



DAILY DEVOTIONAL



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Introduction

We at Food for the Hungry strive to end all forms of human poverty by living in healthy relationship with God and his creation. We've created this year-long devotional to help you nurture and feed your spirit with God's Word.

We hope you enjoy the thoughts we've put together about how you can have a closer and richer relationship with God! May your year be filled with the blessings that only God can bring.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses come from the New International Version (NIV).

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JAN 01

Fresh Beginnings (Start the Year Right)

With the New Year here, everyone is looking for a chance at a fresh beginning. For some of us, last year was difficult. Losses, serious illnesses, divorces and financial troubles impact us all. If this was your year to experience some of these trials, you probably need a new beginning more than ever.

Psalms 77:13 offers a way to get that fresh beginning. It reminds us who is in charge—the sovereign God of the universe. Additionally, this verse reminds us that although there are many gods people worship, none is like ours. Our God gave up Heaven and took on human form so He could relate to us and live as we do. He knows exactly what it's like to experience pain, disappointment, frustration and sadness. The Bible tells us Jesus' ministry lasted only three years, and in that time, He mourned over Israel's lack of faith in Him more than once.

If you need a new beginning this year, pray. Ask God to help you deal with the pain of the past so you can start over. That could mean focusing on good memories of a lost loved one or seeking counseling to deal with a deep hurt. It might mean reaching out to your doctors after your cancer goes into remission and asking them how to deal with your new normal. Whatever you need, remember that God is beside you and will help you find it. In His sovereignty, He knows what will help you most. Seek His direction throughout the year. No matter what the paths look like, you can navigate them better with faith.

Your ways, God, are holy. What god is as good as our God?

—Psalms 77:13



JAN02

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

—Romans 15:13

God of Hope

Hope is a familiar word for Christians, but most of us don't know exactly what it means. Sometimes we equate hope with wishful thinking, as in "I hope I get the job I applied for" or "I hope I get married someday." In this verse, Paul wants to remind us that hope is more than wishing for what we want. We're meant to overflow with hope, as the Holy Spirit gives it to us.

What does to overflow with hope mean? Not all circumstances are hopeful, and not all situations end in a hopeful manner. There's a clue in the first part of this verse. Paul tells the Romans that he prays that the God of hope also fills them with peace and joy. These are fruits of the Spirit available to every Christian. If you don't feel peace or joy in your current situation, ask God for an extra measure. Peace and joy will often naturally lead to hope.

Remember that hope isn't happiness. Cancer treatments, painful divorces and other such situations are never happy. However, you can find hope in the midst of them. Hope comes from knowing who your God is and what He can do. God promises to bring good out of all situations for those who love Him. Additionally, He promises comfort to broken or hurting people many times in the Bible. Ask God to remind you who He is and what He can do in your situation. You may not receive the answers you thought you wanted, but often God shows us a better solution – one we weren't expecting. Place your hope in the person of God and the path He will show you.



JAN03

My Hope Is in God

*But now, Lord,
what do I look for?
My hope is in you.
—Psalm 39:7*

As Christians, we know the Holy Spirit can make us overflow with hope. We're meant to share that hope with others. However, knowing exactly how to do that can be difficult. Most of us regularly encounter people who seem to have no hope. Some of them may not be Christians, so they don't know the God we worship or the joy He longs to give them. Yet some of these people may be Christians. They're simply bogged down in difficult circumstances or struggling with inner conflicts, such as depression or mental illness.

When you encounter someone who needs hope, you can and should ask God to show you specifically what that person needs to hear or see from you. For example, a single mom with two kids may get hope from someone offering to babysit so she can spend time with friends. However, prayer is only the first step in sharing hope. Here are a few other ways to spread hope this month:

- **Write an encouraging note or letter.** Highlight specific traits you love in a person, such as generosity, humor or a talent in a specific area.
- **Go to the person and ask what they need to talk about.** No matter how difficult the topic, listen and show empathy.
- **As with the babysitting example, ask the person if you can fill a physical need.** This could include cooking a meal, fixing something in their house or walking a pet.
- **Invite the person out.** Some of the people who most need hope are fully or partially housebound because of age or disabilities. They may feel unnoticed. Ask what their favorite activity or place to go is, and participate with them.
- **Laugh.** Proverbs says a cheerful heart is good medicine. Maybe the person you're thinking of needs to focus on lighthearted things for a while. Bring him or her some light reading or a DVD of a Christian comedian. Share funny memories or go to a funny movie together.



JAN04

God Is Love

*Whoever does not
love does not know
God, because
God is love.*

— 1 John 4:8

“God is love” is a familiar axiom among Christians. It’s one of the first lessons we learn in Sunday school classes meant for the smallest children. But what does this mean, and how can we imitate God’s love? Today’s verse tells us that if you don’t love, you don’t truly know God. Does this mean if you don’t feel loving toward everyone all the time, you aren’t really a Christian?

Actually, this verse means something much different. It reminds us that God is love. We usually talk about love as something we have or feel toward a person, place or thing. Yet God in His perfection takes love to a whole new level. He embodies love in the deepest way possible, toward everyone at all times. He can love a devout nun or missionary with great passion, but He extends that same depth and passion to the mass murderer who doesn’t know Him or care who He is.

How can this be? Our finite minds will probably never comprehend this. However, that’s why John encourages us to love and tells us that those who don’t love don’t know God. He isn’t saying you have to feel warm and fuzzy toward everyone all the time or love with deep passion you can’t always feel. If you could do that, you would be God.

This verse simply tells us to imitate the love God has for us—to love as unconditionally as possible and show love in as many ways as we can. That looks different for every person and situation, but if you reach out to God and ask to be filled with His love, He will teach you how.



JAN05

As water reflects the face, so one's life reflects the heart.

—Proverbs 27:19

Your Heart Condition

If you've ever looked into a calm body of water, you've probably seen your face there. Water can give us physical reflections, but as today's verse says, we need to look deeper to see the reflections of our hearts. If you spend your life looking at and meditating on negative things, it's likely your heart is bitter. If you spend your life looking for opportunities to give and share, you're cultivating generosity.

God loves a generous heart, as many familiar Bible stories and verses prove. However, a generous heart must be cultivated early. If you want to develop generous hearts in your kids this year, here are a few ideas your whole family can use:

Donate often. For kids, this usually means donating old toys and books. After Christmas is a great time to do so. Make sure everything is in good condition. Adults, set an example and donate your own possessions.

Choose a family charity project. You might sponsor a child through a service such as Compassion International or collect items for Operation Christmas Child shoeboxes throughout the year.

Practice small instances of generosity. Encourage siblings to split that last cookie or take turns choosing the DVD on movie night. Offer to help your spouse with household tasks or make their favorite meal.

Teach young children the importance of taking turns. Part of being generous is knowing you can't always be first and that you must wait patiently for your chance at an activity.

Visit people who need it. One of the best ways to be generous is giving someone your time. This could mean visiting a grandparent in a nursing home or a neighbor whose family lives far away.

Encourage pet care, especially playing and stroking. Generosity extends to those who can't speak for themselves or tell us what they want, and for young children, pets can be a good example.



JAN06

*For the Lord takes
delight in His
people; He crowns
the humble with
victory.*

—Psalm 149:4

You Bring God Joy

Did you know you bring God joy? Many people, even Christians, doubt this or claim it isn't true. Unfortunately, even in the church, myth persists that God is a cosmic cop. Many Christians think He barely tolerates them, allowing them into Heaven because of Jesus' sacrifice but waiting to punish their mistakes and failures on Earth. God's true heart toward you is a heart of deep love and pride.

It's true that God can't tolerate sin and expects us to repent and turn away from it. However, a plethora of Bible verses, including today's, show us a different picture of God than we might be used to. God delights in you. You make Him smile. He created you, and He looks on you with joy and pride. When you do sin or fail, He doesn't take pleasure in your pain. He says, "Come back to me. We'll handle this together." A pastor once said that if God had a refrigerator, all our pictures would be on it.

Knowing you're God's beloved child and that you bring Him joy will bring more joy to your life, too. Your circumstances may not be the best, but knowing God is rooting for you in the midst of them can make them easier to handle. Additionally, you'll be eager to share God's joy with others. You may find yourself doing more kind and generous deeds throughout the year or praising God more. If you need a reminder of how God thinks of you, pray to be shown His joy. Then revel in it, because that will bring Him the most joy of all.



JAN07

*You are worthy,
our Lord and God
to receive glory
and honor and
power, for you
created all things,
and by your will
they were created
and have their
being.*

—*Revelation 4:11*

Finding God's Joy in Your Life

Today's verse overflows with joy. You can almost hear the angels and the saints praising God in Heaven, reminding Him how worthy He is of our honor and love. Reading verses like this often fills us with joy and inspires us to look for God's presence around us. God rejoices when we take such delight in His word.

However, sometimes finding joy is difficult or impossible, no matter what verses we read. Since our world is filled with sin, it often feels like a dim and hopeless place. Christians aren't immune to a lack of joy, particularly if circumstances don't lend themselves to it.

At one time or another, we'll all find ourselves in serious situations that seem to lack God's joy. This could be an unsaved loved one whose behavior is destructive, a devastating diagnosis, a miscarriage, a disability or any number of other circumstances. However, God wants us to cling to Him in these times and find His joy. Here are a few ways to experience this:

- **Worship.** Most people equate worship with singing, which you can do. Yet you can use any other talent, such as writing, cooking or painting to worship God. Hebrews talk about bringing a sacrifice of praise to Him. Do so, and meditate on joyful verses as you do.
- **Reach out.** Find a trusted friend or clergy member to share your burdens and offer to share those of others. Help someone in a physical way—write a letter or give a hug.
- **Get some fresh air.** Sometimes joy can be hard to find if you're cooped up inside. Take a walk or a drive and notice the beauty of God's creation.
- **Spend time with family and friends,** doing lighthearted activities. Isolation brings loneliness, but socializing can increase joy.



JAN08

*For He Himself is
our peace.*

—*Ephesians
2:14a*

God Is Our Peace

Peace is a well-known fruit of the Spirit, but many Christians struggle to find it in everyday life. When most people think of peace, they think of a warm, calm feeling in the chest or a feeling that trouble can't touch them. They equate lack of feelings with a lack of peace.

In today's verse, Paul reminds us our peace is a person, not a feeling. Christ himself is our peace. In other words, no matter how chaotic life seems, focusing on Christ will help us find peace again. We may not feel it, but it will be there.

How can you make Christ your peace? Start by studying verses like today's or the stories of biblical characters such as Mary, who trusted the Lord despite questions about their circumstances. You can also assess how chaotic your life truly is. Although you can't control all circumstances, you can and should control others. For example, if you spend your entire day on the phone or computer or with the television on, unplugging for a while can help to quiet your life. If you're overloaded with commitments, take a step back. Pray, asking God to show you what He wants you to do and what activities you should let go.

If circumstances are beyond your control, find small ways to inject peace into your daily life. Read the Bible or a Christian novel during chemo treatments. Listen to soothing music or meditations on the way to court proceedings. If family life has you stressed, ask a spouse or friend to take over chores or kid-related duties so you can have time to decompress. Finally, remember to pray often, seeking the source of your peace and sharing needs and praise.



JAN09

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid.

—John 14:27

Enjoy God's Peace

Jesus made sure to speak to His disciples about peace, so He clearly wanted us to experience it, too. In fact, references to peace are all over the New Testament. It's even included as one of the first three fruits of the Spirit. However, Jesus knew peace would be hard to find. He tells us not to have troubled hearts or be afraid, which acknowledges these conditions exist.

These days, not letting your heart be troubled might seem impossible. Watching the news for 30 minutes is enough to depress the most optimistic soul. However, it's possible to find and hang onto peace despite all that. If you're having trouble staying peaceful right now, there are a few things you can do to help yourself:

- **Meditate on what is good.** Philippians 4:8 specifically tells us to think of what is true, noble, right and pure. This doesn't mean ignoring what's going on in the world, but it does mean reminding ourselves who God is and that He is in control. Memorize scripture or fill your mind with uplifting messages of Christian books and music.
- **Get quiet.** Turn off the TV and computer, and follow Jesus' example of going into a private room and closing the door to pray or read your Bible.
- **Use your talents and passions to worship God and serve others.** Focusing on what you're good at and how it helps God's kingdom can bring you peace, as can serving others and making a difference, no matter how small.



JAN 10

Jesus answered, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on you do know Him and have seen Him."

—John 14:6-7

God Is Truth

We live in a relativist world. Many people have their own religion or philosophy, and each claims that his or hers is the one that holds truth. At the same time, our world's pervasive attitude is, "If it's true for you, fine; but it's not true for me." How can we be sure our God, Jesus Christ, really is truth in the face of such an open, uncommitted attitude toward faith?

Jesus knew we would face this challenge, so He is explicit in how He addresses it. In today's verse, He states without ambiguity that He is our way, truth and life. Everything He tells us is true, and He is the only way to gain both eternal life and a fulfilled life on Earth. He doesn't leave room for addition or subtraction or say, "I am true as long as you believe it." No—He is the full embodiment of truth.

Other religions or philosophies may have versions of the truths the Bible gives us. For example, most other religious founders or leaders tell us to love our neighbor, forgive enemies, respect creation and do charitable deeds. However, Jesus makes it clear that only His truth is complete. Through Him, we can know and see God, and as we get to know Him, we will understand more of His words.

Truth is difficult to pin down at times, especially with so many voices claiming to have it. If you're unsure God is truth or if you're a Christian but struggling with a particular truth in the Bible, turn to the source of truth. Ask Him to open your eyes, and use your new knowledge to spread God's truth and share the life He wants to give.



JAN 1 1

*When this is done,
I will go to the
king, even though it
is against the law.
And if I perish, I
perish.*

—*Esther 4:16b*

The Courage to Be Truthful

God wants us to speak the truth, but sometimes speaking it requires much more courage than we anticipated. Esther knew this firsthand. As queen of Persia, she had to hide her Jewish heritage, especially after King Xerxes' evil Prime Minister, Haman, decreed that the Jews of Persia should be annihilated.

Esther had one chance to save her people, but it meant revealing her greatest secret. Moreover, if she went to King Xerxes without an invitation, He could kill her on the spot.

Hopefully, few of us will be asked to give up our lives for the sake of truth, but we may be asked to face frightening circumstances. In many cases, Christians who told the truth about their God or stuck by the truth of their morals have lost jobs, families, possessions or prestige. In several foreign countries around the world, Christians are being beheaded, burned or tortured for their faith. Standing up for truth might cost you a deep and important friendship or a financial opportunity you or your family needs. The truth may be the most difficult words you speak in those situations.

If you've been called to speak the truth today, don't hesitate. Ask God to reassure you of His plan and fill your heart with courage. Then speak the words He gives you, whether they're meant for a family member or a large group of strangers. It may be difficult and result in negative consequences, but like Esther, you'll be rewarded. Your message will be heard, and perhaps you will plant seeds in people who need to listen and respond.



JAN 12

To those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it, only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water.

— 1 Peter 3:20

God Is Patient

Most people, even Christians, don't think of God as particularly patient. They think of Him as loving but ready to dispense wrath at a moment's notice. Most Christians might even say they wouldn't blame God for impatience, considering the state of today's world. Sin runs rampant, and surely a holy God can only tolerate so much.

Today's verse indicates that God is infinitely more patient than people think or could hope to be themselves. Peter describes God waiting patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built for more people to repent and be saved from coming destruction. Elsewhere, Peter specifically describes God as patient and says He doesn't want anyone to perish.

God grieves when people don't listen to His warnings and grieves more when they perish because they failed to listen. Sometimes physical perishing doesn't come right away—in fact, this is rare. God knows eternal punishment is so awful, so devastating, that He will wait as long as He likes for as many people as possible to come to Him. He will be incredibly patient with those who doubt, question or outright reject Him, giving them chance after chance to see His truth. Only as a last resort does God condemn anyone.

Endeavoring to show His patience is the best way for us to show people who God truly is. Don't give up on people who need God, even if they're willful and destructive toward themselves and others. Continue to show patience and love, and let God draw people toward Himself.



JAN 13

A hot-tempered person must pay the penalty; rescue them and you will have to do it again.

—Proverbs 19:19

Teaching Your Child Patience

Someone once said to be careful about praying for patience, because you'll get what you ask for—in the form of situations that test the patience you already have. In all seriousness, patience is often one of the most difficult fruits of the Spirit to cultivate. We want what we want the moment we ask for it, and we aren't about to tolerate people who try our patience. This is especially true for young children. Children naturally expect the world to revolve around them, so they must learn patience and the lessons must be repeated often.

How you teach patience will depend heavily on your child. Some children's temperaments allow them to be more patient than others. If your child is already competing with siblings or other family members for attention, he or she might show more patience than is typical for someone his or her age. However, a few key tips can help you teach this virtue to any child in almost any situation:

- **Set an example.** If you're always yelling in traffic or tapping your foot in line, your child will learn that waiting is a bad thing. Take a deep breath and focus on other things.
- **Watch your own temper.** We all have relatives, coworkers or friends who drive us crazy, but your child shouldn't learn that the solution is to badmouth them. If you must vent, do so away from the kids. Teach your child to walk away from someone who makes them angry or say something like, "Please don't call me names."
- **Take children to places they naturally have to wait, and teach them to cope.** Use things like books, coloring or games, or talk to them about their days.
- **Use "when-then" phrases.** For example, on a long car ride, say, "We'll be at Grandma's after six songs."



JAN 14

God Is Kind

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: Sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in His kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.
—Romans 11:22

Christians sometimes struggle with how to interpret this verse. If God is kind, why would He cut off any of His people? Actually, in this verse, Paul is speaking to Israel. Specifically, His words are directed at Gentile Christians who believe that Jewish “branches” of their spiritual family tree were cut off so they could be grafted in—that God no longer accepts Jewish Christians.

In truth, God accepts every person who turns to Him and inclines to the truth. Your background, past sins, family life and other external factors don’t matter to God. Additionally, the Bible promises He will love you with everlasting love and kindness. He does expect you to continue in His kindness—that is, abide in and obey Him. However, God’s motive is to be kind, not to cut people off from Him at will.

Should Christians worry about losing their salvation or being cut off from God? This verse would seem to indicate so, but again that would be a misinterpretation. Here, Paul seems to apply cutting off to those who do not abide in God—those who claim to know him but probably did not to begin with. The Bible tells us true Christians will show their fruit, and that you don’t have to work to produce fruit. If the Spirit is inside you, you and others will be able to tell. If you don’t feel the Spirit working, ask God to show you. In His kindness, He will help you see and become a stronger, more confident Christian over time.



JAN 15

*So in everything,
do to others what
you would have
them do to you.*

—*Matthew 7:12a*

Teaching Your Child Kindness

As parents, we all want our children to be kind. It sometimes seems kindness would be an easy virtue to teach, but children learn through repetition. They also tend to be self-centered, not because they're mean, but because their worlds are still so small. Instilling kindness in your kids will take patience, repetition and plenty of relatable lessons.

Today's verse is a good place to start. It's easy for children to understand and memorize, and relate back to their worlds. For example, you could say to your child, "Would you want someone at preschool to take your toys without asking? You need to ask first." Pairing the instruction with this type of question will teach your children empathy and get them to think critically at an age-appropriate level.

If you need more tips and object lessons, you might consider doing a few of these with your kids:

- **Take the question above to the next level with role-playing.** Use a situation your child or his teacher might have told you about.
- **Discourage using unkind words.** Make it a house rule that name-calling, swearing and other unkind words will have a consequence.
- **Catch your child being kind, and praise her.** Say something like, "I'm proud of you for sharing with Beth today. Did that feel good?"
- **Read stories,** including Bible stories, in which kind and patient characters are rewarded.
- **Do kind acts as a family.** Volunteer at a soup kitchen or animal shelter, or donate toys and books to charity.
- **Perform small acts of kindness.** For your spouse, relatives and children, you can do things such as helping with chores, caring for a pet or doing a favorite activity as part of family time.



JAN 16

After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

— 1 Kings 19:12

Listen for God's Gentle Whisper

When reading the Bible, we often run across stories of God's incredible miracles, especially in the Old Testament. Stories such as Moses' encounter with the burning bush, Elijah calling down fire from Heaven, and the parting of the Red Sea are crucial to the Bible. Yet they can also give us an incorrect view of God and His miracles if studied on their own without context.

Many people, especially new Christians, expect God's presence to be big and obvious at all times. They can see God in widely reported miracles, such as the healing of terminal cancer or the birth of healthy triplets to a woman who was told she'd never conceive. However, focusing on these can make it harder to hear how God usually speaks – in a gentle whisper.

Just like an earthly parent, God doesn't like to shout to get our attention. Tuning in to His whispers shows Him we can hear Him and will listen to what He says. Gentle whispers won't be obvious at first, particularly if you're a new Christian. With practice though, you'll hear them. They often come in the form of a Bible verse you've read before, but that has a greater impact than usual. Sometimes they come as a nudge to do or pray about something specific. Sometimes, God uses other people to tell us something we need to hear. At other times, a change in circumstance might let you know God is quietly speaking. For example, a job opportunity in your city that comes just before you move might be God's way of telling you to stay.

Miracles are an important part of God's work, and we should never stop looking for them. However, His whispers are what will guide us the most in our journeys.



JAN 17

*To slander no one,
be peaceable and
considerate, and
always be gentle
toward everyone.*

—*Titus 3:2b*

Learning to Have a Gentle Spirit

Kindness and gentleness are listed as fruits of the Spirit in Galatians. Are they the same thing? What does it mean to have a gentle spirit? This verse lets us know gentleness is a fruit all its own, and that a gentle spirit can and must be cultivated.

Some Christians believe having a gentle spirit means being overly meek and never standing up for yourself. Although meekness is sometimes a synonym for gentleness, having a gentle spirit doesn't mean accepting abuse or never letting yourself be heard. Titus indicates that gentleness of spirit is considerate toward everyone, puts others first and avoids slander or gossip.

This is often more difficult to do than it seems. Putting others first goes against everything the world tells us to do, and gossip or slander can be as natural as breathing—especially if the other person has wronged you. As with many other fruits of the Spirit, developing gentleness requires transcending human nature, which is impossible without God. If you want to cultivate gentleness, study verses like today's. Ask for direction from God, as well as trusted people like a clergy member. Show gentleness to family and friends, and work your way up to strangers or even those you don't necessarily like. God will reward your faithfulness.

What if people are already taking advantage of your gentleness and abusing you? Remember that tolerating abuse isn't the same as being a gentle person. If the situation is severe, get out as quickly as possible. Seek help from the appropriate agency, such as Social Services. You can also seek help from family, friends and clergy. You may need counseling to learn how to deal with your abuser and approach him or her with gentleness. Take your time, and seek God's guidance in handling this situation.



JAN 18

Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control.

—Proverbs 25:28

God Is Self-Controlled

Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit we often teach our children because we don't want them to be spoiled. However, as adults, we often rationalize our own lack of this fruit. "I'm an adult," we say. "I should be able to do, say and have what I want without worrying about displeasing God."

This line of thinking is wrong and dangerous. God expects adults to please Him just like children—perhaps more so, since adults are more mature and understand His commands better than children would. Additionally, going through life without any self-control often leads to destruction, which breaks God's heart and damages your relationship with Him.

Will God's heart be broken if you have a glass of wine or an extra dessert or if you treat yourself to a shopping spree? No. The key to self-control is knowing what comes first in the Word—self. Self-control is about considering factors other than your wants and needs. It's about knowing your own limits and staying healthy physically, emotionally and spiritually. One glass of wine might be okay, but you need to be able to stop there rather than drinking an entire bottle. Desserts are delicious but can lead to obesity if they become a staple in your diet. Shopping for pleasure is fun, but confusing must-have items with what you actually need often leads to debt.

How can you practice self-control without letting denial cross into legalism? First, know your weak areas and deal with those. If you're a shopper, set and stick to a budget with help from a spouse or other accountability partner when necessary. If you tend to stay up late watching TV, gradually limit screen time until you don't need it. Accountability will keep you on track. Memorize verses like today's, and ask God to increase your desire for self-control.



JAN 19

For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love, and self-discipline.

—2 Timothy 1:7

God Gave Us a Spirit of Self-Control

We hear a lot about self-discipline these days. Writers of diet books and fitness plans tout self-discipline as a way to lose weight and attain the perfect body. Parents are encouraged to teach kids self-discipline so they can succeed in school, athletics and other activities. People advise each other to use self-discipline to curb spending habits.

But trying to master self-discipline on our own leads to disaster. Hyper-focusing on self-discipline can cause legalism, or a tendency to exaggerate our own righteous deeds and not show mercy toward those who are struggling. It can also cause an emotional backlash, since constantly denying ourselves the things God approves of makes us miserable, bitter and prone to taking out our feelings on others. We must rely on God to give us true, balanced self-discipline.

Most Christians are familiar with the concept of relying on God but struggle with how to do it. Does relying on God mean sitting back and waiting for Him to fix all our self-control problems? No. Actually, relying on God means being honest. Tell Him where you are struggling and how self-discipline makes you feel. Ask Him for a greater desire for discipline and to see discipline God's way, not as a punishment but as a way to grow.

Start new disciplines slowly, and give yourself grace if you mess up. God wants you to succeed in building all fruits of the Spirit, including self-discipline. If you rely on Him, success will be yours. Your body and mind may never be perfect, but you'll be in a better place than you were when you began.



JAN 20

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

—Romans 8:18

Suffering Isn't Permanent

Today's verse is one Christians like to pull out when suffering comes, along with Romans 8:28, which promises that all things work together for the good of those who love God. These verses are true and valuable.

If you or someone you love is suffering, what do you most need to hear? Perhaps one of the most common responses is, "I need to hear this suffering will end." Today's verse indicates suffering is not permanent. In fact, Paul promises here that suffering leads to glory. He's not referring to our own glory, but the glory of Christ.

As Paul writes earlier in Romans, suffering makes us more like Christ, imbuing us with His patience, gentleness, kindness and other wonderful fruits. Our world is fallen, so suffering is a given. Yet, when we return to Heaven to be with Christ, we'll see its ultimate positive results.

Of course, future glory in Heaven can feel like cold comfort when suffering is happening. Unfortunately, God doesn't promise to fix all our suffering when we want it fixed or give us the solutions we expected. He does, however, promise to rescue the brokenhearted. He promises to comfort us with an ease beyond what people can give and to make us strong through our suffering.

If you're suffering, open your heart to God. Tell Him how you feel, even if you're angry, frustrated or doubt He is real. Ask Him to make Himself real to you and show you some things that can make your suffering easier. Having a serious illness can impact all areas of your life, but focusing on favorite activities and positive meditations can help. Hold onto the truth of who God is and what He can do for you. Your suffering will begin to seem easier.



JAN 21

Now there was a Pharisee, a man Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

—John 3:1-2

Taking a Risk in Faith

John 3 is probably best known as the chapter where Jesus tells us that God sent Him to save the world (John 3:16-17). Most Christians know these verses but forget to whom Jesus spoke them. Today, let's look more closely at Jesus' student Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee—a highly religious teacher who was well-respected in most Jewish circles. He would have been wealthy and sought out as a wise man. Additionally, Nicodemus was one of the most important people in his synagogue. Coming to Jesus and admitting He was from God could have gotten Nicodemus excommunicated. He stood to lose everything and so he came to Jesus at night for answers to his questions.

Some people might scoff at Nicodemus for sneaking to see Jesus at night. Didn't he know following Jesus was more important than any synagogue seat or material wealth? The truth is that Nicodemus didn't know. He had to find out for himself and was willing to take that risk. Moreover, his risk was rewarded. He acknowledged Jesus was from God, got to know Him and went away fulfilled.

Many prospective Christians take similar risks today. Christianity is illegal in several countries and becoming a Christian can mean death. At the least, it can mean loss of jobs, property and children as well as long-term imprisonment. Because of these penalties, millions of Christians meet underground and must hide their faith in public. Still, they take the risk.

When was the last time you took a risk in faith? Maybe you won't face death or prison, but you could lose a friend, a job or respect and connections you need. If that's the case, follow Nicodemus' example. Ask Jesus for boldness and then follow His lead—24 hours a day.



JAN 22

Elisha said, "Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side"... She left him and shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring.

—2 Kings 4:3-5

Don't Give Up

Many of today's Americans are in dire straits. The widow described here knew what that felt like. Creditors were going to seize her two sons as slaves, and she couldn't stop them. She had only a tiny bit of oil to her name. Why would Elisha ask her for empty jars? Prophet or not, didn't he know he was being foolish? Why didn't he just give her oil, or food or money to pay her debt?

The widow's trust seems strange, but notice what happened after she retrieved all those jars. She "kept pouring," over and over. Her little bit suddenly became more than she needed—enough to sell to pay her impossible debt.

We often find ourselves in situations similar to this widow's. Physically, mentally or emotionally, we'll be depleted. We'll be tempted to give up and let life take more than it's already sapped from us. You might be there right now. You might think you can't stand one more chemo treatment, one more fight with your destructive loved one, or one more night wondering where your next paycheck is coming from. You might even be tempted to take your own life.

In these circumstances, dredging up trust can feel impossible. Ask God to help you find a tiny measure of your own oil: trust. Use your talents one more time. Reach out to one more person who needs help. Make a phone call and ask for help yourself. God will find a way to use what you have and reward your faith.



JAN 23

Just Ask

And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. She came up behind Him and touched the edge of His cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped... Then He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace."

—Luke 8:43-44, 48

We don't know this woman's name. Many Bible translations simply call her "the woman with a blood disease" or "a sick woman." People likely knew her this way, too. They probably knew her name, but thought of her disease first. Some probably forgot her name as years went by, seeing but not acknowledging her. Ancient Jewish law declared the woman unclean, so she couldn't worship at the temple or associate with others.

The woman was probably depressed and a little bitter. Maybe she felt God had given up on her or feared she'd committed a serious sin that couldn't be forgiven. She'd spent all she had on doctors and treatments, and still she bled. In light of that, it must've taken immense courage to approach Jesus. Notice she doesn't interact with Him—she simply touches His cloak and tries to drop out of sight.

Jesus noticed her, but not to call her unclean or accuse her of disrupting Him. Instead, He instantly heals her without turning around. Then He does something the woman must've found more incredible. He calls her "daughter" and tells her to go in peace because she's well. How long had it been since someone called this woman "daughter"? Who last acknowledged her existence, much less claimed such a close tie? Jesus did what doctors couldn't. Yes, He healed her blood disease—but He also touched her soul.

Jesus still heals people physically, emotionally and spiritually. Sometimes we must wait until Heaven for complete physical or emotional healing. Yet spiritual healing that goes soul-deep is instantaneous. If you need it today, ask. Jesus will acknowledge you as His son or daughter and give it. All it takes is one small touch.



JAN 24

The man from whom the demons had gone out begged to go with Him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return home and tell how much God has done for you." So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him.

—Luke 8:38-39

Your Story Can Help Others

This story highlights one of Jesus' more dramatic healings. The man described in Luke 8:26-39 had not only one demon, but a legion of them. They identify themselves to Jesus this way, stating "because we are many." This man is described as living among the tombs, isolated and chained. He's tormented constantly, so much that he breaks free and terrifies those around him. The tombs would've been an appropriate place for him to live because, to the people of Jesus' Israel, this man probably received no more thought or consideration than a corpse.

The man's reaction to Jesus' healing is understandable. Of course, he would want to show gratitude to the Person who changed his life. The most obvious way was to follow Him as a disciple. Jesus, though, says something that sounds strange. He tells the man to go back home.

Sometimes, we have the same reaction. We meet Jesus for the first time or have a fresh encounter with Him. We want to show our love and gratitude, so we seek something big to do in return. Maybe we want to become long-term foreign missionaries or sell everything we own to start a non-profit for the homeless or addicts. Jesus does call some people to minister this way. Yet for many of us, He has another request. He simply wants us to tell how much God has done for us.

Maybe Jesus has asked you to tell your story, and maybe you're hesitant. You might say, "My testimony is boring" or "God did more for John or forgave Beth for more." Don't give in to these thoughts. Jesus gives everyone a unique story, and they all point to Him. Let yours help someone find Him today.



JAN 25

*Now Sarai,
Abraham's wife,
had borne no
children. But she
had an Egyptian
slave named
Hagar; so she said
to Abraham, "The
Lord has kept me
from having
children. Go, sleep
with my slave;
perhaps I can build
a family through
her."*

—Genesis 16:1-2

Waiting on God

It is said God has three answers for prayer: "no," "yes," and "wait." "Wait" can be the hardest answer of all, especially because it sometimes means standing by for years or even decades. Sarai, later called Sarah, knew how this felt. God had promised Abraham she would bear a child so a nation could be built through her line. Decades passed, though, and Sarah still didn't get pregnant. Menopause came and went, and she lost hope. After all, she hadn't heard God's promise like Abraham did. Could her husband be mistaken?

In her doubt, Sarah did what many of us do in similar situations. She concluded she needed to "help" God. In Sarah's time, it wasn't unusual for a childless woman to give her husband a handmaid. The handmaid's children would be born on the wife's knees and raised as adopted sons and heirs. Sarah followed her customs and persuaded Abraham to sleep with Hagar, thinking the promise might come through her child. Maybe both God and Abraham were mistaken, or maybe God didn't mean "biological child."

The rest of Genesis 16 explains Hagar did have a son, Ishmael. However, strife ensued between Sarah and Hagar and between Ishmael and Isaac. Centuries later, war raged between Judaism and Islam—the two nations Abraham's sons fathered. God did give Sarah the promised son, but we're left to wonder: would things have been easier if she waited for His timing?

Waiting for an answered prayer is often difficult and painful. God understands, and He wants us to express our longing. Sometimes He will set us on a path that will eventually lead to answers. However, Sarah's story cautions against "helping" God or following what makes sense without peace in our hearts. It's much better to seek God and handle waiting periods as He wants us to.



JAN 26

*Then he prayed,
“Lord God... May
it be that when I
say to a young
woman, ‘Please let
down your jar that I
may have a drink,’
and she says,
‘Drink, and I’ll water
your camels, too –
let her be the one
you have chosen
for your servant
Isaac...” Before he
had finished,
Rebekah came
out... “Drink, my
lord... I’ll draw
water for your
camels, too.”*

*—Genesis 24:12-
19a*

The Servant’s Heart

Rebekah is a somewhat minor character in Genesis. Most people remember her as Isaac’s wife and as a deceiver. Indeed, Rebekah did deceive Isaac many years later, manipulating his lack of sight so her favorite son Jacob would get his father’s blessing rather than Esau (Genesis 27). However, let’s look at another portrait of Rebekah today.

Abraham had sent his servant to find the perfect wife for Isaac, and the servant responded well. He asked God for guidance with a specific request. The woman he would choose would have to offer him a drink, and she would have to water all his camels.

This was neither an easy nor safe task. In ancient Israel, wells were often located underground at the foot of slippery, steep stairs cut into stone. Moreover, carrying several heavy jars of water as Rebekah did here would exhaust anyone, let alone a young woman. Yet Rebekah offered without hesitation. In doing so, she showed three key traits of a godly woman. She had compassion on a servant who was likely tired, dirty and thirsty from long travels. She showed generosity, offering to complete a difficult task over and over for a stranger. Finally, she asked nothing for herself in return, emulating the attitude of a true servant.

Sometimes God will ask us to do things that feel as hard as carrying water jars up steep stairs again and again. Sometimes serving others, whether they’re strangers or those we love, will be difficult. Rebekah’s story can inspire us to do it and show the world the generous God we have.



JAN 27

God's Justice

And the Lord said, "... And will not God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night? I tell you, He will see that they get justice, and quickly."

—Luke 18:6-8

"It's not fair!" We say this a lot as kids, whether it's about our sibling getting a bigger cookie than we did or our teacher giving us a lower grade than we feel we deserve. When we grow older, we may not say the words anymore, but we still feel injustice.

In fact, the discriminations adults encounter are usually bigger and more painful than childhood unfairness. A beloved parent or grandparent dies of cancer. A baby is born with a disability. An innocent person is killed, or financial problems result in foreclosure. These things can happen for a number of reasons, but often, it's no one's fault. Injustice is a product of sin in the world, but that doesn't lessen the pain.

Through the persistent widow, Jesus offers a solution to the pain of injustice. Don't bottle it up or lash out in anger. Instead, turn to God. Pour out your feelings—sadness, anger, confusion and whatever else they may be. God promises to hear and comfort you, holding you close like a beloved child. Unlike the unrighteous judge in Jesus' parable, God won't consider you a bother or only answer your request to avoid repercussions. The truth is He empathizes with you.

In this parable, Jesus also promises God will see you get justice – "and quickly." Keep in mind that His timing is not ours; it may seem slow or nonexistent. However, God keeps all His promises. You can count on Him to deal with your adversary and help you understand why the injustice occurred. In the meantime, keep praying and asking Him for what you need. Don't give up; He will honor your faith and persistence.



JAN 28

I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.

—Luke 1:38

Radical Obedience

When most of us think of Jesus' birth, we think of Mary. We know her as the mother of Jesus, a woman who is called "blessed among women." Yet we often don't think of Mary in terms of her sacrifice.

When the angel of the Lord visited Mary, she was already engaged to Joseph. If she agreed to bear Jesus, her pregnancy would show in a matter of months and everyone would believe she'd broken her betrothal vows. Joseph would surely divorce her, and she could well be stoned to death under Jewish law. Her life would be ruined and probably taken from her.

Despite this, Mary didn't question the angel or voice any worries she had. Instead, she simply asked, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" When the angel explained the Holy Spirit would come upon her and make the pregnancy possible, Mary trusted his word. Not only that, she immediately responded: "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."

Only one woman was ever chosen to carry and mother God's Son, but God asks us to make sacrifices or do things we think are impossible every day. Sometimes His requests carry risks for us. We might be laughed at or lose something or someone important to us, like a job or a spouse. Yet God promises that His servants' obedience will be rewarded many times in the Bible and that He'll be with us through trials.

Will you follow Mary's example and obey God in a new, maybe radical way today?



JAN 29

“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” He replied. “Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do...” Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes... He got up and was baptized.

—Acts 9:5-6, 18

Treating Others With Respect

Have you ever known someone who makes you think, “That person could never be a Christian?” Perhaps you yourself have been that person. Maybe you’ve said or done things in your past you think are so terrible that God could never forgive and accept you.

Saul could relate to that. He called himself the “worst of sinners,” and he probably ranked high on ancient Christians’ lists. Acts tell us Saul regularly arrested, tortured and killed innocent Christians. As a highly trained Pharisee, he believed he was doing God’s work—that God applauded what he did. Saul was even present at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. According to Acts 7, he stood in the background the entire time, doing nothing as witnesses laid their coats at his feet in tacit approval. Surely, Saul could never become a Christian.

Isn’t it amazing that the Bible says this is exactly what happened? In fact, Saul had a dramatic conversion. He became blind for three days, perhaps because God used physical blindness to highlight his spiritual condition. After those three days, though, the scales fell from Saul’s eyes—literally. God gave him a new name. From then on, Saul the persecutor became Paul. Paul went on to worship Christ more fervently and boldly than almost any other biblical figure. He also wrote several of our Bible’s books and ultimately died for Christ.

As difficult as it may be, don’t give up on the person you think could never embrace Christ. Pray for him or her, and continue offering a chance at faith. If you think you’re the one beyond God’s reach, don’t give up on yourself. Cry out to Him, and tell Him you want to believe. He will be there, and He will open your eyes.



