

LifeWay

# YOU



**WHEN  
EMOTIONS  
RISE**

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**SPIRITUAL  
DISCIPLINES:**  
BECOMING MORE  
LIKE JESUS

# STUDY 1 WHEN EMOTIONS RISE

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## OVERVIEW

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We are all emotional beings. Although some people may try to suppress their emotions, emotions are not bad, but they can be detrimental if we let them “take over” and rule our lives. The writers of the psalms were not hesitant in expressing their emotions, but they directed their feelings toward God. Through their psalms, we learn how to convey our own emotions in a healthy, Christ-honoring way.

**Lynn Pryor** is the Team Leader for *Bible Studies for Life* at LifeWay.

# STUDY 2 SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES: BECOMING MORE LIKE JESUS

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## OVERVIEW

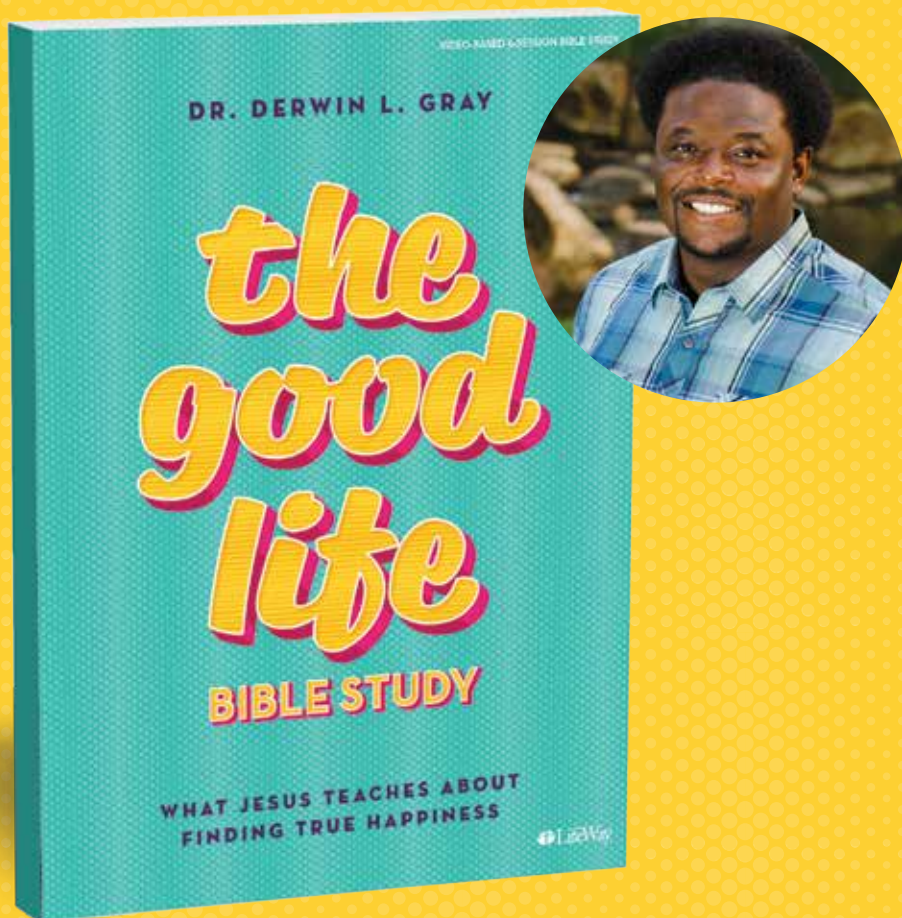
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Discipline. Those who choose to exercise and live a healthy lifestyle know the value of discipline to achieve their goals. It’s the same for our spiritual lives. We grow in Christlikeness as we discipline ourselves to follow and obey Him. The Bible points us to several disciplines others followed that brought them into a closer walk with God, disciplines that can bring greater obedience, intimacy, and joy into our lives. We truly become more like Jesus.

**Jim L. Wilson** is professor of leadership formation at Gateway Seminary and an editor at Freshministry.org.

# SHARE THE GOOD LIFE



True happiness comes from a heart directed toward the kingdom of God. This is an important message for the body of Christ, so why not share it with your small group? The eight-session Bible study, *The Good Life*, uses teaching videos and personal study to help participants realize the road to happiness is found in the Beatitudes of Jesus.

[LifeWay.com/TheGoodLife](https://www.lifeway.com/TheGoodLife)

LifeWay

# GOD'S UNFAILING PROMISE

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We've messed up. You have. I have. We all have. And no matter how good our intentions or efforts are, we can't make up for the wrong we've done.

The Bible uses a much stronger word—sin—to describe how we have failed to live according to God's perfect standard (Rom. 3:23). The result of our sin is death (Rom. 6:23).

Thankfully, we do not have to stay in this condemned state. In spite of our sin and rebellion against God, He loves us and made a way for us to be forgiven and receive a new, eternal life, freed from the consequences of our sin. That way is Jesus Christ, who paid the penalty of our sin and brokenness with His own death (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8). When we turn away from our sin in repentance and turn to Christ in faith, He gives us a new life, freed from the penalty of sin. We are made new in Him (2 Cor. 5:17).

God's unfailing promise—His commitment to us—is the best guarantee we can be offered. "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13).

To receive a new life in Christ, you can pray a prayer like this:

"Dear God, I know I am a sinner. I believe Jesus died on the cross to forgive me of my sins and rose from the dead to give me new life. I'm sorry for all the wrong I've done and ask You to forgive me. I now accept Your gift of eternal life. Thank You for Your love, forgiveness, and a new life in Jesus Christ. From this day forward, I choose to follow You. In Jesus' name, Amen."

Share your decision to follow Jesus with a pastor or those in your Bible study group. Be baptized as an expression of your faith. Get involved in a church that will help you grow in your faith.

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## ON THE COVER

Blake works as an operating manager at KetoBakes.com. But he is definitely not defined by his job. He and his wife Ashton want the way they live and the work they do for Jesus Christ to be evident above all else. He loves the Lord and is passionately striving to know Christ in his own life and also make Him known to others. Blake and his wife aspire to include the transformation power of Christ and the gospel in every area of their lives, whether serving in church ministries or taking a stand for racial equality. He has future plans that include owning a coffee shop with a gym attached, having a fitness clothing line, and serving others through itinerant ministry. Toward his goal in business, he is currently working on the development of a fitness web page. These days his attention is also focused on building a strong and solid Christian foundation for a family. When he has free time, it is spent weightlifting, reading, hiking with his wife, playing video games, and participating in worship nights at his home with friends. Blake and Ashton are members at Grace Center Church in Franklin, Tenn.



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## EDITORIAL

### MARK CROSTON

I am so excited when we get to gather in small groups to study the Word of God. Traditionally we only think of six emotions—happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise and disgust—but a recent study reports there are twenty-seven different human emotions<sup>1</sup>, and excited is on that list. There are some people who think we should all be stoic, but our emotions are God-given. In fact, the Bible often tells of the emotions of God. Our emotions help us to celebrate the highs and navigate the lows in life. Without them life would be stale and boring.

After our study on emotions we will take some time to dig into our need to practice healthy spiritual disciplines. These two studies together remind us that successful Christian living is emotional, but is also guided within the consistent practice of spiritual disciplines.

COVID-19 did not allow us to gather in the Summer of 2020, but make your plans now to join us at the Black Church Leadership and Family Conference. This all-in-one, energizing week is July 19-23, 2021. I'm sure this year will feel like a family reunion.

Learn more at [www.lifeway.com/blackchurchlife](http://www.lifeway.com/blackchurchlife). There is a full program for every member of the family!

Thanks for joining me in this season of study. Grab your Bible and allow God to speak through YOU!

Be Blessed!

Dr. Mark A. Croston Sr.

YOU General Editor

Director of Black Church Ministries

[www.lifeway.com/BlackChurchLife](http://www.lifeway.com/BlackChurchLife)

1 Bruce Y. Lee, "Here are the 27 Different Human Emotions, According to a Study, Forbes, September 9, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brucelee/2017/09/09/here-are-the-27-different-human-emotions-according-to-a-study/#1bb348611335>



# GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOU

*YOU* is a three-in-one learner and leader resource with inspirational and educational features to enhance Bible study that leads to spiritual maturity and life change. Here is information to help you get the most out of *YOU*.

## LEARNER PAGES

The first half of *YOU* includes pages for personal study. These should be read by the learner and leader prior to group time. Included in each session:

**Memory Verses** encourage filling the mind with the Word of God to strengthen every aspect of spiritual life.

**Digging Deeper** provides a deeper look at a word, character, or other aspect from the session.

**Did You Know?** provides an African-American or urban historical fact or update connected to the session.

## DAILY READINGS

Included with each session are five devotionals to be read by the learner and leader. The benefits of a daily devotion are innumerable. Their primary purpose in this resource is to focus attention on the biblical content of each session for application of and conformity to the Word of God.

## LEADER PAGES

The second half of *YOU* includes pages to guide teaching each session. Leaders can use the leader pages to guide learners through the passage and its key emphases as detailed on the learner pages. Here are suggestions on how to teach:

**Prior to the session, read and study the Bible passage, keywords, and learner pages.**

**Plan teaching using the leader pages. Keep in mind that because of time, it may not be possible to use every teaching suggestion. Also the teaching suggestions are in sequential order for easy use.**

**Features to use when teaching include: The Point, which is readily recognizable on the learner and leader pages; the question at the top of the first page of each learner session; Keywords on the Scripture pages; “Object Lessons”; “Digging Deeper”; “Did You Know?”; Pack Items\*; and Commentary at the end of each session on leader pages. Refine your teaching plans when necessary.**

## PRAY

Because the Holy Spirit is the guide for your study, invite Him to show you how to “rightly divide the word of truth” as you teach your group. Read the Bible passage several times, asking the Holy Spirit to show you its meaning and application.

## \* PACK ITEMS

These are posters, charts, and handouts that can provide another layer to your teaching and add needed variety that makes learning more interesting. The *YOU* Leader Pack is located at [lifeway.com](http://lifeway.com).





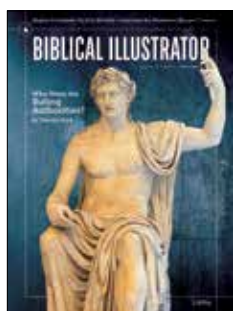
# FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO GO DEEPER



The **Advanced Bible Study** is written for group members who desire more extensive commentary. It includes exposition of each session's Scripture passage, an examination of keywords, an introduction to the setting of the passage and biblical life and times, questions to guide the study, and interactive responses to help readers apply God's truths to their lives today.



The **Herschel Hobbs Commentary** is designed specifically for leaders and provides a comprehensive exposition of each session's Scripture passage. Specific attention is called to items in the biblical text that readers would miss without a commentary. This commentary is based on the King James Version but interacts with all major English translations.



Each quarter, **Biblical Illustrator** offers in-depth background information on Bible customs, history, culture, archaeology, and word studies through vivid photography, engaging maps and graphics, and lesson-targeted articles. You can subscribe to *Biblical Illustrator* by going to [lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator) or by calling 1-800-458-2772. Forty additional articles (in PDF form) that support this quarter's Bible studies are available at [lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator).



**Social Media:** Connect with a community of *YOU* users. Post responses to questions, share teaching ideas, and link to great blog content. [Facebook.com/YOU](https://www.facebook.com/YOU)

For more about *YOU* go to [www.lifeway.com/YOU](http://www.lifeway.com/YOU)

# YOU DISCIPLESHIP PLAN

## The Pathway of Discipleship

Growing in Christ is a journey—a lifelong journey—but what does that look like? LifeWay’s research reveals eight signposts that indicate believers are on the discipleship pathway that leads to spiritual maturity. Each year, *YOU* engages all eight of these areas. Following this intentional plan for discipleship ensures progress on the pathway to becoming more like Christ.

Visit [Lifeway.com/YOU](http://Lifeway.com/YOU) for a fuller picture of this discipleship plan through 2022.

8 SIGNPOSTS	Fall 2020	Winter 2020-21	Spring 2021	Summer 2021
<b>Build Relationships</b>	After God’s Own Heart			
<b>Seek God</b>	All In: A Life of Commitment			
<b>Obey God and Deny Self</b>		When Emotions Rise		
<b>Engage with Scripture</b>		Spiritual Disciplines: Becoming More Like Jesus		
<b>Exercise Faith</b>			Essentials of Christianity	
<b>Share Christ</b>			How to Share Christ	
<b>Live Unashamed</b>				The Church God Desires
<b>Serve God and Others</b>				Elijah: Living Outside the Comfort Zone

# STUDY 1 WHEN EMOTIONS RISE

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## HOW THIS STUDY FITS YOUR'S DISCIPLESHIP PLAN

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### **OBEY GOD AND DENY SELF.**

Denying self means we do not let our emotions run wild and unchecked. As we look to God in obedience and trust, those things that might trigger our emotions in an unhealthy way are kept in proper perspective.

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## Writer Bio

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### **Lynn Pryor**

is the Team Leader for *Bible Studies for Life* at LifeWay. He and his wife, Mary, are Texans who have made Tennessee their home for twenty-seven years. You can read his weekly devotions related to this study at [LynnHPryor.com](http://LynnHPryor.com).

### **Maina Mwaura**

adapted this unit for the *YOU* audience. He lives in the Atlanta area with his wife Tiffiney and seven-year-old daughter Zyan. If you would like to find out more about his work, check him out at [mainaspeaks.com](http://mainaspeaks.com).



## A BIBLE STUDY ABOUT TAKING CONTROL OF OUR EMOTIONS

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This is not a study on the Book of Psalms, but this study captures the heart of the writers of the psalms. The emotions they capture find expression in many circumstances of our lives. These emotions rose out of prosperity, adversity, defeat, and victory and include grief, anger, joy, worry, fear, and depression. This study guides us in understanding how to direct our feelings toward God, just as the psalmists did.

Emotions, good or bad, should not go unchecked. Like the psalmist, we also deal with grief, anger, joy, worry, fear, and depression. This study will help us to gain the power we need to prevent these emotions from taking over our lives.

Probably, the most difficult emotion to deal with is grief. We lose family and friends to death. We lose spouses through death or divorce. We lose our health. We lose friendships for various reasons. We lose jobs. These losses cause us to grieve deeply.

Anger is another emotion that may be hard to deal with and control. Anger can destroy our relationships, affect our personalities, damage how we are perceived, and change how we feel about ourselves.

The emotion that is a keeper on our list is joy. When one thinks of joy, happiness or the absence of sadness may come to mind. Happiness is based on circumstances, but joy that is discussed in the Bible is a state of emotional well-being.

The emotions of worry, fear, and depression will be dealt with separately in this study but can be considered together. Each one has the same outcome when allowed to rule our lives. We become less than God's desire for us. God has a higher purpose for His people, so He is faithful to help us take control of our emotions. Plus He uses our most painful times to draw us closer to Him.

# WALKING IN GRIEF

**THE POINT:**  
GOD RESPONDS  
TO OUR CRIES  
WITH GRACE AND  
COMPASSION.

## PSALM /// 116:1-9,15-17

<sup>1</sup> I love the LORD because he has heard my appeal for mercy.  
<sup>2</sup> Because he has turned his ear to me, I will call out to him as long as I live. <sup>3</sup> The ropes of death were wrapped around me, and the torments of Sheol overcame me; I encountered trouble and sorrow. <sup>4</sup> Then I called on the name of the LORD: "LORD, save me!"

MEMORY VERSE

<sup>5</sup> **The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is compassionate.**  
<sup>6</sup> **The LORD guards the inexperienced; I was helpless, and he saved me.** <sup>7</sup> Return to your rest, my soul, for the LORD has been good to you. <sup>8</sup> For you, LORD, rescued me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. <sup>9</sup> I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living.

<sup>15</sup> The death of his faithful ones is valuable in the LORD's sight.  
<sup>16</sup> LORD, I am indeed your servant; I am your servant, the son of your female servant. You have loosened my bonds. <sup>17</sup> I will offer you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the LORD.

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KEYWORDS

**a. The torments of Sheol (v. 3)**  
– Sheol in the Old Testament refers to the place of the dead. It's often translated "grave," and was understood to be a place of darkness.



# HOW CAN WE BE RESTORED WHEN WE ARE EXPERIENCING SORROW?

In the 1996 Christmas movie, *The Preacher's Wife*, starring Courtney B. Vance, Whitney Houston, and Denzel Washington, Rev. Henry Biggs grieves at the prospect of losing his poverty-stricken church. It's a movie that always makes my wife cry and puts a few tears in my own eyes. Not only is Rev. Biggs feeling angst about the African-American Baptist Church where he pastors, he is stressed because of a decline in membership, financial difficulties, and the pressure he is receiving from real estate developer Joe Hamilton to sell his church. These issues cause him to isolate himself from his wife, Julia, and his young son, Jeremiah.

But the preacher recognized to whom he should ask for help. He called on God, and God sent him an angel named Dudley in response.

This movie exemplifies the reality that Christmas isn't always joyful and exciting. There can be problems and grief that dampen spirits and hearts. But the writer of Psalms 116 shows that God restores us with His grace and compassion.

## Call on God // Psalm 116:1-4

The writer of this psalm experienced great distress and a threat to his life. Whether he faced a near-death experience or encountered severe persecution, the things the psalmist learned of God and his subsequent responses are helpful to us in a variety of situations and emotions.

## WHAT MIGHT KEEP US FROM TAKING OUR SORROWS TO GOD?

God hears our prayers—and He responds! The psalmist's trust-filled psalm shows us that God heard and responded when he was in a deeply distressing situation. Without knowing the specifics of what the psalmist was facing, we see a vivid image of his plight: "The ropes of death were wrapped around me, and the torments of Sheol overcame me." In the Old Testament, Sheol was the place of the dead. Some want to equate Sheol with the New Testament description of hell, and while some passages refer to the wicked going to Sheol



## THE POINT: GOD RESPONDS TO OUR CRIES WITH GRACE AND COMPASSION.

(Num. 16:30; Ps. 9:17), it can refer to what is common to all humanity: death and the grave (Gen. 37:35; Ps. 16:10). The psalmist appeared to be at death's door.

### WHAT TRUTHS ABOUT GOD HELP YOU DURING TIMES OF SORROW?

When grief finds us, we can feel overwhelmed. We experience loss, and we might wonder how we can live or survive without the thing we've lost, whether it's a loved one, a career, or something else we loved and relied on. In those moments, an internal pep talk will not suffice. In those moments, the words of well-meaning individuals who try to boost us up with "Buck up, little buddy" or "This'll pass" sound hollow or empty. In those moments, the only solution is to call on God, the One who hears our call and responds in His love.

### Rest in God // Psalm 116:5-9

The psalmist knew he could call on God to rescue him because he knew the character of the One he called on.

- **God is gracious.** Unfortunately, we often limit grace to the New Testament. Grace is certainly a strong message in the New Testament because it was through the death of Christ on our behalf that we experience His grace. But grace is also seen in the Old Testament! Isaiah said, "Therefore the LORD is waiting to show you mercy, and is rising up to show you compassion, for the LORD is a just God. All who wait patiently for him are happy" (Isa. 30:18).
- **God is righteous.** The root of the word righteous originally meant to be straight; it is the standard. Therefore, someone who is righteous conforms to an ethical and moral standard. No one conforms to this standard like God does. He always does what is just and right.
- **God is compassionate.** The Hebrew word for *compassion* and *mercy* is tied to deep love, such as a love a superior has for an inferior. "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him" (Ps. 103:13). This is what parents feel for their children. And, of course, this aptly describes God's character, but His mercy and compassion toward us far exceeds any human parent's affection.



### DIGGING DEEPER PRECIOUS IN DEATH

Psalm 116:15 is often used in Christian funeral services. It reminds us our God is faithful to us in life, but also faithful in death. The psalmist declared God would show compassion when death came. The Lord's omniscience (all-knowing nature) means He not only sees the struggles of His people, but He knows the moment of each one's death. He promises to accompany the righteous to the place of the dead. Though the psalmist didn't have the benefit of New Testament hope through the resurrection of Jesus, he did state his assurance that a compassionate God would continue to prove faithful.

### How does Psalm 116:15 provide insight to your understanding of death and grief?



**HOW CAN AN UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S CHARACTER HELP US MOVE THROUGH GRIEF?**

When we trust in God to rescue us through His gracious care and compassion, we can also rest. We do not need to worry or fret. We do not need to keep repeating the chorus: My life is over. I see no way forward. My grief is so deep I'm immobilized. When we trust God to work, we can rest confidently that He is with us and He will strengthen us.

**HOW IS GOD GOOD TO YOU EVEN WHEN WHAT'S HAPPENING AROUND YOU IS NOT GOOD?**

This attitude was no wishful thinking on the psalmist's part. He knew firsthand how the Lord had been good to him and rescued him. When we feel the despairing effects of grief, we should remember the testimony of this psalmist.

- When you feel like your life is over, it is the Lord who rescues "me from death."
- When you feel immobilized by your grief, remember the Lord who rescues "my feet from stumbling."

At one time or another we all experience grief. We will only feel overwhelmed in our grief when we fail to trust God.

**Trust in God // Psalm 116:15-17**

It's said that right before Harriet Tubman died, she spoke about God and heaven frequently. It's something that some historians say she was ready for. We know that she lived a life greatly depended on God. Trust in God would need to be a primary factor for anyone who lived the kind of life that she lived.

**WHAT ARE SOME BENEFITS OF TRUSTING GOD DURING DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES?**

At first glance, verse 15 seems contradictory to other passages in the Bible. God told Ezekiel, "For I take no pleasure in anyone's death" (Ezek. 18:32). God does not want "any to perish" (2 Pet. 3:9), yet we read in this psalm that "the death of his faithful ones is valuable in the LORD's sight." The contexts of the passages in Ezekiel and 2 Peter point to God's desire for all to come to Him in repentance before death.

The psalmist, however, was talking about the death of God's children—"his faithful ones." Some scholars interpret valuable in the sense of "costly." In other words, it is costly and grievous to God that the praise of His children is silenced through death; therefore, He steps in and rescues them from death.

## THE POINT: GOD RESPONDS TO OUR CRIES WITH GRACE AND COMPASSION.

### WHAT HELPS YOU TRUST GOD DURING DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES?

God cares for us deeply, even in our last days on earth. God also sees death differently than we do; we tend to focus on life on this earth—the here and now—but God has an eternal perspective. He knows that death is not the end; in fact, believers are never more alive than when they enter Christ’s presence for eternity! Because of the death and resurrection of Christ, death is not a tragedy for His followers; it is a triumph!

In life or death, the psalmist knew he was loved and valued by God. Therefore, he would continue to serve God. The Lord had “loosened my bonds,” and he was once again free to serve Him. As God’s servant, the psalmist would offer a “thanksgiving sacrifice” and “call on the name of the LORD.”

Admittedly, it can be hard to feel thankful in the midst of circumstances that cause us grief, but it’s in those very moments that we need to remember God and all He has done for us in Christ.

### DID YOU KNOW?

The African-American experience included untimely deaths from mortality-plagued transatlantic voyages as well as from the violence of forced labor. Because of these unnecessary deaths, funeral ceremonies were a central rite in slave communities. They also formed the foundation of the black church tradition. Black funerals are distinctive from other funerals in American culture. First, these Christian ceremonies are often called homegoings. During the service bodies are typically viewed in a richly adorned open casket with large floral arrangements and ornate fabrics. There are usually limousines and nice cars to escort families. Historically, homegoings offered black Americans the respect in death that they didn’t always receive in life. A family in mourning could be comforted and understood away from a racist world. Mourners could feel at home despite the sorrow of the moment.<sup>1</sup>

### WHAT IMPACT DID THE WAY OF DEATH OF AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN HAVE ON THE WAY THEY GRIEVED?

## LIVE IT

### How does God respond to our cries during times of grief?

Let us not forget that God is always near, even during our darkest hour. We may become angry or feel abandoned because of the death of a loved one. But believers are precious to God, and He will hear us when we call out to Him. Let this truth provide comfort and rest during times of sorrow and distress. Through our lives, God has been good, and death will never change His goodness to us.

+ + +

- If you’re in a season of grief or sorrow, pray. Talk to God about what you’re experiencing and feeling.
- Make a list of all the ways God has shown you grace and compassion. When difficulties arise, pull out that list and reflect on the ways God has worked in your life. Trust God to continue working in your life.
- If you have a friend or relative going through grief, invest time to sit with him. You don’t have to offer advice or try to talk them out of their grief. Just sit, listen, and be the presence of Christ.



