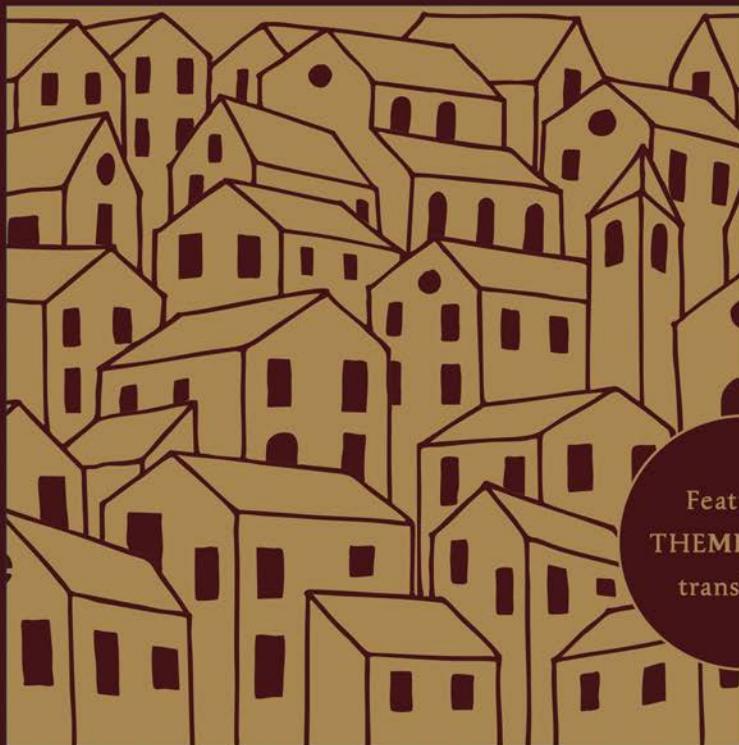


CRUCIFIXION

GOD IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD BIBLE STUDIES



Featuring
THEMESSAGE
translation

8 Lessons on How God Saves Us

DEREK VREELAND

The most sublime mystery in the Christian faith is the incarnation of God in Christ. “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14), as Eugene Peterson’s memorable translation puts it. Now Derek Vreeland has adapted *The Message* translation to lead us in a biblical exploration of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection in a fresh way for small groups and individuals alike.

BRIAN ZAHND, author of *The Wood Between the Worlds*

Derek has accomplished something rare with the God in the Neighborhood Bible Studies. His work is rich and deep, saturated in Scripture and theologically sound, yet it also reveals a profound attention to the condition of our hearts. Through heartfelt prayers and spiritually attuned pastoral leadership, Derek invites us into the all-important work of Christlikeness. God in the Neighborhood is sure to deepen our affection for Christ and exhort us to enjoy closer fellowship with our incarnate, crucified, and risen Savior, Jesus.

KAT ARMSTRONG, Bible teacher, podcast host, and author of the **Storyline Bible Studies** series

Vreeland artfully guides us into Scripture’s wild country, where we see with fresh eyes the wonder of the human God.

WINN COLLIER, pastor, director of the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination, and author of *A Burning in My Bones: The Authorized Biography of Eugene H. Peterson* and *Love Big, Be Well*

With theological depth and pastoral warmth, Derek Vreeland leads us into Scripture using the down-to-earth beauty of *The Message* translation to reveal the wonder of God made flesh. What I love most about this study is how it keeps our eyes on Jesus—God with us—and at the same time helps us imagine how that truth reshapes how we live with and for our neighbors. It is prophetic and hopeful, grounded and transformative.

JULIET LIU, pastor of Life on the Vine Christian Community

Derek Vreeland serves as a thoughtful guide in this excellent Bible study. I especially appreciate the way each lesson is structured in four sections, offering space for journaling and prayer. It's a rich resource—perfect for personal reflection as well as group study.

