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DAY ONE

“I AM...”

Today's Scripture Reading

At one time you were like a dead person because of the things you did wrong and your offenses against God. You used to live like people of this world. You followed the rule of a destructive spiritual power. This is the spirit of disobedience to God's will that is now at work in persons whose lives are characterized by disobedience. At one time you were like those persons. All of you used to do whatever felt good and whatever you thought you wanted so that you were children headed for punishment just like everyone else.

However, God is rich in mercy. He brought us to life with Christ while we were dead as a result of those things that we did wrong. He did this because of the great love that he has for us. You are saved by God's grace! And God raised us up and seated us in the heavens with Christ Jesus. God did this to show future generations the greatness of his grace by the goodness that God has shown us in Christ Jesus.

You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. It's not something you did that you can be proud of. Instead, we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.

Ephesians 2:1-10

Reflection

The first two words of Wesley's prayer are inextricably linked and undeniably essential to understanding the prayer in its entirety. Without a profound examination into the words *I am*, we may potentially dismiss the prayer as distant and vague or perhaps even determine that the prayer

THE WESLEY PRAYER CHALLENGE

is meant for others, not us. When in actuality, the words *I am* can only be seen as deeply personal.

Wesley's prayer demands that we associate the prayer with us, personally. This does not mean the prayer is void of a shared or communal aspect; it certainly is. Rooted deeply within the communal commitment to enact the prayer, however, is a personal and intimate expression of self, "I am."

To some, the words *I am* may seem regular or ordinary. However, the words are extraordinary, for they convey that we, all human beings, are created in the image and likeness of God. Without God's intentional act of love—creating us each uniquely, yet connected to others through spiritual and emotional understanding, physical resemblance, and social relationships—we are merely matter void of purpose and meaning. However, each of us is, in fact, deliberately created with purpose and meaning.

One way to think about purpose and meaning is to think about purpose as our reason for being, objectively. Meaning, then, is the values and beliefs we associate with or assign to our reason for being, subjectively. In other words, purpose tells us who we have been created to be, and meaning tells us the significance and worth we find in the repetition of living out our purpose. When we live according to purpose and meaning, we find peace.

***When we live according to purpose
and meaning, we find peace.***

For me, personally, purpose can be summed up in three primary reasons for my being. One reason for my being is simply to worship God. When I express my awe and love of God through prayer, fasting, song, attending church, studying Scripture, giving, serving others, or sharing my faith, I worship God. A second reason for my being is to represent God to all those I come into contact with, reminding them that God is a loving

God who has not forgotten them. This means that I am determined to fill my heart so full of love that there isn't room for anything else within it. When people come around me, my hope is that they sense a love for God and others. This love then compels them to explore God in meaningful ways. Finally, a third reason for my being is simply to help people become deeply committed disciples. This is why I serve as a discipleship director at my church and teach, mentor, organize small groups, and plan retreats, so that people can become more devoted to their faith through events, experiences, and environments that lead them down the pathway toward being deeply committed. If someone were to ask me, "What is your purpose?" I would respond simply by saying, "My reason for being is to worship God, love God and others daily, and to help people become deeply committed disciples of Jesus Christ."

I find meaning in my purpose when I have opportunity to feel and see that my purpose-driven efforts are working. When I feel inspired through worshipping God, I know I am living into my purpose. When I can help the people around me feel God's love, I know I am living into my purpose. When I watch people grow in their faith and develop an insatiable desire to learn more and practice more of the Christian faith, I find meaning and feel worth and significance. Simply said, when I live into my purpose or exercise the reason for my being, I find value, worth, and usefulness in my reason for being and it compels me to be more Christlike.

Therefore, to be created in the image and likeness of God, with purpose and meaning, is to be created for the reason of reflecting God's glory or to represent God. We represent God best when we understand that in "I am," we are spiritual, relational, and moral beings designed to present to the world around us the main subject of God, which is love.

We are spiritual beings in that we are people who reason, possess a will, and act with complete freedom: a freedom that allows us to love God (or not) by choosing to submit to God's ways. We are relational beings in that we have been created to be in community and to live in God's good creation with a longing for the well-being of all of God's creation, other human beings and the beautiful world around us. Finally, we are

Today's Challenge:
REPRESENT

Today, at least three times, within your sphere(s) of influence, choose the best method and course of action to represent God to others. The best way to do this might be to take action once in the morning, once in the afternoon, and once in the evening.

moral beings. This means that we are capable of knowing, loving, and serving God—to be filled so full of love, there isn't room for anything else in our being.

In the Wesleyan theological tradition, we call a heart so full of love that there isn't room for anything else “Christian perfection.” This perfection is not a static state in which we live free from sin or any other flaw or defect, of course. Christian perfection is, however, the dynamic process of experiencing God's grace in which we are moving on to maturity. I like to describe this dynamic process as increasing the frequency and duration of the holy moments in our life. In other words, how often and for how long can I consistently express a love for God and others.

