



## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur, I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society, and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode. Today, Mark Jefferson is in conversation with CBS Ambassador, Rev. Dr. Andrew Stirling.

Rev. Dr. Mark Andrew Jefferson is an Associate Professor and holds the John Norris Gladstone Chair of Preaching and Worship at Acadia Divinity College, where he also serves as Dean of the Chapel. He's an ordained Baptist minister, a theologian, and a leading voice exploring the intersections of Black worship, preaching, embodiment, and the ways of technology and power that shape our faith communities. His work brings together Black theology sound and the lived experience of the church in a really unique and timely way.

He's preached and taught around the world in his forthcoming book, *Rhythm and Algorithm, Preaching in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, looks at how preaching can become a form of spiritual formation and even resistance in an increasingly digital and algorithm driven world. Mark serves as well as the Martin Luther King Jr. Board of Preachers at the Morehouse College and has been recognized as a Bicentennial Preacher at Virginia Theological Seminary. I hope you enjoy this rich conversation.

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# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

**Andrew Stirling:** Mark, it's my great pleasure to welcome you to Scripture Untangled. I think the first time we met was at the Lester Randall Preaching Fellowship, and you were preaching at a Presbyterian church, and it was great to meet you then, and I've wanted to have this discussion with you ever since.

So welcome to Scripture Untangled, Mark.

**Mark Jefferson:** Well, thank you for the invitation, and to be able to meet the man behind the name means a great deal to me, and so to be able to occupy the place that I occupy is in no small part to you, so I'm glad to be able to have this talk with you.

**Andrew Stirling:** Oh, that's very kind, and I'm pleased to support the work that you do and put my name to it as well as Acadia.

Mark, tell us something briefly about your background in the faith, and who and what were the major influences in the development of that faith?

**Mark Jefferson:** Well, a little snapshot about me. I have recently moved to Canada from the United States. I don't know if that was serendipity or what, but about a year ago I had the opportunity to be able to teach at Acadia Divinity College, where I occupy the John Gladstone Chair of Preaching and Worship, and so being a relative new person to Nova Scotia, I've had a chance to kind of reflect on my journey.

So, I'm from Virginia, native, family is from the American South, and so my education, my formation is taking place in Virginia, Hampton Roads to be exact, formed theologically in that space, in that place. I went to seminary at Candler School of Theology, where I had a chance to study with some really good people there. Atlanta was also a place where I was able to expand my ministry wings, if you will.

I was able to work at some churches of influence, significance, and historical presence, and so that was helpful to cultivate my Baptist imagination. But all the

# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

while, I had a foot in different denominational worlds. My advisor was Presbyterian, I grew up Pentecostal, I was at a Methodist seminary, but I'm being ordained a Baptist.

And then after I finished seminary, I'm accepted to the PhD program there at Emory, where I'm studying homiletics, and I'm getting the academic training to be a preacher, studying with Theresa Fry Brown and Tom Long. But at the same time, I had the opportunity to also work in churches. So, I'm working in churches, I'm pursuing a PhD, and my faith formation in that respect took me to an Episcopal and a Presbyterian seminary.

So, my faith formation was one where I had deep roots in the Bible, deep roots in what Christ's love and sacrifice meant for us all, but where I had a chance to express that has evolved over the years. And to that point, I was raised to have a deep love and a deep faith. I was cultivated by a family who loves God and to this day are very, very fervent in their faith, but their faith wasn't just a pious faith, it was an active faith.

And so, my uncles and my aunts, my grandmothers, they lived a life of faith. My grandfather, Henry Jefferson, he pastored for 47 years, 40 years in the AME Church, seven years in the Baptist Church. My uncle's a pastor; my cousin's a pastor.

So, it's not just a family business, but it's a commitment and a legacy to ministry. And so, I would say my family has been that foremost formative agent in terms of my faith. That's an inheritance and a legacy that we pass on, not just material things, but the legacy of faith.

And so that's a primary mover. And I would say the second influence on my faith would be the mentors that I've had along the way. Not just the pastors, not just the theologians, but mentors in congregations, mentors in barbershops, people who gave me perspective on God beyond the traditional spaces and places.

So, I could say that though I'm deeply formed in the academy, my first orientation to the goodness of God is at the kitchen table and secondly, in the barbershop.

# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

**Andrew Stirling:** That's wonderful. I mean, and the witness of people in every sort of setting does shape us and mold us, doesn't it, Mark? It forms us.

**Mark Jefferson:** Particularly as a preacher, I would say, because I'm awash in their stories. I'm awash in their words. I'm living this life with them.

And so how can I not reflect that engagement when I go to the text, and I go to the world? So, I'm really fortunate.

**Andrew Stirling:** Yeah, indeed you are. You have had in the midst of all this a call to the ministry.

Was there sort of a Biblical text or a story or an image that influenced your decision and that shaped you and the direction of your ministry? Is there anything that you go, oh yeah, that's my kind of calling text, that's my life text?

**Mark Jefferson:** I think I would, but it's a retrospective. Some people had a text early on that spurred them. I don't know if I had a spurring text, if you will.

I think it was just a general sense of devotion and curiosity to the call that led me. But I think as I reflect on my journey, I think about Luke 9.51, where Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem. And as I get older and as I get a chance to engage into the deeper aspects of what it means to pursue this vocation, I can't help but to appreciate that level of calling.

Yes, Jesus was already walking in His calling, but there came a point where the road got narrower. There became a point where the calling made another call. And so, I think that place and that space helps to sum up my ministry vocation.

Yes, I'll call. Yes, I'm called. Yes, I recognize it.

I'm moving toward it. But then there's this narrow place that we're often invited into to really pursue what God has for us.

# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

**Andrew Stirling:** Is it in a narrow call? Is it joyful? Is it daunting? I mean, what would be sort of the dominant thing? And I'm thinking, Mark, of those, for example, students of yours at Acadia who are discerning whether or not, in fact, the ministry is for them.

How do you balance those two things? Like the daunting-ness of it, it is a responsibility, but the joy of it?

**Mark Jefferson:** You know what helps? Clarity. We're not always afforded clarity, which is part of the discomfort. But as God grants clarity, that clarity helps to prioritize things.

It helps us to sort things. So, part of the angst of the journey is not knowing what to shed. And trying to carry everything forward all the time slows up progress.

And so, I tell my students, clarity and focus help to create opportunity in space. Being a generalist has its benefits, but there's also times when you need to be able to specialize and to be able to go deep, to be able to have that added value. And I think for me, having the opportunity to accept the initial call, okay, God, you want me to be a pastor?

Okay.

Oh, maybe not the traditional pastor. You want me to do what? You want me to be a PhD teacher of preaching? I didn't even know that was a job. I didn't even know this was a thing.

When I went to seminary, I saw it. So, I didn't even know to aim for this. So, as I said yes to stranger and stranger opportunities, the road got narrow.

But then in that narrowing, opportunities became more clear. And so, I just tell people, keep going. Yeah, keep going.

If you keep going, the clarity comes.

**Andrew Stirling:** Yeah. It's interesting.

# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

As I look back on my ministry, Mark, I've got to be honest. I mean, I started off getting a call in South Africa. I never, ever in my wildest dreams would think I'd end up at Timothy Memorial Church, Toronto.

Never, never. I could not have mapped it out, not in a million years. And I remember I was getting discouraged at one point in my ministry, and one of my friends who's an organist actually said, sometimes, Andrew, you've just got to keep showing up.

You've just got to keep going. And then the Lord opens the doors and it's there for you. Mark, you've grown up in the crucible of race relations in the United States.

And you're having an influence on your peers and students in the Black community in the United States. You've done that, as you mentioned, in Atlanta. How have race and class affected your view of Christian proclamation? Because I believe that is the topic, if I'm correct, of your forthcoming book, if I'm right.

And how should those who are listening to us today hear what that really means?

**Mark Jefferson:** One of the opportunities that helped to crystallize this thought for me was at my previous institution, Virginia Theological Seminary, I was teaching preaching there. And during my teaching opportunity there, I was invited to become the Bicentennial preacher. There wasn't really a space for that.

But basically, what it was, was the seminary was turning 200. And so, I was invited to preach 200 sermons around the world. And that was a rather daunting, yes, certainly, maintaining my preaching and teaching load and such.

But in that, I had a chance to be a Black man in spaces and places I would never have access to any other place in space. So, I'm standing in historic pulpits of churches that are 200 and 300 and 400 years old. And I'm in front of people who probably didn't expect the Episcopal Seminary to have a Black preaching professor.

And so, my experience with that is one in where if I got hung up in where things were going wrong, I couldn't do my best to do right. And by trying to live faithfully, and

# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

part of living faithfully is not living with my head in the sand, but being honest about the experiences that are unique to me as a person that are common to a group of people, but also have ramifications for us all. As I was able to have these conversations in intimate ways with congregations, I think we were able to have more clarity.

I won't say we always agreed, but there was a mutual respect for position. But I think my preaching has grown through that experience because I've learned that though people may see the world differently, there are those spaces that meet in the middle. So, my preaching is shaped by being a Black man from America in a world where that is a complicated reality.

And so, I'm living in that nexus every time I step in pulpits. I can't count how many times someone has said, you're the first Black preacher that's preached here. And so, you know, we just live in the midst of that and try to be a good witness.

**Andrew Stirling:** Yes, indeed. Indeed. You're now, as you rightly said, a professor at Acadia Divinity College in the John Gladstone Chair.

You certainly are bringing great gifts with you into the Nova Scotian context. And what do you see specifically the Lord giving you to minister in Nova Scotia at a time like this? And essentially, really, why did you agree? Why did you make the decision at the invitation of the school to come to Nova Scotia of all places?

**Mark Jefferson:** I'm glad you asked me that. I'm glad you asked me that, Andrew, because I wanted to have this conversation with you, actually.

I said yes to this because I knew God had already said yes to this. I just, I had this feeling, even when the nascent possibilities of this opportunity came into being, I just felt like this was what I was supposed to do. And so, I couldn't really explain.

I didn't know anybody here. I just felt this yes that kind of made me do it, if you will.

# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

My wife was on board. We have a small child. She was on board as much as a toddler can be.

But we say yes because we just saw that there was a possibility to live the life that we felt faithful and called to do. And so long story short, I arrived here in Nova Scotia. I began to do homework on the black Nova Scotian population, how people arrived here, and the same migration pattern that I took from the Chesapeake Bay of Virginia to Nova Scotia that's happened 200 years before.

And so, I just felt as I was doing more research, I felt like the pull of history moving me here. And so, preaching at New Horizons the last few months, the oldest black church between here and Toronto, the mother church of the AUBA, the African United Baptist Association, all of those things have helped to ground me in this community to be aware of what's happening. So, to answer your question, I say all that to say I believe that God brought me here because preaching matters, not just preaching in the pulpit, but helping to emancipate people to preach in the public square.

And if I can help people to do that here, this place can be a model for what's possible in so many places around the world. And Acadia is uniquely positioned to help people around the world achieve a high-quality education. And so, the yes was, it was of course.

**Andrew Stirling:** Yeah, that's lovely to hear. And you're right. I mean, the historical ties between what happened on the eastern seaboard in the United States and the migration of the black community in Nova Scotia is long and deep and fraught with many of the similar problems with Africville and in fact, the marginalization of black communities in Nova Scotia as well.

I mean, there are clearly parallels and having ministered in Nova Scotia, I could see those and so on. So, I was intrigued when you got this appointment because I thought, yes, it is relevant to the context of Nova Scotia, but you're also teaching students and they have many, many challenges. And I think of people growing up in

# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

the faith today and all the numerous platforms that are to influence them, the influences of social media, the influence now of AI.

How can pastors use their spiritual gifts to minister to young people who find themselves in that, I think, challenging environment?

**Mark Jefferson:** One of the easiest yet most challenging ways that I can invite this type of engagement is to actually see young people. Oftentimes churches understand young people as a demographic category that's not present or as an abstraction. But the times that these young people are living in, that we're all living in, but they're having to grow up, their formative experiences are in a world that never turns off.

We have to be able to see that world to understand that there are people being formed by that world. So, if I, one of the things that keeps me relatively young, Andrew, is that I have a daughter who's two and a half. So having a daughter that's two and a half ensures that I don't get a chance to just grow old and tap out.

I've got to stay current.

**Andrew Stirling:** Oh, do you ever.

**Mark Jefferson:** For the rest of my life.

**Andrew Stirling:** And you've got quite a way to go.

Yeah.

**Mark Jefferson:** Exactly.

Because I need to understand the world that I'm raising her in. But in doing that, I've been able to see people who are living this world right now.

And so, by being able to see them in the reality that impacts us all, hopefully I'm able to say something or do something that is actually relevant to that person's need. And

# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

not just trying to address general young people. The young people in my circumference, how am I impacting them? You know, going down to the street and the hedges and the highways and the byways, that's important, certainly.

But we all are around people that we can impact. And so, if we try, if we do our best to see young people and see the world that they're in, hopefully offer some meaningful support in ways that will encourage them, that becomes contagious in and of itself. And then that's not only good for young people, but that's good for all people.

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**The Bible Course:** I just want to take a moment here out of the conversation to tell you about The Bible Course, because whether you're a seasoned Bible reader or you're just starting on your journey, The Bible Course offers a superb overview of the world's best-selling book. This eight-session course will help you grow in your understanding of the Bible. Using a unique storyline, The Bible Course shows you how key events, books, and characters all fit together.

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**Andrew Stirling:** It's also, Mark, I'd love a comment from you about the importance of community.

# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

I mean, it's a word that gets kind of thrown around now, almost with reckless abandon. But I'm talking about the *koinonia*. I'm talking about the fellowship of believers.

How important is that in the context of young people and emerging in the faith?

**Mark Jefferson:** So, you spoke about the book that I have coming out. It's called *Rhythm and Algorithm, Preaching in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*. And so, in that, one of the issues that I wrestle with is this issue of community.

What happens when humanity and its AI systems want to recreate the Tower of Babel? And then what happens when the gospel reintroduces the space of the table? And so, for us, it's about leaning into the table, leaning into the fellowship. Technology wants to vertically integrate us. Corporate energy wants to vertically integrate us.

We were going to be plugged into a system where community in its gospel form is not necessarily easily attained. So, for us, it's our responsibility to continue to stress and suppress what the table means. The table is a particularly Christian representation that allows us to gather our community around shared principles, values, and theological understanding.

And so for us, not just the table on that first Sunday or whenever people have communion or the Lord's Supper, but living the table, living that expansive community becomes an opportunity for us to hopefully come back to dehumanization that comes in a world that's increasingly more artificial.

**Andrew Stirling:** In your work at Acadia, do you have any responsibility for the worship of the community, of the chapel, of the getting together of people? Because it seems to me that in the days that when I went to seminary, it was kind of secondary. You know, you showed up, sometimes you went to chapel, sometimes you didn't.

# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

But as time has gone along, it seems to me the importance of the gathered community has become more acute. What are your observations on that, Mark?

**Mark Jefferson:** One of the major drawing points for me was the opportunity to be the Dean of the Chapel at the Divinity College. And I say that because when I went to visit and to preach, the chapel experience was such a rich, warm, worshipful opportunity that on one hand, I was like, I don't want to mess this up.

But on the other hand, I felt like there's some things I could add that could hopefully continue to deepen this experience for people. And so that's one of the great honors of this job for me is to be able to help support this community in worship. And it's not one or two people who say that this experience that we have on Wednesdays at 11:30 often leads to more formative outcomes for them than where they end up on Sunday mornings.

And so, we take that seriously because if the people who are going to form people aren't formed in worship, how are we going to form people who are better formed by worship? So, I take that seriously, and it's an opportunity for me to model what we teach. And so, I'm just getting started. I have so many ideas for how we can continue to deepen that.

But a school that's able to worship is a school that has some value for the future.

**Andrew Stirling:** Yeah, absolutely, Mark. It was interesting, one of your sort of predecessors at Acadia, Andrew McRae, once said, you know, about the importance of chapel, and it really did stay with me.

And Andrew and I were friends. And he would say, "Andrew," he said, "you know, so much of what we do is doing, and so much of what forms us is being. And when we go to worship, and we're not leading, we're being, we're not doing."

# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

And there's a need for that in the world, the difference between sometimes doing and being, and being shaped and molded and formed, you know, by the faith in community.

Mark, the Biblical canon, the Bible was written, you know, finalized centuries ago, as we know. How can a lay person now, and I'm talking to anyone who comes to the Scriptures, sort of in their minds, bridge the gap between what I call the then of Scripture and the now of our context between the Biblical world and ours, and what authority does the Scripture have for a Christian today?

**Mark Jefferson:** I tried to invite our students, and not all of them are going into the traditional ministry space.

But this invitation, I think, bears weight for those who want to consider it. Reading the Bible is one thing, but digging into the Bible is another. If we try to read the Bible as a devotional, then it seems somewhat jumbled.

You know, there's Psalms here, there's wisdom literature here, there's different versions of the Gospels. It seems to be a bit much at times. But for me, what helped me was finding a place and just digging in.

What is, who's happening? What's going on? Who are these people? And in the pursuit of it, I was able to find a passion for it. The pursuit was just more out of curiosity, but curiosity turned into passion. So, my hope would be that you all would become more curious about the Bible.

Not just curious because you need to read it or you're going to hell. You should be curious about it because in it are the essence of how human beings have lived together, the ups, the downs, the rights, the wrongs. And in that there's a story of God's redemption through the person of Jesus Christ.

But to that end, in that book, there is romance and violence and political intrigue and war. There's the story of the last four or 5,000 years condensed in this canon. And so,

# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

to become more curious about that not only informs us about what happened, but it also gives us a snapshot about the future.

And so, I would at least want to invite that curiosity, particularly in these strange times that we find ourselves in when other people are telling people what the Bible says.

**Andrew Stirling:** Yeah. Interesting comment that, Mark.

I just want to pick up on that. Sure. What people tell us the Bible says.

In a study that we have done in the Bible Society, we're actually a couple right now. One is we're dealing with young people and their engagement with Scripture. And that's something we're working on now.

But in the past, we worked on one with Cardus and got a sense of Christians and whether or not they engage the Scriptures or read the Scriptures. And actually, it was almost a terrifying report if you're a Christian. You know, people were not engaging with the Scriptures themselves enough but were listening to what other people were saying about the Scriptures.

And so do you have any suggestions for how somebody wanting to come to the Scriptures now, say fresh, not really having much of a background, not having the background you had, for example, or indeed I had in parents and families and so on, but somebody coming in and they're inquiring about the Christian faith, where would you begin to tell them to read? I mean, what would you start with?

**Mark Jefferson:** Okay, pardon my bias, but my mother named me Mark. Maybe because she was hoping that I would embody some of the literary function, right? But the Gospel of Mark for me is relatively accessible in the sense that it was written as a moving kind of read. It's energy packed.

There's no dull moments in Mark. Jesus is doing, doing, doing. And I think for some people who may have questions about other parts of Christianity, do they believe this

# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

or do they believe that? Mark is an accessible version, right? There's no virgin birth in Mark, you know, it's right to the action.

So, I think if you want to get an essence of Jesus, if you want a primer, I think Mark is a good way to go because from Mark you have His influence in the rest of the Gospel. So, I would say start with the Gospel of Mark. It's a good read.

**Andrew Stirling:** Yeah, you've just done a sales pitch for us actually, Mark. Thank you. And I'm glad your mother named you in such a way.

And it is, as you said, I mean, you can see Peter's influence, can't you? And I mean, it's punchy. It's fast paced. You follow the story.

It takes you right into Jesus' ministry and it takes you right to the end. I mean, it's fantastic. And as we know, it's a foundation for other things that were written afterwards.

So, a good suggestion for people. I hope people pick up on what you've just said, because I think that's really important. And there are sometimes, and I have a colleague, Mark, in ministry who has studied the Bible her entire life.

