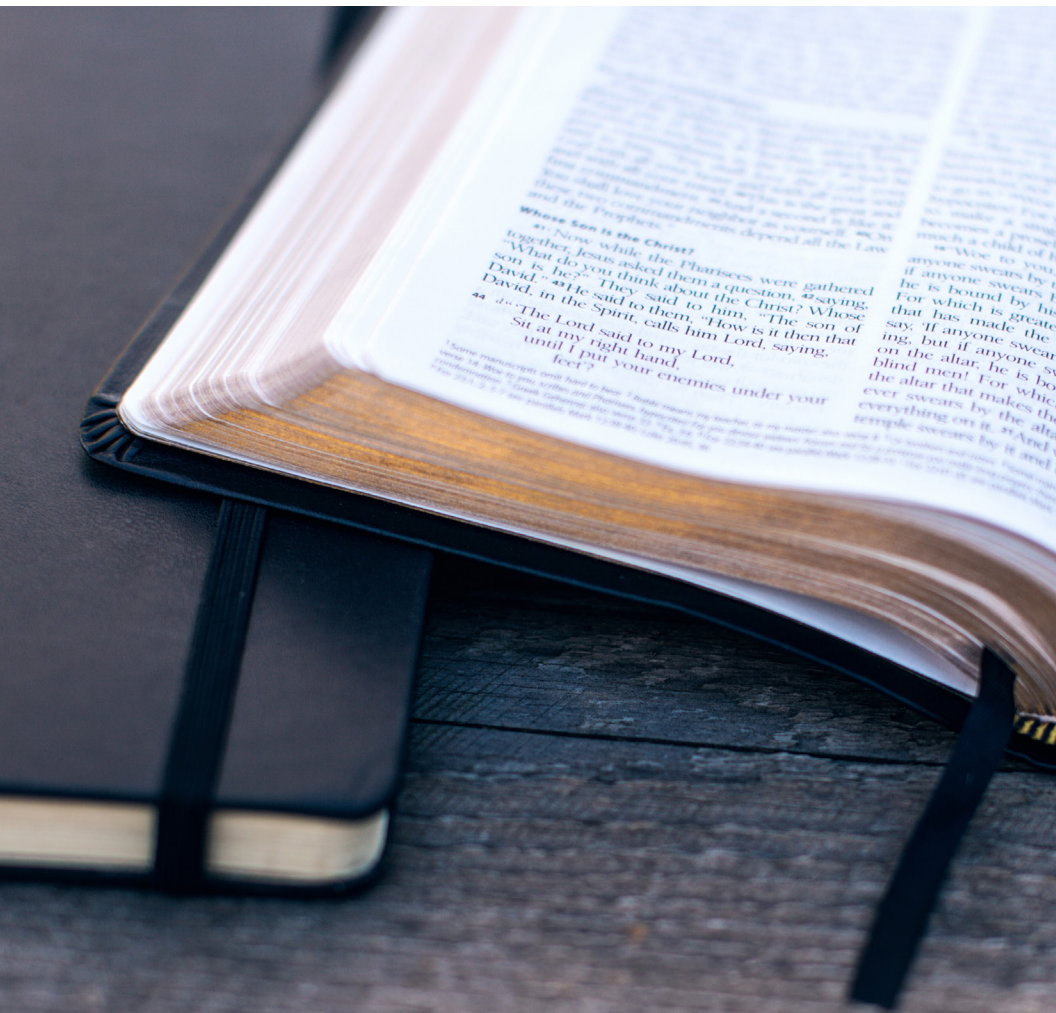




Brethren in Christ U.S.



WEEK OF PRAYER AND FASTING

JANUARY 3-10, 2021

WEEK OF PRAYER
AND FASTING **2021**

Introduction: When Things Don't Go as Planned

2020 was a year that did not work out as planned. Like most years, it began with high hopes and exciting resolutions. But those were soon dashed on the rocks of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Around the world, people were forced to deal with the reality that things do not always work out as we hoped, dreamed, or planned.

The beautiful witness of Scripture is that this is not a new reality. The Bible is filled with stories of people who experienced the unexpected. In these stories, we learn that faithfully following God does not guarantee immunity from surprises, disruptions, and hardships. I am fairly certain that none of the “sufferings” that Paul recounts in 2 Corinthians 11 were part of his plans.

The readings for this year's Week of Prayer and Fasting focus on the fact that life does not always (or ever?) go according to plan. I encourage you to reflect on each reading and then reflect on your own story. What has been your experience in this season? How have you experienced God working alongside you on this journey?