TIM WILDSMITH, pastor, professor, YouTuber, and author of *Bible Translations for Everyone* and *Daily Scripture Guidebook*

In the *God in the Neighborhood Bible Studies*, my friend Derek Vreeland opens up the heart of the gospel not as a collection of abstract doctrines but as the truth of God to be lived every moment, every day, wherever we are. *Incarnation* reveals God drawing near. *Crucifixion* displays God's self-giving love. *Resurrection* announces that hope is stronger than despair. These studies are grounded in the story of Scripture, pastoral in tone, and deeply practical. Derek writes as both a pastor and a friend, guiding us gently toward Jesus. As you work through these studies, you will find that God is not only in heaven above us but also alive in the laughter, sorrows, and stories of the place you call home.

TOMMY BROWN, author of *The Speed of Soul*

As Christians we know that Jesus is the face of God (2 Corinthians 4:6), which means that every contour of the Scripture is but the outline of the face of the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected one; the one in whom is all the fullness of the Godhead (Colossians 2:9), in whose presence we melt in adoration and worship. We believe this—but sometimes it is difficult to see. We need wise guides to help us not only recognize his face but also hear his voice and follow him where he goes—into the country of sin and death to seek and save the lost. I commend to you this series by Derek Vreeland—biblical, accessible, pastoral, wise. A resource that will edify believers old and new.

ANDREW ARNDT, lead pastor at New Life East and author of *A Strange and Gracious Light*

Writing a good resource on the crucifixion of Jesus is difficult to do. It probably doesn't seem that way at first; what could be more quintessential to Christianity than a Bible study on the death of Jesus? But this is precisely what makes it difficult. These discussions have been had so often—and had so poorly—that we tend to push them away. But Vreeland has given us something reliable here in this work. This study doesn't manipulate the reader or cheapen the story of Jesus' death. It helps us relate to the power of the crucifixion in our concrete experience and apply it to our own lives. Jesus moved into the neighborhood, and we already live in one! Vreeland helps us see why this matters.

MARTY SOLOMON, author of *Asking Better Questions of the Bible* and creator of *The BEMA Podcast*

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8 Lessons on How God Saves Us

DEREK VREELAND

NavPress 

Published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers



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Crucifixion: 8 Lessons on How God Saves Us

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ISBN 978-1-64158-988-8

Printed in the United States of America

32 31 30 29 28 27 26
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Taylor

May your wishes all come true



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The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.
We saw the glory with our own eyes,
the one-of-a-kind glory,
like Father, like Son,
Generous inside and out,
true from start to finish.

JOHN 1:14

AS WE BEGIN

An Introduction to Crucifixion

The cross remains the central symbol of our faith because Jesus' death on the cross is at the heart of what Christians believe. As the apostle Paul declares in Romans, "God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him" (Romans 5:8), and love is what prompted the Word to move into the neighborhood. We have been given access to God's neighboring presence not because of any righteous action of our own but because of the precious blood of Jesus shed for us: "It was a perfect sacrifice by a perfect person to perfect some very imperfect people" (Hebrews 10:14).

Jesus died for us to both rescue and reveal. The blood of Jesus *rescues* us from all the corrupting power of sin, hell, and death. And the cross *reveals* the nature of God and the very essence of the Kingdom of God. At the cross we see King Jesus

- not conquering but going down in defeat,
- not killing his enemies but being killed,
- not shouting but silenced,
- not thriving but suffering,
- not retaliatory but forgiving,
- not triumphant but disgraced,
- not glorious but hideous,
- not exalted but humiliated,
- not celebrated but mocked,
- not grandiose but pitiful,

- not regal but repulsive, and
- not revered but ridiculed.

Through his death, Jesus shows us the heart of God the Father. The cross reveals that the Kingdom of God comes through cosuffering love. Crucifixion is not how rulers take their thrones—it's how criminals meet their doom. Yet we can only understand the depths of the meaning of the cross by looking at it through the resurrection. If the gospel ended with the cross, it wouldn't be good news at all. The resurrection of Jesus changes how we see the cross (but that is the subject of book 3 in this Bible study series). The task before us in these lessons is to see *who God is* and *how God saves us*.

God could have chosen to save the world in any way God wanted, but the God of infinite power and might chose to save us by moving into the neighborhood, becoming one of us, and joining us in death through a hideous death of his own and then joining us in new life by rising from the dead. This unimaginable way of saving the world shows us what God is like. God is cosuffering, and God's love is self-giving. From the vantage point of the resurrection of Jesus, we see the cross as the center of everything—the center of the Kingdom of God; the center of God's rescuing, revealing, and restoring work; and the center of God's new world! But it isn't the cross alone. The saving work of Jesus begins with his virgin birth. Jesus' birth saves us from isolation. His cross saves us from sin. His resurrection saves us from death. All these actions work together in a beautiful act of redemption . . . and the cross remains at the center of it all.

The lessons in this Bible study explore the mystery of the crucifixion, God joining us in death to set us free. This study fits well with the season of Lent, particularly Holy Week and Good Friday, but it can be used at any time during the year. We begin in the Old Testament with Psalm 22, a psalm of David that speaks prophetically of the crucifixion of Jesus. This lesson leads us to the next one as we consider the words of Isaiah 53 regarding the then-forthcoming suffering of Israel's king. From here we move on to the New Testament, to the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus reveals the purpose in his impending death, not by lecturing his disciples but by serving them a meal with bread and wine.

From our lesson in Matthew, we push on in the New Testament with stops in Romans, Ephesians, Hebrews, 1 Peter, and 1 Thessalonians. The Spirit-inspired

writers of these letters reflect on the meaning of Jesus' death, emphasizing themes of God's love, the welcoming of non-Jewish people into God's covenant family, Jesus as the new and better High Priest, and healing found in the wounds of Jesus. We find not one way to think about the implications of Jesus' death for us but rather a variety of ways in which Jesus' blood rescues us and reveals God's love to us. We are invited to bring our woundedness to the wounds of Jesus, where we find healing and new life.

This Bible study series uses the beauty and sacredness of ordinary language found in *The Message*, a contemporary and imaginative translation of the Bible, to lead you on a journey through the Scriptures to encounter Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection. The series is broken into three parts:

Book 1, *Incarnation*, dives deep into the mystery of the incarnation, where God meets us, joining us in life.

Book 2, *Crucifixion*, reflects on Jesus' execution, where God joins us in death, and in doing so, saves us.

Book 3, *Resurrection*, leads us on an Easter journey, where God joins us in life anew to restore us to what we were created to be: image bearers of the God of love.

When we realize that God is with us in life, we *come alive*. When we understand that God is with us in death, we *believe*. When we experience God-With-Us in new life, we *participate*. These studies are designed to bring you into "God's neighboring presence," a phrase I picked up from Eugene Peterson.¹ The coming of Jesus marks God moving into our neighborhood, and he is present with us as personally as any of our neighbors.

How to Use This Bible Study

Lessons in these Bible studies are designed for either individual reflection or group study in small groups, Sunday school classes, or home groups. You are invited to use these Bible studies for your own personal growth and spiritual formation. Lessons are made up of four parts—"The Approach," "The Word," "The Neighborhood," and "The Prayer." Here is how each lesson is structured.

The Approach: Setting the Scene

We begin with an introduction to the Scripture passage from *The Message* we will cover in each lesson. “The Approach” ends with starter questions to get you thinking (if you are reading on your own) or to help your group begin sharing with one another.

The Word: Diving into Scripture

Following our introduction and opening questions, we turn our attention to a particular passage of Scripture and dig in, looking at the uniqueness of the language of *The Message*. In his translation, Eugene Peterson sought to break down the dividing wall between so-called secular and so-called sacred language. For Peterson, *all* language is sacred because it is all a gift from God.² Questions are provided here, as well, to encourage you to enter the text more fully.

The Neighborhood: Living It Out

We will wrap up each lesson by looking outward toward our own neighborhoods, asking how the passage of Scripture calls us to live in the way of Jesus while we are among our real flesh-and-blood neighbors. Following Jesus is not merely gaining knowledge and categorizing God facts. Following Jesus is a way of living shaped by the Holy Spirit around the death and resurrection of Jesus so that our lives look like dying to self and rising to reflect the life of Jesus. Reflection questions guide this outward focus on how we live in our neighborhoods filled with real people who may or may not identify as Christians.