JAN 30

Trust God

*But Joseph said,
“Don’t be afraid...
You intended to
harm me, but God
intended it for
good, to
accomplish what is
now being done,
the saving of many
lives.”*

*—Genesis 50:19-
20*

In this passage, Joseph uses two words that, when put together, can become two of the most hopeful in the Bible. It’s tempting to glance over the phrase “but God,” or ignore it altogether. After all, we know God can turn bad experiences around for good, right? We know He can do the impossible. Most of us have heard stories like Joseph’s several times, maybe even all our lives. Yet do we truly understand what “but God” means? Do we believe He can make good come out of horrible circumstances?

Joseph knew something about horrible circumstances. His own brothers sold him into slavery in a foreign land. He was jailed for a crime he didn’t commit. Surely he wondered where God was. What happened to all the grand dreams He sent him? Was Joseph supposed to die forgotten in prison?

God said “no.” In fact, He made Joseph successful in all he did so that he became second in command to Pharaoh. When Joseph’s brothers came to Egypt, he had every right to punish or kill them. Instead, Joseph reassured his kin they were forgiven and that God used what they had done for good.

It’s easy to agree with this truth when we see it in Joseph’s story because we already know the ending. But what about our own situations? It can be difficult—heart-wrenching—to trust God with our own circumstances. Maybe you’re facing foreclosure. Maybe the spouse you loved just walked out or cheated. Maybe you’ve been handed a devastating diagnosis or lost a loved person or pet. Can anything good come out of this?

God promises it can (Romans 8:28). He also vows to comfort us and give us wisdom if we ask. Tell Him how you feel, and ask Him to show you His plans. If you can’t see past the circumstances, ask Him to help you. He will do it and will rejoice with you when you see His good intentions.



JAN 31

Take the ... sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

—Ephesians 6:17

The Sword of the Spirit

In the last part of Ephesians 6, Paul discusses the armor of God. He gives names and functions to each piece and extols Christians to wear them at all times, so they can stand strong. The last part of the armor though, is a sword. The sword represents the Word, or the Bible, and is our only defensive weapon against Satan.

Most Christians understand the Bible is important, but some of them have trouble proving it in their lives. Some don't even read the Bible regularly. As someone once said, this is the equivalent of standing in front of a snake with an unloaded gun and shouting, "Bang, bang!" You'll make noise, but the snake won't budge and will likely bite you. Without a scriptural foundation, you may be okay for a while, but you'll be vulnerable to attack.

Of course, making time for Bible reading and study can be difficult in our busy world. If you find Scripture study hard, boring, or time-consuming, try these tips to find joy and knowledge in it:

- **Use a Bible you understand.** Too many Christians get bogged down because they try to study using a Bible that employs archaic language.
- **Choose a Bible study you'd like to attend.** Studying Scripture with other Christians gives you fresh perspectives. Focusing on particular topics also makes Bible reading seem less daunting.
- **Make realistic goals for yourself,** such as reading the Psalms in 3-4 months or the whole Bible in a year. Reward yourself as you make progress.
- **Memorize and quote verses,** both favorites and less familiar ones. Setting them to a tune or rhythm can help.
- **Shake up devotional time.** Have it at a coffee shop or go out in nature instead of closed in a bedroom.



FEB 01

The New Creation

The start of a new month often brings hope, but for some of us, each new month feels like an extension of the old one, with the same burdensome problems as before. Those problems could be any number of things. Maybe you started the new year determined to lose 10 pounds, only to find you've lost two in the past four weeks or, worse yet, none at all. You may have resolved to give up a destructive habit like smoking, drinking or gambling, but instead you find yourself lighting up, pouring a drink or sitting at a card table.

Paul's encouragement from 1 Corinthians is meant to give us a much-needed shot of hope. Jesus Christ does not look at us and see failures, endlessly spinning our wheels. In fact, Scripture tells Christ, along with the angels in Heaven, to rejoice. Moreover, when we do fail, He is there to pick us up and say, "That's okay. Let's try again, together."

Together is the key. You cannot and will not change the negative or destructive parts of your life without Christ's help. He is willing and eager to give it, but He will never force His help on you. If you have failed to change after months, or even years, of trying, you might feel like giving up and hiding from Christ's keen eyes. Resist the temptation to hide and come to Him instead.

In your prayers, tell Him how hard you have tried and how difficult it is to make permanent change. Ask what He wants you to do; maybe you need wise counsel, an accountability partner or a new approach to your goal. With Him at your side, you can enjoy life as a new creation.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old is gone, the new is here!

— 1 Corinthians 5:17



FEB02

Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

—Romans 7:24-25

Thanks Be to God

Many people believe that once you become a Christian, the desire to sin naturally disappears or that temptation to commit sin will only rarely trouble you. Nothing could be further from the truth. As Jesus warned in Matthew, our spirits are willing, but our flesh is weak. Perhaps we expect daily struggles, but what happens if you have one specific sin you can't seem to shake?

This happens to more Christians than you might think. Some come to the faith with serious addictions, whether to drugs, alcohol, sex or food. Others have less obvious sins that are just as dangerous, such as a tendency to blow up in anger when frustrated. Still others develop small issues over time—"just one time" becomes a craving for sinful behavior. Most Christians will try to solve the problem on their own, usually through legalistic behavior, and end up miserable.

Paul understood this trouble well. In Romans 7, he explains that he constantly does what he knows is wrong, even though he strives not to. He cries out for rescue, just as we should. If you have a longstanding addiction or other form of sin you can't get rid of, drawing close to God is your best hope.

However, drawing close to God does not simply mean reading the Bible, praying more and participating in more church activities. In fact, that strategy often turns into checking things off a list. God never meant for you to battle a sinful nature alone. Some people need counseling, church support or simply a plan of action, written down, to hold themselves accountable. Finally, go to your prayer closet for some self-inspection.



FEB03

Dwell in Unity

Some time later, Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers ... and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise ... because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.

—Acts 15:46-39

Jesus made it clear that He wants believers to dwell together in unity and live peacefully with all people. While that should be the Christian ideal, different personalities, opinions and priorities get in the way, as they did in today's passage. Paul and Barnabas had been dear friends – in fact, Barnabas was the first disciple to accept Paul after his dramatic conversion. They may have retained that close friendship after this passage, but the verses tell us they parted company, deciding not to work with each other any longer.

Sometimes in life, we will be led to part company with a friend or even a family member we love. Determining if it is time to do so can be hard, so you must pray diligently and seek guidance from the Bible and from other trusted people. If you're still not sure, ask yourself these questions:

- **Does this person build me up or tear me down?** Friendships don't exist to stroke egos, but if this person continually discourages you, consciously or not, he or she may not be good for you.
- **Is this person taking advantage of me?** Some people will try to feed off you, overburdening you with their needs or expecting you to solve all their problems. You are a friend, not a therapist or a pastor.
- **Is destructive behavior involved?** If your friend is continually and unrepentantly sinning, or trying to draw you into bad behavior patterns, you need to get away quickly.
- **Can this person "agree to disagree"?** If your friend is always right, can't listen and can't be held accountable, he or she may become a stumbling block for you.



FEB04

*Then God said,
“Let us make
mankind in our
image, in our
likeness.”*

—Genesis 1:26

In Our Image, In Our Likeness

When most Christians tell the salvation story, they start around Genesis 3, the chapter in which Adam and Eve sinned and caused the fall of humanity. That's not a bad place to begin witnessing; after all, it is true that we are all sinners and in need of a savior. The unfortunate truth is that starting with sin may mean losing listeners.

Jefferson Bethke, author of *Jesus > Religion and It's Not What You Think*, explained it this way: Approaching non-Christians and telling them right away that they are horrible and have no hope often drives them away. Though that's not what we mean to say, it's often how others interpret the message. In most cases, we would be better off pointing non-Christians to Genesis 1.

In Genesis 1, we see the vast complexity and beauty of creation. We see the tenderness and thought that God put into each of His creations, especially man and woman. Of the thousands of creatures on Earth, we are the only ones made in God's image. Focus on that for a minute. We are made in God's image, and because God is wholly good, that means we were made as wholly good creations, too.

Sin did damage the nature of man and fracture our perfect relationship with God. Non-Christians and Christians alike need to know this to appreciate Jesus' sacrifice fully. However, God never looks at us and sees damaged people. He sees us as beautiful, good, original creations, each one unique and with a purpose in His kingdom. That's the message we all need to hear, every day.



FEB05

Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan, son of Zerah ... and all that he had, to the valley of Achor. ... Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them.

—Joshua 7:24 & 25b

Questioning and Trusting God

The Bible is a precious and holy book, but some passages can be troubling for the modern Christian. Today's passage is one of these. After the initial attack on Ai, Achan coveted several of the city's possessions. Against the Lord's command, he took them, causing Israel's sound defeat in Ai and the loss of several soldiers. Because of his sin, Achan was stoned.

If the passage stopped there, it might not be as troublesome. Our world tells us that sinners should pay the consequences of their actions. Yet, we are told that Achan's family was killed with him and all his possessions were burned. We may question how this is fair. Does it show that God is vengeful, eager to wipe out anyone who breaks the smallest commandment?

The simple answer to the last question is "no." Studying this passage is a great exercise in learning to trust God when we don't understand what He does or why. The Bible doesn't tell us why Achan's family suffered with him. However, the passage does give us an example of the innocent suffering for the guilty—just as Christ did for us. There is hope here and a hidden gem of God's mercy.

God is neither vengeful nor petty. Everything He does leads us closer to Him. If His actions seem harsh or hard to understand, He allows us to ask questions. Actually, God encourages questions. He knows the world around us doesn't think the way He does, nor does it teach us to trust Him. Sometimes, the only answer we will get when we ask hard questions is, "Trust me." Yet, if we continue in the faith, studying His word and seeking Him in prayer, we will build up trust and learn more about God's true character of love.



FEB06

"Pardon me, Lord," Gideon replied, "but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." The Lord answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive."

—Judges 6:15

The Least in My Family

God gives us plenty of characters to relate to in the Bible, especially the Old Testament. Gideon is perhaps one of the most relatable. Here, God has called him to save Israel from the Midianites, but he has an understandable, common reaction. Gideon focuses on his weaknesses and asks God how he could be used for such a task as saving his whole nation.

Most of us aren't called to save nations, but we all have "Gideon moments" from time to time. The world tells us our weaknesses are bad and that they make us lesser people. Therefore, when God wants to use us, we tend to focus on our weaknesses and put ourselves down. We say things like, "How can I teach elementary kids, Lord? I'm too shy." "Lord, how can I raise a baby? I have a disability." "Lord, why are you asking me to donate food to the food bank when I can barely feed my family?"

God understands these concerns and does not condemn us for them. How could He, when He made us as we are? God gives us those weaknesses, or places us in particularly hard situations, so we can learn to lean on Him more. As we learn to rely on Him, we gain the strength to do the divinely appointed tasks He has given us. Better than that, we're often more successful than we imagined we could be.

Gideon certainly was strong enough—as God promised, he and just 300 men struck down the Midianites and saved Israel. If you are facing a monumental task today, take heart from Gideon's story. Go to God with your weaknesses and let Him make you strong, for you are a warrior in His eyes.



FEB07

She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son, she said, "This time I will praise the Lord." So she named him Judah.

—Genesis 29:35

Praise the Lord

The biblical story of Leah is often overlooked. She's usually talked about in conjunction with her beautiful sister Rachel, the one Jacob loved even though he was married to both women. She is known for having "weak eyes" and being party to Laban's deception of Jacob.

It's easy to read Genesis 29 and assume Leah got a raw deal or that she should be held up as an example of what not to be. Today's verse, though, gives us great insight into who Leah really was.

God did see Leah and have compassion for her. He understood her longing for love, and so He allowed her to have children. Pay attention to what Leah named these children. Her oldest, Reuben, she named because "The Lord has seen my misery." Likewise, she gave Simeon and Levi names that mean "the Lord hears" and "attached," hoping that Jacob would hear and understand her desire for love, or at least become attached to her. Leah was a desperate woman, and it's hard not to pity her.

However, Leah did not wallow in pity. Notice what she says in today's verse after birthing her fourth son. "This time I will praise the Lord." The Bible doesn't say she gave up on Jacob's love, but she does show great strength here. Leah is determined to be thankful for what she has and give credit to God. Therefore, she names her fourth son Judah, or "praise."

Praising God when we don't feel like it, or when circumstances are hard, can be one of the most difficult and painful things about being a Christian. Yet when we choose to praise Him, God will be pleased.



FEB08

But the tax collector ... would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.

—Luke 18:13b-14

Justified

If you've been a Christian a long time, you're probably familiar with the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. You may even roll your eyes in disgust when you read the Pharisee's prayer— "Thank you that I am not like these evildoers. ..." By the time the Pharisee starts listing all his good deeds, you might be ready to throttle him. Doesn't he know how self-righteous he is? Doesn't he know that God is more pleased with people like the tax collector?

These are natural reactions, but maybe we ought to slow down before berating the Pharisee too much. Most Christians try to be as humble, kind, and generous as possible. Most of us also acknowledge our sins, because they are what we count on Jesus to save us from. That said, we all have self-righteous moments, don't we? It's easy to look at the "tax collectors" in our lives and think, "Okay, I sin, but at least I don't do that."

This parable reminds us that no one sin is greater than the other in Jesus' eyes, and sometimes sin can masquerade as goodness or religion. Jesus also tells this parable to remind us that the person who is honest about his or her faults and approaches God with a contrite heart is the one who goes home forgiven. The good news is, anyone can be this person. Even if you were a "Pharisee" before meeting Christ or have self-righteous tendencies, you can always ask for mercy. Better than that, God is always ready to give it.



FEB09

People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

—Luke 18:15-17

The Kingdom of God

"Enter the kingdom of God as a little child" and "Have childlike faith" are popular phrases among Christians, but what do they mean? These phrases are so much a part of Christianity that many Christians, especially adults, have forgotten why they are important. Does Jesus mean we should perpetually act like children? Does He mean we shouldn't think, speak and reason like adults, or make adult decisions?

No. In fact, Paul talks about putting away childish things later in the New Testament. However, neither Paul nor Jesus said to lose the capacity for childlike faith. Here, childlike faith means putting absolute trust in God—trust to take care of us, trust to do what's best for us, and trust to give us the good things He promises.

This level of trust is not unlike what a young child has for a parent. When a little kid looks at Mommy or Daddy, they don't see a big, powerful adult who's smarter and stronger than they are. Though Mommy and Daddy represent these things, to children they are loving, caring figures who make their world safe.

Adults usually don't come to Jesus with this kind of attitude. We think He's too busy solving wars, world hunger and other global-scale problems to bother taking us on His lap and nurturing us. We might even think He's more eager to punish us than treat us like precious children. Yet, as 1 John says, precious children is exactly what we are. Jesus wants us to come to Him every day. He is never too busy, and His heart is always open to His children.



FEB 10

When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritualists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?

—Isaiah 8:19

Inquire of God

Reading horoscopes and following astrology is a popular pastime, even among Christians. Many Christians say, "I don't take this seriously; it's just for fun." Indeed, it might be difficult to find a true Christian who actually plans his or her day according to astrological charts, psychic predictions or tarot readings. However, today's verse reminds us these activities are not "just for fun." They are both sinful and dangerous.

Many Christians might consider this harsh, or say that the Old Testament takes too hard a line against people whose beliefs are different. However, in telling Isaiah this, God's goal was not to be intolerant. Instead, He was warning Isaiah that it's unwise to trust anyone who relies on anything other than God. In today's verse, mediums and people like them are described as "whispering and muttering," not engaging in real communication. God goes on to ask why anyone would consult the dead on behalf of the living, when the dead no longer have anything to do with what goes on in our world.

Not knowing the future is sometimes scary, and it can be tempting to go to a psychic or have your cards read "just this once." Resist this temptation—run from it if you have to. It can lead to occult activities, and more importantly, it hurts God's heart. God is all-knowing and the definition of love and wisdom. He wants us to inquire of Him about the future, as well as the past and present. His words are not predictions; they are always true and spoken with your best interest at heart.



FEB 11

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.

—James 1:19

Dealing With Anger Issues

Anger is probably the toughest emotion to control. How can we obey the instructions of today's verse and set an example for our kids when listening carefully and thinking before speaking doesn't come naturally? Here are some ways to do so in your own life and show your children how to do it, too.

- **Set an example.** If your kids see you raging over little things, they'll learn this is a proper response.
- **Know your triggers.** Understand what sets you off and work on dealing with it.
- **Watch your mouth.** Avoid cursing or using slurs when angry. If you do, apologize immediately if your kids hear you.
- **Confront the real problem.** Are you really angry at the situation or person, or is something else bothering you?
- If your words or actions hurt someone, **be willing to apologize** and ask forgiveness
- **Avoid perpetually angry people.** Try responding positively. If that doesn't work, walk away.
- **Journal about what makes you angry.** Often, writing down your feelings diffuses them.
- **Designate "safe people" to talk to about anger.** For a child, this could be a parent, teacher, Sunday school leader or pastor.
- **Study what "righteous anger" means.** Teach yourself and your children situations when it's okay to be angry.
- **Control your actions.** Never allow yourself or your child to hit or hurt another person or a pet in anger
- **Watch caffeine and junk food.** They can release hormones that can play havoc with emotions.
- **Sleep well.** Angry outbursts often happen when we're tired or cranky.
- **Teach children good ways to express anger.** These can include writing down letters, going to a protest or boycotting a product.
- **Exercise regularly.** It clears your head and releases endorphins.
- Designate a "chill-out area." Visit this place when the need to cool down comes, and teach your children to do the same.
- **Pray.** God listens better than anyone else does, and He can help you find lasting solutions.



FEB 12

Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

—James 1:22-24

Do

Sometimes, listening to sermons and reading what the Bible says is the easy part. Implementing what the Bible says, on the other hand, can be much more challenging.

Some readers interpret this verse to mean that if you memorize Scripture, you will always be able to do what the Bible says, because you will have its words in your brain permanently. Memorizing Scripture is, in fact, a great way to become a “doer of the Word,” but don’t let your efforts stop there. Actions speak louder than words, especially to non-Christians. If you aren’t sure how to become a doer of the Word, these tips may help:

- **Ask yourself, God and others what your gifts are.** Understanding your spiritual gifts can point you to specific tasks. Is your gift teaching? Ask to lead or co-facilitate a Bible study. Is it serving? Maybe the church kitchen staff needs help preparing the potluck dinner for next month.
- **Always be ready to give.** This doesn’t have to mean money to charities like Food for the Hungry; you could donate clothing and possessions to charities like Goodwill. Is there a talent you could give to help your church family?
- **Be an encourager.** Give the people around you specific praise (e.g., “You did a great job on that project; I admire your skill with finances.”)
- **Branch out in your devotional time.** Find a Bible study that captures your interest, use an audio Bible or play praise music while praying.
- **Practice forgiveness for those who wrong you.** If the situation is ongoing or serious, seek help from a pastor, counselor, trusted family member or friend.



FEB 13

A person's wisdom yields patience; it is to one's glory to overlook an offense.

—Proverbs 19:11

Wisdom, Patience

Patience is a fruit of the Spirit, but it is one of the hardest ones to cultivate. Christians are taught to love others, and on most days, we like to think we do a pretty good job. However, most of us also have one or two people in our lives who try our patience like no one else can.

Difficult people can take many forms. For some, it's the fellow church member who perpetually complains and criticizes. Sometimes it's the grandparent or elderly neighbor who seems fixated on how horrible the world is today. Sometimes it's the child in your life who constantly throws tantrums or sulks, no matter what you do. Unfortunately, over time, these offenses toward us build until we can't look at them without seeing a list of wrongdoings and shortcomings.

Today's verse challenges us to go against human nature and forgive those offenses. In fact, the Word specifically states it is "to our glory" to overlook them. In other words, the more patient we are, the more Christ-like we become. The more Christ-like we become, the more we share in His glory on Earth and eventually in Heaven. Overlooking offenses is difficult, especially if the person needles you over and over. Yet, it is not impossible if you use the tools at your disposal.

- **Pray.** Do it silently and quickly the minute the difficult person in your life starts needling you again. Pray specifically for patience, love and a change in both your hearts when you have more time.
- **Remind yourself and the other person of his or her good traits.** This will help take your focus from offenses.
- **Ask the person if he or she has a prayer need.** Sometimes difficult people act as they do because life isn't going well.



FEB 14

A Selfless Love (The Story of Ruth and Naomi)

*But Ruth replied,
"Where you go I
will go, and where
you stay I will stay.
Your people will be
my people and
your God will be
my God."*

—Ruth 1:16

February often brings love to mind, especially on Valentine's Day. Today, let's examine one of the most poignant stories of selfless love in the Bible. The story of Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi is probably familiar, but it bears close examination.

Many Christians aren't fully aware of what Ruth was asking to do in this verse. Ruth was a young widow and a Moabite woman. If she returned to Israel with Naomi, she would know no one and be totally alone except for her mother-in-law, who the chapter also tells us was already bitter because of her own widowhood and the deaths of her sons.

Worse, Ruth would be considered a foreigner and an outsider because the Moabites worshiped different gods. One of these gods was Chemosh, a destroyer god and "abomination to Israel," who required child sacrifice. Ruth could be shunned just for association with this god, never mind whether she actively practiced his rites.

Despite all this, Ruth chose to go to Israel with Naomi. The story doesn't spell it out, but we can infer she had a deep, sacrificial love for her mother-in-law. Ruth proved this love with her promise to make Israel her people and their God hers, embracing a whole new way of life and religion. Her strength, courage and good heart have been lauded for centuries.

Most of us will not be asked to travel to a new nation to show sacrificial love. Yet we can all show it in small ways on Valentine's Day and every day. Ask God how He would have you show love today.



FEB 15

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our savior.

— 1 Timothy 2:1-3

Praying for Our Leaders

In today's verse, Paul tells us that all leaders, from national to local, need our prayers. Prayer may not change their decisions or hearts, but it does please God, who is our ultimate leader and ruler.

Praying for leaders can be a daunting task, since they have so many duties and affect so many people. These things to pray over leaders can help you gain a new perspective on them and what they do.

- **Pray for their minds.** Leaders have tons of things to think – pray for their clarity and focus in decision-making.
- **Pray for their feet,** that your leaders will be safe wherever they go.
- **Pray for their arms,** that they will be strong enough to hold burdens and gentle enough to reach out to people around them.
- **Pray for their souls.** Ask that non-Christian leaders come to know Jesus, and that Christian ones remain strong in faith.
- **Pray for their health,** that all your leaders remain active, vital and able to complete the tasks before them.
- **Pray for their families.** Leaders sacrifice time with their spouses, children and other family members to serve you every day.
- **Pray for their coworkers.** Leaders need patience, especially when confronted with personalities, priorities or policies they don't agree with.
- **Pray for leaders' speech,** that it will be gracious, truthful and meaningful.
- **Pray against oppression,** that anyone under an oppressive leader will find strength and hope in God and that the leader's heart will be changed.
- **Pray against disagreements,** that disagreements between leaders and their people can happen without rage, violence or slander.
- **Pray for impartiality,** that all leaders will be impartial, showing no favoritism.
- **Pray for humility,** that your leaders will be humble enough to admit and try to rectify mistakes.
- **Pray for peace** in your country, that your leaders won't have to face the devastation of war.



FEB 16

As Jesus and His disciples were on their way, He came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.

—Luke 10:38

The Story of Martha

Martha is another biblical character who often gets a bad reputation. Most retellings of her story skim over this verse and go straight to the part everyone remembers—Martha being worried and distracted because of all the preparations involved in having Jesus visit. People often think of Martha as shrewish, demanding Jesus make Mary help her.

Martha's character goes much deeper than that, though. Focus on the last part of today's verse. Martha opened her home to Jesus. She was the house owner, and as such, it was her responsibility to show hospitality. Furthermore, her actions show she knew who Jesus was and loved Him dearly. Thus, she put her best efforts into preparing the house for Him and cooking a delicious meal. Yes, Martha was easily worried and distracted, but she was also a hard worker with a generous heart who gave her best effort to everything she did.

Like Martha, we can sometimes feel as if our character is being summed up into one or two words, or that we're being judged because of one incident where we didn't act our best. We might even feel, as some Christians do, that Jesus loves us less because of it—that He openly favors the "Marys" of our world.

If you are more a "Martha" than a "Mary," embrace this truth today. God made you to serve diligently and give generously, and He does not love you any less for being worried and distracted at times. Furthermore, He doesn't love others any less because of their faults or judge their entire character based on one incident. Jesus sees and loves the whole person, just as we should.



FEB 17

*Finally, brothers,
whatever is true,
whatever is noble,
whatever is right,
whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely,
whatever is
admirable—if
anything is
excellent or
praiseworthy, think
about such things.
—Philippians 4:8*

Thoughts and Focus

Part of being a Christian involves watching and sometimes changing the things we think about and the way we think about them. This doesn't mean policing our thoughts nonstop. Rather, it means focusing on the things that today's verse says we should. At times, this simple call can be quite difficult. Our world is full of negative events, hard-hearted people and actions that are neither lovely nor praiseworthy. How can we realistically keep our thoughts positive and pleasing to God while still dealing effectively with life?

Sometimes, the answer can be as simple as refocusing your thoughts. For example, if you find your thoughts racing with worry as you lie in bed at night, try praying or repeating favorite Scriptures silently to calm down. If the first thought you have when you see a certain coworker is negative, send up a quick, general prayer for that person, and continue to pray throughout the day as he or she comes to mind.

Many Christians, however, deal with ongoing negative or sinful thoughts in one or two particular areas. If you were addicted to pornography before accepting Christ, you may still have lustful thoughts or the desire to visit certain websites. If you are living with a chronic disease or disability, you may continually struggle with the thought that your life matters less than everyone else's life.

In the case of ongoing thoughts, accountability and counseling may help. Fall back on certain calming activities when these thoughts arise. Try journaling, turning on praise music, going for a walk or watching an uplifting movie or TV show. As time progresses, you will be more able to focus on praiseworthy things.



FEB 18

Work and Commitment

⟨I am⟩ confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

—Philippians 1:6

The Christian life is often compared to a marathon, training for the Olympics, or some other difficult athletic challenge. In fact, Paul talks often about fighting the good fight and racing to win the eternal prize of Heaven and Jesus' approval. Everyone's race looks different, but they all can seem long and arduous at times. That's why today's promise is so vital.

Have you ever started a project with great intentions, especially around the beginning of the year, but forgot to finish it? Maybe you promised yourself you'd finally write that novel, or maybe you wanted to make your own bookcases for a private study. For whatever reason though, many of these projects tend to be forgotten in a short time. Then they lie around the house unfinished.

Jesus is not at all like us in this regard. He never starts something He doesn't finish, and this is especially true of people. From the time you are born, Jesus uses people and events to draw you toward Him. Once you become a Christian, He works inside you so you become more like Him. He doesn't stop until He is satisfied with the results and knows you have embraced the person He made you to be.

If your road to completion in anything, especially spiritual matters, seems long today, express that to Jesus. Ask Him to help you trust in His timing and process and to show you His love. You will see progress, and you will know who and what you were created to be. That progress will lead you on a journey where God uses you to further His kingdom every day.



FEB 19

Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright."

"Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?" But Jacob said, "Swear to me first" So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.

*—Genesis
25:25:31-34*

Gratification

We live in a society of instant gratification. No matter how much we try to control or hide it, we want what we want, and we want it right now. Perhaps no one knew this better than Esau. In this famous Genesis passage, we see him selling his birthright and blessing for a simple bowl of stew.

It's easy to read this story and scoff at Esau, telling ourselves how stupid he was and that we'd never do something like that. Truthfully, most of us probably wouldn't sign away our families, careers, faith or other vital parts of our lives for a meal. Still, how many times do we give in to the temptation of cheap thrills and instant gratification on a daily basis? We've had a hard day at work, so we binge-watch a TV show instead of helping a spouse with chores. We want something sugary or fattening, so we eat that instead of the healthy foods our body needs. We buy our children toys whenever they ask, because we feel guilty about leaving them with babysitters while we work.

If we insist on instant gratification all the time, we will end up physically, emotionally and spiritually miserable, and potentially set a bad example for our children and other, less-experienced Christians. Today, ask yourself if you often give in to the pull of instant gratification and if so, in what areas. What triggers your lapses in judgment in these areas? Once you know, ask God to show you how to change. Write down a plan or some realistic goals, and ask for accountability from a family member or friend.



FEB20

Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God.

—Leviticus 19:9-10

Social Justice

Social justice is a hot topic among many Christians, as we debate what it means in a modern context. Some Christians accuse others of not caring for the poor and needy enough, focusing too much on social issues such as gay marriage, abortion and fiscal responsibility. Christians in this group, in turn, accuse their fellow believers of not being discerning enough, not being fair to life inside the womb, and contributing to the decline of values by accepting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) lifestyles. Whatever Christian camp you fall into, neither of these attitudes reflect true social justice.

What then, is true social justice? Today's verses give us a clue. God simply says to leave part of what you have for the poor and the foreigner, which today could mean anyone who is less fortunate than you. God does not specify whether this person is a Democrat or Republican, what his or her orientation is, or whether he or she is a vegetarian, abstains from alcohol, or eats only kosher food. In several other verses throughout the Bible, Jesus indicates that our primary responsibility to needy people is kindness and generosity.

Additionally, God expects our generous hearts to be sincere and as open as possible. This verse uses the word "leave" in the context of giving to the poor and needy. In other words, letting them have their share. It does not, however, mean that poor people should get only what we do not want. When you donate to charity, be sure you're giving possessions in good condition. Give out of the best of what you have, and you will be rewarded.



FEB 21

But \langle Thomas \rangle said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

—John 20:24b

Doubt and Belief

When most Christians read the story surrounding today's verse, they do it with the goal of teaching listeners not to be a "doubting Thomas." A close reading of the text, however, reveals Jesus did not condemn Thomas' doubts. He simply asked him to stop doubting and believe. Thomas was blessed for his belief, and his name is still popular among Christians today. He shares it with such paragons as philosopher Thomas Aquinas.

If the point of Thomas' story isn't, "Don't be like this person," then what is it? Jesus' willingness to let Thomas see physical evidence of His crucifixion, as well as His admonition not to be afraid, can show us the answer.

Christians are asked to accept many things on faith—that Jesus was a real person, that He died and rose again, and that He is present in everyday life. Sometimes though, we need evidence of Him that we can see and touch. Sometimes we condemn non-Christians because they ask for evidence like this, forgetting that at one time we had no more faith than they do.

Remember that every person is different, so every potential Christian is different. Some will gladly accept your testimony on faith alone. Others, like Thomas, are of a more practical and intellectual bent. They will want practical evidence.

You can't physically show them Jesus' scars, but you can and should tell them what He has done in your life. If you have physical evidence that aligns with any of your stories, show this as well. If you allow people to see, they are more likely to believe and rejoice.



FEB22

The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus.

—John 1:41-42

Andrew's Gifts

When Christians are asked to name Jesus' disciples, Simon (also known as Peter) is probably the first they choose. Afterward, they might name disciples Matthew, James or John. Andrew is rarely in the top five or even top 10 list of familiar disciples. Even in the Bible, Andrew is commonly referred to as "Simon Peter's brother," almost as if he were an extension of his name.

Perhaps you sometimes feel like Andrew might have felt when compared to Simon. Maybe you're a devoted Christian, but someone else in your family, friend group or church always seems to outshine you. Maybe you love attending Bible study but rarely speak because the extroverts in the room always seem to voice your thoughts before you can.

This can get discouraging, but focus on one key thing about Andrew. Today's verses tell us that Andrew, not Peter, was the first in his family to believe and follow Jesus. Andrew actually brought Peter to Jesus; without his brother, Peter may not have become the disciple he's known as today.

If you are more like Andrew than Peter, rejoice in your unique personality and gifts. You may not have the flashiest testimony, but you may have the depth of faith someone needs to believe in Jesus. Even if others forget what you've done or don't acknowledge you as often as you'd like, Jesus remembers. Moreover, He is pleased with you just as you are. Keep doing what He calls you to do, and don't try to fit into someone else's mold. Yours is perfect.



FEB23

At the end of the 10 days, they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

—Daniel 1:15-16

Dieting

Does God care about what we eat? Today's verses seem to indicate He does. Many Christians, and one author in particular, have used these verses as the foundation for a diet called the Daniel Plan, which is heavy on vegetables, water and other healthy foods. Healthy foods are a crucial part of a fulfilling lifestyle, and they can improve our physical, emotional and spiritual outlook. Yet, studying Daniel 1 will reveal that God had more on His mind than what is on our plates.

Before this interaction with a Babylonian palace guard, Daniel and his three friends were offered rich local food the royals ate. Even though the Bible doesn't tell us what these foods were, they were probably a great temptation to young men who, it seems, were raised on plenty of vegetables. Yet, all four of these young men freely offered to give up this royal treatment to be tested with healthier, but less appealing foods. At the end of 10 days, they were actually healthier than the other captives with them.

Can you relate to Daniel? Have you ever been offered something "rich" or "royal" that, while not sinful, would not be healthy for you? It could be food—perhaps you've just committed to a diet, and after a few weeks, your friends implore you to eat a meal of fried foods and sweets with them. It could be extra time off from work; your boss approves, but you know you should really come in to help a coworker who's trying to care for a baby.

No matter what, the test can be extremely hard. When facing a test like this, pray and seek wise counsel. Weigh the pros and cons, and ask yourself how you'll feel later.



FEB24

A scroll of remembrance was written in His presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored His name.

—Malachi 3:16

God's Honor Roll

Being a Christian is perhaps the best decision you can make. Eternal life is guaranteed, and blessings in this life are promised to those who obey God. That being said, being a Christian is fraught with hardship. Most Christians face myriad temptations, whether they're small or huge. It's easy to become worn down from refusing or running from temptation. This is especially true if Satan confronts you with the same temptation over and over, which he will do to attack you.

Today's verse offers renewed hope and an extra dose of spiritual strength. Some pastors and writers refer to this scroll of remembrance as "God's honor roll." This phrase doesn't mean God plays favorites. He adores all His children and wants to bless them all, but particular strength in the face of adversity does warrant extra attention.

In James, we are told that even enduring Christians will receive a special crown in Heaven to commemorate their faith. Being on this honor roll is a bit like being on the dean's list—not a necessity for recognition, but a reward for special effort.

The good news is that to God, every effort is "special effort." All who are called will be on a scroll of remembrance in Heaven one day. Some may have bigger crowns and more rewards than others, but we will all be praised. That said, if you want to increase your rewards, ask God how to do so. Ask Him for pure motives and a sincere heart, as well as the strength to stand up under adversity. He will answer with an immediate, absolute "yes."



FEB25

Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?" "Yes, go," she answered. So the girl went and got the baby's mother.

—Exodus 2:7-8

Sacrifice

Sometimes, God will ask us to sacrifice someone or something that is dear to us in order to grow our faith. This doesn't always mean the person dies or that we never see the person or thing again. However, it often signals a painful separation. This was certainly the case for Jocheved. This young Hebrew mother knew she had to save her baby, Moses, from being killed because of Pharaoh's edict against Hebrew baby boys. She knew saving her baby would mean giving him up.

Almost as if adding insult to injury, God ordained that Pharaoh's daughter would find Moses and he would be raised as an Egyptian prince. Remember though, that God is not cruel or selfish. He understands exactly what He's doing when He asks his children for sacrifices. He knows what it costs them and shares in their pain. Because of this, He sometimes allows a gift along with the sacrifice.

For Jocheved, that gift was becoming Moses' wet nurse. It wasn't the same as raising the baby herself, but she would be an integral part of his life. She would be present to watch him grow up and to tell him of the wondrous works of the Israelites' God.

If you have been asked to sacrifice a beloved person, pet or other part of your life, let Jocheved's story give you hope. God will not always give back or wholly replace what you have lost. Whether He does depends on what is best for you in the long run. However, He always rewards sacrifice in some way. He may send you a gift related to your sacrifice, or He may point you toward something better that you never imagined. Express your emotions and pain, but then praise Him for the opportunity to grow, and look for the gift.



FEB 26

*The heart is
deceitful above all
things and beyond
cure. Who can
understand it?*

—Jeremiah 17:9

Following Your Heart

“Follow your heart” is a popular phrase in today’s culture, especially when it comes to romance. People are urged to follow their hearts when making all kinds of choices, but today’s verse cautions against it. According to Jeremiah, the heart easily and constantly lies to us. Some translations call the heart “desperately wicked” as well.

This may seem harsh, but the human heart is inclined toward sin and wrong decisions. That’s why we must ask Jesus to change our hearts, not our behavior. When He convicts us of something we need to change, our first instinct is often to try modifying our behavior as much as possible. For example, if convicted of a tendency toward anger, you may make up your mind to be as peaceful and calm as possible. That’s fine, but it will likely backfire. You’ll end up bottling your emotions until you explode over a trivial matter, and the guilt cycle will begin all over again.

Throughout Jeremiah, God uses the Old Testament prophet to teach us that heart changes are better and more permanent than behavioral modifications. What’s the difference? Behavioral changes work from the outside in and depend on human strength. Heart changes come from the inside and are dependent on God’s strength.

Has God convicted you of something in your heart that needs to change? Today is a great day to repent, acknowledge your need and ask for help. Acknowledge that behavior changes don’t last and often leave you in worse shape than before. Then trust God to heal your heart, which will ultimately show in your actions.



FEB27

⟨The serpent⟩ said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

—Genesis 3:1b

(Subtle) Disobedience

Christians, and even most non-Christians, recognize Satan as a tempter and a liar. However, Satan is also crafty. As today's verse proves, rarely does he try to make us disobey God outright. Christians are particularly vulnerable to this trick because Satan knows they already believe in and love God. Instead of trying to push them into disobedience, he tends to wrap its tentacles around them slowly.

Eve was the first such person to get caught in those tentacles, and it all started with one simple question. "Did God really say ... ?" Satan often does not want us to dispute what God says; he wants us to question whether God truly meant what He said, or meant it the way we know He did.

This sort of deception pops up all the time, especially among the faithful. Many people, even some claiming to be Christian, twist Scripture to mean what they think it should, sometimes innocently and sometimes with malicious intent. As a result, people get hurt and some walk away from Christianity altogether.

If you suspect someone is twisting Scripture, or if Satan is attacking you by twisting Scripture in your own mind, cry out to God immediately. Ask Him, "What did you really say?" Study Scripture diligently and ask for discernment.

If a certain question proves hard for you, go to a pastor or Sunday school leader you trust. Memorize Scripture so you can arm yourself and say, "I am confident that God said this about X situation, and His words are true." Satan cannot speak anything but lies. God, on the other hand, is truth personified and will always stand with you.



FEB28

*Yet I hold this
against you: you
have forsaken the
love you had at
first.*

—Revelation 2:4

First Love

Jesus speaks today's verse to the church in Ephesus. It seems like a simple message, but what does He mean? Just a few verses before, He praises the Ephesus church for its perseverance, good deeds and discernment. Why, then, does He admonish the members here—and why does He say they've forsaken their first love? Shouldn't Ephesus' deeds prove this church loves Jesus?

The answer to this question is a bit complicated, but it's simpler than it looks. Jesus does expect His people to bear fruit and is pleased when we do. Throughout the Bible, though, Jesus (as well as the writers He inspired) warns us that works aren't enough to advance our faith. We must focus on the Person of Christ. Unlike other religions, Christianity isn't about what we do for God. It's about what God has done and continues to do for us.

Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when He spoke to Ephesus. The church members had plenty of evidence that they loved Him, but their focus strayed. Maybe the members were so caught up in activity and religion that they forgot to appreciate who Jesus is. Maybe you're experiencing something similar as you struggle to be the perfect Christian.

Jesus urges you to stop striving so hard. Instead, go back to "the love you had at first." Ask yourself when you last prayed and thanked Jesus for some of His specific traits or anything specific He has done for you. If it's been a while, do so now. Ask Jesus to restore your first love and the joy of your salvation.





MAR 01

Spring Cleaning for the Soul

As March begins, many of us look forward to spring cleaning. Spring cleaning is sometimes difficult, but always brings relief. As we air out our houses, get rid of clutter and dust or vacuum, we often sense that winter's heaviness has been lifted from our homes, bodies and hearts. Somehow, when spring cleaning is done, every part of our lives feels much less cluttered. We can then focus on important goals and personal growth.

Our souls can benefit from spring cleaning, too. The soul's version looks much different from the physical one but is even more important than cleaning our homes. This March, take time to consider the areas where your soul might need cleaning. Has cold weather kept you inside, depending on television and movies for entertainment? Have you given in to the temptation to sleep instead of attending church? Maybe you've gotten bored with Bible reading.

No matter what, don't get overwhelmed at the prospect of spring cleaning. Pray and meditate to determine how God wants you to handle each area. Ask Him if you can tackle something with baby steps or if He wants you to completely change something right away. If this area has needed cleansing for a long time, you might benefit from accountability partners in a Sunday school class or Bible study group. Be willing to make the effort, and enjoy the positive changes you reap.

*Do not conform to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your
mind.*

—Romans 12:2



MAR02

*Wait for the Lord;
be strong and take
heart, and wait for
the Lord.*

—*Psalm 27:14*

Learning to Wait on God

Waiting often feels like the hardest thing we're asked to do. It makes us feel anxious and impatient because while we're waiting, we don't feel like we're doing anything truly productive. Since waiting periods can be long, they can drain our hope. We can give up on the idea that the event we're anticipating will ever happen.

Many people in the Bible knew exactly how waiting felt. Sarah and Abraham waited decades to have a child; both were elderly when it finally happened. The Israelites waited generations to be delivered from slavery in Egypt. Israel's judges waited, seemingly in vain, for an end to Canaanite oppression. Christians continue to wait for Jesus' second coming.

Perhaps you, too, have waited a long time for God to answer your prayers or give you direction. You might feel foolish for waiting, especially if the people in your life have been telling you to get up and do something. Of course, sometimes God asks us to take steps to get what we want. You should always ask Him if there are specific things you should do during your waiting period. However, if God does not show you anything, be as patient as possible. Keep waiting for Him and don't let others dissuade you. Find people who will encourage and strengthen you in your waiting, and seek new ways to draw closer to God during this time. That could mean worshipping in a new way, starting a new Bible translation, or taking up a new ministry. Your waiting will be rewarded; don't give up.



MAR03

God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. So God said to Noah ... "I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make for yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out."

—Genesis 6:12-15

Noah's Courageous Act of Obedience

The story of Noah's ark is a familiar one. In fact, most of us focus our attention on the ark without giving much of it to Noah. Noah only appears in a small section of Genesis, but he is one of the most important and courageous figures in the Bible.

Genesis 7 tells us that Noah was six hundred years old when God fulfilled His promise to destroy the earth. Before then, he spent years building the ark. The Bible doesn't explicitly say so, but we can infer that Noah's contemporaries wondered what he was doing. Many people probably laughed at him and called him foolish. They probably scoffed at the idea that God would really destroy the earth. After all, He had tolerated their wickedness for decades—perhaps centuries. He'd have no reason to destroy them now after all those generations.

Noah had every reason not to obey God. He didn't see immediate fulfillment of what God said, and the evidence before him indicated he was a fool. Most Christians have felt this way at some time in their spiritual walks. God has promised them something or asked them to do something, yet their obedience only seems to bring trouble.

If you're experiencing something like this now, study Noah's example. He obeyed God despite evidence. Twice, we're told he did "all that the Lord commanded him," not missing a single detail. Because of his commitment, he and his family were saved, and Noah was remembered as an important biblical figure. It may be slow in coming, but your obedience will be rewarded.



MAR04

But as for you, be strong and do not give up, for your work will be rewarded.

—2 Chronicles 15:7

The Value of Diligence

Work is part of life. It's so normal that most of us do it without thinking much. Tasks must be completed so homes and businesses can run smoothly. Sometimes, though, our work can seem especially hard—even oppressive. Our workloads don't get any smaller. Our houses never seem clean enough, our children and spouses never seem content enough, and our ministries often feel more like burdens than blessings.

King Asa of 2 Chronicles could probably identify with the strain of hard work. He became king of Israel at a time when the nation had been “without the true God, without a priest, and without the law.” Instead, idols and pagan practices replaced God, and Israel found itself crushed and oppressed. The Bible tells us Asa made many significant reforms, but he was possibly overwhelmed at the scope of them. He probably became discouraged at what they entailed; 2 Chronicles 15 reveals he had to depose his own grandmother from her position as queen mother because she worshipped Asherah.

You may not be dealing with idol worship at work or in your home, but your tasks may seem as huge and impossible as Asa's. If that's the case, give yourself permission to rest. Pray about your work, asking God which tasks are important and which can be delegated. Additionally, ask God for new joy in your work. Once you've had quality rest, return to your tasks with a new heart and new strength. You'll complete tasks more effectively. You'll also see yourself and others grow and change for the better.



MAR05

Therefore, watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape.

—Deuteronomy 4:15b-16a

What Are Your Idols?

In ancient Israel, it was not uncommon for people to make literal idols. These were often statues of wood, stone or metal representing gods and goddesses of the day. Baal, Asherah and similar deities were especially popular, since they were associated with fertility and prosperity. God knew the idols were part of the surrounding culture, but in His love and holy jealousy, He forbade Israel to worship them or have anything to do with them.

Today, it's rare to see an actual idol in anyone's home or church. In fact, some Christians assume they're safe from idolatry if they don't sacrifice to statues or participate in other religions' worship. Actually, idolatry is far more insidious now than it was in ancient Israel. Today's idols can be almost anything. You can make an idol of your career, money, family, hobbies, or possessions. The Bible explains many times how serious idolatry is, so you must avoid it.

But how do you know when something you enjoy or need has become an idol? You'll likely feel a check in your spirit. Ask God to show you where it comes from and how to handle it. You might also notice a deeper than normal emotional connection to the idol. Ask yourself how you would react if you lost it. If you can't imagine living a fulfilling life without that person or thing, you may have an idol in your heart.

Fortunately, idolatry is forgivable and repairable. Once you know an idol exists, repent of your attitude. Ask God how to stop idolizing anything but Him and where the root of your idolatry lies. For example, if you idolize family members because you fear something bad will happen to them, place them in God's hands. Ask for deeper trust in His ability to care for your family.



MAR06

*Blessed are those
who hunger and
thirst for
righteousness, for
they will be filled.*

—Matthew 5:6

Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

Hunger and thirst are two of the most basic human needs—two that demand to be fulfilled several times daily. If you've ever gone without food or water for a time, you know how miserable it can feel. Your stomach growls and twists. Your throat feels dry. Talking takes too much energy, so you don't use your voice. If you remain hungry and thirsty for a significant period, you may become malnourished. Your body may become distended, your lips dry, and your hair and nails brittle.

Most of us would never allow our bodies to deteriorate on this level. However, many of us (even Christians) don't fulfill our needs for righteousness the way we do our needs for food and drink. Over time, we stop craving God. Instead, we fill our minds and lives with empty entertainment and negativity. We avoid church, ministry and Christians because they make us thirsty. We don't know how to be filled again. We become prone to gossiping, criticizing, complaining and judging.

If you're hungry or thirsty physically, reach out for food and drink. The same is true for righteousness. If you experience symptoms of a lack of righteousness, ask Jesus to fill you. Determine why you have gone so long without feeding your soul. If it's sin, don't hide from God. Confess and receive His mercy. If you're bored with prayer and Bible reading, shake up your routine. Seek Christian friends who will feed their souls with you and make sure you stay satisfied. Fill your mind with uplifting thoughts and activities.



MAR07

If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

—James 2:16

Filling Physical Needs

James, Jesus' brother and a devout believer, had no problem stepping on Christians' toes to share his message. Today's verse is a perfect example. It challenges Christians on a pressing issue within the church and our personal circles. We often commit to praying for others. We wish them peace and blessings. Yet we aren't as attentive as we could be to physical needs. In some cases, Christians become so concerned about others' souls that they completely ignore tangible needs.

This is a sin, but an easy one to fall into. Jesus speaks often about Heaven, hell and eternal life in the Gospels. Heaven is such a wonderful hope for Christians and hell is so horrific that we should be concerned about others' salvation. If the person you share the Gospel with is impoverished, sick or hurting, though, he or she is far less likely to hear and respond to your message.

When ministering to someone, balance your response to his or her physical and spiritual needs. Whenever possible, meet the physical needs first. If you know your neighbor's kids need warm coats for school, supply them from a charity, local store or your own closet. When visiting a sick friend in the hospital, ask what you can do to help him or her feel better. Maybe you can bring a favorite food, read to them or help them shower or bathe. Once you meet physical needs, you can offer to pray or open a conversation about God. The person will probably be more receptive, and both of you will walk away blessed.



MAR08

Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.

—*Titus 2:3-5*

Powerful Women of the Bible

Being a Christian woman can sometimes feel like a difficult job. In today's verse, women are encouraged to be reverent, loving, pure, productive, self-controlled and kind. It almost seems as though biblical women were expected to be perfect and that today's are still held to that impossible expectation.

God does not expect any of us, men or women, to be sinless. He knows we are human, and so He gives us plenty of grace and mercy. God also knows we're capable of being kind, self-controlled, reverent and powerful, so He gives us examples to follow.

Women especially should seek out these examples and ask God for help emulating them. Knowing about the influential women in the Bible can increase faith, diligence and many other virtues. It can also help women feel more confident and able to complete the tasks God sets before them. This month, commit to studying and imitating some of these individuals.

- **Mary.** Declare you are the Lord's servant, obeying what He asks you to do despite risks.
- **Anna.** Pray diligently, "asking, seeking, and knocking." Rejoice when He answers your prayers.
- **Esther.** Stand up for those in your life who can't speak for themselves. Ally yourself with those who need you—even if it seems frightening.
- **Sarah.** Wait patiently for God to answer your prayers and show you direction.
- **Ruth.** Nurture your family and spouse with compassion and unconditional love.
- **Martha.** Work diligently at your tasks, and don't be afraid to ask the Lord and others for help when you need it.
- **Deborah.** Solve problems using Godly wisdom, and hold yourself accountable in your spiritual life.



MAR09

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in Heaven.

—Matthew 5:44-45

Love Your Enemies

This is one of Jesus' most pointed commands. Unfortunately, it's also one that gets ignored frequently, especially among Christians. Most Christians agree that loving an enemy is hard—perhaps too hard for Jesus to truly expect of us. We assume that if Jesus knew how trying our enemies were, He wouldn't ask us to love them. Although we might try to love our enemies, we're often stumped as to how that can be done.

The truth is, Jesus does know each of our enemies. Furthermore, He knows exactly what they've done to us. He understands our pain, anger and fear where enemies are concerned because He has been through it. He was crucified despite being sinless. For our sins and our forgiveness, He endured one of the most painful and humiliating deaths humanity has ever conceived. Despite that, He forgave those who crucified Him. He explicitly asked for God to forgive them while hanging on the cross.

It's easy to say if Jesus can do that, we should be able to love those who wrong us. We aren't Jesus, and some of those wrongs are very serious—physical and verbal abuse, molestation, accusations of crimes we didn't commit and more. However, we can find the ability to love our enemies in some small ways.

- **Praying for love.** If you have no love for your enemy, ask God to give you His.
- **Performing small gestures.** You don't have to trust this enemy, but if it's safe to do so, send him or her an encouraging letter or small gift.
- **Talking through the problem.** Again, if it's safe, approach your enemy and ask what you can do to restore your relationship or find some form of peace.



MAR 10

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

—Isaiah 6:5

A Man of Unclean Lips

When the prophet Isaiah said he was a man of unclean lips, he wasn't just talking about a propensity to say a four-letter word now and then. In today's verse, he tells God he lives among a people of unclean lips and has become one of them. He's referring to ancient Israel, a nation that had fallen away from God and turned to idol worship and all forms of wickedness. We can infer this included their language. They probably gossiped, slandered, lied, criticized and complained.

How many of us are guilty of the same sins? We often don't think of them as sins, because we often don't think before we speak. We figure words can't truly hurt anyone—but they can and do. Wicked language of any kind also breaks God's heart and leaves our lips and hearts unclean. Worse, once you form a habit of using unclean lips, it's difficult to break.

God gives us hope for this issue, though. As soon as Isaiah lamented his unclean lips, God touched his mouth with a burning coal. This allowed Isaiah to speak the words God gave him and worship more effectively.

You don't need to burn your lips every time you say something you shouldn't. However, you should confess it to God and ask Him to make your words more gracious and pleasing to Him. You can also practice speaking with clean lips in many ways.

- Find at least one positive thing to say to each person you encounter every day.
- Begin your prayers by praising God for specific things He has done.
- Sing and listen to uplifting songs. Read uplifting texts.
- Practice deep breathing and Scripture meditation.
- Seek out entertainment that lacks foul language.
- Resist the urge to gossip about others.



MAR 1 1

God heard their groaning, and He remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.

—Exodus 2:24-25

God Does Know

At first glance, this verse seems too nonchalant for the situation. God was “concerned about” the Israelites at this time, but they had already been in slavery almost 400 years. Many Christians, even veteran Bible readers, might look at this verse and think, “Why was God only concerned at this point? Why does God often not respond to us until it is too late, or almost too late, to change our situations?”

This, like a plethora of other Bible verses, is one of the most frustrating to digest. Knowing exactly what the words mean can make it easier. Here, “concerned about” denotes deep compassion and omniscient knowledge. When people use this phrase, they often mean, “I’m worried but may or may not do anything about it.” When God uses the same phrase, He means, “This is of great concern to Me, and I will act on behalf of this person or people.”

The question still remains—why didn’t God act sooner? We can’t answer this, but we can draw strength from who we know God is. He is the embodiment of love. He sees and knows all, and He acts in ways that are best for us. If He seems to delay, it’s not because He wants His people to stay enslaved or oppressed. It may be because He wants us to grow or because He is preparing certain people for acts of obedience, as He prepared Moses to deliver the Israelites.

You may be in a difficult situation right now and wondering why God doesn’t deliver you right away, especially if you’ve prayed about it a long time. Never give up asking for deliverance; ask more persistently. God sees and is concerned about you, and He will never forget you.



MAR 12

*Submit yourselves
then, to God.
Resist the devil and
he will flee from
you.*

—James 4:7

Resist the Devil

Submitting to God and resisting the devil sounds easy. As Christians, we align ourselves with God and want to be close to Him, right? Perhaps in theory, but in everyday life, temptation is harder to resist than we bargain for. Most of us avoid what we consider “big” sins like drug addiction, pornography, murder and stealing. Yet what about worry, complaining, laziness and other small temptations that creep into our lives unannounced?

Satan knows exactly which buttons to push to make each Christian sin. He will take advantage of their emotions and coping mechanisms, as well. For example, if you binge eat when upset, Satan might whisper, “One brownie is not a binge. You deserve this. You need to feel better.”

When faced with such lies, many of which are twisted truths, you may wonder how to resist. Prayer is always your first line of defense. Cry out to God, naming the temptation in front of you and telling Him why this one in particular is hard. Physically get away if you can; if you can't, try to refocus your thoughts. A temptation to binge eat could be refocused into, “I will feel better and healthier if I resist.”

If you struggle often with the same types of temptations, write them down. Try to determine what lie is at the root of each temptation. For instance, do you judge others out of fear that they're also judging you? Once you find the lie, replace it with biblical truth. For example, you might memorize verses about your identity in Christ and His love for you.



MAR 13

*Through Jesus,
therefore, let us
continually offer to
God a sacrifice of
praise—the fruit of
lips that openly
profess His name.*

—Hebrews 13:15

Sacrifice of Praise

In ancient Israel, before Christ's birth, people would offer animal sacrifices at the local temples to atone for their sins. God often asked for unblemished lambs, innocent animals who did not deserve to be sacrificed, to emphasize the seriousness of sin and the need for forgiveness.

These sacrifices were painful for the people and animals involved, but praise isn't generally associated with pain. Why, then, does the author of Hebrews talk about a sacrifice of praise? Most Christians associate this verse with what they should do in times when they don't feel like praising God. Indeed, a "sacrifice of praise" can be your effort to praise and worship God when your emotions want to do the opposite. When you sincerely praise God in the midst of sadness, confusion or anger, He sees and rewards it. Additionally, these sacrifices of praise will help you grow spiritually as your faith in God's goodness becomes stronger.

Another way to look at a sacrifice of praise is as a freewill offering. The Israelites often made these to God in praise for His deeds or in thanks for favor He had shown them. You can do the same in your own time with God. Sing hymns or praise songs, or dance in praise. Write a story, poem or psalm that glorifies God and extols what He's done for you as well as His wonderful traits. Go to a favorite outdoor place, and thank God for His creations. No matter what your sacrifice looks like, it will please God.



MAR 14

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and He will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if He does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

—Daniel 3:16-18

Response to the Fire

The story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego gives us a fantastic look at how to respond to persecution and the different fires in our lives. In today's passage, these three men were about to be burned in a literal fire. They express unwavering faith in God to deliver them, and it is true that He can deliver His people from trials. Notice, though, how the last sentence begins: "If he does not." Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego make clear that they will trust and obey God even if they die in the blazing furnace.

Sometimes, God will deliver us from trials the way we want Him to. Other times, He will choose another path. Bible study leader and speaker Beth Moore explains it this way: when faced with trials, God will always deliver us in one of three ways.

- **Out of the fire.** God will spare us completely from the trial before us. An example would be getting a tumor diagnosis only to discover it's benign.
- **Through the fire.** God will allow us to survive our trial but requires we go through it. Example: being delivered from a bad financial situation only after filing bankruptcy and losing your home.
- **By the fire.** God uses the fire, which can be any fatal experience, to bring us home.

Of course, the first option is always the one we want, but God may have incredible plans through the second option or may seek to end terrible suffering through the third. Seek His will for your trials, and trust Him no matter which option He chooses for you.



MAR 15

He has sent me...to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor...to comfort all who mourn...to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes.

—Isaiah 61:1b-3

Beauty for Ashes

March 15 will mark the anniversary of the live action version of Disney's Cinderella premiere in theaters. We're all familiar with the story; it's a favorite among legions of children and adults. Additionally, as some Bible scholars have found, the story of Cinderella contains many elements that can be tied to Christianity.

The way Cinderella dresses is one of these elements. Throughout most of her story, she is a servant, compelled to dress in ragged clothing. Her work, especially cleaning the fireplace, makes her dirty with ashes and cinders. Many scholars have equated this with Cinderella's mourning for her dead parents. They also compare it to biblical mourning, in which the grieving would wear sackcloth and ashes in public.

However, Cinderella's story has a hopeful ending. Her rags are exchanged for a beautiful ball gown, and later, a pristine wedding dress as she marries her prince. Today's verses indicate that Christians have a similar hope. God knows that because of our sins and trials, we often live covered in figurative ashes. That's why He sent Jesus to exchange those ashes for beauty—not only physically, but the beauty of grace, mercy and clean, new lives. We are the bride of Christ, and He sees us as spotless and pure. As Christians, we often don't take advantage of this. We see ourselves as unworthy, but God wants us to revel in the fact that we are royalty in Him.

The next time you pick up Cinderella to read or watch with your children (or even by yourself), remember these verses. Meditate on your beauty in God's eyes, and rejoice in it.



MAR 16

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

—Jeremiah 29:11

Hope and a Future

Today’s verse is a popular one in Christian culture. Most Christians cling to it in times when they need hope, citing it as a reason their future will be good and prosperous. This isn’t wrong; God wants us to have hope and anticipate our future. However, like many verses, this can easily be taken out of context.

It’s important to know where Jeremiah 29:11 comes from. It is part of a letter Jeremiah wrote to the Israelite exiles, whom Babylon had taken into captivity. Jeremiah wrote this letter to encourage His people, assuring them God knew their plight and would bless them again. However, this would only happen after seventy years of captivity in Babylon, the consequence God had set for Israel’s unrepentant sinning.

Our lives sometimes work the same way. Not every difficult circumstance is a consequence of sin. In fact, most can be chalked up to the fact we live in a fallen world. Yet sometimes God allows difficult circumstances to go on longer than we would like so we can grow in Him, learning to love and trust Him more. We shouldn’t interpret Jeremiah 29:11 and similar verses as evidence that God always wants us to be happy, rich and without trouble.

Instead, we should interpret verses like today’s as what they are: evidence of God’s heart toward us. He does not want to harm His followers. He wants to bless us as much as possible, beyond what we can imagine. To obtain such blessings, we must draw close to Him and obey Him every day.



MAR 17

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.

—Romans 8:14

The Real Story of St. Patrick

St. Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland, with a shamrock as his symbol, but that's the extent of what most Christians know about him—except that he reportedly drove snakes from Ireland. The real St. Patrick was much more complex.

Patrick was not Irish by birth. He was born in Britain and taken to Ireland as a slave when Irish pirates raided his hometown. At the time, Ireland was made up primarily of Druids and pagans. Patrick, though, converted to Christianity. During captivity, he wrote his memoir: *The Confession*.

Patrick was held captive until he was 20 years old, but through visions and dreams from God, he was prompted to study for the priesthood and return to Ireland. In one such vision, Patrick saw a man named Victorious who gave him one of the many letters he carried. The letter's heading read "The Voice of the Irish." As Patrick read the letter, he heard the people of Ireland pleading for him to come and "walk among <them>."

Patrick arrived in March of 433 and converted many Irish people. One legend claims he converted the chieftain of a Druidic tribe who tried to kill him. He also built churches across Ireland. Patrick is known for converting entire Irish kingdoms to Christianity, often using the shamrock to explain the Trinity. He is also known for preaching and working miracles. His saint's day, March 17, 461, was also the date of his death. He is well known in the Catholic Church (and some Protestant denominations) for the Loric of St. Patrick.



MAR 18

If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

— 1 Corinthians
13:1

Unconditional Love

Unconditional love is a concept many Christians are familiar with, but it's difficult to enact. Perhaps this is because we come across so few examples in our own lives. Although we may have the most stable and loving families in the world, our society conditions us to absorb the message that as children, we're loved based on good behavior. As adults, we learn we're loved or favored based on our performance at work or school or what we do for others.

Jesus is the epitome of unconditional love. He first showed this when He gave up Heaven to come to Earth in human form and again in His death on the cross. Today, His gentle whispers and involvement in believers' lives show unconditional love every day. However, most Christians still struggle with the idea that Jesus' love is permanent and unchanging. They would never admit this, but they secretly believe Jesus will only love and favor them based on what they do for Him.

It is impossible to fully understand the depth of Jesus' love for us, but if we can grasp just a bit of it, we'll have an easier time showing unconditional love to ourselves and others. Practice this in your daily life. When you make a mistake, don't beat yourself up. Say, "Okay, now I know better and can try again." Make the effort to notice positive traits in people difficult to love. Ask that God would pour His love on you so you can emulate Him better in everything you do.



MAR 19

Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen, to loose the chains of injustice ... to set the oppressed free ... to share your food with the hungry and provide the poor wanderer with shelter?

—Isaiah 58:6-7a

True Fasting

Lent will be drawing to a close soon, but Catholics and many Protestants may still be fasting in preparation for Easter. In ancient Israel, fasting usually meant giving up food. Today, many Christians still fast this way, but you can give up other things. It's common, for example, to forego sweets, television and other pleasures during Lent.

While most of us try to enter Lent with a humble and expectant attitude, some of us use it as a way to monitor our behavior. This isn't wrong in itself, but too much focus on behavioral modification can lead to self-righteousness and self-focus. That is, fasting the wrong things can make you focus on what you're missing rather than on what God can show you through the act.

This may be why God gave today's message to Isaiah. Again, He doesn't condemn traditional fasting. Instead, he rebukes Israel for dwelling so much on outward signs of religion that they forget their fellow man. God exhorts His people, both ancient Israel and contemporary society, that true fasting isn't about what we give up for our own benefit. Rather, it's about the sacrifices we make to show God's love to others.

Think about how you can participate in true fasting this month. Maybe it involves volunteering at a food bank or soup kitchen or opening your home to someone who needs a place to stay. You can raise awareness of a social issue, such as human trafficking, in the effort to end oppression. Whatever you choose, your sacrifice of time and resources will be counted as a true fast.



MAR20

They took palm branches and went out to meet Him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel!"

—John 12:13

Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday is one of the most important days in the Christian calendar—second only to Christmas and Easter. It celebrates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the last time people would praise Him or show any belief in Him before the trial and crucifixion.

Knowing this, most Christians go into Palm Sunday with understandably mixed emotions. They're excited because Easter is approaching but can't help feeling somber since Good Friday is on the horizon. It can also be difficult to determine how to approach Palm Sunday. Should you celebrate, or should you focus on the more serious aspects of the day?

Both are correct approaches. On Palm Sunday, take your cue from the people of Jerusalem. Praise Jesus for what He has done and who He is in and outside of church. You and your family can put on praise music, make crafts (such as palm branches and palm crosses) or write down your praises. To add to the symbolism, consider writing praises on paper palm leaves and using them as Easter décor.

Your praise can and should also incorporate the somber part of the day. Meditate on Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. If you don't know much about crucifixion, read up on it and share with your family (be cognizant of appropriateness for young children). This can help you fully appreciate Jesus' sacrifice. In the same way, meditation on the resurrection can remind you of the hope He brought to ancient Israel, the hope He gives today's Christians, and the anticipation of His second coming.



MAR21

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

—*Genesis 2:15*

Stewardship of the Environment

The Bible clearly states that man and woman are the only creations made in God's image. However, today's verse indicates that His other creations are also important. Before sin entered the world, Adam was placed in the beautiful Garden of Eden and charged with its care. Although God could have made the garden self-sustaining, He allowed Adam to tend and enjoy it.

God wants us to do the same thing with our environment. Some Christians aren't fully aware of this. They reason that because the Bible also says the earth will pass away one day, they can treat it as they wish. This reasoning actually dishonors God because it doesn't respect His original plan. God doesn't want us to worship His creation, but He expects us to be good stewards of it.

Today, pray and thank God for the many beautiful and useful things He has created. It may help to take a walk in nature and focus prayers on what you observe. After that, think about how you can be a good steward of the creation around you. This could be anything from recycling and saving energy to tending your own garden. You could also consider joining a group that cleans up local parks or green spaces, raises awareness of animal welfare or teaches people how to grow their own food. While participating in these activities, remember God's original plan for nature. Thank Him that you get to enjoy its beauty and bounty.



MAR22

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

—John 4:13-14

Living Water

Have you ever thought about how much water you use? Over 50 percent of the human body is made up of water, making it essential for life. That's why physicians encourage us to drink so much of it: to replenish the fluids we lose going through everyday activities. Of all the drinks from which we can choose, water is the only one that quenches our thirst for significant periods. Juices, sodas and other drinks taste good but leave us thirstier than we were before drinking.

Water is also an essential substance for animals, plants and the earth in general. It's the first thing God created after the heavens, and a plethora of Bible verses mention it, including today's. Of course, in this verse, Jesus was referring to spiritual water. He calls Himself living water because He is the provider of eternal life and because belief in Him will quench our inner thirst for love, success, appreciation and confidence. However, physical water is just as important to God.

Without a steady supply of clean physical water, you can't live. That's why it's crucial to appreciate the water around you and be a good steward of it. Today, meditate on water when you use it. You can start with this verse and search for other biblical references to water. You'll find several stories of how water helped people physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Thank God for His provision of water and all it does for you. Make water an essential part of your prayers and devotional time today. Drink it, or hold your devotional time near a brook or pond. In addition, find ways to show appreciation for water today. Turn off faucets when they aren't in use. Filter your water to ensure it's clean, and share some with friends and neighbors.



MAR23

*But Lot's wife
looked back, and
she became a pillar
of salt.*

—*Genesis 19:26*

Don't Look Back

Lot's wife is a minor biblical character, usually remembered only for her final sin against God. Her direct disobedience cost her everything, and it only took a tragic moment for her to lose her life and family. Today, let's look beyond that final moment to discover what drove Lot's wife to disobedience and what we can learn from her.

God hasn't turned people into salt statues since then, but He warns strongly against continued disobedience. Moreover, disobedience isn't always what we think it is. As Christians, we strive to avoid obvious sins such as those listed in the Ten Commandments or those explored at length in Bible stories. However, we often let ourselves get away with what we deem small, insignificant sins.

Lot's wife fell into this trap. God asked Lot and his family not to look back as they fled Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot's wife probably intended to obey, but possibly figured one quick look back could do no harm. She may have built a good life in her home, feared for friends and family members or simply been afraid of what awaited her in a new land. We can sympathize with her reasons, but whatever they were, they drove her to sin.

We often have the same problems—especially when it comes to looking back. God admonishes us to focus on what's ahead rather than behind, in both the Old and New Testaments. That's because He knows looking back too much can lead us into insidious sins such as worry, fear and fretting. We won't become literal pillars of salt, but as we do these things, we'll become paralyzed, unable to worship and serve God effectively.

God wants better for His children. If you're struggling with looking back or any of the sins it can lead to, be honest with Him today. Ask Him to help you look forward again.



MAR24

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing ... he refreshes my soul.

—*Psalm 23:1 & 3b*

The Lord Is My Shepherd

Psalm 23 is one of the most famous passages of the entire Bible. Christians turn to it for comfort, peace and refreshment. It's often quoted at funerals to help the grieving focus on the fact that their loved ones are at peace. It's been made into song arrangements that choirs and praise teams sing in churches all over the world.

But what does it mean that the Lord is our shepherd? Why did David choose to compare God to this particular type of person? It might have been because David, himself, was a shepherd, but there's deeper meaning here. Read today's verse again, and think about what a shepherd actually does. He or she watches over a flock of sheep, sitting quietly with them all day. The shepherd makes sure the sheep are comfortable and protected, often putting him or herself in harm's way to shield them from predators.

The shepherd also leads, guides and directs the sheep. He or she makes sure the sheep stay on a prescribed path, and when they don't, uses a crook to nudge them back, sometimes forcefully. When a sheep strays, the shepherd will go after it, and if the sheep is wounded, the shepherd will carry it home in his or her arms.

God does all this for us and more because we're His sheep. He knows we're fragile and prone to stray, so He's as gentle and firm with us as necessary to keep us on the right path. We should praise Him for this, because it's a remarkably unique quality. Today, read the whole 23rd Psalm again. As you do, meditate on and thank God for His role as the good shepherd.



MAR25

Carrying His own cross, He went out to the Place of the Skull (which is called Golgotha). There they crucified Him.

—John 19:17b-18a

Good Friday

It seems strange to call a day Good Friday, doesn't it? That day marks one of the most tragic days in Christian history: when Jesus was crucified. It's tragic on many levels. First, a sinless person was crucified for all the sins of humanity. Secondly, His death was the most painful and shameful first-century Israel and Rome could ever devise. Finally, because our holy God can't look at sin, Jesus was forsaken in the last moments of His human life.

How could anything good come out of this? That was surely the question on the disciples' and other believers' minds that day. It's often a question for today's Christians, too, even though we know the end of the crucifixion story. Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection are meant to bring us hope. Often, though, we can't help feeling stuck in the dark parts of our circumstances. It's easy to focus on them and wonder how God can redeem what we're experiencing.

Be aware that there is an appropriate time to mourn. Solomon, who wrote Ecclesiastes, tells us so. Jesus' disciples may have turned to those words for comfort after He was placed in the tomb. If you're in a period of mourning, give yourself that time; it's normal and healthy.

However, don't forget to give God a chance to redeem what you think is lost. Three days from the events of today's verse, God redeemed the horror of Jesus' death in a glorious way. In His time, He'll do the same for your situation. Ask Him for deeper trust and faith as you wait. Try to go about life as normally as possible, and find small joyous moments. Above all, keep your eyes on the "Easter Sunday" that will come when the day is over. Once it arrives, you may be able to look back and see that your Friday was truly good.



MAR26

*Then the man said,
"Your name will no
longer be Jacob,
but Israel, because
you have struggled
with God and with
humans and have
overcome."*

—Genesis 32:28

Name Change

Today's verse comes at the end of the famous scene where Jacob wrestled with God. Some Christians read this story and wonder why Jacob bothered struggling with the Almighty. After all, God would automatically win. He could have subdued Jacob with little effort. Yet He chose to wrestle with Jacob, perhaps because He knew this child needed to struggle against Him more than any other.

Jacob certainly knew what it was like to struggle at this point in his life. His mother Rebekah favored him, but his father Isaac preferred Esau. For a son (and a younger one at that), this had to be particularly difficult. The Bible reveals Jacob also paid harsh consequences after he participated in Rebekah's deception. He got the birthright and blessing that should have gone to Esau, but he had to flee his homeland because Esau wanted to kill him. In so doing, Jacob lost everyone and everything dear to him.

Perhaps most significantly, Jacob wrestled with his own sin. His name means "he grasps the heel" or "he deceives." Jacob was given this name because when he was born, he came out grasping Esau's heel. Yet he also lived up to the figurative meaning of his name. Earlier in today's passage, the angel of the Lord asked Jacob for his name. When Jacob replies, the angel knows what the name means. He knows Jacob is essentially saying, "My name is Deceiver."

Maybe this is why God gives Jacob a new name at the end of this account. He doesn't want Jacob to focus on sins or regrets. Instead, the new name Israel communicates that God sees Jacob's strength and triumph. Additionally, it communicates an expectation that Jacob will function in strength from this point forward.

You might feel like Jacob today. Your name may not be tied to a specific sin, but maybe struggles and regret weigh you down. If so, you might not be able to change your name—but you can ask God to change how you see yourself. Ask Him to reveal your strengths and show you how they can honor Him.



MAR27

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."

—John 11:25-26a

Easter Sunday

Easter is the most joyous occasion on the Christian calendar. It marks the day Jesus fulfilled His promise and rose from the tomb after dying for our sins. He's the only God to conquer death. Moreover, He's the only God to lower himself to human status and die for His people. These actions are so wonderful and incredible that they've inspired millions of people to become Christians and commit their lives to Jesus.

If you're a Christian, you have every reason to rejoice. Your Savior is waiting for you in Heaven and will return for you one day. When He does, you'll have eternal life. Pain and sorrow will be things of the past, and you'll live in perfect communion with God as He intended before sin entered the world.

But what if you aren't sure you're a Christian? You aren't alone. Plenty of Christians find they need assurance in their lifetimes. It's vital to be certain of your salvation because so much is at stake. Feeling uncertain can be frightening and lonely. If you've ever been in this position, you've probably heard people tell you to trust God with your salvation. This can be difficult to do, though, when one considers that, ultimately, God is the one who knows who's saved.

If you're struggling with assurance, don't settle for pat answers. Instead, use Easter Sunday as an opportunity to reaffirm your standing with God and renew your joy. Find verses that speak to assurance of salvation, like today's. Ask God to give you peace about where you stand. When He does, rejoice that you're His.



MAR28

He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew.

—John 2:9b

Secrets Entrusted to Servants

Today's verse highlights Jesus' first miracle, changing water to wine at the wedding in Cana. When most people read this story, they focus on the miracle, skimming over small details like this one. Yet God often hides important information for His children to discover. Today's verse is a prime example.

Read it again, and focus on who does and doesn't have information. The master doesn't know where the water to provide the new wine has come from. He knows Jesus has provided the wine because he can see Him performing the miracle. Yet the master of the house doesn't know Jesus requested the water. Only the servants who had drawn the water know this.

Why is that significant? A careful reading shows us at least two reasons. First and perhaps most obvious, servants aren't often trusted with exclusive knowledge. They're seen as quiet workers, not confidants. In asking the servants to draw water He uses for the miracle, Jesus takes them into His inner circle—if only for a moment.

Secondly, Jesus' choice shows these servants were both faithful and trustworthy. They could have revealed their part in the miracle and out of pride, but they didn't. Instead, they were content to do as asked and enjoy Jesus' miracle with everyone else.

These servants provide a remarkable example for Christians. We're Christ's servants, and as such, we're privileged to know what our Master is doing. However, we won't always get the credit we feel we deserve or the significant positions other people are afforded. When this happens, it can be tempting to become prideful or bitter. This story encourages us to remain faithful, patient and trustworthy instead, so we can reap great rewards later.



MAR29

He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

—Luke 19:3-4

Zacchaeus' Determination

Most Christian kids grow up with the story of Zacchaeus. Your Sunday school teacher may have taught you a song about this “wee little man” to drive home the point. The classic Sunday school lesson focuses on the fact that although Zacchaeus was a tax collector and sinner, Jesus chose fellowship at his house. Therefore, Zacchaeus was inspired to make restitution to the people he had wronged and seek forgiveness for his sins.

The fact that he was short usually gets glossed over. However, God never puts a detail in the Bible without a reason. In this story, Luke makes sure to tell us Zacchaeus was short. Additionally, we can infer he was much shorter than average for a man, since he had to climb a tree to see over crowds. Why did Luke focus on this detail? Perhaps it was to show us an imitable quality in Zacchaeus: his determination.

The Bible doesn't tell us if Zacchaeus knew who Jesus was at this point. We don't know if he knew Jesus was the Son of God or even about His previous healings and miracles. Still, Zacchaeus was determined to see this man. He was so determined, in fact, that he climbed one of the tallest trees in existence for a better view. This was risky and dangerous, but Zacchaeus decided seeing Jesus was worth it.

When was the last time you took a risk to attain something you really wanted? More to the point, when was the last time you tried to get close to God? The hazard doesn't have to involve climbing a tree or something physical. It can be as simple as reading your Bible at work or as complicated as going on a mission trip to the developing world. If God directs you through, He'll see and reward your determination and risk.



MAR30

*The way of fools
seems right to
them, but the wise
listen to advice.*

—Proverbs 12:15

What Does It Mean to Be Foolish?

April Fool's Day is a fun time when we enjoy playing pranks on each other. However, in today's verse and throughout the Bible, God makes clear that actually being foolish is a terrible thing. Fools are described as hating discipline, being a disgrace to those around them, and displeasing God.

Of course, no one wants to be described this way, but it can be hard to determine what being foolish looks like in our world. For example, you might wonder if God would consider you a fool for sinning occasionally, or if you are foolish for not holding the same convictions other Christians do (for example, never drinking vs. having one glass of wine with dinner).

When considering whether you are foolish, the key is to look at your life and spiritual walk as a whole. A foolish person will not repent of sin and will consistently make bad decisions, without true intent to change. Ask yourself if you are guilty of these or any of the following:

- Not being teachable
- Focusing on sharing your own opinion rather than listening
- Consistently gossiping and slandering others
- Justifying and not apologizing for wrong choices
- Dragging others into sinful behavior
- Consistently allowing emotions to control your actions

If you have engaged in foolish behavior, you can repent and change. Tell God you know what you are doing is wrong, and ask Him to help you become wiser. He will be pleased with your choice, and you will see good results if you continue working and do not give up.



MAR 31

Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else.

—Galatians 6:4

Avoiding the Comparison Trap

Christians are told not to compare themselves to others. In fact, to do so is sinful, because we are effectively saying God's creation and His choices for us are not good enough. Yet, the comparison trap is one we all fall into.

Sometimes envy motivates it—we want the job, the house, the car, or the job our neighbors have. Sometimes it's a matter of low self-esteem—we think the person next to us is more beautiful, smarter or more spiritual than we are. If we could just be more like that person, we would be happy and God would like us better.

The truth is, no matter how you feel and what you can or cannot do, God cannot love you anymore than He already does. He also can't love you any less. He knows you are human and have flaws. While He wants you to improve upon these, He wants you to do so with His help, and not because you're trying to imitate another person. In fact, Paul tells us the only person we should imitate is Christ.

