

PERSPECTIVE

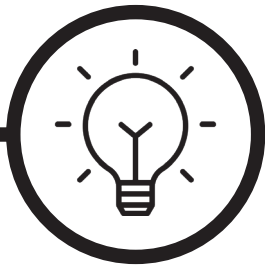
MAY 2022

Does
Holiness
Help My
Prayers?

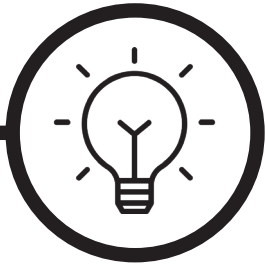
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Kalep Kanode	



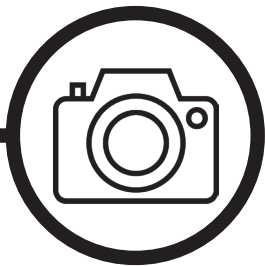
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Does Holiness Help My Prayers?

In January of this year, I gave a Sunday evening devotional on Psalm 66:18. The thrust of this text is the sobering reminder that God will not hear the prayers of his people when they live in conscious unconfessed sin. It is never easy to tell a group of people that God doesn't hear their prayers, even when that group is your own church family who you know and love. Afterwards, a member came up to me and thanked me for the devotion. He then added, *"I know this is true, but I don't like it."* I smiled and nodded because I had felt the exact same tension in my heart as I worked through the text. Is it really true that God, who loved me in Christ before the foundation of the world, would stop his ears to my prayers because of my sin?

On the one hand, this is a simple question to answer. If God is a holy God, how can my holiness not be connected to my prayers? Of course I can't live in sin and expect God to give me everything I ask for. On the other hand, this is a question that requires a careful biblical answer. Once we say that our holiness does have some effect on our prayers, we immediately have to answer other more difficult questions. To name a few, does this I mean I have to earn the right for God to answer my prayers? Is God's blessing conditional on my obedience? If my prayers aren't being answered, does that mean I am living in sin? What about non-believers who seem to get everything they want?

I can't promise that we will tackle all of these questions specifically in this article, but I do hope to accomplish two things. First, to examine the Bible's clear teaching that sin hinders our prayers. The second is to examine how the doctrine of the Trinity helps us more fully understand the relationship between our holiness and our prayers.

SIN HINDERS OUR PRAYERS

The Bible most explicitly speaks about the connection between our holiness and our prayers in the negative. Meaning, rather than telling us how being holy helps our prayers, it most often tells us how sinning hinders our prayers. Let's look at four different ways we see this in the Scriptures. In each example, we'll briefly consider application to our own prayer lives.

IGNORING GOD'S WORD (PROV. 28:9)

Proverbs 28:9 says, *"If one turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination."* This one comes

first because it is the fountainhead of all the rest. God has spoken to humanity clearly in His word. He has most clearly disclosed who He is, who we are, and how we can know Him in Christ. In this sense, God has initiated the conversation with humanity. To attempt to speak to God while completely disregarding what He has already said is disrespectful at best and an abomination at worst.

Additionally, the Scriptures often (if not always) connect hearing to doing (James 1:22–24, John 14:15, Mt. 7:21–27). To truly hear God's word is to obey God's word. Parents understand this principle. When they tell their kids to listen, what they mean is that they want them to obey. It is no different with God our Father. To hear His word and then disobey is to say that you know better than God. It is to declare, like Adam and Eve, that you do not want God as your Father.

To state this Proverb in the positive, God's ears are wide open to the prayers of those who hear and obey His word. Christian, you need God's word everyday like you need food and water. If you struggle to pray then go back to the Bible. The Bible tells us what to pray for and how to pray for it. It gives us an entire book of Psalms that we can pray verbatim back to God. Nothing can short circuit your prayer life like a willful disregard of God's word.

