



JESUS  
AT THE  
CENTER

OF THE CHURCH • PRAYER • MY STORY • TRANSFORMATION • FREEDOM • CHRISTMAS



DAILY DEVOTIONAL



It's the most wonderful time of the year, but it's also the busiest. I'm reminded of a quote from Richard Foster that says, *...our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in "muchness" and "manyness," he will rest satisfied.*

For some reason, when our speed picks up, the first thing to go is our time with Jesus, which is arguably the most needed time to spend with Him. I invite you to make Jesus the center of your Christmas. Make an intentional effort in this season not to slot God in but to choose to build your life around Him. The starting place is to meet with Him each day and allow your heart to learn to enjoy His presence. I pray God will give you fresh eyes this Christmas season to see and enjoy Him.

If this is a great season or a season filled with challenge and loss, may the love of God awaken you and take you to deeper places, so like the psalmist said, *who do I have on this earth but You*, may be true of us. In a culture deeply divided and hurting, may we, as the church, be unified in our pursuit of Jesus above all. May His grace, mercy, and power flow richly through you this season.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'B' followed by a smaller 'J' and a long horizontal flourish.

Bryan Jones, Senior Pastor

## JESUS IS TRUSTWORTHY WITH OUR FEARS!

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*"So don't be afraid, little flock. For it gives your Father great happiness to give you the Kingdom."*

Luke 12:32 (NLT)

One night I couldn't sleep, and my mind was overrun with fear. My heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest as fear overtook my thoughts. Only a handful of times has fear gripped me so much that I couldn't sleep, and this was one of those times. I remember getting up and walking around while everyone in my family was cozy and asleep. Their comfort and rest created more chaos in my mind as I was left alone with my thoughts and worries.

Jesus knows we're all prone to be overrun with worries and fears. *Fear not* is the most repeated commandment in the Bible. That night I experienced something I hadn't before. I kept repeating the Bible verse above. I remember lying in bed saying, *don't be afraid, little flock. For it gives your Father great happiness to give you the Kingdom.* I must have repeated that verse over 50 times lying in bed. After a while, I felt the fears melt away. I had an overwhelming sense that God was with me. The funny thing is I still didn't sleep much that night. However, I knew God was with me. I felt His comfort and peace in ways I couldn't deny.

Following God doesn't promise to remove all pain, fear and suffering, but it does promise that God will walk through it with you. You don't have to be alone. You can trust Him with whatever's creating anxiety or fear. I'm learning to return to this verse when fear creeps in and remind myself that God is with me, and He is for me! He's a good God, and He's our Shepherd. Don't believe the lie that it's all on you or you're alone. Rest in the comfort that God will lead and guide you in this season. Give God your fears and let His peace wash over you no matter what you're facing.

**APPLICATION:** Today give your fears to God and remind yourself that He is for you!

**PRAYER:** Think about what's overtaking your thoughts with fear or worry. Imagine giving God each situation and asking Him to fill you with His peace and comfort. Pray Luke 12:32 over yourself and those in your life. Request that the Spirit help you trust Him in new ways!

# GOD IS TRUSTWORTHY WITH OUR PROBLEMS

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*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."*  
Psalms 91:1-2 (NIV)

Growing up, I constantly heard people say the phrase: *little kids have little problems, but big kids have bigger problems*. I never found that encouraging because we're saying that *if you think you have problems now, just wait*. The point is simple—all of us will face difficulties and setbacks. Unfortunately, it's an inevitable part of life. I can't say I've enjoyed facing more and more problems in my life, but while I've learned that big kids have big problems, I've also learned that big problems can create big faith. Not many of us would say our faith is formed on the mountaintops or in the good times. Our faith is forged and refined in the fires and adversities of life. Now, whenever I see someone facing a problem, part of me gets excited to think how their faith could grow mighty roots in this season if they keep pressing into God.

Trusting God with our problems also gives us a strong witness to those watching. As people watch us while we're facing difficult times, they can see where our hope and trust is. The early church exploded because as the church faced big problems and persecution, it created a big faith that captured the attention of those around. They couldn't understand how people facing problems could have peace, joy and hope when the forecast around them seemed so grim.

I don't know what you're facing, but I know God does, and that greater faith and trust await. So, how do we get this faith? The verse above shows us whoever dwells in God's shelter will find rest. You must get your eyes on God, and you must draw near Him. If you only stare at your problems, you'll become discouraged. But when you stare at God, your faith will grow. What you focus on will determine your future.

Jewish tradition says the greatest miracle ever performed was splitting the Red Sea. Yet there's a midrash, like a commentary from rabbis about certain stories in the Old Testament, about Ruven and Shaman who missed the miracle. *The sea floor was safe to walk on but muddy. Ruven said, "What is this mud? It's just like the slime pits of Egypt."* *"What's the difference," cried Shaman, "mud here, mud there, it's all the same." Because they never looked up, they never understood why those on the other side were singing songs of praise. For these two, the miracle never happened because they never saw past their problems.* Today, look up. Get your eyes on God!

**APPLICATION:** Remember, your problems are an invitation to trust God and grow your faith.

**PRAYER:** Spend time thinking about God being in the middle of your problems. Imagine Him walking with you as you face them. Quiet your mind and heart, and ask the Spirit if there's anything He wants to say to you!

## GOD IS TRUSTWORTHY WHEN WE ABIDE

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*"I have seen what they do, but I will heal them anyway! I will lead them. I will comfort those who mourn, bringing words of praise to their lips. May they have abundant peace, both near and far," says the LORD, who heals them.*

Isaiah 57:18-19 (NLT)

I laid in bed the other night but couldn't fall asleep. I had a thousand thoughts running through my mind and couldn't turn them off. I started to get stressed, thinking *if I don't fall asleep, I won't be able to get all these things done*, which created more stress. I woke up my wife and chatted with her, and that helped a little bit, but I still felt the crippling weight of anxiety. I knew that no amount of talking or problem-solving would fix this. Only God's presence would push out the defeating noise in my head.

I want to tell you it happened instantly, but for maybe an hour, I was beyond overwhelmed. All I could do was focus on God and invite Him into my situation. The Spirit showed me that the enemy was feeding off my fear and I needed to trust God, keeping my eyes fixed on Him. Finally, after who knows how long, I fell asleep. I woke up the following day and spent time with God. This phrase came to my mind—*we abide, then He guides*.

God revealed that I was trying to carry burdens that my shoulders were not big enough to carry. There's a reason God tells us to cast our cares on Him, not only because He's trustworthy but because He can carry them all. Most of my worries came from my confusion about what God told me. Sometimes, I think I guide, and then God abides with me as I live for Him. This isn't true and will often lead to burnout, worry, fear and exhaustion. As the verse says above, God is the one who heals, God is the one who leads, and God is the one who comforts. So, what do we do? We show up and let Him. We must become black belts in abiding because that's where our fruit comes from. It's where our power is. I realized I was trying to guide and take control of everything. I had forgotten the most central command is to abide: to keep showing up and to keep drawing near, to keep our eyes fixed on God and invite Him to be God in our circumstances and life. When we abide, we can find out how trustworthy God is.

**APPLICATION:** He guides us when we abide. Today, try to invite Him into every part of your day.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit of God to guide and direct your every step. Ask Him to help you become more dependent on Him. Ask God if there's anything you're trying to carry in your strength, and give Him whatever He says to release. Thank Him that He's a God who can carry it all!

## JESUS IS TRUSTWORTHY WITH OUR FINANCES

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*If you are a thief, quit stealing. Instead, use your hands for good hard work, and then give generously to others in need.* Ephesians 4:28 (NLT)

It's interesting that the verse above doesn't end with quit stealing. It says to stop stealing and work hard so that you can be generous. Generosity, at its core, isn't an action. It's a condition of your heart. For years, I found a million different reasons not to tithe and be generous with my resources, but it was a heart thing, a trust thing. Have you ever noticed that the Bible is full of bad math? Jesus leaves the 99 sheep for the one, and the first shall be the last. None of this makes sense. It's a trust thing, and it's a faith thing. The Bible tells us to tithe, which means to give 10% of our resources to God. God says that after we give 10%, the remaining 90% of our resources will go further than 100% of our resources. It's bad math, but it's a faith thing. It's a trust thing. I've seen God do this, and I pray you do too!

