PRAYER

RESOURCE PACK

Most Christians would agree that prayer is important. Paradoxically, many of those same Christians would say that they feel uncomfortable, vague and unsure in prayer.

If you spend a daily hour in prayer, have seen God regularly answer your prayers in irrefutable ways and feel that your time with God is consistently fresh and lively, this booklet may help you a little. If you are like the rest of us who find prayer occasionally awkward, have many questions and are still finding your feet, this booklet may help you a lot.

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Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be your name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, As we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one.

Matthew 6:9-14

THE LORD'S PRAYER EXPLAINED

From Right Side Up (Paul Grimmond)

Our Father in heaven

The first words of the prayer are a really important reminder of who we're praying to—our heavenly Father who has given up his Son to make us his children, the heavenly Father who is greater than any earthly father. If you've been hurt or abused by your father, then the word father may be a really painful one. Please know that God isn't like any human father. He loves us more deeply than we can ever know. Human fatherhood is supposed to mirror what God is like as a father. If your father wasn't like that, then he hasn't been what he was supposed to be. When Christians pray, we pray to our precious, perfect Father who dwells in heaven as the Lord of all, and yet who loves us more than we can ever understand.

Hallowed be your name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven

The next part of the prayer reminds us to pray in the light of who God is. As we know God better and understand what he wants for our world, we ask him to do his will in our world. The word 'hallowed', which is a really weird word, just means to 'make holy'. So the first line of the prayer asks God to work so that his name is seen as holy and precious in his world. This request goes hand in hand with the next couple of lines where we ask for God's will to be done on earth. God is treated as God and his name is made holy when people do what he wants them to do. What we're effectively praying is that God will make us more like Jesus and work in others to make them like Jesus too. That's the most important prayer that we can ever pray, for ourselves or anyone else.

Give us today our daily bread

In God's kindness, even as we pray for his will to be done, he also encourages us to pray for our needs — "give us today our daily bread". As the powerful, ruling king, God is in control of everything in his world. He gives every good gift and he is always able to answer our prayers. So we can pray to him about anything and everything. We can pray for food and for shelter, for help in relationships and for strength to do things we don't want to do. But not only can we pray for these things, we should be praying for them. In a world of supermarkets and farming conglomerates, it's easy to think that milk comes from the bottle or from the factory. Ultimately, though, everything we eat comes from the generous hand of God. We pray for these things remembering that everything we have comes from God.

But the concrete nature of this prayer is also another reminder of God's tenderness and care. One of my favourite verses in the Bible says, "... do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Phil 4:6). There is nothing in our lives so big that God cannot deal with it, or so small that God does not care. He encourages us to come to him, because he's the only one who can meet our needs.

And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us

Jesus then reminds us to pray regularly for our greatest need—the forgiveness of our sins. I personally find this part of the Lord's prayer very helpful, because it reminds me that I will always need forgiveness. Becoming a Christian means seeking to live God's way, but it doesn't mean instant perfection. It means ongoing forgiveness for our lack of perfection. It's so important to understand this, because after a while you can begin to wonder what's wrong with you—why do you keep sinning? At this point, the Lord's Prayer presents one of God's great truths—even when you've been a Christian for thirty years, and even when you've sinned for the ten thousandth time, the only way to keep going in relationship with God is to come to him and ask for forgiveness. And each time we come, God forgives us in exactly the same way he forgave us at the very beginning. He listens to the intercession of his Son, who says to him, "I died and rose again for that one. I've borne the punishment for his sin. He trusts me and belongs to me. You can forgive him."

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil

The next line of the prayer asks God to help us live for him. We don't want to be under the power of sin, and we don't want to follow where it leads, and so we ask God not to lead us into temptation but to deliver us from evil. Again, the reminder is that we can't do this by ourselves. By our own strength we will never be able to deal with evil; we need God to be at work in us to deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, Now and forever, Amen

The prayer finishes where it started, with a reminder that we ultimately seek the glory and honour of God—the mighty Lord who is establishing his kingdom. Jesus rules already, and one day the whole world will see him ruling when he returns in glory. The powerful one who holds the future of the world in his hands is our God, and we can pray to him with confidence knowing he wants to do what is best for us. How good is that!