UNCONFESSSED SIN (PS. 66:18)

Psalm 66:18 says, *"If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened to my prayer."* This gets at the idea of a conscious unwillingness to confess sin to God. Few have explained this text clearer than Charles Spurgeon:

If, having seen it (sin) to be there, I continue to gaze upon it without aversion; if I cherish it, have a side glance of love toward it, excuse it, and palliate it; The Lord will not hear me. How can he? Can I desire him to connive at my sin, and accept me while I willfully cling to any evil way? Nothing hinders prayer like iniquity harboured in the breast... An imperfect petition God will hear for Christ's sake, but not one which is willfully miswritten by a traitor's hand. For God to accept our devotions, while we are delighting in sin, would be to make himself the God of hypocrites, which is a fitter name for Satan than for the Holy One of Israel.ⁱ

What does this mean for your prayer life? Daily confess your sin to the Lord. Keep a clean slate. Not in order to earn righteousness, for not even sincere contrition can actually atone for sin (Heb. 9:22). Confess your sin in response to the grace God has shown you in Christ and

with a heart full of faith that He is faithful to forgive you (1 John 1:9). A son delights to be like his father. God is our holy Father, so daily strive to put off your sin and pursue holiness. If you struggle to hate sin and love righteousness, ask for it. There are few prayers God loves to answer more.

MARITAL CONFLICT (1 PETER 3:7)

This one might be surprising. 1 Peter 3:7 says, *“Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.”* Yes, you read that right. Peter is telling husbands that the vibrancy of their prayer life, and more pointedly God’s hearing of their prayers, is directly related to how they live with their wives. Husbands, your wife is your most important human relationship, your closest companion, and a fellow heir with you of God’s saving grace. You should daily labor to love her, listen to her, know her, consider her needs, protect her, and most importantly to help her persevere in the faith until death. Your calling is to model the faithful and sacrificial covenant love of the Lord Jesus for His Church.

This is not easy. Marriage is not easy. To be clear, I am not saying that the requirement for unhindered prayers is a perfect marriage. I think the phrase *“live with your wife in an understanding way”* is intentionally broad. Obedience to this command will look different in every marriage. At a bare minimum, this text is calling husbands to labor to preserve and foster unity in their marriages. God cares so deeply about this that he will actually interrupt his relationship with the husband if he is not living with his wife in this way. For the sake of your prayers, live with your wife in an understanding way.

SINFUL MOTIVES (JAMES 4:3)

So far, we have looked at how sinful actions inhibit our prayer life. But the Bible tells us that sin is deeper than that. Listen to what James 4:3 says, *“You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”* I take this verse to mean that you are asking for the right thing but with the wrong motives. God’s creation is full of many good and wonderful things that we *should* ask for: a roof over our heads, a job that pays the bills, a godly spouse, lots of children, good friends, the list goes on and on. But God doesn’t just care that we want the right things; he cares that we want those things for the right reasons.

Sometimes a sinful motive is clearly seen; praying for a better paying job because you just love money. More

often though our motives are difficult to discern. They are a twisted and confusing combination of righteous and selfish desires. We ask God for a good friend because we know we need them. And yet at some level, are we also unsatisfied with God’s friendship towards us? Such is the nature of the human heart (Jer. 17:9). This leads me to be skeptical of my own heart and to pray that God would clarify and purify my motives. Often, this then leads to a realization and confession of impure motives. God doesn’t just want us to act holy, he wants us to love and value holiness deep in our soul.

PRAYER: RELATIONSHIP NOT TRANSACTION

Brothers and sisters, though these texts are not difficult to understand they are undoubtedly difficult to get a grip on. There may be a number of reasons for this, but I suspect that the root issue has something to do with our ever-present temptation to approach prayer as a transaction rather than a relationship. If I want God to hear my prayers then I need to make sure that I clean up my life. This unhelpfully reduces holiness to something we trade for an answered prayer. However, the Bible shows us that prayer is the expression of a relationship with the triune God, and holiness is the goal of that relationship.

In order to more fully understand the relationship between holiness and our prayers, we must more fully understand the God we are praying to. We must understand something of how God’s triune nature affects prayer.ⁱⁱ To do this, let’s unpack a biblical, Trinitarian definition of prayer: *Prayer is communion with the Father, on the merits of the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

COMMUNION WITH THE FATHER

I wonder how a non-Christian would define prayer if we gave them a front row seat to our prayer lives. Would they say that prayer is just a hopeful request tossed out to an unknown higher power? Or maybe it would seem like a “get out of jail free card” to be used when life turns sour. Regardless, I fear that our prayer lives rarely communicate the biblical truth that God is a loving Father whose presence is to be enjoyed and whose glory is to be desired above all else.

