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Empty Wealth

Chasing the Wind: Searching for Meaning

Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:12

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So, here's a newsflash, a big piece of news! I don't even think if you take notes—you don't even have to take notes—because this is so big you're going to remember it, okay? God hates sin! Big surprise, right? We knew that God is love, and God hates sin. And because God hates sin, we, as His people, ought to hate it as well, and take it very seriously. It's in our lives, and when we see it in the world, sin is serious business. The reason God hates sin so much is because He designed the world a certain way. He designed it to work just right. But then through Adam and Eve's choice, sin entered the world and started to mess everything up. Corruption entered the world, began to kind of infiltrate relationships, and all that God intended, began to be corrupted, began to experience decay, rot. That's what sin does. That's why God hates sin.

We've been studying Ecclesiastes for these last few weeks, and I think we can acknowledge it's a little bit of a depressing book. Now for some people, some people love it. I don't necessarily want to apologize, though, for the fact that it's somewhat depressing, because I find it to be incredibly honest, because we are living in a broken world. We're living in a world that has been infected by sin, and chaos has entered the world. And so as we look around our world, just as the Preacher did, we see corruption. We see decay; we see injustice; we see abuse; we see wars; we see fractured relationships. Just yesterday we saw an assassination attempt. Just watch the news for a moment and you will know our world is filled with chaos. That is the effect of sin, and God hates sin.

The Preacher is depressed because of that. He's depressed and he's looking around the world, and he's seeing God's good things, and he's asking himself the question, "What is going on?" because these things don't seem all that good. And yet, even more, because we as people are affected by sin, we start to even look at the good things, and we start to seek in them what we're only supposed to find in God. We start to try to find ultimate satisfaction in God's good things rather than finding ultimate satisfaction in God and God alone. Sin corrupts what God intended to be good, and the Preacher has looked around; he's realized that, and he said, "Therefore, what is the point? It is all vanity. It's all smoke." And you know what? That's an honest response. But it's important that we recognize that cry of vanity is very honest. It says more about sin than about God's world. It says that the world has been infected by sin. God hates sin because sin corrupts that which God intended to be good. So the Preacher is on this quest, and we've been walking with him through this journey of looking at all these things and saying, "Okay, will this do it…will this do it…will this do it?" None of it has delivered for him. None of it has delivered a sense of deep meaning, but his journey is not done.

He's going to turn today to two temptations that are incredibly common, temptations that we face today. The question he's going to ask, "Is there meaning to be found in the accumulation of power, or wealth? Can that deliver?" And that's what we're going to consider with him this morning.

So open your Bibles to Ecclesiastes, Chapter 5, verse 8. Last week, as we were walking through this passage, and through this journey with the Preacher, we considered whether work is a place to find identity. We acknowledged that work is not the place where identity is found. It can't deliver. Work's not bad, but when we make it something that is not supposed to be, it will lead us into soul-crushing despair. And now as he continues in verse 8 of chapter 5, he's going to turn his attention first to power. He says:

> **If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight; for one official watches over another official, and there are higher officials over them. After all, a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land.** (*NASB, Ecclesiastes 5:8-9)

Now he's talking about political power and a kind of political system in a certain sense. But really what's on display here is an abuse of power. We need to acknowledge power is not bad in and of itself. God created power. He calls us to be people that live according to His power. When God told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, to oversee the earth and subdue it, that's power language. "Have an impact on the world!"

It's interesting that when Paul is talking to Timothy, he says, "Hey, we weren't given a spirit of timidity and fear, but of power and of love, and of self-control." Power is not bad, but here the Preacher is acknowledging there is a corruption of power. He's also talking about hierarchy, and hierarchy isn't bad. We, as humans, create hierarchies, and Scripture affirms that's a wise thing to do. You might remember Moses when he's going through the wilderness and he's hearing everyone's problems. And, ultimately, it's the conclusion, "You can't do it!" So, they create a system, and the system is intended to help everyone be heard, help everyone able to bring the wrongs of the injustice they're experiencing before people that can help them work it out. That's the intent. But the Preacher says, **if you see oppression**, when you see corruption of power, **do not be shocked**. To which I want to say, "Wait a second. Why shouldn't I be shocked? And shouldn't I be shocked, and not only shocked, but shouldn't I be absolutely horrified at what I see? Shouldn't I be angry about what I see? Isn't that a righteous response? Because God is not happy with the misuse of power. So why should I not be shocked?"