As I said at the beginning of this little explanation of the Lord's Prayer, the exact words aren't important, but the ideas are. The Lord's Prayer presents a model for us. It reminds us to pray about the things that are most important to God (because we live in God's world), but it also encourages us to pray about everything, because God is our loving Father and he wants to hear from us.

SUNDAY CHURCH NOTES

PRAYER AND FAITH

From The Necessity of Prayer (E.M.Bounds)

"A dear friend of mine who was quite a lover of the chase, told me the following story: 'Rising early one morning,' he said, 'I heard the baying of a score of deerhounds in pursuit of their quarry. Looking away to a broad, open field in front of me, I saw a young fawn making its way across, and giving signs, moreover, that its race was wellnigh run. Reaching the rails of the enclosure, it leaped over and crouched within ten feet from where I stood. A moment later two of the hounds came over, when the fawn ran in my direction and pushed its head between my legs. I lifted the little thing to my breast, and, swinging round and round, fought off the dogs. I felt, just then, that all the dogs in the West could not, and should not capture that fawn after its weakness had appealed to my strength.' So is it, when human helplessness appeals to Almighty God. Well do I remember when the hounds of sin were after my soul, until, at last, I ran into the arms of Almighty God." - A. C. DIXON.

In any study of the principles, and procedure of prayer, of its activities and enterprises, first place, must, of necessity, be given to faith. It is the initial quality in the heart of any man who essays to talk to the Unseen. He must, out of sheer helplessness, stretch forth hands of faith. He must believe, where he cannot prove. In the ultimate issue, prayer is simply faith, claiming its natural yet marvellous prerogatives - faith taking possession of its illimitable inheritance. True godliness is just as true, steady, and persevering in the realm of faith as it is in the province of prayer. Moreover: when faith ceases to pray, it ceases to live...

Faith does not grow disheartened because prayer is not immediately honoured; it takes God at His Word, and lets Him take what time He chooses in fulfilling His purposes, and in carrying on His work. There is bound to be much delay and long days of waiting for true faith, but faith accepts the conditions, knows there will be delays in answering prayer, and regards such delays as times of testing, in the which, it is privileged to show its mettle, and the stern stuff of which it is made. The case of Lazarus was an instance of where there was delay, where the faith of two good women was sorely tried: Lazarus was critically ill, and his sisters sent for Jesus. But, without any known reason, our Lord delayed His going to the relief of His sick friend. The plea was urgent and touching - "Lord, behold, he whom Thou lovest is sick," - but the Master is not moved by it, and the women's earnest request seemed to fall on deaf ears. What a trial to faith! Furthermore: our Lord's tardiness appeared to bring about hopeless disaster. While Jesus tarried, Lazarus died. But the delay of Jesus was exercised in the interests of a greater good. Finally, He makes His way to the home in Bethany.

'FAITH DOES NOT GROW DISHEARTENED BECAUSE PRAYER IS NOT IMMEDIATELY ANSWERED'

"Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes, that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him." Fear not, O tempted and tried believer, Jesus will come, if patience be exercised, and faith hold fast. His delay will serve to make His coming the more richly blessed. Pray on. Wait on. Thou canst not fail. If Christ delay, wait for Him. In His own good time, He will come, and will not tarry.

Delay is often the test and the strength of faith. How much patience is required when these times of testing come! Yet faith gathers strength by waiting and praying. Patience has its perfect work in the school of delay. In some instances, delay is of the very essence of the prayer. God has to do many things, antecedent to giving the final answer - things which are essential to the lasting good of him who is requesting favour at His hands.

