

The Messy Middle

A 5-Day Devotional Bible Study drawn from John 17 and the Season between Ascension and Pentecost

01

Day 1: The Dying Prayer

Jesus prays for unity as he prepares to suffer

02

Day 2: The Messy Middle

Living faithfully in liminal, in-between times

03

Day 3: Jesus on the Move

Why the ascension matters for the church today

04

Day 4: The Temptation to Stay

When we stare at the sky instead of stepping forward

05

Day 5: May They Be One

Unity, ecumenism, and the body of Christ



The Dying Prayer

KEY VERSE

"Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one." —
John 17:11

Devotional

There is something deeply moving about the idea that Jesus, on the very eve of his suffering and death, does not pray for himself. He does not ask for escape or rescue. He does not call down comfort or demand that the cup be taken away, not yet. Instead, he prays for his people. He prays for us.

This is sometimes called the High Priestly Prayer, and it is the longest recorded prayer of Jesus in the Gospels. We are, in a sense, eavesdropping on an intimate conversation between God the Son and God the Father. And what we hear is stunning in its tenderness. Jesus is preparing to die for the world, and his final concern is for the unity and protection of those he is leaving behind.

The prayer Jesus prays is his dying wish. It is not a prayer for triumph or success in any worldly sense. It is a prayer for relationship, for belonging, for oneness. He wants his people to be one, even as he and the Father are one. That kind of unity is not just organizational agreement. It is a deep, mutual indwelling of love and purpose.

As you begin this week of reflection, let the weight of this moment settle on you. Jesus knew what was coming. The cross was hours away. And he chose to spend those final prayerful moments interceding for you.

Reflection Questions

1. What does it mean to you personally that Jesus prayed for his followers as he prepared to face the cross?
2. In what ways do you feel "held" or protected by Jesus in your own life right now?
3. How does knowing this is Jesus's dying prayer change the way you read John 17?
4. What would it look like for you to intercede for others the way Jesus intercedes here?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you that even as you faced the cross, your heart turned toward us. Teach us to pray as you prayed, with love for others at the center. Protect us in your name, and draw us into the unity you share with the Father. Amen.

The Messy Middle

KEY VERSE

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" — Acts 1:11

Devotional

Between Ascension Thursday and Pentecost Sunday, the disciples found themselves in a strange and unsettling place. Jesus had risen from the dead, yes. He had appeared to them, eaten with them, taught them. And then he ascended. He was gone again, and the Holy Spirit had not yet arrived. They were in the middle, and the middle is rarely a comfortable place to be.

The image from Acts is almost a little funny in its honesty. The disciples are simply standing there, staring up into the sky, until the angels have to gently interrupt them. "Why do you stand looking toward heaven?" It is a kind but pointed question. Life does not wait for us to finish grieving what was. There is something ahead, and standing still will not bring it to you.

Many of us know what a liminal space feels like. It is that in-between time when one chapter has clearly closed but the next has not yet begun. It might be a season of loss, a period of transition, a moment when your faith feels more fragile than firm. The disciples' experience in those ten days between the ascension and Pentecost gives us permission to name these seasons honestly.

The messy middle is not a sign that something has gone wrong. It is often precisely where God is doing something new. The question is not whether we can avoid the in-between. The question is whether we will remain open and watchful while we wait within it.

Reflection Questions

1. Are you in a "messy middle" season right now, either in your faith or in your life more broadly? Describe it.
2. What does it feel like to wait on God when the next step is not yet clear?
3. How do you typically respond to in-between times? Do you freeze, push forward, or something else?
4. What would it mean for you to remain "open and watchful" while you wait?

Prayer

Faithful God, you are present even in the in-between. When we find ourselves standing still, staring at the sky, gently redirect our gaze. Give us patience in uncertainty and courage to trust that your Spirit is already moving ahead of us. Amen.

Jesus on the Move

KEY VERSE

"I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do." — John 17:4

Devotional

Jesus did not stay in the tomb. Jesus did not remain at the dinner table on the Emmaus road, even though the disciples urged him to stay because the evening was near and the moment felt sacred. Jesus did not linger in the upper room where his disciples had gathered behind locked doors. And Jesus did not remain on earth after the resurrection, even though it might have seemed far more helpful if he had.

The ascension is one of the more uncomfortable parts of the Christian story, precisely because it feels like loss. We want Jesus to stay. And yet the ascension is a declaration, not an abandonment. It is the announcement that the risen Christ is not confined to one room, one hillside, one moment in history. The ministry of Jesus is for the whole world, and the work of God cannot be contained in a single place.