Jesus taught us to recognize God as Father at the beginning of all our prayers (Matt. 6:9). To say that the eternal, all-powerful Creator of the universe is our Father is an earth-shattering claim. We could spend pages unpacking its implications. In regards to our present discussion, we must recognize that as a Father, God has *loving authority* over us. By nature, the Father is superior to His children.

The Father's will is more important than the will of His children. But to say that God *merely* has authority is to make him a distant and self-absorbed dictator. The very title of Father implies a loving relationship. It is to say that creating life and having relationship with that creation is at the very core of who God is. To recognize God as your Father is to recognize that you are His beloved child whom He created to know Him and love Him. This is the only foundation on which a biblical understanding of prayer can be built.

What in the world does this have to do with your holiness? The only appropriate way to respond to the love of the Father is to show love in return. But contrary to our modern intuitions, the Bible tells us that love is expressed primarily in obedience to God's will. This begs the question, what is God's will that we must obey? Paul clearly describes God's will for his children in 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

What is God's will for you? That you be holy. He desires His children to become like Him, which means that they become holy. If we do not take holiness seriously, then how can we seriously pray that God's will be done? To be ambivalent about holiness is to be ambivalent about God's will for your life. Pursuing holiness is how we tangibly prove that we do actually want God's will to be done and that we do actually love God.

Have you ever thought that maybe the reason God doesn't give you what you ask for is because He wants to grow you in holiness? Do you genuinely want holiness more than what you are asking for? This tests our belief in God's goodness and sovereignty like nothing else. We must recognize that God will do whatever it takes to conform us to the image of His Son.ⁱⁱⁱ Sometimes this is with the firm hand of discipline. But don't forget, that discipline is always from the hand of a Father who deeply loves you and wants what is best for you.

THE MERITS OF THE SON

One question I asked at the beginning of this article was: "*Would the God who loved me before the foundation of the world really stop His ears to my prayers because of my sin?*" This question is actually the exact opposite question we need to be asking. The right question that every human being should ask is "*If no one is holy in God's eyes, then how does God hear anyone's prayers?*" This is one of the central tensions that drives the storyline of the entire Bible. We lost fellowship with our creator God when we chose sin. And in order to be restored to that fellowship with God, sin must be dealt with. As the entire Old Testament demonstrates, humans have no hope on their own of being made right with God. But when Jesus died on the cross, he paid the penalty for the sins of all of God's people. When we repent of that sin and place our faith in the atoning sacrifice, we are justified and credited the righteousness of Christ. We are not yet perfected, but we now experience what the Scriptures call *union with Christ*. Christians are in Christ. Being *in Christ* means that what is Christ's is ours. So, we are restored to fellowship with the Father because Christ has fellowship with the Father. We can now enter God's holy presence as beloved children because Christ has made us holy. Listen to how the author of Hebrews puts it:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb. 10:19–22).

What is our confidence to enter God's holy presence? Only the blood of Jesus. There is no other way to experience fellowship with God other than on the merits of Christ's blood.

What does this mean for your prayer life? It means that you plead the blood of Christ every time you pray to the Father. It means you recognize that you don't have God's ear fundamentally because of your own righteousness but because of Christ's righteousness. It means that you daily confess your sin to the Lord and acknowledge the reality that you only draw near because of Jesus. What comfort and joy this brings to the sensitive and despairing soul. Christ ever lives to make intercession for you, and He never tires of that service (Heb. 7:25).

On the other hand, coming to the Father in prayer

without acknowledging your own sin is an attempt to approach God on your own merits. You plead your own righteousness instead of Christ's. Yes, your pursuit of holiness seriously affects your prayer life. But remember that the gospel is the key that prevents our legalistic hearts from turning this into a self-righteous game. Pursue holiness as a response to the love God has shown you in Christ, be quick to confess your sin, and trust Christ's perfect righteousness as the grounds of your fellowship with God the Father. May we never take it for granted that through Jesus Christ we have access and fellowship to God our Father.

THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

We have seen that true prayer is coming to God the Father pleading the blood of Christ. The last piece of the puzzle is to recognize that those two things are impossible without the work of the Holy Spirit. I wonder what comes to mind when you hear the phrase "*praying in the Spirit*." Confusion? Memories of past experiences in a more charismatic circle? Maybe, like me, you simply don't know how to respond so you politely change the subject. This article is not the place to fully explore what it means to pray in the Spirit. For starters, I would highly recommend the first half of John Bunyan's book *Prayer*. To get at the heart of the matter, let's look at a familiar text from Romans 8:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:14–16).

How is it that anyone can call God their Father? By the Spirit! It is the Spirit that testifies with us that we are God's children, reconciled to the Father by the work of Christ. Couple that with Jesus' instruction to always pray to God as Father and Paul's instruction to pray in the Spirit at all times (Eph. 6:18), and there seems to be only one conclusion: To truly pray is to pray in the Spirit.

There is not a "higher level" of prayer called "praying in the Spirit." Of course, one can go through the motions of prayer and not pray in the Spirit. But, as Bunyan remarked, this is to have "*the form without the power*."^{iv} It is a miracle that anyone believe that God has declared them justified in Christ. But the miracle goes deeper. Not only are we pardoned by the Judge, we are adopted

by the Father. If God were only Judge, he would declare us innocent then bid us depart His courtroom. But as Father He declares, "*This one is now my child*." Christian, the only reason you can lay hold of this truth is because God's Spirit is at work in you.

So then, what does this have to do with your holiness? If we read on in Romans 8, we see in verse 27 that "*the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God*." What does God's Spirit pray for you? That you become holy, for that is God's will. Now we have come full circle. The Holy Spirit does the work of applying the truth of the grace of God to our hearts so that we actually grow in holiness. There are so many things this means practically. To name a few, just think about all of the ways our prayers can be hindered that we previously mentioned. How do we obey God's word? How do we humbly recognize and confess sin? How do we love our wives? How do we know what to pray for and then pray for it with the right motives? Only by God's Holy Spirit. No human heart can manufacture the desire to live like this. To disregard holiness is to oppose the work of the Spirit in your life and forfeit the power you need to truly pray according to God's will.

PRAY FOR HOLINESS

The question we set out to answer is "*Does holiness help my prayers?*" I hope after reading this article you recognize why this question requires a careful biblical answer. Scripture clearly teaches that our sin does in fact hinder our prayers. However, to simply answer "*yes, holiness helps our prayers*" may unhelpfully reduce holiness to something subservient to our other, more important prayer requests. Holiness becomes an optional booster for one's prayer life. If you aren't getting what you want from God, try holiness!

When we understand the biblical Trinitarian shape of prayer, we see that the pursuit of holiness is not optional for Christians. The goal of our salvation is that we glorify God by becoming holy like God. This side of Christ's second coming, we recognize that we will always struggle with indwelling sin. But the Bible gives us no reason to use that as an excuse to half-heartedly pursue holiness. On the contrary, we are constantly challenged to put sin to death by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:13). Rather than asking whether holiness helps our prayers, Scripture instructs us that holiness *should be our prayer*. This doesn't mean we can't pray for health, a new job, or good friends. But the natural human tendency is to be far more fixated on the things we can get from God than with God Himself. The circumstances of our lives are being carefully orchestrated by God for a more ultimate

purpose; God's glory through our sanctification.

This is why the Father adopted you. This is why Christ died for you. And this is what the Spirit prays for and accomplishes in you. May our prayer lives be increasingly marked by an enjoyment of God's presence and a delight in growing ever more into His holy image.

– Kalep Kanode

ⁱ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David – Psalm 66*

ⁱⁱ For a helpful discussion of John Owen's thought on this subject, see Chapter 12 of *The Quest for Godliness* by J.I. Packer.