Jacob prayed, with point and ardour, to be delivered from Esau. But before that prayer could be answered, there was much to be done with, and for Jacob. He must be changed, as well as Esau. Jacob had to be made into a new man, before Esau could be. Jacob had to be converted to God, before Esau could be converted to Jacob.

Among the large and luminous utterances of Jesus concerning prayer, none is more arresting than this:

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto My Father. And whatsoever ye shall ask in My Name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask anything in My Name, I will do it." How wonderful are these statements of what God will do in answer to prayer! Of how great importance these ringing words, prefaced, as they are, with the most solemn verity! Faith in Christ is the basis of all working, and of all praying. All wonderful works depend on wonderful praying, and all praying is done in the Name of Jesus Christ. Amazing lesson, of wondrous simplicity, is this praying in the name of the Lord Jesus! All other conditions are depreciated, everything else is renounced, save Jesus only. The name of Christ - the Person of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ - must be supremely sovereign, in the hour and article of prayer.

If Jesus dwell at the fountain of my life; if the currents of His life have displaced and superseded all self-currents; if implicit obedience to Him be the inspiration and force of every movement of my life, then He can safely commit the praying to my will, and pledge Himself, by an obligation as profound as His own nature, that whatsoever is asked shall be granted. Nothing can be clearer, more distinct, more unlimited both in application and extent, than the exhortation and urgency of Christ, "Have faith in God." Faith covers temporal as well as spiritual needs. Faith dispels all undue anxiety and needless care about what shall be eaten, what shall be drunk, what shall be worn. Faith lives in the present, and regards the day as being sufficient unto the evil thereof. It lives day by day, and dispels all fears for the morrow. Faith brings great ease of mind and perfect peace of heart.

"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusted in Thee."

When we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," we are, in a measure, shutting tomorrow out of our prayer. We do not live in tomorrow but in today. We do not seek tomorrow's grace or tomorrow's bread. They thrive best, and get most out of life, who live in the living present. They pray best who pray for today's needs, not for tomorrow's, which may render our prayers unnecessary and redundant by not existing at all!

True prayers are born of present trials and present needs. Bread, for today, is bread enough. Bread given for today is the strongest sort of pledge that there will be bread tomorrow. Victory today, is the assurance of victory tomorrow. Our prayers need to be focussed upon the present, We must trust God today, and leave the morrow entirely with Him. The present is ours; the future belongs to God. Prayer is the task and duty of each recurring day daily prayer for daily needs. As every day demands its bread, so every day demands its prayer. No amount of praying, done today, will suffice for tomorrow's praying. On the other hand, no praying for tomorrow is of any great value to us today. Today's manna is what we need; tomorrow God will see that our needs are supplied. This is the faith which God seeks to inspire. So leave tomorrow, with its cares, its needs, its troubles, in God's hands. There is no storing tomorrow's grace or tomorrow's praying; neither is there any layingup of today's grace, to meet tomorrow's necessities. We cannot have tomorrow's grace, we cannot eat tomorrow's bread, we cannot do tomorrow's praying. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof;" and, most assuredly, if we possess faith, sufficient also, will be the good.

What a friend we have in Jesus All our sins and griefs to bear What a privilege to carry Everything to God in prayer

"

The vigour of our spiritual life will be in exact proportion to the place held by the Bible in our life and thoughts.

George Mueller

SUNDAY CHURCH NOTES

COMMON QUESTIONS

From Prayer and the Voice of God (Jensen and Payne)

1. My prayer life is virtually non-existent. I don't even feel like a Christian any more. What can I do?

Nearly all Christians go through periods where they give up praying—that is, their regular habit of prayer is interrupted by illness or family crisis or busyness or just plain laziness, and they don't get around to re-establishing it. The daily prayer time goes out the window and, after a period of stuttering stops and starts, we wake up one morning and realize that it has been a week, two weeks, a month, or longer since we have stopped and prayed on our own to God. There is only one word for this process: sin. And like so much sin, it happens not with a bang but with a whimper. It steals upon us slowly, like the relaxing cloud of sleep that descends on Sunday afternoons if we sit too long in the armchair. Let's not excuse it or paint it with pastels; it's terribly wrong. Prayerlessness is sin, and the Bible warns us how easy it is to deceive ourselves about sin in two quite different ways.

