

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As I begin my journey in the Master of Divinity (MDiv) program at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (GCTS), I am grateful for your support, prayers, and encouragement. I thank God that the period of transitioning out of work, moving from Singapore to the US, and settling into life at seminary, has been relatively smooth thus far.

## **Studies**

This Fall term (*i.e.* September to December 2024), I enrolled in three courses: (1) Basic Greek I, (2) Exploring the Old Testament, and (3) Spiritual Formation for Ministry.

(1) **Basic Greek I** is the first of two required courses on the biblical Greek language in the MDiv program. This course is the most demanding course for me and takes up a large proportion of my study time. The difficulty with learning the language is met with equally (if not more) rewarding satisfaction and anticipation of peering deeper into the richness of Scripture. Beyond learning the language, I have been enriched by the life of faith, humility and prayer modelled by our professor (and in many other GCTS faculty as well). I appreciate that he begins classes with prayer and sharing from scripture or reflection on recent events (*e.g.* the recent Fourth Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization), and that he has a pastoral heart and is genuinely concerned about the lives and ministries of students. On a lighter note, he is also training us to be disciplined about waking up early – the classes (including exams) are weekly on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 8am!

(2) **Exploring the Old Testament** is a survey of all the books of the Old Testament, with classes for each week focusing on a particular set of books. One of the requirements of this course is to read through the entire Old Testament within 12 weeks and to reflect on and write about the contents of each book, for example, what it says about the character and purpose of God, what its particular concerns are, how it fits into the bigger story and theological meta-narrative of the Bible, what recurring themes there are, how it relates to the life of God's people, etc. From classes and readings, I have gained further understanding of the historical and cultural context of the Old Testament. Our professor, whose research interest is in ancient Near East studies, provides further archeological and other cultural background. He guides us in drawing out, from the various materials and books, an overarching narrative and theology of the Old Testament. The exercise of reading through the Old Testament from book to book at such a quick pace has been incredibly beneficial for tracing the developing themes and related concepts through the Old Testament. As I read, I am again struck by God's steadfast love and covenant faithfulness to people whose hearts continually stray from Him, God's

mercy (towards those who humble themselves and repent), God's holiness (and how God's presence is dangerous to sinful people) and God's justice (which, in His mercy may be delayed, but will ultimately come). The Old Testament had often felt to me more distant and difficult to understand than compared with the New Testament. But through this course, I've come to love the Old Testament more and further understand its role in God's story of redemption.

- (3) **Spiritual Formation for Ministry** is a course that seeks to equip Christian leaders to deepen their love for and worship of God, to grow in their own devotional life with Christ, to understand and practice spiritual disciplines, and to help others do the same. In the classes, we cover topics like the theological foundations for spiritual formation/disciplines, spiritual temperament, spiritual disciplines, devotional life and character transformation. One of the books that we are reading, "*Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life*" by Simon Chan, has been particularly insightful. This course has been impactful to me as I reflect on my own devotional life/spiritual disciplines, reflect on my underlying motivations and assumptions, and seek to incorporate spiritual practices in my devotional life. I am continually brought to my knees in prayer as I wrestle with both the theory and the practice (or the lack of it).

### **Life outside of studies**

Outside of my studies, I have been settling into community life. I am thankful to God for the opportunities to learn, grow and serve, and for providing a community of brothers and sisters whom I can share life with during this season.

- (1) **Church:** I am currently attending a church called First Congregational Church of Hamilton (FCCH), which is located in a nearby town. I spent the first few weeks visiting different churches and recently made the decision to regularly attend FCCH.

(2) **Living:**

- a. Living on campus and classroom interactions have provided valuable opportunities to meet and share life with fellow seminarians and faculty members from around the world. It exposes me to different cultures, church backgrounds and denominational practices, devotional practices, theological views, personalities and even cuisines.
- b. In terms of living arrangements, I am staying in a women's dorm that is on campus, and which is conveniently located near the academic center, library, chapel and school administration offices. I share a living space with my suitemate. Our dorm suite consists of a bedroom for each of us

and a shared bathroom. There is a common kitchen in the women's dorm. As the campus is in a rural area, there are no stores or eateries nearby. The nearest grocery store or food pantry is about an hour's walk away. We typically either cook for ourselves or purchase meals from the campus dining hall, which operates for breakfast and lunch on weekdays during term time. There is a local food pantry and Give & Take store where I have been able to procure some donated food, household items and warm clothing. I have experienced the kindness of my fellow seminarians on numerous occasions – they've offered me rides to run errands (I don't have a car and it's difficult to get anything done without one), rides to church and back, shared food, helped me navigate the complex administrative/bureaucratic processes, and more.