The Prayer: Drawing Near to God

Each lesson concludes with a prayer drawn from the specific Bible passage used in that lesson.

There are companion videos available on my website here:



Before You Start

If you are using these Bible studies on your own, find a quiet and comfortable place to read. Before you start a lesson, take a deep breath, exhale slowly, and offer a brief prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to work with Holy Scripture to show you the ways of Jesus. As you are reading, feel free to jot down responses to the questions throughout each lesson.

If you are using these Bible studies in a group, take turns introducing yourself to the group; perhaps you could each share why you are in this Bible study or what you hope to get out of it. Open with prayer, asking Jesus to pour out the Holy Spirit on your group so that the Holy Spirit will be your teacher and guide. Identify a group leader to guide the conversation. Give people a few moments to reflect on the questions through the study, and then invite them to share with the group their thoughts and answers to the questions. Don't rush people to answer. Trust and learn from silence.

Whether you're doing this study on your own or in community, if you are able, read all Scripture passages out loud and pray the prayer at the end of each lesson aloud.

I love Jesus. I've loved Jesus since I was fifteen years old, and after all these years, I *still* love Jesus, because he never ceases to amaze and surprise me. And I love leading Bible studies, because when we take time to study Holy Scripture, God always surprises me with new details that make me ponder. My prayer is that you will grow in gratitude through these Bible studies and see with greater clarity what God has done for us in and through Jesus. I pray you will grow in your knowledge of the ways of Jesus and feel the nudging of the Holy Spirit to live out what you believe.

Derek Vreeland
Lent 2025



LESSON 1

I NEED A NEIGHBOR

The Approach

I got bitten by a snake once, a *poisonous* snake, while camping alone in the backcountry, and instead of hiking out of the woods, I went to sleep.

In September 2021, I was hiking solo on the Eagle Rock Loop nestled in the Ouachita National Forest in western Arkansas. I started hiking around two o'clock in the afternoon and didn't see any other hikers until I made camp near a creek four miles down the trail. Two young male hikers passed by as I was setting up my camp. We talked for a bit before they headed down the trail to camp near the parking lot where their truck was parked. I washed up in the creek and changed into dry clothes (my hiking clothes were soaked with sweat). I made a good-sized campfire as the sun was setting. After dark I realized I hadn't washed my feet, so I grabbed my headlamp and headed back to the creek.

My campsite was in a clearing about 150 feet down a spur trail right off the main trail. With my headlamp illuminating the way, I turned right to walk down the main

trail to the creek. I slipped off my shoes, dipped both feet in the cool, flowing creek, and cleaned them as well as I could. I used a bandana to dry my feet, stood up, and started walking up the trail, looking left for the spur trail back to my camp. But there was a problem: I couldn't find it. I walked back down to the creek, adjusted my headlamp to the brightest setting, and started over. I slowly made my way up the main trail, shining my light to the left, looking for the spur trail . . . and again, I couldn't find it.

I walked back down to the creek and tried to remember how many steps I'd taken on the trail to the creek. I thought it had been fewer than twenty, so I quickly formulated a plan to take seventeen steps up the trail, turn left into the woods, and walk until I found the campsite. I started up the trail for a third time, counting each step. When I got to step seventeen, I turned left and started bushwhacking through the trees, hoping to catch sight of the reflective guylines on my tarp.

It turned out to be a solid plan, but before I could make it back to camp, it felt like my leg caught on a thorny bush. I shined my headlamp down, and to my surprise, I saw a snake slithering away from me. Noticing its half diamond-shaped markings, I immediately stepped back. It was a copperhead, an aggressive (and unfortunately, common) poisonous snake in that area. As the snake continued moving away from me, I looked down again and saw a single puncture wound just above my right ankle leaking blood down into my shoe.

