimate reality.

That's what truth is. It's a communication of ultimate reality. Or it's a display of ultimate reality. The one who is ultimately true, infinite and unapproachable, has come to us and revealed himself to us. Psalm 19, 100 psalms before, says, The heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of his hands.

The created universe is God's text message to all of humanity throughout history to say, I'm here. Without me speaking, without me doing, without me acting, you would have no idea that I exist. You could not discover yourself, me for yourself.

[13:51] I have to do something. So here's the first thing I'm going to do, creation. It's my text message to say I'm here. That something bigger is here.

It's why prayer is so universal across all cultures throughout history, because we know something is there.

I read this devotion with one of my girls the other day, Indescribable. And it's talking about the verse from Genesis 1, 3, Let There Be Light.

And at the end of the devotion, it says, God's universe is so big that it can't be measured in, this is American, right?

Feet and inches or even miles. We have to use a bigger ruler. It's called a light year. A light year is, you guessed it, how far light travels in an entire year, which is 5.88 trillion miles a year.

[15:06] Our own Milky Way galaxy that the Earth exists in, our solar system exists in, is 100,000 light years wide.

And scientists speculate that's just one galaxy out of billions of galaxies that our God created. There was that pause.

There was that pause at the end of me reading that. And she turned to me and said, Wow. God is big, isn't he?

Yeah, but I don't know how big. Just marvel. Marvel. Marvel. The created order is God's text message to say, I'm here.

But the Bible tells us the place where reality, the way things actually are, and the representation of that reality, the communication of that reality, the move from textbook to Facebook, here I am, you can now look at me, is the person of Jesus Christ.

[16:35] God reveals himself most profoundly in the person of Jesus. Firstly, because Jesus speaks the truth. Jesus says this in John 18, verse 37, For this I came into the world to testify to the truth, to testify to the way things actually are.

Everyone on the side of truth listens to me. You want to know reality? Jesus says, You listen to me. And Jesus is saying there, he speaks truth, came to testify to truth.

But he also says something even more profound. In John 14, verse 6, I am the way, I am the truth. Not that I just speak truth, but I am the truth. And the most ultimate reason why Jesus Christ would say, I am the truth, is because he is ultimate reality.

He is God. Which, when you go to the beginning of John's gospel, that's exactly what is affirmed there. John chapter 1, In the beginning was the word.

[17:46] In the beginning was the communication of God, the word. He existed before anything was made. And the word was with God. And the word was God.

And then in verse 2, we are told, He was with God in the beginning. And through him, that is through the word, all things were made. Without him, nothing was made that has been made.

And then, down in verse 14, of John chapter 1, we read something there, which is just startling to us. The word, who is God, existed with God, became flesh, and made his dwelling amongst us.

We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. And so the question is, who's John talking about?

Who is this word, who is God, who existed before creation, who created everything, and who is, full of grace and truth?

[18:56] So you read on a little bit further. John chapter 1, verse 15. John testifies concerning him. He cried out, saying, this was he of whom I said, he who comes after me, has surpassed me, because he was before me.

From the fullness of his grace, we have all received one blessing after another, for the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

So Jesus doesn't just speak God's word. He doesn't just speak the truth. He is the word of God. He is the truth. He is God. And so the place where God, ultimate reality, the way things actually are, and God's communication of that ultimate reality, come together most profoundly, is in the person of Jesus Christ.

Christ. He is both God and the communication of God. And we go, yeah, but Steve, Jesus was 2,000 years ago.

[20 : 06] That was great for, you know, those dudes who were there when he was there. How do we grasp this Jesus? How do we see this Jesus? How do we connect? How does he speak to us and we experience him?

Luke 24, as Jesus has walked along the road to Emmaus, he showed the disciples how the whole Old Testament pointed to him. The Bible, as the word of God, is where we have God revealing the way things actually are.

He says, the whole scriptures is what he's saying, point to me. Everything that God has communicated throughout history has pointed to me.

The 66 books of the Bible with Jesus at the center is truth and therefore the authority by which all things are measured. The Bible is where God speaks, what is real, what is absolute, what is true, the way things actually are.

The Bible is the way God, the ultimate and all important reality in cross all of human history reveals himself to us with clarity and authority to this day.

[21 : 14] So if God is more important than anything, then the Bible is more important than anything but God. And what we need to embrace as God's people, what we need to be confident in is that the whole word of God is true with the Lord Jesus as the center of that truth.

The God who made everything, the God who controls everything, the God who has a purpose for everything, this God has spoken throughout history and it is all recorded for us.

Everything that we need to know for life and salvation is recorded for us in the Bible. 2 Timothy 3 that was just read out to us by Barbara, all scripture, the whole Bible is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

In what our God has revealed to us, we are not left without a knowledge of his will. We are not left without a knowledge of him at work in his world.

We are not left without wisdom. We are not left without a revelation of the way of salvation. But also, I will unpack this a little bit next week, with the presence of the Holy Spirit working through the word of God, the Bible, we also have God's active presence in this world now.

