



Curt Ankeny

My wife Kris and I have lived in Clayton, Ohio, for the past eight years. Our daughter Ariana and her husband Justin live in Florence, Kentucky, with their two sons, Henry (3.5) and Sam (1.5). Ariana is a high school teacher in Kentucky and Justin is an attorney in Cincinnati. Our son Jordan lives in Indianapolis. This past summer we celebrated 35 years of marriage. We are native Oregonians but have lived in the Midwest for the past 27 years, spending time in Iowa, Indiana, and now Ohio. I currently teach political science courses for two community colleges in the area—at the Ivy Tech campus in Richmond, Indiana, and for Edison Community College based in Piqua, Ohio.

I love listening to all kinds of music and know that God speaks to me through song. After several years of consideration, I was inspired to write this series on how God can also speak through the words of songs considered to be “secular.”

In August Kris and I spent some of our vacation with her siblings in Stanley, Idaho. We stayed in a lodge and enjoyed the beauty of the Sawtooth Mountains. In this picture Kris and I are sitting on a fence in front of our future retirement cabin!

BIBLE READING: Psalm 19:1-6

In preparation for this series I felt led to focus on seeing God in the secular or, more accurately, hearing God in what we might consider to be secular music. One of the ways God connects with me is through music. Sometimes in worship the Spirit speaks to me through a hymn we have sung or the special music presented. Other times when I least expect it, my attention is drawn to a phrase I may have sung many times, yet suddenly I hear or see a new truth in the words.

God has also spoken to me as I have listened to some of my favorite groups or singers. Just as during corporate times of worship, a line or a phrase jumps out at me—perhaps for the first time—and it touches something within my soul. Either aware or not, the songwriter was inspired to say something with a deep spiritual meaning. Maybe this experience has happened to you, too. I strongly believe that God uses many ways to communicate truth to us, even unexpected ways.

I am thankful to the members of my family who have provided a song or songs for use in this week's readings. I hope that some of our thoughts are helpful and uplifting to you, perhaps prompting a reminder of a favorite song—secular or spiritual—that held or continues to hold a special meaning for you.

SONG: Open My Eyes, That I May See

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, I thank you for those times where you enter into my thoughts and expose me to new ideas that I had not considered before. Thank you for speaking to me and reminding me of your presence in my life.

—Curt Ankeny

BIBLE READING: Psalm 46

When I asked my wife Kris to suggest a song that has provided her with a nugget of spiritual truth, she chose a song by Don Henley, a former member of the Eagles (a popular band from the 1970s). The song “Learn to Be Still” speaks to the idea that what we need to learn is to be still. I am not sure if Henley thought of Psalm 46:10 when he wrote this song, but he certainly reinforces that gentle command from God “to be still and know that I am God.”

We are like sheep without a shepherd.
We don't know how to be alone.
So we wander 'round this desert.
And wind up following the wrong gods home...
Learn to be still. Learn to be still.

In the hurries of daily life, do we take time to be still and to know God? What would it look like if you or I were to make that an intentional daily practice? A brief pause between meetings, a word of prayer in your car before walking across the parking lot to your office, a quiet prayer for your kids when dropping them off at school and then beginning the day's activities....

Kris noted that this song reminds her of the still, small voice of God. Sometimes, especially in worship, God chooses to speak in such a way to bring our awareness to his presence. We are reminded that God did this when communicating with Elijah in 1 Kings 19:11-12—speaking in a gentle whisper.

SONG: Dear Lord and Father of Mankind

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, I know the busyness of life can sometimes overwhelm me. I pray that I will consciously find times, even if they are brief respites in my busy day, to focus on you and to dwell in your presence.

—Curt Ankeny

BIBLE READING: Philippians 4:10-20

I have been an Eagles fan since they first came on to the music scene in the early 1970s. My brother Robin and I purchased each album as they were released. Don Henley, the former drummer and one of the lead singers, has published some CDs of his own in more recent years. Some of his songs speak to me of a deeper truth, such as “Thanksgiving.” A couple of phrases stand out, particularly the lines:

For everyone who helped me start
And for everything that broke my heart
For every breath, for every day of living
This is my Thanksgiving.

Earlier in the song Henley sings of our country having:
Too many blessings, too little appreciation...
And it’s too long we’ve been living these unexamined lives.

Are we guilty of being ungrateful and discontent with all the things that God has graciously given us? Are we occasionally unhappy with our current status in life or have feelings that life is unfair? Shouldn’t we as Christians be the most grateful people in the world? Can we echo the sentiments of Don Henley? Gratefulness for every breath, every day of living, and small things—family and friends, satisfying work, and even a back that bends.

Paul tells us that he had learned to be grateful in whatever circumstance he was placed, and he was thankful for all the gifts that he had received. Can we say the same thing?

SONG: Thank You, Lord, for Saving My Soul

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Father, thank you so much for all that you have done for me—saving me, loving me, providing for me and my family. Help me to thank you more often for your blessings.