I thought, surprisingly nonchalantly, *Hmm. I think I just got bit by a snake.*

It took no more than ten more steps before I was standing back in my camp. I grabbed my first aid kit, sat down next to what was left of my campfire, and cleaned the wound. I wiped off the blood, dabbed on some antibiotic, covered it with a bandage, and wondered what to do next. I knew it would take two hours to hike back to my car and I'd arrive after midnight. Then I'd need to drive for nearly an hour to find a twenty-four-hour emergency room. My leg near the puncture was not swelling and wasn't red, so I didn't think I was in immediate danger.

All alone in the dark, I offered a brief prayer for wisdom. At that moment I realized how nice it would be to have a neighbor in my camp. I thought about walking down the trail to ask if the two guys I'd chatted with earlier would drive me to a hospital, but it was getting late, and I didn't want to bother them. So I decided to go to sleep and hike out the next morning.

2. When in your life have you felt the most isolated and alone?

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3. When have you experienced the kindness of a neighbor?

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The Word

Jesus came to bring the long and turbulent story of Israel to fulfillment. What God began with the call of Abraham, God fulfilled in Jesus through his birth, teaching, miracles, death, resurrection, and ascension. The story of Jesus, which we celebrate and proclaim, isn't a one-off, stand-alone, generalized story. It's the capstone of a much bigger story—the story of God's work on earth through a particular people at a particular point in history. Jesus himself told his disciples before his ascension, "Everything I told you while I was with you comes to this: All the things written about me in the Law of Moses, in the Prophets, and in the Psalms have to be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44).

Jesus' death and resurrection specifically—which he told his disciples would happen—serve as a fulfillment of the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Jesus continued, “You can see now how it is written that the Messiah suffers, rises from the dead on the third day, and then a total life-change through the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in his name to all nations—starting from here, from Jerusalem! You’re the first to hear and see it. You’re the witnesses” (Luke 24:46-48). Jesus’ hideous death by crucifixion shocked his disciples, but it had been spoken of beforehand in places like Psalm 22. In this ancient prayer, we encounter real human sorrow and a longing for God’s neighboring presence.

God, God . . . my God!

Why did you dump me
miles from nowhere?

Doubled up with pain, I call to God
all the day long. No answer. Nothing.
I keep at it all night, tossing and turning.

PSALM 22:1-2

In an act often called the cry of dereliction, Jesus uttered the opening lines of Psalm 22 while suffering on the cross. In his immense agony, Jesus felt utterly abandoned by God, rejected and forsaken by his Father. Jesus’ very human experience of feeling isolated reveals that while our emotions are real, they do not always communicate the truth about God to us. While Jesus *felt* alone, as if God had dumped him a million miles from nowhere, the truth, which Jesus knew, was that God the Father was—and is—always present.

And you! Are you indifferent, above it all,
leaning back on the cushions of Israel’s praise?
We know you were there for our parents:
they cried for your help and you gave it;
they trusted and lived a good life.

CRUCIFIXION

And here I am, a nothing—an earthworm,
something to step on, to squash.
Everyone pokes fun at me;
they make faces at me, they shake their heads:
“Let’s see how GOD handles this one;
since God likes him so much, let *him* help him!”

PSALM 22:3-8

The Message, working to draw out the richness of the Hebrew language, translates the phrase “enthroned on the praises of Israel” (Psalm 22:3, NLT) as “leaning back on the cushions of Israel’s praise,” which highlights the seemingly accusatory and exasperated tone of a suffering man.

Jesus felt the crushing weight of accusation on the cross. During his crucifixion, soldiers mocked him, and the crowd reviled him. According to Luke’s Gospel, “The people stood there staring at Jesus, and the ringleaders made faces, taunting, ‘He saved others. Let’s see him save himself! The Messiah of God—ha! The Chosen—ha!’” (Luke 23:35). He felt forgotten, as if God didn’t care.

And to think you were midwife at my birth,
setting me at my mother’s breasts!
When I left the womb you cradled me;
since the moment of birth you’ve been my God.
Then you moved far away
and trouble moved in next door.
I need a neighbor.