ⁱⁱⁱ In his commentary on Psalm 106:14-15, John Bunyan points out that when God seems to answer the prayers of the unrighteous, this may in fact be His judgment on them. They get what they want, but what they want is not God. It is something far less satisfying.

^{iv} John Bunyan, *Prayer*, 52

Prayer and the Voice of God

Written by Phillip D. Jensen and Tony Payne

What is prayer? Why should we pray? Why don't we pray? How should we pray? Phillip Jensen and Tony Payne set out to answer these questions in *Prayer and the Voice of God*. The core conviction that informs their answers is: "If we are going to understand true prayer, and pray how God wants us to, then our first step must be to *listen to what God has to say about prayer*" (7). With simplicity and biblical clarity, they provide the following answers to the questions posed above:

What is prayer? According to Jensen and Payne, "In the Bible, 'prayer' simply means '*asking God for things*'" (8). This is a provocative statement. They defend it by pointing to the fact that this is how prayer is described or defined throughout the New Testament and nuance it slightly as they unpack the "how" of prayer.

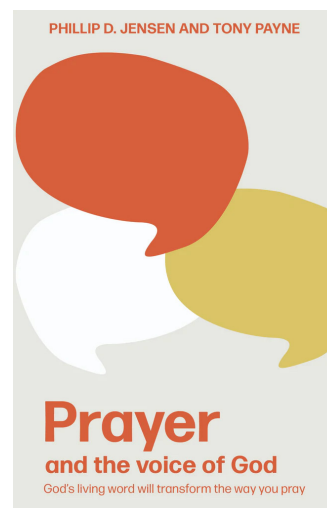
Why should we pray? In short, we pray because our Creator both allows and commands us to. He is a personal God who is not only able but willing to answer. And we are needy people who are completely dependent upon him for everything. We pray because we must, and we pray because, in Christ, we can.

Why don't we pray? Jensen and Payne provide a number of helpful answers but really get to the heart of our struggles when they explain, "The real basis of our difficulty is not intellectual; it is moral and spiritual" (60).

How should we pray? In answering this question, the authors focus primarily on what the Bible teaches us to pray for: the desires of God and the anxieties of life. We can be confident God will grant requests in the first category and can confidently entrust those in the second to God's good and sovereign will. I found this section to be particularly helpful.

Jensen and Payne authored the *Prayer and the Voice of God* with newer Christians in mind, but seasoned believers will also be helped by what they've written. I recently read the book with a brother from MVBC. Though we've been Christians for a while, we were both greatly helped by the book and challenged to pray more and better. I would highly recommend reading it with another believer. The authors have even provided discussion questions to guide you as you encourage one another to put God's word into practice.

– RECOMMENDED BY DUSTIN BUTTS



Excerpts from the Book

1

"Prayer is a work of God's Spirit within us such that we approach our heavenly Father in faith, through the merits and death of our Lord Jesus, to ask him for things. It's our relationship of dependence upon God expressed in words. Prayer is audible faith."

– The God of Prayer, p. 30

2

"For every individual anxiety we have, there are ten causes for thanksgiving. We should not forget this. When we surround our requests to God with thanksgiving, we do the right thing on two counts. We rightly honor God, and we wisely help ourselves."

– The Anxieties of Life, p. 117-8

3

"[W]e are God's fellow workers in prayer. God includes and uses our prayers in his purposes, much as a patient mother will let her three-year-old help with the cooking, even though it takes much longer and produces considerably more mess! God gathers our prayers into his purposes for our sake—to help us learn to trust him and depend upon him for all things."

– What Happens When We Pray?, p. 142

Everyday Prayer with the Puritans

Written by Donald K. McKim

The struggle to cultivate a rich prayer life is not new to the modern Christian. The Puritans also needed to encourage themselves and others with the truths of Scripture to persevere in prayer. *Everyday Prayer with the Puritans* is a collection of daily devotionals that make their insights accessible to any Christian. Each one-page devotional contains a key passage of Scripture, an English Puritan's reflection on prayer in light of the passage, and Donald McKim's helpful commentary on both. As I've worked my way through these devotionals, here are three themes that have enriched my own prayer life.