Let us remind ourselves that even when life takes unplanned detours, we can continue to trust in God who is with us every step of the way.

Blessings as you start this new year,

Alan Robinson

BIC U.S. National Director

Day 1 - Our Ever-Present Help

By Ron Bowell

Scripture meditation: Psalm 13:1-2a, 46:1, 147:3

It's been ten years since my little grandson Zane died, struck down in January of 2010 by a stealth killer called sudden infant death syndrome. At a mere two months of age, he slipped away silently in his sleep and just wouldn't wake up. It broke our hearts and immediately took the "happy" out of the new year.

Some of you may be limping into 2021 with aching hearts. You carry the heavy weight of grief on your shoulders. We can try to bottle up that grief and bury it in a dark and isolated place, but it always seems to find a way out.

It's always lurking, waiting for an opportunity to pounce out of the shadows and overwhelm us. It's always as near as a song, or a scent, or a sight. Our inability to control it makes us feel powerless, anxious, and angry. We can end up as emotional and spiritual hermits, isolating ourselves from those we really need the most.

Grief and stress can come through a death like Zane's. Or it can come through a disaster, a business loss, a relationship breakup, an election that doesn't go "our way," a pandemic like COVID-19, or numerous other calamities that shake the walls of our spiritual house like a Kansas tornado.

It's difficult to survive times like these without Christ, his church, and the assurances of Scripture. While neither God's word, nor God's people can answer all of our questions, the Holy Spirit can comfort us in unimaginable ways. When chaos threatens our peace, times of prayer and fasting can enable us to hear our Father's comforting voice. **He is our ever-present help in times of trouble!**

PRAYER

Father, may your Spirit quiet my anxieties and soothe my sorrows. Help me sense your presence as you comfort me in my troubles. Renew my joy and gladness as I lift a thankful song to you, my refuge and my strength.

Ron Bowell has been a longtime member of the BIC and planted CrossRoads Church in Salina, Kansas in 1998. He served as lead pastor there for 22 years and is now bishop of the Midwest Conference. He and his wife, Kerry, have five children and 15 grandchildren.

Day 2 – Lord Willing

By *Aner Morejon*

Scripture meditation: James 4:15, Jeremiah 29:11

I remember in 1986 I was supposed to move from Cuba to Venezuela to pastor a congregation. However, the visas never arrived. At the time I did not understand why things did not go as expected, but God in his sovereignty had other plans.

Four years later in 1990, visas for my family to come to the U.S. miraculously came through. We packed up our lives and moved to South Florida where I met the local BIC family and helped start the Maranatha congregation. Now known as Iglesia Rescate, I was blessed to serve there for 23 years as the congregation flourished. Planning to retire from there one day, my plans changed when I was appointed bishop of the Southeast Conference.

I again experienced a change in plans shortly after that I never could have imagined – undergoing three brain tumor operations. “Surely,” I thought, “this will be the end of my ministry.” But, once again, God intervened, and I returned to work with renewed strength.

Like many of you, I have experienced many situations where things don’t go according to plan, but I recognize that there is someone who always knows what is best for me. In Jeremiah 29:11 we are reminded “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

We should always remember to say, “Lord willing.” Our lives and futures are in his hands.

PRAYER

Father today I once again put my life in your hands. Even when I don’t understand, I will trust you for you know what is best for me. Help me to rest in you.

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Aner Morejon sensed a call to ministry early in his life and served with the BIC in Miami for over twenty years before transitioning to bishop of the Southeast Conference. He and his wife, Vivian, have two grown children and four grandchildren.

Day 3 – A Turning Point

By Bryan Hoke

Scripture meditation: Luke 15:11-32

How many times have we believed that we know best, but things don't work out like we expected? Like when I was sixteen and loaded up the family minivan with friends but ended the fun with a fender bender. Or the time I invested my savings account in one "sure thing" stock tip that resulted in a zero balance.

We all experience times when we ignore the wisdom of others, go our own way, and the outcome is not what we expected. Jesus tells the story of a lost son who was sure he knew best. When he reached a breaking point, he knew what he needed to do: return to the Father.

But that's not the unexpected part of this story. As the son got closer to home, Jesus describes the Father in this way: "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son ..." (Luke 15:20). The Father doesn't wait for him to reach the front porch or acknowledge that he messed up. He runs out to meet him.