# DAILY READINGS

## 1. OK TO CRY // PSALM 116:1

Crying is a very real emotion. Whether the psalmist cried tears of sorrow or whether the word “cry” was an expression of sorrow does not matter. The point is that he experienced grief. The Bible makes it clear that it’s natural to cry in times of grief—even Jesus cried because of the sorrow expressed for His dear friend, Lazarus (John 11:35). Because Jesus showed emotion, we should never be afraid to reveal our true emotions. It’s OK to cry at the loss of a loved one.

**During times of grief and sorrow remember God is standing by, listening for your call.**

## 2. GOD HEARS // PSALM 116:2

The psalmist made clear in this chapter that he loved God. The reason He loved God so much was because God heard his cry during times of suffering. Nothing so delights the human heart like the realization that our almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, has personally heard the distressed cry of one of His children. For one not to love such a merciful and compassionate God would define a cold, unemotional heart. God’s ear “is not too deaf to hear” (Isa. 59:1).

**God is interested in what we’re going through; just call to Him. He can hear us just fine.**

## 3. CALL ON GOD // ISAIAH 65:24

During the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, it may be hard to get away and seek the face of God. Everyone is distracted by seasonal shopping, decorations, and events. But as Christ-followers, we must remain focused on the One about whom we celebrate. We must remember too that our God is never too busy for us. He has promised that His presence will forever be with us. Because He is near, He wants us to call on Him in any season, good or bad, during times of happiness or grief.

**Just call on Him. He will answer, because He is listening.**

## 4. DO NOT FEAR // ISAIAH 41:10

What scares you? We’ve all had childhood fears—bugs or monsters under our beds. Because of exposure to the media, kids today as well as adults fear bigger phenomenon such as natural disasters and mass shootings. Basically, our fears are rooted in one overall fear—we are afraid to die. God made us and understands the fear in our hearts. Through the prophet Isaiah, He spoke words of encouragement to the Israelites, telling them “do not fear.” God wanted them (and us) to know that when life turns upside down, we can trust that He will still be God. He wants us to understand He has a solution for whatever we may be going through both now and in the future.

**Just remember God’s words, “I am your God. I will strengthen you; I will help you.”**

## 5. GOD’S SHIELD // ISAIAH 43:2

The word *shield* as a noun is a broad, sustainable material such as metal that protects a person from harm. It is a wartime piece of equipment used by soldiers in battle. Though we are not enduring a war, we struggle as if we were. Sometimes life can be so overwhelming that we feel we could go “insane,” if we had to endure “just one more thing.” God knows our struggles. Just as He assured the Israelites when they were pressed into exile, He assures us that He will never let go. Remember how He brought you through sickness, loss, and other adversities of the past. His strong shield of protection would not allow you to sink; instead, He taught you to swim. Meditate on this verse, allowing it to take root in your heart, so you will remember that God will not allow you to be swept away or burned.

**God is our shield of protection and nothing can overcome His power. Do not fear.**



# SHAKING OFF FEAR

**THE POINT:**  
GOD IS OUR DEFENDER  
NO MATTER WHAT  
WE FACE.

## PSALM // 91:1-6,9-16

### MEMORY VERSE

<sup>1</sup> **The one who lives under the protection of the Most High dwells in the shadow of the Almighty.** <sup>2</sup> I will say concerning the Lord, who is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust: <sup>3</sup> He himself will rescue you from the bird trap, from the destructive plague. <sup>4</sup> He will cover you with his feathers; you will take refuge under his wings. His faithfulness will be a protective shield. <sup>5</sup> You will not fear the terror of the night, the arrow that flies by day, <sup>6</sup> the plague that stalks in darkness, or the pestilence that ravages at noon.

<sup>9</sup> Because you have made the LORD—my refuge, the Most High—your dwelling place, <sup>10</sup> no harm will come to you; no plague will come near your tent. <sup>11</sup> For he will give his angels orders concerning you, to protect you in all your ways. <sup>12</sup> They will support you with their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. <sup>13</sup> You will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the young lion and the serpent.

<sup>14</sup> Because he has his heart set on me, I will deliver him; I will protect him because he knows my name. <sup>15</sup> When he calls out to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble. I will rescue him and give him honor. <sup>16</sup> I will satisfy him with a long life and show him my salvation.

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### KEYWORDS

**a: Protection (v. 1)** – Literally “hiding place”; refers to the protection of the sanctuary.

**b: Plague (v. 6)** – Includes flood, famine, hail, fire, or any-

thing that threatens livestock and human beings.

**c: Pestilence (v. 6)** – Often personified as a demon or evil spirit.

# WHAT SHOULD WE DO WHEN FEAR STRIKES?

“Wade in the Water” is a song that many of us have sung during baptismal services in our churches. But one of the true reasons for the song was its use in protecting and helping slaves toward freedom as they escaped from slave masters.<sup>2</sup> The same God who walked with our ancestors during those horrendous conditions is here to get us through difficult times of fear.

Fear takes many forms. We all have things we'd just as soon avoid. Some fears are good for us, in that they make us cautious. For example, woodworking is a great hobby, but a “healthy fear” of a running table saw is the reason to keep all ten fingers. Some people actually enjoy being afraid. That's one reason horror movies are so popular.

Whether what is before us is a legitimate concern or not, the fear we feel is real. Thankfully, we do not face our fears alone. Psalm 91 gives us strong assurance that, when fear strikes, we can rest in God's power and protection.

## Trust God's Power // Psalm 91:1-6

We don't know who wrote this psalm or what threats he faced, but he was not afraid because he had a strong trust in God. His trust was grounded in the character of God. He used three different names for God that reflect His character.

- “The Most High” (*El Elyon*) – The Hebrew word captures the absolute supremacy of God. As the One who is over and above all, He is all-powerful and omnipotent (Ps. 18:13) and never changing (Ps. 21:7).
- “The Almighty” (*Shaddai*) – The Hebrew word focuses on the power of God. He is omnipotent and nothing is too big or beyond His ability.
- “The Lord” (*Yahweh*) – This is the name of God by which He revealed Himself to Moses and the children of Israel. Usually translated as “I Am,” this is the name by which God established a covenant and relation with His people.



## THE POINT: GOD IS OUR DEFENDER NO MATTER WHAT WE FACE.

Under such powerful protection, it is easy to see why the psalmist declared: “my God in whom I trust.” His trust was a secure confidence in God. Trusting in Christ means we have a secure confidence in His salvation, love, and protection over us—and that secure confidence is reflected in how we live in the face of fearful situations.

### HOW HAS GOD HELPED YOU THROUGH A FEAR SIMILAR TO THE ONES LISTED IN THESE VERSES?

When we trust and stay close to God, “he will cover you with his feathers.” This imagery captures the loving heart of God. Just as a hen pulls her chicks in close and covers them with her wings, God lovingly keeps us close to protect us. The psalmist immediately pulled in another image. God is a loving, caring God, but He is also a mighty warrior who fights for us—whose “faithfulness will be a protective shield.” God provides both tender care and victorious defense.

David echoed this same trust. “The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom should I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—whom should I dread?” (Ps. 27:1).

### WHEN WE ARE AFRAID, WHY SHOULD GOD BE THE FIRST PLACE WE TURN?

## Trust God’s Protection // Psalm 91:9-13

For many of us who grew up in a home with older siblings, our parents would make it clear to us that if someone bothered or tried to bring harm to your younger brother and sister, it was your job to protect them when fear or harm came their way.

God still protects today. “For he will give his angels orders concerning you, to protect you in all your ways.” Many people hold on to this verse as the grounds for believing God has assigned a guardian angel to each and every person (or at least to every believer), but it’s a stretch to make that conclusion just based on one verse. Of course, there are other references to angels:

- “See to it that you don’t despise one of these little ones, because I tell you that in heaven their angels continually view the face of my Father in heaven” (Matt. 18:10).



## DIGGING DEEPER GOD MOST HIGH AND ALMIGHTY

The two titles for God in verse 1 emphasize His strength. **Most High** depicts God’s omnipotence, exalted nature, and majesty. This title first appears in the Old Testament in the account of Abram’s encounter with Melchizedek, king of Salem. On that occasion Melchizedek identified God Most High as “Creator of heaven and earth” and as Defeater of Abram’s enemies, thereby stressing God’s power (Gen. 14:17-20). The second title, **Almighty**, can also be rendered “Most Powerful.” You may be familiar with the related title, *El Shaddai*, which means “God Almighty.” This divine title emphasizes God’s sovereign, all-powerful, invincible attributes.

### How do these titles for God help you to overcome fear?

- “Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve those who are going to inherit salvation?” (Heb. 1:14).

These passages don't refer to guardian angels as such, nor do they explain exactly how these angels serve. Nevertheless, many people take comfort from the idea that God has assigned them a specific angel who is always there and always looking out for them. They regularly think about their angel, they're thankful for that angel, and some even post pictures to remind them they have a guardian angel.

Satan used this passage about angels.

“Then the devil took him to the holy city, had him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: He will give his angels orders concerning you, and they will support you with their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone’” (Matt. 4:5-6).

In his challenge to Jesus' divinity, Satan wanted Jesus to force God to show He would intervene. Jesus' response about not testing God is a good word for us. We should never presume upon God. God's promise of protection doesn't mean we can act foolishly. God's protection

is grounded in our faithfulness and obedience to Him.

### WHAT STEPS MUST WE TAKE TO MAKE THE LORD OUR DWELLING PLACE?

## Walk with God // Psalm 91:14-16

Psalm 91 now shifts and it is God's words we hear. He gave two reasons why the psalmist could rest assured in God's protection.

1. **He has his heart set on me.** God surrounds the one whose heart is undivided, the one who looks solely to God and no one else. What does an undivided heart look like? It's seen in the greatest commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37).

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SET OUR HEARTS ON GOD?

2. **He knows my name.** Knowing God in this way is more than being aware of God's name; it is knowing Him by experience. The one who knows God's name has a relationship with Him. Some try to use God's name like some incantation; utter



## THE POINT: GOD IS OUR DEFENDER NO MATTER WHAT WE FACE.

the right words, like “in Jesus’ name,” and you’re guaranteed protection. God is not someone we can manipulate. Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). We must have a relationship with Him!

### WHICH OF GOD’S PROMISES IN THESE VERSES ARE MOST DEAR TO YOU?

God gives us more than what we ask. The psalmist trusted God for protection. God answered his request, but He also gave him honor, long life, and salvation. The psalmist honored God by trusting Him in the face of fear, and God in turn honored him. The psalmist looked to God to save his life; God did that—and blessed him with a long life and salvation.

Many of us may remember the old spiritual song “He Knows My Name.” This song is loved by many because it reminds us that no matter what we’re going through, God knows our names and our thoughts. So when fear strikes, we can count on the fact that God knows our names.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Levi Coffin was an American Quaker and leader of the Underground Railroad in Indiana and Ohio. Some referred to him unofficially as the “President of the Underground Railroad.” It is estimated that he gave protection and refuge to some three thousand slaves. Coffin’s home in Fountain City, Indiana, was often called the Underground Railroad’s “Grand Central Station.” As a child, Coffin was exposed to and came to oppose slavery. He grew to become a farmer, a merchant, and a business leader, from which he grew wealthy. His financial status helped to supply food, clothing, and transportation for the operation of the Underground Railroad. Coffin later moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he opened up a warehouse that sold free-labor goods. He assisted hundreds of runaway slaves, often by lodging them in his Ohio home.<sup>3</sup>

### WHY DO YOU THINK THE QUAKERS WERE NOT AFRAID TO PROVIDE PROTECTION TO SLAVES?

## LIVE IT

### What will you do to “shake off fear” and trust the power and protection of God?

Even though we may be trusting God, sometimes what’s feared comes to pass. Where was God and His protection then? We can trust the hand of God even when we don’t understand. God doesn’t tell us how or when He will rescue us from what we face; He only assures us that He will deliver. God’s protection includes a long life and salvation, and that takes us beyond just what we experience on this earth.

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- Make a list of those things that tend to cause you fear. Beside each of those fears, make a note of why trusting God helps you overcome that fear.
- If you deal with a long-term, deep-seated fear or phobia, talk to your pastor or a trusted counselor. Talking to a counselor can help get to the root of such fears and help you trust God.
- Walk alongside someone who might be prone to fear. Be an example and model of 2 Timothy 1:7.



# DAILY READINGS

## 1. IN THE SHADOW OF THE ALMIGHTY // PSALM 91:1

Many Christians share testimonies about God's protection in their lives, and many times they point to Psalm 91 as a source of strength. We know we can dwell in "the shadow of the Almighty." Also, we know that even though we find peace by remaining close to God, we can still experience troubles. But when those troubles—those life struggles—come, do we really look to God, or do we look to money, people, and other material things? We must remember that during our struggles there is only one place we can run to in the entire universe. We can find safety, peace, and all we need in the shadow of the Almighty.

**God has promised, "The Lord is the one who will go before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or abandon you. Do not be afraid or discouraged" (Deut. 31:8).**

## 2. THE LOVE OF GOD // PSALM 91:4

The psalmist has given us a picture of God's love and care for His children. In this verse, God is presented as a bird, who is sheltering young chicks under His wings. With her last dying breath, a bird will fight off the attack of an animal ten times her size to protect her chicks. This is the love of our God. His love is so big, so strong that He gave up His Son to die for a world that had no regard for Him. In your struggles be comforted that the love of God far exceeds any love we will ever know.

**Be encouraged that God loves us like a bird loves her chicks, but His resources far exceeds anything we can imagine.**

## 3. BLESSED // PSALM 91:14-16

In these verses, God spoke of promises and blessings. But some will miss out, simply because they do not love God. What are the blessings God will place on those who through faith trust in Him? In the last few verses of this psalm, God promised to

be with us. We have the blessing of His presence, protection, promotion, prosperity, and preservation. Simply stated, God promised to be with us in trouble, to deliver us, to honor us, to give us long life, and to show us His salvation. We must remember that these are not wishes; they are promised blessings from the heart of God. And they belong to us because of Christ in our hearts and lives.

**We can make it through anything life has for us when we believe and receive God's blessings into our lives.**

## 4. GOD'S JOY // 1 THESSALONIANS 1:6

More often than we like to admit, we walk into church grumbling. We begin to criticize everything wrong with the world—a misspelled word in the bulletin, a missed note by the choir, a sermon you've heard before. Paul noticed that joy had been given by the Holy Spirit to the believers in Thessalonica. It was the kind of joy that is not available in the world and reached deep into the heart. If this deep joy was more powerful than the severe suffering the Thessalonians experienced, it is certainly strong enough to conquer our minor criticisms and grumpiness, if we allow it to do so.

**Enter into worship to give glory to God, and open up your heart to receive His joy.**

## 5. SPIRIT AND TRUTH // JOHN 4:23

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Christ. But Jesus did not stop being God to become a human being. That baby born in Bethlehem and placed in a humble manger full of straw was the Son of the Most High. What can we give Jesus (who has everything)? We can worship Him "in spirit and truth." This Christmas decide not to offer a mechanical or formalistic worship to Christ. Give Him praise that originates from the heart. Give Him a sincere praise motivated by your love for Christ and gratitude for all He is and all He has done.

**Allow the Holy Spirit to awaken this type of praise in your heart.**

# EMBRACING JOY

**THE POINT:**  
WE CAN EXPERIENCE GREAT JOY BECAUSE JESUS SAVES.

## PSALM // 95:1-3; LUKE // 2:4-14

### MEMORY VERSE

Ps. 95:1 **Come, let's shout joyfully to the Lord, shout triumphantly to the rock of our salvation!** <sup>2</sup> Let's enter his presence with thanksgiving; let's shout triumphantly to him in song. <sup>3</sup> For the LORD is a great God, a great King above all gods.

Luke 2:4 Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David, <sup>5</sup> to be registered along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. <sup>7</sup> Then she gave birth to her firstborn son, and she wrapped him tightly in cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

<sup>8</sup> In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock. <sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: <sup>11</sup> Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be the sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup> Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: <sup>14</sup> Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors!

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### KEYWORDS

**a: Rock of our salvation (Ps. 95:1)** – A metaphorical expression denoting security and safety. The Hebrew word "rock" describes the steadfast character of God.

# WHY SHOULD WE CELEBRATE THE BIRTH OF CHRIST?

For many African-Americans, the celebration of both Christmas and Kwanzaa is a celebration of the birth of Christ as well as the black cultural heritage. Both holidays embrace traditions of family and togetherness.

So many of us relish these annual traditions because it takes us back to our childhood. It's also a reason for long-distance families to gather together. We find joy in these moments. Yet many of us find no joy in these same traditions. They only serve as a reminder of those with whom we used to celebrate such as deceased parents, spouses, or the now broken family that used to be together.

Our joy should not be tied to the outward trappings of Christmas. When family goes home and the decorations are put away, the joy is often put away too. True joy should rise out of the reason and purpose behind Christmas, a purpose often lost in the array of Christmas trappings. There's a joy we can embrace year-round—even when life is hard. It's a joy that rises out of life in Christ.

## The Joy of Our Salvation // Psalm 95:1-3

African-American historians have discovered that although our ancestors were enslaved, they experienced joy when they came together. Although they were experiencing hardship as a result of slavery and were under extreme pressure, they had a sense of joy when they were worshiping God, because they knew salvation was a means to freedom.

There is a distinction between happiness and joy. Our English word “happiness” is rooted in happenstance, chance, and good luck. In this sense, happiness is based on our outward circumstances. Happiness comes and goes depending on whether or not the sun is shining, we hit several green lights in a row on our way to work, or our team is headed for the playoffs. Most people see little distinction between happiness and joy. They feel joyous when they're happy. But from a biblical perspective, joy is independent of outside events. It can be raining hard as you sit at one red light after



## THE POINT: WE CAN EXPERIENCE GREAT JOY BECAUSE JESUS SAVES.

another listening to sports radio talk about how poorly your team did, but you can still experience joy.

Right off the bat in Psalm 95, we see the character and work of God.

- **The rock of our salvation.** While a rock makes us think of God as unshakeable and immovable, this image is also a reminder of when the Israelites were in the wilderness and desperate for water. At God's command, Moses struck a rock and life-giving water gushed out. The rock is God Himself, and He has repeatedly proven Himself to provide what we desperately need.
- **A great God.** He is almighty. Nothing is beyond His knowledge or power.
- **A great King above all gods.** No other “gods” come close to the one true sovereign Lord of the universe. A god is not much of a god if he can't rule supremely. Because our God reigns over these “gods,” they are proven to be frauds and not gods at all.

### WHAT EMOTIONS DO YOU EXPERIENCE WHEN YOU READ THESE VERSES? WHY?

When we focus on ourselves, joy is absent. When all we see are our problems, joy is absent. But when we look to God, we look to the One who carries us through regardless of outward circumstances or our own internal deficiencies.

When we individually reflect on the goodness and greatness of God, we're compelled to thank Him and joyfully praise Him. Joyful praise is something believers should do in private and with others. Notice that the psalmist repeatedly called to the people: “Let us shout triumphantly” and “Let us enter his presence with thanksgiving.” Joyful praise is contagious.

### The Birth of Our Salvation // Luke 2:4-7

We never tire of a good story. Even though we may have heard it a hundred times before, we gladly listen to the family patriarch tell it again at the family reunion. So we may read the same book or sit through the same movie again because we love the story. The same could be said of the events of



### DIGGING DEEPER MYSTERY OF THE CENSUS

Luke claims the entire world participated in a census. However, no other records show such an extensive Roman census. Records do show Augustus sought to reorganize the financial policies and procedures of the empire. The census was one means he used to gain financial resources. Records also show Quirinius carried out an important census (referred to obliquely in Acts 5:37), but it was a decade after Jesus' birth. Without further records, we cannot solve this historical problem. Such solving is not necessary, however, to maintain confidence in God's Word. It would answer human questions but would not provide new theological insights or new directions from God for life.

**Why do you think the census during Jesus' birth is shrouded in mystery?**





Christmas. We gladly read again the history recorded by Luke because it touches us like no other story can.

Jesus wasn't just born anywhere. He was born in Bethlehem, a fact foretold by the prophet Micah eight hundred years earlier (Mic. 5:2).

We don't know how familiar Joseph was with the passage from Micah; yet, one would wonder if it ever entered Joseph's mind to take a pregnant woman 85-90 miles south. Such a trip would be anywhere from four to seven days of hard travel, but God orchestrated events through an empire-wide census that would require Joseph to be in Bethlehem.

It was a difficult road to travel, but God did not soften it for Joseph and Mary. He only strengthened Joseph to care for Mary. God did not provide a luxurious inn for Joseph and Mary but brought His Son into the world in a humble cave. His Son was wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a feeding trough. The surroundings were dark and dirty. But none of this made any difference. God's will had been done. He sent His Son into the world to save us from our sins.

**HOW WOULD YOU SUM UP THE "GOOD NEWS" OF JESUS' BIRTH?**

## The Cause of Our Salvation //

**Luke 2:8-14**

To the citizens of Bethlehem, there was nothing especially unusual about the birth of this baby, except the "unfortunate" fact that the baby had to sleep in a manger. That's if they were even aware of the birth. One group though, was about to be given the ultimate birth announcement.

For a group of shepherds, a quiet evening watching out for the sheep was interrupted by the sudden appearance of an angel standing in front of them. The angel was certainly not to be mistaken for someone who just walked up, because "the glory of the Lord shone around them." The shepherds "were terrified"—as I'm sure we would be too. Angelic appearances have that effect on people!

In our previous session, we saw in Psalm 91 that we can walk confidently in the face of fear when we walk with God. Fear has a positive place in our lives when it is a reverential and humble fear of God, but when He sends an angelic messenger to us, it would be easy to slip back into being afraid. Twice already in the events leading up the birth of Jesus, an angel appeared, and both times Zechariah and



## THE POINT: WE CAN EXPERIENCE GREAT JOY BECAUSE JESUS SAVES.

Mary were afraid. But on those two occasions, Zechariah and Mary received the same comforting word the shepherds received: don't be afraid (Luke 1:13,30).

The angel had "good news of great joy that will be for all the people." The good news centered on the birth of the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus was acknowledged even at His birth as Savior and Lord. We would see the culmination of His role as Savior and Lord at His death and resurrection, but even now, He was hailed for the mission He would carry out.

Such a joy-filled promise of hope and salvation cannot be contained. After the angel's announcement, he was joined by a great chorus of other angels proclaiming, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors!" Can we do any less? Christ came to earth to bring us peace and salvation. He has graced us with the very thing we do not deserve—and that is cause for great joy.

### WHY IS JESUS' BIRTH A CAUSE OF JOY FOR PEOPLE FROM EVERY PART OF THE WORLD?

### DID YOU KNOW?

Kwanzaa did not originate in Africa, nor is it an African Christmas celebration. It was a festival introduced in 1966 by Dr. Maulana Karenga, a professor at California State University, as an African-American response to the commercialism of Christmas. It is called a celebration of life and is celebrated December 26 to January 1. Some say Kwanzaa resembles Thanksgiving rather than Christmas. The word "kwanzaa" is swahili and means first fruits. Each family celebrates Kwanzaa in its own way and often utilizes songs and dances, African drums, storytelling, poetry reading, and a large traditional meal. Ideally, candles are placed on a Kinara (candleholder) and a different one is lit each night as values of the African culture are discussed. An African feast, called a Karamu, is held on December 31.<sup>4</sup>

### HOW IS THE JOY OF KWANZAA DIFFERENT FROM THE JOY OF CHRISTMAS?

## LIVE IT

### How will you embrace and express joy during the season of Christmas?

Whether you celebrate Christmas or some other holiday, this can be a really challenging season. Our joy shouldn't be tied to the outward trappings of Christmas. Our true joy should rise out of the reason and purpose behind Christmas. We can embrace joy year-round—even when life is hard. It's joy that rises out of life in Christ.

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- Christ came to forgive you, restore you, and give you hope and a future. If you have never trusted Christ for salvation, do so now. Talk to your group leader or read the inside cover of this book.
- Make praise a regular part of your prayer time. Continually praise Him and remember all He has done.
- The greatest gift you can give someone this Christmas is the good news of why Jesus came to earth. Tell someone else about the salvation and joy you experience because of Christ.