Take some time today to ask yourself how much comparing you do. You probably make comparison statements more than you realize. Pray to determine what motivates these statements and attitudes, and ask God how to kick the comparison habit. Search for verses that affirm your identity in Christ as a perfect heir, a beloved child of God, and someone worth dying for. Remind yourself of the things you do well, and look for opportunities to do them. Finally, ask yourself how you can encourage others. There are probably people out there who compare themselves to you, and you can show them how special they are to God as well.



APR 01

The Meaning of Grace

Grace. It's such a beautiful word. When we hear "grace," we think of fluid dancers or beautiful deer in a forest, or royalty moving through crowds, showing generosity. We also think of virtue and favor. In fact, Grace is a popular girls' name, especially among Christians.

However, what does grace truly mean in the sense of today's verse? As Christians, we know about God's grace and we mention it all the time—"By the grace of God, we got there safely" or, "By the grace of God, my cancer was healed." Yet often, we don't reap all the benefits of grace that we could.

Some people say grace is unmerited favor or not getting what we deserve. To take this a step further, grace means receiving the good things we don't deserve. Jesus was the living symbol of grace when He died for us—we deserved to be crucified, not Him. He continues to show us His grace today.

Sometimes grace is connected to our human nature, like the way God continues to love us and bless us even when He knows we will sin. Sometimes His grace is an unexpected blessing, like the encouraging phone call you get when you're sad or the paycheck bonus you received just when your child outgrew his school shoes. Grace can even be "tough love," such as the gentle but firm scolding you receive from a Christian friend who sees you hurting others with your words and actions.

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

—John 1:17



APR02

*Then desire, after it
has conceived,
gives birth to sin,
and sin, when it is
full grown, gives
birth to death.*

—James 1:15

Sin Gives Birth to Death

Many Christians find today's verse confusing and even a bit scary. They wonder if it means all their desires are sinful or if someday God will strike them down because of their sin. Actually, today's verse means neither of those things. James meant it as a cautionary tale about how sin progresses.

Notice that James starts out talking about desire. Desire in itself is not usually sinful. We all desire certain things, and many of them—such as love, family, health and careers—are good and natural. The problem occurs when Satan, as he likes to do, twists those desires so they prey on our pride. The desire for love is good, but it is not good to say, "I deserve love, so I'm going to have an affair." The desire for health is good, but not if you starve yourself at the expense of your body's needs.

However, twisted desire does not always immediately lead to the worst consequences of sin. How can you know when your desire is giving birth to sin and stop it from giving birth to mental, spiritual and even physical death? The key is to recognize prideful, sin-driven tendencies before they start.

Perhaps your desire for a career has become desperate because you can't find a job. If you've found yourself slipping money out of a spouse's wallet or if you are badmouthing job candidates so they won't get the position you want, your desire has birthed sin. If you've committed to an exercise regimen and are skipping school, work or church to work out, that's newly birthed sin as well. Run from temptation and straight to God. Tell Him what you're doing and ask for help fixing it. An accountability partner or counselor may help.



APR03

⟨Deborah⟩ sent for Barak ... and said to him, "The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: Go, take with you ten thousand men ... I will lead Sisera ... to the Kishon River and give him into your hands."

—Judges 4:67

Deborah's Leadership

Deborah was the only female judge in all Israel, and many scholars have wondered why God chose her without appointing other female judges. Some Christians read Deborah's story and conclude that women are rarely called to lead or should not lead at all. Others assume that Deborah was chosen to lead only because the men around her were weak; if they had not been, God would not have called on her.

In reality, God chose Deborah on purpose, not as an alternative or substitute. He gave her tremendous gifts, including the ability to prophesy, and blessed her leadership. All Christians, especially women, can and should look to her as an example. Deborah lived in a time when it was indeed rare for women to lead or be prophets, and so she was probably frightened or confused when God spoke to her. She probably doubted her abilities and might have asked God to choose someone else. Still, she consistently trusted God, obeyed His commands, and delivered His messages to others.

Maybe you can relate to Deborah today, whether you are a man or a woman. Leadership is difficult, and you may not feel ready. However, if God has chosen you, it's because you have the abilities necessary, and He knows you will obey His commands. Ask Him to teach you how to lead, and then follow Him in all your decisions. You may not save a nation as Deborah did, but you will win the respect of the people under your supervision. You will also help your family, your company and others around you accomplish great things.



APR04

*Drink water from
your own cistern,
running water from
your own well.
Should your springs
overflow in the
streets, your
streams of water in
the public squares?*

—Proverbs 5:15-
16

Stem the Flow

Despite what today's verse looks like, it's not a warning against drinking dirty water. The water is a metaphor for how we speak and how we live our lives. It's an admonition to mind our own business and be careful what we share with others, even fellow believers.

Christian author Karen Ehman recently wrote a book titled *Keep it Shut: What to Say, How to Say It, and When to Say Nothing at All*. Though geared toward women, the book has something to say to everyone. Whether we mean to or not, most of us talk too much at some point. We gossip about people or tear them down with negative words before we know what we're doing. We share intimate details of our lives with people who, though friendly, probably should not know them yet, if at all. Once you say the words, they're about as easy to get back as spilled water into a cup.

This doesn't mean to stop talking or sharing, but it does mean to consider whether our words are uplifting and meaningful, or whether we need to share certain details with certain people. If you aren't sure whether to say something, it's probably best left unsaid. If you haven't known someone long, resist the urge to tell your life story, even if that person is a Christian. If what you are going to say is negative or would hurt the person it refers to, keep your mouth shut. That will stem the flow of negativity that is common to our world. Make your own tongue a pleasant cistern from which others can drink.



APR05

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies.

—1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Caring for Your Temple

Most Christians think of honoring God as a spiritual pursuit. When asked to name things that honor God, they might bring up going to church, reading their Bibles, participating in charitable activities or avoiding certain sins. However, you can and should honor God with your body as well. It's true that your body will pass away one day, but in the meantime, God has given it to you to use. He wants you to use it well and keep it healthy.

How do you honor God with your body? Again, most Christians are familiar with some basics such as eating healthy food and exercising. God approves of these, but remember He's concerned about your whole body—limbs, muscles, heart, brain and more. He wants you to treat each part as well as you can every day. Here are several key ways to honor God with your body.

- **Get enough sleep.** Sleep refreshes you so you can enjoy God's world and do what He calls you to do.
- **Work hard, but take breaks often.** Do all things in moderation.
- **Exercise to feel and look healthy,** not to attain someone else's attractiveness standard.
- **Eat healthy.** Indulge in treats occasionally, but do not rely on them for sustenance.
- **Keep yourself sexually pure.** Wait for marriage if you are single. If you have already been active, make a new purity commitment with your partner.
- **Fill your mind with the things God approves of.** Avoid entertainment that revolves around sinful behavior.
- **When you do get sick, follow doctors' orders.** Let medicine, rest, and good food get you healthy again.



APR06

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage; as they pass through the Valley of Baka, they make it a place of springs.

—Psalm 84:5-6

Passing Through the Valley

“Baka” is a Hebrew word meaning “toil” or “tears.” Christians often use these words in connection with their “valleys” or periods in their lives involving difficult circumstances. Perhaps that’s why the writer of today’s Psalm talked about sojourners of God making a valley of tears a place of springs – a cool and refreshing oasis.

No Christian likes the idea of going through valleys. In fact, we plan ahead as much as we can to avoid them. Unfortunately, valleys and trials often come before we can do anything, and they are part of our journey with Christ. Some trials, such as cancer, a death in our family, or the loss of our home, are not ones we can fix. Often, God allows us to walk through a time of tears in order to help us grow and learn.

Of course, God understands this isn’t easy. Making a valley “a place of springs” does not mean acting happy when you don’t feel it or pretending trials don’t exist. Instead, it means leaning on God and letting Him carry you when you spiritually can’t keep walking. It means searching for His peace and rejoicing as you find it. Those who do this, God promises, are blessed.

Are you or someone you know going through a Valley of Baka today? It may seem small and insignificant to you, but every valley is a place of growth and blessing for God. Ask Him what He wants to show you, and request the strength and courage you need to see it and learn.



APR07

The Lord said to Satan, "Very well then, everything \langle Job \rangle has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."

—Job 1:12

When Life Isn't Fair

Job's story is one of the most famous and complex in the Bible. Many Christians read this verse and wonder what God was thinking—why He let Satan torment one of His most faithful saints. They may also wonder if this is a prerequisite for other humans. Does God treat us like cosmic playthings, letting Satan take control whenever he wants?

Fortunately, the answer is a resounding "no." God loves His children and never lets anything happen to them that He did not permit first. Remember, Satan had to ask God's permission to test Job, and God could have easily said no. The question, then, becomes why He said yes. For the modern Christian, the question might be where God is when unfair things happen.

Most of us won't lose everything as Job did, but we will all go through unfair circumstances. Some of us will endure divorce even though we thought our marriages were strong. Some of us will watch our children get sick or struggle with disabilities. Some will fight to stay above the poverty line while others remain rich and comfortable but don't show charity.

When this happens, cry out to God as Job did. Ask if this circumstance is a test. If so, what you can learn from it. If the circumstance is not a test, but rather a natural consequence of our fallen world, ask for the courage to handle it. No matter what, request an extra measure of God's mercy and love. He will freely and gladly give it to you.



APR08

But the Lord said ... “And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred twenty thousand people, who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

*—Jonah 4:10a,
11*

Jonah’s Anger

When we think of God’s compassion, we normally don’t put anger in the same thought—unless we’re reading about Jonah. Jonah has an interesting reaction to God’s ultimate compassion for Nineveh. Instead of thanking God for sparing the city, Jonah is angry at God’s compassion. In his mind, Nineveh had no right to a second chance. Every inch of it should have been wiped out.

We don’t know why Jonah felt so angry toward Nineveh. Some scholars speculate it was because the people of Nineveh had hurt his own people or even his family. It may also be that Nineveh’s sins so shocked and appalled Jonah that he thought they were unforgivable. No matter His reason though, God sternly responded to Jonah’s attitude. There were thousands of people there, God says, as well as animals who didn’t know what sin was. Shouldn’t He, a merciful God, decide what to do with them?

If we’re honest, we’ll all probably admit we have a Nineveh or two in our lives—it could be the nasty coworker who’s always trying to undermine you in front of the boss. It could be the parent who abused you in childhood, the friend who betrayed you, the spouse who cheated on you or the church whose hypocritical actions broke your heart. No matter who they are or what they did, a part of you doesn’t want them forgiven. In your mind, these people should get what they deserve.

Through today’s verse, God warns us to be careful. Even if you are not guilty of Nineveh-like sins, you are still deserving of wrath. It is only through God’s mercy and grace that you were spared. Remember that, and work up the courage to spare someone today, even if only in your mind.



APR09

*As far as the east
is from the west, so
far has He
removed our
transgressions from
us.*

—Psalm 103:12

No Fishing Allowed!

A pastor once said that when God forgives and saves you, He tosses all your sins into a deep sea and posts a sign: No Fishing Allowed! Tongue in cheek though that description may be, it's apt for almost all Christians. That is, we know we've been forgiven. We know we are saved from sin and death and that God will never leave us. We know He chooses to remember our sins no more. Still, we're always picking up our mental fishing poles and dragging up those old, smelly sins as if they were fresh fish.

This is a sin in itself, because it communicates that Jesus' sacrifice wasn't enough. Why do we still do it? Often, the answer lies in perspective. We know God sees us as righteous, but the tough reality is that we have to deal with our human selves every day. We can't choose not to remember. Sometimes our sins smack us in the face. Even worse, sometimes other people bring up past sins to make us feel guilty.

Maybe you've gone fishing lately, but you want to stop. First, get alone with God and ask Him to show you that you are forgiven, once and for all. Pray openly about how those sins made you feel. Ask Him to help you remember only what is important—that you were rescued from them. If others constantly bring up your past, set boundaries. Explain that their reminders are making change hard, and you would appreciate more support. It may be necessary to get those people out of your life for a while. In that case, you may need a pastor or counselor's help. Whatever you decide to do, remember one rule: No fishing!



APR 10

The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord.

—Proverbs 21:31

Planning and Trusting

“Trust the Lord.” Christians often say this to each other and to nonbelievers, and they are right to do so. God asks us to trust Him, because He is the only one with ultimate control over our lives and because He loves us so much. However, some Christians believe that trust means you should not plan or prepare for the circumstances that arise in daily life. This is incorrect and can be dangerous if taken too far.

God does want us to give Him control, but He also gave us minds capable of anticipating what is coming and planning accordingly. If you know a performance review is approaching, you should do your best work and prepare intelligent questions for your supervisor. If you want to move out of your parents’ house, start saving money early.

Of course, there are many circumstances where we don’t have any control or influence. This is where true trust in God kicks in. When you’ve studied as much as you can for a test, it is up to God to provide calmness of spirit and accurate recall. If you’ve searched for a new job for weeks or months with no success, turn to prayer and relinquish your job to God.

The important thing is to strike a balance between expecting God to do what you can do yourself and planning realistically. It can take time to find this balance, so pray about it and seek help from accountability partners. God will reward your trust and guide you through His plans.



APR 11

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

—Acts 1:8

Power for Everyone

What do you think of when you hear “power of the Holy Spirit?” Most Christians think of the Holy Spirit’s power as some nebulous force that existed in the early church but is not needed or relevant now. This couldn’t be further from the truth. In fact, the Holy Spirit is relevant for every era and generation, and His power is not elusive.

When Jesus came, He made God’s power available to anyone who sincerely sought Him. No matter your ancestry, past sins or current trials, you can access the power of the Holy Spirit, and it will positively influence your life. The Holy Spirit helps us understand our unique spiritual gifts and encourages us to share those gifts with the church as a whole.

The power of the Holy Spirit will look different for everyone. You may not speak in tongues or have miraculous abilities, but the Holy Spirit will still be there. You may feel Him when it becomes easy to witness to a friend. You may sense Him telling you to give money or food to a homeless person, or filling your church during a service.

If you aren’t sure how to recognize Him, ask Him to open your spiritual eyes. God is only too eager to give you His power and courage. Over time, you will learn to recognize and respond to the Spirit’s presence. This will empower you spiritually and draw nonbelievers’ attention to you, so they may ask to know more about your God.



APR 12

In my name they will drive out demons ... they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all.

—Mark 16:17-18b

Watch the Signs

Today's verse comes from a controversial passage; some Bible translations don't even have it as part of the book. Perhaps that is because most Christians don't know how to read it. Some denominations exist that take these signs literally. Just because there are differing interpretations of a Scripture, though, doesn't mean we should undervalue its significance.

At times, Jesus spoke figuratively to His disciples, and this could be one of those times. There is a theory that the snakes and poison discussed in Mark 16 refer to sin and the dangers of a fallen world. A Christian who is able to "handle a snake" may be someone who can be exposed to sin regularly—such as gossip on the job—and not be affected. The "poison" may refer to everyday encounters with sin, such as when a Christian college student is required to read material that glorifies sinful behavior. We all face metaphorical snakes and poisons in our lives, and we must pray that God keeps us strong enough not to be hurt by them.

No matter how you interpret this passage, be careful when you face frightening situations. Do not put yourself in danger in God's name, and do not "test" God to see how much sin you can handle. Instead, pray and study the Bible when the "poison" comes to you. Jesus will give you as much immunity as you need for the situation, and you will triumph. This verse explains the incredible power Christians have in the face of adversity—power you should know is yours as a child of Christ.



APR 13

*Then one of the
elders said to me,
“Do not weep!
See, the Lion of
the tribe of Judah,
the Root of David,
has triumphed”.*

—Revelation 5:5a

The Lion of Judah

If you grew up in church, you're probably used to hearing about "Jesus, meek and mild." You may have sung songs that described Him this way or seen pictures of a smiling, bearded Jesus wearing white robes in Sunday school. Your early spiritual curriculum probably focused on Jesus' mercy—His healings, His holding of little children and His gentle leadership.

Jesus is gentle and merciful, but we sometimes focus so much on His mildness that we forget about His power. As C.S. Lewis said of Aslan, the Christ-like Lion in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Jesus is good, but not "safe." He is a Lion, capable of the greatest power and might. People, angels and demons all tremble at His feet, and His actions and words shock and amaze all who come in contact with them. Jesus is able to command everyone and everything on Earth in a way no other leader could.

Take time to get to know Jesus as a Lion today, especially if you feel powerless. Call on His courage and strength to fill you as you go about life or face difficult circumstances. Ask Him to stand up for you when you cannot do it yourself and to protect you from people and things that want to hurt you. An earthly lion is a predator, but Jesus protects His lambs from becoming the world's prey. As Susan and Lucy did in the Narnia books, climb up onto Jesus, hold onto Him and experience the glory of His might for yourself.



APR 14

*I know that you
have little strength,
but you have kept
my word and not
denied my name.*

—Revelation 3:8b

Little, But Mighty

Today's verse was written to one of the seven churches, the church in Philadelphia. The Philadelphian church is one of the only two for which Jesus had only praise (Smyrna is the other). At first, this might seem confusing. Jesus says Philadelphia has "little strength," so it would make sense for Him to criticize some of what they were doing or not doing. However, He promises them open doors "that no one can shut" and to make their persecutors "come and fall at <their> feet."

What did the church of Philadelphia do to merit such praise and promises? Jesus says they kept His word and did not deny Him. As simple as that sounds, it was probably highly difficult for the congregation. Revelation was written in a time of intense persecution. Thousands of Christians were tortured and killed for their beliefs. It would have been easy for a small church like the Philadelphian one to backslide or even disband. Still, these congregants remained strong and trusted Jesus for their needs.

You may not endure the persecution Philadelphia faced, but you have likely related to their congregation's plight. Maybe God has called you to do something, but you feel too small in spirit to accomplish it. Maybe people around you ridicule your faith, and it's difficult for you to endure. If you are in these or similar circumstances, turn to the church of Philadelphia for encouragement. Ask Jesus to give you strength and open new doors for you. Your efforts will be rewarded greatly.



APR 15

One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. ... The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

—Acts 16:14

Lydia's Faithfulness

This passage is the only place in the Bible where Lydia is mentioned. Other than her hometown, Thyatira, and her occupation, we know nothing about her. Why, then, did Luke, the writer of Acts, choose to mention her? Many scholars believe it was because she was one of Paul's first converts—perhaps his very first. However, there is more to learn about Lydia if we look at her more closely.

When learning about Lydia, zero-in on her occupation. She was a dealer in purple cloth. Purple cloth was a rarity in ancient Israel. Only royalty and the upper echelons of the upper class could afford or wear it. In addition, the indigo dye used to make purple cloth was rare in itself. Producing purple was a long and arduous process that involved working in suffocating, odorous dyeing sheds.

The Bible tells us that Lydia dealt in purple cloth, meaning not only that she made it, but also that she sold it for money. This signals she was a wealthy woman and a merchant, which in turn signals that she was a rare businesswoman in what was very much a man's world. She would have every reason to believe she did not need God—she had already risen far in her world and attained respect women only dreamed of. Yet, the Bible calls her a worshipper with an open heart.

Lydia was not only rich in material possessions, but also rich in her heart. Despite, or perhaps because of, her material blessings, she knew God mattered most and was willing to be His follower even though it might have cost her dearly. Perhaps her faithfulness is why Luke gives her special mention. Meditate on Lydia today, asking God to grant you her richness in heart.



APR 16

*Wives, submit to
your own husbands
as you do to the
Lord.*

—Ephesians 5:22

True Submission

Today's verse is one of the most controversial and misused in the entire Bible. Nonbelievers often use it as proof that Paul oppressed women and God approved. Some use it as a tool to make women submit to spiritual abuse, and some Christians eschew the verse altogether.

God made women with the same care as men, and He expects them to be treated with dignity and respect. Jesus made clear that women are neither sexual objects, nor lesser people to be abused. In fact, some of His most faithful followers, including Mary Magdalene and Joanna, were women.

What, then, should modern women do with this verse? First, they should be confident in the fact that it does not excuse abuse. However, they should also seek to embrace a biblical view of submission. This includes:

- Listening to the husband and respecting his opinion
- Keeping disagreements private
- Allowing the husband to function as the home's spiritual leader (i.e., leading family devotional time, leading family in prayer)
- Allowing husbands to care for and provide for their families
- Respecting the husband and building him up
- Giving the husband his conjugal rights, as he gives the wife hers

Additionally, both women and men should read and meditate the rest of Ephesians 5, where men are commanded to love their wives as Christ loved the church. If men do this well, women should be able to submit with joy, without feeling trampled. If you and your partner struggle with this, seek godly counsel and pray to strengthen your marriage.



APR 17

There was also a prophet, Anna. ... She never left the temple but worshipped night and day. ... Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

—Luke 2:36a-38

Anna's Patience

Many times in the Bible, God says He has a purpose for everyone. Sometimes though, do you feel like He forgot yours? Anna may have felt that way. Luke tells us she was married for just seven years before her husband died, leaving her a widow for more than 80 years. At a time when the value of women was connected to marriage and children, Anna may have felt worthless. She may have wondered if God had "shelved" her. Despite this, we are told she worshipped God constantly, never even leaving the temple.

Anna's extraordinary patience and faithfulness was rewarded when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple. All that time praying, fasting and worshipping gave this prophetess plenty of time to talk to God about the coming Messiah who would deliver Israel. The Bible explains many people expected the Messiah to be an earthly king who would deliver them from the Romans. Perhaps Anna understood better than anyone else that the new kingdom would be spiritual, and this Messiah would deliver His people from sin, the enemy within. If Anna hadn't been so diligent, she wouldn't have been able to share her prophecies about Jesus with everyone when they needed them most.

Perhaps you are in a situation similar to Anna's. You see everyone fulfilling their purposes and wonder what yours is, or think you are somehow "less" because your purpose is not as glamorous or appreciated as others'. Take comfort from Anna today, and rejoice in the opportunity to learn at Jesus' feet. You will be called on to share what you know, and when that happens, God will reward your patience and diligence.



APR 18

Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; He is the faithful God, keeping His covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments.

—Deuteronomy 7:9

Generational Blessings

All people want to leave a legacy—something good they will be remembered for when they are gone. In biblical times, and often today, much of that legacy is wrapped up in our children. Even if you don't have biological children, you can and will leave legacies to adopted children, stepchildren, grandchildren or nieces and nephews. Some of that legacy may be physical, such as talents and characteristics you pass down. Some may be emotional, such as your mannerisms. The most important part of your legacy though, will be spiritual.

God makes clear in the Old Testament that He blesses the generations who love Him but curses those who curse Him. Because of Jesus' new covenant, this no longer means that children can be punished for their parents' sins. However, it means that sin, if allowed to go on for generations, can make it harder for children to accept, worship and love God. Thus, it can be hard for those children to reap divine blessing.

Today, ask yourself what you are doing to leave spiritual blessings for the next generation. This could involve teaching children to read Scripture, pray or guiding them down the path of righteousness. It could involve exposing them to Christian entertainment, teaching them about missionaries or teaching them how godly values play out in the modern world. Every time you see a teachable moment, use it so the young people in your life will understand who God is.

If there is generational sin in your family, you can be the one to break the cycle. Identify the sin—abuse, alcoholism, gambling, drug addiction—and call it what it is. Then, with the help of godly counsel, make a commitment to take steps that remove the sin from your lifestyle.



APR 19

Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained in the way of righteousness.

—*Proverbs 16:31*

Respect for Elders

Today's senior citizens live much different lives than those in biblical times. In ancient Israel, elderly parents and grandparents often lived under the same roof as adult children and grandchildren. Because they lived so much longer than people do today, older people were considered walking examples of wisdom. They were respected as family leaders and diligently cared for. They were consulted often, and their opinions held plenty of weight.

Compare that to the way seniors are often treated today. They are seen as irrelevant because their generation has passed. They are often placed in low-income housing or nursing facilities away from their families. Some elderly people who do live with families are not treated as vital members of the circle. Certainly, this is not the case all the time. Many senior citizens are loved and cherished. However, it is rare that their gray hair and years of hard-won wisdom are treated as crowns of glory.

Solomon may have thought about these situations when he wrote today's proverb. Here, he admonishes readers to go beyond "respecting their elders." In describing gray hair as a crown of splendor, Solomon indicates that the aged, no matter their physical and mental condition, are to be revered. Even if they cannot share their experiences, these are to be learned from. They are to be cared for and loved, and to participate in family activities as much as possible.

If you have a senior citizen in your life, such as an aging parent or a grandparent, visit them today. If you can't, call or email to say how much they mean to you. Ask them about their lives and what they want you to know, and truly listen. Your efforts will be rewarded when you attain your own gray crown.



APR 20

You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

—2 Corinthians 3:3

A Living Bible

A pastor once said that as Christians, we should live our lives carefully because we may be the only Bible some people ever read. St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel ... use words if necessary." While it is good for all people to read Scripture, our lives should be the first example nonbelievers turn to when exploring the Christian life. If others see us acting the way we say Jesus would have us act, they will be more likely to embrace the Gospel.

Of course, this is easier said than done at times. We are human, so we are bound to do something sinful now and then. Additionally, many nonbelievers are hostile toward Christians and use every mistake we make as proof that we are not what we say we are. It is best not to listen to every angry word we hear, but the Bible teaches self-examination is a good thing.

Periodically during your prayer and devotional time, ask God to show you areas where your Christian walk could improve. This does not mean questioning your salvation or engaging in legalism. It simply means opening yourself to the possibility of new growth. If God does show you an area to work on, ask Him what your first steps should be. For instance, if negativity is an issue, ask God to teach you to say positive things to others. If you spend too freely, ask God to help you make a conscious effort to save or tithe.

No Christian will ever be perfect on Earth, but we do have the opportunity to be living Bibles. Our actions can make Scripture come alive for others. As Christianity becomes more relatable, more people will be eager to learn about and worship our God.



APR 21

These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings.

—Colossians 2:22

The Right Rules

Paul addressed today's verse to the church in Colosse. This church sincerely loved Jesus but had gotten caught up in the strictures of religion. One verse earlier, Paul describes their anxious pursuit of perfection. They submitted to human rules that taught, "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" These rules applied to everything they did and were apparently choking the life from their worship. Paul was trying to explain that the rules were killing their worship.

Rules are generally good things. After all, God gave us the Ten Commandments so that we would know how to treat Him and others. Jesus teaches us to love Him and love our neighbor. However, many Christians often add to these with the manmade rules of their denominations or personal preferences. Recognize what are matters of faith and what are matters of church doctrine, because the two may be different.

Personal conviction is a matter between the individual and God and should never be judged. Be careful though, that you and the Christians around you do not place human rules or routines where God ought to be. If your church is holding you to unbiblical or abusive standards, get out as soon as possible. If you yourself struggle with legalism, pray to recognize it and seek godly counsel so you know what is of God and what you are clinging to for your own religious satisfaction. As you replace legalism with trust and grace, you will feel freer, and your worship of God will be deeper and more authentic.



APR 22

The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

—Exodus 12:13

The Passover Blood

This month, Jews will celebrate Passover. Today, many Christian denominations—especially Messianic Jewish ones—hold Passover Seders and ceremonies to show their solidarity with the Jewish people. No matter what denomination you come from, Passover is a time to celebrate liberation.

The Israelites celebrated their first Passover in recognition of their physical freedom from slavery in Egypt. They also celebrated that God spared them and their children from the plagues visited on Egypt, particularly the tenth plague, which prescribed the death of all Egypt's firstborn. For today's Jews and Christians, Passover is a remembrance of physical freedom but can also celebrate emotional and spiritual liberation.

Although you may be a veteran Christian, you may have been in slavery to sin. Jesus liberates us from that slavery, but you have probably felt enslaved to something in your life. It might be a difficult job, a tense family situation, a serious illness or something else. Sometimes, you will literally be freed from these things. Your addiction may fall away, your illness may go into remission or your family member may apologize for hurting you.

However, what if liberation does not seem possible or simply will not happen on Earth? Passover can still be a time of celebration for you. Instead of focusing on physical, earthly problems, focus on the freedom Christ gives you. Ask that He would teach you to walk and act as a free person, filled with His peace, love and other fruits of the Spirit. Do not give up hope for physical deliverance, but leave it in His hands as you increase your trust in Him. Above all, let the Passover remind you of His sacrifice, which He made so you could be free indeed from the most evil slave master of all.



APR 23

*David said to Saul,
“Let no one lose
heart on account
of this Philistine.
Your servant will
go and fight him.”*

*— 1 Samuel
17:32*

You Can Win Against Goliath

The story of David and Goliath is familiar to anyone who grew up in church. It's one of the first stories told in Sunday school. The message is familiar—no matter how big your adversary, you can win with God on your side. Yet as we grow up, that story seems harder to believe, almost like a fairytale or a myth about Greek or Roman heroes.

God never puts a story in the Bible without a reason, and He never specifies that certain narratives are only for children. When God inspired the writer of 1 Samuel, He knew we would all face Goliaths in our lives. Sometimes they are people—an unfair boss, a school bully or another kind of adversary. Sometimes they are the places we are afraid to go or the circumstances we are afraid to face, like a new city, a disability, a sickness or simply a new chapter in life. These adversaries are different “sizes,” but sometimes they all feel too big to defeat. Like David, we sometimes look at them and feel all we have to fight with is a few small pebbles.

If you're facing a Goliath, run back to this familiar Sunday school story today. Tell God the truth—you don't feel like David and you're afraid to fight. God is truth, so He responds well to it. He will give you the inner strength you need. He will also equip you with the right weapons, whether those are the right words, the right career move or the right decision at a crossroads. Your adversary will shrink, and you will be able to handle it. Once you have, you can claim another victory and praise God.



APR 24

*We all, like sheep,
have gone astray,
each of us has
turned to his own
way; and the Lord
has laid on Him
the iniquity of us
all.*

—Isaiah 53:6

Like Sheep

Sheep are thought of as friendly, cuddly animals. If you have a baby or young child, you might have painted lambs on the walls of the nursery. Bible story pictures often show Jesus or David lovingly tending sheep. These images can make Christians forget that sheep are also notoriously stubborn and somewhat dumb. They stray even after the shepherd has corrected them. When one goes somewhere dangerous, others follow, even if they can see the peril ahead. Sometimes, the shepherd has to break a sheep's legs to bring it back to the fold.

Few of us end up with broken legs when we sin, but we are quite similar to sheep. We don't always rebel openly, but we tend to want control and our own way. We think we know what is best for ourselves, so we sometimes make decisions without consulting God. We assume we can't get hurt, so we do things we know are harmful. As a result, God has to yank us back to the path. In fact, He offered His life, the ultimate sacrificial lamb, so our sin would not end in death.

What kind of sheep are you today? Are you following behind the Shepherd, or are you being stubborn and seeking control? Perhaps you're a new Christian, a lamb in need of guidance. No matter what your position is, don't be afraid to come back to the Shepherd, even if you have strayed. Repent of sin if it exists, and seek His guidance more. As time progresses, you will be more likely to follow closely than to stray.



APR 25

Do you not know that in a race, all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.

—1 Corinthians 9:24

Running a Good Race

If you've ever participated in a marathon, race or other athletic event, you know how taxing it can be. For those of us who are not athletically inclined, our weekly workouts can be a commitment in themselves. Some of us have other "races," such as finishing a college degree, raising children or completing a stint in the military. No matter what the race looks like, it can require plenty of stamina and get tiring. Sometimes you might wonder if running is even worth it.

In today's verse, Paul assures us that every race is worth it and encourages us to run in a way that makes us worthy of the prize. When Paul wrote this verse, scholars speculate he was subtly jabbing Nero, who would award himself medals in athletic games just because he was emperor. However, he was also talking about the self-discipline of life as a Christian and encouraging all believers to do their physical and spiritual jobs well.

You may not receive medals for raising your children, completing your degree or living life well in the face of cancer, lupus or a physical disability. God, however, will know what you've done and be pleased. The Bible says He awards crowns of victory to all believers at their judgment, and that a "cloud of witnesses" cheers us on in Heaven each day.

If you are physically, emotionally or spiritually tired today, take a break. Ask God to remind you of the witnesses cheering you on and of the people behind you in the Christian race. Those people are counting on you to lead them. Pray to be shown how to do that. Above all, keep the end in mind, because it will be great.



APR 26

Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the Lord.

—Leviticus 19:14

God and Inclusion

At first glance, it seems the Bible has little to say about disabilities. Jesus healed many disabled people, but with the exception of blind Bartemus, they are not named, nor are they seen after their healings. The Bible also uses terminology that many modern disabled people and their advocates consider offensive, such as “crippled,” “lame,” or “dumb” (in reference to those who cannot speak). The Bible’s writers did not mean to offend. This was simply how disability was viewed in their day. Does that mean that God sees people with disabilities as lesser beings?

Today’s verse tells us no. In fact, it indicates God deals harshly with those who mistreat or exclude people based on disability. He specifically references causing the blind to fall and cursing the deaf, pointing out that this is taking cruel advantage of these people. We can infer God feels the same way about other disabilities—that those who have them should be loved and respected as equals.

Most Christians and churches try to do this as best they can, but their members with disabilities still sometimes feel segregated. Often, this is because disabilities make people uncomfortable, or they aren’t sure how to interact. Keep today’s verse in mind next time you encounter a person with a disability. Speak directly to him or her, even if the person can’t speak back. Show interest in their lives, and communicate that they are valuable to you and to God. When the opportunity presents itself, find ways for people with disabilities to participate in your activities. Instead of causing these people to stumble, you will be helping them live a full and rich life.



APR 27

The righteous care for the needs of their animals, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel.

—Proverbs 12:10

Caring for Animals

These days, there is plenty of conversation and controversy surrounding animals. Many people make a distinction between animal welfare and animal rights, stating that since animals cannot reason as humans do, they do not have rights. Others are passionate about animal rights. Some refuse to consume meat or all animal products such as milk and eggs. Some eschew wearing leather or fur. Some people have many pets and treat them as children.

The Bible doesn't say much explicitly about how to treat animals, but today's verse gives us a clue. God calls people who care for animals "righteous," indicating that He considers animal cruelty sinful. Elsewhere in the Bible, He carefully creates all animals. In the Gospels, Jesus tells the Pharisees that a righteous man will pull his donkey from a well on the Sabbath; therefore, people should be able to seek healing on the Sabbath as well.

God does not tell us to treat animals the same as humans. Actually, this would dishonor our position as the only creations made in God's image. In some cases, it can cross into animal worship, which God makes clear is wrong in Exodus 32, the story of the golden calf, and elsewhere. No person or animal should ever be put in God's place.

That said, God does expect us to be good stewards of the animals we have been given, pets and otherwise. If we do choose to eat and use animal products, we are to do so out of necessity, not sport. We are to respect and be compassionate toward the animals in our care and make sure their needs are met.

If you have a pet or simply love animals, spend time with them today. Thank God for these unique creations and the roles they play in our lives.



APR 28

May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. ... The one who calls you is faithful, and He will do it.

— 1 Thessalonians 5:23a, 24

He Will Sanctify You

“Sanctification” is one of those complicated “church words” that can confuse new Christians, and even those of us who have believed for many years. Being sanctified means that we are perfectly righteous in God’s sight, although we are still working out our salvation and growing spiritually on Earth.

The concept of sanctification can make being a Christian seem like a great deal of work. In fact, some Christians take sanctification to mean that they must become as close to perfect as possible, constantly policing and modifying their behavior. In reality, this is not a fulfilling Christian life. It can lead to mental and spiritual exhaustion, frustration with self and resentment toward God.

Perhaps this is why Paul ends 1 Thessalonians on the note that he does. Paul cared for all the churches he visited, and he surely wanted all of their congregants to grow to be righteous Christians. Still, he must have known that to do so, the people of Thessalonica—and all other churches—would need plenty of God’s peace. Therefore, in today’s verse, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that God ultimately sanctifies the believer. Our efforts to change our behavior do not make us righteous. Rather, God does as He changes our hearts. As our hearts become tender toward God, we become more willing and able to express our faith.

If sanctification feels like work today, do not lose heart. Instead, ask yourself if you are trying too hard or focusing too much on your own efforts. If yes, tell God how you feel, and how difficult it can be to stop relying on yourself. Ask Him to show you how your heart has changed and direct you to opportunities to find joy in Him.



APR 29

When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had driven seven demons.

—Mark 16:9

Complete Deliverance

Mary Magdalene is a famous biblical figure, but not a well-known one. She appears only a handful of times throughout the Gospels, and most Christians aren't sure about her true history. Many Bible scholars say she was a prostitute, equating her with the "sinful woman" who wiped Jesus' feet with her hair in Luke. Whether this is true or not, we do know Mary Magdalene fought demonic oppression most of her life. This could have been literal demonic possession, or it may have been what we know today as psychosis. In either case, Mary is described as having seven demons Jesus drove out.

Seven is a significant biblical number. It's the number of completion and comes up often in the Old and New Testaments. For example, Naaman washed in the Jordan River seven times to be cured of leprosy. There are seven seals in Revelation. Some scholars believe Mary Magdalene's seven demons are a mark of completion, too. In other words, Mary was completely oppressed. Outside of Jesus, there was no hope for her.

However, Jesus drove out all seven of Mary Magdalene's demons effortlessly. We don't see her healing, but we are told she became one of His most devoted followers. Perhaps this was because she knew, deep in her soul, the joy of complete deliverance. She placed every ounce of hope in Jesus, knowing that with Him, she was free of oppression forever.

Oppression is very real and comes in many forms. It may be a sin you can't conquer or a lie you believe about yourself. Whatever it is, take heart that Jesus can and will deliver you. Then, like Mary Magdalene, follow Him as closely as possible.



APR 30

Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the planting and harvest season you must rest.

—Exodus 34:21

The Value of Rest

Rest and relaxation always sound good in theory. When we actually try to rest, we sometimes find ourselves unable to do it. We get preoccupied thinking about the work we should be doing, or we find chores and activities to fill up what feels like wasted time. Sometimes, we try to justify this with Scripture, citing verses about the virtue of diligence.

God wants us to be diligent, but He also knows there is a time and place for everything, as it says in Ecclesiastes. He wants us to do the work set out for us but take time to rest as well. Rest is vital to our physical, mental and spiritual health. It helps our bodies recuperate, so when the relaxation period is over, we will feel energized. It also helps us focus on taking care of our brains and our hearts.

This month, you may be struggling to find time to rest, or you may be tempted to use time meant for relaxation to do other things. Pray, asking God to reassure you that it's okay not to be busy. Read verses such as today's or read from Matthew, where Jesus discusses His light and easy burdens. Then focus on recreation and relaxation. You don't have to sleep, although a long nap may be beneficial. Do your favorite quiet activities, such as reading or watching an uplifting movie. Spend quality time with family and friends or lengthen your devotional time. When the time comes to work again, you'll find you are more than ready.





MAY 01

Vashti's Courage

Queen Vashti is only mentioned in one chapter of the entire Bible. After this, King Xerxes dethroned her and cast her aside. Despite this, let's not gloss over her courage. The king's seven eunuchs made Vashti out to be a willful and disobedient queen. They convinced the king that her actions would corrupt all the women of Persia. However, most Bible scholars suggest this was not her motive at all.

We can't be sure why Vashti refused to come before the king. Some scholars speculate it was because he wanted her to parade naked in front of the court, wearing nothing except her crown. Others say she refused to be objectified or that Xerxes' drunkenness and revelry angered her. Whatever the reason, Vashti made a gutsy choice here. She placed her own dignity, modesty and self-respect before a royal command. She risked being killed immediately.

Few of us will ever be faced with the kind of choice Vashti made. We should also keep in mind that God does not want us to disobey authority whenever we feel like it. Sometimes, a person in authority may ask us to do something we know goes against God. In those cases, we are free to respectfully disobey. If you ever find yourself in such a position, remember Vashti and ask God for strength like hers.

Your choice may end badly. You may lose a job, a friend or a coveted position in an activity or ministry. Yet, if your motives are good, God will be pleased and will honor your decision. You may not see how right away, but rest assured that He has good plans for you.

... when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him ... to bring before him Queen Vashti... Queen Vashti refused to come.

—Esther 1:10-12a



MAY02

In your anger, do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.

—Ephesians 4:26-27

Righteous Anger

Everyone gets angry. It is a human emotion and in itself, not sinful. These verses point out that it is what we do with anger that makes it sinful or not. When we choose to let anger control us, we are more likely to sin with our words or actions.

However, what about righteous anger? This term is often used in Christian circles but is unfamiliar to many people. Simply put, righteous anger is hating or becoming angry at the things that anger God. For example, you could experience righteous anger at a person who abuses a child or an animal or someone who takes advantage of the disabled or elderly. You're might experience it when you become angry at what terrorists do to innocent persons across the world or when you react to news of murder or rape.

God understands our anger in all situations, but He wants us to express it in constructive ways, especially when it is righteous. Whenever you are angry, think as carefully as you can about the best way to express it. God might lead you to write a letter to someone in power about your grievances or participate in a protest. He may ask you to stand up for an abused or marginalized person. You may simply be led to pray for the situation and the people in it, that their hearts will turn toward God.

Whatever you are led to do, do it faithfully. Let God help you deal with your anger and be ready when it's time to let the anger go. Once you've worked through the emotion, you'll be better able to do the next thing God has in store for you and show compassion to the people you encounter.



MAY03

Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory!

*—Revelation
19:6-7*

Hallelujah!

Did you know “hallelujah” is the only word that’s the same in every language across the world? Perhaps God planned it this way so anyone who wanted to praise Him, no matter their national origin, could do so with all brothers and sisters in Christ at any time.

We know we are meant to praise God, and He is worthy of our praise and worship. However, how often do we truly consider how much our praise means to Him? He doesn’t need it; God is God all by Himself and is fully aware of His power and accomplishments. Yet He chooses to request and require our praise, not because He has a big ego but because He loves us. God sees how much joy it gives us to praise Him and how it can lift us up in trying circumstances.

You may not feel comfortable shouting “hallelujah,” and that’s okay. Your hallelujahs can be as quiet as whispers. They don’t even require words. God gave each Christian unique gifts and talents that they can turn into worship. If you are a dancer, dance in praise. If you are a writer, write your own psalm or create a story or poem with God at the center. Labor such as washing dishes or doing janitorial work is a form of praise if done with a glad heart.

What about the times you don’t feel like praising? Be honest; tell God your heart doesn’t have a “hallelujah” in it right now. Then, ask Him for the strength to focus on praiseworthy things, such as the death and resurrection of Christ or the beautiful creation around you. No matter what form it takes or what language you are speaking, God knows how to interpret your praise. It is always “hallelujah” to Him.



MAY04

Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Jesus Christ.

*— 1 Thessalonians
5:16-18*

The Importance of Prayer

In the U.S., the National Day of Prayer is a time when Christians and other faithful people go to their churches or sacred sites to pray or take time to pray while going about daily tasks. That day isn't more special than any other day. God hears and answers prayer all the time. Today, let's focus on why it's so important to pray.

In verse 17 of today's passage, Paul tells the Thessalonians to pray continually. Some translations say, "Pray without ceasing." Did he mean, spend copious amounts of time in a closed room on your knees? You can do this if led, but praying without ceasing is much easier if you do it in frequent small increments throughout your day. Your prayers don't need to be long or eloquent. They can be only a few words. If you are learning to pray without ceasing, or need a guide, consider the following prompts:

- **Pray on a small to large scale.** Start with needs in your hometown or region, then your state, your country, and finally the world. Pray for the Fruits of the Spirit to be present in every Christian and for nonbelievers to know Christ.
- **Pray for the people you see each day.** These can include your coworkers and boss to the coffee barista or janitor. Ask names if you don't know them, so you can pray for them by name.
- **Pray about your spiritual gifts.** Ask God what they are and for opportunities to use them.
- **Pray for leaders,** that local, state, country and world leaders will make wise decisions.
- **Pray for greater love** of God and people around the world.



MAY05

*Simon, Simon,
Satan has asked to
sift you as wheat.
But I have prayed
for you, Simon, that
your faith may not
fail. And when you
have turned back,
strengthen your
brothers.*

—Luke 22:31-32

A Time of Sifting

These verses are probably familiar. They take place during the Last Supper, when Jesus warns Peter of his impending denial. When most Christians read them, they focus on how Peter must have felt upon hearing this news. Yet, most of us skim over an important part of this story—that Satan had asked to sift Peter, and Jesus had already prayed for this precious disciple.

Sometimes, Satan will want to sift us as He did Peter. There are several reasons for a metaphorical sifting. It might happen because you've been sinning habitually and God wants to bring you back into a right relationship. It may be that God will use a sifting time to help you grow and prepare you for a new assignment in Him. Sometimes, sifting happens because Satan sees you as a threat to his work.

No matter what the reason, take heart in knowing that Jesus is never surprised. He never allows Satan to do anything He didn't approve first, and He will never let Satan harm you beyond what you can bear. Be encouraged, also, because Jesus prays for you when sifting time comes. He wants you to triumph, and in His strength, you will. If you sense sifting is coming or that you are already in the midst of it, ask Him to show it to you. Then ask for more of Jesus' prayers. When Jesus prays, all the saints and angels in Heaven join Him. You have a huge crowd of supporters on your side.



MAY 06

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables."... They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

—Acts 6:2, 5a

Waiting Tables for Christ

At first glance, it might seem the disciples were a bit arrogant in today's verses. Some people read these verses and wonder if the apostles thought waiting on tables and other menial tasks were too good for them. In reality, it seems the disciples were expressing their concern for how both tasks—serving people and preaching the Word of God—would get done. The verses indicate they chose only those "full of faith and the Holy Spirit," like Stephen, to complete the task of serving overlooked people like widows.

It's human nature to eschew these tasks in favor of ones that will put us in the spotlight. It's also tempting to be angry or frustrated when we are relegated to serving food, stacking chairs or cleaning up after others rather than, say, singing special music or leading Bible study.

God has a place for all work, whether it's showy or behind the scenes. He also doesn't want Christians who perform behind-the-scenes tasks to feel inferior to others. In fact, the work nobody sees is often the most important of all. For example, a special church dinner won't go over well if enough food isn't cooked and served. No one wants to drop off his or her children in a dirty or understaffed church nursery.

If you have been led to "wait tables" in your church, at work or as part of a ministry that you serve, accept your assignment. Ask God to help you do it cheerfully and diligently. If others are acting superior toward you, pray they will see your work's value and show more compassion. Above all, remember you are working for the Lord, and He is pleased and proud of what you are doing for His kingdom.



MAY07

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

—Colossians 4:6

Well-Seasoned Conversation

The Bible tells us to speak graciously, but that is often more difficult than it looks. Gossip or hurtful words often slip out when we don't mean them to or because we're upset with someone else. Many Christians struggle with cursing or other language that tears others down instead of building them up. Perhaps this is why so many verses, including today's, admonish us to speak with grace and truth.

What does it mean to have grace-filled conversations that are "seasoned with salt?" Here, salt is a metaphor for the truth of Christ. It harkens back to Jesus charging His disciples to be salt and light on Earth. If your conversation is "seasoned" yet gracious, you will not use Christ as a tool to bludgeon others verbally. Instead, you will speak the truth in love.

Gracious conversation also means making sure your words are as positive as possible. Instead of gossiping about a coworker you don't like, make the effort to compliment something about him or her. Instead of flinging hurtful words at a spouse when they make you angry, take time to cool off, and then be willing to apologize and work out the problem. If you must share a painful truth with someone, do so gently, and make clear you have the other person's best interests in mind.

What if God leads you to have a seasoned, gracious conversation with someone whose faith is different from yours? This may be one of the hardest things you are asked to do, but God will give you the power. Approach the person kindly and ask him or her for their story. Why do they believe as they do? Why are these beliefs important to them? Work to find common ground as you prepare to introduce the other person to Jesus.



MAY08

She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

—Proverbs 31:26-27

Mother's Day

During the month of May, we honor our mothers. God is the Father of us all, but He also gave us mothers to nurture and instruct us in a different way than fathers do. Mothers are the parents who physically grow children inside them. A mother is the first person a child sees and bonds to when he or she is born. If cultivated carefully, the relationship between a mother and child will become one of the strongest and most important in the lives of both parties.

There are many ways to honor your mother this month. You might take her out for a favorite meal or complete chores for her so she can rest. You might buy her gifts or take her on a special outing to a movie, concert, or some other activity. If you need fresh ideas, try a few of these:

- Write a poem or an acrostic using the word MOTHER, expressing love and appreciation.
- Gather some favorite photos of yourself and your mother, and put them in a scrapbook or slide show.
- Make a card featuring Mom's favorite Bible verses.
- Make a "favor coupon book." Your mom can cash in different coupons at any time.
- Offer your mom a massage or spa day, or simply a big hug.

What if your mother is not alive or you had a difficult relationship? Pour out your pain to God. He knows the grief of losing someone precious to Him and will comfort you. Honor your mother in the best ways you know how, such as visiting a grave or speaking positive words. If necessary, seek help and godly counsel, and give your mother all the love you can.



MAY09

Now Haman thought to himself, "Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?" So he answered. ... "Have them bring up a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden. ... Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets."

—Esther 6:6a-9b

Justice and Honor

We all probably know at least one person who is arrogant and craves honor and power, like Haman. This person may be morally bankrupt and out to hurt those who do the right thing, and yet they receive and expect praise and special privileges from the people in charge. Whether this person is a coworker, a teacher, an activity leader or someone else, dealing with them can be extremely frustrating.

In this passage, God reminds us there will be honor and justice for those who honor Him and do what is right. Haman was a conniving and manipulative person. He even manipulated King Xerxes into agreeing to exterminate the Jewish nation because of petty anger at Mordecai. However, Haman was ultimately not the one the king delighted to honor. That privilege went to Mordecai, who not only saved King Xerxes' life, but also expected no recognition in return.

Mordecai is a great example for Christians to follow. If you receive an opportunity like his, don't boast about it or demand recognition. Instead, do what you are asked or led to do quietly, because you know it is right. Wait for recognition to be offered or for someone else to bring up your good work.

If a person like Haman is getting honor and privileges he or she doesn't deserve, or you are being treated unjustly at their hands, remember this story. Eventually, Mordecai was paraded through the streets like royalty, while Haman was hanged on the gallows he built for Mordecai. You may not be treated like royalty, and your adversary probably won't be killed. However, God will honor your commitment and see your tormentor is made to answer.



MAY 10

But Jehosheba, the daughter of King Jehoram and sister of Ahaziah, took Joash son of Ahaziah and stole him away from the royal princes, who were about to be murdered. She put him and his nurse in a bedroom to hide them from Athaliah; so he was not killed. He remained hidden with his nurse at the temple of the Lord for six years while Athaliah ruled the land.

—2 Kings 11:2-3

A Hiding Place

Athaliah is remembered in history as one of Israel's most wicked queens. She was so anxious to be crowned queen that she was willing to kill all the royal princes—her own grandchildren. This put Joash, the rightful heir to the throne, in grave danger. Fortunately, his Aunt Jehosheba also is remembered, for her courage and compassion in hiding Joash and his nurse for six years.

Like Joash, all Christians will need a hiding place at some point. Many Christians, such as the ones under siege from some terrorist groups, need physical hiding places to keep from being killed. Sometimes, hiding places also protect us from physically, verbally or mentally abusive people, or from dangerous situations such as natural disasters.

Many times though, we find ourselves in need of an emotional or spiritual hiding place. This can happen at any time for a variety of reasons. Maybe you or a family member is seriously ill and needs healing or provisions for medical costs. Maybe you are a veteran seeking refuge from mental and physical trauma. Perhaps your job has become overwhelming or someone you work with is trying to sabotage you.

In all these cases and a plethora of others, God offers Himself as our ultimate hiding place. In the New Testament, Jesus expresses how much He wants to take Israel under His wings as a mother hen does to her chicks. He feels the same about us. Many Bible verses speak of God's ability to protect, nurture and comfort us. If you need a hiding place today, seek God first. If your hiding place needs to be physical, reach out to family and trusted friends who will help you find one and protect you from people and things who would try to hurt you.



MAY 11

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.

— 1 Timothy 1:13

No Stain Too Deep

Paul has plenty of negative descriptors for himself in today's verse, and it's not likely any Christians in his era would contradict him. Paul was guilty of all the things he says he is, and he says he "acted in ignorance." Essentially, he calls himself stupid for persecuting and killing Christians.

To the human eye, Paul does not look like the kind of person Jesus would use to spread the Gospel and further His kingdom. Yet, Paul was the exact person He chose, despite Paul's past. Paul's story can offer hope to any Christian who has a particularly sinful past, as well as one who doesn't but feels he or she can't be used by God for whatever reason.

Bible teacher Lisa Harper describes Paul's history with Christians as a "stain" on his resume. She goes on to say we all have these, whether they are significant sins, small ones or simply embarrassing moments or things we don't like about ourselves. Any of these can make us feel disqualified. Again and again, God chooses people who seem the least qualified to do His work. He lifts them up, shows them the depth of His love, and equips them to do what they thought they could not.

Today, think about the "stains" or disqualifications on your spiritual resume. Bring them before God and tell Him how they impact you. Then be still and listen as He reassures you of His love and your potential. He will use everything on your resume—the stains and the accomplishments—to grow you into the person He wants you to be.



MAY 12

*I will not leave you
as orphans; I will
come to you.*

—John 14:18

Not Left as Orphans

Orphans are popular characters in literature and movies. From Little Orphan Annie to Harry Potter, it seems that many major protagonists of the stories we loved as children are orphans. Characters in adult stories fit this description, too. Orphan status is a device writers often use to force their characters to be smarter, stronger and more courageous.

However, being an orphan in real life is nowhere near as romanticized or adventurous as it is in stories. Furthermore, everyone has felt like an orphan at some point, even if they have living parents. You can feel like an orphan if you don't have many friends nearby, if no one seems to understand your situation, or if any family member is absent or has died. Orphan status is one of the loneliest and frustrating in the world.

It's no coincidence that Jesus reassures His disciples and us that we won't be left as orphans. We can't see Him or physically interact with Him, just as the disciples couldn't once He ascended to Heaven. Jesus was prepared for this, and so He sent the Holy Spirit. This third member of the Trinity nurtures and guides us like an inner parent. He comforts us when we're lonely or sad, and He clears our minds when we're confused.

Today, if you're in a situation that makes you feel like an orphan, meditate on this verse. Thank God for choosing to live in you through the Holy Spirit, and ask for an outpouring of that Spirit on your daily life. You may be physically alone sometimes, but God is always with you.



MAY 13

But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

—Matthew
10:19-20

Given What to Say

Christians around the world are regularly arrested, imprisoned, tortured and killed for their faith. To own a Bible is illegal in at least 51 countries. The Voice of the Martyrs recently published a book titled *I Am N*, the collected testimonies of persecuted Christians across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Today's verse is likely dear to those believers.

In the West, it is unlikely any of us will be arrested for our faith, let alone killed. However, Jesus never inspired anything to be put in the Bible without a reason. He knew His disciples would face this challenge and that other Christians would too, for centuries. Jesus also knew that persecution doesn't have to take the form of imprisonment and torture.

American Christians are more likely to experience verbal or psychological persecution. They may be falsely accused or lose their jobs for living out their faith. They may face verbal abuse that can turn into physical aggression or violence.

Today's verse applies to all forms of persecution. Jesus wants to assure us that we need not be worried about challenges to our faith. He promises to give us what to say and do when we need it, as well as the strength and grace to endure. Persecution is not right, and if you can seek justice, you should do so. However, do not be afraid to submit to persecution as Jesus did. Jesus sees your suffering and empathizes—He did no less when crucified. He is proud of your stand and will honor it.



MAY 14

There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father, he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods.

—Daniel 5:11a

Doing the Impossible With God

Daniel is one of the Old Testament figures who scholars speculate experienced the Holy Spirit before Christ's ministry. Certainly, today's verse indicates his intelligence went beyond being smart or perceptive. He was able to discern and interpret things the most educated Babylonians could not. Twice before the events of today's passage, he had interpreted the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar without being told beforehand what those dreams were.

Few of us will be asked to interpret dreams or show a supernatural level of knowledge. If you are a Christian, however, the Holy Spirit lives inside you. The Holy Spirit can, whenever He chooses, use your gifts in ways you never thought possible. Through Him, you may be able to do what you thought you couldn't before.

Additionally, God gives His children measures of virtues like wisdom, diligence, faith and charity. Again, He may not lead you to use them in supernatural ways, but you may find yourself drawn to expressing one or two virtues over others. Study the Christian virtues so you'll be familiar with them, and ask God to show you which ones are strongest in your life. Then use them to further His work. For example, if your virtue is charity, you can give, monetarily and otherwise, to causes in need. If your virtue is diligence, set an example to people in your workplace by finishing assignments on time or offering to help a coworker who is ill. The more you look for the Holy Spirit in your life, the more He will reveal Himself to you, and the stronger your faith will grow.



MAY 15

Pentecost

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from Heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

—Acts 2:1-4

This month marks the beginning of Pentecost, or the end of the 40-day period between Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Some Christian denominations are more familiar with this holiday than others are, but it remains an important one on the Christian calendar because it signals the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit enables believers to be blessed with specific spiritual gifts, all as individual as the believer. He does much more than that, though. Christians can rejoice on Pentecost and every day because the presence of the Holy Spirit means God actively lives inside and guides them.

This was not always the case for those who believed in Yahweh, as God is called in the Old Testament. Back then, some believers, such as David and Daniel, were said to have the Holy Spirit, but His presence was much rarer. The only people who are referenced this way are those who God chose for a specific mission or, in the case of David, saw as "a \langle person \rangle after His own heart."

Jesus wanted to be accessible to all of us, to restore the perfect relationship sin destroyed. This is why He returned to Heaven rather than staying on Earth indefinitely. In His wisdom, He knew we would need Him with us every minute of every day to live the life He called us to live. Furthermore, Jesus allows the Holy Spirit to speak to each Christian in unique ways. The Spirit might lead one person to become a full-time missionary, for example, and another to be His witness to neighbors and local people.

Thank God for the never-ending presence of the Holy Spirit for you and for everyone today. Ask Him to lead you through His Spirit and give you the grace to obey.



MAY 16

Be Utterly Amazed

Look at the nations and watch, and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe even if you were told.

—Habakkuk 1:5

Today's verse comes from the book of Habakkuk, a minor prophet with a big problem. He wrote his book during one of the most chaotic times in Israel, when sin ran rampant and the wicked seemed to prosper, never being punished for their evil deeds. Naturally, Habakkuk turned to God and asked why this was happening. Did God ever intend to stop it? Would there be justice for Israel's faithful?

God's answer not only gave Habakkuk hope, it can impart hope to us as well. Although He does not always exact justice the way we would like, He does enact it, and blesses those who obey Him. Writer Jennifer Rothschild puts it this way—God is not fair, as humans think of fairness. Yet He is perfectly just. If He allows something “unfair,” He does it because He can see the big picture. He knows how every event fits into His plan even when we do not.

Today's verse can also bring hope to people in situations that look hopeless. Maybe you were in remission from cancer or MS, but the disease has returned multiple times. Maybe you have a disability keeping you from getting a job or living the independent life you want. Perhaps you're a woman longing for a baby, but have been unable to conceive for months or years. God doesn't promise to answer our prayers or questions exactly as we want. However, He does promise we will be “amazed” at what He does—so amazed we wouldn't believe it if we knew ahead of time.

Perhaps sinful people around you are prospering or your situation seems hopeless. Meditate on this verse, and thank God in advance for His amazing plans.



MAY 17

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "How long will this wicked community grumble against Me?"

*—Numbers
14:26-27a*

Avoiding Complaining

Here, as in other Bible verses, God cautions His people against complaining. Yet, how easy is it to complain? If we aren't careful, we can find ourselves grumbling and complaining about everything from our jobs to how our kids behave to the food we eat or the traffic we have to sit in. Over time, complaining can wear on our nerves and annoy the people around us, pushing them away. It also displeases God.

God will not "smite" you or punish you for complaining. Because of Jesus' sacrifice, all sin, including this one, is covered. Complaining is still a sin, and one to watch out for. Before you complain, think about whether what you are saying is legitimate. That is, are you upset about something that would upset God, such as the abuse of an innocent person or wanton destruction of the environment? Or are you instead upset at a temporary situation? If the latter is true, pray about it and make an effort to meditate on positive things instead.

Of course, everyday situations can get on our nerves, too. God doesn't expect us never to voice what we don't like. The key is in how we do it. For example, instead of snapping at your children for being too loud, find a place for them to burn their energy and be loud. Instead of griping about a coworker who is lazy, ask him or her if you can help with certain tasks. Whenever possible, turn your complaints into positive comments or find a workable solution for them.



MAY 18

The Good Samaritan

*But a Samaritan,
as he traveled,
came where the
man was; and
when he saw him,
he took pity on
him.*

—*Luke 10:33*

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a familiar Sunday school story. Most Christians who've grown up in church have heard it several times and try to take Jesus' lesson about loving one's neighbor to heart, no matter who that neighbor is. It's common to skim over the identity of the one who showed neighborly mercy in the first place.

Jesus' main audience for this parable was Jewish. Most Jews in His time disliked or outright hated Samaritans. They were considered ethnically inferior or "half-breeds" because they had intermarried with Israelites against God's command. Therefore, they were not allowed to enter the temple or worship as the Jews did. This makes the identity of the one who showed mercy on the robbed man all the more significant.

Look again at the scripture before today's verse. Jesus points out a priest and a Levite saw the injured man and walked away, ignoring him. Jesus doesn't explain why. Perhaps these men were hard-hearted or simply didn't want to get involved. Perhaps they were in a hurry or thought helping the man was not part of God's agenda. The key is that these were two of Israel's religious leaders. They, not the Samaritan, would be the ones expected to stop and show mercy.

Christians can learn much from today's verse. Namely, do not be quick to judge unbelievers as unable to show mercy and other virtues. Sometimes, nonbelievers think to do things Christians don't. Today, pray about the nonbelievers you regularly encounter. Ask God to show you how you can cooperate with them to serve others and show God's love.



MAY 19

As she breathed her last—for she was dying—she named her son Ben-Oni. But his father named him Benjamin.

—Genesis 35:18

Son of My Right Hand

Names are often significant in the Bible. Most Bibles have footnotes explaining what certain names mean, and those names often greatly influence the individual's life. That influence increases and becomes more positive when God chooses to change someone's name. For example, He changed Benjamin's father's name from Jacob, which can mean "deceiver," to Israel, which means, "May God prevail."

Perhaps because of his own name change, Jacob steps in to change his youngest son's name in today's verse. His mother Rachel named him Ben-Oni, which means "son of my trouble." Most likely, she was referring to her difficult childbirth. Maybe, though, Jacob thought seriously about the name and predicted such a moniker would have negative consequences. Thus, he chose Benjamin, meaning "son of my right hand," for this last son of his favorite wife.

In this passage, Jacob acts much like our heavenly Father. Not many of us change our names, but we often feel as if our sin or trouble influences who we are. If we allow troubles to define us, negative consequences will follow. We will be rendered ineffective as Christians and may waver in our faith.

God wants us to remember we are sons and daughters of His right hand. In biblical times, the right hand was the place of honor, which we all occupy as co-heirs with Jesus Christ. If you are struggling with sin or other negative events in your life, lift up your troubles to God. Tell Him how much they affect you and ask to be lifted up. God will faithfully remind you of your place of honor so you can go out with confidence and do His will with full knowledge that your Father loves you.



MAY 20

*But you are a
chosen people, a
royal priesthood ...
God's special
possession, that
you may declare
the praises of Him
who called you out
of darkness into
His wonderful light.*

— 1 Peter 2:9

Who's Your Daddy?

As co-heirs with Christ, we are heavenly royalty. On Earth, we are able to walk and act with grace, dignity and confidence because we are God's special possession. Despite this, the everyday grind and troubling circumstances that go with being human can make us forget our true status. The most devout Christian can struggle with his or her identity as chosen and perfect in God's eyes.

For every Christian, there are different reasons for this struggle. You might have sin in your past that makes you wonder why God would choose you. Maybe your struggles come from an abusive home where you were treated as anything but a special possession. Insecurities related to body image, academic hardships or handicaps might be at the root of your identity crisis.

Whatever those roots are, God is ready to help you dig them up and dispose of them. He is used to identity crises, even among His chosen children, because He made us human. He knows in a fallen world, it's tough to remember who we are meant to be. That's why He offers verses like today's, among many others, to tell us how much He loves us. His Word also gives us plenty of true stories about people who didn't think they mattered to God, but were used mightily.

If your identity in Christ is a sticking point, ask God to show you the truth behind what He says about you today. Remind yourself who your heavenly Father is and what He can do. If He says you are worthy and chosen, no one and nothing can contradict Him. Walk in confidence as a royal child because your Father is the King of Kings.



MAY 21

*Charm is
deceptive, and
beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who
fears the Lord is to
be praised.*

—Proverbs 31:30

True Beauty

These days, the media is full of advice to men and women on how to look and feel more beautiful. Makeup and perfume counters overflow at department stores. Diets, gym machines and body wraps all promise a perfectly proportioned, impossibly thin body. Mannequins are draped with trendy fashions that promise to make anyone look young, confident and glamorous.

In itself, there's nothing wrong with wanting to feel beautiful. Losing weight to be healthy or putting on makeup to enhance one's best features isn't sinful. Today's verse cautions that a dependence on these things makes them harmful. A man or woman can look and act charming but be hateful and manipulative on the inside. Someone may maintain physical beauty for a while, but age and time will make it fade. God wants us to take care of our temples, but the pursuit of physical perfection is not the Christian's ultimate goal.

Today's verse reminds us the true way to be beautiful is to fear the Lord. In other words, put God first in your life. Spend regular time with Him, praying and studying the Bible, and seek what He wants you to know each day. Love yourself and your neighbor, and do things to show His love, such as helping someone with a task or serving in a ministry you enjoy.

Perhaps you regularly struggle with your body image and physical appearance. Find out why, seeking godly counsel from trusted friends or a counselor. Eat well, exercise in moderation and dress in stylish yet tasteful ways. However, remember your confidence comes from the God who resides in you, who loves you unconditionally.



MAY 22

Philip and the Ethiopian

“Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

“How can I unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

—Acts 8:30-31

Philip is one of Jesus' 12 disciples, but this is the only passage that spotlights him specifically. Still, it is an important one from which Christians can glean much. It is often cited as a passage that explains a good way to witness to others.

There are at least three valuable lessons in today's passage. First, let's zero-in on who was with Philip and the Ethiopian—or rather, who was not. Philip was simply walking along the road when he encountered the Ethiopian and shared Jesus with him one-on-one. Some Christians may believe the best way to witness is to a group of people. However, if your comfort zone is just a few, or even one person, that's absolutely okay. Sharing Christ one-on-one may give you time to develop deeper relationships with people, too.

Secondly, notice Philip wanted to know if the Ethiopian understood what he was reading. Often, nonbelievers will be curious about Jesus but may not understand everything about what we believe. When witnessing, ask others what they know and what they think about it. If they get something wrong, don't jump to correct it immediately. Instead, explain patiently.

Finally, remember witnessing opportunities can happen any time. Philip probably wasn't expecting to encounter someone in need of Christ. Don't wait for a church service or another opportunity where the Gospel might “naturally” be shared. Get to know people and their stories. Express your beliefs in everyday conversation, without pressing for a decision right away. The more genuine and open you are, the more attracted to your faith others will be.



MAY 23

With his wife's full knowledge, he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and kept back some of the money you received for the land?"

—Acts 5:2-3

Ananias and Sapphira

This is one of the Bible's most troubling stories. Most Christians skim over or ignore it because they don't know what to do with it. They worry Ananias and Sapphira's story suggests sin will cause God to strike them dead or otherwise severely punish them. Because of the new covenant, God does not discipline Christians out of His wrath, but there must be a particular reason this story was kept in the canon.

Scholars suggest the story is significant because of Ananias and Sapphira's specific sin. As Peter implies, the problem is not that they kept back money from the sale of their property. In verse 4, he points out that the money was already theirs before the land was sold. The issue is that they lied to the apostles and, by extension, the Holy Spirit.

This, however, brings up another question. How can God be lied to if He already knows everything? Scholars speculate this is part of why He allowed the couple's deaths. After all, if God already knows everything, He knows when He is being lied to. He also abhors sin and hypocrisy, two activities Ananias and Sapphira engaged in with full knowledge. That knowledge may suggest unrepentance, which adds to the seriousness of their crime.

What can Christians learn from this story? Again, the lesson is not that God will strike dead anyone who sins. Rather, the lesson is to avoid hypocrisy because it is lying to ourselves and God. The story also cautions us to repent when we sin, understand the seriousness of the sin and avoid it in the future.



MAY 24

He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid."

—Genesis 3:10

Come out of Hiding

Today's verse is one of the most oft-quoted parts of Genesis 3. The chapter explains the entrance of sin into the world and the downfall of humanity. Be careful not to rush past the dialogue between Adam and God. God seeks Adam out in the Garden of Eden to spend time with him, but Adam's sin has made him afraid of God.

How awful must Adam have felt at that moment? We know up to then he and Eve enjoyed a perfect relationship with their Creator. It's joyous to picture the three of them walking and talking in Eden together, and it's amazing to think these first two people had full access to God every day. They could talk to Him about anything and ask any question. Yet their sin shattered that intimacy, partially because it made them afraid to approach God.

Often, we do the same thing. Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we know, unlike Adam and Eve, our sins are already forgiven. There is nothing we can do that would make God love us any less or turn away from us. Still, we hide from Him when we sin. This isn't physical hiding. God's eyes are everywhere. Our hiding may look like avoiding prayer or Bible study, not going to church or simply putting thoughts of God from our minds because of our shame.

God does not want us to drown in shame. He wants to cover our shame with forgiveness, as He covered Adam and Eve with the first clothing. Whenever you sin, run straight to God instead of away from him. Repent and enjoy forgiveness.



MAY 25

Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand and all the women followed her with timbrels and dancing.

—Exodus 15:26

Miriam the Prophetess

When most people think of Miriam, they think of the young girl who helped save her baby brother Moses, keeping watch over his basket as it floated down the Nile. They may also think of her as the one who brought Moses' biological mother to Pharaoh's daughter as a nurse for Moses. Not many people know she was Israel's first prophetess.

As a prophetess, Miriam would have enjoyed a deep and intimate relationship with God. Some Bible scholars and writers of biblical fiction suggest God showed Miriam dreams and visions. Some of these may have been of the 10 plagues unleashed on Egypt before the exodus. Whatever her function as a prophetess, Miriam was considered a leader in Israel. Here, she leads the women in celebration of the Hebrews' new freedom, singing and dancing to the Lord.

Miriam's story and place in Israel is significant for today's Christians, especially women. Your church and denomination may have different views on how and when women can lead. However, nothing in the Bible suggests God never wants women to be leaders. He has called on them for centuries, and they have gladly fulfilled their duties to Him. Miriam is only one such woman. Others such as Deborah and Esther are other popular examples.

If you are a woman who feels called to a leadership role, you might experience anxiety and uncertainty. If you are a man, and a woman in your life has expressed leadership potential, you may feel uncertain as well. Let Miriam's story quiet your anxiety and uncertainty. Pray about what your leadership role should be and how you should enact it. Finally, never be afraid to praise the Lord for His gift to you.



MAY 26

But store up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

—Matthew
16:19-21

Treasures in Heaven

All of us can name what our earthly treasures are. For some of us, our treasures include a spouse or children. Others consider pets as special treasures. Still others make treasures of their careers, money or hobbies. There is nothing wrong with having and enjoying these things. That is often why God gives them to us. Yet today's verse indicates there is a better place to store up treasures: Heaven.

What do heavenly treasures look like? Parts of today's passage give us a clue. Heaven's treasures cannot be stolen or destroyed. They won't wear out with use, and we won't get tired of them and eventually put them in a garage sale or send them to Goodwill. Heavenly treasures are permanent, and their value only increases with time. Therefore, we must look for them and cultivate them.

A heavenly treasure is generally not something you can hold, touch or experience with your senses. Rather, it's often what you do in response to Christ's living in you. For example, your praise and worship time with God is a heavenly treasure. You cultivate heavenly treasure when you visit a grandparent in a nursing home, care lovingly for children, spouses and pets, or stand up for those who can't do so themselves.

Additionally, other earthly treasures can become heavenly ones if we are good stewards of them. Let's say one of your hobbies is reading. If you continually read books that glorify sin and hatred, you are not glorifying God, and that would not be a heavenly treasure. If instead you read uplifting books and share the joy of reading with others, perhaps by offering reading tutoring, you have cultivated a treasure. Ask God to show you how to cultivate those treasures today.



MAY 27

Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown.

—Revelation 2:10

The Victor's Crown

Persecution of Christians has been rampant in almost all nations throughout the centuries. Roman emperors burned thousands of Christians or fed them to lions for refusing to treat the emperors as gods. Christians who spoke against dictatorial regimes such as Hitler's were tortured and killed. Today, Christians across Africa, Asia, the Middle East and some parts of Europe flee their homes to avoid persecution. Yet all these people are assured of a victor's crown in Heaven because they have endured and remained faithful to Christ.

Christians in protected areas can be assured of victor's crowns as well, though our persecution may look different from what is leveled against believers in other lands. When you hear of persecuted Christians, do not feel guilty or assume your faith is weaker than theirs. Remember, every time you stand for Jesus despite what others say, you are proving faithful.

Proving faithful looks different for each individual. Consider what being faithful means to you, and how God is calling you to separate yourself from the world around you. Despite the consequences, be strong in your beliefs and stand by them, even if the world disagrees with you. We are called to be in the world, but not a part of it.

When persecution wears you down, remember a great reward is in store for you. In addition, remember who wears the original victor's crown. A popular praise chorus names Jesus as the wearer and tells us He is the ultimate overcomer. Turn to Him and request strength. He will gladly give it.



MAY 28

Poor but Blessed

*Blessed are the
poor in spirit, for
theirs is the
kingdom of
Heaven.*

—Matthew 5:3

Christians who go on mission trips to impoverished places often report the believers they meet there are some of the most grateful and joyful in the world. They marvel at this, since those believers have so little. Some of our brothers and sisters around the world live in abject poverty on pennies per day. Sanitation, satisfying meals and adequate clothing may be foreign concepts.

Some Western Christians think of this and feel guilty or bitter. They assume Jesus chastises them for having more than poor people, or that He naturally loves and blesses the poor more. Today's verse offers a different perspective on poverty. When Jesus spoke of the poor in spirit, He wasn't only talking about material things, although some of His audience might have been impoverished. He was talking about the state of the spirit.

To be "poor in spirit" means to understand, no matter how much or how little you have, material possessions are not what make you important to God. Money and things may help you reach your goals in this world, but they mean nothing in Heaven. What does mean something is your ability to abide in and obey the Lord. Love, joy, patience and other fruits of the Spirit are what make you rich in Christ.

If you are comfortable from an earthly standpoint, don't feel guilty or assume you must be poor to be blessed. Instead, thank God for your abundance and seek opportunities to share it. Learn about impoverished Christians around the world. Pray for them, and when you hear of their joy, do your best to emulate it in your own life. You may grow poorer materially, but your spirit will be rich.



MAY 29

Memorial Day

When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior."

—Judges 6:12

Gideon probably didn't feel like a mighty warrior when the angel of the Lord appeared and told him he was going to lead Israel in defeating the Midianites. Today, we don't face Midianites, but enemies are still present at home and abroad. As the Israelites relied on Gideon and his men, we rely on our troops to keep us safe from those enemies. Countless numbers of them have died protecting us, and we celebrate their lives this month.

Today, many of our veterans are expected to be mighty warriors, but it's likely they don't feel that way all the time. Statistics tell us thousands, perhaps millions, of veterans deal with post traumatic stress disorder. Others have sustained permanent disabilities or deformities. They have lost limbs, hearing or eyesight, or their faces have been burned or shot through. Every day, these men and women fight to stay alive.

As Christians, we should pray for the troops who protect us. There are many ways to support them and make them feel like the warriors they are. Consider writing an encouraging letter to a soldier or sending cards to troops on holidays like Memorial Day. Volunteer at a local VFW organization or veterans' hospital. Donate to organizations that provide wounded veterans with the services and modifications they need.

If you are a Christian serving in the military, take heart from the story of Gideon and other warriors such as David. Read and meditate on these stories. When you feel fear or anxiety, express it to God, and ask Him for courage and strength. Respect the authority of your commanding officers and treat fellow soldiers with dignity and respect. Finally, always remember you are God's warrior.



MAY 30

*And Jonathan
made a covenant
with David
because he loved
him as himself.*

— 1 Samuel 18:3

Covenant Friendship

David and Jonathan are a wonderful example of friendship. In today's world, friendships can change almost as quickly as they are formed. A teenage girl or boy's best friend today may be his or her worst enemy tomorrow. A coworker you thought you could trust might betray you. You might get offended at something an online friend says and decide to block him or her. This is not the kind of friendship God designed. His desire is for Christians to form lasting and covenantal friendships.

Jonathan's friendship with David was so strong because he "loved David as himself." The Bible tells us how Jonathan took great personal risk to keep his father Saul from killing David. It points out many times how the two were as close as brothers. In fact, long after David became king, he sought out living members of Jonathan's household to show them honor, perhaps to repay Jonathan for his unwavering loyalty.

Your friends probably won't have the opportunity to save you from being killed. You also probably won't feel as close to every friend as David did to Jonathan. However, you can seek out covenantal friendships and cultivate them. Look for friends who share your beliefs and values and will help you grow in faith. Seek people who have the same interests so you can build common ground.

Additionally, remember that covenantal friendship is meant to last. In other words, don't turn your back on a friend if he or she offends you. Instead, work out the issue together. If your friend is engaging in sinful behavior, pray diligently and speak to him or her in love. Love this person as yourself, and allow yourself to be loved in return.



MAY 31

After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, and his wife Priscilla ... and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.

—Acts 18:2-3b

The Importance of Fellow Believers

Aquila and Priscilla are minor biblical characters, but they were clearly important in Paul's faith journey. One of the things that bonded the three so strongly was their mutual occupation of tent making. Like Christians today, Paul, Priscilla and Aquila probably bonded over the common joys and struggles of their occupation. They might have shared tricks of the trade or asked each other's advice on physical as well as spiritual matters.

Christians today should endeavor to find like-minded people at work, school and wherever they go. This does not mean shunning unbelievers. It simply means building a support system with which they can share their deepest beliefs, questions and experiences. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon writes about the value of having such a circle, because "a cord of three strands is not easily broken." The value of like-minded friends is extolled in many other passages, too.

A network of fellow believers is absolutely vital to your spiritual journey. Believers who try to go solo are often vulnerable to Satan's attacks and are more likely to become overwhelmed with circumstances. As the Bible points out, the purpose of Christian friendship is to bear one another's burdens while sharing each other's joys.

If you don't have a network of believers in your life, reach out to find one. Start in your church, or if you don't have one, pray about where God would have you attend. Offer to start a voluntary Bible study or Christian book club at work or school to attract other believers. Recreational sports teams are also good ways to form networks. As you find like-minded people, rejoice in your shared faith together.





JUN 01

God Is Able and Willing

"Immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine." That's quite a promise, isn't it? Of course, we know intellectually God can do anything and everything. He is God, far more equipped and able to do anything people can. Yet, verses like this one continually amaze us. Maybe it's because sometimes we pray for God to do something but don't really expect an answer. Maybe it's because while we know God is able to do what we ask, we wonder if He is willing.

This is a question all Christians face at one time or another. They pray constantly, but their circumstances don't change. Instead, they continue to struggle for physical and emotional survival. Maybe you've been there. Your circumstance might be a church without a pastor, a grim diagnosis, a prodigal child, or something equally as daunting. No matter what it is, you may wonder why God doesn't answer your cries if He is able to do so.

God's sovereignty plays a big role in dealing with this question and the promise of today's verse. That is, God is able to do anything but in His love, He allows Himself to do what is best for us. Like any good parent, He sometimes withholds what we want because He can see a bigger and better picture.

If God seems slow in answering your pleas for help, tell Him how you feel; He wants your honesty. Then ask Him to show you the depth of His sovereignty and love. He'll give you the strength to deal with what you must. What seems like a tangled mass of threads will eventually become a beautiful tapestry of your faith journey.

*Now to Him who is able to do
immeasurably more than all we ask or
imagine, according to His power that is at
work within us, to Him be glory...*

—Ephesians 3:20-21



JUN02

When Jesus was in Bethany... a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on His head as He was reclining at the table.

—Matthew 26:6

The Alabaster Jar

The woman of Bethany, sometimes called Mary, is mentioned in all four Gospels. Here, she's pictured pouring her perfume over Jesus' head. In Luke, it is said she poured it over His feet and wiped them with her hair and her tears. There is debate about this woman. Some scholars say she is Mary Magdalene, while others say she is Mary of Bethany, whose brother Lazarus Jesus raised from the dead. Still others claim she is a sinful woman or prostitute whom Jesus had forgiven.

No matter who this woman was, she did a beautiful thing for Jesus, as He says a few verses later. She was willing to approach Jesus and interact with Him in an intimate way, one most people of her day would've found scandalous. She was also willing to sacrifice her expensive perfume, sometimes called "pure nard," in a selfless act. Likely, she saved for that perfume for many weeks, even months, and had set it aside for the most special of occasions.

Of course, not everyone appreciated the woman of Bethany's gift. All four Gospels record someone—Judas Iscariot or a Pharisee—becoming indignant at the "waste" of perfume. Sometimes, this happens to today's Christians. We use our gifts in ways that God shows us, but that other believers and nonbelievers don't understand. We may be called wasteful or foolish. However, that shouldn't stop us from using our gifts.

Today, think about what is in your alabaster jar. In other words, what is your most precious talent or gift? What is it you love to do, that brings you your greatest joy? Think about it, and ask God for the opportunity to pour it out freely for Him. When you do, you will have done a beautiful thing.



JUN03

*Whatever you do,
work at it with all
your heart, as
working for the
Lord, not for
human masters.*

*—Colossians
3:23a*

Working for the Lord

Most Christians are familiar with the idea that they work primarily for the Lord, no matter what their actual occupation is. However, it can be difficult to determine what that means in daily life. How, exactly, do you show you are working for the Lord when you have a human employer and are working in earthly circumstances?

Today's verse gives us an important clue. Paul admonished the Colossians to work at whatever they did with all their hearts. He wanted them to find passion and joy in their work, and give everything their best effort. Of course, this is easier to do on some days than it is on other days. Christians have times when they dislike their jobs, just like anyone else. They find aspects of work frustrating, such as a backbiting workplace culture or a boss who seems to expect too much.

If this describes your workplace or if you're struggling to find joy in your work, take heart. The Lord knows you are human and will strengthen you to do what you need to do. Although your work situation may not be ideal, there are still ways for you to set a good example and show your commitment to Jesus. A few of these ways are by:

- **Show compassion wherever you can.** Help a coworker with a difficult project or take over for one who is sick.
- **Abstain from workplace gossip.** Endeavor to say positive things about everyone.
- **Show gratitude.** Say "thank you" as often as possible.
- **Be diligent.** Meet your deadlines, come to work on time, and keep your workspace neat.
- **Ask for help when you need it.** We all need help on occasion, as when doing something we haven't tried before or when our plates are overloaded.



JUN04

*Be joyful in hope,
patient in affliction,
faithful in prayer.*

—Romans 12:12

Patience in Affliction

In today's verse, "affliction" does not mean everyday trouble, like a washing machine that won't work or a traffic jam on the freeway. Here, Paul is referring to ongoing and severe physical and emotional affliction, the kind that can wear a Christian down over time like coffee and wine wearing down tooth enamel.

This type of affliction has been described as feeling pressed or crushed, almost claustrophobic. It might be the way you feel when your spouse of 20 years suddenly decides to separate or cheats on you. You might feel this way when faced with the news your baby has a severe disability or when someone you love with all your heart dies. It's not a pleasant feeling, and it's not one that will let up anytime soon.

Arguably, Paul knew this type of affliction better than most believers. He describes many physical torments he endured for Christ's sake, such as being whipped, beaten with rods, stoned and shipwrecked. He also describes emotional torment via his "thorn in the flesh," which never went away despite fervent prayers. Perhaps Paul is the most qualified to tell us to be patient in affliction. Yet, how do we do it?

Patience of any kind isn't easy, especially the kind cultivated during affliction. It must be possible to cultivate this patience, though, or God wouldn't have inspired Paul to write about it. If you are in a season of affliction, pray about how to remain patient and joyful while it runs its course. Some key ways to do so include:

- **Reach out to others.** Find a support group or ask for godly counsel from a pastor or friend.
- **Take care of yourself physically.** Eat right, exercise and get enough sleep.
- **Stay grounded** in the Bible and prayer.



JUN05

Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in Him.

—*Psalm 34:8*

Taste the Lord's Goodness

"God is great, God is good." It's one of the first lessons we learn in Sunday school. Perhaps you made this into a prayer you said over food. All over the Bible, we are told the Lord is good and His love endures forever. However, today's verse is one that attaches verbs to that goodness.

As another devotional writer put it, "taste" and "see" are experience words. They refer to two of our five senses, arguably two of the strongest ones we have. What we see and taste often stays in our minds longer than what we touch, smell or hear, because the eyes and the tongue are such complex organs. Perhaps God designed them that way so when He invited us to taste and see His goodness, we would know how deep He wished the experience to be.

Yet, how do you taste and see goodness? Goodness is an abstract concept; you can't eat it or examine it like a piece of artwork. More importantly, we are talking about this God's goodness. How can we see His goodness when we cannot see Him?

God gives us many ways to experience who He is and see He is good. His Word is one. Reading the Bible reveals God's will for His people, as well as His all-encompassing, sacrificial love. Prayer and fellowship are other ways to experience God's goodness. Communicating directly with God or talking about Him with fellow believers brings you closer to Him.

Outside of prayer and the Bible, here are a few more ways to experience God's goodness:

- Journal: Write letters to God.
- Read an uplifting book.
- Go on a hike and thank God for His creations.
- Exercise to honor God with your body.
- Sing praise songs to God.



JUN06

On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

—Matthew 9:12 & 13b

Spiritually Ill

You know when you are becoming physically ill. Your symptoms may vary from illness to illness, but some remain consistent. You feel tired or rundown. Your body aches. You don't feel like doing your normal activities, and everything seems to take much more effort than it usually does.

When we become physically ill, we know how to remedy it. A lingering sickness often signals we need to see a doctor, a professional who can diagnose our specific problems and give us the tools we need to get well. However, what does it mean to be spiritually ill? How can we diagnose spiritual illness and what medicines do we need to eradicate it?

Like physical sickness, spiritual disease looks different for every person. A non-Christian may show chronic and obvious symptoms, such as outright disdain for God, an unusually short temper, or a tendency to speak hurtful or unedifying words. In contrast, a spiritually ill Christian may be better at hiding his or her symptoms. He or she may go through the motions in terms of Bible reading, prayer and church, but seem numb or disengaged. He or she could also participate in ongoing secret sin.

The good news is that no matter your belief status, Jesus has the cure for all forms of spiritual illness. For the nonbeliever, the cure is admitting sin, confessing it and turning to Him for a changed life. For the believer, the cure may involve repentance or a request for a deeper, more vibrant spiritual life. In addition to prayer, godly counsel may be needed. Draw strength from the truth that you can get well.



JUN07

*The chief
cupbearer,
however, did not
remember Joseph;
he forgot him.*

—*Genesis 40:23*

Never Forgotten

Today's verse is short, but it packs an emotional punch. By the time we reach the end of Genesis 40, Joseph, Jacob's favorite son who had received God's promise through many dreams, has already been in prison for years. He didn't commit the crime for which he was incarcerated and although God had granted him favor with the prison guard, he surely longed for his freedom. How awful it must have felt to hope for that freedom after helping the chief cupbearer, only to gradually realize he'd been forgotten.

Have you ever felt God has forgotten you, as Joseph did? Most Christians can name at least one experience where they felt forgotten. Although the circumstances may be different, the feeling and struggle is not. Being forgotten makes you feel empty, unwanted and alone. You might wonder if God has abandoned you, too busy dealing with wars, world hunger and terrible diseases to concern Himself with your problems.

While it's human to wonder about this and to feel forgotten, God doesn't forget any of His children for an instant. Many Bible passages talk about God remembering someone, but in that context, remembering means choosing the exactly right time to act. It doesn't mean God suddenly recalls someone He pushed to the back of His mind while taking care of someone else.

If you feel forgotten today, ask God to remember you. Tell Him you feel alone and ask Him to be with you in a new way, one you can experience in the depths of your soul. Even if He doesn't change things right away, He will be with you and will remember you. Like Joseph, your trial will end and you will triumph.



JUN08

But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

—Isaiah 40:31

Wings Like Eagles

June is graduation season, and today's verse is a popular one for graduates. Adults often present Isaiah 40:31 to high school and college graduates to communicate the hope that these young people will soar in life. However, soaring takes much more effort than the connotation of the word implies. To soar, you have to be strong enough to fly—that is, learn new skills, practice them and become adept at them. These skills could be physical, emotional or spiritual.

Most learning processes are difficult, and they will leave you weary. If you overdo certain things, you might even feel faint. This is an unfortunate side effect of being human in a fallen world. However, today's verse promises that if you focus on God, He will let you soar in ways you never anticipated. Fixing your eyes on Jesus, as Hebrews puts it, gives you strength to do what you never imagined you could do.

What is it you need strength to do today? Where and how do you most need to soar? Perhaps you're a student working your way through tough finals to graduate. Maybe your doctor has said you're close to remission but the thought of another arduous treatment makes you feel faint. Soaring could be as simple as making the effort to get a strong-willed child dressed for preschool or day camp today.

Getting up the strength to fly is the hardest part for any bird. They have to be pushed from the nest and flounder on unsteady wings for a few minutes. Like birds, people are unsteady, too. You won't always feel like soaring. However, when you feel yourself falling, God will give you the push you need. Pray to feel His gentle push today and His fatherly voice cheering you on.



JUN09

"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter."

—Ruth 1:20

Naomi's Bitterness

When most Christians read the story of Ruth, they focus on the titular character. They glean important lessons, such as how to show unconditional kindness or how to wait patiently for the partner God has for them. However, most Christians glance over Naomi's role in the story, especially the first chapter of Ruth.

As today's verse says, Naomi was bitter when she returned to Bethlehem from Moab. She had plenty of reasons to be. Her husband and sons had died, leaving no one to provide for her. As a widow, she was impoverished and would be considered one of the lowest members of ancient society. Her only company was a foreign daughter-in-law who worshipped different gods and did not know Israel's customs. Naomi had also had a physically difficult journey.

To reflect how she felt, Naomi changed her name from a word meaning pleasant to one meaning bitter. We aren't sure how long she stayed bitter, but can infer it took her a while to feel like Naomi again.

Have you ever known a bitter person like Naomi? Have you ever been that person? Christians are not exempt. Bitterness can creep into our souls before we know it's there. In fact, Christians may be more vulnerable to bitterness, because we are supposed to have joy, love and peace as evidence of Jesus in our lives. That's why it's so important to recognize and deal with bitterness when we see it.

When you feel bitterness creeping in, identify its source. Find a safe place to express your feelings, through prayer or to a godly friend or family member. Ask God to hold you and to replace your bitterness with joy.



JUN 10

*Are not all angels
ministering spirits
sent to serve those
who will inherit
salvation?*

—Hebrews 1:14

Angels Everywhere

Most Christians are familiar with angels as a concept but aren't sure how they fit into the Bible or their overall faith experience. Some denominations, such as Catholicism, emphasize the role of angels in Christians' lives. Others glance over angels or ignore them altogether. Some Christians see angels as mystical beings and worry that acknowledging their work could turn into worship.

The Bible does warn against worshipping angels or giving them more credit than they deserve. In fact, the Bible teaches Christians will judge angels in Heaven. However, we shouldn't discount angels and the roles they can play in our lives. In today's verse, angels are described as ministering spirits. Angels from God are created to watch over us and help draw us closer to Him.

The Bible doesn't have as much information on angels as we would like. Most Christians want to know more about angels, because there aren't specifics in the Bible, or because they are struggling to understand God and find angels easier to comprehend. Wanting to know more about angels is fine, but always remember that Jesus is your intercessor. Although He may not reveal everything you want to know about God or Heaven, He can show you what you need to know when you need it most.

Most of us like the idea of a guardian angel or a host of angels fighting for us when Satan deigns to attack. Today, thank God for creating angels and for what they do in your life, even when you cannot see it. At the same time, thank Him for sending you Jesus, an intercessor who sent those angels for you.



JUN 1 1

*He will cover you
with His feathers,
and under His
wings you shall find
refuge.*

—*Psalm 91:4*

Under His Wings

The Bible uses several animal, plant and occupation images to get its message across to readers. Jesus often told parables based on common occupations of the day, such as shepherding, to express how He wanted His followers to live and interact with each other. In today's verse, God is indirectly compared to a bird giving refuge to its chicks.

When a mother hen or goose wants to protect her young, she opens her wings and immediately gathers them all to her. The chicks form a tight-knit group, and the mother is able to hide them from predators, weather and other dangers under her wings. God has a more impressive "wingspan" than any mother bird, big enough to cover every person in the world. He longs for us to find refuge under His divine wings.

Many Christians struggle to see God as a refuge. They've grown up with the image of a demanding and angry God who swiftly punishes people who disobey. Other Christians reject God's refuge because they want to be independent. They feel like they can and should do everything themselves.

These attitudes may work for a while, but they eventually will wear you down. You will come up against an obstacle you cannot surmount. When that happens, God will be there. However, He won't be waiting to say, "I told you so." He will have His arms open, ready to enfold you and give you the refuge you need. If you need refuge today, run to those arms through prayer. Meditate on today's verse and thank God for His compassion.



JUN 12

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask Him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

—Matthew 11:2-3

No Other Messiah

It might seem odd for John the Baptist to ask this question. He was the forerunner of Jesus and had preached repentance before Jesus did. More importantly, John had gone about crying, "Hallelujah to the Lamb of God!" He fully believed Jesus was the Messiah and wasn't afraid to express it. Why, then, would he question Jesus now?

As with today's Christians, John's circumstances had much to do with his questioning. He had been thrown into prison for standing up to Herodias, daughter of Herod. In biblical times, prisons were far from the fairly comfortable cells we think of now. The worst were holes in the ground, where prisoners were chained to walls. They were fed minimally, and many became sick and died. John must have known there was little chance he would ever see freedom again.

Some Bible scholars speculate John was disappointed in God, and by extension, Jesus. He may have wondered, "If serving the promised Messiah looks like this, what am I doing?" He may have asked himself, "If Jesus is the Messiah, why doesn't He free me?"

We don't know why Jesus chose not to free John. We do know, though, that He was faithful. He knew His friend was suffering greatly and wanted to reassure him. Right after the disciples report John's questioning, Jesus reminds them of who He is and what He can do. He isn't angry with John. He says no one born of men and women is greater than John the Baptist (Matt. 11:11).

Has God allowed something that disappointed you today? Ask Him about it, and ask Him to remind you who He is. He will answer, as He answered John.



JUN 13

“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

—John 11:21

God’s Timetable

God’s timing is not ours. It’s a well-known truth among Christians and a popular answer Christians give to nonbelievers and each other when things are not progressing as we’d like them to. Unfortunately, sometimes the popular answer does not make sense to us. This was certainly the case for Mary and Martha, whose brother Lazarus was dead for four days before Jesus reached their home.

Martha has a natural reaction when Jesus arrives. You could easily read anger into her statement: “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” If not anger, there was definitely anguish in her words—deep sorrow with an undercurrent of confusion as to why Jesus, who had healed so many others before, didn’t heal Lazarus before he died.

In Martha’s estimation, Jesus arrived too late. The mourners were already at the house. Lazarus had been in the grave for four days, his body already decomposing. She might have wondered why Jesus would bother to show up now, when an opportunity to perform a miraculous healing was gone.

In today’s passage, Jesus proves He can do much more than people give Him credit for, and that His timing is perfect. Because He arrived after Lazarus’ death, Jesus was able to raise him from the dead. This proved Jesus had ultimate power over death, and cemented His standing as the Son of God. Perhaps the miracle of Lazarus had a hand in helping people believe in Jesus’ own resurrection a while later.

If God’s timing seems slow, or if you think He’s too late to do something, ask what He might be doing while you wait. Consider how His timing can help you grow, and ask Him to give you discernment.



JUN 14

So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?

— 1 Kings 3:9

A Discerning Heart

Solomon went down in history as the earth's wisest king. Whether or not they are from the Judeo-Christian tradition, most people can cite examples of Solomon's wisdom, such as when he decided between two women claiming to be the same baby's mother. It's important to remember, Solomon did not get his wisdom from being naturally smart or studying hard. His wisdom is directly from God.

Solomon's request pleased the Lord, as all requests for wisdom do. Wisdom isn't a fruit of the Spirit, but it is part of God's will for us as believers. In Matthew, Jesus says believers should be "wise as serpents (and) harmless as doves," indicating He wants us to be able to judge right and wrong with His guidance. All Christians obtain greater wisdom as they grow spiritually. Some Christians have the spiritual gift of discernment, which lets them distinguish "spirits," or the true motives of people.

Even if you do not have the gift of discernment, you can and should seek greater wisdom. Reading the Bible is a great way to start. Any time a moral or ethical question arises, look to see what the Bible says about it. If the Bible does not give a direct answer, pray, asking for the ability to distinguish what you should do.

You can gain wisdom from many other sources as well, but be careful which ones you choose. For example, you might be a science teacher required to teach your students about evolution. Read up on both evolution and creation, seeking discerning authors who represent both sides of the equation fairly. No matter what dilemmas you face, always seek to be wise in handling them.



JUN 15

Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

*— 1 Corinthians
7:8-9*

The Truth About Singleness

Singleness is often looked upon with pity, skepticism or outright scorn in many of today's churches. Often without meaning to, married believers send singles the message that because they aren't married, there is something wrong with them. Sometimes believers cite Paul as the ultimate example of singleness, telling single believers they have a special "gift of singleness" and are to remain single forever. While this is meant as encouragement, it often leaves the single believer feeling sad and alone.

Paul's lifelong single status seems to indicate that some believers are meant to stay single. However, this is rarer than most churches make it out to be. Focus on the latter part of today's verse—"it is better to marry than to burn with passion." God created us with a need for relationships. For most people, that means marriage. If you have been single for a long time yet want to be married, put the "gift of singleness" out of your mind. That is not likely your gift.

However, a longing to be married doesn't mean single Christians should constantly seek human relationships. It is better for Christian singles to bring their desire to God, pray diligently and use their single time wisely. If you are a single Christian, ask God how He wants you to use your time without a spouse. He may lead you to a new ministry. He may ask you to participate in mission work or to give yourself a needed mental and emotional rest.

If you are single today, don't give up hope for a spouse. At the same time, embrace your singleness and find lasting hope in God.



JUN 16

However, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived, the things God has prepared for those who love Him."

—1 Corinthians 2:9

What Is Heaven Like?

Perhaps one of the biggest questions Christians have is, "What is Heaven like?" We know Heaven exists—we are promised eternal life there through Jesus Christ. Whenever an elderly believer prepares to die, it's common for him or her to talk about the hope of Heaven and what it will be like. Revelation does provide some descriptions, but they aren't as specific as most Christians want them to be.

Today, curiosity about Heaven is stronger than ever among Christians and non-Christians alike. Books such as *Heaven is for Real* and *Miracles from Heaven* are snatched from bookstore shelves, and people fill theaters to see movies based on these stories. Some Heaven stories are hoaxes, which can cause people to doubt Heaven's existence and the promise of eternal life.

In today's verse and many other passages, God promises that Heaven is indeed real. Unlike modern books, the Bible doesn't have detailed accounts of the experiences of people who went there and came back to tell about it. However, the Bible emphasizes the promise of Heaven again and again. As Jesus says in John regarding His Father's house, "If it were not so, I would not have told you."

Whenever you are curious about Heaven, go back to the Bible. Start in Revelation 21 and 22, which give us physical descriptions of the heavenly city and New Jerusalem, such as gates made of pearls and buildings made of jewels. Remember most of all, however, that Heaven will be more than a physical location. It is a place where God rewards those who love Him, with greater rewards and greater joy than we could ever conceive.



JUN 17

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean. Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

—*Psalm 51:7*

Washed Clean by God

After a day of hard work or a long, sweaty workout, nothing feels better than a hot, cleansing bath. When our bodies are clean, we naturally feel better about ourselves. We are able to enjoy ourselves more and focus on any tasks we need to do. In fact, teachers in any school will tell you children learn best when they are well rested, well fed and clean.

As God's children, we learn best when we are spiritually clean. In other words, we are able to focus on God and communicate with Him more effectively when we have a clear conscience and a pure heart. We are also able to enjoy His presence more and want to be connected to Him. Unfortunately, sin often gets in the way, dirtying our spirits.

Perhaps no one knew this better than King David did. He was "a man after God's own heart," but he wrote Psalm 51 after committing a grievous sin. He had had an adulterous affair and had his mistress' husband murdered. If anyone needed his spirit washed clean, David qualified. In a great example for modern believers, David sought God and asked for cleansing.

As hard as we might try, we cannot spiritually cleanse ourselves. Efforts to do so often lead to legalism, which gives birth to misery. Misery can actually tempt us to sin more, making the problem worse. Instead, we need to ask God to cleanse our hearts. God will not be angry or disappointed. He knows we sin, and He waits eagerly for us to repent. Once we do, He will gladly wash us clean so we can enjoy His presence again.



JUN 18

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him.

—*Luke 15:20b*

Father's Day

We celebrate Father's Day in June. Many pastors pull out the parable of the prodigal son on Father's Day. It's one of Jesus' most famous parables, and one pastors use to encourage nonbelievers to turn to the God who loves them. This is definitely a correct use of the parable. However, often the focus is on the son instead of the father.

When most Christians read the prodigal son's story, they tend to glance over the father's role. They know the father forgives his son and throws a celebration for him. Yet, they don't stop to think about how long the father had waited. The Bible doesn't specify a time frame, but we can infer this father loved his son. He may have watched for him to come home every day, for hours on end.

Bible scholars point out that when the son does come home, the father runs to greet him. This is no casual homecoming. It is an emotional embrace from an eager parent who thought he'd never see his child again. In early Jewish culture, it would have been undignified for the father to run, but he did not care.

God is like that with us. Believers or not, we are all His prodigal children. Some of us simply have more prodigal moments than others. Every day, we have a choice to stay at God's side spiritually or go off and do what we want. Too often, we choose the latter. Yet God doesn't turn away from us. Instead, He runs to us, welcoming us back. If you need to be welcomed back today, remember this parable and come home.



JUN 19

*For we are God's
handiwork, created
in Christ Jesus to
do good works,
which God
prepared in
advance for us to
do.*

—Ephesians 2:10

You Are His Beautiful Poem

No one obtains salvation through works. As Paul says earlier in Ephesians, it is by grace alone we are saved. We also don't have to work to stay saved. However, God does prepare us for certain works He wants us to do while on Earth. These works further the heavenly kingdom and let everyone know who God is.

Some Christians seem to know what works they are meant for right away. For example, you might know a man in your church who is gifted at cooking. It seems he can take the most random ingredients in the church fridge and make something delicious in minutes. You might know a woman who works as a nurse or doctor. Her hands seem to bring healing with the simplest touches.

When faced with these examples, it can be hard to discern what your gifts are and what good works God has prepared for you. Some Christians figure God has sidelined them because they can't think of any works worth doing for Him. They see themselves as God's divine exception to Ephesians 2:10.

The truth is that God doesn't make that kind of exception. Every believer is His handiwork. In Greek, this word is translated poema, which looks like the word "poem." You are more than a random person. You are God's beautiful poem, and He has a place and a mission for you. It might not be as showy or glamorous as someone else's mission, but it is yours, designed especially for you.

Today, ask God to remind you of your beauty as His workmanship. Ask for the ability to see yourself through His eyes, and ask Him to show you what good works He has for you. They can be as big as going on a mission trip or as small as calling a neighbor to say hello, but they are there.



JUN20

I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.

—Malachi 3:6

Words for an Election Year

In election years, believers and nonbelievers alike are anxious about who will be elected, what he or she will do in office, and what will happen to our country and world as a result. It's not uncommon to hear some believers predict that if X or Y candidate is elected, the end of the world will soon follow.

Christians can and should take comfort in knowing Jesus did not tie the Second Coming to the leadership of a certain president or king. Although He warns the state of the world will be dismal before His return, He doesn't give many specifics. We don't know what to expect from which person, group or country. We don't know the effects certain events will have, or how long we have on Earth.

What we do know is the truth of Malachi 3:6 and many other verses like it. The Lord does not change. He is not a political candidate, trying to win votes with persuasive words. His words have already been spoken and they will stand forever. Furthermore, He will protect His people. As believers, we will die because we are human. Some of us might even be tortured or die for our faith. Yet because of God, we will not be destroyed.

If an election has you worried today, turn off the news. Disconnect from the internet and put down the newspaper. Instead, pick up your Bible and meditate on verses that speak of the constancy and unconditional love of God. Rest in the knowledge that no matter who is elected, God is on His throne.



JUN21

Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.

—*Psalm 96:1*

Sing a New Song

The Psalms have plenty to say about singing to the Lord. King David, who wrote many psalms, was a musician and singer, so it would make sense for him to mention singing to God often. A classic worship song says, "I will celebrate/sing to the Lord a new song." Yet, what does it mean to sing a new song to the Lord? What was the old one, and why should singing a new one make us celebrate?

Psalm 96 itself doesn't give an answer, but the Bible as a whole does. Throughout the Bible, God's people were put in positions where if they sang at all, it was likely a song of mourning. The enslaved Israelites in Egypt and the Jews taken captive to Babylon are only two of many examples. Their songs, or the way they lived their lives, were likely dirges, reflections of hopelessness.

Therefore, singing a new song to the Lord probably reflects a change not only of circumstances, but also of heart. Singing a new song indicates we've remembered God's love for us, and trust everything He does comes from that love. When we sing a new song, we do want to celebrate because God has renewed our joy in who He is and who we are in Him.

Perhaps you need to sing a new song today. If so, start by acknowledging the difficulties that have contributed to your old song. Journal them, pray about them or talk them through with family, friends or a counselor. Then meditate on verses, books or other outlets that remind you of the joy God wants to give you. If so moved, you can write your own psalm or song and speak it in prayer, or sing it.



JUN22

*Whoever spares
the rod hates their
children, but the
one who loves their
children is careful
to discipline them.*

—Proverbs 13:24

Godly Discipline

“Spare the rod, spoil the child” is a familiar axiom among parents, especially Judeo-Christians. Many Christian parents use this verse as justification for spanking their children or otherwise disciplining them physically. There is plenty of debate about whether physical discipline is okay and what constitutes abuse. However, this verse makes clear that a parent who loves his or her child will discipline that child.

Discipline may be a sign of love, but most parents are at least a bit unsure about how to enact it. If you examine the word “discipline,” you will find the word “disciple,” as in Jesus’ disciples. In Jesus’ day and today, a disciple was one who sat under a particular rabbi, or teacher, to learn from them. They were disciplined, or disciplined, until they knew how to obey their teacher’s instructions and live by his teachings.

From this, we can conclude true discipline is teaching. It is not done in anger, as punishment is done. The goal of true biblical discipline is not abuse or control, or breaking the will of a child. Instead, it is to teach the child what is right and wrong, and why. A disciplined child is one who has had a good teacher. A self-disciplined Christian is one who has learned from God’s teachings and does his or her best to follow them.

If you are struggling with discipline today, whether it involves yourself or your child, think about the messages you are sending. When your child does something wrong, do you react angrily? When you don’t do something you should, do you berate yourself? If so, ask God to show you what true discipline means, and how to do it gently and fairly.



JUN23

*Even in laughter,
the heart may
ache, and rejoicing
may end in grief.*

—*Proverbs 14:13*

Behind the Mask

Have you ever known a Christian whose trouble doesn't seem to touch? Someone who seems happy and optimistic all the time and who overflows with joy no matter the circumstances? Some Christians are given the spiritual gift of joy or faith. It is easy for them to trust that God will work everything out for their good and the good of others. However, never make the mistake of thinking a fellow believer doesn't feel all the emotions you feel.

Some believers do, in fact, hide behind masks. For these people, joy doesn't come from a spiritual gift. It's manufactured, produced to keep others from knowing what's truly going on inside. There are many reasons believers hide behind a mask of plastic happiness. Some do it because they were raised to cover emotion. Others hide because they assume not being happy or joyous means that they don't have enough faith. They assume if they show sadness or anger, they will somehow let down God and He will be disappointed in them.

God wants to reassure us that we never have to put on an act. While joy is a fruit of the Spirit and evidence of faith, it should never be manufactured or used to cover real feelings. Let today's verse give you permission to feel what you need to. If it is unsafe for you to express true emotions in one environment, get to one where you can as quickly as possible. Lean on friends and family who understand that even though your mouth is smiling, your heart may ache.



JUN24

Do not take revenge my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge, I will repay," says the Lord.

—Romans 12:19

The Truth About Vengeance

Revenge is a popular literary theme, in the Bible and a plethora of other books. It has been called one of the oldest motives for crime in the world. When someone has wronged us, it certainly feels good to think about getting even, although we may not do so. Sometimes, when people do have the opportunity to get revenge, they take it. It might be easy to envy those people, but the Bible cautions us not to.

Sometimes Christians use, "Vengeance is mine" as a pat answer. They don't want to deal with the fact that a fellow believer is angry enough to take revenge, so they try to smooth the emotion away quickly. A better response would be to acknowledge how the angry person feels. Let him or her talk through the wrong that was done, even if you are anxious or don't agree with how things were handled.

Remind a fellow believer or yourself of this verse, not in the context of God pouring wrath on someone, but in the context of Him showing perfect justice. Human justice is often flawed. That's where we get the concept of revenge in the first place. God's justice, though, is always right. He may not enact it the way we want Him to, but He will enact it both for our good and for the other person's.

If there is something you feel should be avenged in your life today, meditate on Romans 12:19. Ask God to give you a new measure of trust in His justice, and ask Him if He wants you to do something specific with your feelings. For example, maybe He wants you to reconcile with the other person. Pray and seek His guidance, and let your desire for vengeance cool.



JUN25

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ... Then the Lord made a woman from the rib He had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

—*Genesis 2:20 & 22*

The Value of Women

Some people, nonbelievers and Christians alike, wonder if God approves of oppressing women. They cite teachings such as a wife's submission to her husband, and the husband as the head of the household, to support this idea. They also cite the fact that for centuries, women have not had equal standing and are still struggling to obtain it in some societies.

Many Bible passages show that God loves and values women. However, this is the first, found in the earliest part of the Bible. God could have chosen any helper for Adam, such as an animal, a tree or another man. Yet, He chose to make woman, a whole new creation. Many Christian writers such as John and Stasi Eldridge posit that God made Eve, the woman, last, because she was the best thing He ever made.

While God doesn't call Eve His best creation, He is clear about how He wants women to be treated. Over and over in the Bible, God uses women for His good works. Esther, Ruth, Mary and Deborah are only four of several examples. He listens to the prayers of women, as He did for Hannah and Rachel, who could not have children. He defends women in His commands to care for widows.

Throughout history, women have been a valuable part of God's creation, and they continue to be so. If you are a woman who feels unheard, be encouraged that God wants you to have a place in His kingdom and will stand up for you, through other people or divine intervention.



JUN 26

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution, or famine or nakedness, or danger or sword?

—Romans 8:35

Remembering the Persecuted

Millions of Christians are persecuted for their faith every day. According to *Christianity Today* magazine, there are at least 51 countries in which Christianity is illegal. Several other countries are considered “closed” to various degrees—that is, Christianity is legal or tolerated, but Christians cannot speak freely of their faith, meet in public or do other activities Western Christians take for granted.

With the rise of brutal terrorist groups and publication of books such as *I Am N*, Westerners’ awareness of Christian persecution around the world has improved. Increasingly, churches are speaking out about this issue, and Christians are forming groups to pray for and otherwise reach out to the persecuted. The efforts are wonderful, but they might leave the individual Christian wondering what he or she can do to help.

If you want to help persecuted Christians, you are not alone. Your desire shows you are ready to help, and you can do so on your own or in a group. A few ways to help persecuted Christians around the world include:

- **Prayer.** This is probably the easiest yet most effective thing you can do. You can do it anywhere, at any time of day. If you desire, you can go to a website like Voice of the Martyrs to learn the prayer needs of specific countries or groups.
- **Speaking.** Ask your pastor for the opportunity to share stories of persecuted Christians with your church. Share news stories through social media or create a private Facebook group to discuss these stories.
- **Missions.** If you’ve never been to a closed country, make sure you have proper training first. Pray diligently before, during and after your trip.



JUN27

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

—Romans 8:1

No Condemnation

The first chapter of Romans begins with a much-needed message of hope. For Jews and Christians in Paul's era, condemnation was probably a daily occurrence. Religious groups like the Pharisees and Sadducees constantly burdened their followers with laws impossible to keep, yet condemned them for not keeping every single law. Considering that the Torah alone contains 613 separate laws, obedience was a full-time job at which no one, not even the most righteous Pharisee, could succeed.

Today's Christians don't have actual Pharisees in their lives, but many deal with people who act like the Pharisees of ancient Israel. These people judge others regularly and hold others to higher standards than they hold themselves. Modern Pharisees also make excuses for their own sins and tend to blame sin for everything, even things that happen because of a fallen world, such as disease.

Attitudes like this often lead to legalism, or a form of religion in which believers try in their own strength to be perfect. Some believers do this out of fear for their salvation. Others do it because they want to feel better than someone else, perhaps a person who hurt them. As Paul himself could attest, legalism is a miserable way to live. It often results in anger, bitterness and, in cases like Paul's, the delusion that sinful attitudes are godly.

How good it is to have this verse, which promises absolutely no condemnation for those who are in Christ. If you are a believer, your past, present and future sins are already forgiven. You do not stand condemned, and so you need not condemn yourself or anyone else. Ask God to show you the truth of your freedom and celebrate it today.



JUN 28

If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

—Matthew 18:6

Jesus Loves the Little Ones

If you grew up in Sunday school, you're probably familiar with the song, "Jesus Loves the Little Children." One of the first Bible stories you were taught was probably the one about Jesus blessing children even though the disciples were indignant and tried to keep the children from bothering Him. Pastors routinely refer to their congregations as God's children. Yet, just how highly does Jesus value children, and whom does He consider a child?

Today's verse can answer both questions well. Jesus values children highly—so highly He will show His full anger in defending them. Bible teacher Beth Moore writes about this in her study *Breaking Free*. She offers hope to readers who have experienced child abuse, molestation or any other crime, big or small, committed against children. Moore points to Jesus as the ultimate defender of the world's innocents and invites readers to cast childhood burdens on Him.

However, you don't have to be a minor for Jesus to consider you a child. Focus on how He qualifies "little ones"—"those who believe in me." Anyone who is a believer in Christ is also His child. As such, believers have the privilege of considering Jesus Daddy. He unconditionally loves, protects, defends and teaches His children, whether they are physically kids or not.

As an adult, you might feel too old to be considered a child, even God's child. It might seem like an inordinately long time since you called Jesus Daddy or considered Him a benevolent Papa God. Let yourself be little again today. Climb into His lap and speak to Him as a beloved Daddy. He will be glad you did.



JUN29

*Blessed are those
who mourn, for
they shall be
comforted.*

—*Matthew 5:4*

Death of an Unsaved Loved One

For Christians, death is not only the end of earthly life, but also the beginning of eternal life. Most Christians draw hope from the promise of Heaven and eternal life, even in the throes of deep grief. However, what if you have lost a loved one who was unsaved or know someone who died unsaved? Many Christians wonder if there is comfort or grace in the death of the unsaved and if yes, where to find it.

The first part of finding comfort in such a death involves acknowledging the truth of the Bible and the truth of how you feel. If a loved one dies unsaved, the implication is Christians will not see them again in eternity. The Bible also implies Heaven is a place where we will not mourn or weep. Therefore, it can be inferred we won't miss our unsaved loved ones.

Most Christians have a hard time wrapping their minds around these truths. They are difficult, perhaps offensive. How, we wonder, could we go to Heaven and never miss someone who isn't there, nor think about him or her again? If this thought makes you sad or angry, it's healthy to acknowledge that. Let God see all your feelings, including the unpleasant ones. He knows them anyway, but He wants to hear them from you.

However, remember that one day you will understand the destiny of your unsaved loved one, as well as your own and why they had to be different. Until that time, pour out your heart as much as you need. Ask God to remind you of His goodness, His perfect love and justice. Trust that when you can't understand eternity, He does and will one day reveal everything to you.



JUN30

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.

—*Ecclesiastes 3:1, NIV*

New Seasons

Summer begins a fresh season. Maybe newness is on your mind. You'll notice buds in your garden, cherish baby animals, welcome warm weather and embrace several other changes. New growth will bud and flourish in summer and prepare to go dormant in autumn. Eventually, it will die off in winter so next spring can bring more rejuvenation.

Some people look at this cycle of seasons and feel sad or discouraged. They want things to stay as they are for longer so they can hold on to favorite memories or special parts of each season. These feelings are natural. They reflect the setting of eternity in everyone's heart. We sometimes rebel against time because deep down, we know good things aren't supposed to end.

Yet today's verse tells us that as long as we're on Earth, we'll experience time. Moreover, there's a time for every purpose. You can allow this verse (and the chapter it comes from) to encourage you. If you're in the midst of a difficult season, focus on the promise that it'll eventually end to make room for a new one. If you're in a good season, don't fear that difficult ones may be coming. Instead, enjoy what you have now. Try to look at difficult seasons as opportunities for growth and change.

Finally, remember that God is with you in every season. He created the physical seasons and oversees the emotional and spiritual ones in our lives. Always allow Him to guide you through each of yours.



A photograph of a rustic building with a blue door and a thatched roof. The building appears to be made of stone or mud-brick. The roof is covered in a thick layer of dried grass or straw. The door is a bright blue color and is set in a wooden frame. The overall scene is somewhat weathered and aged.

JUL01

God's Sheltering Canopy

Summer brings some of the most extreme weather on the calendar. One day it might be blisteringly hot, and another day might offer a severe storm filled with torrential rain and high winds. These ups and downs wear on our bodies and minds after a while, and we seek shelter in our homes, where the climate is easier to control.