And she says, you know, during the Lenten period, I just select like a Gospel like Mark, and I just read it again in sequence. So, you get kind of the breadth and the scan of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. And He sort of becomes central again, and so on.

So good advice, good advice.

**Mark Jefferson:** Well, to your point, it's just important for us to go deep, find some place, you know, skimming across the top can only take you so far. At some point, diving in and being comfortable, being uncomfortable is one of the best ways to learn something.

The Bible is no exception.

# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

**Andrew Stirling:** Yeah, no, it isn't. No.

And it does make one uncomfortable at times. After that, there's no doubt. And if it doesn't, woe betide, I would say.

Mark, you have a devotional life, and it's important to all Christians. You know, you have a young family, you're new to the country, you have a spouse, you have all the influences and opportunities at Acadia.

What spiritual practices do you follow just personally in terms of, you know, the reading of Scripture or personal devotional prayer? And can you give advice to others who might want to, as you said, and you've said now multiple times, go deeper? How do you go deeper, Mark?

**Mark Jefferson:** Two things, and I'm fairly good at it, but I'm still getting better. The first thing I would say is do your best to dedicate the early part, the earliest part of your day to God and to yourself. Do your best, even if it's 15 minutes, but do your best to try to carve out time early, because it's hard to do time later.

So, I do my best to be an early riser. So, I try to wake up between 4 or 4.30, because I know that my wife and my daughter are going to sleep longer. So, the earlier I'm able to get up, the more time I can squeeze out for myself.

And so, my motivation is, let me get up, because if I'm able to give God God's time, that helps my time, which is next, to go better. So, by the time everyone's up, I am not wiping my eyes, but I'm up in mind, body, and spirit. And so, though it's still not second nature, it's a fight that I'm fighting because I see how my days go better when I properly allot my time before everyone wakes up.

And so yes, I'm missing out on sleep and such, but I feel better about the day in a way that extra sleep wouldn't have given me because I have accomplished something that feeds me internally.

**Andrew Stirling:** Yeah, very true. I get asked that question actually by people.

# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

You know, we have the daily Bible readings from the Bible Society, which are a tremendous discipline. They're a great help, and they guide you in sort of what to read. But people ask me when to read it.

And I often say, you know, begin the day with the Lord if you can. And it forms and shapes you and your world. People talk about worldview all the time.

Well, your view of the world is formed and shaped by those early moments of devotion. And, you know, I love that.

**Mark Jefferson:** Well, Jesus made sure that those mornings, early in the mornings, that time was spent with the Most High also.

So, I was really trying to follow what Jesus did because it worked. So even though it's hard for me, it gets easier because I see its benefits. So, I would just say, start with 10 minutes, see how that goes, and just inch your way.

But because I'm an early riser, and I know once everyone's up, that's it. My motivation is to try to get as much done before then. So hopefully people will invest that time in themselves and in God.

**Andrew Stirling:** Yeah, that's beautiful. Mark, you have an important role to play, and it will become increasingly more so, I must tell you, over time as people get to know you and as your program develops. What can we in the Bible Society, what can our audience who have been listening to you now pray for? For you, for Mark Jefferson, what would you like us to pray for you today?

**Mark Jefferson:** My primary prayer is that the Lord makes the way clear.

If the Lord makes the way clear, the rest of the things become a lot easier. Material things come, immaterial things come, because clarity brings the ability to see. So, if you all can continue to pray, my ability to discern and to see what the Most High is doing clearly, hopefully good things will come of that, that you all will be able to see.

# Scripture Untangled

## Season 13: Episode 4 | Mark Jefferson | How Do You Go Deeper, Spiritually?

**Andrew Stirling:** Well, Mark, be assured of our prayers. And I truly, truly am grateful for your time. I know the people who have listened to this will be behind you and with you, and we'll be lifting you up in prayer.

And I know you're going to make, and are making, a great contribution to the life of the church here in Canada. We're glad to have you here, Mark.

**Mark Jefferson:** Thank you for this wonderful opportunity.

And anything I can do for you all, let me know.

**Andrew Stirling:** Will do. Thanks, Mark.

God bless you. Now on behalf of the Bible Society, thank you.