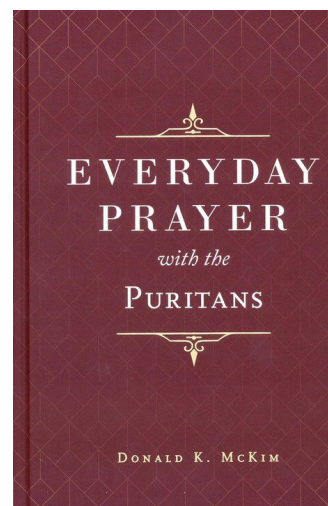
First, *prayer is an agent of God's providence*. If God has predestined all things according to his will, why pray? God not only calls his people to pray, but he leads and guides us to pray according to his will. He not only controls the universe but also uses his people to accomplish his perfect plans—often through their prayers. What a sweet blessing to be used by God to fulfill his good purposes!

Second, God *hears us*. The God of the universe, our Maker, Sustainer, Redeemer, and King, hears our simplest prayers. He hears the cries of our hearts when we don't know what to say. He even hears our tears (Ps. 6:8–10). Meditating on this truth has helped me marvel at the gift of prayer and more quickly go to the Lord with my daily needs.

Third, God *answers us in his perfecting timing*. It's difficult to understand why God delays to answer certain prayers. But trusting in God's character grants us the faith to pray anyway, knowing that his answer and the timing of it is perfect. He "is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Ps. 145:8).

I recommend *Everyday Prayer with the Puritans* to any Christian looking to grow in their personal prayer life. Not only do these short devotionals provide helpful encouragement to pray, but they also point the reader to delight in who God is—a loving Father who hears, comforts, forgives, and answers.

— RECOMMENDED BY MARJORIE ROBERSON



Excerpts from the Book

1

"Prayer honors Providence, and Providence honors Prayer. [For] you have had the very Petitions you asked of him. Providences have borne the very signatures of your Prayers upon them. O how affectingly sweet are such mercies!"

— John Flavel, *The Signature of our Prayers*, p. 23

2

"Yea is thou canst not speak, yet if thou canst weep, God will hear the voice of thy weeping; tears have a voice (Psalm 6:8), as well as words."

— Thomas Hall, *God Hears our Tears*, p. 30

3

"We may be sure that as the Lord doth hear, and regard every prayer we do make, so he will certainly give us a gracious answer in due time.... No tender mother is so wakeful, and apt to hear her infant when it cries; as the Lord is to hear his children whensoever they cry unto him" (Ps. 34:15).

— Arthur Hildersham, *A Gracious Answer in Due Time*, p. 36

MAY

These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!

May 1	Jeremiah 37:11-21	May 17	Jeremiah 45-46
May 2	2 Peter 3:1-11	May 18	Jeremiah 47-48
May 3	2 Peter 1:1-11	May 19	Jeremiah 49-50
May 4	2 Peter 1:12-21	May 20	Colossians 1:3-23
May 5	2 Peter 2	May 21	Jeremiah 51
May 6	Genesis 7:11-8:12	May 22	Jeremiah 46:1-24
May 7	2 Peter 3:12-18	May 23	Jeremiah 52
May 8	2 Peter 3:1-11	May 24	2 Kings 24:18-25:30
May 9	Jeremiah 42:7-22	May 25	Jeremiah 52:1-11
May 10	Jeremiah 40-41	May 26	Jeremiah 52:12-30
May 11	Jeremiah 42	May 27	Matthew 1:1-17
May 12	Jeremiah 43	May 28	Jeremiah 52:31-34
May 13	John 3:1-21	May 29	Jeremiah 52
May 14	Jeremiah 44		*Sermons in bold
May 15	Jeremiah 42:7-22		
May 16	Jeremiah 46:1-24		

TAKE UP & READ

NEW MEMBERS



**Joe
Brannen**



**Adair
Broome**



**Cheryl
Francis**



**Wallace
Francis**



Lisa Gable



**John
Lander**



**Julie
Morris**



**Emily
Rodgers**



**Jennifer
Stepp**



**Zack
Stepp**



**Travis
Street**



**Heather
Vernon**



**Timothy
Vernon**



Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH