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THE UPPER ROOM

WHERE THE WORLD MEETS TO PRAY

Susan Hibbins

UK editor

INTERDENOMINATIONAL

INTERNATIONAL

INTERRACIAL

33 LANGUAGES

Multiple formats are available in some languages

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How to use *The Upper Room*

The Upper Room is ideal in helping us spend a quiet time with God each day. Each daily entry is based on a passage of scripture, and is followed by a meditation and prayer. Each person who contributes a meditation to the magazine seeks to relate their experience of God in a way that will help those who use *The Upper Room* every day.

Here are some guidelines to help you make best use of *The Upper Room*:

1. Read the passage of Scripture. It is a good idea to read it more than once, in order to have a fuller understanding of what it is about and what you can learn from it.
2. Read the meditation. How does it relate to your own experience? Can you identify with what the writer has outlined from their own experience or understanding?
3. Pray the written prayer. Think about how you can use it to relate to people you know, or situations that need your prayers today.
4. Think about the contributor who has written the meditation. Some *Upper Room* users include this person in their prayers for the day.
5. Meditate on the 'Thought for the day' and the 'Prayer Focus', perhaps using them again as the focus for prayer or direction for action.

Why is it important to have a daily quiet time? Many people will agree that it is the best way of keeping in touch every day with the God who sustains us, and who sends us out to do his will and show his love to the people we encounter each day. Meeting with God in this way reassures us of his presence with us, helps us to discern his will for us and makes us part of his worldwide family of Christian people through our prayers.

I hope that you will be encouraged as you use the magazine regularly as part of your daily devotions, and that God will richly bless you as you read his word and seek to learn more about him.

Susan Hibbins
UK Editor

Inspired to forgive

‘Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive’ (Colossians 3:13, NRSV).

I remember the first time I visited a women’s prison. Members of a local congregation in Salta, Argentina, went to this prison regularly, and they invited me to join them as the celebrant for a Communion service with the women. The prison was unlike those I was familiar with in the United States. This one was more like a large house with guards and security at the entrance. The women mixed together freely, washing their clothes and hanging them in the yard to dry, raising their children, and helping one another with other daily chores. It was almost as if they were a family—guards and inmates alike. As with any family, strong emotions often arose among them. If you were getting along with the other inmates and the guards, life was good; if you weren’t, life could be miserable.

After celebrating Communion, an inmate named Ana told me about a particular meditation from *El Aposento Alto*, the Spanish edition of *The Upper Room*, which had affected her. The meditation described how the guards in a men’s prison asked a minister to hold a Communion service for both the guards and the inmates. The guards said that they wanted to overcome any animosity that either they or the inmates had for each other. The story inspired Ana, and it led her to forgive one of her guards and build a friendship with her. Ana asked me if I would sign a copy of *El Aposento Alto* as a gift to the guard.

Thinking about my conversation with Ana, I realised that this is what Communion is about: forgiveness, renewal and love. For me, this story represents the power of *The Upper Room*: Christians across the world learning from one another and supporting each other in their journeys of faith. My prayer is that each of us will find in the pages of this magazine the encouragement to forgive and to love as Ana did.

Carmen Gaud

Former Editor, El Aposento Alto

Where the world meets to pray

Pakistan: Since 1952, *The Upper Room* has been translated into Urdu, the national language of Pakistan.



India: In Odisha, churches and schools use *The Upper Room* during daily quiet time. The magazine ‘inspires young people to have Christ-centred lives,’ says Manasi Mohanty, the Odia edition’s editor.

Sri Lanka: The publishing team in Sri Lanka hopes to lead devotional writing workshops to encourage readers to share their faith stories.

Susan Hibbins writes...

Recently my daily Bible reading was the story of the feeding of the five thousand in John 6:1–13. I thought back to my Sunday school days, when this was a familiar passage, and we were encouraged to be like the boy who brought all that he had and gave it to Jesus.

There are a number of interpretations of what actually happened that day: Jesus literally turned the small amount of food into enough to feed the multitude of people who had come to hear him; or, when people saw the boy's example, they followed it and began to share what they had with their neighbours, so that all were fed, being two examples.