It is important that we do not move too swiftly or read too quickly past the first two words *I am*. In those two words, we find a rich and robust understanding of who we are and the worth that we find and possess in our being. Ultimately, Wesley wants us to know that God is love and, in that love, we are God's representatives of God's love. We ought to symbolize God's grace, mercy, and justice to all whom we come into contact with, wherever we live, work, study, or play. This means that wherever God has directed our paths, there we are intended to be an icon of God's great love for all of God's creation.

I encourage you to remember the Great “I Am,” God, who in God's self-existent, eternal, and self-sufficient being is the source and sustainer of all of life and, therefore, is worthy of all worship and honor. We are alive because the Creator and Sustainer of life, the true source of existence, created us for a loving relationship with God and others.

Personal Reflection

- What is my purpose for life?
- Where do I find meaning for life?

Group Discussion

- In what ways do you best represent God to others?
- Based on today's commentary, how would you describe what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God?
- Describe the specifics of your spheres of influences.
(Think: places in your life where you have an opportunity to make an impact.)
- What would you say is the main idea of this part of the prayer?

Departing Prayer

God, help us to remember who we are and whose we are—and to represent you as an emblem of love wherever we live, work, study, or play. Amen.

DAY TWO

“...NO LONGER MY OWN,”

Today's Scripture Reading

The snake was the most intelligent of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say that you shouldn't eat from any tree in the garden?”

The woman said to the snake, “We may eat the fruit of the garden's trees but not the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. God said, ‘Don't eat from it, and don't touch it, or you will die.’”

The snake said to the woman, “You won't die! God knows that on the day you eat from it, you will see clearly and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” The woman saw that the tree was beautiful with delicious food and that the tree would provide wisdom, so she took some of its fruit and ate it, and also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then they both saw clearly and knew that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made garments for themselves.

During that day's cool evening breeze, they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden; and the man and his wife hid themselves from the LORD God in the middle of the garden's trees. The LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?”

The man replied, “I heard your sound in the garden; I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself.”

He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree, which I commanded you not to eat?”

The man said, “The woman you gave me, she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate.”

The LORD God said to the woman, “What have you done?!”

And the woman said, “The snake tricked me, and I ate.”

The LORD God said to the snake,

“Because you did this,
you are the one cursed
out of all the farm animals,
out of all the wild animals.
On your belly you will crawl,
and dust you will eat
every day of your life.”

I will put contempt

between you and the woman,
between your offspring and hers.
They will strike your head,
but you will strike at their heels.”

To the woman he said,

“I will make your pregnancy very painful;
in pain you will bear children.
You will desire your husband,
but he will rule over you.”

To the man he said, “Because you listened to your wife’s voice and you ate from the tree that I commanded, ‘Don’t eat from it,’

cursed is the fertile land because of you;
in pain you will eat from it
every day of your life.
Weeds and thistles will grow for you,
even as you eat the field’s plants;
by the sweat of your face you will eat bread—
until you return to the fertile land,
since from it you were taken;
you are soil,
to the soil you will return.”

THE WESLEY PRAYER CHALLENGE

The man named his wife Eve because she is the mother of everyone who lives. The LORD God made the man and his wife leather clothes and dressed them. The LORD God said, “The human being has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil.” Now, so he doesn’t stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever, the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to farm the fertile land from which he was taken. He drove out the human. To the east of the garden of Eden, he stationed winged creatures wielding flaming swords to guard the way to the tree of life.

Genesis 3

Reflection

When we pray the Wesley Covenant Prayer, we must recognize, as we discussed in the previous day’s reflection, that we are created in the image and likeness of God. We are spiritual, moral, and relational beings, designed with purpose and designed to experience a life full of meaning. We are to reflect God’s good way, which is to love all those we come into contact with or come into contact with us—wherever we might live, work, study, or play.

The second part of the prayer, moving beyond our self-revelation in the words *I am*, is the description, “no longer my own.” In fact, as we all know, we were never really our own. We belong to God for God’s purposes. This is the truth embedded in “I am.” This admission, that we are God’s and not our own, is often in direct conflict with the inner desire we harbor in our nature—to act independent of God’s will. We face this conflict daily, sometimes multiple times a day.

For me, one thing immediately comes to mind: money. You may have heard this another time or two in your life, but John Wesley is credited with saying, “Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can.” Sometimes in my life, although I am better about this than I ever have been before, by the grace of God, I forget that Wesley’s statement has two other key aspects beyond earning all I can. If I didn’t practice automatic giving through electronic funds transfer, I could easily get offtrack and find it difficult to save and to give. Although, for me, giving is easier than saving because I find deep meaning in charitable actions.

***“Earn all you can. Save all
you can. Give all you can.”
– John Wesley***

Truthfully, like all of those around us, we struggle daily to turn our trust away from self and toward God. The freedom we have, having been created as beings with the ability to choose, is God’s way of sharing God’s love with us. God loves us so much that in that love, God gave us the ability to love God back, or not. This is the fundamental struggle within all of humanity—to love God and let God be the god of our life, or not.

The story of Adam and Eve in Genesis chapter 3 gives us a picture of what all humans are like. (Genesis chapters 1 and 2 give us a picture of what the world was like before the fall of humanity, let’s not forget.) Distracted by and drawn toward what is “pleasing to the eye” (Genesis 3:6 NIV), Adam and Eve chose to exercise their freedom of will and, in doing so, usurped God’s authority through the eating of the fruit. This self-centered action of eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, from which they knew they were not to eat, was a deliberate action to do their own thing. Eating the fruit was a measured way of putting their trust in their own selves, their own understanding and reason, rather than in God’s order.

The decision to disregard God’s order, as you know, had tremendous implications for Adam and Eve. No longer were they allowed to live freely in paradise, in the garden of Eden; they were expelled from it. God, in God’s amazing grace, continues to provide, protect, and love as only God can, but their life of peace and intimacy with God was now twisted with shame and blame. This shame and blame led to other self-interested wickedness and, over a period of time, God’s heart was broken and God becomes sorry that God ever created human beings and put them on the earth. We know from Genesis 6:5-6, which says, “The LORD saw that humanity had become thoroughly evil on the earth and that every idea their minds thought up

Today's Challenge:
BE BOLD

Make a list of at least three struggles of self-interest that keep you from trusting in God more fully. Share the three struggles with family, friends, or others in your small group. Ask them to hold you accountable to purge them from your behavior or lifestyle.

was always completely evil. The LORD regretted making human beings on the earth, and he was heartbroken.”

Christians who choose to surrender their own will and return to God's will live out the prayer that they are “no longer our own.” Christians who faithfully do this are making a conscious effort and taking immediate action to let God's will and mission for this world be the prevailing purpose for their life. It is in that purpose where meaning is discovered and consistently experienced. The end of the story is not a broken world in which God is grieved that God created humans and put them on the earth. The end of the story (as we see in Revelation chapters 21 and 22) is paradise restored. The end of the story is actually the beginning of a new story, a new earth, that is marked by peace and wholeness as opposed to disharmony and brokenness. Our Christian hope projects the belief that, one day, the world will know no brokenness, only wholeness.

Revelation gives us a glimpse of a paradise restored:

Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, shining like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb through the middle of the city's main street. On each side of the river is the tree of life, which produces twelve crops of fruit, bearing its fruit each month. The tree's leaves are for the healing of the nations. There will no longer be any curse. The throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. Night will be no more. They won't need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will shine on them, and they will rule forever and always.

Revelation 22:1-5

The admission that “I am no longer my own” in Wesley's prayer gives us a new or renewed vision for our life, a vision of a paradise restored in

which God dwells with God's people and one in which there is no more darkness, only the light of God. When we pray, "I am no longer my own," we resist the urge to have our individual desires and interests prevail. In their places, we surrender ourselves to God's good work of restoring the world toward its intended wholeness and work attentively to represent God with our entire lives.

Personal Reflection

- If I am honest with myself, how do I answer the question, "Do I live as 'my own'?"
- With what three areas in my life do I have a hard time trusting God?

Group Discussion

- Do you agree with the author that a fundamental struggle for humanity is to love God by letting God be God and not trying to be or have our own gods? Why or why not?
- What distractions or items that are "pleasing to the eye" do you wrestle with?
- In what ways do you intentionally temper your individual desires or areas of self-interest?
- What would you say is the main idea of this part of the prayer?

Departing Prayer

Teach us to trust you, God. Help us to use our freedom of will to allow you to truly be the only God in our lives. Help us to resist what is "pleasing to the eye" so that your will might be done. Amen.

Renew Your Passion for Prayer in Just 21 Days.

The Wesley Covenant Prayer has been used in Methodist services around the world on the first Sunday of the year since John Wesley introduced it in 1755. Wesley expected that people would pray this prayer as a way of remembering, renewing, and surrendering themselves in complete trust to God. When we pray it, we are to remember what living like Jesus looks like and what loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind and loving our neighbor as ourselves require of us.

In *The Wesley Prayer Challenge*, author Chris Folmsbee invites readers to consider words from the Wesley Covenant Prayer each day for three weeks while reflecting on their meaning in the context of the larger piece.

Each day's reading will include Scripture, prayer, and a challenge for daily life.

**ALSO AVAILABLE:
LEADER GUIDE FOR A THREE-SESSION GROUP STUDY AND DVD**



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