On the one hand, we can pretend to ourselves that there isn't really a problem—that we're not sinning and that we don't need to worry about it. But this is selfdeception. The Christian life is a constant battle between flesh and Spirit, and the flesh will sometimes have its way, this side of glory (Gal 5:16-25). The Christian life is not an effortless, glorious, upward cruise of victory over sin; it is a hard- fought battle, with much stumbling and falling, and much repenting and begging for forgiveness.

Christians of tender conscience who are cut to the heart at their failure to pray, and who doubt their salvation as a result, need to remember this truth. Failure is our unwelcome but constant companion on the Christian walk. The very fact that we are experiencing the battle against sin (and, in this instance, getting a bloody nose) is an indication that we're in a fight. It is quite right that our prayerlessness should make us feel guilty and that we should long to put it right. But it should not lead us to doubt the faithfulness and mercy of our Master. We may be faithless at times, but he is supremely faithful and will cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

However, we can also be deceived in the opposite direction by thinking that our prayerlessness doesn't matter. "After all," we may say to ourselves, "once a Christian, always a Christian. God has paid for my sins. And besides, even if I don't pray, he will still fulfil his sovereign will." If we are sliding into this way of thinking, Scripture has a strong message for us:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor 6:9-11).

Persistent, unrepentant ungodliness will exclude us from the kingdom of God. We cannot and must not presume upon God, thinking that our sin doesn't matter. We will find out one day, to our cost, that it matters a great deal. We must repent of our prayerlessness and start again. Christianity is a startagain life.

2. I want to kick-start my prayer life but I don't know how. Do you have any suggestions?

If you're at the point of starting (or re-starting) a life of regular prayer, here are some practical ideas to help you get going:

 Repent of your prayerlessness. Confess your failings to your heavenly Father. Don't hold back. We may sometimes deceive ourselves, but he is never fooled.
Ask God to forgive you and to work in you by his Spirit to enable you to change.

2. Devise a simple, not-too-ambitious pattern of regular prayer that fits with your lifestyle. Don't resolve to have 'a two-hour prayer time' every morning before breakfast. The length of time will not impress God and it will most likely discourage you (when you fail to meet it). Start with a regular, manageable program - for example, a time of prayer every night before bed, or a regular slot at lunch time, or a walk before breakfast during which you pray.

3. Work out what you are going to do when you pray. For example, you might use the time-honoured, simple, but very effective method of reading a short passage of Scripture and, from the passage, picking out one thing to give thanks for, one thing to ask God's forgiveness for, and one other request to bring to God. You can apply these three points to yourself, your family and others you wish to pray for. You might even jot down a list of people and apply these prayer points to a different one each day. Another simple way to pray is to use the Lord's Prayer as a kind of template. (See appendix I for some useful summaries of what to pray for, including how to use the Lord's Prayer in your prayers.)

4. With a regular pattern decided upon and a simple method to use, work hard at keeping to this pattern for 4-6 weeks. During this time, don't try to do anything too fancy or different. Just focus on establishing (or reestablishing) a regular habit of prayer in your life. Habits are powerful and, if they are good habits, very useful. Of course, we should be wary of turning a prayer habit into a meaningless daily ritual - a kind of legalistic 'good work' that we have to perform in order to stay in God's good books. Habits are best thought of as alarm clocks. Once established, they wake us up at a certain time each day and say, "Time to pray!" They are a helpful device for sleepy, sinful people like us, who by nature would much rather do anything than pray.