- (3) **Discipleship Group:** I am part of a GCTS Discipleship Group that meets weekly. We meet to study the bible together and to share life. My group comprises of one GCTS faculty member who is “discipler” (she is a professor in the counselling department) and another MDiv student. The commitment for us as “disciples” is that in the next academic year we will in turn lead a discipleship group as “disciplers”.
- (4) **Chapel:** I attend a weekly GCTS chapel service held on campus and am serving as member of the chapel music team. Chapel is a time when students, faculty and staff gather to praise God and listen to His Word – a central part of spiritual life together. To experience being a part of a diverse group of people from different backgrounds, nationalities, languages, political views, denominations/traditions, all worshipping and desiring to serve the triune God, is but a sweet foretaste of what is to come when *“a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, [stand] before the throne and before the Lamb”* (Revelation 7).
- (5) **Chinese students group:** There is a Chinese students group within GCTS that meets for prayer and for other ad hoc gatherings (e.g. mid-autumn festival).

### **A reflection on spiritual growth**

A friend recently asked if I was feeling spiritually nourished and fulfilled. My response was, yes on the one hand I feel spiritually nourished in the sense that I'm learning much and receiving lots of insight and wisdom from what I hear, read and reflect on, yet on the other hand I'm increasingly being made aware of how much I still lack, be it

in the outworking of holiness, love for others, knowledge of Scripture, etc. I don't always know how to bridge that gap between where I am and where I desire to be.

The accumulation of knowledge itself does not necessarily lead to a transformed life in Christ. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), a pastor and theologian born in Connecticut, USA, and who later ministered in Northampton, Massachusetts, USA (not too far from where GCTS is), wrote:

*“A person who has a knowledge of doctrine and theology only—without religious affection—has never engaged in true religion. Nothing is more apparent than this: our religion takes root within us only as deep as our affections attract it. There are thousands who hear the Word of God, who hear great and exceedingly important truths about themselves and their lives, and yet all they hear has no effect upon them, makes no change in the way they live.*

*The reason is this: they are not affected with what they hear. There are many who hear about the power, the holiness, and the wisdom of God; about Christ and the great things that he has done for them and his gracious invitation to them; and yet they remain exactly as they are in life and in practice.*

*I am bold in saying this, but I believe that no one is ever changed, either by doctrine, by hearing the Word, or by the preaching or teaching of another, unless the affections are moved by these things. No one ever seeks salvation, no one ever cries for wisdom, no one ever wrestles with God, no one ever kneels in prayer or flees from sin, with a heart that remains unaffected. In a word, there is never any great achievement by the things of religion without a heart deeply affected by those things.”<sup>1</sup>*

(Edwards further enumerates in his writing nine affections that Scripture encourages us to have: holy fear, hope, love, holy desire, joy, religious sorrow, gratitude, compassion, and zeal.)

Many things I know in my head (knowledge). How does knowledge penetrate the heart and transform the affections (motivations) and desires of the heart? One such way that the Holy Spirit works this in me, I have found, is through prayer. Reflecting on my friend's question to me, I've noticed something different about me in the past months. I talk to God in prayer a lot more than I used to. It is almost an instinctive response to God, involving praise and reverence when I learn more about His nature and character, confession when I am made aware of the stubborn sins and oft-disguised idols in my heart, thanksgiving for the things and experiences He provides and for the love shown by brothers and sisters in Christ, and petitions and requests for matters I worry about, need, do not understand, fear or cannot control. I pray that over time, my head, heart and hands will be increasingly aligned in complete devotion to God and what matters to Him.

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<sup>1</sup> See excerpt “Engagement of the Heart: Excerpts from Religious Affections” from *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups* (Richard J. Foster & James Bryan Smith, Editors. HarperCollins, 1993.) (available at <https://renovare.org/articles/engagement-of-the-heart>).