What struck me when reading this story again was the comments of the disciples, and what Jesus was trying to teach them—and us—through what happened that day. Jesus, seeing the crowd arriving, asked them, 'Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?' Reasonably enough perhaps, Philip replies that it would cost an enormous amount of money to buy sufficient bread for the crowd to have even a small amount each. Now is the moment that Andrew brings forward the boy who has 'five small barley loaves and two small fish', but, says Andrew, 'how far will they go among so many?' But in Jesus' hands, the food becomes more than enough for everyone to share, and there is plenty left over.

Are we like the disciples that day? We may feel we have little to offer to Jesus, or we look at other people and feel that they have much more in the way of ability or talent, compared to ourselves. How can we make a difference in our church life, or in our walk of discipleship? How can we, with our meagre resources, help even those around us, let alone those in the wider world?

The truth is that if we bring whatever we have to Jesus, whether it is a tangible material gift, or our own time, talent or other ability, he can use and multiply it beyond anything we can imagine. Two small fish and five small bread rolls became enough to feed a huge crowd: what could he do in the world today with what each of us can give to him?

Susan Hibbins

Editor of the UK edition

The Bible readings are selected with great care, and we urge you to include the suggested reading in your devotional time.

Family Faith

Read Proverbs 3:3–6

Trust in the Lord with all your heart.

Proverbs 3:5 (NIV)

I became the first Christian in my family and the joy I found in Jesus Christ led me to speak the good news. But I was rejected by my own family. My sister did not want me to practise my Christian faith in our shared bedroom—no Bible, no prayer, no Christian radio, no praise. My heart was broken, and I cried out to God, ‘Lord, I have been praying for my family to know you, but now I have nowhere to pray.’

I heard a small voice telling me, ‘Seon, why do you think you have nowhere to pray? Pray in the bathroom.’ I was surprised, but this message from God brought comfort to my broken heart.

We had two bathrooms in our house. I asked my family to use the bathroom next to the living room while I prayed in the other one from midnight to 1 am. The first night I sat on the edge of the bath and burst into tears. But as I read the Bible and prayed, God’s peace and grace surrounded me. God turned my sorrow into joy.

That’s how my ‘bathroom years’ began; every night, I felt as if I were going to the seashore to meet my Lord Jesus. By God’s grace, my parents and sister later became Christians. Sometimes when I have a problem or need a deep conversation with God, I still pray in the bathroom, trusting that God will meet me there.

Prayer: *Dear God, bless our hearts to trust you and your word, so that we keep praying for our loved ones who are not Christian. Amen*

Thought for the day: To whom can I speak good news today?

Young Seon Kim (Tanzania)

Every Believer's Call

Read Galatians 6:1–6

Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2:5 (NRSV)

As an Upper Room staff member who is blind, I have shared laughter and tears with our Braille readers. While I initially contacted them about subscriptions, together we have found an unbreakable bond in Christ Jesus. These conversations reminded me that we are called to be a holy priesthood in Jesus Christ. But what does that mean?

As priest of Israel, Aaron interceded for the people—demonstrated by the breastplate he wore: ‘Aaron shall bear the names of the children of Israel in the breastplate of judgment upon his heart’ (Exodus 28:29, KJV). Aaron carried the children of Israel upon his heart as he prayed and offered sacrifices for them.

We are called to do the same for one another, following Paul’s exhortation to bear one another’s burdens in Christ. In this way we fulfil that call to be priests, living stones and spiritual houses. While talking with my fellow readers of the Braille edition of *The Upper Room*, it would have been easy to say, ‘That’s not my concern.’ But how could I hear their joys and sorrows without bearing their burdens with them? Such is the call to every believer in Christ. He bore on the cross the burden of humanity’s sin so that we can all live abundant lives as forgiven people.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, soften our hearts to those around us and help us to show them your love. Amen*

Thought for the day: We can imitate Christ by helping to bear one another’s burdens.

Brooke Pernice (Tennessee, US)

The Wind at Your Back

Read Revelation 21:1–7

Your sun shall no more go down, or your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.

Isaiah 60:20 (NRSV)

I once told someone about my struggles with a habitual sin. I asked for advice and support. The response was ‘Well, if you’re a Christian, you shouldn’t have any trouble controlling your demons.’