Generosity is counter-cultural in our consumeristic world. The problem is no amount of more will fill our hearts the way Jesus can. It's important to note giving doesn't change your heart. You can give and not love, but I believe it's impossible to love and not give. Giving shows that God has our heart. It reveals that all the world's treasures aren't better than God's presence.

Take a step of faith and trust God. The Israelites had to take a step of faith before the waters of the Jordan River parted. If you aren't tithing, take a step towards it by giving. Don't let a million excuses keep you from trusting God and allowing your faith to deepen through generosity. I challenge you to believe the great truth that it's impossible to outgive a generous God. He's generous with His love, His Spirit, His mercy, His power, His Kingdom, His grace, His gifts. Simply put, His generosity spurs ours.

**APPLICATION:** Look at all you've been given in Jesus. This allows our hearts to give with the right motives.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit what He wants you to give. Ask Him what a step of faith looks like for you. When He speaks, be obedient and yield. Thank God for His generosity that He's richly lavished you as a son or daughter of God!

# GRATITUDE INCREASES YOUR TRUST IN GOD

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*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." Surely He will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge; His faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day,*

**Psalms 91:1-5 (NIV)**

The average American sleeps 6.8 hours a night. Some sleep more, and some less. I tend to have a love-hate relationship with sleep. Some people can hit the pillow and fall asleep. My wife is like that. For me, my mind struggles to shut off. Here's what's helped me tremendously with sleep—gratitude. I've learned, and am learning, that worry and anxiety are future-oriented. They operate with constant *what-if* questions. *What if things don't get better? What if the conversation doesn't go well? What if something terrible happens to my kids?* You name it, and I've probably thought it. I tend to be a master at the *what-if* questions.

So, what's the solution? It's gratitude. Gratitude tethers us to God in the present by saying *Thank You*. I've found that even little things like thanking God for food, friends who support me, a home, clothes and His presence have radically shifted my heart. I'm convinced that tremendous gratitude will create greater peace. Remember what David said when he was facing Goliath? *"The LORD who rescued me from the claws of the lion and the bear will rescue me from this Philistine!" (1 Samuel 17:27 NLT)* His mind could have gone to a thousand different *what-if* scenarios, yet he conquered Goliath with gratitude.

If you want to take down the goliaths in your life of worry, stress and anxiety, then gratitude is the way forward. Think about it. Currently, we have the highest anxiety rates we've ever had in the US, and yet it seems gratitude is lower than ever before! The way forward is gratitude because gratitude is the way of the Kingdom!

**APPLICATION:** Practicing gratitude today will fill our minds with peace and hope.

**PRAYER:** Spend time thinking about who and what you have in Jesus. Thank God for His blessings in your life, no matter how hard the season is. Thank God for the Spirit, and ask Him to make you more aware of His presence!



# GOD IS TRUSTWORTHY WITH YOUR DEATH

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*And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with Him the believers who have died.* 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 (NLT)

Death is a subject few people want to discuss. However, it's the one common reality for all of us. For some, there will be one less stocking hung on the mantel and one less chair filled around the table. Christmas is when the losses seem to be multiplied because of family gatherings and the nostalgia of the season. Paul said when it comes to death, those who are in Christ Jesus can grieve and hope. We grieve because of the loss of those we love, but we find hope because they're filled with immeasurable joy at the feet of Jesus, and we'll one day be reunited.

I love how Jon Ortberg says it: *Death is still our enemy. But it is defanged. The viper's poison has been drained away. The deadly sting is gone. The sting of death was sin. And the damning power of sin was in the demand of the law. But thanks be to Christ who satisfied the law's demand. "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55).*

We don't have to be afraid of death because we know those who are in Jesus are experiencing the resurrection of Jesus in their resurrection. There's never a moment that a follower of Jesus is separated from Jesus. When you close your eyes in this life, you automatically awaken into the glory and splendor of your forever home.

It's interesting that most of us fear the unknown. My wife and I have moved three times, and each time, I was sad because we didn't know exactly where our next home would be or what it would be like. Each time our new home was better for various reasons, but because I couldn't see it, moving felt dreadful because all I could see was the loss. Heaven is a little like this. We love our family, friends, community and church, and the thought of leaving can be overwhelming. However, you'll never long for your old life once you arrive in your future home, Heaven. You'll be thankful for it. You'll be in the fullness of joy and life. Heaven is a place where there are no more tears or suffering. You can trust God with everything, even your death. Also, remember that your life is untouchable until God calls you home. So, live each day completely trusting God and let His peace and goodness wash over you!

**APPLICATION:** Your life is untouchable until God calls you home. You aren't in control. He is.

**PRAYER:** Ask God to help you number your days correctly. For many Christians, the big question isn't *if we die, will we go to Heaven*, but *if we live, will Heaven come to Earth?* Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you about how you're living. Knowing this is your temporary home, ask the Spirit to take any fears, replace them with boldness, and trust in Him!

# GOD IS TRUSTWORTHY WITH YOUR DREAMS

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*Trust in the LORD and do good. Then you will live safely in the land and prosper. Take delight in the LORD, and He will give you your heart's desires.*

**Psalms 37:3-4 (NLT)**

You were made on purpose with a purpose. I've heard it said that no two snowflakes are exactly alike. They all have differences when we zoom in and look. You're no different. You might look like others from a distance, but God has uniquely and wonderfully designed you. God has given you gifts, passions and burdens that all contribute to who God is calling you to be. It's important to know your design leads to your destiny. It takes time to find out how God has uniquely equipped you. I found my calling by looking at what drained me the least. Whatever you're designed to do will give you life. Also, you start to narrow in on your wiring as time passes through experiences and feedback from others.

Walking step by step with God is the key to finding and unlocking your future. When you follow Him closely, He will guide your steps! Read what Charles Spurgeon says: *When your will is God's will, you will have your will.* The verse above says the same. When you delight in God, He will cause your heart and desires to reflect His. Then, He will grant whatever you ask because you're so deeply connected to Him.

Honestly, I would've never picked the path I've walked, but looking back, I wouldn't change a thing. I can say God's plans are better than mine. Even if you can't say that yet, keep going, and if you keep seeking Him, this verse promises it'll be true. He will give you the desires of your heart because your desires and His will be one. It's freeing to know we don't have to work out every detail in our lives perfectly. People often think *I have to go to the right college, get the right degree, get the right job, meet the right people, do the right things, get into the right house, have the right kids*, and so on. The problem is that this puts pressure on you that you can't bear, and it does something more dangerous— it gets your eyes off God. You have one primary job: to seek His Kingdom first, then He will take care of everything else (Matthew 6:33). You can trust Him with your plans. You can trust Him with your future. He is good!

**APPLICATION:** Every good and perfect gift is from above. Trust Him today.

**PRAYER:** Thank God for placing you where you are right now. Ask Him to give you the trust and faith to live faithfully where you are, no matter the circumstances. Ask God if you're seeking Him with your whole heart. Ask for the Spirit's help to trust and get your eyes on God.

## DIVINE PROVIDENCE

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*And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them.*

**Romans 8:28 (NLT)**

God is in total control, ruling as Sovereign over the entire universe.

That statement is easy to make but sometimes hard to believe. When we look at everything happening around us, it can seem like everything is random, chaotic and out of control. But God is weaving a beautiful tapestry that we cannot fully fathom.

Even before you were born, He knew you (Psalm 139:13-16) and had been working things out. That even includes who your parents are. In the Scriptures, we see God select Mary and Joseph as the earthly parents of Jesus. God is no less present in working all things together on your behalf.

Perhaps you've heard people attribute good fortune to simple luck or chance. What if we instead acknowledged the sovereignty and divine providence of God? Romans 8:28 is more than just a verse to be quoted to someone in grief or tragedy. It should encourage us daily!

This verse doesn't mean everything will always be sunshine and rainbows. There will undoubtedly be hard times. Jesus Himself promised us this. He then encouraged us by telling us He's overcome the world (see John 16:33). We must maintain an eternal perspective and trust that God is working all things together for our *ultimate* good.

So, remember: God is in total control, ruling as Sovereign over the entire universe. Be encouraged!

**APPLICATION:** What difficult situation are you struggling with right now? Take time to share every bit of that with God. Share your fear or frustration with Him—He can handle it. Then ask Him to help you trust Him.

**PRAYER:**

Almighty God,  
Help me to truly believe that You are Sovereign. Grant me the ability to see Your fingerprints all over my life, working things together for my good and Your glory. Thank You for how You've blessed my life.  
In Jesus' name,  
Amen.