And the Preacher explained, "We shouldn't be shocked because that is what happens in a world where power is so quickly corrupted. Sin starts to infect things, starts to infect those in power, and it becomes something that no longer produces good and flourishing for everyone. But it ultimately makes sure that the oppressed, the impoverished, stay that way." Hierarchies are built, and they're not built in order to help people flourish. They're built, ultimately, to create levels of bureaucracy, where if you have a problem, "Come take a ticket, and maybe we'll get back to it in about five years." That's what the world system and sin corrupting power and hierarchy start to do.

A king or a leader is supposed to be a person that's helping everyone flourish. But in verse 9, what the Preacher says is that what he sees is, instead, the king is the one that's benefiting from the land, the land that's supposed to benefit everybody. It's a corruption of power. Power is not bad. Hierarchy is not bad. But in a world that is corrupted, in a world filled with sin, it can so quickly work against those that it's actually intended to help. And so rather than creating a system of flourishing, what he's describing is a system that is the opposite of flourishing, a system of chaos

and depression and oppression. And he's stuck, and he's saying, “This is not the way it's supposed to be.” But he's acknowledging this is a tale as old as time. Corruption of power occurs everywhere we look. Our political system struggles with this; businesses struggle with this; churches struggle with this. And the call, in this moment is, “People of God, we want to be people that acknowledge the good of power, and see that God intends power to be something that is bringing about creative good in the world.” But so often what the Preacher is lamenting is, that is not what happens. It doesn't lift up the oppressed; it doesn't heal the brokenhearted. A sin-filled world leads to vanity. Sin corrupts power, and power is closely related to money.

And so now he turns to a reflection in the way sin corrupts money, in our use of it. So as he turns to money, he starts with three short little proverbs, just little statements of common wisdom. I think, as you hear these, you'll probably nod along with me, and you'll think, “Yeah, that makes perfect sense.” He begins in verse 10:

> **He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance *with its* income. This too is vanity.**

Smoke! Meaningless! It’s basically describing a situation where we have to ask the question, “How much money is enough money?” The answer is, “More money. More money is enough money.” When money becomes a driving focus in life, when it becomes a desire of the heart, when it becomes a love, it becomes something that kind of starts to bleed into everything, and it is never satisfied. And that's actually the way all of our desires work. Desire, in and of itself, isn't self-limiting. He doesn't have a little button that says, “Okay, you've had enough now.” Desire always wants more if it's unchecked, and a desire or a love for money will not satisfy because anyone that loves money always wants more. And so it will lead to an unsatisfied life. It continues with another proverb in verse 11:

> **When good things increase, those who consume them increase. So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on?**

So we could say it this way. When something is successful, yeah, it’s great. It kind of grows but, along with it, a lot of stress grows as well. The more success, the more stress. Maybe you have a small business, and when you started at the beginning, you were just worried, “Is anyone going to come through the door?” That's the stressful thing you're experiencing. Then something happens. It explodes! It goes viral…and now there's a line around the block. A whole new stress: hundreds and hundreds of people that you're now trying to make sure are satisfied customers. Success did not alleviate the stress and the anxiety that you had when you began this endeavor to start a new business. Good things increase. So does stress. Verse 12:

> **The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much; but the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep.**

In other words, while the working man might be poor, might even be impoverished, he might not be able to feast. But if his stomach is full, he sleeps at rest. Oh, sure, he can't feast. He's not rich but being rich and full of stress is not automatically better than being poor and filled with peace. Now, please hear me. He is not equating poverty with peace. That's not the point. The point is the

comparison. We are apt to think, "If I were rich, then I would be filled with peace," and he's saying that is not true. Now money is not bad. We need to affirm that. We want to keep talking about a biblical view of money. Money is not bad, but our tendency to make money a primary goal will lead us into a life of deep disappointment…deep disappointment. As he continues, he's going to tell us a little story. Verse 13:

> **There is a grievous evil *which* I have seen under the sun: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt. When those riches were lost through a bad investment and he had fathered a son, then there was nothing to support him. As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand. This also is a grievous evil—exactly as a man is born, thus will he die. So what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind? Throughout his life *he* also eats in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger.** (Vs. 13-17)

The Preacher's story here, and one of his lines echoes a reflection out of Job, and I'm sure, in the room, that's many people's favorite book in the Bible. You just love to dwell on Job, right? Job says a very similar thing. "Naked I came from the womb; naked I'll return to the ground." In other words, "I came in with nothing; I'm going to leave with nothing." What exactly is the point? This man hoards wealth, gathers more and more, and then something happened through a bad investment. We don't know exactly what, but something happens…and he loses all of it. And the once rich man can't even support his child. And so that leads the Preacher essentially to ask, "What is the point if wealth can leave in a moment's notice? Why on earth would we place any confidence in it? That is a fool's errand." That was true 3000 years ago. That is true, absolutely, today.

Things totally outside of our control can drain our bank accounts. Do you remember back in March of 2021, there was this ship that got caught in the Suez Canal. Do you remember that? It kind of got caught diagonally. I was fascinated with this whole thing. You're kind of amused at first. Big old ship, but now nothing can get through the Suez Canal. And you're wondering, "What's going to happen?" But then you start to realize this is going to have a significant economic impact in our world. There are estimates that that little act—that moment of that ship being stuck—cost the world economy $10 billion a day. It slowed supply chains everywhere. The price of goods increased. Certain goods couldn't get to where they needed to go. Essentially, in a world economy like ours, we live in a precarious place where something that happens in a canal in Egypt, can impact my checkbook in Lincoln, Nebraska. And so the question is, "Why on earth would I put my confidence in that?" It can be gone in a moment. And if I am placing my confidence in how full my checking account is, how much wealth I have, I will be filled with anxiety, because so many things outside my control can come and take it from me.

So the Preacher is saying, "Vanity!" He describes the rich man—this rich man who lost everything—eating in darkness. In other words, the whole day goes by: he works all day, eats alone at night, filled with vexation, with sickness and with anger. Wealth is an empty pursuit. I'm going to do something we don't do too often. We're going to skip a few verses, and then we're going to come back to them, and there's a reason for that. But I want you to skip ahead to chapter 6 with me, verse 1. He's going to continue his negative reflection about the dark side of wealth. Here in chapter 6, verse 1, he says:

> **There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men— a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires; yet God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is vanity and a severe affliction. If a man fathers a hundred *children* and lives many years, however many they be, but his soul is not satisfied with good things and he does not even have a *proper* burial, *then* I say, "Better the miscarriage than he, for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity; and its name is covered in obscurity. It never sees the sun and it never knows *anything*; it is better off than he. Even if the *other* man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things—do not all go to one place?"** (Ecclesiastes 6:1-6)

We are so tempted, affected by sin, to start to put our trust in wealth in places where we shouldn't put our trust. And he is saying this is folly, and it will ultimately lead you to a devastating life. And he illustrates that with another story. A man gets rich, and says he lacks nothing, but he's never able to enjoy it. He's saying, "What is it worth?" You don't have to watch too many documentaries about wealthy people that have come and gone, to know that so many of them die with hearts that are just empty, even though their bank accounts are absolutely overflowing. He says, "What good is that?" He continues, and he describes a man who has a hundred children, and a hundred children is clearly a sign of blessing in these ancient days in the ancient world. He lives a long life, but he's never satisfied, and it says that **he receives a proper burial.** And this would have been an incredibly shameful reality. In the Ancient Near East, to not receive a burial, would have meant that you died in shame, and shame will be on you forever. That man, he says, would have been better off had he never been born. That's what he's describing when he says **better the miscarriage**. And what strikes me in a book that is filled with highs and lows, it seems like this trough that he is in right now is lower than low. He is about as low as he has been. He is in the throes of depression. He is saying it would have been better if I had never been born. That's deluded thinking. That's honest thinking, but that's deluded thinking. In this moment, he's wrestling with the same thing Job wrestled with. Once again, Job utters these same words when he looked at the world. He said, "I just shouldn't have been born; cursed is my mom." Job said, "I shouldn't have come forth from the womb."