# DAILY READINGS

## 1. IN THOSE DAYS // LUKE 2:1

The “in those days” mentioned here occurred a little more than two thousand years ago. At that time, Caesar Augustus ruled a huge Roman empire, and many other events were taking place all around the world. It was in those days that God decided to empty Himself of His glory, “assuming the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:7). He went from having the might of all the kingdoms of the world to being a tiny baby born in a cave. A lot happened in those days, but the most important thing was the birth of Christ. It was when the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

**Now on this day how will you respond to the greatest gift of all time? How will you respond to the birth of Christ the Lord?**

## 2. CHRISTMAS READY // PHILIPPIANS 2:5

The world in which we live grows more indifferent to the things of God with every passing day. Many people just don't want to live for God or have anything to do with Him. But it should be different for believers. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior, we should ask ourselves, “How should I display the attitude of Christ in a world of indifference? What does it mean for me to have the mind of Christ? How can I be Christmas ready?” To be Christmas ready means determining how Christ will be honored. The greatest honor we can give our Savior is to seriously ask ourselves, “WWJD” (What would Jesus do)?”

**Be Christmas ready. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you imitate the Lord in this world.**

## 3. JOY TO THE WORLD // 2 CORINTHIANS 9:15

The Christmas song “Joy to the World” can be heard everywhere at Christmastime. It's a favorite with those who seek to celebrate the true reason for the season. The joy of the birth of Christ resounds throughout all of creation—even the fields and rocks and hills and plains “repeat the sounding joy.” This

is good news for the whole world. But what is so good about the news announced every Christmas? Why all the joy? The answer is in the third verse of the song. Jesus has come to deal with the curse of human sin and rebellion. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus brings the blessing as “far as the curse is found.”

**So this Christmas sing loud and sing strong: “Joy to the world! The Lord is come . . . and heaven and nature sing.”**

## 4. SINFUL ANGER // EPHESIANS 4:26

Anger is a valid emotion that defines a part of who we are as humans. However, according to the Bible, anger can easily lead to sin. Therefore, anger must be controlled. Some anger is OK. This emotion would be released if someone harmed me for no reason. And like God, we should be angered by evil. But unlike God, we can become irrational, destroying relationships if we don't deal with anger appropriately. Be mindful that anger is about the person who is angry. That means if you become angry, you must deal with yourself. Invite God into the situation through prayer before it turns to sin.

**Ask Him to root out bitterness and an unforgiving spirit so that healing can take place.**

## 5. FREE FROM RAGE // PSALM 23:1

If we are not careful, the stress of the Christmas season can cause our emotions to morph from joy to rage. The preparation of meals, shopping for gifts, special requests, decorations, church programs, and school activities can leave us dangling from the edge of a cliff where one more thing will tip us over the edge into a raging fit. Decide at the outset of the season to have a rage-free Christmas. Use Psalm 23 to invite God to lead as your Shepherd and provide all you need. Then at every step worship Him for the gift of His Son.

**God's love and care leaves us free from rage.**



# Dealing with Your Anger

## or 7 Tips to Keep Your Anger from Going over the Top

BY MARK CROSTON

A cartoon character getting angry is always amusing. Viewers tend to eagerly anticipate the visceral response. Steam shoots out of the ears as crimson creeps from the tips of the toes to the top of the head, threatening to explode. Not so much in real life! A human being's physical stages of anger aren't fun to witness and they're even less enjoyable to feel such as teeth grinding; fists clenching; face flushing; and prickly sensations, muscle tensions, and temperature changes.<sup>1</sup>

No matter the personal response, there are some things we all need to know and consider.

Everybody gets angry, even God. Exodus 34:6 says, "The LORD passed in front of him and proclaimed: The LORD—the LORD is a compassionate and gracious

God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth."

Anger is sometimes helpful. Jesus was angry and chased the money changers in the temple with a whip in John 2:13-15 and turned over tables in Matthew 21:12.

Many times, anger can be harmful. Anger can get you in trouble. Consider Cain in Genesis 4:6-8 who got angry and killed his brother Abel.

Even for a great leader like Moses, anger was a lifelong hindrance. Starting in Exodus 2:11-12, Moses' anger caused him to kill an Egyptian who was striking a Hebrew. Later when Moses talked to Pharaoh about freeing the Israelites, Exodus 11:8b says, "And he went

out from Pharaoh's presence fiercely angry." Even in Exodus 32:19-20 "as he approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses became enraged and threw the tablets out of his hands, smashing them at the base of the mountain."

Anger was Moses' lifelong struggle, at age 40, 80 and then at 120. Ultimately, we read in Numbers 20:6-12, Moses' anger issues kept him from entering the promised land.

Unchecked anger leads to bitterness, verbal abuse, dishonesty, beating yourself up, attacking the source in unproductive ways, isolation and exclusion and even attacking a substitute—hurt people hurt people.

If anger is an issue for you, use these 7 tips to keep your anger from going over the top.

**1. Admit It**—Feel it, own it, just don't be dominated by it. Ephesians 4:26-27 says, "Be angry and do not sin. Don't let the sun go down on your anger, and don't give the devil an opportunity."

**2. Seek the Source**—A man was once driving his sedan along a narrow, winding road when all of a sudden, a woman driving a large Rolls Royce came hurtling around the corner, nearly driving him off the road. As she drove by the man, he heard her shout, "Pig!"

Immediately the man retaliated by yelling back, "Fat old cow!" Then he drove around the bend himself—and crashed head-on into the biggest pig he'd ever seen.

Ask yourself, "Why am I snapping people up? What is really bothering me?"

**3. Practice Self Control**—When you get mad the amygdala part of the brain is going crazy. It wants to do something, and the time between a trigger event and a response from the amygdala can be a quarter of a second.<sup>2</sup> This is why you get a lot of advice about counting to ten when angry, to give the amygdala time to calm down.

People who get angry all the time may have disabled the mechanism to turn off the outburst that can accompany anger.

**4. Focus on Forgiveness**—A woman was bitten by a rabid dog, and it looked like she was going to die from rabies. The doctor told her to put her final affairs in order. So, the woman took pen and paper and began writing furiously. In fact, she wrote and wrote and wrote. Finally, the doctor said, "That sure is a long

will you're making." She snorted, "Will, nothing! I'm making a list of all the people I'm going to bite!"

Ephesians 4:31-32, says, "Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice. And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ."

**5. Grow Spiritually**—Remember self-control is a description of the fruit of the Spirit.

**6. Build Self-Esteem**—There is some evidence to suggest that if you assume a smile then your physiology follows and you become happier and less able to be angry.<sup>3</sup>

**7. Pray and depend on the Holy Spirit for help.** Read the rest of Philippians 4 and pray. God is able to give us peace that surpasses our ability to understand.

God wants us to be more like Him in every way, so, "Refrain from anger and give up your rage; do not be agitated—it can only bring harm" (Ps. 37:8).

1 Molly Edmonds, "How Anger Works," *How Stuff Works*, retrieved June 9, 2020, <http://science.howstuffworks.com/environmental/life/human-biology/anger6.htm#tavis>

2 *ibid*

3 Nicole Spector, "Smiling can trick your brain into happiness—and boost your health," *nbcnews*, Jan. 9, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/better/health/smiling-can-trick-your-brain-happiness-boost-your-health-ncna822591#>.

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SESSION 4

# REDIRECTING ANGER

**THE POINT:**  
TAKE YOUR ANGER  
TO GOD AND  
LEAVE MATTERS IN  
HIS HANDS.

## PSALM // 35:1-3,13-18

<sup>1</sup> Oppose my opponents, LORD; fight those who fight me. <sup>2</sup> Take your shields—large and small—and come to my aid. <sup>3</sup> Draw the spear and javelin against my pursuers, and assure me: “I am your deliverance.”

<sup>13</sup> Yet when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled myself with fasting, and my prayer was genuine. <sup>14</sup> I went about mourning as if for my friend or brother; I was bowed down with grief, like one mourning for a mother. <sup>15</sup> But when I stumbled, they gathered in glee; they gathered against me. Assailants I did not know tore at me and did not stop. <sup>16</sup> With godless mockery they gnashed their teeth at me.

<sup>17</sup> Lord, how long will you look on? Rescue me from their ravages; rescue my precious life from the young lions. <sup>18</sup> I will praise you in the great assembly; I will exalt you among many people.

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### MEMORY VERSE

James: 11:19 **My dear brothers and sisters, understand this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, <sup>20</sup> for human anger does not accomplish God’s righteousness.**

### KEYWORDS

**a: Shields (v. 2)** – Evokes military ideas: Those who trust Yahweh often take refuge from their enemies in Him.

**b: Mockery (v. 16)** – More than playful ridicule; it included a malicious intent.



## HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO OPPOSITION?

Small children can get mad about the silliest things—and if they catch us giggling, they only get madder. Parents report their children get mad because . . .

. . . his ice cream was too cold.

. . . I wouldn't let him wipe his nose with a piece of bread.

Unfortunately, we can get angry as adults—and for equally silly reasons.

- Someone chews his food too loudly.
- Someone in front of you is walking (or driving) too slowly.

Admit it. You've gotten angry over something petty—just like I have. At other times, more serious matters push the anger button: slander, threats, and unjust actions. Do we give into the anger, or is there a better way? In Psalm 35, David had good reasons to be angry, but he took a different route. It's a route we should consider when anger wants to well up inside us.

### Leave Vengeance to God //

Psalm 35:1-3

Many of us have played the game of one-upmanship. We've played it when we try to look better than the next person. "You took your kids to the state park? I took mine to Europe." We've also played a negative version of the game. "You think you had it bad? Let me tell you how sick I was!"

#### WHAT'S YOUR FIRST REACTION TO THESE VERSES? WHY?

That's not a game you would want to play against King David. When it comes to opposition and roadblocks in life, David's list would be longer and greater than yours or mine. Opposition comes in many forms. We view anything that keeps us from what we want or think we deserve as opposition—and these are the things that can stir up anger in us.

But David faced real—and serious—opposition. Psalm 35 was likely penned during the period



## THE POINT: TAKE YOUR ANGER TO GOD AND LEAVE MATTERS IN HIS HANDS.

of David's life when he was being pursued by King Saul. After David's victory over Goliath, he quickly rose in popularity with the people. He served in Saul's court, and he was successful in everything he did. David never sought to usurp King Saul, but that was not how Saul viewed David.

Lest we think David is mean-spirited with no love in his heart, there are two things in David's life worth noting:

1. **David had an easy opportunity to kill his enemy—twice!** On one occasion, Saul went to relieve himself in the very cave in which David and his men were hiding. David crept up and cut the corner of Saul's robe to prove that he could harm Saul—but wouldn't (1 Sam. 24:1-11). On another occasion, David crept into Saul's camp while he was sleeping and took the javelin and water jug that were inches from Saul (26:23-24).
2. **David took the matter to God.** David didn't seek vengeance; He sought God. Read this psalm through verse 8 and you see a cry for David's opponents to be disgraced, humiliated, ashamed, and ruined. David expressed his anger and frustration to God, but he left the matter there. David surely knew what God said in the law: "Vengeance and retribution belong to me. . . . The LORD will indeed vindicate his people" (Deut. 32:35-36).

Whom do we turn to when we're opposed and anger rises up? We may turn inward and just fume about it, or we may lie on our beds at night, envisioning all sorts of creative retribution. And some may take their anger to others, recruiting them to join in their anger. David models a better approach: take the matter to God. Even though David offered suggestions to God on what He should do, he prayed to God, trusted Him, and looked for His assurance "I am your deliverance."

### HOW CAN GOD HELP US DEAL WITH ANGER?

## Treat Others with Love and Grace //

### Psalm 35:13-16

It's wonderful to watch two people find each other and fall in love. Their wedding is a picture of undying love. But it is a shock to hear that, just a few years later, she turns to him and says, "I don't love you anymore." And just like that, she walks



## DIGGING DEEPER VENGEANCE

Some readers of the Psalms have long been troubled by the harsh expression of vengeance uttered by psalmists, often attributed to David himself. Take for example the statement: "Break the arm of the wicked, evil person" (Ps. 10:15). A plausible understanding of these difficult sayings must take into account the significant role the psalmists play in the Book of Psalms. They were often kings or represented the king in some official capacity. God mandated Israel's king to safeguard the people and all God had promised to do through them. Thus, any threat to God's people was also a threat to the very promise of God. In this unique situation, to oppose the God-anointed king was to oppose God Himself. So the king/psalmist prayed that God would judge those evildoers who intended to hinder God's work.

### At what point does a psalmist cross the line of vengeance?



away, leaving him blindsided and devastated. It doesn't happen just between a husband and wife. Good friends—even best friends—turn their backs and work against the person.

That's what made David's situation so hard. The ones who were seeking to kill him were the very ones he cared for. We've already noted the relationship between Saul and David. David served Saul closely; his best friend was Saul's son, Jonathan (1 Sam. 18:1). But David had also been a military leader for Saul, and many of the soldiers now pursuing him were men he served alongside.

For those who think David was being unusually harsh in this psalm, note that David sincerely prayed for these men. David wasn't guilty of the casual prayer in passing. Nor did he say—as we often do—"I'll pray for you," and then promptly forget. He fasted. He mourned for them. His "prayer was genuine."

#### HOW CAN DAVID'S EXAMPLE GUIDE US IN RESPONDING TO OPPOSITION?

When friends or family turn on us, it can be tempting to respond in kind. "I tried to be nice, but if he is going to be that way, I can too." We are not to respond in anger or retaliation; we are

to respond in love. Loving those who anger us or seek our harm is the best way to "get back" at them. "If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For in so doing you will be heaping fiery coals on his head. Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good" (Rom. 12:20-21).

### Leave Matters in God's Hands

// Psalm 35:17-18

Saul took his beef with David to the battlefield; he responded as a warrior, chasing his enemy to kill him. David was well-known as a mighty warrior, but he appealed to God to be the warrior on his behalf. David was also appealing to God as his Advocate and Judge. He needed protection from "their ravages." Without God's intervention, David's life was truly in danger, David asked God to "rescue my precious life from the young lions."

The heart of David's prayer and appeal to God was for rescue, not retaliation. Underneath David's words in this psalm . . .

- "Oppose my opponents" (v. 1)
- "Let those . . . be disgraced and humiliated" (v. 4)

## THE POINT: TAKE YOUR ANGER TO GOD AND LEAVE MATTERS IN HIS HANDS.

- “Let their way be dark and slippery” (v. 6).
- “Let ruin come on him unexpectedly” (v. 8)

... was a desire to be rescued. Their demise was not his goal; his rescue was. David's attitude and heart toward his enemy was evident at Saul's' death (2 Sam. 1:11-12). There's no retaliation or sense of vengeance when we grieve over the fall of those who seek our downfall.

### WHY IS COMPASSION A NECESSARY CHARACTERISTIC FOR FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST?

David knew God would rescue him; he just didn't know when. “Lord, how long will you look on?” David's trust is also seen in his praise of God. David offered his praise and worship publicly. “I will praise you in the great assembly; I will exalt you among many people.” Our public praise in the thick of frustrating, anger-inducing circumstances is a great testimony of our trust in God. It honors Him when we chose trust rather than anger and retaliation.

### HOW CAN WE OVERCOME ANGER AND PUT MATTERS IN GOD'S HANDS?

### DID YOU KNOW?

Civil rights icon Rep. John Lewis had every right to be angry and take justice into his own hands, but he did not. As one of the leaders of the March 7, 1965, voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, he was severely injured by police. Some 600 protesters left from a church and got only as far as the Edmund Pettus Bridge six blocks away, where state and local lawmen attacked them with billy clubs and tear gas and drove them back into Selma. Like many others that day, Lewis was beaten with a billy club. He sustained a skull fracture and was later taken to the hospital. That day became known as “Bloody Sunday.” Although forced back, the protestors did not fight back. Rather than resolving to take vengeance, Lewis used his energy to bring about change.<sup>5</sup>

### HOW DO YOU THINK THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT WOULD HAVE BEEN IMPACTED IF JOHN LEWIS HAD RETALIATED WITH VIOLENCE?

## LIVE IT

### When anger begins to brew, how will you respond?

When opposed by others, many believers don't respond as if they are followers of Christ. David modeled the best approach: take the matter to God. We aren't to respond in anger or retaliation; we are to respond in love and compassion. Loving those who anger us or seek our harm is the best way to “get back” at them.

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- Be honest with God about why you're angry. Ask Him for the strength to refrain from anger and the will to trust Him with the situation.
- At the very least, pray for the well-being of the other person. As you genuinely pray for another person, God will also work on your heart.
- Show love to the one who has made you angry in order to honor the One who loves you.

# DAILY READINGS

## 1. VENGEANCE // PSALM 137:9

Many of the prayers of David were red hot with retaliation against his enemies. Can the words of your prayer be as cruel as David's was in this verse? Maybe you know someone who was victimized. Maybe you were abused or violated. Some of us think there are not many real victims in our world. We suspect that most sufferers "asked for it" or "got what they had coming." But the psalms do not tolerate keeping such a distance from human suffering. They experience, and express, anger on behalf of the oppressed. Hating evil is critical for a healthy spiritual life, but then, so is love. Jesus teaches us to love our enemies. Therefore we must trust vengeance to Him alone.

**Be honest with God about your anger, and then lay a need for vengeance at His feet.**

## 2. PRAY FOR ENEMIES // MATTHEW 5:44

The command to pray for our enemies requires no interpretation. Jesus could not have been any clearer: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." But what about the neighbor who keeps putting his trash in your yard? And what about the cashier who grumbles when you say hello? When we've been slighted by someone, we may carry a grudge and wish the worst for that person. But when you trust Jesus and obey His command, you receive freedom from any hurt and power to forgive the sins committed against you. Loving your enemies is actually a gift of God that helps you experience God's love for you in a deeper and more powerful way.

**When loving and praying for your enemies becomes hard, remember that while you were God's enemy, Jesus loved you and died for you.**

## 3. LET GO // PSALM 35:17

It was never God's intention to leave us alone to struggle against enemies. Paul said, "Do not

avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for God's wrath, because it is written, Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay, says the Lord" (Rom. 12:19). This is especially significant today when lawsuits and incessant demands for legal rights are rampant. Letting go and leaving it to God sounds almost impossible, but it can be done. If you find it difficult to let go of a vengeful attitude, try a kind act. Send your perceived enemy a gift. Smile at the person who has hurt you. Give them over to God through prayer. Let go by loving them in some way first.

**The best way to get rid of enemies is turn them into friends.**

## 4. DON'T WORRY // MATTHEW 6:25

Do you worry? Many of us worry about everything—paying bills, losing our jobs, getting sick, raising our children, getting married. With all the concerns in life, can Jesus really be serious when He tells us not to worry? Life on earth will always have its concerns, but Jesus said we should not worry about them. Worry isn't necessary because God knows exactly what we need. Therefore worry is not necessary for those who follow Christ. If God dresses the flowers in the field and feeds the birds in the air, then surely He will take care of His children. The same God who went through the hell of Calvary for you, loves you too much to leave your life to chance.

**Don't worry! God has control of your life!**

## 5. LIKE SHEEP // PSALM 23:1

Sheep are worry-free animals. They have a shepherd who provides everything they need: food, protection, guidance, water—everything. David said God is our Shepherd, because God gives us everything we need. Therefore, we should be worry-free like sheep. We tend to forget that quite often, because we depend too much on ourselves.

**Let us remember that the One who leads us will lead us in the right places and in the right ways. Therefore, we should follow Him.**



SESSION 5

# OVERCOMING WORRY

**THE POINT:**  
GOD'S PRESENCE  
PROVIDES A WAY OUT  
OF WORRY.

## PSALM // 23:1-6

<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd; I have what I need. <sup>2</sup> He lets me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside quiet waters. <sup>3</sup> He renews my life; he leads me along the right paths for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even when I go through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. <sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

MEMORY VERSE

<sup>6</sup> **Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD as long as I live.**

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KEYWORDS

**a. Anoint (v. 5)** – Prophets, priests, and kings were anointed or smeared with oil in biblical times to set them apart for the Lord's service. Anointing symbolized God's power.

# WHAT CAN WE DO WHEN OVERWHELMED BY WORRY?

The world offers us a lot to worry about: terrorism, global tensions, a fluctuating economy, and crime . . . will we be better or worse next year at this time? We also face worries more close to home. We worry about the safety of our kids, our health, our job security and retirement, and the list goes on.

Surely we know we're not supposed to worry, but let me give you a reason you shouldn't worry: it's not good for you. The National Institutes of Health tell us that worry leads to a weak immune system, making you more likely to have colds or other infections. Worry also leads to high blood pressure, ulcers, acid reflux, cardio-vascular problems, irritable bowel, backaches, headaches, respiratory problems, and even skin conditions.<sup>6</sup> *Great. Now I have something else to worry about: worry!*

Even for those who think they are “natural-born worriers,” there is an antidote: trust. Psalm 23 paints a beautiful picture of what it means to let go of our worries and rest in God, the loving Shepherd who takes care of us in all situations.

## Trust God's Guidance //

### Psalm 23:1-3

God's presence is the most comforting thing we can have when worries arise. Psalm 23 is a great picture of God's loving presence, which helps explain why the 23rd Psalm is so widely known and loved. It reminds us that, when we encounter life in all of its brutality, God is present to guide us and comfort us.

### WHAT AREAS OF LIFE DO PEOPLE TEND TO WORRY ABOUT?

David wrote this psalm, but we don't know when he did so. It could have been when he was a young boy working as a shepherd, when he was being chased and challenged before becoming king of Israel, or when he was an old man looking back on his life. No matter when he wrote it, his song—sung by the Hebrew people and used by many in the face of worrisome situations—reminds us that God is our Shepherd. David reminds us of three things God does for us as our Shepherd.



## THE POINT: GOD'S PRESENCE PROVIDES A WAY OUT OF WORRY.

1. **He guides us.** By nature, sheep are not terribly smart. They often wander aimlessly, getting themselves into one problem after another. The shepherd's staff has a hook on one end for this very reason: so that he can haul sheep out of holes and ravines when they fall in. This is a pretty good metaphor for our lives.
2. **He provides for us.** A shepherd does more than just keep the sheep out of trouble; he also provides for their needs. God does the same for us. The psalm says God is such a good Shepherd we will lack nothing. It is an absolutely amazing statement. In the midst of life's needs, sorrows, and grief, God provides perfectly for us.
3. **He renews us.** With God, we get guidance and provision, but we also get renewal. The psalm refers to green pastures—a place of rest—and still waters—a source of refreshment. Again, it is only by God's presence in our lives that we can get to these places of refreshment.

### HOW HAS THE LORD REFRESHED YOUR SOUL?

## Trust God's Presence // Psalm 23:4-5

Our worries can sometimes become reality:

- A job loss
- A diagnosis from the doctor
- A broken relationship

In the end, it does not matter if your problem is self-inflicted or brought on by others. It does not matter if it is public or private. What matters is that you are not alone. God's presence makes all the difference no matter what circumstance you face.

**As our Shepherd, God protects us.** Sometimes we do walk "through the darkest valley." We imagine ourselves as a defenseless sheep wandering alone at the midnight hour. We can feel helpless and hopeless. But it is in these circumstances—when death or danger seems near, when we are in the darkest valley imaginable—God is protecting us. Only the One who is the Author of life can possibly escort us when we are in the darkest place where death or fear seems to reign.



## DIGGING DEEPER QUIET WATERS

The "quiet waters" to which the Shepherd leads us literally, refers to waters that have been stilled, further expanding the peaceful scene created in this psalm. Weary and worn sheep need a long, refreshing drink from the rapid stream. But being instinctively afraid of running water, the shepherd must pick up a few large stones and dam up a place, causing the rushing stream to slow its current and create quiet waters. Then the flock may drink with no fear. God gives true, abiding peace to believers who abide in Him and drink of His grace.

### How do "quiet waters" help us to overcome worry?



**In times of danger and fear, God's presence gives comfort.** Remember, we are His sheep. As it says in Romans 8:31, "What, then, are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?" We gain comfort in knowing that God Himself uses His power on our behalf when we face darkness and the predatory nature of this world.

**God's presence also brings about courage.** David wrote, "I fear no danger" when he spoke of "the darkest valley." Consider the dark valleys of life you must pass through. In many of them, there is really nothing you can do.

**And when He walks with you, victory is yours.** The imagery David used in verse 5 is one of a celebration. The enemy is forced to watch as we celebrate. A huge banquet table is set before us. It is a time to feast and laugh and be glad because God is with us.

#### WHAT HAS HELPED YOU TRUST GOD THROUGH DARK VALLEYS?

### Trust God's Goodness //

#### Psalm 23:6

Psalm 23 is comforting because of what it tells us about God and what He will do on

our behalf. For many people, though, their real question is not "What will God do for me?" but "Will God love me?" Some worry that their past or sin is a barrier from experiencing God's love.

#### WHY IS GOD'S GOODNESS AND MERCY THE BEST MEDICINE FOR WORRY?

The Book of Psalms is essentially the songbook the Israelites used during worship. Every psalm was used as a part of worship to the Lord and as a teaching tool for the people to remind them of what God had done on their behalf. In light of that, David taught us in Psalm 23 to sing that God's goodness and faithful love will come after us . . . and they will be there for the rest of our lives. Don't miss it. David says that God's "goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life."

- When we feel like temptation is pursuing us, God is more determined to win our hearts.
- When sorrows seem to be around every corner, the Lord is present to wipe our tears and win our hearts.
- When life is just plain hard and we don't know if we can overcome the pain, the Shepherd is present to guide us toward His love.

## THE POINT: GOD'S PRESENCE PROVIDES A WAY OUT OF WORRY.

One of my favorite names for Jesus is "Immanuel." In the story of the birth of Jesus, an angel told Joseph in a dream to take Mary as his wife. Using the Old Testament prophecy from Isaiah 7:14, the angel told Joseph that Jesus will be called Immanuel, a title that means: "God is with us" (Matt. 1:20-23). This has to be the most comforting thought in all of life: God pursued us from the throne room of heaven, lived a life in the dirt with us, and He will not hesitate in His pursuit for us. He desires to be with us!

God also desires that we will live with Him. That is the reason He sent His Son to suffer and die on the cross for us. That is why He pursues us—and He will never stop. God loves you, and He desires to become your Shepherd and protect you in the deep, dark valleys of your life. It is by His presence that we gain a sense of hope and courage. His never-letting-go, always-coming-after-us love becomes an ever-present help in our lives. And by His goodness, we dine at the King's table. Forever.

### HOW DOES AN ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE HELP ALLEVIATE WORRY?

### DID YOU KNOW?

Carl Maxie Brashear enlisted in the U.S. Navy on February 25, 1948, shortly after the Navy had been desegregated by President Harry S. Truman. Brashear faced hostility and racism and often received derogatory and threatening notes. Against this backdrop, Brashear graduated from Boatswain's Mate First Class Rutherford and became a highly decorated sailor. In March of 1966, while Brashear was working at a bomb's recovery operation, a line used for towing broke loose. The line caused a pipe to nearly shear off Brashear's left leg below the knee. Through sheer determination, Brashear became the first African-American U.S. Navy Master Diver despite losing his left leg and despite racial opposition. Brashear said he was motivated by his belief that, "It's not a sin to get knocked down; it's a sin to stay down."<sup>7</sup>

### IN WHAT WAYS DID BRASHEAR DEMONSTRATE A WORRY-FREE LIFE?

## LIVE IT

### How will you live out your trust in God?

Even for those who think they are "natural-born worriers," an antidote is available: trust in God. He knows what we need, and when we decide to stop struggling and start trusting Him, we experience relief. Consider this: worry can lead to all kinds of physical and emotional diseases; but trusting God can lead to peace and tranquilly even in the midst of trauma.

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- Identify the things about which you're most prone to worry. Turn that list into a prayer list, trusting Him to work in each situation.
- As a safeguard against worry, memorize Philippians 4:6-7: "Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."



# DAILY READINGS

## 1. A SPIRITUAL MIND // ROMANS 8:6

What consumes your thoughts? Are you the type to panic or pray? Many of us have wasted countless moments worrying and can testify that worry never helped work out anything. None of us will ever look back on our lives and wish we had spent more mental energy on earthy concerns. Paul, as he often did in his epistles, presented the options very clearly. We can choose to set our minds on things of the flesh, or things of the Spirit. The result of being spiritually minded is that we will experience life and peace. So ask yourself: *What changes can I make that will enable me to enjoy the benefits of a spiritually-minded life?* We must become intentional about examining our thoughts. For example, are you prone to worry?

**Choose to lean on the Spirit to guide your thoughts. God will help us focus on Him and on the things of the Spirit, rather than worry.**

## 2. SMALL STUFF // MATTHEW 6:31-33

Much of the stuff that Jesus says we should not worry about are things that will probably never happen in most of our lives. What we will eat? What we will drink? What we will wear? These are small things compared to the really big stuff Christ is talking about. The important stuff is seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Christ wants us to fill our thoughts with God's desires and go to Him first for help. So what is really important to you—the small stuff, what you will eat, drink, or wear, or the important stuff, God's kingdom?

**Don't sweat the small stuff. Small stuff will take care of itself when you focus on the kingdom of God.**

## 3. PEACE BE STILL // MARK 4:39

In the business world of technology, Subject Matter Experts are the programmers of complex systems such as aircraft or computer systems. Jesus is the ultimate SME. He rebuked the wind and the sea,

which He created, and they obeyed Him. All we see is chaos, and because of that we worry. But we can call on Christ, our SME, and there will be peace.

**Jesus assures us He has everything under control. He can bring peace in a storm.**

## 4. SHARE YOUR BURDENS // ROMANS 15:1

Listening is a powerful tool when someone is depressed. By listening to the stories of others and offering hope, we can help them carry their burdens. If you consider yourself strong in comparison to your brother or sister, use your strength to serve that person, instead of using your strength just to please yourself. This may go against the tenants of our time because of the "me" consciousness of our culture. But the thinking of believers should be different.

**Christ commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves. This includes listening so the load they are carrying will be made lighter.**

## 5. BE A CONQUEROR // ROMANS 8:37

Paul knew what he was talking about when he spoke of tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and the sword. He was very open about the trials he experienced while preaching the gospel. He endured imprisonment, beatings, hunger, and shipwrecks, among many other trials. We can take great comfort in being told, by someone who has been there, that "in all these things we are more than conquerors." We have all experienced various hardships and heartaches. No one makes it through life unscathed. In moments of difficulty like the loss of a loved one, a life-altering diagnosis, or the betrayal of a trusted friend, depression may seep in. But those are the moments when we must remind ourselves that no circumstance, no matter how difficult, can separate us from the love of Christ.

**No pain can overpower the grace of God. No loss can lessen the power of the Spirit in us. Indeed, we are more than conquerors.**

# WEATHERING THE BLUES

**THE POINT:**  
GOD LIFTS US UP  
WHEN WE FEEL DOWN.

## PSALM // 31:1-8

<sup>1</sup> LORD, I seek refuge in you; let me never be disgraced. Save me by your righteousness. <sup>2</sup> Listen closely to me; rescue me quickly. Be a rock of refuge for me, a mountain fortress to save me.

<sup>3</sup> For you are my rock and my fortress; you lead and guide me for your name's sake. <sup>4</sup> You will free me from the net that is secretly set for me, for you are my refuge.

<sup>5</sup> Into your hand I entrust my spirit; you have redeemed me, LORD, God of truth. <sup>6</sup> I hate those who are devoted to worthless idols, but I trust in the LORD. <sup>7</sup> **I will rejoice and be glad in your faithful love because you have seen my affliction.** You know the troubles of my soul <sup>8</sup> and have not handed me over to the enemy. You have set my feet in a spacious place.

### MEMORY VERSE

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### KEYWORDS

**a: Spacious place (v. 8)** – Conveys the notion of being delivered from surrounding enemies who have someone enclosed with an exit.

# HOW DOES GOD LIFT US UP WHEN WE ARE FEELING BLUE?

Sometimes we just get down. I'm not referring to clinical depression—that's a whole different matter. Some call it the blues or the blahs but whatever it's called, we're not at our best.

January 18, 2021, has been identified as Blue Monday, the most depressing day of the year. For fifteen years now, the third Monday of January has been identified as a depressing day because the excitement of Christmas is well past; many have failed in their New Year's resolutions by this time; and they're now facing the bills and debt accrued at Christmas.

Well-meaning family or friends will try to “talk us out of” our feelings. “What have you got to be sad about?!” “You just need to turn that frown upside down.” In many cases, those clichés don't help. But the issue remains: what do we do when we have a bout of the blues?

King David wrote some amazing psalms of praise, but he also wrote psalms that reflected his troubled soul. Through his words in Psalm 31, we find the best answer to the blues.

## Problems Can Weigh Us Down

// Psalm 31:1-2

We're not lacking for suggestions on how to beat the blues. Some advice focuses on connecting with others; for example, talk to a friend or play with a dog for an hour. Other suggestions center on the physical: engage in vigorous exercise, drink coffee, eat more seafood, and take vitamin and mineral supplements. Many of these suggestions are sound ideas whether we're feeling down or not. While many of these ideas may benefit some people but not others, I am confident that we can all practice and benefit from one task: trust in God.

### HOW DO YOU TYPICALLY RESPOND WHEN YOU START TO FEEL THE HEAVINESS OF LIFE?

In Psalm 31, David was not explicitly fighting depression per se, but he obviously was facing circumstances that weighed heavily on him. Although we're not sure of the exact circumstances, many scholars think King David



## THE POINT: GOD LIFTS US UP WHEN WE FEEL DOWN.

wrote that at the time his son, Absalom, was in rebellion and attempting to take over the kingship. It was evident from David's instructions to his soldiers to treat his son gently that he loved Absalom deeply (2 Sam. 18:5). He wept bitterly when he heard Absalom was dead (v. 33). But earlier, David had to run for his life because of a threat from his own flesh and blood, the very one he loved and cared for (17:21-22). Such circumstances were not just an external challenge; David surely felt heavy-hearted at his situation. I can only speak for myself, and say that if one of my two sons rebelled and sought to take my life, I would experience more than the blues!

David went to God. "LORD, I seek refuge in you." A refuge could refer to a mountain, harbor, or city, but David knew God would provide the only shelter he needed. Nothing and no one else could offer David the protection from disgrace that God provided.

As he looked to God for safety, David also requested, "Save me by your righteousness." He was being unjustly attacked, so he turned to the only One who is forever just and righteous. David ran into the refuge of the One who will protect him by His righteousness.

David's problems and concerns may have weighed heavily on him, but he looked to the Lord God he knew and trusted. Whatever weighed him down was no match for a righteous God. Just as David cried to God for His help and righteous intervention, we can too.

"Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your cares on him, because he cares about you" (1 Pet. 5:6-7).

### HOW DO DAVID'S WORDS GIVE US HOPE IN OUR DISTRESS?

#### Give Concerns to God // Psalm 31:3-4

David's request in verse 2 for God to "be a rock of refuge for me, a mountain fortress to save me," also reminded David that God had already been his refuge. He declared in verse 4: "For you are my rock and my fortress." Looking to God for refuge was not a new experience for David. We see this repeatedly in David's life.



#### DIGGING DEEPER GOD MY ROCK

In the Book of Psalms, God is frequently referred to as a rock. Psalm 18:1 interprets its meaning in detail: "The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock where I seek refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold." David recognized that God was a hiding place from the enemy. In Psalm 31, David found himself emotionally distressed and physically drained, with no one to turn to but God. God was a source of security, his protection from the onslaught of weapons. Rocks also symbolize stability, something in which a person can place his trust. Although David had often taken refuge among the rocks of the wilderness (1 Sam. 23:25; 24:2), his true security was found in the Lord.

**Why do you think David used a rock to symbolize God's protective characteristics?**

From the moment we are introduced to David in 1 Samuel 16, we see a young man who trusted God. When this young man with a heart for God stood before King Saul and offered to face Goliath, he said, “The LORD who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine” (17:37).

David was not perfect. He sinned grievously when he slept with Bathsheba and then killed her husband in an attempt to cover up his sin (2 Sam. 11:1-27). But when Nathan confronted David, the king was convicted of his wrongdoing (12:1-14) and remembered the Righteous One who was his refuge, and David came to God in repentance. He remembered God’s grace and faithfulness and humbly prayed, “Be gracious to me, God, according to your faithful love; according to your abundant compassion” (Ps. 51:1).

Now as David faced a new challenge, he turned again to God as his rock and fortress. He said with confidence, “You will free me from the net that is secretly set for me.” Sometimes it’s easy to be “prayed up” and trust God with the problems we see in advance coming down the road. But sometimes, we’re struck unaware. When we experience those secret traps, we can feel defeated. A sense of depression

comes over us as we face yet another challenge. In those moments, it is wise to remember that the God who loves us and has been our refuge and fortress in the past is still the same refuge and fortress.

**WHAT ARE SOME WAYS THAT GOD SENDS HELP WHEN WE TURN TO HIM WITH OUR PROBLEMS?**

## God Will Take You Through //

**Psalm 31:5-8**

Listen to the absolute and total trust in David’s words: “Into your hand I entrust my spirit!” David had chosen, quite literally, to place his life in God’s hands. Whatever came and whatever happened, David’s life was in God’s hands—and there was no better place to be.

Jesus uttered these same words on the cross. He completed the mission He had come to earth to accomplish; He endured the agony of the cross, and with His work on earth finished (John 19:30), He trusted His work and life into the hands of the Father.

**WHERE DOES OUR CULTURE ENCOURAGE US TO PUT OUR TRUST WHEN WE NEED PROTECTION?**

We too should express such total reliance on God. We don’t need to trust our circumstances. We certainly don’t need to trust our feelings.





## **THE POINT: GOD LIFTS US UP WHEN WE FEEL DOWN.**

Instead, we should place our whole selves—body, mind, and emotions—in God’s hands.

In our moments of despair and depression, we may feel no one sees or cares, but God sees and knows—and He cares. Instead of being led by our feelings, let’s trust God who does not hand us over to the enemy.

David declared: “You have set my feet in a spacious place.” He said this before he was actually rescued from his troubles and resting in that spacious place. That’s faith.

In those moments when we’re in a tight spot surrounded only by depressing thoughts and feelings, let’s remember that God will always deliver those who choose to look to Him in spite of circumstances. God will set us free from the tight space of depressing thoughts and bring us to a spacious place.

### **HOW DOES IT MAKE YOU FEEL TO KNOW THAT GOD SEES YOUR AFFLICTION AND KNOWS THE TROUBLES OF YOUR SOUL?**

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

On June 14, 1920, Francis Cecil Sumner became the first African-American to receive a Ph.D. in psychology. In his career as a professor, he taught at various colleges, including Howard University. Sharing the same views as Booker T. Washington, Sumner emphasized the need for education to be customized for African education. His goal was to culturally elevate African-Americans. Sumner’s views on “Negro Education” grew criticism from organizations like the NAACP who were concerned that Sumner was advocating for perpetually segregated education systems. Sumner also worked with the Journal of Social Psychology and the Psychological Bulletin writing abstracts. He wrote over 2,000 abstracts during his time with these two journals. Dr. Kenneth Clark once stated about Sumner, “He didn’t just teach psychology. He taught integrity.”<sup>8</sup>

### **DURING SUMNER’S TIME, WHAT ROLE DID PSYCHOLOGY PLAY IN THE EMOTIONAL STABILITY OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS?**

## **LIVE IT**

### **What can believers do when feeling blue?**

David’s problems and concerns may have weighed heavily on him, but he looked to the Lord God he knew and trusted. He did not make the mistake we sometimes make, looking for answers in the wrong places, making decisions on which we will regret later, or trying any do-it-yourself remedy for blues. Just as David cried to God for His help and righteous intervention, we can too.

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- Make the decision to engage in worship both with your church and in your private devotional life.
- Identify Bible verses that teach what God says about the issue of depression and sadness in our lives so you can share them with others.
- Do a serious personal evaluation about what causes depression in your life. Admit that it is real and it is serious. It might be time to talk with a close friend, pastor, or counselor about it.

# DAILY READINGS

## 1. SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER // 1 PETER 5:7

When feeling down, our typical response is to carry our distresses on our own. But this verse encourages us to humbly lay our cares at the feet of God. The old hymn “Sweet Hour of Prayer” signifies that when we do, we are drawn from “a world of care” as we spend time in prayer with the Father. Carrying our distresses and daily struggles without God shows we have not trusted Him fully. Humbly get out of the way and recognize that God cares. He is more than capable of lifting you up from your slump and bearing the weight of your burdens.

**Make this real in your heart: “Sweet hour of prayer that calls me from a world of care.”**

## 2. MANY COUNSELORS // PROVERBS 11:14

God did not mean for us to live this life alone. Not only will He guide and comfort us, but we have brothers and sisters around us to help with carrying our loads. It takes humility to admit your need and allow others in God’s family to help you. But that’s one of the reasons we are here; we are here for each other. The Bible is filled with verses that testify of this. Here are a couple: “Carry one another’s burdens; in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2); “Don’t neglect to do what is good and to share, for God is pleased with such sacrifices” (Heb. 13:16). God wants us to love and be loved. He wants us to carry each others’ burdens.

**Call out to God in prayer for the believers in your life, and call out to at least one to share God’s love.**

## 3. THE SPIRIT’S HELP // JOHN 14:26-28

Through the miracle of the outpoured Spirit, God dwells in our human hearts to help us in our times of need. This should be remembered when we have the blues. The Holy Spirit responds to our need in the role that will be beneficial at that moment. This is what Christ wanted us to understand. When He

ascended to heaven and was no longer physically present on earth, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to be with His followers. This holds immense comfort and assures us that we are not alone. As Christ-followers we have been given the help we need during times of distress through the power of the Holy Spirit. There is not a higher privilege for followers of Christ, than to welcome the power and help of the Holy Spirit into our lives.

**When feeling down we must remember that the Holy Spirit is with us and in us to guide and comfort us.**

## 4. EMOTION MANAGER // PSALM 31:6-8

What would humans be like if we did not have emotions. We would be like the a robot with artificial intelligence. Our responses to each other would be without feeling. But God created us with emotion, because He is a God of emotion, and we are created in His image. We can feel an array of emotions, from love to fear and all emotions in between. But like our minds and our bodies, our emotions have been impacted by the fall. Because of this, we need to manage them with care. We should not allow them to get out of control.

**When necessary, we must pour our emotions out to God and allow Him to manage them.**

## 5. EMOTIONAL GROWTH // ROMANS 12:1-2

Out-of-control emotions are sinful. Anger, jealousy, and envy can destroy lives and relationships. We should be thankful for our emotions. The ability to love does the benefactor a world of good. But we must make sure our love remains love of the purest form. The way to control our emotions is to grow in our spiritual walk. Paul taught we should “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” When we renew our minds, we get rid of proud and selfish worldly thinking that can drive sinful emotions.

**Therefore, don’t neglect doing those things that can lead to healthy, emotional growth.**

A close-up, high-resolution photograph of a woman's eye. The eye is light green and has a clear reflection of a landscape, including a blue sky, green hills, and a body of water. The woman's skin is fair and has a soft, natural glow. Her dark eyelashes are prominent, and her eye is looking slightly to the right of the camera.

“PEOPLE SEE GOD EVERY DAY; THEY  
JUST DON’T RECOGNIZE HIM.”

**Pearl Bailey**

# SPECIAL FOCUS: CREATED FOR A PURPOSE

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## INTRODUCTION

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Our culture often determines a person's value by how that person can contribute to society or not be a burden to others. Unfortunately, a lot of people—including the unborn, the elderly, or those with special needs—must depend on others. Some people question the value of a person who cannot “stand on their own two feet,” but God never does. Every person has value and purpose.

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## Writer Bio

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# CREATED FOR A PURPOSE

**THE POINT:**  
GOD VALUES EACH OF  
US AND CREATED US  
FOR A PURPOSE.

## JEREMIAH // 1:4-10

<sup>4</sup> The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>5</sup> I chose you before I formed you in the womb; I set you apart before you were born. I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

### MEMORY VERSE

<sup>6</sup> But I protested, “Oh no, Lord God! Look, I don’t know how to speak since I am only a youth.” <sup>7</sup> Then the LORD said to me: Do not say, “I am only a youth,” for you will go to everyone I send you to and speak whatever I tell you. <sup>8</sup> **Do not be afraid of anyone, for I will be with you to rescue you. This is the LORD’s declaration.**

<sup>9</sup> Then the LORD reached out his hand, touched my mouth, and told me: I have now filled your mouth with my words. <sup>10</sup> See, I have appointed you today over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and demolish, to build and plant.

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### KEYWORDS

**a. Formed (v. 5)** – The word means “created,” much like a potter would form a vase or bowl on the potter’s wheel from clay.

**b. Youth (v. 6)** – The term has a broad range of meaning, including those who are too young to understand the meaning and purpose of life—children or teenagers.



# HOW CAN I FULFILL GOD'S PURPOSE FOR MY LIFE?

It seems everyone is interested in self-discovery. Personality tests are incredibly popular. It's not uncommon to see friends list their number . . . or animal . . . or set of identifiers in their social media profile. Some use them to explain or justify their behavior. Used rightly, some personality tests can help people see their blind spots and learn how to understand and live with others who have a unique set of gifts or emotions.

The Bible offers no personality test; far better, God's Word shows us that every human being is known by God before they were born, formed by God in the womb, and has a unique purpose in this life.

Jeremiah the prophet had no personality tests in the sixth century BC, but the same questions of identity plagued him as he grappled with God's unique call on his life. The words of God to this weeping prophet can help us understand who we are as God's children. Our self-discovery comes from knowing who made us, who knows us, and who calls us into His mission.

## God Has a Purpose for Us //

Jeremiah 1:4-5

Jeremiah was the son of a faithful priest during one of the most tumultuous times in the history of God's people. Living in the Southern Kingdom of Judah after the kingdom had split, Jeremiah was facing a difficult, lifelong mission that few of us would sign up for. God wanted him to speak hard and difficult truths to a people who didn't want to listen.

God wanted Jeremiah to know that his life, his calling, and the time in which he was born was not an accident. Notice how God affirmed Jeremiah: "I chose you before I formed you in the womb; I set you apart before you were born." This tells us important truths about who God is and who we are.

1. **God exists outside of time.** He didn't begin. He wasn't created. He is bigger than we are. Before we were born, He knew us and knew who we would be. He's also the one who formed us. There are no "self-



## THE POINT: GOD VALUES EACH OF US AND CREATED US FOR A PURPOSE.

made” people, only people created and designed by a loving Designer.

2. **God values life.** Today our culture has shifting definitions of what it means to be human. But human life begins at conception—and God values that life. Life is always valuable to God, even in its earliest embryonic stages. Even when life is fragile and dependent on someone else, that human being is known and named by God.

Listen to the way God assigns personhood and value to the unborn Jeremiah in verse 5:

- I chose *you*.
- I formed *you*.
- I set you apart before *you* were born.
- I appointed *you* a prophet to the nations.

### HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO THE TRUTH THAT GOD KNOWS YOU PERSONALLY?

At the earliest stages of life, Jeremiah was a full human being who, according Genesis 1:26, bore the image of God. And the language God used here about “forming” Jeremiah in the womb is the same word capturing God’s creative work of forming “the man out of the dust from the ground” (Gen. 2:7).

God works the same way today. Every human being is formed with precision by our Creator. Every human being has full value from the earliest stages of life. This truth has widespread implications for how we see ourselves and how we see the world. First it reminds us that we are not our own, but were created by a loving Creator. Second, it should inform the way we see others.

### God Helps Us Carry Out Our Purpose // Jeremiah 1:6-8

We have a God who forms us and knows us before we were born, but he didn’t just leave us there. He formed Jeremiah for a purpose. For the young prophet, the call of God just seemed too difficult. Echoing the reservations Moses had about serving (Ex. 4:10), Jeremiah claimed he could not possibly be



### DIGGING DEEPER JEREMIAH

Jeremiah was called to be a prophet in the 13th year of King Josiah. At the Lord’s command, he neither married nor had children because of the impending judgment that would come upon the next generation. He was the prophet of the “word of the LORD” (1:2). Of the 349 times the Old Testament used the phrase “thus says the Lord,” Jeremiah accounts for 157 of them. He constantly proclaimed God’s judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem, and yet he was also a prophet of hope, proclaiming oracles of salvation, conditioned (3:22-4:2) or unconditioned (30-31; 32:36-38; 33:6; 34:4). Jeremiah repeatedly warned the people about the vanity of their reliance on ritual and external formalism. His ministry as a prophet ended after 586 BC.

**What example does Jeremiah set for those who want to know God’s purpose in life?**



the person for the job because he was not an eloquent speaker and was just too young.