## FAMILY OF GOD

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*All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ. Even before He made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in His eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into His own family by bringing us to Himself through Jesus Christ. This is what He wanted to do, and it gave Him great pleasure. So we praise God for the glorious grace He has poured out on us who belong to His dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that He purchased our freedom with the blood of His Son and forgave our sins. He has showered His kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding.*

**Ephesians 1:3-8 (NLT)**

Have you ever heard the expression *you can't choose your family*? This statement might be made from frustration or embarrassment with your family or jealousy over someone else's. And there is some truth to this for us.

But not for God.

He chooses His sons and daughters. Even before the world began, He knew His people, loved them and had a plan for their redemption. He decided in advance to adopt us into His own family. What an undeserved miracle! No one coerced God into doing this. Instead, He chose to do so simply because it pleased Him.

The God of the universe finds pleasure in relationship with you. Let that sink in.

Not just the *professional Christians* or your friend who seemingly has it all together when it comes to being a disciple. You—despite all your flaws and failures. He has known you perfectly and completely from the beginning (see Psalm 139:1-6). And knowing all that, from the beginning, He knew He wanted to adopt you into His family.

Praise God for this glorious grace and kindness.

**APPLICATION:** Tell God how thankful you are that He chose to redeem you. Let us not lose sight of the miracle of our regeneration in Christ. Thank Him for His kindness and grace in your life. Ask Him to help you walk in the confident assurance that He is a good Father who loves you simply because it pleases Him.

### **PRAYER:**

God,

Thank You for loving me. I couldn't earn it, and I don't deserve it, but still, You choose to redeem me. Thank You for making me part of Your family. Help me remember that I'm Your child.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

## DIVINE DISCIPLINE

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*And have you forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you as His children? He said, "My child, don't make light of the LORD's discipline, and don't give up when He corrects you. For the LORD disciplines those He loves, and He punishes each one He accepts as His child." As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as His own children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father? If God doesn't discipline you as He does all of His children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really His children at all. Since we respected our earthly fathers who disciplined us, shouldn't we submit even more to the discipline of the Father of our spirits, and live forever? For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in His holiness. No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way.*

**Hebrews 12:5-11 (NLT)**

Discipline is love. We can see this for others but often miss it for ourselves. For instance, if a small child is trying to run away from you in a busy parking lot, it's loving to discipline them so they learn not to continue this dangerous behavior. Even if they get mad at you, you're ultimately doing this for their good—you know more about the situation than they do.

It's the same with our heavenly Father.

His discipline proves that He loves us. He cares enough about us to set us back on the right path. And while this doesn't make the discipline enjoyable, it does help us maintain some perspective.

Author Jerry Bridges says this about discipline: *The purpose of God's discipline is not to punish us but to transform us. He has already meted out punishment for our sins on Jesus at Calvary. But we must be transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ. That is the purpose of discipline.*

So, how is the Father transforming you? What is He trying to show you through His divine discipline? Where is He loving you through discipline, and why? Are you receptive to how He's leading?

**APPLICATION:** Take a moment to think about how God has loved you through discipline. If you're in that season right now, ask God what He wants you to know. Implore the Holy Spirit to transform you more and more every day.

**PRAYER:**

Father,

Thank You for loving me enough to discipline me. Help me remember that You are for me, not against me.

Make me more like Your Son Jesus, in whose name I pray.

Amen.

## FAMILY DYNAMICS

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*Children, obey your parents because you belong to the Lord, for this is the right thing to do. "Honor your father and mother." This is the first commandment with a promise: If you honor your father and mother, "things will go well for you, and you will have a long life on the earth." Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord. Ephesians 6:1-4 (NLT)*

It should come as no surprise that our relationship with our parents tremendously impacts who we become as adults. Maybe growing up in your home was a tremendous blessing, with godly parents who pointed you toward Christ. Praise God! But perhaps it was a difficult season of your life, filled with conflict and stress. In that case, the call to honor your parents might chafe. They haven't earned it, and they don't deserve it.

Neither have we earned or deserved the love that God grants us.

The call remains the same for all of us: honor your parents. For some, this is easier than others. You may need to process some things and maybe even have a tough conversation. Perhaps you need to begin walking a difficult path toward forgiveness.

One of the things we emphasize to our students at Brookwood Church is that parents are people, too. They have struggles and shortcomings, the same as any of us. Grace abounds—and that grace covers parents as well. You need only become a parent yourself to realize that Paul's words in Ephesians 6:4 aren't easy. If you're in a season of raising children, remember to treat your children with the grace and kindness you've received from God. Children are a blessing and sacred trust from the Lord!

**APPLICATION:** Reach out to your parents. Ask them how you can pray for them. This is one small way to fulfill the fifth commandment and honor our parents. If you are a parent, ask God to help you treat your children as He treats His own.

**PRAYER:**

Father God,

Thank You for being my perfect heavenly Father. Help me to honor my parents and, in so doing, honor You. Make me more like You—slow to anger and quick to forgive.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

# SHEMA

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*"Listen, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

**Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (NLT)**

Have you ever heard the word *Shema*? It's the Hebrew word for *hear* (or *listen*, as in the NLT above) and the first word of this passage, which carried tremendous significance in biblical times. It was so significant that when Jesus was asked what the most important commandment was, He began by quoting this passage.

But the rest of this passage is significant as well. In addition to loving God with everything we are, we must pass on what God has taught us. Specifically, the instruction is to repeat the commands for the next generation, at home, in the community, in travel—everywhere.

We all have a responsibility for passing on our faith. Who are you discipling? If you're a parent, indeed that begins with your children. If you're not, how can you impact the next generation for Christ? Who has He placed in your path?

Pastor Tony Evans says: *The single greatest reason why we are losing a generation is because the home is no longer the place of the transference of the faith.*

Let us commit to sowing a seed into the next generation. Let's begin in our own homes and then consider who we can reach who may not have a Christ-centered home life. Let us lead and direct them towards Jesus, the only One who can truly save them. Let's develop a passion for His Word by living it out and examining and explaining it regularly. Let's ask God to establish a holy zeal for His Word within this next generation!

**APPLICATION:** Ask God to show you who He wants you to impact from the next generation. Who can you disciple and help grow in their walk with Christ? Pray for clarity, courage and conviction to begin today!

**PRAYER:**

Dear God,  
Help me to love You with everything that I am. Help me to love others as I love myself. Please give me opportunities to advance Your Kingdom among the next generation. Give me the words to speak that I might honor You.  
In Jesus' name,  
Amen.

## HUMBLE LEADERSHIP

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*And now, a word to you who are elders in the churches. I, too, am an elder and a witness to the sufferings of Christ. And I, too, will share in His glory when He is revealed to the whole world. As a fellow elder, I appeal to you: Care for the flock that God has entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly—not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God. Don't lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example. And when the Great Shepherd appears, you will receive a crown of never-ending glory and honor. In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you, dress yourselves in humility as you relate to one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* **1 Peter 5:1-5 (NLT)**

*I have to do this for them.* Have you ever felt this way about someone in your care? The burden of their dependency can be exhausting at times. We can become jaded or cynical and view our responsibility as obligatory. When we do this, we miss out on the blessing entrusted to us. To care for others and shepherd them well is the highest honor. It changes our thinking from, *I have to, to, I get to.* It may seem like semantics, but it's not. It reveals the condition of our hearts.

Whose care is entrusted to you? Peter wrote the passage above to elders in the church. But there's an application for us entrusted to care for others. We're all called to lovingly care for the flock God entrusted us. Children? Grandchildren? An elderly loved one? A community group? Are you willingly, enthusiastically leading and loving them or begrudgingly bemoaning the burden?

Humility is the key to leading (or being led, for that matter). Consider Paul's words in Philippians: *Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.* **Philippians 2:3-5 (NLT)**

If God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, then let us humble ourselves. If we're to have the same attitude that Christ did, then let us humble ourselves. As followers or leaders, the call is the same.

**APPLICATION:** Take a moment to pray blessing and favor over those you've been entrusted to lead. Whether that's your flesh and blood, a co-worker or someone else—pray for them by name. Then ask God to help you remain humble—but beware! This is a dangerous prayer that you should only make if you mean it.

### **PRAYER:**

Lord, Thank You for allowing me to influence the lives of others. Help me to lead and love with humility and selflessness, just as Your Son Jesus did. Grant me a fresh fervor to serve others and, in so doing, serve You. In Jesus' name, Amen.



## NEVER GIVE UP

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*"Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. "You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask Him."*

**Matthew 7:7-9 (NLT)**

Have you ever witnessed a child incessantly asking their parent for something? Maybe in your home, the grocery store cereal aisle, or somewhere random? They endeavor to wear their parents down with a remarkable, singular focus. Nothing else exists. Nothing else matters. They place every ounce of energy they have in their request.

They don't give up, and neither should you.

Some days, it's so easy to want to throw in the towel. You've asked God for that one thing for so long, and nothing has happened. You're starting to believe that God doesn't answer prayers or that if He does, then the answer in this instance is undoubtedly *No*. But sometimes, the answer is *Wait*. Be patient. Keep asking, seeking and knocking. God operates on His timetable, not ours.

If you're a parent, you're familiar with the joy of fulfilling your children's requests. We delight in the delight of our children receiving blessings. How much more so does our heavenly Father experience this same joy? And the greatest gift that we've ever been given is Jesus Christ. He willingly gave His life for ours so that we may know true, eternal, abundant life in Him. Consider the words of the famous hymn by Stuart Townend, *How Deep the Father's Love for Us*:

*How deep the Father's love for us, How vast beyond all measure, That He should give His only Son, To make a wretch His treasure.*

Don't forget that God loves you. He desires to bless you. He's ultimately working all things together for your good and His glory. So don't give up.

**APPLICATION:** Write down three prayer requests in a journal, on your phone, or anywhere. The idea is to keep a regular log of what you're asking from the Father. Revisit it regularly, and any time you see an answer to that prayer, make a note. Then rejoice and express gratitude.

### **PRAYER:**

God, You are good. Please help me remember this simple fact. Renew my strength when I am weak. Help me endure and always believe that You can move in miraculous, even supernatural ways. Thank You for how You've moved in my life and help me trust You with the future. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## GOOD NEWS

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*He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from Him, and peace to the Jews who were near. Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us. So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. Together, we are His house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus Himself.*

**Ephesians 2:17-20 (NLT)**

It's easy to lose sight of what matters most. In the hustle and hurry of everyday life, we can get focused on all the wrong things. That's valid year-round, but perhaps especially so at Christmas. With parties and family gatherings and travel and shopping and a million other things, we can struggle to keep Jesus at the center of Christmas. And while decorating the trees and singing carols is wonderful, this time of year should celebrate the arrival of the King of kings and Lord of lords. This is the Good News—that He has come to redeem.

Redemption is available to people from every walk of life. In biblical times, this would have been difficult for Jews to believe. They took such pride in being God's chosen people that many had developed a disdain for Gentiles. Yet Paul clarifies in the passage above (and many others) that the Good News of Jesus is for all.

Even from the story of Jesus' birth, we see God welcoming those who wouldn't ordinarily have been invited. God led the Wise Men from far away, Gentiles, and likely not even followers of God. The shepherds from nearby were about as low on the societal totem pole as you could get. And yet they too are invited to be a part of the single most significant moment in all human history.

Because of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ, we Gentiles are graciously welcomed into the family of God. What a gracious gift!

**APPLICATION:** Slow down and be still for a few moments. Ask God to help you keep Jesus at the center of the Christmas season. Thank Him for welcoming you into His family.

**PRAYER:**

God,  
Help me to keep my eyes on what matters most: Your Son Jesus. Thank You for sending Him to redeem Your people. Use me to advance Your Kingdom this holiday season.

In Jesus' name,  
Amen.

## BARRIER BREAKER

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*So He left Judea and returned to Galilee. He had to go through Samaria on the way. Eventually He came to the Samaritan village of Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; and Jesus, tired from the long walk, sat wearily beside the well about noontime. Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give Me a drink." He was alone at the time because His disciples had gone into the village to buy some food. The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are You asking me for a drink?" Jesus replied, "If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask Me, and I would give you living water."*

John 4:3-10 (NLT)

Jesus breaks down barriers.

Those we see in the birth narrative of Christ aren't who we'd expect. Throughout His public ministry, Jesus engages with people who'd have drawn the ire and scrutiny of the religious elite. Perhaps no story better illustrates this than that of the woman at the well in John 4.

You didn't *have* to walk through Samaria to get from Judea to Galilee. Many Jews, who hated Samaritans, would lengthen their journey to walk around Samaria. On the occasions when there was no other choice, they'd make haste to get through Samaria with maximum expediency. Isn't it interesting that where we find Jesus is resting by a well in Samaria? Not taking the long way around. Not hightailing His way through. Almost as if the reason He *had* to go through Samaria was to encounter this woman.

Just by conversing with this woman, He breaks down many barriers. First, she was a woman, and He was a man. A Jewish rabbi didn't speak publicly to women. Next, she's a Samaritan, while He's a Jew. As we find out from the full text, this was a woman with a checkered past (and present). Jesus doesn't let gender, racial or sin barriers prevent Him from offering living water to this woman.

And He doesn't let any barriers stand between us either. Praise be to God!

If we're going to follow Christ, then we must live as He did. We break down barriers in the name of sharing the Gospel and advancing His Kingdom.

**APPLICATION:** Where did God meet you? Reflect on who you were and how He transformed your life. Express your gratitude for His salvation. Ask Him to reveal to you who you might reach out to in the name of advancing His Kingdom.

### **PRAYER:**

God, Thank You for Your radical love. Help me to love others the way You love me, and help me to break down barriers in Your name. Show me how I can be used to advance Your Kingdom.  
In the matchless name of Christ, I pray, Amen.

## SALVATION

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*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved. As the Scriptures tell us, "Anyone who trusts in Him will never be disgraced." Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same LORD, who gives generously to all who call on Him. For "Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved." But how can they call on Him to save them unless they believe in Him? And how can they believe in Him if they have never heard about Him? And how can they hear about Him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That is why the Scriptures say, "How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!"* **Romans 10:9-15 (NLT)**

Sometimes we make things more complicated for ourselves than needed. When we see someone we love doing this, it's saddening and frustrating because you want them to... get it. And it's not that hard! But when we do this to ourselves, we're often completely oblivious that we're putting ourselves through that same frustrating (and unnecessary) process.

Salvation is one of those things that perhaps some have made more complicated than it needs to be. Paul lays it out clearly in the passage above. Declare Jesus as Lord. Believe that He is alive. Place your faith in Him, and you will not be let down. That's it. You don't have to have life all figured out first. You don't have to eradicate every issue and struggle to the point where you're perfect (something unattainable anyway). You're saved by grace through faith—this is the gift of God.

Who do you know who needs to experience the freedom of salvation in Christ? This passage poses a series of challenging questions. How can someone call on God to save them without believing? And how can they believe if they've never heard the Gospel? And how can they hear the Gospel if no one ever shares it with them? And who will share the Gospel without being commissioned and called to do so?

You have been commissioned and called. *You* are Christ's ambassador (see 2 Corinthians 5:20).

**APPLICATION:** Who do you know who needs to have a life-changing encounter with Christ? People have a certain receptivity to an invitation to church around Christmas—pray about inviting them to join us. But in addition, pray about sharing the Good News with them yourself!

**PRAYER:** Father, Thank You for the salvation You have made possible through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Your Son. Would you help me as I seek to be Your ambassador? Show me who I can share the Gospel with this holiday season.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.

## LIVING IN HARMONY

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*May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory.*

Romans 15:5-7 (NLT)

Do you remember when you were little and you could make friends with anyone at any time? You just showed up on the playground and had a blast running, jumping and enjoying each other's company. There was something about the innocence of childhood that allowed you to come together despite any differences in background, socioeconomic status, etc.

Somewhere along the way, that gets lost, barriers are erected, and lines are drawn. *We* is replaced by *us and them*. It's sad, but it's also not befitting of a Christ follower. We're called to live in complete harmony with each other. But instead of uniting around the most important, Jesus, we tend to focus on secondary or even tertiary things and allow them to divide us. Just think through the last several years, and all that we've seen divide us.

A few chapters before this passage, Paul tells us that if it's possible, as much as it depends on you, to live at peace with everybody (Romans 12:18). It's not always possible because we can only control ourselves. But we are called to be a people of harmony and peace where we can.

Are you pursuing peace? Are you known in your home, job, community, etc., as a harmonious person? This is a long, arduous, often thankless work. But we do so because this is what our King has called us to. What step do you need to take today?