Like extreme heat and rain, emotional and mental turmoil can make us run for shelter. A difficult work project, a recent loss, or financial problems might make you feel oppressed, as if you were stuck in a never-ending heat wave. A relentless series of small issues might add up to a big emotional storm. When things like this happen, physical and emotional shelter is needed.

In today's verse, God promises to give us His shelter. His emotional, mental and spiritual canopy won't stop all storms, but it will give us a safe place when they come. God's canopy provides adequate cover for every problem, no matter how big or small.

If you are facing a storm today, run to that canopy. Go to a private place, shut the door and pray. Ask for an extra measure of peace and do things to facilitate it, such as listening to calming music or soaking in the tub. Meditate on verses or devotionals that focus on fruits of the Spirit, particularly peace, self-control and joy. Throughout the storm, periodically take this time for yourself. It will make facing the extreme weather in your emotional and spiritual life much easier.

It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain.

—Isaiah 4:6



JUL02

*Discipline me, Lord,
but only in due
measure—not in
your anger, or you
will reduce me to
nothing.*

—Jeremiah 10:24

Prayer for Discipline

In today's verse, Jeremiah prays for God's discipline. At first glance, this seems like a dangerous prayer, because we often equate "discipline" with "punishment." Our parents or guardians may have used the terms interchangeably or made well-meant discipline feel like anger-driven punishment.

When reading Jeremiah 10:24 and similar verses, it's crucial to remember there's a difference. Anger tends to drive punishment—the punisher takes out his or her feelings on the punished. When this happens, the one being punished probably learns a lesson. However, guilt, sadness and resentment may follow.

In contrast, "discipline" comes from a root word meaning "to teach." Like punishment, discipline may be painful, but the goal is to teach the one being disciplined how to do right the next time. This—not punishment—is God's ultimate goal for us. He can and does punish, but only those who wholly reject Him and only as a last resort.

None of us grew up with perfect parents or guardians, but God is the perfect Father. He knows we need discipline because we are prone to disobey. He also knows the kinds of discipline that will get through to each of us. Therefore, God tailors our discipline not so we feel punished, but so we can learn from the experience.

Do not be afraid of God's discipline. Instead, recall how wise and merciful He is. Ask Him to teach you His ways and correct you when you sin. The answer to this prayer may not be pleasant, but you will learn from it and grow closer to your heavenly Father.



JUL03

*Open my eyes that
I may see
wonderful things in
your law.*

—Psalm 119:18

Open Spiritual Eyes

Have you ever tried to complete a task while you were only half-awake? The results are often not beneficial. You might trip and fall, stumble or miss important details in class or at work. As we go to school, work or indulge in our hobbies, it's crucial to keep our physical eyes open at all times. That way, we ensure that we miss nothing. We protect ourselves from getting hurt or making mistakes.

God gives us spiritual eyes for the same purpose. They are there to guide us through His Word and show us how to live strong Christian lives. However, many Christians stumble through their spiritual lives as if half awake. They know the basics of the Bible, so they become complacent about what it says. They rush through prayers to get to other tasks or miss opportunities to serve others.

The good news is that you can open spiritual eyes any time, just like physical ones. Today, ask God if you're "sleeping" in any spiritual areas. When He answers, ask Him to revive you and open your eyes. Then respond with clear vision. Read a Bible passage you haven't seen in a while, and record what it says to you. Change your prayer time with music, audiobooks or a nature walk. Participate in a new ministry.

Once your eyes are open again, ask the Holy Spirit to keep them open. Search for ways God speaks in your everyday world. Evidence of Him might be a coworker covering for you when you're sick or your child drawing you a special picture. When you find these times, rejoice because God lets you see them.



JUL04

"I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but I will not be mastered by anything.

—1 Corinthians 6:12

True Freedom

Today is Independence Day. Every year on this day, we celebrate our freedom as a nation and as individuals. Recognizing and appreciating our freedom is important, because it came at a high price. Because courageous people were willing to stand up to tyranny and start a new nation, modern Americans have rights and liberties they might not have otherwise. Our country is unique, because it's one of the few countries where everyone can worship, work and live as they like, without fear.

However, with freedom comes responsibility. As Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 6:12, just because you have the right to do anything doesn't always mean you should. Today, many Americans need to remember this truth. Sometimes consciously and sometimes not, we abuse our rights and freedoms. We disrespect our fellow people, engage in sin and don't live the lives God has called us to live.

What life is that, though? What's true freedom? The Bible teaches that true freedom doesn't come from physical independence. It comes from knowing we belong to Christ and serve Him first. Some people believe serving Christ will make them slaves instead of free. However, Christ's service is a regimen of love, honesty and acceptance. In Christ, you'll be freer than you've ever been.

This Independence Day, rejoice in physical freedom. However, be cognizant of any spiritual yokes that keep you from feeling free inside. If you have these, ask Christ to lift them and replace them with His yoke of true independence. Request discernment, and then you'll know how to embrace your freedoms without abusing them, as well as how to love God and others.



JUL05

I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

—2 Timothy 1:5

Family Faith

Paul's protégé Timothy did not have to come from a strong faith background. In fact, it would have been easy for him to be confused about which faith to follow. Timothy's mother was Jewish and his father was Greek, so Timothy grew up hearing about two separate belief systems. Despite this, Paul indicates Timothy was grounded in Jesus Christ.

Paul credits Timothy's family for this strong faith. Apparently, Lois and Eunice were diligent in teaching Timothy who Christ was from an early age. By the time Paul met Timothy, he was ready to be mentored. He learned well, eventually becoming Paul's trusted ministry partner. Paul even dedicates two New Testament letters to him, asking Timothy to be by his side in the last days of his life.

Any child can become like Timothy if his or her family shows the same dedication as Lois and Eunice. Additionally, you don't have to be a "super Christian" to help the children in your life grow spiritually strong. Simply show them who Jesus is in your words and actions. Read and discuss Bible stories with them. Teach them to pray by doing it together as a family. Tell your children about the character of God, and give examples of how He is present in their everyday lives.

What if you're a new Christian or your family doesn't have faith as a legacy? Rejoice, because you can be the one to start a new era. Your branch of the family can be the first to fully embrace Jesus and raise faithful children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces. Seek mentors to help you and press on—you'll be rewarded.



JUL06

*Love is patient,
love is kind. ... It is
not proud; it does
not dishonor others.
It is not easily
angered; it keeps
no record of
wrongs. Love does
not delight in evil,
but rejoices with
the truth.*

— 1 Corinthians
13:4-6

Unconditional Love

Some people call 1 Corinthians 13 the Love Chapter. Most pastors read it at weddings because it's such a strong, comprehensive example of how to love another person. Yet even the kindest and most well-meaning Christians find the Love Chapter a challenge. They wonder if it's possible to embody everything these verses say love is.

If keeping the tenets of 1 Corinthians 13 seems impossible and unrealistic, that's because it is. Our human nature doesn't allow us to love perfectly all the time. Despite our best efforts, we aren't always kind or patient. We hold grudges against others and act out of pride instead of considering what's best for someone else. Trying to achieve perfect love as a human can lead to feelings of failure, guilt and discouragement.

The good news is that it isn't up to us to embody perfect, unconditional love. Only God can do it 100 percent of the time, and He offers us His strength so we can do it, too. As a believer, you experience God's unconditional love every day. When you sin, He doesn't keep score; He patiently wipes away the mistake and encourages you to do right next time. He's unfailingly kind, He won't shame or dishonor you and He teaches you truth so you can rejoice in it.

Meditating on God's unconditional love for you makes it easier and more pleasant to love others, including those who aren't easy to love. Today, think about a person who needs to know God's love through you. Thank God for that love, meditate on it and ask for strength to love others as He loves you. Then find the person you thought of, and show him or her love as God leads.



JUL07

*To them I was like
one who lifts a little
child to the cheek,
and I bent down to
feed them.*

—Hosea 11:4b

God Feeds Us

We need food to survive. Hunger is one of the most unpleasant feelings a person can experience. Although it's fairly easy to obtain food in America, dealing with hunger until you can eat is a challenge. Hunger saps energy and concentration. It makes you easily irritated. If hunger goes unchecked, it leads to severe physical and emotional symptoms such as depression, hopelessness, muscle atrophy and infections.

In today's verse, Israel was hungry and showing symptoms of long-term spiritual malnutrition. The nation had turned away from God, worshipping idols for decades, maybe centuries. Throughout Hosea, God compares Israel to an unrepentant prostitute, cheating on Him with other gods. He accuses Israelites of doing detestable acts such as burning their children at false gods' altars. Countless warnings did nothing to make Israel repent.

Despite their sin, God never lost His love for Israel. His motives are clear in Hosea 11:4. God knows His people are suffering, starving for Him. He wants to lift them up to His cheeks, like a daddy lifting a toddler, and feed them what they need. Unlike physical food, God's supply never runs out. He has enough for everyone at any time and aches to share it at His table.

Today, you might be spiritually malnourished. You probably don't bow to wood and stone like Israel. However, you may have idols in your life. These idols give you a false sense of spiritual nutrition. They aren't healthy or sustaining food. If you are malnourished, you'll know it. You might find yourself more prone to anger or depression, or you may avoid church, prayer or Bible study.

During prayer time, tell God you're hungry for Him. Ask Him to help you "eat" what's spiritually healthy. He'll lift you up and serve you a full plate.



JUL08

Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you.

—3 John 5

Embracing Strangers

Every day, we all encounter strangers. They could be the people with whom you share public transit, the coworker you haven't yet met or the person at the next lunch table. A stranger could be someone you recognize but are hesitant to talk to because you feel you have nothing in common.

It's natural to feel hesitant around people we don't know. In fact, most of us grew up hearing, "Don't talk to strangers." As we grow older however, a stranger often becomes a new person to whom we can reach out. In today's verse, John extols Christians who embraced new believers in their church—even though these people were unfamiliar.

You don't have to approach every new person to reach out effectively. Start with one person, perhaps the visitor who sits alone at church or the classmate who's struggling with certain parts of the material. Offer a kind word or a service, such as help studying or working on an assignment. Ask the other person about him or herself. Ask about enjoyable activities and thoughts about your church, school or workplace. As you get to know one person, expand the friendship and include other new people.

If a stranger is a nonbeliever and you want to tell him or her about Jesus, strike up a friendship. Don't try to explain the Gospel in your first meeting, but bring up faith naturally. Ask what he or she thinks about God, suffering, good and evil, Jesus and other common faith issues. If a nonbeliever has a physical need you can meet, don't hesitate. Serving him or her physically will open the door to Gospel-centered discussions.



JUL09

*In the beginning
God created the
heavens and the
earth.*

—Genesis 1:1

In the Beginning

The very first verse in the Bible is one many Christians gloss over because it's so familiar. From the time we enter Sunday school we learn that one of God's crucial roles is that of Creator. After all, if God had not created the heavens and Earth, we wouldn't have a planet on which to live.

When was the last time you stopped to think about what this actually means? Earth is a huge planet, and it's part of a vast solar system made up of eight more planets, dozens of moons and countless galaxies. We have seven huge continents, five major oceans and the most diverse geography anywhere. For God to make everything, He would have to be more creative than even the best artist, carpenter or writer alive. He would have to be a Master Creator like no other.

Furthermore, God could have stopped at creating the heavens and Earth. He didn't have to create people. We've proven again and again our ability to cause Him pain. In Genesis 6, God goes so far as to say He regrets creating humans. Still, He chose to make us and call us His masterpieces. We're the only creations made in God's image. We're the only creations given souls meant to live with Him for eternity.

Genesis 1:1 is an easy verse to skip or skim, but it's worth meditating on. Perhaps more than any other, this verse gives us a glimpse into both the abilities and heart of God. His heart is to create, mold, teach and love. He did this from the beginning, lovingly crafting a place we could live and enjoy communion with Him. Thank Him today.



JUL 10

*Don't be afraid;
you are worth
more than many
sparrows.*

—Luke 12:7b

You Are Worth It

An old L'Oréal ad campaign encouraged people to use their shampoo and conditioner, "because you're worth it," meaning, worth the effort it takes to cultivate healthy hair. Today, "you're worth it" echoes from ads for things like decadent chocolate, telling us we're worthy of treating ourselves. However, these messages compete with subtle lies that tell us we aren't worth anything. If we aren't good-looking, thin, smart or athletic, we're worth less than we would be otherwise.

The church gets in on this at times. Through words and actions, Christians tell each other they're only worth God's time if they're perfect. A full-time missionary in Africa is considered more worthy than the church member who serves coffee on Sundays and has never left the United States. The woman in a fancy dress is considered more approachable than the single mom who wore a T-shirt and jeans to church.

God doesn't want any of His people to feel worthless. That's why He created so many of us but didn't make any two people the same. It's why we read so many stories of Jesus reaching out to marginalized people—shepherds, prostitutes, the sick and the disabled. He wanted us to know that we're all worth His crucifixion.

In today's verse, Jesus reminds the audience that people could sell sparrows for pennies in their culture. In other words, sparrows weren't worth much monetarily or otherwise. If a sparrow fell and died, no one really noticed. In contrast, Jesus promises that the Father sees when each sparrow falls—and cares about each one. Jesus also tells us each of us is worth more than many sparrows.

Today, thank God for counting you worthy of sacrificing His Son. Ask Him to remind you of your worth and help you rejoice in it. Then go out and show others they're worth it to Him too.



JUL 11

Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

—Matthew 6:27

Combating Worry

Jesus' question reminds us how futile worry is. Most Christians believe worry is sinful, because it reflects a lack of trust in God. Yet worrying is a difficult habit to break. Most of us do it without thinking, and it's easy to worry about many things at once. Additionally, we sometimes think if we don't worry about someone or something, it means we don't care.

Be careful not to confuse worry with genuine concern. Jesus doesn't say, "Don't be concerned about your loved ones or neighbors." Many Bible passages encourage us to show compassion to others, speak truth to them in love and carry each other's burdens. All these attitudes further God's kingdom and lift up other people.

Worry, on the other hand, accomplishes nothing. Constantly thinking about negative things that might happen wastes energy you could be using to affect change. Excessive worry can lead to physical and emotional symptoms, such as anxiety attacks.

Some people are natural worriers; if you're one, there are ways to deal with it. The next time you catch yourself worrying endlessly, try these tips:

- Pray specifically, aloud if possible.
- Do something physical related to your worry. Are you worried about a tough work assignment? Email your supervisor with questions.
- List three to five things you are grateful for or that bring you joy.
- Sing a praise song, hymn or other positive song. Good lyrics leave no room for worries.
- If you have full-blown anxiety, seek help from a Christian counselor.
- Go outside. Fresh air helps remind us how big the world is and how God looks after it all.



JUL 12

But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

—Luke 1:7

Unable but Chosen

God loves to use people who are unlikely choices. Almost every heroic figure in the Bible was an unlikely one for ancient Israel. God often chose youngest children over firstborns, women over men, the childless over the fertile and the disabled over the able-bodied. This was not to make certain groups feel like lesser people, but to prove no one escaped His notice or love.

Elizabeth is yet another example. Although she and her husband, Zechariah, were both old, the Bible is careful to tell us she wasn't able to conceive. Bible teacher Beth Moore says Elizabeth is described in terms of what she does not have: children. This is a terrible burden for any woman, but more so in Elizabeth's culture. Ancient people often considered Israelite women who couldn't conceive cursed, or at least overlooked, by God.

Perhaps you can commiserate with Elizabeth right now. Maybe it seems like no one notices your talents, focusing instead on the one thing you can't do that they value. Perhaps the stigma of an illness or disability makes others assume you can't do the activities they can. Other situations can make you feel lesser and "unable" as well—financial problems, a divorce, infertility or an abusive past to name a few.

God had already done many miracles through barren women like Hannah, Sarah and Rebecca. He saw Elizabeth's longing. Instead of saying, "I will leave her unable," He chose her.

God may not make you able to do everything you want. At the same time, He won't leave you feeling cast aside because of inabilities. If you open yourself to Him, God will choose you to accomplish what no one else can.



JUL 13

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

—*Philippians*
4:12b

Achieving Contentment

Christians often talk about contentment, but no one seems to know exactly how to live it. Often, this is because most people don't know what real contentment means. Does it mean never trying to better our lives? Does it mean accepting abuse or other untenable circumstances? Does it mean never having or expressing an opinion?

The answer to all these questions should be "no." Jesus wants His followers to be kind, gentle and patient, yet He never meant we should be doormats. If there are ways to escape abuse or other dangerous situations, take them. If you have the opportunity to further your education, get a better job through moving or have another child, you're free to take that, too. Reaching out for more or better doesn't mean you lack contentment.

Real discontent comes from finding negative aspects of every situation no matter how good it is. It comes from putting people down instead of building them up, and focusing so much on bettering yourself or your situation that you lose sight of what God has for you right now. True discontent is rooted in your attitude, not your desires themselves.

As one pastor said, the tent of discontent isn't a pleasant place to live, and you'll know if you're living there. You'll catch yourself complaining about everything, being unusually short-tempered or withdrawing from people and activities you love. If these symptoms are severe, a pastor or Christian counselor can help. Here are a few other ways to practice daily contentment:

- Write down at least one thing each day that makes you feel gratitude.
- Give your time and resources to others; it shows you how much you have.
- Do enjoyable activities to increase your positive attitude.



JUL 14

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

—John 10:27

Listening to God

Many Bible passages, including today's, talk about listening to God's voice. When Christians face dilemmas, they tell each other to ask God for direction and listen to Him. However, God doesn't speak audibly as often as He did in the Old Testament, so it can be hard to know if you're hearing from Him or not.

People often describe God's voice as a "still, small voice" that nudges you in a particular direction. Some people compare it to a conscience, showing you the difference between right and wrong, but it's more than that. God's voice not only alerts you to sin, but gives you the opportunity to influence His kingdom. God's voice might compel you to invite someone to church, say something encouraging, make a purchase or go on a mission trip. Sometimes, the voice will remind you to spend time with God in prayer and Bible study.

Like most undertakings, listening to and hearing God takes practice. Start by building quiet reflection into prayer time. Instead of your prayer needs, focus on what you think God is teaching you. Go over attributes of God, such as His power, grace or healing nature. As you read a Bible passage, ask God what He wants you to learn.

Also, look for opportunities to do what God says, even if you don't hear anything specific. God might not tell you specifically which charity should get your time or money. However, because the Bible extols charity, you can be confident your decision to invest in a reputable one is in line with His will.



JUL 15

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

—*John 10:10*

Abundant Life

Some translations render this verse as, “I have come that they may have life ... more abundantly.” However, what does it mean to live an abundant life? Some people assume it means a prosperous life on Earth, filled with money, possessions and security. Others think today’s verse talks only about the promises of life in Heaven for believers.

Actually, both interpretations are flawed. God never promised we’d have easy, secure lives all the time. In reality, the Bible talks often about suffering—especially for Christians. Yet, neither did God say our lives would be miserable outside of Heaven. An abundant life lived God’s way is one that honors Him. Any believer can have an abundant life; it’s there for the asking.

Perhaps you’d like your life to be abundant but aren’t sure how to make it happen. Consider why your life doesn’t feel abundant. It may be because of a physical need, such as a financial problem or the need to lose or gain weight. You might have an emotional struggle, like an estranged family member.

You can change some of these things over time, while you must leave other things entirely in God’s hands. Either way, you should pray diligently about them. If the obstacle keeping you from abundance is something you can change, work on it. For instance, consider going back to school if a lack of education keeps you from a job you want. If you can’t change the situation, ask God for an extra measure of strength, gratefulness and joy. He will show you where abundance already exists and how to make it grow.



JUL 16

*Hear, O Israel, the
Lord our God, the
Lord is one.*

—*Deuteronomy
6:4*

The One God

Our verse today is a prayer called the Shema, prayed in Jewish synagogues and in some Christian churches. It's simple but contains one of the most important and profound truths of Christianity. The Lord is our God, and the Lord is one. He's the Alpha and Omega, the only God worthy of worship.

In every generation, there are people and things that keep us from seeing God as the only one like Him. In ancient Israel, literal idols carved from raw materials were often the problem. These idols represented gods whose religions required worship the true God found detestable. It included sexual orgies, human sacrifices and self-mutilation.

Today, these forms of idol worship are rarer. Modern people, including Christians, can fall into the trap of worshipping careers, possessions, money and prestige. Sometimes our family, home and security can become idols. God never said any of these things are sinful, but they become so when they take His place.

Since it's so easy to slip into idolatry, pray often about whether you're putting God first. If God shows you an idol, don't beat yourself up. Avail yourself of His grace and seek to replace the idol with the One God. This may take time, and you may have to dethrone the same idol many times. However, God will always be patient in helping you. You'll never defeat idols alone. Each time you do, you'll find God more worthy of worship, so it'll be harder to turn to idols.



JUL 17

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

—Matthew
26:28b

Power in the Blood

Christianity places much emphasis on Jesus' blood. This emphasis can turn off nonbelievers and even some believers, who would prefer to focus on God's love. God is the ultimate picture of love and mercy, but we can't discount the importance of Jesus' blood and sacrifice.

Sacrifice is a huge biblical theme. The Old Testament covenant, for example, required animal bloodshed for the forgiveness of sins. Leviticus and Numbers discuss laws based on tenets such as "an eye for an eye." Large parts of the Old Testament concern the conquest of Canaan, a bloody endeavor indeed. Unfortunately, this type of bloodshed meant constant loss of life.

When God the Father planned Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, He intended it to be the last blood sacrifice for sin. Hebrews describes it as "once and for all," meant for every person on Earth. Those who accept Christ are covered symbolically with His blood—guaranteed eternal life and earthly benefits of salvation because of His sacrifice.

Bloodshed is never easy to think about or pleasant to discuss. However, Jesus' blood and death are unique because they offer eternal hope. Unlike many examples of violence today, Jesus' blood wasn't spilled senselessly. As an old hymn says, "When He was on the cross, (you) were on His mind." Better, because Jesus is God, His death wasn't forever. He rose again, making His sacrifice the only one of its kind.

When you're tired of violence and bloodshed, switch your focus to the one instance of bloodshed that offers hope. Thank Jesus for the blood spilled for you. Then celebrate it, sharing the message of His blood with others.



JUL 18

He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?"
—Job 2:10

Why (Not) Me?

The Bible tells us Job never sinned in what he said, despite the arduous tests God bestowed upon him. However, Job felt sadness, anger and hopelessness at his plight like any other person. Scripture says he was in so much pain from boils that he scraped himself with broken pottery. At one point, Job wished he had never been born.

Since our world is fallen, many Christians will face intense testing like Job. Maybe you're one of those Christians. Your test could be a cancer diagnosis—for your 5-year-old child. It could be homelessness, intense persecution at school or work, or false accusations. A natural disaster or the killing of a loved one might test you. These aren't average spiritual tests, and they're likely to leave you asking, "Why me?"

Perhaps a better question, though, is "Why not me?" In the midst of a test, it can be difficult to believe God can use your circumstances for anything good, but He can. Often, the people tested the most find that God had an incredible plan and testimony in mind for them. You won't know what your testimony is right away. It may take months or years to discover what it is, and after you find out, you might still say, "Lord, I don't want it!"

Remember, though, that the human mind is finite. We see only what we can make sense of, but God sees the big picture. Your recovery from a natural disaster might encourage others who are struggling on a smaller scale. Your child's cancer diagnosis may put you in contact with the best and most understanding friends you've ever had. False accusations might stir a new passion for godly justice in you.

When terrible circumstances come, it's okay to ask God why. After that, ask why not. Ask Him to show you how to handle your situation with His grace.



JUL 19

Indeed, if you cry out for insight ... and search for it as hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.

—Proverbs 2:3-5

Searching for Wisdom

Millions (perhaps billions) of subjects exist for us to study. These branch out into billions of careers at which we can become experts. The only One we'll never completely understand no matter how hard we try is God. We'll never know everything possible about Him because, unlike God, humans are limited.

That said, God wants us to know Him as intimately as we can. He withholds some knowledge, because it is "too lofty for (us)," but He invites us to gain wisdom regarding His ways. Today's verse tells us how to do it: diligently, as if searching for the most valuable treasure in the world.

Although some people use "wisdom" and "knowledge" interchangeably, don't confuse the two. Knowledge refers to facts we can grasp with the human mind, or truths boiled down to their essence. You have knowledge of God if you know He is love, or if you know He can perform miracles. Knowledge is a step toward wisdom, but it only provides the basics.

Wisdom regarding God's ways and true understanding of God must be cultivated over time. Again, you'll never fully understand God but will achieve a level of understanding. This will help you love and trust Him more, and it provides the next step toward wisdom. Wisdom is the application of your knowledge and understanding. You prove you're wise when you know, accept and enact God's ways in a given situation.

At any point on your spiritual journey, you glean new knowledge, understanding and wisdom. You may stay in the "knowledge" phase for a long time regarding a specific characteristic of God or a spiritual question. Don't rush this process. Instead, continue seeking and asking for wisdom, and enjoy the journey.



JUL 20

Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

—Proverbs 27:6

Wounds From a Friend

It's human nature to embrace what we want to hear. We'd all rather accept a positive comment than criticism. Criticism may be constructive, but when we hear it, we get defensive. Although we might not admit it, the idea we are wrong about something wounds our pride.

Proverbs 27:6 reminds us that wounded pride can be a good thing if the wounds are inflicted with love. It also reminds us where this type of wound often comes from: a true friend. This verse's writer makes a clear distinction between friends who tell us what we want to hear versus those who express what we need to hear. Those who consistently stroke our egos are not friends, but enemies.

No one likes constant criticism, so it's easy to say this characterization is harsh. Don't be quick to dismiss it, though. Although flattery and kindly worded untruths feel good at first, they'll harm you in the end. Eventually, you'll learn the truth, and by then it may come from someone who wants to use the truth to tear you down. Worse, by then your heart may be too hardened toward that particular issue for you to want to change.

When a friend tells you the truth about a wrong you've committed, it'll hurt at first. You might defend yourself and believe you're right. However, if you ask God for discernment, He may have something valuable to show you. Listening to kindly meant words that hurt can make you a stronger, more grounded believer.

Is there someone in your life you need to listen to today? What's he or she trying to say? Go to this person, and be open to his or her words.



JUL 21

I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow and was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

—*Revelation 6:2*

The Prince on a White Horse

Many people loved fairytales growing up, and we knew when the prince rode in on the white horse, the day was about to be saved. Whether you dreamed of being the heroic prince or the princess meeting her dashing hero, you unconsciously recognized the white horse and conqueror as a sign of hope and victory.

As adults, we still wait for a victor on a powerful steed, although we may not admit it. Some Bible teachers theorize it's because we know deep down our earthly lives aren't the end. We know there's something more, something better, waiting for us. Yet, we can't attain it on our own because, as with fairy tales, evil forces block our way. We need a victor to go before us.

Revelation paints Jesus in this role, the perfect victor/savior. Unlike a fairytale prince, He's real. He saves everyone, not just the beautiful or outwardly deserving. There's no chance He'll fail in His mission; He'll rescue us all. We'll attain victory and the better life awaiting us. We'll live that life first as earthly believers, called to live abundantly. Then we'll join our Savior in Heaven.

You might have given up on fairy tales long ago. Maybe real life was harsh toward you, or you simply grew out of your belief in shining knights, dashing princes and lovely princesses. Fairytales are fantasy, but they're a shadow of a glorious reality. You do have a Prince, and He's coming for you. In the meantime, He guides you through life using the Holy Spirit.

Pray and thank God for being your Prince today. Ask Him to show you your worth and rescue you, either through a prayer for salvation or one for renewed strength and grace. Rejoice in your position as a treasure He fights for.



JUL 22

A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.

—Proverbs 31:10

Far Above Rubies

The ruby is July's birthstone—and a valuable stone at that. The Bible often compares the ruby favorably with other stones, citing its high price and preciousness. The ruby is often associated with royalty, leadership and achievement.

Perhaps the writer of Proverbs 31 had this symbolism in mind when he described a wife of noble character. Indeed, a godly woman is worth far more than any jewel in existence—but so is a godly man. While most Christians associate Proverbs 31 with women, its verses apply to all believers. We should all cultivate hearts and souls worth far more than rubies, diamonds or any other precious possession.

Of course, such cultivation isn't possible on our own strength. We can try but will end up emotionally and spiritually exhausted. We must remember that it's up to God to craft us into His jewels. Our job is cooperation: a listening heart, willingness to obey His direction and willingness to trust Him.

How do you know when you're developing a character worth more than rubies? Several inner signs will tell you, including:

- **You have a greater desire for God's Word:** studying, memorizing, and applying it, and sharing what you learn.
- **You enjoy a rich prayer life:** you'll easily come to God with every need.
- **You desire to understand God's will for your life:** you'll wait patiently for His calling and go where He leads you.
- **You feel greater compassion for others:** a deeper desire to encourage and serve your fellow man and share the Gospel and your testimony.
- **You want to trust God:** you'll be quicker to put adverse circumstances in His hands.



JUL 23

Again, the kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

—Matthew
13:45-46

Cultivating Heavenly-Mindedness

Pearls are highly unique stones. They're the only stones that are purely organic and the only ones whose quality can be determined without a jeweler's loupe. Many people associate pearls with purity, modesty and of course, Heaven. Jesus makes the same comparison in today's verse.

Jesus' parables were often confusing to His listeners, but He's always clear about the kingdom of Heaven. He describes it as the ultimate goal for believers, cautioning them to build up heavenly treasures instead of focusing on earthly gain. Throughout the New Testament, other authors drive home this truth. For example, Paul reminds us that although Heaven is unseen, it's eternal and worthy of our constant attention.

Most Christians want to be heavenly minded, yet find the prospect daunting. Some wonder if focusing on Heaven means neglecting one's earthly life or looking forward to death. While believers do feel "homesick" for Heaven, constantly focusing on death doesn't lead to heavenly mindedness. It's also not necessary to shut out life on Earth.

Heavenly-minded Christians have several key traits. First, they know that cultivating an eternal perspective takes time. Even longtime believers will never have this perspective all the time on Earth. However, heavenly minded Christians seek God every day, asking Him to teach them more about His will, which ultimately includes Heaven.

Maintaining an eternal perspective also means remembering earthly circumstances are temporary. Difficult circumstances are a natural part of living in a fallen world. Similarly, joyous circumstances become more so when we recall that earthly happiness is only a shadow of the joy we'll live out in Heaven.

Ask God to help you become more heavenly minded today. Seek to treat Heaven as a pearl of great price in your life.



JUL24

*Listen, my son, to
your father's
instruction and do
not forsake your
mother's teaching.
They are a garland
to grace your head
and a chain to
adorn your neck.*

—Proverbs 1:8-9

Parents' Day

This month we celebrate Parents' Day. After celebrating Mother's and Father's Days, this month we honor our parents as a unit. We acknowledge that they raised us together and that they both helped us become who we are as adults. Parents' Day also honors adoptive parents and parental figures such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and foster parents who have positively impacted millions of lives.

The Bible is clear on how we're supposed to treat our parents; they deserve our respect and honor. "Honor your father and mother" is the fifth commandment, the first after four that tell us how to relate to God. As Paul points out, it's the first commandment with a promise. Honoring our parents guarantees our lives will be longer because we'll respect and use the wisdom they gave us.

What if your parent was absent or abusive? You can still find ways to honor him or her. The first is forgiveness; this is a long process and may require help from a counselor. Additionally, pray for absent or abusive parents. Ask God to draw them toward Him and change their hearts. If it's safe to do so, consider making efforts to rekindle a relationship. Seek guidance from the Lord and godly friends when doing this.

Make a special effort to reach out to your parents or parental figures. Call to thank them for what they've done for you, or write a letter or email. Invite them to dinner or a favorite activity. Ask what advice they'd give now that you're an adult. Then use their advice just as you did as a child.



JUL 25

When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

—John 8:44

The Great Deceiver

Satan glories in all sin, from murder to adultery to thievery. However, today's verse suggests he takes special delight in lying. Lying is "his native language." He's incapable of speaking truth or edifying anyone. Deception, it could be argued, which Satan fuels, is the root of all sin at one point or another.

Some Bible scholars take this argument further, explaining many lies are twisted truths or perversions of what God calls good. For example, the desire for love is a godly one. However, if that desire leads to adultery, you've believed a lie that says you deserve love at any cost and must take it yourself. The desire to give your family a prosperous life is good. However, if you steal to facilitate it, you believe the lie that you can only prosper at others' expense.

Of course, not all of Satan's lies are this obvious. He loves to deceive Christians in subtler ways, such as making them feel unworthy of God's love or telling them that they aren't saved. These lies are some of the hardest to overcome, because they aren't tied to a particular, physical sin. They grow deep roots, sometimes in the span of years or decades. For example, someone abused as a child may struggle for years to trust God's love as an adult.

Taking stock of your words and actions can help you identify any lies Satan uses against you. If you consistently sin in a certain way or tell yourself negative things, a particular lie is probably the cause. Ask God and others to help you identify the lie and its origin. Once you know, seek godly counsel and methods to rid yourself of it for good.



JUL 26

Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

—Matthew 5:15

This Little Light

People who grew up going to Sunday school are probably familiar with “This Little Light of Mine.” Church members across the nation sing this song, especially in Sunday school classrooms. It’s an early lesson on believers’ status as light to the world. It also encourages us not to hide our lights. Instead, we’re to speak boldly about Jesus, His death, resurrection and the way He influences our everyday lives.

However, being bold for Christ is more difficult than it looks. Today, American believers are often ridiculed or persecuted, called intolerant, hateful and old-fashioned. Others plant doubts in us, saying the Bible is irrelevant or doesn’t mean what we think it means. Although physical persecution is rarer in the United States than in some countries, it does happen. All this is enough to wear down the hardiest Christian, making him or her want to extinguish the inner light and hide from the world.

Jesus understands how we feel and wants to comfort us when sharing Him is hard. Yet, He encourages us to stay strong and keep sharing. This doesn’t have to be obvious; you aren’t required to share the Gospel the moment you meet a nonbeliever. It can be as simple as offering a helping hand or kind word. Sharing Jesus might mean acknowledging people you don’t generally notice or sacrificing your time to help with a ministry.

If your light is burning low today, pray. Tell God you need some “oil” for your lamp. Bible study, praise music, meditation and physical rest all help with this. Once your light is rejuvenated, go out to share it again.



JUL 27

But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

—*Jeremiah 18:4*

Becoming Malleable in God's Hands

Most Christians know the analogy of God as the potter and ourselves as clay. It's a popular one, because clay is such a moldable substance. If you've ever seen kids playing with Play-Doh, you know they can make it into almost anything. In their hands, a shapeless blob becomes something that captures their imagination and serves great purposes in pretend play.

Sometimes, though, clay becomes hard. When this happens, molding is difficult. Potters often deal with broken clay, which they must moisturize and re-shape into new vessels. Christians are similar. We don't always let God mold us as He'd like. Sometimes, He allows tests to make us more moldable or even break us so He can start from scratch.

It's important to remember that God takes no pleasure in allowing circumstances that break His people's hearts. When we hurt, He hurts, and He comforts us. Some people say that God never wastes a hurt. If He allows something to re-shape you, it's because He has a better plan than you can see right now. Sometimes you need to "re-moisturize," soaking in His Word and character before refocusing on the tasks He gives you.

Finally, remember that you're clay, not the potter. You don't choose what kind of vessel you'll be. God gives us talents and spiritual gifts that help determine this, but ultimately your destiny is His decision. If you're having trouble trusting it, tell Him. Ask Him to make you malleable and teachable so your spirit can grow. He'll make you a beautiful vessel.



JUL 28

*For in Him we live
and move and
have our being.*

—Acts 17:28

He Is Why We Exist

Since ancient times, there has been much debate on how we got here and why we exist. Some people believe humans were a cosmic accident. Others believe there's no true reality—only illusions. Still others understand God created us and loves us, but not that He's the reason we exist.

Everyone is vulnerable to this line of thinking, even and perhaps especially Christians. That is, ministries, Bible studies, mission trips and other forms of service often distract us. We do all this to please God but forget He doesn't need us to do anything for Him. He created us as human beings—not "human doings." Our primary purpose is to find joy in Him and get to know Him.

In our busy world, it's hard to figure out how to do this. Does it mean shutting yourself in your room and praying 10 hours a day? Does it mean quitting your job in favor of a long-term missionary assignment or moving to a monastery? God has certainly led people to do these things, but they aren't generally His choice for modern Christians.

Today, "living and moving and having your being" in Christ means acknowledging Him in every facet of your life. It means being diligent and having a good attitude at school or work. It means teaching your kids to be godly, reaching out to others and spending plenty of quiet time alone with God.

Getting to know God can take any form you like. Some people go to a quiet room to complete Bible studies; others prefer to worship God through dancing and singing. Still others write their own poems and psalms. Whatever form you choose, always remember your root purpose: finding joy in God, who created you.



JUL 29

*Now, you women;
hear the word of
the Lord; open
your ears to the
words of His
mouth.*

—Jeremiah 9:20

Women and the Word

It's important for men and women to know and live the Word of God. However, in today's verse, Jeremiah specifically speaks to women. Bible scholars speculate there are several reasons for this. One might be because Jeremiah's culture didn't consider women worthy to study God's Word. Perhaps he was encouraging them to receive the Word and take an active role in sharing it with others. Another reason might be because of women's domain over child rearing. Although men were created to be spiritual leaders, women nurtured children and first exposed them to God.

Whatever Jeremiah's reasons, his words are vital for today's women. Modern Christian women have more physical and spiritual freedoms than ancient Israel's women ever dreamed of. They lead Sunday school classes and Bible studies; some denominations allow women to preach. Additionally, today's women participate in thousands of ministries outside the church. Their mission field could be their workplace or their home, a clinic or a classroom, a police station or a fire station.

With all this freedom comes busyness. Many women are so overwhelmed with godly responsibilities that they forget to absorb His Word and character. That's why it's crucial for everyone, but women in particular, to learn to balance activities and commitments. Don't be afraid to say "no." It frees more time for you to hear and learn from God.

If you're a woman who feels overwhelmed with all your freedoms and responsibilities, meditate on today's verse. Your primary responsibility is listening to God, not so you can get marching orders, but so you can enjoy Him. Today, give yourself permission for some valuable time with Him.



JUL 30

*Blessed is he
whose
transgressions are
forgiven, whose sins
are covered.*

—Psalm 32:1

Forgiving Ourselves

Some pastors and teachers teach this psalm as 3-2-1 so their listeners will remember it. Indeed, it's one of the verses most worth remembering in Psalms. Forgiveness is a basic tenet of Christianity and the most valuable thing Jesus offers us. His forgiveness encompasses every sin from our past, present and future. It frees us as no human forgiveness can.

While this concept is familiar, most of us struggle to forgive ourselves. After all, we're the ones who have to wake up and look at ourselves every day. We know ourselves well, including our flaws, sins and checkered pasts. Even the most grounded Christian with the best background can struggle with self-loathing and a lack of forgiveness.

Pastors often quote the verse where Jesus tells us He won't forgive us if we don't forgive others. They usually use the verse as a springboard to talk about avoiding grudges. They sometimes forget, though, that we are all part of "others." If we can't forgive ourselves, we miss the depth of Jesus' forgiveness. We sacrifice the opportunity to walk in freedom and extend love to others because we don't see past our own mistakes and problems.

As you read this, you might be struggling to forgive yourself for something. It might be a "small" but persistent sin, such as being short-tempered and critical toward your spouse or kids. You might have darker sins in your past such as addiction, sexual sin or a prison term. Any of these can cause self-loathing, but you can break the cycle. Today, determine to forgive yourself. Forgive yourself even if you don't feel it. In time and with God's help, your emotions will catch up.