I wanted to scream: ‘That’s not helpful, nor is it true!’ We are Christians because we have accepted that we are sinful and need God’s guidance. Later, I asked God to forgive me for this habitual sin. But even though I knew that God had forgiven me, I continued to be overwhelmed by shame and guilt.

One Sunday, my pastor preached on God’s limitless grace: ‘Sin will always be with us,’ she said, ‘but we need to confess our wrongdoings to the Lord and to move on. Forget about it. After all, doesn’t God forget about it?’ Her words lifted my spirits. She was absolutely right. But I still struggle to let go of the past and focus on improving in the future.

A family member once told me, ‘God is the wind at your back, not the rain in your face.’ God doesn’t hold us back, constantly reminding us of our sin. He guides us forward. We may be the rain in our own faces. If we continue to forgive ourselves and move beyond our past sins, we can accept God’s new covenant and start fresh.

Prayer: *Dear God, forgive us. Help us to accept your forgiveness and leave the burden of sin behind. Amen*

Thought for the day: God forgives my sins: I can forgive myself.

Nathaniel T. McMaster (Washington, DC, US)

Created for a Purpose

Read Jeremiah 29:11–13

I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

Jeremiah 29:11 (NRSV)

I am only four feet seven inches tall. At school, I was constantly teased about my height. The ugly words troubled me. One day I asked God, ‘Why did you make me so small?’

Now I am a special education teacher who specialises in teaching pupils with impaired vision. Early in my work as a specialist, the school wanted to place a pupil who was blind into a pre-school class with sighted children. I would assist him as the teacher gave instruction to the whole class. This had never been done before.

On his first day of lessons I led Carlos into the room and sat beside him. As the teacher greeted the class I whispered to him, ‘I’m right here.’ A spiritual insight surged through me. God was saying, ‘For this purpose I created you.’

Being small was perfect: I fitted into the pupils’ tiny chairs and was able to sit by their desks. I taught Carlos to read Braille and helped him achieve success in grade after grade until he left high school. With God’s help, I was able to teach students with special needs for 20 years. I am thankful that the Lord used me, all four feet seven inches, to help so many people.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, help us to trust your design. Thank you for helping us to persevere. Amen*

Thought for the day: God has a purpose for me.

Marion Young (Texas, US)

Kindling

Read Matthew 4:12–17

[Jesus said] 'I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!'

Luke 12:49 (NIV)

In more recent years we have been blessed with central heating in the house. It responds to our need for warmth with just the press of a switch. It wasn't always like that—as I recalled on holiday when we stayed in a remote rural cottage. I found myself once again kneeling in front of a long-dead fire, brushing ashes out of the grate before relaying kindling wood and small coal ready to be relit in the evening.

Although it may have seemed a daily chore in past years, cleaning out the grate was a useful morning exercise with a spiritual meaning: there can be no new fire without first cleaning out the old ashes.

I sometimes long for greater enthusiasm among people of faith—and in myself—and I am challenged by the words of Jesus as he longed for his 'kingdom fire' to be lit in the whole world. From the very beginning of his ministry Jesus taught that repentance and moving on from the past is the key to rekindling our trust in God. A deeper spiritual life and gospel enthusiasm follow a cleaning out of old things—the old me—ready for a Spirit-spark.

I think I miss that morning fire-lighting, and its daily spiritual challenge!

Prayer: *Lord, clean me out. Relight the fire of your love in me. Amen*

Thought for the day: Each new day we can be rekindled by God's grace.

Colin Harbach (Cumbria, England)

The Question

Read 2 Corinthians 11:16–33

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

Philippians 4:11 (NIV)

After my first few months working overseas—struggling with learning a new language and experiencing a culture very different from my own—I was beginning to have a negative attitude. Then the Holy Spirit brought to my mind my last training session for this work. I looked up the verse quoted above and remembered the question our mentor asked us after reading Philippians 4: ‘Have you really learned to trust the Lord and be content in all circumstances?’

Paul’s words encouraged me but were also convicting. He experienced persecution, imprisonment and other trials; yet he learned to be content. I realised that, in comparison, my troubles were very small. I prayed, and the Lord restored my trust that he would help me to be content whatever challenges I encounter.