[22 : 53] Not just, here is a guidebook, here is a handover new card, there is the manual if something goes wrong for you, but God himself walking with us on the journey.

that is, that is just priceless. If we could awaken our hearts and our minds the confidence to the confidence that this is so, just imagine how we would navigate our lives, how we would live our lives.

Just imagine how we would navigate the complexity of this life of this world, which is our vision for our next generation, that they would, they're getting millions and millions of options, of identities and options to live in life in this world.

And to say that there's one firm foundation, just imagine how we would navigate the complexity of this life. Just, God has not left us without a way to measure every single thing that we face every single day.

The Bible speaks about everything we face every day. Everything we face is either, is touched by the Bible, it is either directly touched because it is in the Bible or it's indirectly touched because the Bible shapes every category by which we approach it.

[24 : 17] Every criteria which we deal with it. The Bible will be the sun in the solar system of all of our learning. It gives light, perspective, meaning.

Its truth needs to permeate everything. All ideas will be judged by this book. This book must be known first and it must be known better than all other books and ideas and information.

this absolute God absolutely speaks. But when he speaks what he reveals is he absolutely listens too.

There's one more step we need to take here. See, it's one thing to say that God is ultimate reality and God has revealed ultimate reality by speaking to us but that does not mean in any way that we can have any form of relationship with this creator God.

It just means that ultimate reality has communicated ultimate truth. Except there's one thing that is absolutely essential that this God does reveal to us about himself in the Bible and that is that fundamentally in his very nature he is a God of ultimate love relationships.

[25 : 44] The nature of God becomes explicit for us at the end of Matthew's gospel Matthew 28 verse 19 this is where Jesus sends his disciples into the world and he says I call you to baptize people in the name of the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Now he doesn't say I baptize you and call you to baptize people in the names of the Father Son and Holy Spirit but in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit. That is they have a single name.

That is the Father Son and Holy Spirit all share one divine nature. They are all one being. There is only one God not three gods but they are distinctly the Father Son and Holy Spirit.

They are all equally God. They are three persons of the Godhead. Three persons within the unity of God's being who are equally divine who know and love one another and who from all of eternity from everlasting that way to everlasting that way have poured love into each other.

And from all of eternity they have worked for our salvation. God himself by himself before he made a single thing has always within himself had a perfect relationship.

[27 : 14] God is infinitely profoundly happy filled with perfect joy.

The fierce happiness of dynamic love relationships. God would have spoken and created the universe and created humanity was not in order to extract cosmic love and joy out of us for himself because he already had that but in fact was to share it with us.

The God of the Bible calls us into that relationship to converse with him to know him to relate to him because it's what we were made to do.

It's a relationship that God himself delights in and to share the joy that he has in himself. What we discover is that the New Testament particularly is the character of God's fatherhood.

It becomes so prominent and so clear for us. Galatians 4 verses 4 to 6 puts it very succinctly. God sent his son born of a woman born under the law to redeem those under the law that we might receive adoption to sonship because you are his sons.

[28 : 53] God sent the spirit of his son into our hearts the spirit who calls out Abba father. See what you're saying there? This God is not just an all powerful being but this God has made it possible for us to call him father.

He has adopted us and being adopted is not just a legal event. To be adopted into a new family means a revolution in how you live your life day by day. In Jesus believers are personally established into the ultimate reality relationship.

In John 17 23 is a remarkable verse where Jesus prays to his father for his followers for us. He says that the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

As you have loved me so we have loved them. To be adopted means that now God loves us as he has done all along with Jesus.

He loves us as if we have lived as Jesus has lived. And that means that this God who has revealed himself is a God that we can run to.

[30 : 19] He calls us his sons and we call him our father and we run to him not with fear and trepidation because he has embraced us.

We have the most intimate and unbreakable relationship because with the God of this universe he has made everything possible that we might be called his children.

We have direct access to ultimate reality and unless he revealed himself and made it possible we would not be able to do that. We are blind and in the darkness.

So prayer for the Christian is offered on the basis of God's free saving grace and his steadfast endless fatherly love for us.

How is such access and freedom possible to ultimate reality? Well mark this the only time in all of the gospels in all four gospels that Jesus Christ the son of God who existed forever with his father in the spirit prays to God but never calls him father is on the cross.

[31 : 47] it's the only time every other time he says I'm going to teach you how to pray father in heaven. His prayer on the cross was my God my God why have you forsaken me?

The father turned his face away. Jesus lost his relationship with the father for that moment on the cross so that we can have a relationship with God ultimate reality and call him father. Jesus was forgotten so that we would be remembered forever from everlasting to everlasting. Jesus Christ bore all the eternal punishment that our sins deserve. The sin of living life and becoming determiners of what reality is sin is that is the cost of prayer for us. Jesus paid the price so that God could be our father and we would have direct access to him unhindered access to him. So to be a Christian without prayer and if this is a rebuke then take it to be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing. Prayer for the Christian is a unique gift from God. Christianity declares that through the Bible and the work of God's spirit in our lives our understanding of ultimate reality becomes unclouded. [33 : 29] True knowledge of God is nothing more very simply as a gift from God. It's not because Christians are more clever. Without God first speaking to us we would have no way of speaking to him.