—Curt Ankeny

BIBLE READING: Psalm 139:1-10

One of the most well-known and loved songs of the '70s is "You've Got a Friend," written by Carol King and sung by her and James Taylor. My sister Paula suggested this song; it reminds her that God is always there. "Winter, spring, summer, or fall, all you have to do is call and I'll be there...I'll come running to see you again."

Paula also mentioned that at Newberg Friends Church, this song is sometimes combined with the hymn "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," a further reminder that Jesus is our friend. And like a good friend, Jesus cares for us on many levels, accepting us when we are perhaps not at our best, even bearing our burdens and worries.

Not only is Jesus there for us when we call on him, but he is also running to us and seeking us out, even when we are not in the mood to be with him. In thinking about this second quality, I was reminded of a quote by Henri Nouwen:

"I am beginning to see how radically the character of my spiritual journey will change when I no longer think of God as hiding out and making it as difficult as possible for me to find [God], but instead, as the one who is looking for me while I am doing the hiding" (quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God*, Norman Shawchuck and Rueben Jobs, co-editors, Upper Room Books).

SONG: What a Friend We Have in Jesus

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Jesus, I thank you for the image of you as a friend—one who is always there. May I be a good friend to you and spend as much time together as I can!

—Curt Ankeny

BIBLE READING: Ephesians 5:2

Alison Krauss is a well-known bluegrass artist that both Kris and I enjoy listening to. I have collected many of her CDs, and we had the opportunity to hear her and her group Union Station when they played in Dayton. My sister Lynne, also a fan of Krauss, has sung the song “A Living Prayer” with another local singer in the Boise area.

Krauss is considered a secular artist, but she has written a few songs with an obvious spiritual message. This song suggests how we should live our daily lives—by making our life a “living prayer” to him.

In your love I find relief
A haven from my unbelief
Take my life and let me be
A living prayer, my God, to Thee.

I need to ask myself: Is my life a living prayer to God? Do my attitudes and my comments in front of others—coworkers, family, others close to me—act as a living prayer to God each day? Another stanza of this song contains a reminder that Jesus is always with us, giving us strength:

The way is dark, the road is steep
But He’s become my eyes to see
The strength to climb, my griefs to bear
The Savior lives inside me there.

Do you hear an echo of what we considered yesterday—the fact that Jesus is our friend and companion? That he bears all our sins and grief? What a privilege to take everything to God in prayer!

SONG: Living for Jesus

PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, I praise you, and I am so thankful that you are with me on this journey that we call life. May the life I live indeed be a prayer to you.

—Curt Ankeny

BIBLE READING: Psalm 139:23-24; Romans 12:2

Not only am I a longtime Eagles fan, but I have been a fan of Jackson Browne for many years as well. Browne collaborated with the Eagles on their song “Take It Easy.” His song “Looking East” is one that initially got me thinking about the nuggets of spiritual truth found in secular tunes. Browne’s words speak to me when I hear:

Hunger in the midnight, hunger at the stroke of noon
Hunger in the mansion, hunger in the rented room
Hunger on the TV, hunger on the printed page
And there’s a God-sized hunger underneath the laughing
and the rage.

Blaise Pascal stated, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.” How are we filling that vacuum in our lives? Career, money, material goods? What are we searching for?

I continue to be intrigued by the idea presented by Rufus Jones in his book *The Double Search*. Our search for God is actually a two-way search: we are searching for God as God is searching for us. Jones writes: “Our real search, our divine passion is for that divine Other to whom we belong...the search is a double search. We have learned that the Divine Other whom we seek is also seeking us.” Are we seeking God each day? Are we open to his leading and willing to be “found”?

SONG: Search Me, O God (Cleanse Me)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Dear Lord, help me look deeper to find your truth and not depend upon finding fulfillment in what the world says is important. Thank you for the reminder that you are all I really need in my life.

—Curt Ankeny

BIBLE READING: John 15:12-17

I became aware of the British band Mumford & Sons a couple of years ago when they played with Bob Dylan and the Avett Brothers on the Grammy Awards. I enjoy listening to one of their CDs while driving. One Sunday this past summer, Seth, our music minister, and Dylan, the drummer in our church's praise band, sang the group's song "Awake My Soul" in worship as a duet with piano and cajon drum. Dylan sang the opening solo:

In these bodies we will live, in these bodies we will die
Where you invest your love, you invest your life.

He repeated these lines, and then both sang the chorus:

Awake my soul, awake my soul, awake my soul
You were made to meet your maker
You were made to meet your maker."

This beautiful song especially spoke to me that day in worship. And it raises the question: How are we investing our lives each day? Solely for ourselves? Or are we sharing it with others? I believe God would have us invest in our families, friends, and even strangers.

I am reminded of a quote by Jim Elliott who, with four of his fellow missionaries, died at the hands of the Wadoni Indians in Ecuador in 1955. On October 28, 1949 (exactly 63 years ago as I am writing this devotional!), Elliot wrote: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." I trust all of us are trying to serve God and others the best we can, investing our lives in the lives of others.

SONG: Love Can Change the World

(song by Aaron Niequist, www.aaronniequist.com)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, thank you for the privilege of demonstrating your love by practically investing in the lives of others.

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