It's just one of those moments where we need to go back and remember the purpose of Ecclesiastes and remember how we're trying to read it. We are walking slowly with the Preacher as he is on this quest. And in this moment, he is in a very raw, very real, very human moment. He is in the pit of depression and despair. And I'm thankful that these kinds of accounts are in the Bible, because I think, in this room, there are people that have felt this way before, maybe even that feel this way right now. Maybe you've had a similar thought: "It would have been better off had I never been born…be better off if I didn't exist." It's an incredibly honest statement, isn't it? Please hear me. The Bible is not affirming that thinking. The Preacher is going to continue his quest, but the Bible is acknowledging the reality of that thought. The Preacher's quest is not finished. He is in a very raw moment here.

But I do want to say, just as the Preacher hopefully didn't have to struggle alone, I just want to acknowledge that if you find yourself in that place, that's not a shameful thought. But that is a thought that we don't want you to linger on alone. I think, so often things get so hard, and we start to find ourselves thinking that I would have been better if I hadn't even been born. And then we

start to feel so filled with shame. “I shouldn't even speak that out loud to anybody,” and we have to walk through all of that alone. And that is an incredibly lonely, incredibly difficult place to be. And we want to be a church where we can affirm what Romans affirms. “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” It’s not a place for shame. We all struggle, and if your struggle includes that kind of thought, we just want to acknowledge once again, we are here to help, because that is a difficult place to be. It's very difficult to struggle through that alone, and I don't think God intended anyone to struggle through that alone. Spiritual Care, counseling, talking to someone else: your life is incredibly valuable. But we do know that in moments that are difficult, when the world feels like it's crashing down, there is this part of us that wants to escape. And that's exactly where the Preacher is. He is wrestling with, “What do I do with the fact that I can't find meaning anywhere?” But his reflection doesn't stop here, and neither should our reflection. We have to continue along with him. Now, that's not to say that in the next few verses, he's going to get very positive. Okay, I do want to warn you. He will by the end of the book, but not today. Today, his struggle is going to continue. Verse 7:

> **All a man’s labor is for his mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied. For what advantage does the wise man have over the fool? What *advantage* does the poor man have, knowing how to walk before the living? What the eyes see is better than what the soul desires. This too is futility and a striving after wind.**
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> **Whatever exists has already been named, and it is known what man is; for he cannot dispute with him who is stronger than he is.** (Vs. 7-10)

I want to pause there for a moment. It's a statement of resignation. He's essentially saying, “Okay, I know there is a God and He is bigger than me.” He is a long way away from joyful surrender, but he's acknowledging, “I can't figure this out, and I'm really at the mercy of the One who has designed things.” And because that's a difficult place for him to be, he ends with these fairly depressing words. Verse 11:

> **For there are many words which increase futility. What *then* is the advantage to a man? For who knows what is good for a man during *his* lifetime, *during* the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?** (Vs. 11-12)

This is how he ends his reflection on wealth. He ends up absolutely stuck, saying wealth is of no benefit. He's not saying poverty is of any benefit. Sometimes people glorify poverty. That's not the teaching of Scripture. That same poverty is not of any benefit. Wisdom is not a benefit. Being a fool is not a benefit. And so he's just stuck, and he concludes with these haunting words in verses 11, and 12. I'm going to read them again to you, but I'm going to read them from The Message because sometimes, it just captures the poetry that is intended in the text. Verses 11 and 12 say:

> **The more words that are spoken, the more smoke there is in the air. And who is any better off? And who knows what's best for us as we live out our meager smoke-and-shadow lives? And who can tell any of us the next chapter of our lives?**

He's in the throes of desolation…stuck! What's the point? What's it all worth? Questions aren't answered. And his final kind of conclusion is, “Who can even tell me about what comes next?” And the answer, of course, is, “Only God!”. But we all know that God does not make us privy to what is coming next. Most of the time, we have to take a day at a time; we don't get to know what's coming next. And so the question is, “What do we do? What do we do with that?”