I am grateful that story doesn't end with the Father closing the door. We don't need to explain or offer reasons; the same Father is running toward us, arms outstretched as we turn to him.

Where are you experiencing bent fenders, lost savings, or the need to come to your senses? The best unexpected ending is that while we may have gone our own way, the Father is running towards us. Simply turn to him.

PRAYER

Father, thank you that you come running to meet us. Help me to continually turn from my own direction and my own plans to face you.

Bryan Hoke has more than 15 years of pastoral experience spanning across three BIC conferences and now serves as bishop of the Atlantic Conference. Bryan and his wife, Kerry, have three daughters, one son-in-law, and one grandchild.

Day 4 – Worship on the Worst Days

By Anne-Margret Neilsen

Scripture meditation: Psalm 34, Job 35:10

“I am sorry, you are losing the baby,” the ER doctor told us in that small, dimly lit room. It was the day after Christmas, my favorite time of the year. What should have been a day of eating leftovers and spending time with family turned out to be the worst day of my life.

In that moment, I had two ways to respond: turn to myself or turn to God. My spirit knew it needed encouragement through worship. With all my pain and grief, I began to sing the familiar chorus, *Blessed Be Your Name*:

“You give and take away, you give and take away,
my heart will choose to say,
Lord blessed be your name.”

Worship has been used by people of faith in hard times for centuries. The book of Psalms is David’s heartfelt prayers of joy and grief. When he encountered one of the worst days of his life, David sang praises to God (Psalm 34:3). And even earlier in Scripture, Elihu reminded Job that God gives us songs in the darkest hours (Job 35:10).

How we choose to respond through trials speaks volumes about our faith. We are witnesses even in our pain and disappointments. Psalm 34:19 (TLB) reads, “The good man does not escape all troubles – he has them too. But the Lord helps him in each and every one.”

Even on the worst day of your life, God is worthy of your praise.

PRAYER

Father, I submit my pain and grief to you. I trust in you alone and ask you to use my trials to bring me closer to you. Please let my responses always bring you praise and encourage those around me.

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Anne-Margret Neilsen is the preschool children’s ministry coordinator at Upland BIC Church in Upland, California. She is married to Ricky, and mother to two adorable children.

Day 5 - Sudden Changes

By Rob Patterson

Scripture meditation: Numbers 14, Job 1-2, Acts 9

I have a habit of singing. It's usually random, but occasionally I sing a song that relates to something in the moment. One evening I burst out with the line "If I could turn back time."

The following morning, my wife, Daryl, mentioned it. I sensed it was on her mind, so I asked, "What is the one thing you would do if you could turn back time?"

She said, "I would tell Lisa to stay home."

Lisa was Daryl's baby sister. In April 1991, while standing at the end of her driveway talking to a friend, Lisa was struck and killed by a drunken driver. In just a moment, our lives were forever changed.

Consider these Bible characters whose lives were also suddenly and irrevocably altered:

Joshua and Caleb were godly men of strong character and faith. When they visited the Promised Land, they were confident that they would possess it. But due to the Israelites' lack of faith, they instead had to wander in the desert for 40 years.

At Satan's request, God permitted Job's faith to be tested. What had previously been a comfortable life turned sour when his children and possessions were wiped out in just one day.

After Saul's blinding encounter with Jesus, the same Jesus whom he had been attacking, his life turned upside down. He was given a new name and a new calling.

It might be our own doing, others' choices, or possibly God's sovereign will; but life can change suddenly. Be prepared. Stand in the faith even when all seems wrong. Walk in the light.

PRAYER

Father, thank you for your presence, your provision, and your protection. Forgive our sins. Fill us with your Spirit. Deliver us from evil. May we forever be unified with Jesus, and with one another.

Rob Patterson is the former pastor of Canoe Creek BIC in Hollidaysburg, Pa. and has served as the bishop of the Allegheny Conference since 2002. He and his wife, Daryl, have three children and three grandchildren.

Day 6 – Honest Grief in the Midst of Joy

By Heather Beaty

Scripture meditation: 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

Our family loves new adventures! New friends. New foods. New challenges. Most of the time.

Occasionally, however, I am reminded that these new adventures stretch us in ways that are uncomfortable. Sometimes, they demand more of us than we feel we can give.

Over the years, God has called our family to relocate multiple times to serve in different locations across the United States. After our third cross-country resettlement, our daughter, who was five at the time, looked up and asked, “Why doesn’t Jesus tell *someone else* to move?”