- **The excuse of deficiencies.** Even at this young age, Jeremiah knew his own deficiencies. There are good reasons to admit our limitations because God can use a person who humbles himself this way.
- **The excuse of age and inexperience.** Jeremiah's second rebuttal to God's call was his age and inexperience. The Hebrew word for "youth" could be broadly used, but its general use was to refer to a young man (in contrast to an old man or elder). How could a young prophet move a nation? Only because God said, "I will be with you."

**WHAT ARE SOME EXCUSES WE USE FOR NOT DOING WHAT GOD COMMANDS US TO DO?**

We can similarly take comfort that God will be with us through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. God promises His presence to every believer, regardless of age or season in life. The way of the disciple is to listen to the voice of God and step into His mission.

**WHAT MAKES YOU FEEL AFRAID ABOUT THE WORK GOD HAS CALLED YOU TO DO?**

**God Equips Us to Fulfill Our Purpose // Jeremiah 1:9-10**

God told Jeremiah, "I have now filled your mouth with my words." The call of God would not be simply about the young prophet's self-discovery. This wasn't about following his heart or pursuing his dreams. Jeremiah had a clear and unmistakable mission of God to preach judgment and salvation to God's people. Notice the two things God said in His call to Jeremiah:

1. **I have appointed you.** To be appointed is to be selected. Of all the people in the world at that time, only one—Jeremiah—was a candidate for this mission of God. He was hand-selected for a special task.
2. **I have filled you.** To be filled is to be empowered by God. For Jeremiah, God specifically filled Jeremiah's mouth with His words. What Jeremiah was preaching to the people of God were not his words, but God's divine declarations. He put words in Jeremiah's mouth. So when the people of God rejected Jeremiah, they were ultimately rejecting God Himself.

We live in an age of the Holy Spirit who is present in the church. So we can't apply what

## THE POINT: GOD VALUES EACH OF US AND CREATED US FOR A PURPOSE.

God said to Jeremiah in quite the same way as God applied it to Jeremiah. And yet we can take comfort in knowing that the same God who equipped a young obscure prophet to speak hard truths to Judah is the same God who fills us with His power to do what He's called us to do today.

We don't prophesy in the same way as Jeremiah, but in another sense, we are still part of God's mission to "uproot and tear down, to destroy and demolish, to build and to plant." God's new kingdom has dawned in Christ, a kingdom that is renewing and rebuilding what sin has corrupted and destroyed.

Perhaps you are wondering how God could possibly use you at your age or with your physical limitations. Take heart in knowing that if you are in Christ, God knows your name. He knew you before you were born. And your weaknesses and limitations are a perfect match for His power.

**HOW DOES IT FEEL TO KNOW THAT GOD HAS GIVEN YOU EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO FULFILL YOUR PURPOSE?**

### DID YOU KNOW?

The first section of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution states, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." This amendment was ratified in 1865 and in effect outlawed slavery in the United States. But the fight for civil rights had only begun, because whites disregarded the U.S. amendments. Laws were soon passed that called for the separation of whites and blacks. These discriminatory laws came to be known as Jim Crow laws. African-Americans were devalued and racial inequality had become a fact of everyday life. Today, the most serious concerns of the black community appear to revolve around poverty resulting from the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow.<sup>9</sup>

**WHAT DIFFERENCE WOULD IT HAVE MADE HAD AFRICAN-AMERICANS BEEN ALLOWED TO LIVE OUT THEIR PURPOSE AS FREED U.S. CITIZENS?**

## LIVE IT

### How can we live out God's purpose in our lives?

Being used by God knows no restrictions. The way of a disciple is to listen to and obey the voice of God. The God who knows us and formed us will be with us as we live out His purpose for our lives. The words of God to Jeremiah can help us understand who we are as God's children. Our self-discovery comes from knowing who made us, who knows us, and who calls us into His mission.

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- Pray and seek God's face. Ask Him to show you the ways He can use you for His kingdom.
- Put your "yes" on the table and trust God to empower you for His service. Step out in obedience, trusting the power of the Holy Spirit, and do that for which God has called you.
- Find practical ways to help those whom the culture deems helpless to see that God values them and has a purpose for them.



# DAILY READINGS

## 1. HEAR GOD'S VOICE // JEREMIAH 1:4

Imagine the silence around a prisoner in a jail cell or a patient in a hospital room. It can be devastating. We need to hear the voices of people or we lose something within ourselves. Jeremiah heard the voice of God speak to him at a pivotal moment in his life. This happened long ago, and it can happen today. Because he loves us, God breaks into our silence, speaking to us through His Word and through the Holy Spirit in our hearts. In the silence of our self-absorption, we may be tempted to wait for a more pleasing voice, but there is no other true speech. Open up your heart and hear the voice of God today.

**God speaks all the time. Ask Him to help you hear His voice.**

## 2. SET APART // JEREMIAH 1:5

A true prophetic ministry begins with a call from God. Being a prophet is not a ministry that just anyone can take up. Only false prophets dare to take this up for themselves. Jeremiah was set apart before he was born for the work of prophecy. Like Jeremiah, we were set apart before we were born. There is a work that God has earmarked for each of us. He knows where He wants each of us. When we seek God and draw near to Him, His calling will be revealed in our lives. If you want to know your calling, spend time in God's presence through prayer and worship.

**Ask the Lord for His guidance and His direction, and He will lead you to your Spirit-led calling.**

## 3. BE CONTENT // JEREMIAH 1:6

Complaining can be a favorite pastime of many people. They complain about the weather; they complain about their food; they complain, complain, complain. Even when things are going well, they complain. Jeremiah complained to God because

he did not believe he was right for what God called him to do. Through complaining, he had fallen into the devil's trap. And if he had followed through, he would not have fulfilled the calling on his life. Paul calls us to do everything without grumbling or complaining (Phil. 2:14). Is this possible? Yes, when we learn to concentrate on God's grace in Christ. How can we complain so often when we know we are loved by God? His grace can move us from a complaining attitude to an attitude of gratitude.

**God can help you to be content and thankful. Ask for forgiveness when you complain. Find contentment within yourself.**

## 4. POWER OF SUPPORT // COLOSSIANS 3:14

Depression runs deep and can color your whole outlook on life. Its devastation in the lives of people places it in the mental illness category. Elijah struggled with that type of depression (1 Kings 18–19). He felt hopeless, alone, and afraid. He had low self-esteem and wanted to die. But God had a solution for Elijah. He sent supporters that ministered to him and met his needs. Soon Elijah was encouraged and regained his focus. Don't underestimate your influence when someone is feeling blue.

**Your prayers and ministry to those who are feeling blue can stimulate the hope they need to recover.**

## 5. DON'T QUIT // GALATIANS 6:9

Depression and the blues may take a while to overcome. If day after day you feel increasingly hopeless, seek help. And no matter how afraid you are, no matter how anxious you are about tomorrow, no matter how sad and helpless you feel, don't quit! God will never, ever give up on you, so don't you give up on Him. Don't believe the lie of the enemy, that your sadness will never end.

**Trust that no matter how long it will take, God is working in your heart and in your life so that you can be refreshed and restored.**





# Discipline Yourself

JASON THOMAS

Being a Christian is a matter of faith, hope, and trust. These are some of the foundational aspects of our Christian life. A believer's journey began with confessing Christ as Savior wherein a life of infinite joy ensues. Our conversion is a once and forever experience, but being disciplined in our spiritual life will take time and practice to bring us to spiritual maturity.

We live in a world with unending distractions at every turn. In fact, for most of us, we major in the minor of virtual reality, which is not a reality at all. These distractions can potentially disrupt our focus on spiritual things that help to nurture our relationship with God. However, the practice of spiritual disciplines focus us upward, outward, and inward. Spiritual disciplines include prayer; Bible reading and study; confession of sins to one another; regular

repentance; Scripture memory and meditation on the Word; regular gatherings with other believers; fasting; service; generosity; acts of kindness or mercy; and all kinds of outreach. This is not an exhaustive list. But from that list believers should, through the leading of the Holy Spirit, daily practice those disciplines that will strengthen spiritual prowess and help with upward, outward and inward spiritual growth and maturity.

## Focus Upward

Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 9 that the world has positioned all kinds of perishable rewards before our eyes, especially in the sports arena. The only way an athlete can possess these earthly rewards is by becoming the best in whatever talent or skill required for winning. Athletes will spend many weeks of training and practicing for only a two-hour

competition. The athlete will be the victor if he or she beats the other team through individual or coordinated efforts. However, many times competition does not stop there. The earthly reward must often be defended against a new opponent. This requires that the athlete keep a downward focus on the next competition.

However, a confessed Christian must develop passions and disciplines that can lead toward eternal rewards which causes us to focus upward. The practice of spiritual disciplines is evidence that we cannot become spiritually strong in our own strength nor can we ever hope to gain the favor of God. We do experience God's presence as we place our faith, hope, and trust in the work of Christ. One of the spiritual disciplines that allows us to have this experience is the reading and study of the Word of God.

According to Donald Whitney, "No Spiritual discipline is more important than the intake of God's Word."<sup>1</sup> The reading of the Bible provides a conduit of the Holy Spirit by which we catch a glimpse of Almighty God Himself. God in His providence wants to lavish His love on us, and His Word contains "how" in every page. But we can only learn this by surrendering our own desires and being submitted to Jesus Christ. Paul was committed to living this way, and he gave insights on where his life would be without the disciplines: he would be a disqualified and struggling Christian.

## Focus Outward

Our way forward in this Christian journey is to become practitioners in the spiritual disciplines. The Christ-directed life should not be a life of isolation. If we want to grow even more, then we should extend our focus beyond ourselves. God's love for us demands this. Therefore His love through us should transform into service to others. The spiritual disciplines of generosity, kindness, mercy and outreach allow us to use the love we gain from God to serve the world. Ultimately, proclamation of the gospel message is more readily received from hearts that extend these disciplines.

As we focus outward, Christians lose the desire to live selfishly. Paul said in Philippians 2:3, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves." Even Jesus lived His life teaching about the importance of reaching outward through healing the sick, raising the dead, and other acts of service.

## Focus Inward

Living in the presence of God and the power to serve those around us is developed through a life that is dedicated not only upward and outward, but also inward. Spiritual disciplines transform the inward life. There are Scriptures that command our practice of spiritual discipline that will impact us individually. We will grow as we obediently read and study God's Word, pray, meditate, confess, and fast. This is important for us to understand. The Holy Spirit is given to aid our growth but only as we cooperate with Him. As Christians, we can worry about a great many things, but the beauty of why we are saved is that God wants us to become successful as spiritual beings. Spiritual disciplines reveal to us that our lives are to be lived from the inside out so that we can follow in the footsteps of Christ and be readied to live for eternity in heaven..

As we dive into living our lives as followers of Christ, we must understand that we are called to focus upward, outward, and inward. The spiritual disciplines allow us to practically order our lives in such a way to make this a reality. God eternally works in our lives, so that we will have the freedom to experience Christ through the practice of spiritual disciplines.

1. Dennis Lee, *From Here to There: A Journey to Spiritual Transformation*, (Xulon Press) 2015, p. 118.

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## STUDY 2 SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES: BECOMING MORE LIKE JESUS

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### HOW THIS STUDY FITS YOUR'S DISCIPLESHIP PLAN

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#### **Engage with Scripture**

Many of the spiritual disciplines revolve around our personal engagement with God's Word: reading, studying, praying, meditating, sharing, and so forth. Seeking to grow closer to Christ through spiritual disciplines also brings us into a deeper understanding and practice of His Word.

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## A BIBLE STUDY ABOUT SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

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To discipline is to enforce provided boundaries or safeguards. Although we don't usually think of it in this way, discipline is a positive! Military discipline shapes people into strong and conscientious adults. Disciplined eating extends life and trims the waistline. Disciplined work habits produce excellent work ethics and a good reputation. Discipline is a wonderful thing. Especially the discipline of the Spirit! It helps us to intentionally guard our faith from attacks of unbelief, fear, and pride.

Spiritual disciplines is not a well-known term. Ask anyone outside of the church walls. Honestly, some inside of the church walls may not be able to define the term. It's plausible that a great number of Christians are practicing prayer, fasting, giving, reading Scripture, meditating on Scripture, solitude and silence, and confession, but would not condense these under the term spiritual disciplines.

This unit's goals are to introduce to some and reintroduce to others the activities and practices that have the potential to make us more like Christ. After studying this unit, you should:

- Be able to list spiritual disciplines
- Articulate the benefit of each discipline
- Have an idea about how to incorporate spiritual disciplines into your life
- Understand the purpose of practicing spiritual disciplines
- Cite scriptural references for spiritual disciplines
- Identify opportunities to share disciplines with others



# THE BENEFIT OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

**THE POINT:**

GROWTH IN CHRIST OCCURS WHEN WE PRACTICE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES.

## 1 TIMOTHY // 4:1-10

<sup>1</sup> Now the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will depart from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons, <sup>2</sup> through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared. <sup>3</sup> They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods that God created to be received with gratitude by those who believe and know the truth.

<sup>4</sup> For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, <sup>5</sup> since it is sanctified by the word of God and by prayer. <sup>6</sup> If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished by the words of the faith and the good teaching that you have followed. <sup>7a</sup> But have nothing to do with pointless and silly myths.

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### MEMORY VERSE

<sup>7b</sup> Rather, train yourself in godliness. <sup>8</sup> **For the training of the body has limited benefit, but godliness is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.** <sup>9</sup> This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance. <sup>10</sup> For this reason we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

### KEYWORDS

**a. Sanctified (v. 5)** – To be sanctified is to be made holy, set apart by God for His purposes.



# HOW CAN SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES HELP ME TOWARD GODLINESS?

We have good habits, maybe a few bad habits, and perhaps a . . . well, unusual habit. For example, some of us . . .

. . . tuck ourselves tightly into bed at night, a habit we started as children to protect ourselves from the monster under the bed.

. . . say “Wed-nes-day” phonetically when we need to write it out.

The writer Voltaire drank 40-50 cups of coffee—every day! That may sound like a bad habit, but Voltaire also lived to the age of 83. The artist Michelangelo slept in the same clothes for days on end and avoided baths. Again, this doesn’t sound healthy, but Michelangelo lived to the age of 89.

We might debate the relatively good or bad of certain habits, but there are some things we can do that are definitely good for us. Anything we do that helps us grow in our walk with Christ is definitely good, and we would do well to discipline ourselves to do these regularly and faithfully.

## The World Distorts Godliness // 1 Timothy 4:1-3

God has provided many good things for us, but the world seeks to distort them. Paul said this would happen, and he referred specifically to “later times.” Paul mentioned this again in his Second Letter to Timothy, and he referred to “the last days” (2 Tim 3:1). Both expressions carry the same meaning—the days between Jesus’ ascension into heaven and His return. As the end gets closer—and His return becomes imminent—the world will be busy “paying attention to deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons.”

### WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF GOOD THINGS THAT HAVE BEEN DISTORTED OR PERVERTED BY OUR CULTURE?

Sadly, what is happening today is nothing new. As Paul did in his day, we see those who “depart from the faith.” Departing from the doctrine of Christianity and failing to live in obedience to Christ gives evidence that such



## THE POINT: GROWTH IN CHRIST OCCURS WHEN WE PRACTICE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES.

people never had a relationship with Jesus to begin with. (See John 14:23-24.)

Those who depart from the faith are led astray by “liars whose consciences are seared,” those who offer a counterfeit spirituality. These people are hypocrites who engage in willful deception. In their deceit, they seek to distort the things of God. Paul gave two examples.

1. **Marriage.** Paul wrote that these deceivers will “forbid marriage.” The covenant of marriage is God’s good gift, and His people should celebrate it. Jesus Himself endorsed marriage: the joining together of one man and one woman in a lifelong relationship (Matt. 19:4-8).
2. **Food.** The deceivers also will demand that the people abstain from eating certain foods—“foods that God created” for them to eat. While the Old Testament law restricted the children of Israel from eating some animals (Deut. 14:3-21), God later clarified that Peter was free to eat anything “God has made clean” (Acts 10:15).

The hypocrites and deceivers Paul described were not promoting moderation or even making healthy choices. They were deceitfully teaching the people not to accept good gifts from the hands of God. Yet marriage and good food are wonderful gifts God created for us, which we should receive with gratitude.

### WHY ARE SOME PEOPLE NO LONGER ABLE TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD?

#### Focus on the Truth of God // 1 Timothy 4:4-7a

God’s creation is good. On the sixth day, when “God saw all that he had made,” He declared that “it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). No exceptions. He made no mistakes. There were no errors. In totality and in each detail, it was very good.

In his letter to Timothy, Paul stressed, “everything created by God is good”; therefore, we can receive it all “with thanksgiving.”

Those two things go together: God’s good gifts and our thanks. When we receive His good gifts with thankfulness,



### DIGGING DEEPER SAVIOR OF EVERYONE

Paul said we should train in godliness because our hope is in God, who is the “Savior of everyone, especially of those who believe” (v. 10). This statement may seem to teach universalism, the belief that every person will eventually go to heaven regardless of whether they accept Christ. But the rest of Scripture clearly denies this idea. The Greek word translated here as “especially” expresses the sense of “particularly.” The point is not that Jesus saves everybody and then saves believers even more. Rather, Jesus is the Savior for all— all who believe. Further, “everyone” pictures the transnational scope of the gospel. Thus Christ is the “Savior” of people from every race and nation.

**How does the truth that Jesus is Savior of those who believe motivate you to strive toward godliness?**



we foster a spirit of gratitude, not a sense of entitlement. Paul specifically mentioned marriage and food, but it is also true with all of God's creation.

Paul urged Timothy to teach those he served. He was to correct the deceivers' false teaching by focusing the believers' attention on and exalting God's truth.

When we focus on God's truth, we can avoid "pointless and silly myths." By silly myths, Paul was certainly referring to the teachings of abstinence from food or marriage, but the principle expands beyond those two teachings. The best way to know when a teaching is counterfeit is to be acquainted with the real thing.

In the United States, the counterfeit economy is staggering. In fiscal year 2017, US Customs and Border Protection seized about \$1.2 billion in counterfeit goods. Counterfeiting is a major problem for consumers shopping online. One of the ways experts say consumers can protect themselves is to "know the hallmarks of the real product."<sup>10</sup>

The same is true with avoiding silly myths. To avoid falling prey to silly myths circulated by

false teachers, we must know the hallmarks of truth—and truth is found in God's Word.

#### WHAT ARE SOME THINGS THAT HAVE HELPED YOU FOCUS ON AND LIFT UP THE TRUTH OF GOD?

### Spiritually Discipline Yourself // 1 Timothy 4:7b-10

We ended the previous section on Paul's emphasis and command to avoid "pointless and silly myths" (v. 7). The apostle immediately followed that with a second command: "train yourself in godliness."

#### HOW DO THESE VERSES ENCOURAGE YOU TO PURSUE SPIRITUAL GROWTH?

Just as rigorous training, hours of practice, and strict rehearsals improve the performance of athletes, musicians, and actors, diligent spiritual discipline benefits followers of Christ in this life. However, spiritual discipline also will benefit believers in the life to come. "It holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." Physical exercise is good for us, but spiritual discipline is even more important because it has eternal consequences.

## THE POINT: GROWTH IN CHRIST OCCURS WHEN WE PRACTICE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES.

This is why believers must be willing to train. “We labor and strive” because it is worth the effort. Laboring and striving do not denote easy activities. In fact, they often are quite rigorous—Paul did not encourage Timothy (or us) to take the easy path. Instead, we are to take the best path—the one that leads to godliness.

One of the ways we train is by practicing spiritual disciplines, those “small things Christians intentionally do to open themselves to God’s work of conforming them to the image of Christ.”

- To avoid silly myths and falling prey to gospel counterfeits, believers study their Bibles.
- To fight temptation, believers pray for strength, enter into accountability relationships, and memorize Scripture.
- To increase their intimacy with God, believers meditate on Scripture and practice heartfelt prayer.
- To maintain their focus on Jesus, believers practice fasting and confession of their sins.

While we cannot manufacture godliness on our own, God will use our disciplined training to produce godliness in our lives.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Tradition and habit have impacted the health and lives of African-Americans. Black adults are twice as likely to die of stroke before age 75 than other population groups because of an emotional attachment to “soul food.” The origins of the diet lie in slavery. Slaves ate a high-fat, high-calorie diet that would allow them to burn 3,000 calories a day working. This diet began to be called soul food during the civil rights and black power movements of the 1960s. Besides tradition and habit, poverty and neighborhoods without good supermarkets also contribute to an unhealthy diet. Low-income black communities lack access to vegetables and have an overabundance of fast food and highly processed foods that are high in calories and fats.<sup>11</sup>

### WHAT PART CAN SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE PLAY IN PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE?

## LIVE IT

### How can we develop habits for practicing spiritual disciplines?

Because of the need around us and in us, we must “labor and strive” to be in shape spiritually. We might debate the relative good or bad of certain habits, but there are some things we can do that are definitely good for us. Anything that helps us grow in our walk with Christ is good, and we would do well to discipline ourselves to do these regularly and faithfully.

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- Commit to prepare for and attend every session of this study on spiritual disciplines.
- Add an additional thirty minutes each day to your quiet time for the next six weeks to practice the spiritual disciplines covered in this study.
- Develop a relationship with a new or young believer (of your same gender) to assist his or her growth in Christ.

# DAILY READINGS

## 1. GET IN THE GAME! // 1 CORINTHIANS 9:24

Any “wannabe” athletes in the house? Are you an amazing mental sprinter, hoping for a 2024 Olympic debut? There’s a problem! Couch-a-lete is not an Olympic category. Sorry but you cannot get in the game that way. Read 1 Corinthians 9:24. Paul made it clear that winning a race requires discipline. To win the Christian race, you must position yourself to know God and His Son, Jesus, through prayer, fasting, and other disciplines of the faith. Don’t just stand on the sideline of life day-after-day.

**Open your Bible. Train diligently on your knees through prayer—your spiritual growth depends on it. Get. In. The. Game!**

## 2. AND FOCUS ON THE CROWN . . . // 1 CORINTHIANS 9:25

Usain Bolt just might be the fastest human being on earth. Clocked at speeds of 27 mph, Usain can outrun a roadrunner. But how does he reach such unbelievable speeds? One word . . . focus! This human roadrunner specifically focuses on the goal, which is finishing the race. We can learn something from Bolt and this verse. Each are reminders that we need to discipline ourselves to daily focus on spiritual disciplines that will shape our present lives and secure an internal and eternal state of peace. This will lead to the perfect finish.

**Focus on the crown by saying no to anything that will distract you from the purposes of God in your life.**

## 3. THEN RUN! // 1 CORINTHIANS 9:26-27

In the game? Focused on the crown? If you answered yes to both of those questions, then run! However, don’t run all willy nilly. Run like you mean it; let nothing hold you back. The runners referred to in 1 Corinthians 9:24 stripped themselves of everything that could slow them down, including most of their clothing. Anything hanging from their

bodies, no matter how small, counted as a weight. The same is true for us. Things in our lives may be OK in themselves. There is nothing wrong with watching television or playing a game. But when those things get in the way of winning the race, we must lay them aside. We must remove everything that threatens our running this Christian race. Paul encourages us to run and compete as athletes who really want to win.

**Without effort, we cannot excel in godliness and righteousness.**

## 4. YOU THIRSTY? // JOHN 4:13-14

“You thirsty?” is not a grammatically incorrect question. Usually, it’s more of an embarrassing label used to call out social media stalkers, attention-seekers, and the like. But trending thirsty isn’t a bad thing, depending on whose words you believe: those from social media or those from the Bible. As bodies thirst for water, so do our souls. Those who choose to drink from the wells of Instagram®, TikTok®, or other outlets will remain desperately thirsty. But those who drink from the Word of God will be filled. Why deprive our souls from the spiritual water that satisfies?

**The Word of God and the living Word, Jesus Christ, can satisfy our thirsty souls. You thirsty?!**

## 5. RECEIPTS REQUIRED // 1 JOHN 2:3-6

How can you be sure you belong to Christ? Consider this: You need to return something to the store because it’s the wrong size. Have you got receipts? Not a paper tallied total, but evidence proving without a shadow of a doubt that you purchased that outfit. Oftentimes, our sharing that we are Christians is just as unbelievable as proving we paid for clothing. True Christian faith results in changed behavior. This is the reason John says, “This is how we know we are in Him . . . [we] walk just as He walked.”

**Consistently reading God’s Word and living its truths will present the necessary proof.**



# KNOWING GOD

**THE POINT:**  
OUR RELATIONSHIP  
WITH GOD IS  
STRENGTHENED AS  
WE ENCOUNTER HIM  
IN HIS WORD.

## PSALM /// 119:17-24

<sup>17</sup> Deal generously with your servant so that I might live; then I will keep your word. <sup>18</sup> Open my eyes so that I may contemplate wondrous things from your instruction.

<sup>19</sup> I am a resident alien on earth; do not hide your commands from me. <sup>20</sup> I am continually overcome with longing for your judgments. <sup>21</sup> You rebuke the arrogant, the ones under a curse, who wander from your commands. <sup>22</sup> Take insult and contempt away from me, for I have kept your decrees.

### MEMORY VERSE

**<sup>23</sup> Though princes sit together speaking against me, your servant will think about your statutes; <sup>24</sup> your decrees are my delight and my counselors.**

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### KEYWORDS

**a. Resident alien on earth (v. 19)** – God's people are only temporary residents on this earth (1 Pet. 2:11-12). Our real home is with God for all eternity (John 17:14-18; Heb. 11:13-14).

## WHAT ARE BENEFITS OF KNOWING GOD THROUGH HIS WORD?

Many of us have become quite dependent on GPS. And why not? GPS calls out directions as we need them, never requiring us to take our eyes off the road. This becomes all the more important when we're in an unfamiliar area in hazardous conditions.

One Canadian woman would disagree. She was in an unfamiliar area of Ontario on a “dark and stormy night,” but when she drove down a boat launch into the Georgian Bay, she discovered her GPS may not have been

as reliable as she thought. She did exactly as directed by her GPS, but the GPS was wrong. She came out of the frigid water just fine, but the same could not be said for her car.<sup>12</sup>

Thankfully, we can always rely on the direction the Bible gives without fail. It will never lead us astray. Psalm 119 is a comprehensive treatment of God's instruction, and in this psalm we see how the Bible produces spiritual growth, equips us to face opposition, and gives us a reliable perspective to navigate life.

### We Grow Spiritually //

#### Psalm 119:17-18

Psalm 119 is an amazing piece of Hebrew poetry. The psalm has 22 sections—one section for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each section has eight lines that begin with the same letter. The psalmist quilted these sections together so the worshiper could reflect on the wisdom of submitting to the Lord's instruction.

Psalm 119:17-24 is the third section (called the Gimel section after the third letter of the Hebrew alphabet), and it radiates with passion for God's Word. The composer pleaded for God's favor so that he could “live” and “keep your word.” The verbs rendered live and keep are both tied to obedience. The goal was not merely to know or understand God's instruction: it was to live it, keep it, and obey it.

The psalmist did not view his obedience as a difficult obligation. Nor was he punching a spiritual time clock while daydreaming about something more enjoyable. The psalmist did not view God's Word as a means to merely make his life better. The Lord's instruction was his reason for life.



## THE POINT: OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS STRENGTHENED AS WE ENCOUNTER HIM IN HIS WORD.

This attitude is in stark contrast to current Bible use in the United States. In the “State of the Bible 2019” report, commissioned by the American Bible Society (ABS), only 16 percent of Americans use the Bible every day, and 31 percent never use the Bible.<sup>13</sup> Even among regular churchgoers, only 32 percent of them read the Bible every day.<sup>14</sup>

Reading the Bible daily will do more to help you grow spiritually than any other choice you can make. It is the foundational spiritual discipline that all the others build on. Beyond the immediate benefit of encountering God when you read the Bible, the understanding that develops over a lifetime of reading the Word provides a framework for all other spiritual disciplines. Your understanding of God’s will, as revealed in the Bible, helps you distinguish between God’s voice and other influences.

### WHAT HELPS US HEAR GOD’S VOICE ABOVE ALL THE OTHER DISTRACTING VOICES IN THIS LIFE?

Biblical interpretation is a science, and it can take work to interpret and expound on difficult passages, but that effort is not enough. Understanding God’s Word is a spiritual work requiring the Holy Spirit to illuminate its meaning to the reader (1 Cor. 2:10-14). The psalmist longed to hear from God, but he prayerfully looked to God to open his eyes to what He revealed through His Word.

## We Can Face Opposition // Psalm 119:19-22

Hearing from God was important to the psalmist, especially since he knew that the world around him was not always a friendly place. After marinating his soul in the instruction of the Lord, the psalmist saw the sin-saturated world as foreign to him. He declared that he was “a resident alien on earth,” a sojourner who felt like he did not belong; he was an outsider. This world was not his home.

### HOW DOES THE PHRASE “RESIDENT ALIEN” CREATE A PICTURE OF THE PSALMIST’S NEED FOR GOD’S WORD?

The psalmist desired to live in obedience to God’s Word; therefore, he felt like a stranger in a world that felt at home with sin. The sin-infested people around him were insulting and



## DIGGING DEEPER MEDITATION

Most references to meditation occur in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms. It is the act of calling to mind some supposition, pondering upon it, and correlating it to one’s own life. The Hebrew words for meditation primarily were derived from two separate roots. The first (*hagah*) literally means “to utter in a low sound.” The word is used to denote the growling of a lion (Isa. 31:4) or the cooing of a dove (Isa. 38:14). Therefore it has been suggested that in ancient Hebrew meditation Scripture frequently was recited in a low murmur. The second root word (*siach*) has the basic meaning of “to be occupied with,” or “concerned about.” Thus meditation is the repetitious going over of a matter in one’s mind because it is the chief concern of life.

**Why is meditation such a significant spiritual discipline in the lives of Christians?**



contemptuous toward him. They even acted arrogantly; either proud of their sin or haughty in thinking they were beyond the need to follow God's instruction. Yet, the psalmist experienced relief and comfort from God's Word while living in this hostile environment.

The psalmist had a quiet confidence that God would straighten everything out. Though others treated him with contempt and pummeled him with insults, he knew this was a temporary condition. He knew he was keeping God's commands and decrees, and that was what really mattered. What mattered most was not what the cultural elite thought of him, but what God thought of him—God's judgment. And he knew God was pleased with the life choices he was making—the choices to know and obey God's commandments.

Living God's way is not usually the easiest path, but it is always the best path. It requires that believers go against the grain of the sin-filled culture that surrounds us, which often means we will experience contempt and endure insults. Other times it means we will face outright persecution, but we can withstand all these things as we trust God and live in obedience to His Word.

#### HOW HAS KNOWING GOD THROUGH HIS WORD

70 YOU

#### HELPED YOU FACE CHALLENGES IN LIFE?

### We Have God's Perspective // Psalm 119:23-24

The psalmist didn't merely face the insults or contempt of everyday people; he experienced a conspiracy of princes and governmental officials who collaborated to persecute him. As always, God's Word, the delight of his life and constant counselor, gave him the proper perspective to face the persecution.

#### HOW HAS YOUR PERSPECTIVE BEEN SHAPED BY GOD'S WORD?

Instead of being afraid of those who plotted against him, the psalmist chose to "think about" the Word of God. He made an intentional choice to go beyond merely familiarizing himself with God's Word by reading it; He made a choice to internalize it and meditate on it. Meditation—going over a matter in your mind—requires an investment of time to consider, reflect on, and pray about God's truths.

Because the world we live in is so corrupt, it is tempting to concentrate on how bad things are and how unjust the treatment is that we receive. But when our focus is on how bad things are, we lose sight of how good God is. Please don't

## THE POINT: OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS STRENGTHENED AS WE ENCOUNTER HIM IN HIS WORD.

dismiss this as the difference between optimism and pessimism. This is a choice on how to allocate your time and discipline your mind.

Meditating on God's Word requires focused, deliberate attention over a prolonged period of time on biblical teachings. Bible reading gives breadth. Bible study gives depth. Meditating on the Word gives perspective. It is an intentional choice we make to join God in His work of transforming us into the image of Christ.

### WHAT IS REQUIRED IF WE ARE TO INTENTIONALLY INTERNALIZE GOD'S WORD?

When we meditate on God's Word, it becomes the delight of our lives and the constant counselor that guides our decisions. The Bible is worthy of our time and effort. It provides proper guidance for life and equips us to make wise choices under pressure.

### DID YOU KNOW?

"Lift Every Voice and Sing" was a poem written by James Weldon Johnson and first read publicly at a celebration for Abraham Lincoln's birthday. Johnson's brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, put the words of the poem to music. The NAACP labeled the song "The Negro National Anthem" in 1919 because of its "power in voicing a cry for liberation and affirmation for African-American people." The song has been described as a prayer of thanksgiving for faithfulness and freedom. It evokes biblical imagery of the Exodus of the Hebrews flight from slavery to the freedom of the promised land. Through the years the song has been featured in numerous Christian hymnals and sung at African-American churches throughout North America. It has also been featured at many national events, including televised programs.<sup>15</sup>

### HOW DOES THIS SONG COMPARE WITH PSALM 119 IN FOCUSING THE HEART AND MIND TOWARD GOD?

## LIVE IT

### How can our relationship with God be strengthened through His Word?

A GPS can sometimes be an unreliable instrument. But thankfully, we can always rely on the direction the Bible gives without fail. It is always reliable and will never lead us astray. Through Psalm 119, we have learned how the Bible produces spiritual growth, equips us to face opposition, and gives us a reliable perspective to navigate life.

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- If you're not spending time in God's Word, start here and now. Spend at least fifteen minutes every day reading God's Word.
- Choose a book of the Bible and spend time studying its message.
- Turn off the TV, computer, and smartphone and spend uninterrupted time meditating on God's Word. Journal your thoughts and observations.



# DAILY READINGS

## 1. ETERNALLY LIT // PSALM 119:105

LED lights have taken over the market as the efficient way to light up our homes. Compared to incandescent and fluorescent lighting, LED lighting is more versatile and lasts longer. LED lights are also directional, emitting light to a focused point. The psalmist did not know where to step without the light of the Word of God. Like an LED light, the Bible illuminates our path in such a way that we know where to walk in this dark world. The Word of God is also a book of light. It is filled with truths that help us to live wisely in a world of uncertainty and fear. Eventually, all lights will fade, even LED lights, but God's Word is eternally lit.

**Read its truths every day to guide, encourage, and equip you as you journey through this life.**

## 2. HIDDEN TRUTHS // PSALM 119:11

Hidden object puzzles invite the player to hunt for objects hidden in a picture. One may find a tree hidden in a flower or an ice cream cone in a cloud. It is adventurous in its appeal. But how are the hidden truths of the Word hidden in one's heart the same or different from hidden objects? It is totally different. First, the hidden truths from God's Word are there by choice. Believers must choose to memorize God's Word. The psalmist read the Word, and thought about it continually, until it became ingrained in his heart. Second, hidden truths of the Word of God are hidden for a reason. Once we place the Word in our hearts, it must be put to work so that we will live free from sin. Hidden objects provide pleasure on a leisure afternoon and pale in significance when compared to hidden Bible truths.

**The hidden truths, which is the Word of God, is vital for everything we do.**

## 3. SWEET! // PSALM 119:103

"Sweet" is one of those unique words that has more than one use, but the meaning remains the same. Sweet . . . when things go well. Sweet . . . when

your friend has the latest technology. Sweet . . . when your budget includes enough to buy that Louis Vuitton® purse. Sweet is sweet! But there is nothing like the sweetness of Scripture dripping over the bitterness of life, turning that which was once sour into the savory treat of understanding. The psalmist felt that time spent in God's Word was pleasant and an experience for which he was thankful.

**Taste and see for yourself that the Word of God is sweet.**

## 4. GOD IN THE MORNING // MARK 1:35

"Oh, Oh, Oh . . . it's the Tom Joyner Morning Show." Many African-Americans started their mornings with this tune wafting through their speakers. After 25 years, Joyner, a pillar in the community, signed off the air for good leaving some morning routines in limbo. It's great to know that as believers, our morning souls with Christ are never in jeopardy of ending. It may come and go as we choose to sleep late or rush off for a meeting. But we can always meet Christ in the morning. Even Jesus knew the importance of solitary time with God.

**Don't neglect your solitary time with God. There is much to learn and experience when we are alone with Him.**

## 5. THAT PART // PROVERBS 15:29

Some words have the power to make hearers stop, reflect, and respond, "That part!" That part is sort of new to American slang and is one of the few terms that can be used to point to the strength of God's Word. Proverbs 15:29 is "that part" worthy. Though short in length, this verse attracts the reader's attention by emphasizing a major benefit of being in relationship with God; He hears our prayers above the noise of this world . . . that part. And one other benefit: the prayers that we pray are effective before God when we pray with fervor (Jas. 5:16).

**Through prayer we gain God's heart for the things He is fervored about . . . that part!**



# I AM THE VINE: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

BY PAUL E. KULLMAN

Encouraged? Surprised? Perplexed? What did Jesus' disciples feel when they heard the Master say, "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vineyard keeper," and then "I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in Me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without Me" (John 15:1,5)?

The vine was the first cultivated plant mentioned in Scripture, a fact that meant viticulture (the cultivating of grapes and vineyards) dated at least back to the time of Noah (Gen. 9:20). Although the Hebrew word for "vine" could refer to many types of vines, the term most commonly referred to either a vineyard or grapevine. Vineyards produced fresh grapes, which could be dried into raisins or squeezed for fresh juice, vinegar, and wine. Growers used all parts of the vine: they ate the leaves and used the discarded vines to feed livestock, to make ink, or to tan leather.

## Vineyards in the Old Testament

Many Old Testament texts mention a vine, a vineyard, or its fruit. For instance, while being held in Pharaoh's prison, Joseph interpreted a fellow prisoner's dream, one involving a vine and grapes (Gen. 40:9-13). Although the text does not mention a vineyard, grapes evidently grew extremely well in the land of promise. When the 12 spies were in Canaan, "they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes, which was carried on a pole by two men" (Num. 13:23). Later, protesting Moses' leadership during the

wilderness wanderings, Dathan and Abiram said, "you didn't bring us to a land flowing with milk and honey or give us an inheritance of fields and vineyards" (16:14). A generation later, God, speaking through Joshua, reminded His people how He had fulfilled His promise: "I gave you a land you did not labor for, and cities you did not build, though you live in them; you are eating from vineyards and olive groves you did not plant" (Josh. 24:13). Centuries later, knowing that her husband, King Ahab, wanted a particular vineyard, Jezebel had two "wicked men" (scoundrels, NIV; 1 Kings 21:10,13) kill its owner, Naboth, so her husband could have it. And of the virtuous woman Proverbs says, "She evaluates a field and buys it; she plants a vineyard with her earnings" (Prov. 31:16).

**Laws**—Vineyards were valuable and work intensive; God thus established laws and ordinances to protect them. He instructed Moses at Sinai: "When a man lets a field or vineyard be grazed in, and then allows his animals to go and graze in someone else's field, he must repay with the best of his own field or vineyard" (Ex. 22:5). Planting a vineyard exempted a person from military service (Deut. 20:6).

**Symbols**—The Old Testament used vineyards to symbolize peace and prosperity. Describing the calm and abundance during Solomon's reign, the Bible says, "Throughout Solomon's reign, Judah and Israel lived in safety from Dan to Beer-sheba, each man under his own vine and his own fig tree" (1 Kings 4:25). Ezekiel spoke of the children of Israel returning from captivity

to re-inhabit their homeland: “They will live there securely, build houses, and plant vineyards” (Ezek. 28:26a).

In contrast, the destruction of a vineyard or a vineyard’s failing to produce fruit could symbolize the Lord’s judgment. Declaring His judgment on Judah, the Lord said, “There will be no grapes on the vine, no figs on the fig tree, and even the leaf will wither. Whatever I have given them will be lost to them” (Jer. 8:13b). And describing those living in Jerusalem at the coming Day of the Lord, Zephaniah said the people, because of their sin, would not enjoy the benefit of their labors, including the wine of their vineyards (Zeph. 1:13).

Most commonly, though, the Old Testament used grapevines to symbolize Israel. The best-known text describing Israel as a vine comes from “the parable of the vineyard” (Isa. 5:1-7). In the parable, God is the vinedresser, the gardener; His people are the vines. God cleared the fertile field, built a protective watchtower, and planted “the finest vines.... He expected [the vineyard] to yield good grapes, but it yielded worthless grapes” (v. 2). In other words, in spite of all God had done, Israel was unfaithful. God, therefore, was bringing judgment: “I will remove its [the vineyard’s] hedge, and it shall be consumed. ... I will make it a wasteland” (vv. 5b-6a).

## The Disciples’ Understanding

Against this backdrop, Jesus made statements about Him being the vine and His Father the vinedresser (John 15:1-8). The contrast between Jesus’ words and the declarations in Isaiah are stark. Whereas Israel had sinned, Jesus was sinless (Heb. 4:15; 1 John 3:5). When the Lord of Hosts looked to His vineyard, Israel, hoping to find justice and righteousness, He found instead “bloodshed” (esv) and heard “cries of wretchedness” (Isa. 5:7). God’s people had not been obedient to what He had wanted them to do; instead they had been quite the opposite. Jesus, however, submitted Himself fully to the Father’s will and was “obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8b; see also Luke 22:42).

What did the disciples think as they heard Jesus describe Himself as the vine? They would have been familiar with Isaiah’s parable in which the vine was destroyed. Jesus went on, however, to make the distinction clear. He was the vine—they were the branches, and they were to abide in Him (John 15:5). In Jesus’ “I am” statement, the vine would not be destroyed. Those who did not abide in Him, those who were unproductive branches, however, would be gathered and burned (v. 6).

Jesus instructed His disciples, then, that in Him they were to bear fruit. He would be their source and their supply. As they relied on Christ and obeyed His commands, fruit would come. Rather than disappoint the Father by providing “worthless grapes” (Isa. 5:2,4), Jesus’ followers would bring the Father, the “vineyard keeper,” glory as they produced “much fruit” and thereby proved they were His disciples (John 15:1,8).

1. John C. H. Laughlin, “Vine” in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 1392-94.
2. Irene Jacob and Walter Jacob, “Flora; Vine” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. in chief David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:810.
3. Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*® (HCSB).
4. “Vine, Vineyard” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, gen. ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 915.

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# INTIMACY WITH GOD

**THE POINT:**  
PRAYER DRAWS US CLOSER TO JESUS AS OUR HEARTS ALIGN WITH HIS.

## JOHN // 17:1-5, 21-26

### MEMORY VERSE

<sup>1</sup> Jesus spoke these things, looked up to heaven, and said: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, <sup>2</sup> since you gave him authority over all people, so that he may give eternal life to everyone you have given him. <sup>3</sup> **This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and the one you have sent—Jesus Christ.** <sup>4</sup> I have glorified you on the earth by completing the work you gave me to do. <sup>5</sup> Now, Father, glorify me in your presence with that glory I had with you before the world existed.

<sup>21</sup> “May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me. <sup>22</sup> I have given them the glory you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one. <sup>23</sup> I am in them and you are in me, so that they may be made completely one, that the world may know you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me.

<sup>24</sup> “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they will see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the world’s foundation. <sup>25</sup> Righteous Father, the world has not known you. However, I have known you, and they have known that you sent me. <sup>26</sup> I made your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love you have loved me with may be in them and I may be in them.”

### KEYWORDS

**a. Glorify (v. 1)** – A claim to deity since the Old Testament affirms that God will not give His glory to another (Is. 42:8; 48:11).

## HOW CAN I DRAW CLOSE TO CHRIST THROUGH PRAYER?

I have begun to wonder if we own our smartphones, or if they own us. One of the most popular uses of smartphones is to access social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and text messaging. How big a part does social media play in our lives? On average, some 3.2 billion users spend two hours and twenty-two minutes per person on social media. *Every day.*<sup>16</sup>

Research shows that, when people give in to that compulsion to check social media, their anxiety level rises. Being connected constantly to social networks or answering texts endlessly makes it hard for them to log off. They felt obligated to keep checking in—just in case.<sup>17</sup>

Social media may build bridges between the world and us, but it also puts up walls. Too often we are consumed with our social media profiles, and we miss the most important relationships we have. We miss the joy of spending uninterrupted face-to-face time with friends and family, and we squander the opportunity to really know God.

### Pray for God's Glory // John 17:1-5

Knowing God requires spending time with Him—both time in His Word and time in heartfelt prayer. Heartfelt praying is deep praying. It is going beyond the surface of merely “saying our prayers” or crying out for help during a crisis or tragedy. To really know God—to have an intimate relationship with the Lord—we must move beyond the rote and our request lists and really connect with our heavenly Father. When we go deep in prayer, we encounter His glory.

Those who have eternal life can know God intimately. Eternal life not only ensures that we will behold His glory face-to-face throughout eternity, but it makes an intimate relationship with God possible here and now.

#### HOW IS GOD'S GLORY SEEN ON THIS EARTH?

In John 17, Jesus' “hour” had come. In the midst of the “hour,” He prayed that even as God was glorifying Him, He would glorify the Father. God's *shkinah* glory that once resided in the





## THE POINT: PRAYER DRAWS US CLOSER TO JESUS AS OUR HEARTS ALIGN WITH HIS.

temple, now rested in the incarnate Jesus who was dwelling among God's people (1:14). Jesus prayed that those who had been given eternal life would see that glory.

Following Jesus' example, we also are to pray for people to see God's revealed glory. It's important to note that the first thing Jesus prayed was for God to be glorified. Our desire to see God's glory is to surpass all other desires, and our first request is to be for His glory. The Model Prayer Jesus gave us to pray begins with the request: "Our Father in heaven, your name be honored as holy" (Matt. 6:9). We seek God's glory and honor over all else.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO GLORIFY GOD IN OUR LIVES?

When we follow Jesus' example, we pray for the things He prayed for—and in the way He prayed for them. We must break free from only approaching God when we need something from Him; we must learn to pray because we need Him. We are to seek Him and not just seek things from Him.

Even as we pray for His glory, we will encounter Him in His glory. As we deepen our prayer life, praying as Jesus prayed, we experience His glory—His holiness, His authority, and His reputation. Heartfelt prayer increases intimacy with God. As we come to know God intimately, He will reveal His glory.

### WHAT DO WE LEARN ABOUT JESUS FROM THIS PRAYER?

## Pray for Unity // John 17:21-23

Jesus also prayed for unity. The believers needed unity then, and we desperately need it now. Is unity possible? Can people with different agendas, backgrounds, beliefs, interpretations, and points of view really be unified? Division and discord are everywhere. We encounter it in politics, at work, and even when we are trying to relax and enjoy a ballgame.

As long as opposing teams with differing agendas take the field, unity will be difficult to achieve. This happens at sporting events; it happens in everyday life; and if we're not Christ-focused, it can happen in the church.

Jesus prayed for unity, not conformity. What does that unity look like? It looks like the Triune God: the unity of the Father,



## DIGGING DEEPER PRAYER

Prayer is dialogue between God and people, especially His covenant partners. Jesus' example and teaching inspire prayer. Significantly, the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray after watching Him pray (Luke 11:1). Dialogue is what is essential to prayer. Prayer makes a difference in what happens (Jas. 4:2). Our understanding of prayer will correspond to our understanding of God. When God is seen as desiring to bless (Jas. 1:5) and sovereignly free to respond to persons (John 3:9), then prayer will be seen as dialogue with God. God will respond when we faithfully pursue this dialogue. Prayer will lead to a greater communion with God and a greater understanding of His will.

### How has prayer impacted your personal walk with God?



Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus prayed, “May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you.” While the Father is not the Son or the Spirit, and the Son is not the Father or the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father or the Son, the Father, Son, and Spirit are God. God is three Persons, but one Essence. Jesus prayed that His followers would be unified in like manner. Our personalities are not to be absorbed and lost by our unity, but our self-interests will. They will have a unified purpose. Paul helped us understand what this looks like among believers:

“Make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose” (Phil. 2:2).

We can only achieve this unity when we are in God and He is in us. Jesus prayed, “May they also be in us.” When believers are connected to God—we are dwelling in Christ and He is dwelling in us—unity happens. We are in Him, and He is in us. We move beyond a surface relationship with God, into a deeper relationship in which we know Him intimately. There is no other path to unity.

The spiritual discipline of heartfelt prayer is not limited to a private quiet time. While Scripture

certainly tells of many people praying in “prayer closets,” we also find numerous accounts describing believers who gathered together for prayer. With one mind, one heart, and one purpose, God’s people lifted their prayers up to God. This was not just to petition Him for their needs, but also to praise Him and to know Him. (For an example, see Acts 4:23-31.)

