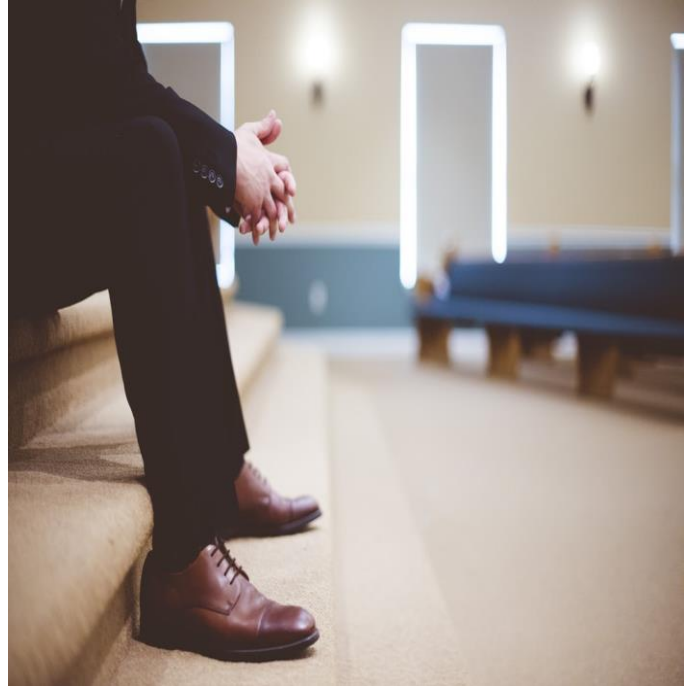




OCTOBER 2020

"HOW LONG...?"

The inner question that lurks around the edges of our dailies



In 2020, all of us have asked many "How long?" questions.

How long will this new wave of the pandemic last? How long will everything seem so tentative or uncertain? How long will politics in the world seem so utterly divisive? How long until greater justice prevails for all people? And on a more personal basis - how long until we can greet each other with a handshake, a hug, or meet safely face to face? How long until I see my relatives again? How long will these often overwhelming feelings of sadness, anxiety, loss, and grief last? There are hundreds and hundreds more "how longs?" Some are simple daily frustrations, some are extraordinarily complex realities, many are both.

Let's bring those hard questions to God together in prayer this month for our citizens of London.

Canadian singer and songwriter Steve Bell beautifully captures this question in his song "How Long" - listen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN314Bm2mHc>. It is inspired by this poignant lament in Psalms 13. *"O LORD, how long will you forget me? Forever? How long will you look the other way? How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul, with sorrow in my heart every day? How long will my enemy have the upper hand? Turn and answer me, O LORD my God! Restore the sparkle to my eyes, or I will die. Don't let my enemies gloat, saying, "We have defeated him!" Don't let them rejoice at my downfall. But I trust in your unfailing love. I will rejoice because you have rescued me. I will sing to the LORD because he is good to me."* Many of the Psalmists asked "How Long?" questions. It is comforting to know that this is not just a 2020 question, but one through all the ages and cultures.

Think for a moment about how many times in the Bible that this question must have been asked. Noah and family could have said it often on an ark with all of those animals and an uncertain future. The Israelites asked it often wandering in the desert for forty years. Job had great reasons to question how long his sufferings would last. Jonah must have cried it out while in the belly of a large fish for three days, because even five minutes there would have seemed like too long!

Jesus himself - fully human, fully God - wondered how long it would take for people to recognize who He was and what He was doing. He knew the agony of waiting, especially in the week before his crucifixion. And his followers must have asked "How long?" in the difficult days following the crucifixion, resurrection and transfiguration. We still ask you God, how long until your Kingdom comes in all its fullness?

Pause for a moment and think about how many times in your life that you have asked "How long, God"? Right now, it feels like being on a train that we cannot get off, that we did not buy a ticket for, we do not know where we are going or how long the journey will be. We confess honestly....most of us are not patient people. Forgive us God.

So we bring to you, Father God, all these cries of our hearts, our "how longs..." Lord, hear our prayers.

We pray for those who have already experienced COVID19 in London and have thankfully recovered, especially those who may be dealing with lingering symptoms. Be present with them. We pray for those who have sadly lost family members to this virus, who may not have had opportunity to grieve that loss well with loved ones. Comfort them daily. We continue to pray for all our healthcare workers who now face the potential of a second wave and wonder how long they can sustain caring, energy and focus in the days ahead. Continue to protect them God and give them peace. We pray for our young people who are recognizing that they too are vulnerable - give them extra wisdom and compassionate hearts beyond their years for those around them. Teach them of community responsibility - it is not easy. And we pray for many, many people who have other pressing health issues besides this virus. We do not forget them. May they also receive the important care and advice they need in timely ways - for appointments, medications, healing, support, surgeries and tests. Give us grateful hearts for our healthcare system.