**APPLICATION:** Ask God to show you where there's an absence of peace and harmony in your relationships. Who do you need to reach out to for forgiveness? Who do you need to forgive? What would prevent you from taking a step towards reconciliation and harmony?

**PRAYER:**

Lord,  
Help me to represent You well. Help me to love and forgive as You do. Use me as an agent of unity and harmony in my family, friend group, job, community and church. Lead me in Your ways.  
In Jesus' name,  
Amen.

## DESPERATION

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*O God, You are my God; I earnestly search for You. My soul thirsts for You; my whole body longs for You in this parched and weary land where there is no water. I have seen You in Your sanctuary and gazed upon Your power and glory. Your unfailing love is better than life itself; how I praise You! I will praise You as long as I live, lifting up my hands to You in prayer. You satisfy me more than the richest feast. I will praise You with songs of joy. I lie awake thinking of You, meditating on You through the night. Because You are my helper, I sing for joy in the shadow of Your wings. I cling to You; Your strong right hand holds me securely.*

Psalm 63:1-8 (NLT)

Have you ever longed for something with every fiber of your being? You didn't just want it. You felt that you needed it to survive. As we approach Christmas, there may be some children (and adults, if we're honest) who think this way about a new toy or electronic. They're captivated by their desire to possess that one particular thing.

Do you have an intense desire to know Jesus more and more? Can you say, like the psalmist (David), that your very soul longs for Him? Sadly, much of the time, Jesus is an optional thought instead of our main focus. Our love for Him should be our driving force every day. Unfortunately, we too often give Him our leftovers and scraps.

Author and pastor Francis Chan wrote about this mentality in his 2008 book *Crazy Love: Leftovers are not merely inadequate; from God's point of view (and lest we forget, His is the only one who matters), they're evil. Let's stop calling it a 'busy schedule' or 'bills' or 'forgetfulness.' It's called evil.*

In this psalm, David says the love of God is better than life itself. Do we believe that? During the hustle and bustle of your holiday schedule, are you keeping Jesus at the center? Delighting in Him above all else?

**APPLICATION:** What are you prioritizing above your relationship with God? Confess this to God. Repent. Ask Him to reignite your love for Him above all else. Take time to read the passage slowly and aloud again. Make it your prayer this week.

### **PRAYER:**

Holy God,  
Your love is more valuable than life itself. May Your Spirit burn within me to know and love You more each day. Forgive me for my idolatry, and help me to prioritize You above all else.  
In the name of Jesus, I pray,  
Amen.

## HUMBLY SEEK GOD

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*So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world. Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up in honor.*

**James 4:7-10 (NLT)**

How humble are you? Trick question, right? It's not exactly something you can brag about because the moment you do—it's no longer true. But we're called to humble ourselves before God. There are some verses in Scripture that we may find confusing or unclear. What James says in the passage above is obvious: humility is an integral part of a healthy relationship with God.

The good news is that when we humbly seek God, He promises we'll find Him. He's not playing some cosmic game of hide and seek. When we come close to Him, He draws close to us. If you're at a place right now where there's separation between you and God, I have good news and bad news. The bad news is you're the one who moved and created that separation. I know that stings, but there's good news! When we repent and return to Him, He's ready and willing to restore. Like the father who waited and watched for the prodigal son, our Heavenly Father stands waiting and watching for us.

At Christmas, we celebrate God drawing close to us through the birth of His Son Jesus. John 1:14 (NLT) says it this way:

*So the Word became human and made His home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen His glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.*

Today is the day. Don't rationalize or equivocate or delay. Humble yourself before the Lord, and He will lift you in honor.

**APPLICATION:** What do you need to confess to God? In what ways do you need to repent and humble yourself today? You may feel the Holy Spirit's conviction and know immediately. If not, pray Psalm 139:23-24.

### **PRAYER:**

Father,

Humble me today. Help me remember that You are the vine, and I am the branch. Apart from You, I can do nothing. Strip away my pride and arrogance that I might walk in Your ways. Thank You for Your forgiveness.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

## RUN THE RACE

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*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the Champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting Him, He endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now He is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne.*

Hebrews 12:1-2 (NLT)

How's your pace?

Certainly, you're busy. Some things must get done this time of year. Christmas is nearly here, and time is running out to get it all done! You may find yourself moving at a frantic and unsustainable pace. Mary rested at the feet of Jesus, but Martha was busy. Not doing evil or wicked things—just busy. Being busy leads to burnout. So again—how's your pace?

We're called to run the race set before us with endurance. This isn't a 40-yard dash or a 5K. It's a marathon. We do want to be able to run well, so that means getting rid of anything that slows us down. Note that the writer of Hebrews says *especially* the sin. That means the sin needs to go, but there may be other, non-sinful things that are slowing us down and inhibiting us from running the race God has set before us.

The only way we can do this is to keep our eyes on Jesus. To keep Him at the center. Recall Peter walking on the water to Jesus. He was fine until he began looking at the wind and waves. He took his eyes off Jesus and began to sink (see Matthew 14:22-33).

So where are you fixing your eyes? That will have a direct impact on your pace and your ability to run this race well.

How can you keep your eyes on Jesus? Prioritize His Word, time for prayer, Christian fellowship, worship through song, and practice the Sabbath. These are some helpful starting points—but there are many more. Take the first step and then see where He leads.

**APPLICATION:** Take at least five minutes to sit silently—no devices to distract. Breathe deeply. Ask God to speak to you about the pace of your race. Ask Him to reveal anything that might be slowing you down. Commit to practicing spiritual disciplines this week.

### PRAYER:

Lord, Help me avoid being so busy that I miss making time for You. You are the reason for the Christmas season. Help me keep You at the center of it. Grant me supernatural Holy Spirit endurance as I run the race You've set before me.

In Jesus' name, Amen.



## MAKE ROOM TO LISTEN

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*Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.* James 1:19 (NLT)

The numbers vary from survey to survey, but the low-end numbers say we speak 7,000 words, and the high-end say we speak 20,000 words daily. Regardless, we use a lot of words each day. We then listen to music filled with words, we watch TV shows and movies filled with words, and we listen to podcasts filled with words. It seems like everywhere we go, there's noise. We're constantly speaking throughout the day, and sometimes, it's hard to slow down and listen to God.

In the psalms, we're told *be still and know that I'm God*. James says above that we should be *quick to listen and slow to speak*. I confess I'm often interrupting people and speaking before they even finish. For most, we're quick to speak and slow to listen. Why is listening so important? God isn't always in the loud noises, the busy schedules, the Mach 3 pace. I rarely find Him in those. He's often found in a quiet place. The quiet place is where our spirit comes alive, and the voice of God is amplified. The quiet place is important because we need to hear from God far more than He needs to hear from us!

Think about it: when things get busy for us, what's the first thing that usually goes? It's our quiet time with God. Yet, when Jesus was the busiest, He often broke away to be alone with God. Now, if Jesus, the Son of God, needed to break away and listen, how much more should His followers spend time alone with God? The truth is the more time you carve out to listen to God, the more you'll begin to discern and understand the voice of God.

In the same way you grow in anything over time, you will, over time, grow to be more in tune with the Spirit of God. Remember the old radios that had dials? Often, you would have to keep turning the dial to get the static out of the station. I think this is often a picture of prayer. There's often static and noise that's competing with the voice of God. However, if you keep dialing in, after a while, the voice of God will continue to get louder and clearer. The God of the universe wants to speak. Keep pressing in!

**APPLICATION:** The quiet place helps us hear God's voice louder.

**PRAYER:** Spend time with God and ask Him how you can carve out time to meet with Him, Ask Him to help you set a time, place and plan to help you draw closer to Him. Ask the Spirit for His voice to increase and the voice of the world to grow quieter!

## MAKE ROOM FOR SELF-CONTROL

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*“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”* Matthew 5:5 (NIV)

I don't know if I've ever heard someone refer to another person as meek. Frankly, if you call me a meek person, I don't think I'd take it well. It just sounds a little like an insult. The truth is, being meek is a great thing. The word above has the idea of strength under control. Think of a wild animal that's been tamed. They still have all the strength they did. Now they can control it. Now people can get around them and not be hurt. This is what the verse above refers to—when you have self-control, it isn't weakness. It's strength under control. It means people can be around you, and they won't be crushed or hurt by your words or your anger. Weak people can't do this. Only a strong person can operate with self-control.