Well, fortunately, the Hebrew literature actually includes some structure that gives us a hint. It points our attention by the way it's formed—and we lose it in the English—but in the original Hebrew, there's focus given to those verses that we skipped: Verses 18, 19, and 20. That's the moment where there's something to grab hold of. There's a place to focus, a place to rest. And we're going to turn there in just a moment, but before we do that, I wanted to talk for just a moment about the dark side of money.

There's temptation that we all face in a world like ours: temptations of power, and temptations of money—to place our confidence there—because each day we walk through life, we are encountered by this temptation over and over and over again. It is as old as the Earth is old. As long as humans have been upon the earth, these temptations have been present, and they usually come in threes. The three big temptations, really, if we get down to it are money, and sex, and power. And here he addresses two of the big ones. This plague that mankind has suffered with to make power and money into an illicit god, makes life all about the accumulation of those things. And he is saying, “When that becomes the focal point, you are on a pathway to destruction.” And that's what sin does. Sin corrupts—not only money and power—but also our ability to think of it correctly.

That's why we want to be so adamant about how we keep coming back to God's Word to see how He thinks about these things. We don't talk or preach about money often, but we're not afraid to talk about that. Money is not bad. We have needs, and so we bring them before you. We do that when we get to the fiscal year end, and we say, “Hey, here are our needs. Here's the goals we're trying to hit. These needs meet a number of ministry needs, and they also pay salaries, and they keep the lights on and we just are honest about that.” We want to be very honest about that. But let me tell you something that is very, very true right from my heart. I am much more concerned that we, as a body, are moving more and more towards a godly view of money, of stewardship of power than I am that we ever meet a goal. If we don't meet a goal, but we, as a people, have a better and more biblical view of money, we're thinking about the way God wants us to use these things in the world. If we're thinking more biblically about it, then we have won. That is way more important than meeting a goal.

It’s so critical that we, as a people, continue to bring our minds and our hearts before God's Word. And we keep saying, “Lord, where am I off? How do I think wrongly about these things? And how do I have my mind start to conform to the way You think about these things?” It's what we're doing when we open His Word. One of the ways that God helps us kind of grow in a view of money is something that we do every week. And when we do it, we try to use it as a bit of a teaching moment when we talk about giving. We try to talk about how, when we give, what we're trying to do is to acknowledge it is not ours. It's all His. We don't get to take it with us. Ultimately, it's His to do with as He pleases. And so we give it freely in order to advance kingdom purposes in the world. And we let go of it, because it's not ours. And we acknowledge, “Lord, everything we have is from

You. You're our generous God, and we want to be generous people." We lack nothing and giving reveals that. We talk about that every time we give.

A second thing that giving does though, and we don't talk about this as often, is that God uses it to teach me. And the way that He uses it to teach me, is because if I am completely honest with you, sometimes it hurts a little bit. Now, it's not wholly because it hurts. That's not what I'm saying. It's not about that. What that moment provides me with is this opportunity to say to the Lord, "Lord, why does that hurt? Why do I want to hold on so tight?" And what it reveals is what's in my heart. Down in a corner of my heart, there's a part of me that thinks: Number one, it's mine, and number two, if I let go of it, maybe I'm going to suffer. I'm going to be impoverished. Maybe God won't provide. And so in that moment, I can come to God and say, "Lord, in this moment, as I released this to you, it's hard for me. I'm just going to be honest about that. But as I release it, help me to think correctly. Help my heart to just be full of joy, knowing that I lack nothing because of You. Help me to see things rightly and think about money as it's something that You provided in order to advance your ends in the world. Lord, align my heart, my thinking, back to what is good and right." God uses it to teach me. It's a teaching moment. We want to be people that continue to strive to look at God's good things, all these good things He created that have been subject to decay, but to restore to our minds, to our hearts, and in our activity, to restore them to their proper place and use them as acts of worship, giving thanks to God, enjoying the good things that He's given us.