We pray for our political leaders - civic, provincial, and federal. We know that present, urgent decisions will impact future plans and hopes - there will be many difficult consequences ahead requiring much financial and social wisdom. We do not know how long these difficult days will last. We pray for much needed collaboration, communication, and respect. We especially pray Lord for our American neighbours in the month ahead leading up to their election. Like any neighbour, their choices and challenges will not only impact them but also impact us in Canada and here in London. We need to love them too as we love ourselves. How long can their tensions and conflicts of the last days, months, and years continue? Remind us to pray for them earnestly, just as we pray for our own leaders.

We pray for local pastors and ministry leaders as they continue to figure out weekly what ministry looks like right now. It is not easy, with no 'one size fits all' answers. At a recent CCNL online event with over ninety local Christian leaders, we addressed what it means to lead in times of crisis. How long can they keep going in these new realities? How can all of us as followers of Jesus encourage and support one another? What creative new opportunities can spring up? How will this change the church in the future and how will it affect the culture? How may the gospel move forward? May we be faithful to our calling.

We continue to pray for those who are most vulnerable in our city. All of them have many daily 'How long' questions? *"When will I have an affordable place to call home? How long until I can get help with deepening addictions or food security? Can I even get a job or keep a job? Where do I belong? Who cares what happens to me?"* If many of us have nagging questions, their concerns are amplified many times over - without good supports or family connections, safe housing, mental health or physical health capacity, or any form of financial security. We thank you God for those who help in London - individuals, ministries, city officials, agencies, churches - all seeking to become more proactive in addressing these mounting needs in challenging times. Bless them, strengthen them as they serve. May we work together well to make a difference in precious lives.

We pray also God for justice. How long, O Lord must we, like the widow in Luke 18 "*cry to You day and night*" for justice to be seen? Help us and our church and civic leaders to discern how to bring an end to the systemic racism experienced in our city and society. Give us ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to us as a Christian community through our brothers and sisters of colour. Help us to stand in solidarity with all those who suffer oppression so that we, both individually and as a church community can "do justice" as we also love kindness and walk humbly with You (Micah 6:8). May we share Jesus' heart and mission who said, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has*

anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor".

We pray for the many workplaces in London - for business owners, employers, and employees. All are anxious about how long they can keep going without customers while seeking to respect necessary restrictions. There are many hard choices ahead about sustainability and recovery in order to provide jobs, benefits, training, rent payments, and opportunities. We pray too for all the educational institutions. All of us wonder how long they will be able to safely stay open. Give leaders in these places such nimbleness and responsiveness to know how to engage in these very difficult decisions that may change daily or weekly. We pray for many who are underemployed or jobless right now. May they get financial supports and opportunities to find work.

We pray for so many who are anxious, discouraged, depressed, or overwhelmed. Sit with us God in these times. Give all of us much more patience, sensitivity and grace with one other - in our relationships, in our workplaces, out in our community. We acknowledge Lord, that at times, we are all probably a little snappier, a little tenser, and short of forgiveness. We need you to calm our Spirits, to enter into our conversations, to inhabit our reactions as we engage in these daily new realities. We ask that the evidence of your Spirit in us grow: kindness, gentleness, self-control. We pray for hope to win out in our lives. These verses in Romans 5 seem awfully challenging right now *"We also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."*

Some of us might confess that we honestly don't want to "exult" or "rejoice" in these current challenges. But we will choose to turn our faces towards you God, and pray that you give us sufficient courage to submit to seeking patience and greater perseverance in these tribulations or trouble. Sometimes, we again confess that we just want it to stop! God, keep on teaching us about resiliency, and keep on building into our character. Keep us from petty whining and complaining, attacking and arguing, and undermining your good work in us.

As we do all this, please God give us not only an upward view, but also a constant outward view. Now more than ever, we need to care for those around us. Bless this community of London with extraordinary compassion, generosity, thoughtfulness, and gratitude through you, made alive and present in us. Galatians 5 says this: *"Let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time, we will harvest a good crop if we don't give up, or quit. Right now, therefore, every time we get the chance, let us work for the benefit of all, starting with the people closest to us in the community of faith".*

AMEN - so be it here in London Ontario, in our churches, in our marriages, in our families, and in our neighbourhoods. In our workplaces, in our schools, in our friendships and in our quiet moments. With thankful hearts, we trust in you for the journey.