In a culture of Yelp reviews, instant feedback, social media and growing criticism, people often are careless with their words and emotions. This isn't strength, but rather, it's indulgence. It's okay to speak truthfully, but grace isn't optional. I can't pick truth when it's convenient and grace when it's convenient. They're both necessary and should always go hand in hand. It's just like breathing in and breathing out. You need both.

I'm often humbled that Jesus was silent before His accusers. When He was falsely accused, He stood and took the physical and verbal abuse that was hurled at Him. The creation was mocking their creator, yet He didn't fight back. This isn't weakness. It's strength. On the cross, they mocked Him— *if You are the Son of God, then come down and save Yourself*. It wasn't the nails in Jesus' hands and feet that kept Him on the cross. It was His love. At any moment, He could have called down 10,000 angels to His rescue or crushed those mocking Him, but He didn't. Again, this isn't weakness. It's strength under control. Sadly, I used to think of power as position, but now I think of it as an inner condition. It's a strength that allows you to serve, not crush, love not destroy, build up not tear down, to absorb the loss instead of fighting back. It's tough to do, but it's the way of Jesus. It's the way of the Kingdom, and we must make room for self-control as Jesus' disciples.

**APPLICATION:** Power isn't a position. It's your inner condition. Let God fight your battles.

**PRAYER:** Ask God to help you be more patient! Ask the Spirit where you're struggling with patience or gentleness. Ask Him to bring greater levels of freedom and joy into your life. Ask Him to give you greater control that would increase your witness to Him!

## MAKE ROOM FOR COMMUNITY

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*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Acts 2:42-47 (NIV)*

A pastor friend was talking with his congregation about what a modern-day miracle would be. They were asking what would capture the attention of those around them. The answer they shared with him surprised me. They said it would be *time*, time for each other. Jesus was the busiest man on earth and had the greatest mission on earth to bridge the gap of sin between man and God, but have you ever noticed that He made margin for people? He was constantly interrupted by people around Him.

Did you ever think Jesus didn't need disciples to complete His mission? One could argue that His disciples often missed the point and slowed Him down. So why bring them along? Part of this is because God cares about community. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit live in perfect community. When God created man, He saw that man was alone, which wasn't good, so He made a helper and partner. Jesus was modeling how vital community is for us.

In Acts 2:42, the church is formed. Notice the word *fellowship* in verse 42. There's perhaps no more overused and underappreciated word than *fellowship*. The word for *fellowship* is the Greek word *koine*. It appears 20 times as a noun in that form—it's translated as common, sharing, contribution, partnership. Some people think of fellowship in social terms. Some think it's about having a coffee or an occasional get-together. Some think it's a friendliness and niceness. It has a social component to it, but it's spiritual. It's a deep unity, a oneness where Jesus is at the center. Read what Martin Lloyd Jones says: *The moment someone becomes a Christian, he becomes new, regenerated. God in us expresses itself in new ways. When a man becomes a Christian the association with other Christians is the chief association with their life! The man who doesn't have this desire is not a Christian.*

Once you become a Christian, your whole outlook changes. We realize we're journeymen. That this life is passing, and this thing I'm giving myself to today will be gone tomorrow, and then I'll be gone! You no longer belong to the darkness, but to the light, and if you have the light in you, then you want to meet with those who have light. This is the kind of community God is calling us to treasure!

**APPLICATION:** Your friends create your future.

**PRAYER:** Ask God to strengthen your commitment to meet with those who are a part of the body of Christ. If you don't have a strong community of believers, ask God to give you one. If you do, pray that He will take your group deeper.

## MAKE ROOM FOR COMPASSION

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*When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*

Matthew 9:36-37 (NIV)

I confess there are people for whom I have very little tolerance. People who have bad attitudes, gossip and waste opportunities that are right in front of them. The problem with me is that I usually only see their behavior, and I get frustrated at their actions. The problem is I'm only seeing what's on the surface. I find it interesting that up to 90% of an iceberg is underwater, meaning only 10% is seen. Often, we only see a small glimpse of someone because most of what is driving them is some pain, heartache or problem that's under the surface. Jesus saw this, and it gave Him compassion for those He saw. I'm not excusing bad behavior, but I am saying that part of our discipleship to Jesus is we must learn to see people and not just the problem because when you see people, you have compassion.

Think about it like this: there's always a need behind the deed. If you only deal with the deed, you aren't dealing with the deeper problem, the need. I find it's messier to be moved by compassion. I find it more costly to be driven by compassion. Think of the good Samaritan who could have said, *this guy got himself into the circumstance. He was traveling at the wrong time.* In addition, Jews and Samaritans hated each other. Think of the animosity between Israel and Palestine right now. Jesus is saying that it would be like an Israeli helping a Hamas terrorist. These two groups despised each other. Yet, the Samaritan wasn't moved by truth or justice. Instead, he was moved by compassion. This is the way of Jesus. We can't just see people's actions, deeds or behavior. We have to look deeper and see their needs. We must slow down and ask God to give us a heart like His.

When Jesus saw people, He was moved by compassion. Sometimes, I fear that in the church, we're moved by obligation or duty, but is that a potent enough force to keep us loving and serving our hurting world? We need something profound and more powerful. We need compassion that flows from the Spirit to us. Jesus saw the people and saw their need for a shepherd, for a provider, for direction, and this moved Him with compassion. If we're ever going to reach a lost and lonely world, we must be people of compassion. We need God to break our hearts for people. We need a revival of compassion.

**APPLICATION:** Today, look at people's needs behind their deeds and pray for them.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit to move you compassionately towards those around you. Ask if there's anyone in your life He wants you to have greater compassion for. Give Him your frustration, anger and sense of justice, and ask Him to move your heart toward them.

## MAKE ROOM TO WRESTLE

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*This left Jacob all alone in the camp, and a man came and wrestled with him until the dawn began to break. When the man saw that He would not win the match, He touched Jacob's hip and wrenched it out of its socket.*

Genesis 32:24-25 (NLT)

The longest wrestling match in Olympic history was between Martin Klein and Alfred Asikainen in 1912. The match lasted a staggering 11 hours and 40 minutes. Some might call it the most intense match until you set your sights on Genesis 32. The verse above said that a man, the incarnate Jesus, wrestled with Jacob until dawn. I find three words in this verse surprising: *wrestled with him*. Almost every time people speak of fights, wrestling matches, or even wars, people will say something like *he wrestled against him*. God was wrestling with him. Jesus could have supernaturally crushed him at any point. However, He engaged.

I sometimes wrestle with my kids, and by sometimes, I mean a lot. I'll get on my knees or not use both hands. It makes for a fun match, but anyone watching knows I'm holding back. God wasn't trying to crush Jacob. He was trying to get him to surrender to Him. He wants Jacob to trust Him. There can only be one Lord, and sadly, sometimes, I try to be the lord of my own life. I wrestle with God about His plans, directions and the decisions He puts before me. Jacob was no different.

Listen to what Charles Spurgeon says, *It was brave of Jacob thus to wrestle, but there was too much of self about it all. It was his own sufficiency that was wrestling with the God-man, Christ Jesus.*

We sometimes look at Jacob and think what arrogance to wrestle with God physically. But if we're honest and pull back the unsavory secret, most of us are no different. Sure, we don't physically wrestle with God, but we resist His plans, His directions and His decisions. I'm learning God is okay with me wrestling *with Him*, but against Him doesn't usually work well for me. What I mean is I'm honest. I tell God I don't like this or that. I'm painfully honest about my struggles and my weaknesses. I wrestle with God about some of the people He puts in front of me. However, at the end of the match, I submit. I make room to wrestle, and then I make room for surrender. Both are necessary.

**APPLICATION:** God wants you to be honest about what you face today. Don't hide. Wrestle *WITH* Him.

**PRAYER:** Thank God that He gets close enough to wrestle with us, to grieve and struggle with us. Ask Him where you need to surrender and trust Him fully!

## MAKE ROOM FOR CHURCH

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*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV)

Everyone loves verse 24 above. *Let us consider how we may spur people on to love and good deeds.* Far fewer people like the next verse, *Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing.* It's like when I say I want to be physically fit, but I don't want to do the whole working out and eating healthy thing. It's problematic. You know what I find interesting? There's more anger, division and animosity than ever before. No one would argue this. It feels like the divided states, not the United States. Ironically, fewer people are involved in church in America than ever before. You can't be encouraged if you don't show up, and others can't be encouraged if you don't show up.