When we pray about our struggles and seek God’s help, we become newly aware of his power in our lives. The same power that raised Jesus from the grave can transform us, giving us joyful hearts and grateful spirits no matter what comes our way.

Prayer: *Dear God, help us to trust you and be content, knowing that your deep love for us will see us through. Amen*

Thought for the day: I can overcome difficulties with God’s help.

Karol Ruth Whaley (California, US)

Learning to Listen

Read Mark 4:21–25

Jesus said, 'Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.'

John 5:24 (NIV)

My husband and I have been birdwatching together for 20 years. Recognising bird songs helps us to know which bird is near so that we can more easily spot it. At first I only recognised a few songs, but now I know the songs of all the birds in our area.

One spring morning, my husband and I paused on our walk through the woods to listen for more birds. The symphony of birdsong that morning reminded me of Jesus' words in today's reading: 'Consider carefully what you hear...' (Mark 4:24). I paused to think: have I been as attentive to words from God as I should be? Do I focus as carefully on God as I did to learn each individual bird song?

Paying careful attention to scripture, sermons and God's whispers in our hearts helps us grow in faith. If we devote all our attention to careful listening, as I did when learning bird songs, we can increase our understanding and insight. But if we fail to pay attention, we may lose our perception of Christ and God's kingdom. We can make a commitment to listen for God with eagerness and attentiveness so that we may deepen our faith.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, please help us to be attentive to you so that we may grow in faith and in our knowledge of you. Amen*

Thought for the day: How can I pay more attention to God today?

Eugenie Daniels (Massachusetts, US)

Using Time Wisely

Read Ephesians 5:1–20

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.

Ephesians 5:15–16 (NRSV)

One night, after a period of feeling detached from God, I received word that one of my childhood friends had died in a tragic traffic accident. The news was so painful that I felt as if I had died inside, but it also caused me to reflect on my life in an extraordinary way and turn back to God. The worst pain of all was wondering why it had taken such a tragic event to make me reflect on my life and seek God again. As with many of the mysteries in this life, I still do not have an answer. The only thing I know with certainty is that I don't want to be detached anymore from the one who gave me life, from the Lord of hosts, from my loving Father.

Many of us can be ambitious about our finances, social position and recognition, but sometimes we forget that the Lord has given us these lives we cherish. When I find myself striving for success I have to ask myself: am I putting my time to good use? Am I really living as if this were my last day? These and other questions help to transform my thinking. God, who is rich in mercy, gives us opportunities again and again to repent of our wrongdoings and foolishness. When we do so, we can feel reborn.

Prayer: *Dear God, remind us that you are the one who gives us life. And help us to cherish each day. Amen*

Thought for the day: Each day of life is a sacred gift from God.

Wendy Orellana (Barquisimeto, Venezuela)

Clean Viewing

Read Matthew 23:23–26

Rid yourselves of all the offences you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit.

Ezekiel 18:31 (NIV)

Winter seemed to drag on for months and left all the windows of our home covered with a dull film. On the first nice day of spring, my wife washed them. She went from one to the next, scrubbing and cleaning. Later, as we looked out of a window together, she said, ‘How bright and new the world looks through clean windows!’

This experience reminded me of how my perspective changed when I first accepted Christ. Suddenly everything and everyone seemed sacred. I saw God’s presence everywhere. I wondered how I had missed seeing this for so long. Then I realised that the world hadn’t changed; I had been changed.

True, there is evil in the world, but God’s love is always working in the world too. He calls us to repent and to seek clean hearts. Living in unrepentant sin gives each day a dark and ominous feeling. However, with repentance and forgiveness, every day takes on a bright, clean appearance. The change can be like beginning a new life.

Prayer: *Dear God, fill our hearts with your love so that we can share it with people we encounter. Amen*

Thought for the day: God’s love fills us with the light of new life.

Gale A. Richards (Iowa, US)

God the Mother

Read Hosea 11:1–4

As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.

Isaiah 66:13 (NRSV)

‘My translation says something different here,’ my friend said. We were leading a discussion on Psalm 91 and its comparison of God to a fortress that can protect and shield us. But we began talking about the bird imagery in verse 4. Our German language Bibles had contained very different imagery. One translation, a paraphrase edition, compared God to a mother hen; the other, Luther’s translation, spoke of God as a bird with strong, sheltering wings. My friend liked the image of God as an eagle with strong wings to shelter us. I agreed at the time; but the more I thought about it, the more I realised that I actually disagreed.