5. Tell someone. Just as habits are helpful weapons in our battle against our own laziness and unbelief, so too is Christian fellowship. Ask a friend to pray for you as you commit yourself to regular personal prayer. You might even find that your friend is struggling too, and that you can encourage and urge each other to stick to a plan of action. 6. Once you've established a regular habit, you can branch out and do more. Extend your regular time, or think about other times of the day or other regular occasions when you might pray. When you've been talking to someone on the phone, pause for a minute or two after you hang up to pray for them. If you're chatting to someone at church and they share something with you, stop right then and there and pray with the person for a few minutes. The possibilities are endless.

I know two elderly sisters who live alone in different parts of the city. They call each other every night, have a chat about the day and then pray together over the phone.

These are all just suggestions, not law. The important thing is that we heed God's call to pray, that we confess our stupidity and sinfulness in failing to pray, and that we get back on our knees again and again.

3. What is 'praying in the Spirit'?

Twice in the New Testament, we are urged to pray in the Holy Spirit. Here are the two references:

In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints ... (Eph 6:16-18)

¹⁹ It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. ²⁰ But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith, and praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life (Jude 19-21, authors' translation).

What does this mean? Is this 'Spirit prayer' a special kind of prayer - prayer on a higher plane? The context of both passages shows that praying 'in the Spirit' is indeed special and extraordinary, but it is not a supercharged mode of prayer that is only some- times achieved. 'Praying in the Spirit' is the amazing privilege of all true Christian prayer. In Ephesians 6:18, Paul urges his readers to pray "at all times in the Spirit". This immediately rules out the suggestion made by some that 'praying in the Spirit' is a reference to some special kind of prayer, like speaking in tongues. It is very clear from what Paul says elsewhere that not all Christians have the gift of 'speaking in tongues', whatever that gift might be (1 Cor 12:30, 14:26-27). And so, in urging all the Ephesians to pray "at all times in the Spirit", Paul cannot be referring to a practice that only some Christians are gifted to undertake.

The rest of the passage, and indeed the rest of Ephesians, make clear what Paul is referring to. The Spirit is the seal of our heavenly inheritance (1:13-14), who grants us access to the Father (2:18), builds us into a dwelling place fit for God (2:22), strengthens us with power in our inner being (3:16), unites us with other Christians (4:3-4), and fills us so that we can live a godly, wise life, full of thanksgiving (5:18-21). The whole Christian life is "in the Spirit", even the daily spiritual battle described in chapter 6. One of our weapons is the sword of the Spirit - the word of God - and the prayers we undertake in the midst of the fight are also "in the Spirit". It is only in and by God's work within us by his Spirit dwelling in us - that we can come before him, have access to him as beloved children, and wage war against the spiritual powers of evil that constantly seek to weaken our faith, disrupt our obedience, and lessen our grasp on the truth.

The message of Jude is remarkably similar. In the face of worldly scoffers who follow their on passions and cause divisions, and who are "devoid of the Spirit", Jude urges his readers to stay true. They are to keep them- selves in the love of God (v. 21), and the way they are to do it is by building themselves up in the holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit (v. 20). This is simply a different way of describing the Christian battle of Ephesians 6. In our struggle against all that opposes us as God's people, we need to keep building and rebuilding our trust in God, and keep praying to him in the strength of the Holy Spirit he has given us.

4. Does the quantity of our faith affect our prayers?

Sometimes, when we don't get the answer in prayer that we were hoping for, we are tempted to think that the problem is our faith. If only we had believed a little harder —a little stronger—a little more fervently—then God would have given us what we asked for. In other words, we sometimes think that faith is like a muscle with which we push God. And if we could only push a bit harder, then God would give way and grant our requests.