I must confess, my first instinct was to talk about the wonderful rewards that come with following Jesus. To explain to her that while we may have our own plans, God’s are bigger and better than our own. Or to remind her that, “We can do all thing through Christ who strengthens us.”

But looking at her little face I realized she was simply processing grief and loss with childlike honesty. Her little life was being turned upside down in an unexpected fashion. While all of my responses were true, what she needed right then was presence, comfort, and understanding.

We all experience transitions that are painful. Saying goodbye to a loved one. Losing a job that we enjoyed. Relocating and starting over. Even in new opportunities, we must process surrendered expectations and unfulfilled dreams.

In the midst of these experiences, our family has found encouragement from Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7. It is okay to recognize loss and to grieve unexpected change. We also know those same experiences prepare us to encourage others with the presence, comfort, and hope of Christ in their time of need.

PRAYER

Father, thank you that you are present in the midst of every challenge and transition. Help me to trust you in these times and to look for opportunities to comfort others who are experiencing unexpected pain and loss today.

Heather Beaty has served in various BIC congregations around the U.S. and now serves as the regional administrator for the Susquehanna Conference. She and her husband, Bob, have two teenage children.

Day 7 - Steady and Strong

By Lynn Thrush

Scripture meditation: Genesis 49:24-25

Like a whipsaw - Joseph experienced sudden changes in life's direction.

He had to be hopeful, with a special coat from his father indicating favored status and those amazing dreams in which his parents and brothers bowed to him. Where did this hope and favor go when he was tossed into a cistern and sold to Egypt?

But then it must have been rewarding to be in charge of Potiphar's whole estate, both the house and the fields. Then in an instant, he was falsely accused by the boss's wife, and thrown into prison.

Joseph was then placed in charge of prison operations and all his fellow prisoners. He encourages the Pharaoh's cupbearer by interpreting a dream, but when the cupbearer is released, he forgot about Joseph for two years.

Then, in a very short time, Joseph was made second-in-command over all of Egypt. Pharaoh gave Joseph his signet ring, a robe of fine linen, a gold chain around his neck, and a chariot. The people shouted "bow down" before Joseph.

As Joseph's father was on his deathbed, he said to Joseph, "You shall be steady and strong," and the reason? "Because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, because of your father's God who helps you, because of the Almighty, who blesses you ..." (Gen. 49:24-25).

For you, when like a whipsaw life suddenly changes direction, may you know the God who helps you be steady and strong.

PRAYER

Father, I am unable to predict life's transitions and surprises, its gifts and tears.

Because you are my rock and my shepherd, because your hand reaches out to me and helps me, because you bless me, I shall also be steady and strong.

Lynn Thrush has 38 years of pastoral experience in the BIC in two different conferences and has served as bishop of the Great Lakes Conference since 2016. He and his wife, Carol, have four grown children and four grandchildren.

Day 8 - Treasured Perspective

By Erica & Jonathan Lloyd

Scripture meditation: Matthew 13:44

Our first Christmas in Malawi brought high temperatures, unrelenting humidity, and extra homesickness. It just didn't feel like Christmas. We were prepared for change, but we didn't know it would feel like this. But honest grieving of what we missed, coupled with thankfulness for the new things we experienced, brought surprising blessings to our Christmas celebration – a buried treasure if you will.

The lucky man who found the treasure in the field was not crazy to sell everything to buy the field. In this teaching, Jesus is not praising the commitment of the treasure hunter, rather he is testifying to the immeasurable value of the treasure. Jesus is saying it is worth trading everything you have or love to belong to God's kingdom.

We love a lot of people and even a lot of things; sometimes we forget how much more valuable Jesus and his kingdom actually are. That's why our first Christmas in Malawi was such a gift. Without our normal Christmas traditions, the treasure of Jesus - and the difference his birth makes in our desperately hurting world - became clearly visible.

When things don't go as planned, we are offered the gift of perspective. If we know that Jesus is our most precious treasure, we can rejoice when challenges reveal other things we have come to worship and depend on. We are blessed and God is glorified when Jesus has the uncontested first place.

PRAYER

Father, thank you for the treasure of belonging to you through Jesus. We want to love you fully and worship you only - because you are worth it. Thank you for the challenges that help us to do that.

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Erica & Jonathan Lloyd have been married since 2002 and served in Malawi from 2005-2010. They live on a farm in Pennsylvania and have four children. Jonathan is currently the director of BIC U.S. World Missions.



BRETHREN IN CHRIST U.S.

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