This has profound implications for the church. If Jesus himself refused to stay put, if the risen Lord moved from tomb to road to table to upper room to the right hand of the Father, then the body of Christ, the church, cannot afford to be a museum. We cannot simply preserve the past and call it faithfulness. The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is always moving, always drawing people forward into something new.

The work God gave Jesus to do was finished on the cross and vindicated in the resurrection. Now that same God is at work through us, through his people, in a world that is still very much in need of the good news. The question is whether we are willing to move with him.

Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think Jesus did not simply remain on earth after the resurrection? What does his ascension say about the nature of God's work in the world?
2. In what ways might your own church or faith community be tempted to become a "museum for the past"?
3. Where do you sense God is calling you to move or grow right now, even if it feels uncomfortable?
4. How does the idea that Jesus is "on the move" change the way you think about mission and purpose?

Prayer

Risen Lord, forgive us when we try to keep you contained in the familiar and the comfortable. You are always moving, always working, always calling us forward. Give us the courage to follow where your Spirit leads, even when staying feels easier. Amen.

The Temptation to Stay

KEY VERSE

"This is a good place to be. Let us make three dwellings here." — Matthew 17:4

Devotional

The transfiguration is one of the most breathtaking moments in all of scripture. Peter, James, and John climb the mountain with Jesus, and before their eyes he is transformed. His face shines like the sun. Moses and Elijah appear. The voice of God breaks through the cloud. In that one moment, the law and the prophets converge on the person of Jesus. Everything becomes luminously clear.

And what is the very first thing Peter wants to do? He wants to build. He wants to put up shelters and stay right there on that mountain, in that moment, in that clarity and brightness and holy wonder. It is a deeply human response. When something good, true, and beautiful breaks into our ordinary lives, we want to hold it still. We want to freeze the frame before it passes.

But Jesus will not let them stay. He leads them back down the mountain, back into the mess of the world below, where a suffering father is waiting with a struggling son and the disciples are powerless to help. The mountain was real. The glory was real. But the glory was not given so they could remain there. It was given so they could carry it downward, outward, into the world.

This is a pattern worth noticing in your own life. When has God given you a clear, beautiful, mountaintop experience of faith? And what happened when it was time to come back down? The temptation to build a shelter, to preserve the moment, to resist the next movement of God is one of the most persistent struggles in the spiritual life.

Reflection Questions

1. Can you name a "mountaintop" moment in your own faith life, a time when everything felt clear and God felt very near?
2. What happened when that season ended? Did you try to hold on to it?
3. What might God be asking you to carry down from the mountain and into your everyday world?

Prayer

Transfiguring God, thank you for the moments when your presence breaks through and everything becomes clear. Give us wisdom to receive those gifts with gratitude and then the courage to carry them back into the world. Do not let us build shelters when you are calling us forward. Amen.

May They Be One

KEY VERSE

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." — John 17:20-21

Devotional

We return, on this final day, to the prayer that started the week. But now we hear a little more of it. Jesus is not only praying for the eleven disciples gathered in that room. He is praying for all who will come to believe through their witness, which includes every generation of Christians since, which includes you and me. This prayer was prayed for us, across two thousand years.

And the heart of the prayer is unity. Not uniformity, not the erasure of all difference or disagreement, but a deep, Spirit-given oneness that reflects the relationship between the Father and the Son. This prayer is why John 17 has been so central in ecumenical conversations, in the ongoing work of different Christian communities discovering what they hold in common and how they might serve the world together.

Unity is costly. It requires humility, patience, and a willingness to see the image of God in people whose traditions, worship styles, and theological emphases differ from our own. But Jesus considered it important enough to make it the content of his dying prayer. If the last great wish of the Son of God was that his people would be one, then the pursuit of that unity is not optional for those who follow him.

As you close this week of reflection, consider what it might look like to live out this prayer in your own relationships, your own congregation, and your own engagement with the wider body of Christ. The Holy Spirit is still moving. Jesus is still on the move. And the prayer is still being prayed.

Reflection Questions

1. What obstacles to Christian unity do you observe in your own community or in the broader church?
2. What would it cost you personally to pursue greater unity with Christians who are different from you?
3. How might you, in a very practical way this week, live as an answer to Jesus's prayer that his people would be one?
4. As you close this devotional week, what is the one thing the Holy Spirit has stirred most deeply in you?

Prayer

Holy Father, your Son prayed that we would be one, as you and he are one. Forgive us for the ways we have chosen division over unity, comfort over mission, and the familiar over the new thing you are doing. Fill us with your Spirit. Send us out. Make us one. Amen.