That's just what we find in that focal point in verses 18 to 20 of chapter five. So let's close with a reflection on these verses. Chapter five, verse 18. He says:

> **Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun *during* the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward. Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.** (Ecclesiastes 5:18-20)

Many commentators look at this passage and other passages that echo it and they call it the Carpe Diem passages. "Seize the day." Live fully in the moment that God has given you in the vexation of life, in the confusion of life. Even when you see depressing realities of life, seek to find enjoyment in God today. We've read this a number of times as we've been studying Ecclesiastes. Enjoyment in God's gifts has this power to start to dispel some of the depressing anxiety that we have about the future. To focus on what God has given us today, empowers us to live with joy today. Throughout the book, thus far, He's taken these moments and He said, "Enjoy food and drink and your work and all those kinds of things." Now He adds wealth. He's saying, "Enjoy wealth." When you can buy yourself food, enjoy that food. That's a gift from God. Enjoy the day; be thankful today. Praise God today. Simple gratitude. Don't just praise Him for the big things. Praise Him for the small things. These simple acts of gratitude could just sum it up in its simplicity, simplicity before God, "God, I'm so thankful for what You've given me." Our world could use a little more of that. Simple acts of gratitude, simple acts of thankfulness.

It was during World War II, during that era—the 30s and the 40s—where Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor in Germany. And he wrote a book right in the midst of this growing threat of the abusive power of Nazism that was on the doorstep. And in that time he says, “To be simple, is to fix one's eyes solely on the simple truth of God. To be simple is to fix one's eyes solely on the simple truth of God at a time when all concepts are being confused, distorted, and turned upside down.” In the midst of a world that is turning concepts upside down, distorting everything, he is saying, “Here's what it is to be simple. Give thanks to God. Have your eye focused solely on the simple truth of who God is.” In other words, Church, as we live on this side of the cross, as we live in a world that is still deeply and profoundly affected by sin and the corruption that it brings, as we walk in the midst of this world that is full of decay, there is relief to be found in this simple act: Give thanks to God. Thank Him. Don't just thank Him for the big things. Thank Him for the small things. Offer up thanks to Him in a world that is experiencing corruption. Gratitude is a powerful medicine in the midst of the sickness that we are walking in.

Maybe today, for you, it is a very hard day. Today is a hard day for me. I can be thankful today. I am thankful today. I'm thankful for this day. I opened my eyes. I'm thankful that I had a car to drive here. And even though the check engine light has been going on for a while, I'm thankful. I’m going to choose it. Thankful for you. thankful for my family, I'm thankful for the afternoon the Lord has given me. I'm thankful for the nap that I hope I am going to have. I'm thankful in the midst of a world that is corrupted. Being thankful, having a heart full of gratitude, can be an incredibly rebellious act in the midst of a corrupted world. So, we've been given today. Jesus said it like this. “Don't worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow has got enough trouble. Instead, seek first the kingdom of God. Seek first its righteousness and all these other things He will add unto you.” We only have today; we don't know what tomorrow holds. So, let us be a people that today turn our hearts to Him. Thank Him for what He has given us today. And seek our ultimate meaning and fulfillment in Him and in Him alone. Let's pray together.

> *Our Father, we come to You, acknowledging that there are so many things that we are tempted to trust. There are so many places we are tempted to find meaning and purpose and wholeness, and to be filled up with and in, and we confess those to You. We confess that we want to be people to find our joy in You, and in You alone, to find contentment in You and in You alone. And so we do ask, by Your grace, will You empower us to be people that look around and see Your gifts and Your blessings everywhere? And help us to be people that are quick to give thanks. And that thanks might be pouring forth from our lips towards You always, even in the midst of a world that is broken. We ask that You would empower us to do just this, to live this way by your Spirit, and we pray these things in the name of Your Son, Amen.*

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