## **Request for prayer**

God listens and responds to prayer. As I continue this journey, I would be grateful for your partnership in prayer in the following areas:

### **(1) Spiritual growth:**

- a. that as I continue to learn and to live in community, God would help me to grow in faith, knowledge and character;
- b. that what I read and learn will not merely remain in my head, but will penetrate the heart and translate into action; and
- c. that as I examine my thoughts, intentions, sins and idols, the Holy Spirit would guide this process, help me to perceive things accurately, and teach me to be humble and be holy;

### **(2) Spiritual community:**

- a. that God would provide me with close spiritual community in seminary and in church; and
- b. that God would lead me to the areas/ministries that He desires I serve in;

### **(3) Adapting and coping:**

- a. for grace to adapt to my new environment and the resilience to overcome the challenges of transition and the challenges of schoolwork. Transitioning to seminary life has brought its own set of challenges, for example, adjusting to different cultural norms, building a new routine, finding ways to procure living needs, and finding a rhythm in my daily life. The academic demands have also been significant. Coping with the volume of readings and the depth of the material has required considerable effort and discipline. Please pray for mental, physical and emotional strength to cope with school, church, community and personal life; and
- b. that I will be a wise steward of my time and resources;

### **(4) Faculty and students:**

- a. that the GCTS faculty will continue to teach and minister to students, rooted in a deep understanding of Scripture and with a heart for the development of students in their spiritual growth and ministry;
- b. one professor had to step away from classes mid-way through the term because of severe health issues, please pray for recovery and for the affected students to be able to continue their studies; and
- c. that GCTS students will be in good health and will be able to cope with the demands of academic work, especially now as the term gets more stressful with the exams and assignments rolling in.

Thank you for taking the time to read these updates and for your prayers. If you would like to have a chat or share how I can pray for you too, please feel free to contact me.

May God be glorified in all things.

In Christ,

Jean Chan

November 2024

*p.s. Some pictures below.*



*Picture 1 – Kerr Building, the main building where the dorms, dining hall and offices are*



*Picture 2 – Part of the GCTS campus grounds*





*Picture 3 – Fall colors in the GCTS campus grounds*



*Picture 4 – Christina (my suitemate) and I, on our first day of classes at GCTS*





*Picture 5 – The Academic Centre and Chapel*



*Picture 6 – Study spaces in the Library*



*Picture 7 – The Great Hall at GCTS, which also functions as a common study area*



*Picture 8 – My place of sleep and study in my dorm room*





*Picture 9 – Shared kitchen in the women's dorm*



*Picture 10 – School dining hall*



Picture 11 – During OT Class

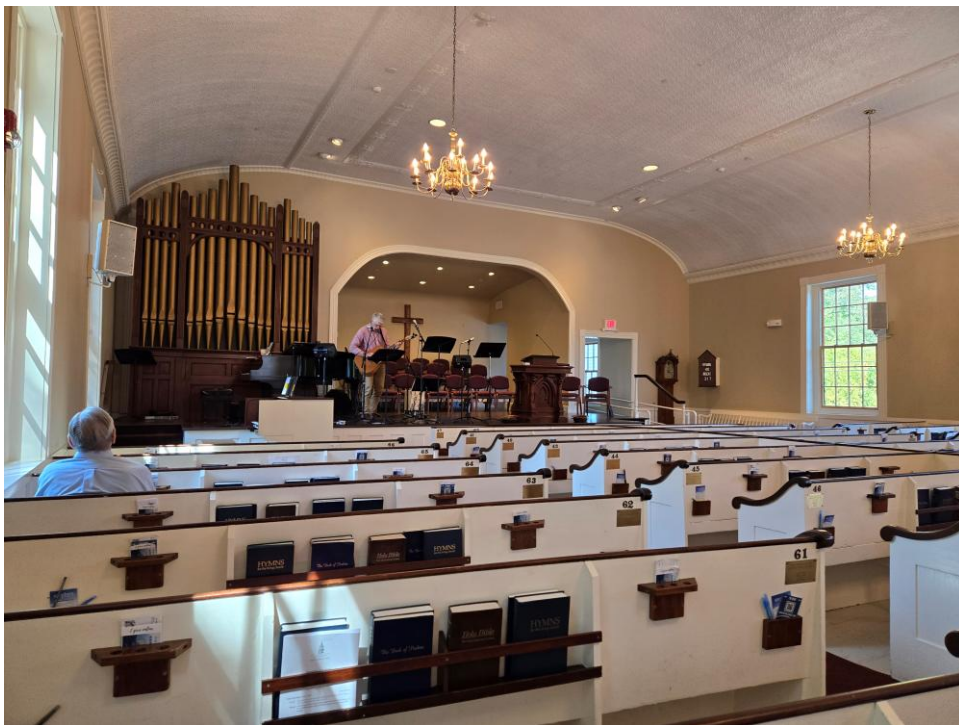


Picture 12 – At an event called “Dinner for All Nations” - a GCTS community potluck shared meal to celebrate all nations and share food from around the world





Picture 13 - Missions sharing in Chapel



Picture 14 – First Congregational Church of Hamilton (FCCH)