Quite a few of the miracles in the Bible happen when people are showing up to meet. Think about Acts 2. Remember the tongues of fire? Remember the powerful winds and the movement of the Holy Spirit? Did you realize this was a regularly scheduled event? The people of God were meeting like they always do, to study God's Word and worship. This means there were probably a few folks in there who weren't *feeling* it before they met. There were probably some in there who had stayed up late the night before and just wanted to sleep. There were likely a few who struggled to get their kids ready that morning. There were probably a few that had some things distracting their minds. We know this because 500 were invited. This is who Jesus showed up to and told them to keep meeting, but only 120 showed up. Jesus only got 24% of people to show up for church. This is staggering. Yet those 380 missed out on something amazing.

You can't say you want more of God and never show up to what He calls His bride, the church. Busy schedules, past wounds and the day's demands can't be excuses. There aren't all stars in the Kingdom of God. There are just those who are available and those who aren't. God wants us to commit that we won't give up meeting together. We'll gather on Sundays to be encouraged and to look to encourage others. Church becomes a potent place when the people of God show up on Sunday looking for people they can inspire and spur on toward the love of God. If you have a church filled with people like that, the church will ignite, and the community will be affected! Make room to show up. It matters to God.

**APPLICATION:** Make it a priority today that your church on Sundays won't be optional.

**PRAYER:** Ask God to strengthen your commitment to His church. Pray for others who've stopped attending church. After you pray for them, reach out and invite them to attend!

## MAKE ROOM FOR DIVINE INTERRUPTIONS

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*Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard Him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water.*

John 21:7 (NIV)

Have you ever noticed how Jesus has a history of showing up when you aren't really looking for Him, and sometimes, when you try and spend time with Him, it seems like He's nowhere to be found? Some of the most powerful moments of my life have been little divine interruptions where I'm not necessarily looking for Jesus, but He all of a sudden shows up in an unexpected way. I heard someone say once that we need to have an expectation without an agenda in our approach to Jesus. We need to expect that He will show up. We need to expect that He will be faithful to meet us. However, we need to let go of our agendas and timetables.

If Jesus is Lord, which He is, that means I don't try to control or tell Him how to run my life or the world. I know that each day, each week, I expect to encounter Him in His way. This can be frustrating, but it can also be freeing. Peter thought the whole movement of Jesus had ended at His crucifixion, and he went back to his old craft, fishing. Yet one day on the boat, Peter wasn't looking for Jesus, but Jesus showed up in a unique way. Notice Peter didn't say, *hey, Lord, any chance we can meet for lunch? I'm kind of busy right now.* Peter embraced this divine interruption, and he literally jumped off the boat and started making his way to Jesus. Here's the point: a meeting in the office, a small group, a friendly conversation with the neighbor, a family dinner, a day on the golf course, a night of tossing and turning in the bed can all be places where God shows up in a mighty way. Make room for those divine interruptions by letting God speak to you and being faithful to what He might put on your heart to share or do. I think part of the reason Jesus shows up like this is He wants to show us He's not limited to a simple morning/evening devotion or a Sunday morning service. He wants us to know that with Him, any ordinary moment can suddenly turn into an extraordinary moment. Expect God to show up. Look for Him each day and how He may be speaking or moving. Don't give God a schedule or agenda when He can show up. Learn to look for Him daily, and you'll be surprised by the little moments He unexpectedly shows up.

**APPLICATION:** Today, look for big and small ways God might be working and join Him.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit to give you spiritual eyes to see and hear His voice in new and fresh ways. Ask the Spirit to awaken your heart and mind to the reality that God isn't confined to our morning meetings or nighttime devotions, but He's with us every moment!

# REPENTANCE

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*Have mercy on me, O God, because of Your unfailing love. Because of Your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins. Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin. For I recognize my rebellion; it haunts me day and night. Against You, and You alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in Your sight. You will be proved right in what You say, and Your judgment against me is just.*

Psalm 51:1-4 (NLT)

Happy New Year!

This year's going to be different, right? Finally, we'll make those changes we've contemplated for some time. It's time to dig deep, exercise some willpower and make it happen. But there's one hiccup: our willpower only takes us so far. *Pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps* is a terrible strategy. So, what do we do?

We do what Jesus said: repent and believe the Good News (Mark 1:15).

Repentance isn't a one-time thing that takes place at salvation and then never again. It's a daily practice of humbling ourselves before God, acknowledging our shortcomings and our need for Him. Pride is our enemy in this—believing that we're okay or not that bad or that we can do better if we try harder. We must come to the end of ourselves and begin to rely entirely on our Savior.

Psalm 51 was penned by David, who was described as a man after God's own heart. And while his love for God was strong, he still made some terrible, sinful choices that had heartbreaking consequences. This psalm was written in the wake of being confronted with his sin. He cries out for mercy, compassion and restoration. Perhaps this is precisely how we need to approach God as we embark on a new year. Not full of pride and plans for 2024, but with humility and dependence on His love.

**APPLICATION:** Read the entirety of Psalm 51. What stands out to you and why? Ask the Lord to forgive you where you've sinned, and pray that He renews a loyal spirit within you (Psalm 51:10).

**PRAYER:**

God,  
Thank You for second chances. You are slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Help me bring my life fully under Your authority. May Your Spirit guide me this day and every day of this new year.  
In Jesus' name,  
Amen.



## WHAT GOD WANTS

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*"I hate all your show and pretense—the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won't even notice all your choice peace offerings. Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps. Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living."*

Amos 5:21-24 (NLT)

What does God want from us? Some might imagine that this is an unanswerable mystery question. In truth, it's not. There's an abundance of Scripture that lays out what God is looking for from His followers. But here, at the outset of a new year, why don't we consider what He says to us through His servant Amos? Because here we'll find what He wants, and perhaps equally helpful, what He doesn't.

Amos is a book where God condemns the complacency and hypocrisy of the Northern kingdom of Israel. It was written at a specific moment in history to a particular group of people about their sins. Yet there's application for us as we consider our complacency and hypocrisy.

God makes it clear that He isn't interested in people putting on a good show. Going through the motions, even if those motions are religious, isn't what He's after. God says He will not accept offerings with the wrong motivations. Being able to sing worship songs to God with your eyes closed and hands lifted means very little if your heart is, in fact, far from Him.

So, what does He want? According to verse 24, *a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living*. In other words, He wants Jesus to be at the center of everything we do. Not just for a few hours on a Sunday. Not just to be able to satisfy our religious checklist. God wants us to pursue holiness in every aspect of our lives. Living righteously means choosing His ways over our own. God alone gets to determine the boundaries. Not society, Hollywood or even you.

A mighty flood of justice means dealing rightly and fairly with all and advocating for those for whom justice has been fleeting. There's a constant refrain throughout Scripture to care for the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the poor. How might God want to use you to impact the lives of the least of these?

**APPLICATION:** Take stock of where you are in your relationship with God. Not where you wish you were, but where you are. Sometimes, we're not honest with ourselves about this. Ask God to reveal to you any complacency or hypocrisy, and then commit to live a life of justice and righteousness by the Spirit.

### **PRAYER:**

God, Point out anything in me that offends You. Help me live with honesty and integrity, fully submitted to Your will. Help me to honor You with my thoughts, words and deeds. Be glorified in and through me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## A LOVING TOUCH

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*Large crowds followed Jesus as He came down the mountainside. Suddenly, a man with leprosy approached Him and knelt before Him. "Lord," the man said, "if You are willing, You can heal me and make me clean."*

*Jesus reached out and touched him. "I am willing," He said. "Be healed!" And instantly the leprosy disappeared. Then Jesus said to him, "Don't tell anyone about this. Instead, go to the priest and let him examine you. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy. This will be a public testimony that you have been cleansed."*

**Matthew 8:1-4 (NLT)**

The healing of the leper in Matthew 8 is one of my all-time favorite stories in the Bible, and it's easy to overlook. This miracle occurred immediately after the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' largest recorded public teaching. Many who heard Him teach on the mountain are following Him when the leper appears. We know nothing else about this man except that he had leprosy, a contagious, painful condition that would have made him an outcast. He approaches Jesus and states that he believes Jesus can cure this incurable condition.

And Jesus reaches out to touch this man.

Don't miss this—it's perhaps the most significant detail in the story. Because Jesus could have healed him from a distance with a word. We see Him do so at other times in the Gospels. It's in His spoken word in this story that the man is healed. So why did Jesus touch him? I believe it's because Jesus knew the loneliness this man was feeling. To be ostracized not only by society at large but by those who loved him most had to be painful and difficult.