Jesus shares His glory with His people—“I have given them the glory you have given me”—but this was not simply so that we would possess His glory. His glory is to lead to our unity: “So that they may be one as we are one.”

#### WHAT DOES UNITY LOOK LIKE IN THE CHURCH?

### Pray for God’s Love // John 17:24-26

As we see in verses 24-26, when we pray like Jesus, those prayers will also include a desire to make His love known to others, so that they can experience it as well.

An eternal love exists between the Father and the Son, and Jesus’ prayer was that “the love you have loved me with may be in them and I may be in them.” His love in us spills out! We will care about what He cares about. We will care for the people He cares for. We will align

## THE POINT: PRAYER DRAWS US CLOSER TO JESUS AS OUR HEARTS ALIGN WITH HIS.

our activities with what He is doing to reconcile the world to Himself (2 Cor. 5:18-19). When we grow in knowing Him, the force that drives us will be the desire to make Him known.

Knowing God and experiencing His love motivates us to pray for those who have not yet come to know Him. When God's love runs through us, we will pray for people who need Him, but we will also tell them what He has done for us. We will pray for the salvation of people who do not know Jesus, but we will also make His name known to them. We pray for family members, neighbors, and acquaintances, but we will also show them God's love.

While Christians fail to agree on many things, we all can agree that people need the Lord. To carry out our role in "the ministry of reconciliation" (v. 18), we must be unified in our purpose. We must be unified in sharing the gospel with the people in our neighborhoods and all around the world. And when we are, we receive the joy, but God gets all the glory!

### HOW HAS PRAYER DEEPENED YOUR CONNECTION WITH GOD?

### DID YOU KNOW?

Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson became a national institution in her lifetime. She sang in concert halls, jazz festivals, theaters, and several times at the White House. She also sang before crown heads of Europe and at civil rights gatherings, including one on the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Despite these experiences, she was never impressed. She believed her calling was to work for the Lord and be active in the civil rights movement. For years, she had been an advocate for everyone, especially blacks. One afternoon during an event in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial, she gave her own words of encouragement by singing, "I've Been 'Buked and I've Been Scorned." Many in the crowd had become emotional, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., when she let out a guttural "Glory Hallelujah." It was at that program that he gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

### DESCRIBE THE GLORY OF GOD MAHALIA JACKSON SHARED WITH OTHERS THROUGH SONG.

## LIVE IT

### How can you utilize the spiritual discipline of prayer to draw closer to Jesus?

Jesus prayed for us and set an example for us to follow. When we follow Jesus' example, we pray for the things He prayed for, in the way He prayed for them. As we deepen our prayer life, praying as Jesus prayed, we experience His glory. Our confidence to work in God's kingdom also increases. Heartfelt prayer increases intimacy with God.

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- Replace at least five minutes of social media time (or TV watching) with additional time spent in prayer for God's glory.
- Gather with others to spend time in concentrated prayer for unity among believers.
- Set an alarm on your smartphone for 3:16 every afternoon and pray John 3:16 over at least three people who need to know the Lord.

# DAILY READINGS

## 1. JUST TALK! // EPHESIANS 6:18

Prayer is a conversation between you and God. No big or churchy words are necessary. Just talk. God understands the simplest to the most academic language as long as your prayer is from the heart. Start by acknowledging who He is and what He has done. From the beginning of creation until now, He has done wondrous things. Then, just open your heart. Tell Him what's on your mind. The wonderful thing about talking to God is He understands more about you than you do. Allow the words to flow without feeling any shame. Remember His love. He cares for you, and He desires an intimate relationship with you.

**Just talk to God; He is worthy of your prayers.**

## 2. EYES WIDE OPEN // EPHESIANS 1:18

Did you know prayers are effective even when your eyes are open? As a matter of fact, prayers work best when prayed with open eyes—with open spiritual eyes that is. Many of us have spiritual eyes that have been dimmed by unfulfilled requests from God, harmful life experiences, and confusion about God and His promises. Without clear spiritual eyes, we will not have the sure hope that everything will work out OK. Spiritual eyes allow us to have the complete assurance that God will be victorious in whatever we ask Him for. Those with open spiritual eyes pray informed prayers, make requests that please God, and can discern needs that are not verbally spoken.

**Ask the Lord to open your spiritual eyes to all that He has to show you, so that you can pray with your spiritual eyes wide open.**

## 3. THE A TO Z PRAYER AND BEYOND // ROMANS 12:12

There are twenty-six letters in the alphabet. Phonetically, each letter has its own voice, producing forty-four sounds. Amazingly, many of the letters of the alphabet have more than one sound,

and each find space on the human lips. These letters make up the words of our prayers. Even though some people have conditions that prevent them from hearing phonetic sounds, God hears every word. He clearly hears your powerful words of faith when you go to Him in prayer. Because of this Paul encourages us to remain hopeful despite what may be happening around you.

**Don't give up, but steadfastly remain connected to God. He hears every sound you make from A-Z.**

## 4. FOCUS ON THE HILLS // PSALM 121

Focusing might one day be placed on the endangered species list. Distractions of every type and size crowd our lives and fight for our attention. For believers, prayer times are often interrupted because of this. We receive phone calls that can lead to mindless roaming on social media apps. Then before you know it, two hours have gone by without one ounce of focus. This can impact our connection to Christ. The psalmist was not distracted. He focused on the hills as he traveled because he knew God was there. His focus was not on anything around him or even on where he was going. His focus was on his Helper.

**Let us ignore distractions and not lose focus on the One from which comes our help.**

## 5. AN AUDIENCE OF ONE // PROVERBS 16:3

Big audiences equal success. At least that's what we think! However, when it comes to intimacy with Jesus success may need to be redefined. An audience of Jesus alone means more than having the whole world rooting for you. And better than that, it means more than the whole world rooting against you. Proverbs 16:3 reveals how seeking an audience of one will bring redefined success. The psalmist promised that our plans will be established.

**So commit your work to Jesus and watch your audience of One increase your success.**

# MAINTAINING FOCUS ON GOD

**THE POINT:**  
FASTING AND  
CONFESSION KEEP US  
RIGHTLY FOCUSED ON  
CHRIST.

## DANIEL // 9:1-7,17-19

MEMORY VERSE

<sup>1</sup> In the first year of Darius, the son of Ahasuerus, a Mede by birth, who was made king over the Chaldean kingdom—<sup>2</sup> in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the books according to the word of the LORD to the prophet Jeremiah that the number of years for the desolation of Jerusalem would be seventy. <sup>3</sup> **So I turned my attention to the Lord God to seek him by prayer and petitions, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.** <sup>4</sup> I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed: Ah, Lord—the great and awe-inspiring God who keeps his gracious covenant with those who love him and keep his commands—<sup>5</sup> we have sinned, done wrong, acted wickedly, rebelled, and turned away from your commands and ordinances. <sup>6</sup> We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, leaders, ancestors, and all the people of the land. <sup>7</sup> Lord, righteousness belongs to you, but this day public shame belongs to us: the men of Judah, the residents of Jerusalem, and all Israel—those who are near and those who are far, in all the countries where you have banished them because of the disloyalty they have shown toward you.

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<sup>17</sup> Therefore, our God, hear the prayer and the petitions of your servant. Make your face shine on your desolate sanctuary for the Lord's sake. <sup>18</sup> Listen closely, my God, and hear. Open your eyes and see our desolations and the city that bears your name. For we are not presenting our petitions before you based on our righteous acts, but based on your abundant compassion. <sup>19</sup> Lord, hear! Lord, forgive! Lord, listen and act! My God, for your own sake, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your name.

KEYWORDS

**a. The desolation of Jerusalem (v. 2)** – Refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC and the time after in which the city lay in ruins.



# HOW DOES FASTING HELP ME IN MY CHRISTIAN WALK?

Productivity expert Merlin Mann coined the phrase “inbox zero” to describe the concept of retaking control of your life from your computer. Mann’s theory is that if you can clear out your email inbox and keep it empty, you will experience higher productivity, a sense of stability, and lower stress levels.

Achieving “inbox zero” does not mean you will have to constantly check your email; actually, the opposite is true. Proponents recommend disabling notifications and having your email app closed for most of the day in order to focus your attention on your day’s priorities. You have achieved a zero status when you reclaim your attention and retake control of your life.<sup>18</sup>

While it is not possible to achieve sinless perfection this side of heaven, it is possible to achieve “confession zero.” Sin build up is far worse than any accumulation of emails, but through the spiritual disciplines of fasting and confession, we can maintain a strong relationship with God. With sin out of the way, our focus on Christ remains strong.

## Fasting Focuses Us on Greater Things // Daniel 9:1-4

The community of Old Testament believers observed days of fasting as a part of their religion to help them keep their minds focused on God (Jer. 36:6). They also fasted when individuals faced difficult circumstances. For instance, King David fasted when he mourned over the deaths of Saul and his son Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:12).

Daniel fasted and prayed because of extreme circumstances. As he prayed and fasted, Daniel wore sackcloth and sat in ashes, as was customary during that time. For Daniel, this was not a routine observance of his faith. He was deeply burdened.

Daniel was no longer the teenage boy who had been brought to Babylon as a captive during Nebuchadnezzar’s reign (Dan. 1). King Nebuchadnezzar and King Belshazzar had died, and now Darius was king in Babylon. Likely Daniel was around 80 years old, which is



## THE POINT: FASTING AND CONFESSION KEEP US RIGHTLY FOCUSED ON CHRIST.

significant because Jeremiah had prophesied that Israel's exile and captivity would last around 70 years (Jer. 29:10). That captivity now was almost over.

Even with the weight of sin burdening him, Daniel still was able to see the glory and the grandeur of God. His prayer began with praise and adoration of “the great and awe-inspiring God who keeps his gracious covenant with those who love him and keep his commands” and who loves and cares for his people. God had made a covenant with Abraham that included a specific piece of land (Gen. 12:1-3), and His exiled people soon would return to that land.

Fasting was still practiced during the time of Jesus. For example, Anna prayed and fasted in the temple (Luke 2:36-37). Jesus taught about the proper practice of fasting and prayer (Matt. 6:5-18). Fasting does not appear to be as common today as it was in biblical times. However, the spiritual discipline of fasting is still appropriate as a special observation. And when believers fast, it should be done in a biblical and responsible manner.

The purpose of fasting is to focus on Jesus, not impress others. People with medical conditions should consult their physicians before fasting from food and should ease into the practice gradually. If unable to fast from food, believers should practice other spiritual disciplines that will help them stay focused on Jesus. Fasting does not have to include food. Paul noted that married couples can fast from sexual intimacy (1 Cor. 7:5). A person can engage in a fast from media or other activities.

### WHAT ARE SOME REASONS FOR FASTING?

## Fasting Should Include Confession //

### Daniel 9:5-7

When Solomon dedicated the temple, he prayed and asked God to forgive the sins of His people, even if those sins resulted in exile and captivity (2 Chron. 6:36-39). God heard and answered Solomon's prayer, saying that if “my people, who bear my name, humble themselves, pray, and seek my face, and turn from their evil ways, then I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land” (7:12-14).



## DIGGING DEEPER FASTING

The Bible describes three main forms of fasting. The *normal fast* involves the total abstinence of food. Luke 4:2 reveals that Jesus “ate nothing”; afterward “He was hungry.” Jesus abstained from food but not from water. In Acts 9:9 we read of an *absolute fast* where for three days Paul “did not eat or drink.” The abstinence from both food and water seems to have lasted no more than three days (Ezra 10:6; Esth. 4:16). The *partial fast* in Daniel 10:3 emphasizes the restriction of diet rather than complete abstinence. The context implies that there were physical benefits resulting from this partial fast. However, this verse indicates that there was a revelation given to Daniel as a result of this time of fasting.

**What circumstances dictate the type of fast that should be practiced?**



Now, more than 400 years later, Daniel and his fellow Jews were experiencing the very exile and captivity in Solomon's prayer. Perhaps thinking of God's promise in 2 Chronicles 7 and knowing God would hear him, Daniel prayed a prayer confessing both his personal sin and the sins of all Israel.

He confessed the sins of the Jewish community, even while they were in exile. He included himself in his confession of corporate sins. He was thorough in his confession, speaking of sin in six ways:

1. **Sinned.** The root word means to miss a mark. Missing the mark implies an effort that is not quite good enough—it may come close, but if it does not hit the mark completely, it is sin.
2. **Done wrong.** Doing wrong is more than just missing the mark; it is missing the mark intentionally by distorting the truth.
3. **Acted wickedly.** With growing intensity, he confessed that they had been wicked. They missed the mark set by God, they did so intentionally, and they will continue to sin.
4. **Rebelled.** Through their sin the people had risen in revolt against God.

5. **Turned away.** The people had departed from God's revealed will. They had turned their backs on God's ways.
6. **Not listened.** Daniel humbly admitted they had refused to even listen to the prophets God had sent.

As Daniel confessed their sins, he also declared God's righteousness. Daniel was able to bear his soul and confess with outright transparency because he knew what God would do when he confessed his sin and the sins of the people. As God had promised: "I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:12-14).

**WHY DOES CONFESSION AND FASTING GO HAND IN HAND?**

**Prayer with Fasting Focuses Us on God // Daniel 9:17-19**

As Daniel concluded his prayer, he included a phrase from a blessing given in the law: "may the LORD make his face shine on you" (Num. 6:24-26). However, instead of asking for God's face to shine on his people, Daniel prayed for God to "make your face shine on your desolate sanctuary for the LORD's sake."

## THE POINT: FASTING AND CONFESSION KEEP US RIGHTLY FOCUSED ON CHRIST.

Daniel's petition was not based on the worthiness of God's people, but on God's great compassion. He wanted God's name to be lifted up by raising Jerusalem again. That is not to say that he prayed just for buildings and walls to be rebuilt. Yes, Jerusalem bears God's name, but the people also bore His name. Daniel pleaded with God to hear, to forgive, to listen, and to act, for the Lord's sake.

Daniel's attention was not on getting something from God; his focus was on God Himself. Burdened with a heavy heart, Daniel shifted his focus from food and comfort. We've already seen that his prayer included confessing his sins and the sins of the people without making excuses or allowances. Now with his attention focused exclusively on God, he prayed for God's name to be lifted up as He restored His people from captivity.

Confession and repentance are always the right things to do; these humbling actions make it possible to restore our relationships. However, if we don't confess our sins, we can't see clearly; our minds remain on our sin. Because we carry guilt about our sins, we can't pay attention

to God. But when we confess our sins, God forgives, the fog lifts, and we are able to focus on God.

### WHAT OBSTACLES MIGHT HINDER US FROM ENGAGING IN CONFESSION AND FASTING ON A DEEPER LEVEL?

#### DID YOU KNOW?

Civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has made fasting a symbolic sign of sacrifice to the public to be in solidarity with those who are suffering from systemic injustice. Dr. King fasted regularly and once preached, "What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't have enough money to buy a hamburger?" On Martin Luther King Jr. Day many people fast to honor the discipline, willpower, and sacrifice that MLK had to endure in his mission to bring forth civil rights in America.<sup>19</sup>

### WHY DO YOU THINK FASTING IS USED FOR REASONS OTHER THAN FOCUSING ON CHRIST?

## LIVE IT

### How can I incorporate fasting into my life as a valued spiritual discipline?

"Confession Zero" is our goal. We must leave no sin unaddressed in our hearts. Rather, we should diligently search our hearts for hidden sin, confess it to the Lord, receive forgiveness, and experience the stability and peace that comes from fellowship with God. Confession with fasting and prayer launches us to a higher level of spirituality. Consider how you will incorporate these disciplines into your life this week.

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- Spend time confessing any sin you have not previously brought to God. Confession is "agreeing with God" that your actions were sinful. Don't make excuses. Confess—and thank Him for His forgiveness.
- Choose something that you do daily, such as watching television or connecting on social media, and use that time for uninterrupted prayer and focus on Christ.
- If your health allows, spend next weekend in an extended fast.

# DAILY READINGS

## 1. PIONEER, PERFECTER . . . JESUS // HEBREWS 12:1-2

Everything has a process. Nothing just happens unless you are God and have the power to create something out of nothing. But even God used a process for creation. Included in that process, God took a moment to observe His work (Gen. 1:3). To live effectively, we must fix our eyes on Jesus and let Him take care of life's process. When you look at your own life and see the circumstances around you, you may begin to sink. The life you are living as a follower of Christ is not about you. It is about the "Pioneer" and the "Perfecter" of our lives. The idea is that Jesus who began a work in you will complete what He started (Phil. 1:6). Our responsibility is to remain fixed on Him and not on ourselves.

**Choose to follow the process of Christ.  
Choose to keep your focus on Him.**

## 2. STEADY FOCUS // PSALM 112:7

Trouble usually comes quick, hard, and fast, knocking down our peace. Psalm 112:7 is what happens when our minds and hearts finally understand and accept the power of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Constant worry and fear are replaced by a steady focus on the good news of Jesus who conquered death and the grave. Though the knowledge that He has all power in His hands does not stop distressing things from showing up, they no longer have the power to take away the hope we have for a better life.

**Trust that what Jesus did on the cross worked.  
Keep your focus on Him and you will live fearlessly with hope.**

## 3. EYES FORWARD // PROVERBS 4:25-27

Soldiers are required to focus forward when marching in formation. The intent is to look toward the waiting destination. Looking ahead also allows the soldier to spot any holes or dangers that may lay before him or her. When and if pitfalls are spotted,

another route will be taken. We, as soldiers in the army of God, are blessed with Jesus who is at the head of our spiritual formation. The Bible leads us to discipline ourselves through steady focus on Him. We focus on Him through the practice of prayer, Bible reading, fasting, meditation, and serving others. Then we are spiritually transformed into the Christian soldiers God wants us to be.

**Keep your eyes on Christ. He is the One who will lead you on path that leads to God.**

## 4. BODY TRAINING // EPHESIANS 4:11-12

Strength training results in increased muscle mass, bone thickness, balance, and calorie burning. Different tools are used by those who want to get those results such as weights, bands, kettle bells, and fitness machines. God has provided the members of the body of Christ with tools for spiritual strength training. He's been known to use prophets and apostles back when Jesus walked the earth. Today, He uses pastors, teachers, evangelists, and other church leaders to strengthen and empower His body—the Church.

**Now that God has provided these people for our spiritual training, let us take every opportunity to follow what they prescribe.**

## 5. FELLOWSHIP REMINDER // HEBREWS 13:16

As a spiritual discipline, fellowship is not as much about the casual conversation that occurs during a church meal, as it is about listening deeply to each other and entering into the lives of other people. Fellowship is an intentional choice to value other believers—even those who are vastly different from us—because God desires to use His Church with its diverse members to aid our growth in Christ. Such fellowship sometimes takes effort, but it's worth it. The writer of Hebrews reminds us not to forget this principle: fellowship through sharing with God's people is pleasing to God.

**We are obligated to share with others.**



# CONNECTING TO CHRIST'S BODY

## THE POINT:

SPIRITUAL GROWTH CALLS FOR REGULAR INTERACTION WITH AND MINISTRY TO OTHER BELIEVERS.

### 1 CORINTHIANS // 12:12-24

#### MEMORY VERSE

<sup>12</sup> For just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body—so also is Christ.

<sup>13</sup> **For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and we were all given one Spirit to drink.**

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the body is not one part but many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot should say, “Because I’m not a hand, I don’t belong to the body,” it is not for that reason any less a part of the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear should say, “Because I’m not an eye, I don’t belong to the body,” it is not for that reason any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup> But as it is, God has arranged each one of the parts in the body just as he wanted.

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<sup>19</sup> And if they were all the same part, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many parts, but one body. <sup>21</sup> The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” Or again, the head can’t say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, those parts of the body that are weaker are indispensable. <sup>23</sup> And those parts of the body that we consider less honorable, we clothe these with greater honor, and our unrespectable parts are treated with greater respect, <sup>24</sup> which our respectable parts do not need. Instead, God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the less honorable.

#### KEYWORDS

#### a. All given one Spirit to drink

**(v. 13)** – Paul borrowed imagery from the practice of dying various cloths by immersing them in the same dye vat.

# HOW DOES SERVING OTHERS IMPACT OUR SPIRITUAL GROWTH?

In 1947, the Dodgers called minor league player Jackie Robinson up to the major leagues six days before the start of the season. On April 15, Robinson made his major league debut at the relatively advanced age of 28 before a crowd of 26,623 spectators, more than 14,000 of whom were black. Although he failed to get a base hit, he walked and scored a run in the Dodgers' 5-3 victory. Robinson became the first player since 1884 to openly break the major league baseball color line.

Robinson did not do it alone. Despite opposition because he was black, he received encouragement from several major league players. Lee "Jeep" Handley, who played for the Phillies at the time, was the first opposing player to wish him well. Dodgers teammate Pee Wee Reese once came to Robinson's defense with the famous line, "You can hate a man for many reasons. Color is not one of them."

Our spiritual growth is not something we do alone. We greatly benefit from the help of others.

## One United Body //

1 Corinthians 12:12-13

We use different techniques to give something emphasis. Some people use ALL CAPS to emphasize a thought. Authors sometimes put a word in *italics* to indicate that it is a key term. Biblical writers used synonymous parallelism to emphasize a particular truth. This is a literary device that repeats a phrase using slightly different terminology. If the writer really wanted the thought to stand out, he would also arrange the parallel thoughts in a chiasm, a poetic structure that placed the parallel thoughts in a crosswise arrangement. In verse 12, Paul used a chiasm to give emphasis to a truth about the body of Christ.

- The body is one and has many members.
- All the parts of the body, though many, are one body.

Paul's emphasis is clear and he did not want us to miss it. The human body is a single,



## THE POINT: SPIRITUAL GROWTH CALLS FOR REGULAR INTERACTION WITH AND MINISTRY TO OTHER BELIEVERS.

unified body even though it has many parts. He repeated the thought in slightly different words and structure, arranging his argument to make it pop off the page for his audience.

The church, like the human body, has many parts or members. The individual members are unique in their personalities, backgrounds, and spiritual giftedness, but they are all one body. The diversity does not work against unity; in fact, that diversity is functionally necessary.

### WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF UNITY IN THE CHURCH?

Paul reminded the church they were all baptized into a single body. While believers come from different races, cultures, and socio-economic levels, our differences did not threaten the church's wholeness. We are one. Coming from all our diverse backgrounds, we do not become uniform and exactly alike—but we do enter into a single body, Christ's body.

In the New Testament, baptism often refers to a person's physical immersion in water. In this passage, though, Paul was not referring to literal water baptism; instead, he was using the term metaphorically to indicate that the church has been immersed into the Spirit. We have been covered by the Holy Spirit. But Paul did not stop with that word picture. It isn't just that the Spirit covers the church, but the Holy Spirit also is inside the individual members of the church; believers are "all given one Spirit to drink." God's Holy Spirit makes us one, and He fills us and empowers us to function as one.

### WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF DISUNITY IN THE CHURCH?

## The Responsibility of Believers //

### 1 Corinthians 12:14-18

During the 2018 Superbowl, the Philadelphia Eagles pulled off a magnificent play that called for the quarterback to function as a wide-receiver, and the running back to function as the quarterback. The center snapped the ball to the quarterback who was really the running back. The running back, who wasn't the quarterback, slyly passed the ball to the quarterback who was acting as a wide receiver. After a sweet fake, the wide receiver, who was really the quarterback, sauntered into the endzone. Confused? So were the New



## DIGGING DEEPER FELLOWSHIP

Fellowship is the bond of common purpose and devotion that binds Christians to one another and to Christ. "Fellowship" is the English translation of words from the Hebrew stem *chabar* and the Greek stem *koin-*. The Hebrew *charar* was used to express ideas such as common or shared house (Prov. 21:9), "binding" or "joining" (Ex. 26:6; Eccl. 9:4), companion (Eccl. 4:10), and even a wife as a companion (Mal. 2:14). *Chabar* was used for a member of a Pharisaic society. Pharisees tended to form very close associations with one another in social, religious, and even business affairs. A most important dimension in the life of these cheberim was a sharing together in the study of Scripture and law and table fellowship.

### What weakens fellowship within relationships?



England Patriots. Before they knew what happened, the Eagles scored a touchdown, paving the path to Superbowl victory. Everyone, including the opposing team, expected the players to be positionally located according to their titles. The play worked because the team allowed each man to use his gifts in the area in which the coach placed him, no matter the area!