PSALM 22:9-11

God’s presence—which had at one time been nurturing—could no longer be felt or seen by Jesus on the cross. It felt like God had moved out of the neighborhood and pain, scorn, and suffering had moved in next door instead. As he was dying,

Jesus had neighbors, two thieves crucified along with him, but these were not the neighbors he wanted. One extended nothing but contempt for Jesus and the other asked for remembrance, but neither offered Jesus any help. How could they? Feeling displaced and alone, Jesus longed for the neighboring presence of God, a neighbor who could alleviate his suffering.

Herds of bulls come at me,
 the raging bulls stampede,
 Horns lowered, nostrils flaring,
 like a herd of buffalo on the move.

I'm a bucket kicked over and spilled,
 every joint in my body has been pulled apart.
 My heart is a blob
 of melted wax in my gut.
 I'm dry as a bone,
 my tongue black and swollen.
 They have laid me out for burial
 in the dirt.

PSALM 22:12-15

The mocking crowd surrounding Jesus on the cross, offering nothing more than jeers and contempt, looked like a herd of bulls poised for a stampede. Jesus felt excruciating pain during his crucifixion, a pain felt in every bone, muscle, joint, and organ. As blood leaked from his body, dehydration set in, causing Jesus to exclaim, “I’m thirsty” (John 19:28).

Now packs of wild dogs come at me;
 thugs gang up on me.
 They pin me down hand and foot,
 and lock me in a cage—a bag

CRUCIFIXION

Of bones in a cage, stared at
by every passerby.
They take my wallet and the shirt off my back,
and then throw dice for my clothes.

PSALM 22:16-18

All four Gospel writers record the division of Jesus' clothes by casting lots, the soldiers playing some kind of ancient game of chance (see Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34-35; and John 19:23-24). Jesus' executioners stripped him of his dignity, crucifying him as an unclothed bag of bones and torn flesh for the world to gawk at and revile.

You, GOD—don't put off my rescue!
Hurry and help me!
Don't let them cut my throat;
don't let those mongrels devour me.
If you don't show up soon,
I'm done for—gored by the bulls,
meat for the lions.

PSALM 22:19-21

The plea for help in Psalm 22 is palpable. Jesus felt his life flowing out his body in tears of anguish and blood from open wounds. Death had sunk its sharp teeth like iron spikes into Jesus, ready to devour him. Jesus knew his body would not hold up, and still help was nowhere to be found. As he loudly uttered, "Father, I place my life in your hands!" (Luke 23:46), he took his last breath, trusting in a God who did not rescue him in that moment.

This psalm presents us with several jarring references to suffering and pain. Take a deep breath, and then take a moment to reflect on the following questions.

4. What are the differences between God the Father abandoning Jesus the Son on the cross and Jesus *feeling* abandoned?

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5. Has there been a time when you've endured suffering and there has seemed to be no one there to help? How did that feel or how do you imagine that would feel?

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6. Were you ever ridiculed or mocked during your childhood or teen years? How did you respond or how might you have responded?

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7. What would it have been like to be Jesus in the darkest hour of his suffering?

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8. In that moment on the cross, how did Jesus muster up faith amid suffering?

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The Neighborhood

In our age of increasing technology, we have more forms of digital communication than ever, and yet many people admit feeling lonely and isolated. We pull the car into the garage and close the door, never giving our neighbors the chance to say hello. We speed toward the door of the apartment, hoping not to be caught in a casual conversation with other people living in the building. As an introverted pastor working in an intensely extroverted world, I understand! Nevertheless, we each live in a neighborhood where hurting people are suffering in silence. Certainly we have moments when we need a neighbor, and we can be sure that the people who live near us need a neighbor from time to time too.

9. What can you do to be aware of the neighbors in need where you live?

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10. What are some tangible ways you can point your neighbors to our ever-present God, who is ready to help?

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The Prayer

As you reflect on the needs in your neighborhood or community, offer this prayer.

Lord God, we thank you for your nearness and closeness, especially in moments of pain and stress. We confess that often it feels like you have dumped us off millions of miles away from you. We also confess that we believe you are here, in this moment, by the Spirit, to guide and comfort us. May we perceive your merciful presence and have opportunities to point others to you. In Jesus' name, amen.