Perhaps you feel like the man in this story. Lonely. Ostracized. Left out. Unwanted. The Good News of the Gospel is that Jesus sees you, knows you and loves you. He's willing to reach out to you when no one else will. Healing is possible for you—spiritually, emotionally, and, yes, physically. Do you believe that He can make you clean? Are you willing to kneel at His feet and ask Him to do what only He can do?

**APPLICATION:** In what area of your life do you need a special touch from Jesus? Where do you need His divine healing? Ask Him to do what only He can do.

**PRAYER:**

God,  
You're the Great Healer. Thank You for intervening in my life when no one else could. Help me continue to come to You alone in my brokenness.  
In Jesus' name,  
Amen.

## LIVING BY THE SPIRIT

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*Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do. For if you live by its dictates, you will die. But if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.*

Romans 8:12-14 (NLT)

Sometimes, we misunderstand entirely what it means to be saved.

The thinking goes like this: *now that I'm saved, I can't do any of these things anymore.* And while there's an element of truth in this thinking, it's just enough skewed to put us off course. There are, in fact, things we should no longer be party to as Christ followers. We're to be in the world but not of it. But it's not so much that we can't do certain things anymore as we aren't obligated to do them.

When you were dead in your sin, you were a slave to it. Romans 6:6 speaks of our being crucified with Christ so that sin would lose its power over us. So, you are free. Hallelujah! Praise God for this freedom. The sin patterns that used to dominate your life no longer have to be. There will always be temptation, but in Christ, there's freedom. You have been set free to honor God with your life. The focus should not be on what you can't do anymore. Instead, it's what you don't have to do anymore since you're free.

Paul is very clear in our passage from today—if you live by your sinful nature, it'll lead to death. But to live by the Spirit is to experience true life. The new year is a great time to start over. Maybe that was your intent a few days ago, but you've already stumbled. Grace abounds and is sufficient for you. Repent, believe the Good News, and live in the freedom He's afforded you.

Are you intentionally seeking to live a Spirit-led life? Are you asking the Spirit to guide you? How and when are you making yourself available to hear from Him? So often, our prayer times are us telling God what we want and need. Are we listening for the Spirit to speak to us?

**APPLICATION:** Completely unplug and disconnect from all distractions. That means turning off your phone and getting alone. This can be a difficult feat with family and work and the demands of life. So, plan. Put it on the calendar if need be. Plan it like you would a date with a significant other. And once you're in that place of silence and solitude—ask the Spirit of God to speak to you. Just sit and listen for His voice, which can be like a gentle whisper (see 1 Kings 19:11-13).

### **PRAYER:**

Holy God, Thank You for setting me free from my sin. Help me remain free, honoring You with my life. Grant me an awareness of Your Spirit and help me submit fully to Your daily leading.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.

## GOD'S WILL

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*And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all He has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind He will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship Him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.* Romans 12:1-2 (NLT)

We've all wondered: *what is God's will for my life? Should I go to school here or there? Major in this or that? Marry now or later? Take one job or the other? Have this many kids, or more?* And while God certainly has a plan for your life, the answers to these questions aren't the primary answer to the question.

God's will for your life is to glorify Him.

That's it. The entire point of our existence is to glorify our Creator. And while you may still want answers to specific questions, God, in His kindness, grants us so much freedom to choose for ourselves in these matters. Whatever we choose and whatever we do, the call is the same: glorify the Lord (see Colossians 3:16-17).

So how do we do that? We give ourselves to Him wholly. We offer ourselves as living sacrifices, for this is the way we truly worship Him. Sometimes we confine worship to twenty minutes at the beginning of church on Sunday. Every part of our lives being fully submitted and surrendered to His Lordship is how we worship in spirit and truth.

This means that we'll look different than those around us, not copying the behaviors and customs of the world. We'll be out of step with what society says at times because we've committed to following what He says. The renewing of our minds transforms us. God will begin to change how you think, seeing things from His eternal perspective instead of our limited perspective. When this happens, we'll start to understand more fully His will for our lives, which is all about bringing Him glory.

**APPLICATION:** Consider how you can worship God in your everyday rhythms. How can you glorify your Creator outside of a worship service? If the renewing of your mind wholly transformed your thinking, how would your relationships change? How would your attitude toward your resources change? How would the Kingdom be advanced?

**PRAYER:**

Father,

Help me to honor You in every part of my life. Sanctify me through the power of Your Holy Spirit. Continue to transform me by the renewing of my mind so that I will be able to glorify You.

In Jesus name,

Amen.

## COMMUNITY AND PRAYER

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*Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. Elijah was as human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for three and a half years! Then, when he prayed again, the sky sent down rain and the Earth began to yield its crops.* James 5:16-18 (NLT)

If you showed up at church one Sunday and found out we were having a service based entirely around confessing sin to one another, you might be deeply uncomfortable. You might fake a phone call or take an extended trip to the bathroom. Being completely transparent about your lowest and worst moments can be terrifying. What will everyone think if I confess those things? There's no way I can do this!

And yet, if we want to experience healing, confession is necessary.

Now, maybe a Sunday morning service that's mainly filled with people you don't know isn't the optimal setting for confession. But do you have a few people with whom you can confess your sins? Do you have even one? There's no such thing as a lone-wolf Christian. We are called to an authentic and transparent community.

Now, you may think that all you must do is confess your sins to God. And absolutely, that's the most important step. Only He can forgive and restore us. But when we can take that next step of confessing to our brothers and sisters in Christ, we dispel the shame and isolation the enemy uses against us. We can begin to find acceptance and accountability for who we are, struggles and all, rather than just who we project to be.

What James tells us in our passage above is that having our faith-family pray for us is powerful. This is where we can find healing. He cites Elijah, an ordinary man who loved God and prayed fervently. His prayers accomplished miraculous things, and ours can too. So, who are you praying for? And who's praying for you?

**APPLICATION:** Part of keeping Jesus at the center of our lives is keeping Him at the center of our relationships. Instead of having surface-level conversations with your closest friends, ask if you can get together to confess sin and pray healing over one another. It may be a tough sell at first, but over time, this healing practice will help us as we seek to grow in Christ.

### **PRAYER:**

Father,

Thank You for faithfully forgiving me when I confess my sin to You. Please grant me the courage and conviction to live authentically in community. Thank You for surrounding me with people who love and pray for me. In Jesus name, Amen.

## THE PEACE OF CHRIST

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*Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank Him for all He has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.* **Philippians 4:6-7 (NLT)**

We live in difficult times. This isn't a groundbreaking statement. All you need to do is turn on the news, and you'll be inundated with stories of violence, corruption, war, racism, addiction and so much more. You used to scroll your social media for cute cat videos or pictures of your family and friends, but now it further reinforces the negativity around us. All this tension in the world can lead you to a place of worry and anxiety. So, for some of us, a healthy first step might be to unplug and disconnect from some of the negative reinforcement.

But the best step is to pray. Again, this is not a groundbreaking statement. We, as Christ followers, should pray—a lot. We should tell God what we need and thank Him for all He has done. We do this because He is Jehovah Jireh—the God who provides. We do this because He is good and has blessed us richly. But we also do this because, according to the passage today, this is the key to experiencing God's peace.

The peace that He provides is unlike anything the world offers. A quick internet search can provide you with a list of the top ways to achieve peace. Meditation, breathing exercises, a walk in the woods, visualization techniques, etc. None of those provide what God does—transcendent, supernatural peace.

The troubles of our world (or our personal lives, for that matter) never catch God off guard. Jesus said this in John 16:33: *"... Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."*

He still rules and reigns. He is sovereign. And in the end, we know He will set all things right. He's returning for His people so that we may be with Him always. Take comfort and peace from this good news.

**APPLICATION:** Ask God to help you maintain an eternal perspective. The troubles and trials of our time are temporary. That doesn't mean they're not real or difficult, but they won't last forever. As you patiently wait for God to set everything right, pray and ask Him to help you. Seek His peace. Take a few moments to tell God exactly what you're anxious about.

### **PRAYER:**

Almighty God,  
You're still on Your throne despite all the brokenness I see around me. Grant me Your peace, which surpasses all understanding. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. But in the meantime, help me trust in You. Thank You for who You are, what You've done, and what You will do.  
In Jesus' name, Amen.





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