Just as each individual body part has its own unique role and function, each member of the congregation serves a role and has individual responsibilities. For the church as a whole to function well, each individual member of the congregation needs to fulfill his or her role and responsibility in a way that is consistent with the spiritual gift(s) God has bestowed.

**WHAT ARE RESPONSIBILITIES ALL CHURCH MEMBERS SHARE, REGARDLESS OF INDIVIDUAL GIFTS AND ROLES?**

## **A Necessary Part of the Body //** **1 Corinthians 12:19-24**

Paul's teaching about unity in diversity was not a hypothetical exercise. The church in Corinth was not healthy; it was rife with divisions.

- They quarreled over who their favorite leaders were (1 Cor. 1:10-13).
- They envied one another and were striving against each other (3:3).
- They brought lawsuits against one another (6:1-8).
- Their self-centeredness was evident even in the way they acted at the Lord's Supper (11:17-22).

Diversity in the body is necessary, but diversity should not lead to division. Paul underscored this when he said the eye cannot reject the hand because it viewed the hand as useless and unnecessary. Every member, according to Paul, is necessary. However, if the different members do not fulfill their individual functions in concert with the other members, the body will not be healthy.

In a healthy body the systems all work together, supporting one another. However, when a person suffers from an autoimmune disease, one part of the body begins to produce antibodies that will attack and harm another part. Rheumatoid arthritis, for example, causes the immune system to attack the joints, resulting in swelling and pain.

## THE POINT: SPIRITUAL GROWTH CALLS FOR REGULAR INTERACTION WITH AND MINISTRY TO OTHER BELIEVERS.

Unhealthy churches have the equivalent of an autoimmune disease because one group attacks another. In a healthy church, members not only work together, but they value, appreciate, and depend on others who have different roles. Every part of the body is valuable and necessary. The members of the church work hard to practice true Christian fellowship. Such fellowship includes celebrating other people's joys, crying with them in their sorrow, and walking beside them in their pain—and we need that interaction for the sake of our own individual spiritual growth.

As a spiritual discipline, fellowship is not as much about the casual conversation that occurs over coffee and donuts, as it is listening deeply and entering into other people's lives. Fellowship is an intentional choice to value other believers—even those who are vastly different from us—because God desires to use His church with its diverse members to aid your growth in Christ.

**HOW IS OUR CHURCH DEPENDING ON US TO BUILD FELLOWSHIP WITHIN THE BODY AND CARRY OUT ITS MISSION?**

### DID YOU KNOW?

The Apollo Theatre in Harlem was the first U.S. theatre that allowed African-Americans to display their talents in public. It began during a time when African-Americans were not allowed to enter any U.S. theatre. At first, the Apollo was a whites only burlesque theatre that was built in 1913. Then in 1932, burlesque was banned by the mayor of New York. The theatre remained empty for two years until Syndey S. Cohen purchased and renamed it the Apollo, after the Greek god of music. Cohen decided the Apollo would be the first theatre to allow African-Americans to perform. The Apollo theatre has helped to launch the careers of many popular black entertainers such as Stevie Wonder, James Brown, Bill Cosby, Jimi Hendrix, and tap dancers the Nicholas Brothers. Many people think the Apollo is for blacks only, but the truth is all races are welcome to perform there.<sup>20</sup>

**WHAT DIFFERENCE WOULD IT MAKE IF WE WORK AS HARD AT MAINTAINING CHURCH FELLOWSHIP AS WE DO AT ENTERTAINMENT PLACES LIKE THE APOLLO?**

## LIVE IT

### How will you deepen your involvement with other believers and ministry to His church?

The church is made up of many members who function in different roles and have unique responsibilities, but no one member could function effectively without the rest of the body. Our spiritual growth is not something we do alone. We greatly benefit from the help of others. This is the discipline of fellowship in its truest form.

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- Get to know someone in your church you do not know or do not know well. Make an intentional effort to build a relationship with the person.
- If you are at odds with someone in your church, get together with the person and seek to work the problem out.
- Become a part of a mission work that serves the body of Christ in another culture or setting.



# DAILY READINGS

## 1. ONE FOR ALL—ALL FOR ONE // 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-13

Paul reminded the church we're all baptized into a single body, though we are from different races, cultures, and socio-economic levels. Our differences do not threaten the church's wholeness. And we do not become uniform and exactly like one another—but we become part of a single body, Christ's body. All of us have been baptized by the Holy Spirit. We were "all given one Spirit to drink," which means the same Spirit fills each of us. We don't lose our individuality, but we have a oneness in Christ.

**Be mindful when we fellowship that because of the Holy Spirit, we have one goal.**

## 2. SHARED PAIN // 1 CORINTHIANS 12:26

If you have ever stubbed your little toe on a coffee table, then you know that even smaller, seemingly unimportant members of the body are still connected to the body and profoundly affect the functioning of the whole! The pain of a little toe stub soars throughout the whole body. Such is the case when one part of the body of Christ is suffering or when one part is honored. How do you respond in either of these cases? We should rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. Because we are part of the same body, there is no such thing as private Christianity.

**Get involved with your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Begin to enjoy one another's relationship with Christ.**

## 3. HOLY GIFTING! // 1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-7

The human body has eleven major organ systems, containing at least seventy-eight different organs. We have 206 bones, and our tongues may have as many as 10,000 taste buds. Who knew all that was housed inside our bodies? No wonder Paul used the human body to shed light on the body of Christ. Housed inside Christ's church are more expressions

of giftedness through diversity than can be named. Part of the excitement of following Christ involves discovering one's spiritual gift and the service to which God has called each of us.

**Trust the Holy Spirit to reveal God's special gift to you. Then make serving God and others your motive for using it.**

## 4. "I AM" SENT ME // EXODUS 3:14

Sometimes life is just plain hard! In this verse of Scripture, God is preparing Moses to face a challenging time when a man of great power, along with the mighty nation he ruled, would stand arrogantly against him. Moses thought his only problem would be his stutter, but that was the least of his worries. However, God was the sending power! Moses had no reason to fear what waited ahead. We may not find ourselves in a pharaoh-like situation, but what we are facing can be just as difficult. That's when we must remember that the same all-powerful God who stood with Moses is the same God who stands with us. Like Moses, we have no reason to fear.

**The next time you feel overwhelmed by trouble, remind yourself of I AM.**

## 5. WHERE HE LEADS . . . // EXODUS 3:16-17

Joining God in His soul-saving work can be scary. It can also be confusing when things don't work out the way you expect. Just ask Moses, who faced the pharaoh, Egypt's ruler. He also faced the entire nation of Israel. God had called him to declare an end to Egyptian rule over the Israelites. Pharaoh scoffed understandably. But Israel groaned at the thought. Why didn't they shout for joy? Freedom was at hand. But their moans did not stop Moses. Despite bewildering reactions from the Israelites, Moses knew that God had called him, and He was with Moses just as He is with us.

**Wherever God calls you to go, follow His lead, and ignore those who groan.**

# JOINING GOD'S WORK

**THE POINT:**  
BELIEVERS ARE TO JOIN GOD'S WORK IN BOTH THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD.

## JOHN // 15:1-8

<sup>1</sup> "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> Every branch in me that does not produce fruit he removes, and he prunes every branch that produces fruit so that it will produce more fruit. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

MEMORY VERSE

<sup>4</sup> "Remain in me, and I in you. Just as a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself unless it remains on the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. <sup>5</sup> **I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me.**

<sup>6</sup> "If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown aside like a branch and he withers. They gather them, throw them into the fire, and they are burned. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> My Father is glorified by this: that you produce much fruit and prove to be my disciples."

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KEYWORDS

**a. Gardener (v. 1)** – The Father as the Gardener harks back to Isaiah's first vineyard song, where God is depicted as tending His vineyard, only to be rewarded with sour grapes (Is. 5:1-7).

# WHAT DOES GOD EXPECT OF ME AS A FOLLOWER OF CHRIST?

Some jobs just sound harder than others. We'd probably agree that fields like brain surgery or teaching advanced physics would top the list, but what about ministry? Some view ministry as one of the hardest jobs out there.

The first international mission trip I took offered scrumptious meals, a beachfront hotel, and welcoming locals. The next one offered airport scammers, hotel tarantulas, and limited food selections. On the second trip, of those we ministered to, not all were happy to see us. But God called us there, so we served. Sometimes we served cautiously, sometimes we were on the verge of fainting from the heat, sometimes we trailed into an unknown wilderness destination . . . but never with doubt! God was with us in the work.

You may not go on an international mission trip, but you are called to minister. Every follower of Christ is called to minister. We do not need to fear the work. The same confidence I found applies to all believers: We are called, and we are not alone.

## God Expects Spiritual Fruit //

John 15:1-3

In the fifteenth chapter of John, the disciples didn't know it yet, but disturbing incidents were on the horizon for them. They would need to trust the deity and power of Jesus, and the strength of the relationship they had with Him. These are the events surrounding John 15.

- Jesus predicted His betrayal (John 13:21).
- Judas, one of the twelve closest followers, was Jesus' betrayer (John 13:22-27).
- Fear motivated the disciples to deny Jesus (John 18:25-27).
- Jesus was crucified (John 19:1-29).
- The death of Jesus filled the disciples with disbelief (Mark 16:14-15).
- Confusion and sadness plagued the disciples after Jesus' ascension (Acts 1:6-11).



## THE POINT: BELIEVERS ARE TO JOIN GOD'S WORK IN BOTH THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD.

- The disciples faced severe persecution during the early days of the church (Acts 5:17-42).

Looking toward the future, Jesus spoke truths to empower His disciples. When He used the construction, “I am,” Jesus was associating Himself with God. The Jews were quite familiar with Exodus 3:14, where God instructed Moses to tell those who inquired that “I AM” had sent him to bring the Israelites out of Egypt.

When Jesus said He is “the true vine,” He signaled He was fulfilling the purpose that Israel didn't. Many Old Testament writers used the vine as a metaphor for Israel, God's covenant people. Sadly, in most of these instances, Israel was the vine that failed to bear fruit. In stark contrast, Jesus is the true vine—a vine that produces fruit.

However, Jesus does not do it alone. He produces fruit through the branches—believers who are God's co-workers (1 Cor. 3:9). In God's grand design, He works through believers to do good works according to His will (Eph. 2:10).

### WHAT ARE SOME THINGS GOD EXPECTS BELIEVERS TO PRODUCE?

The Father is the Gardener who trims and prunes the branches. He does this to increase the fruit-bearing capacity of the branches so that they will bear more fruit. To bear fruit can mean leading people to Jesus (John 4:36); serving them in Jesus' name (Matt. 7:16-20); and developing the character of Jesus (Gal. 5:22-23). In His care, the gardener does not tolerate non-fruit-bearing branches. If the Father sees a branch that is not bearing fruit, He prunes it—severs it from the vine.

## Believers Are Connected to Christ //

John 15:4-5

Momentarily breaking from the analogy of the vine and branches, Jesus with a forceful command told His disciples they must remain in Him. He broke from the image because it failed to illustrate this point: unlike branches attached to a vine, believers have a choice of whether or not to remain connected to Christ. Branches do not have a will; people do. Jesus, in a straightforward, forceful way commanded us to remain in Him.



## DIGGING DEEPER MINISTRY

Ministry is service to one another. For Christians, Jesus is the supreme model of a minister. In His inaugural sermon, Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah, summarizing the purpose and the many dimensions of His ministry (Luke 4:18-19). Although Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth, His style of leadership and ministry was not one of dominating His followers (Mark 10:42) but one of service. Jesus' ministry included teaching, preaching, evangelism, casting out demons, healing, providing for physical needs of people, and counseling. His supreme act of ministry was His obedience to the Father in going to the cross where He gave His life to atone for the sins of the world.

**How does ministry as a spiritual discipline impact the spiritual life of believers?**



Remain means to abide or dwell within something, and it carries the idea of personal, intimate residence. Jesus emphasized His followers must remain or abide in Him, and He in them. It is a mutually intimate, conjoined union. The intricacy and interconnectedness of the relationship between Jesus and His followers is difficult to express—and impossible to overstate! Jesus wants His followers to abide in Him as closely as He abides in them. That's close!

#### **HOW CAN WE STAY CONNECTED TO JESUS, THE TRUE VINE?**

The reason for Jesus' call to remain in Him is fruitfulness. Jesus promised us that we will be fruitful if we remain in Him. He reinforced this point with repetition. First, He stated it negatively: "Just as a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself unless it remains on the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me." Then He repeated the principle in a positive way: "The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit." Jesus is clear: we will not be fruitful without Him, and we will be fruitful with Him.

#### **HOW DO SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES HELP US REMAIN IN JESUS?**

## **God Receives the Glory //**

**John 15:6-8**

Unconnected branches are good for nothing. Psalm 1 contains a parallel metaphor: the one who walks with God is fruitful "like a tree planted beside flowing streams," but the ungodly "are like chaff that the wind blows away" (Ps. 1:3-4).

The contrast is strong and it makes a point. Instead of living a life that goes up in smoke, those connected to Jesus bring God glory. We bear fruit so that God is glorified. God receives the glory; we don't. It is His glory—His weight, His authority, His reputation—not ours. Any fruitfulness on our part comes from being connected to Jesus, so the glory is all His, never ours.

Being fruitful for Christ is not a synonym for success. Abiding in Christ does not guarantee you will reach all your life goals or be successful in any worldly sense. The fruit we produce in His power is fruitful in the way it glorifies God.

During the first quarter of Super Bowl XLIV, Indianapolis Colts kicker Matt Stover pointed to the sky when he made a 38-yard field goal. This is not unusual at all—many athletes show



## THE POINT: BELIEVERS ARE TO JOIN GOD'S WORK IN BOTH THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD.

similar gratitude to God for their successes. But in the fourth quarter, with the game on the line, Stover missed a 51-yard field goal attempt. Yet again, he pointed toward heaven. Recognizing the significance of the gesture, the announcer noted that Stover was “a ‘spiritual man’ grateful for divine blessing in success and failure, victory and defeat.”

God is glorified, not just because the fruit is produced, but because the fruit-bearing branches depend on Him no matter what. When we produce spiritual fruit, we glorify God and prove that we are Jesus' disciples. I would argue that Matt Stover had a fruitful day, even though he was not always successful. As he pointed to the heavens after a personal failure, he was acknowledging that it was not about him. He was acknowledging that he was dependent on God, who gave him the ability and opportunity.

As we live in Christ and live for Christ, we will bear fruit—and God will be glorified.

### WHAT DOES THIS LESSON TEACH US ABOUT OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

### DID YOU KNOW?

Author and pastor, Dr. Tony Evans, connected his life, family, and ministry to Christ at an early age. Now a father of four, grandfather of twelve, and great-grandfather of one, Dr. Evans has impacted the lives of millions for more than 40 years. One of his messages was centered on being connected to the Vine, which is Christ. He advised Christians not to confuse their religion with their relationship with Jesus. He said, “Religion is anything you do for God that does not stem out of a heart connected to God.” He gave the following example: if you go to church because it is the religious or spiritual thing to do rather than going to spend time worshipping God, learning about Him, and experiencing Him, then that is religion. Dr. Evans encourages all believers to make Christ first in their lives.<sup>21</sup>

### HOW CAN BELIEVERS ENSURE THEIR RELIGION GROWS OUT OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST?

## LIVE IT

### How will you deepen your involvement with other believers and ministry to His church?

Every follower of Christ is called to minister. We don't need to fear the work. We are called, and we aren't alone. Jesus has commanded to us to connect to Him. We can only do the work He's called us to do and produce fruit if we remain connected to Christ. Ministry focuses us beyond ourselves to impact the lives of others, but it also impacts us personally as God's plans become our plans.

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- Surrender your plans and choose to remain in Christ, living in Him and in His power. Pray for open eyes to see the ministry opportunities He places before you.
- If you are already involved in a ministry, offer to mentor someone who is not.
- If God is calling you to ministry leadership, accept His call. Talk with your pastor about this calling and your next steps.

# DAILY READINGS

## 1. TRUE VINE // JOHN 15:1

When Jesus said He is “the true vine,” He signaled that He was fulfilling the purpose that Israel did not fulfill. The vine was used as a metaphor for Israel, God’s covenant people. Sadly, Israel was the vine that failed to bear fruit. In stark contrast, Jesus wants His disciples to know He is the true vine and He has called us to be branches that bear fruit. As disciples who follow Christ, we must be rooted in Him (not in Israel or the church) if we will bear fruit for God. To be rooted in Christ means that we are in communion with Him. Our hearts should desire this intimate relationship with Christ. If we choose to be connected to anyone or anything other than Christ, our walk will be fruitless, just like Israel’s was.

**Choose to remain connected to Christ, so that you can produce fruit for the kingdom of God.**

## 2. FRUIT OR FRUITS // GALATIANS 5:22-23

Fruit can refer to one item or several items of the same fruit. In the Book of Galatians, Paul listed the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. No mystery on why many people make the mistake of thinking the word “fruit” should be plural. Yet, the nine are one. It’s either all or none, because the Spirit has only one work to do in each believer. The work of the Holy Spirit in a Christian’s life is an on-going process that grows the fruit within us, so that we become holy through sanctification.

**We cannot get or grow this fruit on our own. Instead, we must join our lives to the life of Christ.**

## 3. WITHERED? WATERED? // JOHN 15:6; PSALM 1:3-4

John 15:6 reveals the life story of branches separated from the vine. They are worthless; they become dead, dry twigs that have withered. The Gardener gathers the brittle remains to be burned in the fire, because disconnected branches have no life purpose. Psalm 1 provides a contrasting metaphor: the one who walks with God is fruitful

“like a tree planted beside flowing streams” that are watered. How would you describe your walk with God—withered or water? The Bible’s clear description of both helps us determine the best option for our own good and for the glory of God. A withered life is a sure indication that unhealthy choices have been made, which have resulted in a disconnection with God.

**Recognize the severity of the withered life, and for the sake of your own spiritual survival, reconnect with God.**

## 4. IMMEASURABLE JOY // JOHN 17:12-13

The word “remain” means to abide or dwell within something. It carries the idea of living up close and personal. The details of just how close and personal Jesus is with us is difficult to express. It can only be felt, but never can it be overstated. It is a life-giving, soul-thrilling, joy-producing experience that continues without end. Jesus’ followers must agree to remain or abide in Him, and He in them. Judas, whom Jesus chose, didn’t choose to remain in Christ. And we know what happened to him. Jesus wants us to be immeasurably joyful, which we can obtain only through intimate contact with Him, because He is the source of all joy.

**When we remain connected to Christ, we will experience the special care and joy of God.**

## 5. GLORY // ISAIAH 43:7

Living the Christian life, which means we are fruit-bearers, won’t prevent us from having a few fruitless moments. You know those times when the wrong things are said or done. In those moments, push the reset button! Confess, ask for and accept God’s forgiveness, and move forward. God is glorified not just when fruit is produced, but also when severed branches reconnect through confession. Don’t let Satan get the upper hand. You were created for God’s glory and messing up does not change that.

**Give glory to God, the One for whom you live and the One who loves and cares for you.**



# MAKE CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS WITH YOUR CLASS

DARCHELLE M. GARNER

Christmas is among the most celebrated holidays on the Christian calendar. The annual December 25th commemoration of the birth of Jesus Christ is typically observed by a season of parties and get-togethers; tree-decorating, toy-shopping, and gift-giving; cooking, baking, and eating; and traveling near and far to be with loved ones. New Christmas films beckon us to the movie theater, while Christmas “classics” require a sit-down in front of the television. Excitement, anticipation, and plenty of busyness mark this “most wonderful time of the year.”

+ But in a season known for bringing delight, many Christians instead experience stress. Emotions can run high at Christmas. Unrealistic expectations can lead to disappointment. Extra responsibilities can bring on exhaustion and frustration. Grief over a loved one no longer here to share the holiday can be fresh—and refreshed—at Christmas. Dealing with family conflicts, meeting children’s needs, even coordinating travel plans can all take their toll. Financial difficulties can cause worry, while loneliness and depression can dampen the soul. Holiday stress is real for many, and in its midst, the true meaning of Christmas can be easily lost.

So, what is a Christian to do? How can you relieve the stress? How can you release your emotions, renew your outlook, and realign your walk through the Christmas season? How can Christians truly celebrate Christmas?

First, be intentional. Make a conscious effort to slow down. Take moments throughout each day of the season to mindfully breathe. Also, take time to identify the specific sources of your stress and the overwhelming feelings that can cause it. Talk about your feelings with your Bible study class or a trusted friend, as sharing can help lighten the emotional load. Above all, take your stress and emotions to God in prayer. He already knows your heart and what you feel. He is ready to help. Just ask. Then, rediscover the true meaning of Christmas, as it is the celebration of the greatest gift ever given to humankind. Let that sink in . . . the greatest gift ever! Christmas commemorates when God, the Almighty Creator of everything and everyone, sent from heaven to earth His one and only Son,

Jesus Christ, in the form of a newborn baby. Humanity had been awaiting the arrival of the Messiah, the One who would bring salvation for all, and finally, He was here, gifted to the entire world by God Himself. It was a Gift given out of God's incomparable love for each of us and all of us. What a remarkable, amazing Gift!

It's important to get reacquainted with this Christmas story in Luke 2:1-21, for it's a story of wonder and awe, promise and peace, joy and love. Read it, then read it again. Reflect on it and discuss it with your Bible study class. Pray about it, seeking fresh understanding of the true meaning of Christmas. Then, celebrate the birth of Christ in a new and meaningful way by carrying out one of the following Christmas activities. Establish your selected activity as an annual tradition for your Bible study class, family, or group of friends.

Carry out random acts of Christmas kindness. There are so many ways to bring joy to others at Christmas: when dining at a restaurant, pay for a stranger's meal; deliver cookies to a homebound church member; give a stranger a compliment; choose to smile; let someone cut in front of you in line; leave a Christmas note (a Scripture verse or a prayer) on a stranger's car windshield; buy coffee for the person behind you in line; feed someone's parking meter; read a book (or the Christmas story) to an elderly neighbor. Acts of kindness can be big or small. You won't always witness the impact, but you can be certain that even one small act can make a positive difference for someone at Christmas. Set a time frame with your Bible Study class, perhaps one week. Then share stories of your acts with each other when you again come together.

Memorize the Christmas story. Each person in your Bible study class or family can take a verse or two (21 verses total) and memorize it. Then come together to recite the entire Christmas story. For added fun, video your group reciting it. As you walk through the Christmas season, meditate on the verses you have memorized as a reminder of the true meaning of Christmas.

Plan a Christmas prayer meeting. Make a list of those in your family, church, community, and world who need special prayer during the holiday season. Then, assign a set of the names to each class member and spend a Bible study class lifting them all in prayer. Include both individual and group prayer during your meeting, and remember to pray for each other.

Host a family (or two) for a Saturday Christmas breakfast. Consider a family whose financial resources are low; who are from another country

and have no nearby relatives; who have a parent deployed in the military, an incarcerated parent, a family member in the hospital; or who are new to the Christian faith. Sing carols together and share the Christmas story. Present each child with a Christian children's Christmas book, the parent(s) with a daily devotional book for the following year, and the family with a food basket.

Take a group visit to a local homeless shelter. Help serve a meal and minister to the guests. Share with them the love of Christmas by singing carols and telling the Christmas story. Inspire hope by reminding them that Christmas commemorates the glorious night when God gave humanity the greatest Gift ever. The Gift of Jesus Christ is for them, too!

Support the military. Partner with a local nonprofit to write Christmas cards and prepare care packages to send to deployed military troops. Christmas can be a lonely time for military personnel stationed far away from loved ones. Let them know they are thought of, appreciated, and prayed for during the Christmas season.

Throw a Birthday Party for Jesus. Invite a few families from your community for this special birthday celebration. Simple decorations will make the space festive and fun. Be sure to have a birthday cake, and sing the "Happy Birthday" song. Plan several Christmas-themed games or arts and crafts for the children. Sing Christmas carols together and read (or act out) the Christmas Story. Then send everyone home with a small, wrapped gift with a Christmas tract tucked inside.

Go Christmas caroling in your neighborhood. Or visit a local nursing home or rehabilitation center for caroling and gift-giving. Simple, useful presents such as socks and scarves can be ideal gifts, especially for seniors.

As you carry out your selected activity, remember the story of that extraordinary night 2,000 years ago when our Lord and Savior was born. Let the joy and peace promised that night flow through your heart. Your stress will recede, and you will experience the true meaning of Christmas. Merry Christmas to All!

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