As I get older, I appreciate more and more everything my mother has done for me: the sleep lost; the hours spent playing with me; driving me everywhere and helping me with homework; the laundry washed; the wisdom offered; the prayers prayed. How much she must have given up so that she could always be there for me!

I love the image of God as a mother, there for her children all the time, caring for them and sacrificing for them. God is our protector; but he is also our comforter.

Prayer: *God, our protector and comforter, thank you for caring for us, your children. Thank you for images that give us a deeper understanding of you. Amen*

Thought for the day: God is both mother and father for us.

Alina Kanaski (Pennsylvania, US)

Unchanging Values

Read Micah 6:6–8

What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8 (NIV)

When asking for directions to a certain shop, a friend who was new to our town asked me, ‘Is it on the right side of the street or the left side?’ I replied that it depended on where he was coming from. ‘If you’re coming from the sugar factory, it’s on the left side of the street.’ That didn’t seem to help, so I just said that it’s on the west side of the street. West—like north, east and south—does not depend on where you’re coming from. It is fixed and unchanging.

Some parts of our lives can be a matter of individual choice: clothes, food, hobbies. But for Christians, compassion, honesty, peace-seeking and justice are non-negotiable. We are called by Jesus to practise compassion and honesty, to seek peace and justice, and to be loyal to God in every situation. These ways of Christian living are as unchanging as the cardinal points on the compass. They are the standards by which Jesus lived and to which he has called us to live.

Prayer: *Thank you, Holy One, for all of the opportunities you put before us. Help us to honour Jesus’ call for peace and compassion as we pray, ‘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.’* Amen*

Thought for the day: Jesus calls me to a life of compassion, honesty, peace and justice.

Philip A. Rice (Michigan, US)

Unflinching Devotion

Read Psalm 149:1–5

Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ.

Colossians 3:23–24 (NRSV)

My elder brother takes great delight in his service to God. Most weekends, he wakes up early and joins the women in our local church in keeping the chapel clean. He is also zealous in his participation in the church's drama group, always ministering to the glory of God.

As he has served, God has opened a new door for him. He was awarded a scholarship to study for a master's degree in agriculture at the University of Kent. After completing his 14-month-long studies, he returned to Nigeria and continued with his unflinching devotion to ministry for God.

One Sunday morning, the women in our church, who were inspired by his committed service to the church and to God, decided to honour him, conferring on him a 'disciple of the year' award. My family was amazed at this great honour.

Through my brother's example, the words of the scripture quoted above came alive for all of us in a new way. His continued dedication has inspired a younger generation to devote their time in service to God and to their brothers and sisters wherever they find them.

Prayer: *Gracious God, help us to work humbly in your service so that all may know that you are God. Amen*

Thought for the day: God rewards the faithful with joy.

Ibifubara Okoseimiema (Rivers State, Nigeria)

No One to Help

Read John 5:1–9

At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

John 5:9 (NIV)

It was the Sabbath. Jesus and the disciples were in Jerusalem when they encountered a number of people who were blind, sick and lame waiting by the pool of Bethesda. These people believed that its water possessed healing powers. While walking by the pool, Jesus encountered a man who had been ill for a long time. Jesus showed mercy to the man and healed him.

Jesus' encounter with the man by the pool tugs at my heart. When Jesus asked him if he wanted to get well, the man replied 'I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.' When I read these words, I picture the man trying to get into the pool and missing his opportunity every time—for 38 years—until the day Jesus walked by and the man's life changed for ever.

This passage from John's Gospel reminds us that no matter how hard we try, some things cannot be accomplished without the help of Christ. Too often I have tried to succeed on my own, only to have someone '[go] down ahead of me'. Eventually, Jesus has come along to tell me to 'pick up [my] mat' and to trust his way and his power for my life.

Prayer: *Father God, thank you for being with us; we cannot make it on our own. Amen*

Thought for the day: Christ stands ready to help me.

Sherri Tuck (Virginia, US)

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