This is the gift and the wonder of the Bible and prayer for the Christian. Prayer is not plunging into the abyss of the unknown. And so these two resources of Bible and prayer are just gifts. wonderful gifts for us as we navigate life in a complex world. Gifts from God that we might fellowship with the personal God who is ultimate reality and defines all things as we follow the Lord Jesus Christ as truth.

you see we only know who we're praying to first of all and foremost is because we learned it in the Bible and we know how we should be praying only by getting our vocabulary from the Bible our prayers should arise out of immersion in the Bible what we discover is that the God of the Bible is both simple and complex he's majestic and tender he's holy and forgiving he's loving personable and mysterious at the same time he has given us everything we need for life and for salvation but he has not given us everything there is still mystery what we discover is the God of the Bible is as I said simple and complex loving personable and mysterious and therefore as we listen we study we think we reflect we pondered this God in this Bible our response to him in our hearts and our minds is therefore going to be varied it may be one of shame it may be one of joy it may be one of confusion or of appeal our prayer can never be primarily confessions or praise or appeals it cannot be mainly one type of expression or the other some prayers in the Bible are like intimate conversations with a friend others like an appeal to a great monarch and others akin to a wrestling match in every case the nature of prayer is determined by the character of God who's revealed himself who is at all the same time our friend our father our lover our shepherd our creator and our king we pray in response to God himself and only if we respond to his word will our own prayer life be rich and varied the more we clearly grasp who this God is the more our prayer is shaped and determined accordingly but friends be patient this journey may be slow as slow as a child learning to speak and read it takes discipline consistency a child does not learn to speak and to read without effort and those that do and do well they learn to navigate life better than those that don't the

[36 : 55] Bible and prayer are God's gift God's gift from a loving heavenly father for this journey so don't neglect them personal time communing with God in his word and prayer are essential for the life of discipline of discipleship in fact I would say it's essential for life full stop can I say listening to a sermon once a week online at church is like eating food once a week and thinking that that will sustain you a research project on personal Bible reading revealed that it made virtually no difference in your growth as a disciple of following Jesus unless you were doing more than four a week four week times of commuting with

God and that's why in our strategic plan you'll notice that strategic priority number one not that they're all necessarily ordered but I want to make the point this one they're not ordered in terms of you know which is the most important priority but strategic priority number one is for 70% of this church practicing a daily devotional life of more than four a week now my goal this year is to read the New Testament and Psalms twice and the rest of the Old Testament once and my intention not just this year but my intention is to do that throughout all of follow 25 and the reason I'm saying that is because I heard from someone his name was mentioned earlier Tim Keller that it takes at least five years of that sort of discipline before you start to grapple with and grasp the enormity and the scope of scripture five years of discipline so why don't you join me on that one the reason I'm doing it is because I want to navigate life well I want my life to be aligned with the things the way things actually are and when they are it's for my joy I want to know the God who simply is other

members of my family are aiming to read the whole Bible in the entire year they're doing a read journal what's your plan to take up God's gracious gift of Bible and prayer this year out on the table out there I just want to mention a couple of resources out on the table out there you'll see this little booklet getting into the Bible it's just a really really simple book to grasp how to interpret the Bible how to understand the Bible and how to get into the Bible they're free and I've got lots more so you know take them you're sitting here going not really sure what you said about that Steve I'm a bit of a skeptic well there's a great book for you Doublers Guide to the Bible this is my copy so if you want to it can be a boomerang but I won't be offended if you take it and digest it entirely it'd be totally that's totally fine

I'm going to stick it out there you want to sneak it in your bag and walk out with it or if you're someone online and you want to get a copy of this then please send us an email so please take that up if you're somebody who's not convinced for what I said also James has put together as at least a starting point for us a set of devotions for this whole follow series whatever it is that you want to do can I just encourage you speak to the staff to your community group leader they would be delighted to speak to you about this and how to get going on this journey in God's word and prayer this year let's pray gracious God wow it was over 480 years ago now that William Tyndall was strangled he was tied to a stake and he was burnt to death all because the consuming passion of his life was you and to have you accessible in the common language of all people so that we might this morning here in 2021 have the Bible in our language sitting on our laps

Lord we owe him a debt but gracious God I pray that our commitment to you through your word and prayer will not primarily be because we owe Tyndall a debt of gratitude but because it's you a God who is who defines all things and is worthy of all praise and glory you God have spoken to us and you have made it known and possible for us to speak to you to relate to you to know you to be in fellowship with you gracious God from this day we ask that you would by your spirit enable us to not despise that gift Amen