But this is not what 'faith' is. As we've already seen in chapter 2, faith is active trust or reliance or dependence upon someone. It's relying on the lifesaver to get you back to the shore. Now the really crucial thing in your rescue is not how much trust you have in the lifesaver, but whether the lifesaver is strong and skilful enough to get you back to shore. The important thing about faith is the object of your faith, not how much faith you might have. As Jesus said to his disciples when they asked him to 'increase their faith',

"If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." (Luke 17:6)

If we are praying for something and God doesn't grant our request, it may be that his will for us is otherwise. Or it may be that he is teaching us to be patient. But if we are expressing our confidence and trust in God by calling upon him in prayer, then the quantity of our faith is not the issue.

5. What about when I just don't feel like praying?

Sometimes we don't feel at all like praying. Is it phoney or inauthentic to press ahead and pray when our hearts are not in it? Or should we wait until we feel more 'in the mood' for prayer?

If prayer were a mystical activity that required a certain kind or level of feeling to succeed, then our 'mood' would be very important. But prayer is not mystical contact with the divine; it's asking God for things constantly, regularly, on all occasions.

One day, in the eternal kingdom of God, we will always feel like praying. Thanks and trust will flow out from us like fragrance from a flower. But in the meantime, our feelings about prayer will be mixed, because we ourselves are 'mixed'. We have God's Spirit within us, but we still live in the flesh and we still battle against the desires of the flesh—one of which is to neglect prayer!

Thus, whether our hearts feel cold and lifeless, or despairing and depressed, or happy and satisfied, or

anxious and fearful, or bored and tired, or angry and upset, or joyous and glad—in any and every circumstance of life, regardless of how we feel, we should come before our Father and pour out our thanksgiving to him for all his mercies, and bring our requests to him in expression of our trust in his goodness. This is the command of God to us for our good, and we should obey it. God knows the fickleness of our hearts and our feelings. He urges us to keep praying, regardless of how we feel—not only because in so doing we grab hold of his blessings, but because we very often improve the way we feel as a result! 'Feeling like praying' often comes as we pray and after we pray, rather than before. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but you do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.

You do not have because you do not ask God.

When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your own pleasures.

James 4:1-4

SET THE LORD BEFORE YOU

From Lord Teach Us To Pray (Alexander Whyte)

For what state of life is there? – what need? What distress? What perplexity? What sorrow? What sin? What dominion and what disease of sin? What possible condition can we ever be in on earth? – in which we cannot set Jesus Christ before us in prayer and in faith and for help, and for assurance, and for victory? Who are you? And what are you? And what is your request and your petition? Open your New Testament, take it with you to your knees, and set Jesus Christ out of it before you. Are you like David in the 63rd Psalm? Is your soul thirsting for God, and is your flesh longing for God in a dry and thirsty land where no water is? Then set Jesus at the well of Samaria before the eyes of your thirsty heart. And, again, set Him before your heart when He stood on the last day, that great day of the feast, and cried, saying, 'If any man thirst let him come to Me and drink.' Or, are you like David after the matter of Uriah? 'For, day and night, Thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer.' Then set Him before you who says; 'I am not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.' ...

And when you are in your own place of prayer, do not be in a hurry to get on with your prayer and to get done with it. If need be, He can make the sun stand still to give you time to pray. Never kneel without at the same time shutting your eyes on all earthly things, and setting God on His Throne in Heaven, and Jesus Christ in His intercession, before you.

FOR FUTHER STUDY

Matthew 9:35-38

Acts 6:1-7

Luke 18:1-8

Luke 21:34-36

Acts 10:2

Romans 12:12

Ephesians 6:18-19

Colossians 4:2

1 Thessalonians 5:17

1 Peter 4:7

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About Martin Luther:

'I overheard him in prayer but, good God, with what life and spirit did he pray! It was with so much reverence, as if he were speaking to God, yet with so much confidence as if he were speaking to his friend.'

In Spurgeon's Lectures to My Students Two excerpts in this booklet have been published with permission from Matthias Media. You can buy the full books for a specially-negotiated price by sending an email to info@gracecity.com.au.

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