JUL 31

*Today in the town
of David a Savior
has been born to
you; He is the
Messiah, the Lord.*

—Luke 2:11

Christmas in July

July's arrival signals our calendar is more than halfway to Christmas. Many people celebrate what they call Half-Mas with "Christmas in July." Networks like Hallmark play Christmas movies, and keepsake ornaments appear on store shelves. Some people host Christmas or winter-themed parties to take their minds off summer heat, humidity and bugs. In a struggling economy, many retailers often put out their Christmas decorations much earlier than normal.

While a Christmas in July party is fun, you don't need decorations and carols to celebrate every day of the year. Sometimes all you need is a timely reminder such as today's verse. Most Christians are so used to hearing about Jesus' time on Earth that they don't stop to think about His humanity. Jesus was fully human. Like all of us, He started life as a helpless baby. He gave up Heaven to be born in cramped, smelly conditions—for us.

Outside the Christmas season, Christians often skim over Jesus' birth. We want to jump straight to the crucifixion and resurrection, which we consider the most important parts of the story. However, Jesus, the best Author in the world, never skimps on details. Since His birth was included in the Bible, it must be crucial.

The Bible doesn't give us many details on Jesus' babyhood or childhood. Yet what's there reminds us of a powerful truth. None of us can accomplish our adult tasks unless we're born, and we aren't born without God's hand. Today, meditate on Jesus' birth and how it changed the world. Then meditate on yours. Thank Jesus that He was born and allowed your birth. Celebrate Christmas in July and all the time.





AUG 01

Conquering Our Fear

We frequently hear, "Don't worry, God is watching over us." It can be difficult to be strong and courageous in lieu of today's ongoing tragedies, massacres and public strife. No matter how many times we tell ourselves the Lord is with us, sometimes we need to hear it from God Himself to truly have faith.

Twice in this chapter and once from Moses, Joshua hears the phrase, "Be strong and courageous." The tools of the enemy, the tools of Satan, work to bring fear, terror and discouragement into Joshua's life. Just as Satan made Joshua forget God's omnipotence, he can make Christians forget that God is with us wherever we go.

Terror is a tough battle to fight. Faith in God enables us to be evil's worst nightmare—invincible soldiers on the battlefield. It takes faith in God to fight against the evil and frightening things going on in our world. Every one of us must respond to fear and discouragement with open, spiritual eyes. Not only are our peers telling us not to fear, God Himself tells us every day. All things work together in God's power for the good. What we perceive as losses are steps forward—battles lost to win the war.

Today, open your eyes and see what good the Lord has given you. See past the difficulties in your life and focus on the positive. See with eyes of faith. Turn off the news, go to a quiet place and reflect with God. He has everything under control, even when we feel lost and in despair. Just as Joshua did, we need to let go of our fear and listen when God tells us He is with us.

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

—Joshua 1:9



AUG02

Manna From Heaven

*He humbled you,
causing you to
hunger and then
feeding you with
manna, which
neither you nor
your fathers had
known, to teach
you that man does
not live on bread
alone but on every
word that comes
from the mouth of
the Lord.*

*—Deuteronomy
8:3*

Today's verse references God's testing of Israel. God sent the Israelites into the wilderness without food, until the sixteenth day of the second month of the journey, when He feeds them. They were left to their own devices for one whole month, and they nearly starved. Through hardship, the Israelites realized that they needed the Lord to survive. The wilderness was God's way of testing what was in their hearts, not of making them suffer.

God, of course, knew what was in their hearts, but the people of Israel didn't. God needed to show Israel how proud and faithless they were through a humbling experience. He could easily have fed them sooner, but He waited until they suffered from hunger to teach them an important lesson. Throughout the Bible, we learn that our life should focus on God's will, not our own.

Christians often foolishly believe we can take care of ourselves and depend on our own resources to survive. God puts us through hardships, through our own wilderness experiences, not to make us suffer but to test what's in our hearts. The wilderness is meant to remind us that we depend on God for life and for all things—immediately, entirely and absolutely. God humbles us with suffering to remind us that we must depend on His word alone.

If you're going through your own wilderness experience today, take faith in the knowledge that it's God's way of sustaining you. It can be difficult to cheerfully serve and trust in the Lord during a tough time, but this is exactly what will end days of starvation. God will give you a miraculous supply of food for the soul the moment you humble yourself and look to Him for sustenance.



AUG03

Equal in God's Eyes

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

—Galatians 3:28

In this verse, Paul claims that race, social class and gender are abolished when we come together in Christ. Paul's audience at the time in the Greco-Roman world would have looked around them and observed that this isn't true, except in Utopia. These three social structures did and do exist, at least physically. This verse continues the conversation that all Christians are "sons of God." When standing before God, we're all equal.

Paul is commenting on the fact that no outward form can secure the blessings of the Lord, and that Christ doesn't put one person on a pedestal above another. In baptism, we profess to be Christ's disciples—a new birth that saves all in the same way. While many Christians accept this as the truth, it can be difficult to think this way in our daily lives. Social structures do exist in our world, although modern society is taking steps to abolish them.

Distinctions of race, class and gender are at odds with true Christianity. While we may see barriers that separate us, God doesn't. As Christians, we must see others the way God does and do our best to erase the lines drawn in the sand. Paul teaches that everyone becomes Christians in the same terms, with religious privileges on the same level. God shows no special favor to one over the other in the matter of salvation.

It can be difficult for us to see people through God's eyes. For some of us, it will remain an ongoing struggle. Today, make an effort to take Paul's words seriously. Christian fellowship bonds us all together and lifts us up equally. The Gospel breaks down walls of separation and crosses all boundaries.



AUG04

The Power to Do Good

For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by you, brother.

—Philemon 1:7

St. Paul declares his joy in the refreshment of “the bowels” of the saints. In Matthew 11:28, the Lord promises to refresh all that “travail and are heavy laden.” In today’s verse, “refreshed” is the keyword. Through Christ, the hearts of the saints are refreshed—or given relief and rest. The term “brother” is given to Philemon here to emphasize feelings of affection and friendship. Through Philemon’s works of charity, the saints found relief from distress.

Just as Food for the Hungry brings relief and “refreshment” to the hearts of those living in poverty, driven from their homes or suffering hunger, Philemon’s charitable actions are a source of immense joy. We can impart joy to others and thus to the Lord through charity, spreading the love of God through our actions. Philemon’s actions gave great joy to the saints, who had no need for his comforts. In the same way, God cherishes our good deeds even though He doesn’t need them Himself.

Throughout your life, refresh the hearts, bodies and minds of those who need your help. Your charitable actions will spread joy and strengthen your bond with the Lord. Do these acts cheerfully and spread comfort to others—even to those who don’t need your charity. Take today’s verse as a reminder that Christ does notice our actions.

Offer your assistance to those who need it. You have the power to refresh others with your actions, just as the Lord refreshes you through Christian fellowship. Be like Christ in your acts of charity, and know that you’re giving joy and consolation to the Lord through your love.



AUG05

John's Promise

His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

—*Luke 3:17*

Despite what it may sound like, today's verse isn't about wheat and chaff. The Bible often gives metaphors regarding "chaff" as a symbol of the wicked, ungodly and evil of the world. Luke 3:17 is a metaphor in which the oppressors, the false-hearted and the selfish of the world will be separated from the rest (the "wheat") and destroyed. While this may sound harsh, the metaphor is meant to speak to the antagonism between good and evil—between the followers and enemies of Christ.

John the Baptist says that he isn't Christ, but he confirms that a long-promised Messiah comes and that He will baptize the people with the "Holy Ghost and with fire" (Luke 3:16). While John can baptize the people with water, he humbly assures them that he can't purify and cleanse the people as the Messiah can. Christ can baptize the people, purifying their hearts as fire clears out the chaff from the threshing floor.

This verse isn't meant as a threat, but as a reminder that God alone has the power to absolve our sins and remove our guilt—just as He has the power to destroy His enemies. "Unquenchable fire" is the Holy Ghost, working in the souls of Christians like a fire to purge them of their sins and corruptions. As a believer, the fire of the Holy Spirit lives in you.

When you've sinned against Christ, go to Him and ask for repentance. Christ will gather the good in you, the wheat, into His barn and burn the rest with the fire of the Holy Spirit. God alone has the power to absolve you of sin. Pray for forgiveness, and He'll cleanse you as completely as fire clears chaff in a barn.



AUG06

Redeeming Rain

*You heavens
above, rain down
my righteousness;
let the clouds
shower it down. Let
the earth open
wide, let salvation
spring up, let
righteousness
flourish with it; I,
the Lord, have
created it.*

—Isaiah 45:8

In many regions, July and August are marked with powerful thunderstorms and heavy rains. Instead of seeing rain as a sign of darkness and depression, this verse shows us that rain is meant to cleanse and nurture. Throughout the Bible, rain and floods are symbols of wonderful cleansing: the flood that isolated Noah on the arc, the rain and wind that slammed against the house on the rock in Matthew 7, and the rain the Lord sent to the wicked in Samuel 12, among others. Rain is a symbol of God's mightiness, as He is the only one with the power to make rain and thunder.

Rain has multiple meanings throughout the Bible. In many verses, it's proof of God's awesome power. Rain can cause awesome strife and flooding, but it's also what enables the earth to grow, giving us food to eat. Rain is a symbol of salvation and righteousness, as God has created it. The Lord commands blessings to descend upon His people, and Christians should willingly and gratefully receive them.

Without rain, the earth can't flourish. It droops and dies. When showers descend on the earth, they bring forth fruit and plants. Christians should see rainstorms as a revival of righteousness, just as it revives the earth. Let the earth become fruitful in producing salvation from heavenly rain.

If you're feeling down in this rainy season, take heart in the knowledge that God has created it. Just as rain is a metaphor for righteousness and salvation in Isaiah 45:8, let the rain be a constant reminder of the Lord's presence in your life. Enjoy life-giving rain, and let righteousness spring up in you like shoots from the ground.



AUG07

Suffering Is Our Armor

Therefore, since Christ suffered in His body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin.

— 1 Peter 4:1

Today's devotional is in honor of our veterans wounded in combat. Let's recognize those who suffered for our freedom. Just as Jesus suffered in His body to cleanse the world of sin, combat-wounded veterans suffered on civilians' behalf. Today's verse doesn't only refer to Jesus' death on the cross, but to His entire life.

The life Jesus knew on Earth brought many pains. He lived a higher life than men, but His higher life was the source of the bitterness He suffered. Jesus' life is the pattern through which all Christians should live. Peter hints at the conflict between our personal defenselessness and the unyielding armor that Christ gives to us. When we take on the mind of Christ, we can live according to the will of God and renounce the sins of men.

Today's verse is about arming yourself with the attitude of Christ. It can be difficult to make sense of a great physical pain or loss and reconcile it with the image of a loving, caring God. You may be tempted to blame God for earthly suffering. However, this verse teaches disciples of Christ to suffer evils as armor of proof against your enemies. If a man overcomes fear of torture or death through Christ, no weaker temptation will come close.

If you've suffered a terrible pain or loss in your life or know someone who has, take heart in the fact that this pain of the flesh will be rewarded in Heaven. Thank our Purple Heart veterans, today and every day, for their suffering for our freedom, and know that it's all part of God's larger plan.



AUG08

God's Abundant Blessings

To those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ: mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance.

—Jude 1:1-2

The highest glory any one of us can strive to aspire to is to be “loved in God” and “kept for Jesus Christ.” Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ, calls Christians to higher and better things than those who reject Christ. God’s mercy is a fountain of all the good we can ever hope for: a living well of mercy, peace and love. Today’s verse reminds us that walking with Christ is the way to obtain God’s love and mercy.

Christians’ lives can be full of these three things in abundance. Both weak and strong believers in God can enjoy the three most important blessings in the world. Mercy pardons our sins, peace gives us acceptance with our fellow men and in our own consciences and love is the vehicle through which all things are possible. Christ multiplies these things within His believers.

God gives His loving grace to us freely each day. He casts His love over all of us and wants us to feel the fullness of His joy. Look at things God has created on Earth: the grass under our feet and the stars in the sky. God has a purpose for each and every one of His creations, including you. In our darkest times, we can call upon the Lord for mercy, peace and love.

If you’re feeling lost, call on God for the blessings He freely gives you. We often get too caught up in our daily lives and struggles to feel the mercy, peace and love that’s our right by Jesus Christ. It’s ours in abundance, whenever we ask for it. Take time today to focus on the good things God has given us, and appreciate the endless blessings we have through our faith in Him.



AUG09

Trusting God

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever

He tells you."

—John 2:5

In John 2:5, Mary tells the servants to obey Jesus' commands, even if they do so without understanding His ultimate plan. The servants filled the pots with water, failing to understand how it would help their situation. Jesus had a plan all along and miraculously turned the water into wine. Today's verse reminds us to trust in God's plans. Even if we don't see the reason behind His commands, we must have faith that He knows what's best for us.

The Lord may have reasons for things in your life beyond what you can possibly imagine. The Bible teaches us to always have faith in the ways of the Lord and to trust that He knows what's best for us. As Christians, we know this to be true. As humans, it can be difficult to "blindly" trust in what God has in store for us. However, we must humble ourselves and follow His guidance without question.

Don't question the reasonableness of God's commands. If you feel your life is spinning out of control, remind yourself that it's all happening for a reason. Even if you can't foresee the meaning behind your daily trials and triumphs, know in your heart that God wouldn't lead you astray. We must invite Christ through prayer, and do as He pleases. When you pray for something and don't get the result you want, realize that this is for a reason.

In all things, God is in control. We must not question God's methods, even when we can't fathom the reason behind certain events in our lives. It can be difficult to cope with difficult times and believe it's for the best. But we have to have faith that God will turn our water into wine if we trust in Him.



AUG 10

Prayer in Times of Plenty

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.

—James 5:13

Today's verse isn't about praising God when we need Him the most, but rather when we feel we're doing fine on our own. When things are going well in our lives, we tend to become complacent. We may pray less or sing praise with less active intentions. We often make the mistake of only rendering our hearts to God when something bad happens or when we need guidance. Instead, give your heart to God even when things are going well.

We can all use a little reminder that God desires to be a part of every aspect of our lives. While it's true that He's there for us in our times of need, He's also there for us in times of plenty. The best time to consult with and praise God is when we believe we have our lives under control. This is the ideal opportunity to thank God for His blessings and hear more clearly the word of the Lord.

It's God's will that we pray continually—not every now and then when we're crying out for help. Through success and achievement, we may become more comfortable in our lives and seek God less and less. When this happens, we close ourselves to the words of God. Instead of becoming remiss with your prayers in times of plenty, turn to God more often, with peace of mind, clarity and openness to hear Him.

If everything is going well in your life right now, take a moment to thank God and ask for His words. In your rational state of mind, you'll hear more clearly from God to guide your steps with purpose. Honor God this day with a heart-felt communion, regardless of your circumstances. Keep in constant communication with the Lord, in times of poverty and of plenty.



AUG 11

Life-Giving Prayer

*That person is like
a tree planted by
streams of water,
which yields its fruit
in season and
whose leaf does
not wither—
whatever they do
prosper.*

—Psalm 1:1-3

Psalms offer many words of advice to Christians that we can use in times of strife. In today's global atmosphere of hardship, uncertainty and fear, we need the Word of God more than ever. Today's verse reminds us that those who don't walk with the wicked or sit in the company of mockers are blessed by God and will be fruitful and prosperous.

If we delight in the Word of the Lord during these hard times, meditating on His law day and night, we become like the tree in Psalm 1:1-3. This psalm offers blessings to those who trust in the Lord, even during difficult times. Today's world gives us many things to think about: technology, politics, wars... things that distract us and demand our attention. We're so tired at the end of the day because our leaves have withered.

We can find strength and comfort in the Word of God. When we tune out the sights and sounds of the physical world around us and meditate on Christ, we'll find rejuvenation and happiness, like a well-watered tree. We can bear fruit and remain strong in the face of adversity. Focusing on Christ is the only way to center your thoughts and live through the teachings of the Lord.

Consider making a Psalm a day part of your daily devotion. This will let you see the blessings of God, delight in His word and drown out the distractions around you. Take time alone to meditate on a Psalm, and give your undivided attention to Christ. Through focused prayer, we can enjoy fruitful, prosperous lives.



AUG 12

Teaching the Ten Commandments

Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

—Deuteronomy
6:6-7

Children give us a world of opportunity—to grow ourselves as Christians and teach the Word of the Lord to the next generation. The Lord asks us to take His Ten Commandments into our hearts, teaching them to our children and speaking of them frequently. Those who love the Lord must do everything in their power to engage their children with Him and pass this affection from generation to generation.

Today's children may not be as willing to hear the Word of the Lord as previous generations. Children have much more opportunity for distraction and entertainment. We must be diligent in impressing the Commandments onto our children in a way that will make their meanings clear.

Today's verse reminds us that the Lord wants us to instill His lessons on our children at all times, preserving Christianity in your family. If you're at a loss as to how to teach the Ten Commandments to your children, try these tips:

- **Daily reminders.** Mention one Commandment every day, as a life lesson or just as a reminder, until your children know them by heart.
- **Set an example.** Obey the Ten Commandments in your own daily life, and your children will follow your example.
- **Arts and crafts.** Turn learning the Commandments into a fun activity. This is a great memorization tool and makes learning about the Word of God engaging.
- **Relate them to today.** The Ten Commandments may seem irrelevant to today's children. Make sure they understand the everlasting power of God's rules by relating them to your children's everyday lives.

Not every commandment will be appropriate for every age—it may be difficult to explain some to young children. As your kids grow, their ears will be more ready to hear these lessons.



AUG 13

Listening Fairly

In a lawsuit the first to speak seems right, until someone comes forward and cross-examines.

—Proverbs 18:17

Many times throughout our lives, we argue and point the finger of blame at others. Confiding in our friends and telling our side of the story may feel like we're just looking for an open ear to hear our case. However, when the defense cross-examines us, a different story is often told. Today's verse teaches us to listen to all sides of a story instead of jumping to conclusions and to keep an open mind and heart.

In many cases, when one person tells a story of how he or she was wronged, the other person comes forward with an entirely different story. In other cases, both parties tell the same story, but the reason for the wrongdoing paints a different picture in the listeners' minds. For example, say a storeowner tells the story of a woman who came into his store and stole a bag of apples. To the listener, this seems like an obvious crime. However, if the woman explains how the storeowner overcharges her for basic goods, the listener might be more sympathetic.

Think about a time in your life where you failed to listen to both sides of story. It may be hearing about an argument between your children or deciding the fate of an employee under review. Big or small, it's important to listen to all sides of a situation. It's easy to assume you're right about something, but the truth may surprise you. Listen to your neighbors (and your enemies) to appreciate both sides of every story.



AUG 14

Blessed Are the Meek

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret.

—Matthew 6:3-4

The Bible gives us plenty of guidelines for how to be better Christians, if we're open to hearing them. Today's verse is a popular one from Matthew, which tells us to keep our giving a secret. In this verse, the left hand represents our baser instincts of self-praise and self-promotion. The right hand represents the higher element in all of us—the part of us that seeks acts of true charity.

"True charity" is an act of kindness that doesn't come from a place of selfishness but instead from a place of purer intentions. The Lord warns us against outward displays of our goodness and holiness, and He praises those who perform acts of charity without shouting them out to the public. In other words, the Lord is telling us that giving in "secret" is more praiseworthy than giving just to reap a reward.

Today, it can be difficult to keep our good deeds to ourselves. It's tempting to publicize our acts of charity through viral internet videos or status updates praising ourselves for our good deeds. The competition to be a "better" Christian than our neighbors is exactly what the Lord warns us against in Matthew 6:3-4. This attitude doesn't grant us favor in the eyes of the Lord, no matter how charitable we are.

Next time you give to a nonprofit like Food for the Hungry or perform a good deed, consider not telling anyone. Keep your donation completely anonymous. Don't even tell your family. Reap the rewards of doing a truly selfless deed. Know that God sees everything you do, whether other people do or not. Your award won't be here on Earth, but instead in Heaven.



AUG 15

Putting Out Fires

*A gentle answer
turns away wrath,
but a harsh word
stirs up anger.*

—*Proverbs 15:1*

It's all too easy to get caught up in an argument and say things we don't mean. When tempers flare, we can speak harsh words we can't take back. Harsh words hurt the ones we love, and they facilitate a harsh response—escalating an argument that may never have gotten so out of hand with a gentle response. Today's verse reminds us to speak not out of anger, but from our hearts, even in times of trouble.

A gentle answer has more power than we realize. In the worst of times, it can be nearly impossible to reply to someone else's scathing tones in loving, gentle tones of our own. However, this is the only way to defuse a situation and put out a fire before it consumes us. Be the bigger person and end a pointless argument by replying in mild, yielding answers. A gentle reply is water on the flames, while harsh words are kindling.

Throughout the Bible, we often see the damage harsh words cause. Examples include the words of Jephthah to the Ephraimites, the Ephraimites to the Gileadites and Nabal to David's servants. In every case, rough answers stir up anger and negative consequences. Harsh words often feel like accusations or a means of cutting your opponent down. Mild words, on the other hand, stir feelings of compassion instead of resentment.

The takeaway from this devotional is to endeavor to soften the matter for the sake of tranquility. These wise words from Proverbs are easier said than done. Remind yourself of this devotional any time you get into a heated argument with a loved one. Probe the source of the problem with kind, gentle responses instead of fighting fire with fire. Sharp, contemptuous words will only make a situation worse.



AUG 16

Speaking Like Christ

The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil.

—Proverbs 15:28

In the Bible, God states repeatedly that the meek will inherit the earth. A person who is God-fearing, righteous and slow to anger who contemplates His words before speaking will have a much more peaceful life than those who “gush evil.” Today’s verse gives us a lesson on thinking and acting more righteously through our words.

A wise person doesn’t say everything on his or her mind without thinking of the consequences. Instead, the righteous understand the process of cultivating small thoughts. The more power and attention you give to the wicked, the more they grow. Eventually, their negative thoughts will turn into actions, leading to temptation and sin. Those who speak all the negative or evil thoughts in their minds spread wickedness throughout the world.

Have you ever been in a conversation where a person is extremely quick to spout judgment and negativity? Proverbs 15:28 teaches us to listen more and speak less. The more you listen to others, the more you can learn. It’s impossible to learn if you’re doing all the talking. Thinking bad thoughts in itself isn’t necessarily a sin. We all have moments where we fall prey to the negative thoughts within our minds. However, acting on these thoughts is where the line is drawn.

Nobody is perfect. There are everyday frustrations in every person’s mind—it’s what makes us human. However, you can lessen the negative feelings in your heart through prayer. Today, choose to actively reject the evils others may be speaking around you and the evils you may be tempted to speak yourself. When temptation rears its ugly head, be ready with a prayer instead. Smile and say something nice—or say nothing at all and turn the other direction.



AUG 17

You Are Justified

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ
—Romans 5:1

We've all enjoyed times when our beliefs or actions are justified. Whether a statistic supporting our beliefs comes out or someone else takes our side, feeling justified can bring a sense of peace and righteousness. Justification can be the saving grace we need to feel confident in our beliefs. Justification brings peace, and faith brings justification. Today's verse implies that through the mediation of Jesus, Christians secure a state of grace through faith.

The crucifixion of Jesus assures us a never-ending, justifying love. His death was for our offenses, and His rising from the dead was for our justification. The idea of justification through Christ means we have the right to look forward to a glorious future. Reconciliation with God gives us a blissful sense of serenity, composure and peace. No matter what we encounter throughout our lives, our faith enables us to look forward to the future.

It's important to note that Paul includes himself in his statement. He puts himself in the same class as the people he is exhorting as an example for us to do the same. Today, we must embrace the justification of the Lord from a place of humbleness and equality. While our faith gives us serenity, we must remember to use this advantage to help others, not to ridicule or talk down to people.

Take today's devotional as an excuse to relax and find peace in your faith. The happy effects of justification through faith reconcile us, and the grace of God gives us power. When we become true believers, we undergo a blessed change and enjoy peace through the absolution of sin. Enjoy justification through your faith today—as a pardoned sinner and beloved child of Christ.



AUG 18 Do Good Works

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

—Ephesians 2:10

You are God's handiwork. Take a moment and let that sink in. Too often, we dismiss ourselves as weak, inferior or less-than. In a competitive world, it's easy to feel useless or unimportant. Never forget the remarkable truth of what we are. We are first, foremost and forever the work of God's hands. His presence shines in everything we do. He created us to do good in our time on Earth and to be Christ-like in our actions.

If doing good works feels like a tall order to fill, it's because it is. God expects a lot from us, but He also knows how much we can bear. We can't be ideal disciples at all times, no matter how hard we try. God understands this and wants us to do our best. We work downwards from salvation because we already have it. We don't work up toward salvation. The "good works" we do are the consequence of salvation, not the cause.

Our thoughts form the basis of our behaviors. Thus, we must begin our good works starting with our own minds, focusing our thoughts on the truths of Scripture. We receive new life to do everything that is "lovely and of good report," in the words of the Apostle Paul. Take today's verse as a reminder that God created us in His image and expects us to honor Him through good works.

If you don't know where to begin to do good works, start with a local nonprofit organization. Nonprofits work to feed the hungry, cloth the naked and uplift those in desperate need of assistance. Take pride in being God's handiwork, and show Him your devotion by doing the good things He created you to do.



AUG 19

You Are the Light of the World

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.

—Matthew 5:14

This verse is popular, especially for use in hymns and Christian music. However, many people don't fully understand its meaning. The metaphor of light versus darkness crops up often in Scripture to portray Christ's goodness and leadership. If Christ is our light shining through the darkness, and He made us in His image, isn't it logical that we should be a light for others?

Today's verse is an important metaphor for our purpose here on Earth. We must strive to be like the "town built on a hill"—shining brightly for all to see. If we don't hide our light, but make it so clear and resplendent as not to be missed, we fulfill God's wishes. In times of trouble, you may not feel like the light of the world. But to God, we are each beacons with the power to shed light on dark places.

Christ refers to us as enlightening in contrast to sin, darkness and ignorance. Sin's corruptive power can't overtake a light that twinkles merrily on a hillside, but it can corrupt those who hide their lights. He doesn't refer to us as the light of the Earth for a reason—our light goes beyond the limitations of this Earth and into the realm of the entire solar system. God's faith in us is that great.

Never forget that you are the light of the world. Remind yourself of this truth by listing 10 positive things about yourself today. It's easy to hide your light and believe falsehoods about yourself. It's not as easy to embrace your good qualities and see yourself through Christ's eyes: a town that can't be hidden.



AUG20

Nobody Is Perfect

*For all have sinned
and fall short of
the glory of God.*

—Romans 3:23

One of the most essential things to learn as a Christian is that we're all sinners. Romans 3:23 and 3:10 tell us that no one is righteous except for God. Nobody on Earth can come close to the glory of God—and He doesn't expect us too. God sent Jesus down to Earth to save us from our sins. He recognizes the baser human instincts we all have to sin and has room in His heart to forgive.

In today's verse, the fact of a universal experience is portrayed both positively and negatively. That all have sinned is a positive assertion, but "falling short" is negative. This verse is meant to show us that we all have human hearts and universal sinfulness, and we'll never attain the glory of God. Instead of seeing this as a bad thing, we need to accept this as a truth and proof of God's almightiness.

Once we accept that we're all sinners, we can begin to live more full lives in Christ. We must recognize that God doesn't compare us with others, but with Himself—and we'll always fall short. Comparing ourselves to others will only distract us from our true purpose and harden our hearts against our neighbors.

If you're someone who often compares yourself to people you know, give yourself a much-needed break from scrutiny today. We're all sinners, without exception. The Lord expects us to make mistakes and repent for our sins. He doesn't expect His disciples to be perfect or godlike, but to exist on Earth as flawed beings. Go a little easier on yourself today. Know that when God forgives, He forgives completely.



AUG21

Active Worship

Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say.

—John 8:43

Today's verse comes from a heated conversation between Jesus, the scribes and the Pharisees. These religious leaders believed they were saved because of their royal bloodline and because of the traditions they followed. They mistakenly believed their traditions made God their Father, when in reality they had lost the true meaning of relying on God. Jesus says this verse to them to show them the importance of true worship.

Many people today believe the same thing as the Pharisees did. Many Christians are raised to attend church regularly, read the Bible and observe religious holidays—yet they don't have a personal relationship with God. While these religious traditions help Christians express their love for the Lord and become closer with Him, they aren't what make a person a child of God.

For Jesus' language to be clear to you, you must receive Him and believe in Him. You must actively engage your mind and heart with the Lord, not just your physical person. A childhood steeped in religion is certainly a positive thing, but one can't simply go through the motions without truly having faith. In the Pharisees' case, if God had been their father, they would have understood Jesus' meaning. Similarly, we can only understand God's meaning if we embrace Him fully.

Each day, make an effort to hear and understand what God tells you. Don't let the monotony of everyday life dull your spirituality. No one can have a relationship with God on your behalf. Take charge of your own relationship with Christ, and go beyond the daily tasks you've been brought up to do. Find and define your own love of God.



AUG22

Lay Down Your Burdens

*Come to me, all
you who are weary
and burdened, and
I will give you rest.*

—*Matthew 11:28*

We all feel overcome with our personal burdens sometimes. Bearing the hardships of our emotional, physical and financial battles can prove too great for even the strongest of God's children. Today's verse offers us a beacon of hope: a promise of rest at the feet of the Lord. The "weary and burdened" encompasses every form of human sorrow and sin. God gives what no one else can: total, absolute rest from our burdens.

The burden of sin is perhaps the worst weight we can take on. Guilt can take a toll on you and make everything else around you appear dull. Instead of suffering under the weight of our sin, go to God and lay it at His feet. Jesus can look into our lives and see the innermost depths of our hearts. He sees the toils we suffer and the sorrows that weigh on us every day. The only way to lighten our load and remove our sins is to confide in the Lord.

How do we allow God to take our burdens off our shoulders? The answer is through prayer. Asking God to remove your troubles is the only way to find rest at His feet. If something is weighing on your mind today, give it up to God. Say a simple prayer such as, "Let thy will, not my will, be done." This prayer serves as a reminder that we aren't in control, even if we think we are. Allow God to work in your life, and find relief in the fact that He alone can remove our burdens.



AUG23

Jesus' Promise to Us

Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on... They will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.

—*Revelation 14:13*

Dealing with the death of a loved one is a terrible hardship. As Christians, we can find a sense of comfort and closure in the promise Jesus gives to us: everlasting life in Heaven.

Revelation 14:13 proclaims a blessing on those who die in the Lord. The blessing promises a happy union with Him, rest from earthly toils, and rewards for their faith and labors of love. This verse can go great lengths to console mourners after a death, as it promises it's not farewell forever. Many times throughout the Scripture, God promises us a life after death. We can take heart in the knowledge that our loved ones' good works weren't in vain and that they live happily alongside the Lord.

Although we may lose our earthly possessions when we die, the Lord assures us that we don't lose our good deeds. This verse reminds us that our lives aren't about how much wealth we can acquire but about the legacy we create through our actions. The Bible tells us that those who give only to be honored by others have reaped their full reward on Earth, but those who give in secret will find their reward in Heaven.

If you've lost a loved one recently, know without a shadow of a doubt that the Lord embraced him or her with love. Say a prayer for your loved ones, that the Lord may recognize the good works of their lifetime and reward them in His Kingdom: "Give <Name> eternal rest, O Lord, and may your light shine on him/her forever."



AUG24

Judging Others

There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

—James 4:12

Contrary to what many non-believers think, the Bible doesn't teach Christians to judge thy neighbor or take on a "holier than thou" attitude. Rather than tearing our neighbors down for their misdeeds and sins, we should focus on our own shortcomings. Just as John 8:7 tells those without sin to cast the first stone on sinners, James 4:12 reminds us that nobody is perfect. Our purpose on Earth isn't to compete with our neighbors, but to let God be the Almighty Judge.

The ultimate source of law is God. All judgment is delegated by Him, not the people of the Earth. While our nation's laws are necessary to keep the peace, they're only placeholders for the real thing: the laws of Christ. It isn't our duty to judge others, as we can't carry out their "sentence." There are many verses in the Bible that tell us not to judge others, but this verse is especially poignant because of its powerful verbiage.

This verse intentionally uses the words "save" and "destroy" to remind us that the Lord is all-powerful. The contradicting thoughts of annihilation and safety serve as a lesson in God's omnipotence. No judge on Earth has the power to see into men's consciences or save or destroy men's souls (or their lives, for that matter). If we aren't the one Lawgiver or Judge, why do we waste our time judging others?

While it's human nature to compare yourself to others, try to resist the urge to make judgments. Condemning your fellow people makes you appear like a false god—the last thing the Lord wants from you. Every time you notice yourself judging others, bring to mind one thing about yourself that's flawed. A little humbleness goes a long way.



AUG25

Jesus' Many Names

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given... And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

—Isaiah 9:6

The Bible gives over 200 names to Jesus: Christ, Son of God, Lamb of God, Messiah, Emmanuel, King of Kings... the list goes on. Today's verse is the announcement of Jesus' birth where we're given four of His many names. The more we understand about each of His names, the better we can get to know who Jesus really is.

Some interpretations take these four names as four elements of the same name. Jesus is one being, with many different elements. His different names don't symbolize different people or different personalities. Since it was customary for people of this time to call children by a name that meant something, we can infer that each name suggests a different quality of Christ.

"Wonderful Counselor" takes on a few different meanings. It can mean "a wonder of a Counselor," "one who counsels wonderful things," or "wonderful in counsel." This name embodies the wisdom of the future Messiah. "Mighty God" is significant in that it means an absolute deity. "Everlasting Father" or the Father of Eternity, purposefully uses the word "Father" to represent Jesus' love and protection. "Prince of Peace" represents the Prophet clinging to the idea that Jesus represents peace, not war.

Why does Jesus have so many names? It's not to confuse us. Each name the Scripture gives to Jesus represents a different one of His purposes: what He did in His short time on Earth and what He's doing now. Recognizing the many names of Jesus helps us understand Him and grow closer to Him as Christians. Use one, two or many of His names during prayer, depending on your need.



AUG26

Alcohol in the Bible

*Wine is a mocker
and beer a
brawler; whoever is
led astray by them
is not wise.*

—*Proverbs 20:1*

Many Christians today ponder the subject of alcohol. Those who enjoy drinking often use Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine as reasoning for its appropriateness, while others reference the damages and "evils" of alcohol to use against it. Alcohol has broken homes and marriages, and its use is connected to significant health problems and death. Understanding what the Bible says about alcohol can help us grow as Christians.

People still debate if the said "wine" in the Bible even represents an alcoholic beverage. Many believe it's just a juice made of grapes from the vineyard. The Bible states that drunkards won't inherit the kingdom of God and that moderation is key to life (1 Corinthians 6:10). Even dining to the point of gluttony is a sin. However, the Bible also states that sin is in the heart of man, and not in any object (Matthew 15:19). If drinking feels sinful to you, it becomes a sin for you. The alcohol itself isn't the sin, therefore, but a means to sin.

Not everyone will find alcohol a stumbling block to their faith. For those who do, stop. For those who don't, be considerate of others for whom alcohol represents danger.

The main takeaway from today's verse is that God didn't put us here to judge others. The Lord is the only Judge. Loving thy neighbor regardless of their sins is a timeless lesson that our Lord wants us to understand. Offer up a prayer today for those with alcohol troubles so that they may find peace in God and practice moderation.



AUG27

Hezekiah's Words

My sons, do not be negligent now, for the Lord has chosen you to stand before him and serve him, to minister before him and to burn incense.

*—2 Chronicles
29:11*

After King Solomon's death, Israel was divided into two kingdoms. King Ahaz, a ruthless and wicked king, cut the articles from the temple in two, set up idolatrous altars and offered his children as sacrifices. King Ahaz's actions brought the wrath of the Lord down on the people. Ahaz's son, Hezekiah, became king and followed the Lord. Today's verse reflects Hezekiah's words to his people once they worshiped the one true God again.

Too often, we're negligent in our worship of the Lord. Modern Christians in today's world have a lot on their plates. The world demands more of us than in the past, expecting us to do more, better, faster. In an atmosphere of constant motion, it can be difficult to spend the necessary time on our God. One small step away can lead to more and more steps, until we find ourselves far away from the Lord's teachings.

Regardless of how often we attend church, pray and read the Bible, we may be guilty of being negligent Christians. It's easy to get engrossed in sins or distractions, becoming like the Israelites under King Ahaz. However, we must actively resist this temptation and offer our hearts to Christ through genuine worship.

If you find yourself getting farther away from God, seize the day to make a change. Repent your sins, ask for forgiveness and serve the Lord in every way you can. Know that God has chosen you for His own, and take heart in the mercy of a God who will always take you back into His arms.



AUG28

What Would Jesus Do?

Wealth attracts many friends, but even the closest friend of the poor person deserts them.

—Proverbs 19:4

Time and time again, modern society sees celebrities and fantasizes about how great our own lives would be if that were to magically happen to us. Fame, fortune, beauty, glamour—these things have one common denominator: friends. Proverbs 19:4 teaches us an important lesson about money.

The more money and recognition you have, the more other people want to be around you, talk to you and do things with you. To a selfish person, the idea of many people loving him or her can bring on feelings and behaviors of greed. Thus, they build relationships based on selfishness. People want to be around those with immense wealth because of the possibility that something great will happen to themselves. Perhaps they can win favors from these people or become popular themselves. Sadly, the wealthy tend to have more “friends” than the poor, even if these friends aren’t real.

On the other end of the spectrum is the poor person. The homeless, poor and impoverished have historically been ignored—or even shunned—by most, even if they have the purest of hearts. Most people believe they have nothing to gain from a homeless man, and they avoid contact altogether. Even if you don’t consciously realize this, it happens every day.

Next time you see someone on the streets or begging for change, remember to be like Jesus. The Lord loves us equally, whether we live lavishly or on the sidewalk. Jesus loves us even when we’re the man or woman in the gutter with nothing to offer. He’ll always be our friend and ally, just as we should be to those in need.



AUG29

You Are New in Christ

*And now what are
you waiting for?
Get up, be
baptized and wash
your sins away,
calling on his name.
—Acts 22:16*

To be with Christ means to be united with him in faith and by baptism. In such a case, Christians are born again—born as a new creation. Today's verse reflects on the idea that we're new in Christ's eyes upon baptism, completely washed of our old lives and old sins. Paul, who had known the power of Christ to transform a life, wrote this verse with confidence, to tell others of the incredible restorative power of the Holy Spirit.

It may feel like reformation is a rare occurrence in the 21st century. It feels as though everyone is stuck in their ways and that true change may never happen—especially on a national or global scale. It's easy to forget the overwhelming power of the Lord to revolutionize lives, abolish old habits and open people's eyes to change. We must find faith in the idea of "new creation" by siding with Christ.

If any man be in Christ, he or she is rendered a new creature. This doesn't mean the evils of a past life will cease to tempt you. If you follow God as a means of escaping alcoholism, for example, old scars will still exist. The consequences of your actions will remain with you. However, walking with Christ changes the center of your existence, giving you a new love that expels old ones.

If you want to feel new again, consider revitalizing your walk with Christ through daily devotionals, more focused prayer and another baptism. If you're a new Christian who has yet to be baptized, understand that being in Christ makes you a brand new creation. Today, embrace "out with the old, in with the new," and see what God has in store for your new life.



AUG30

Money's False Promise

*Better a little with
righteousness than
much gain with
injustice.*

—*Proverbs 16:8*

Today's verse is about the decision to choose righteousness instead of injustice regardless of the returns we will get. Truly righteous people understand that money isn't more important than doing the right thing. The potential for personal gains should never get in the way of God. Unfortunately, many people spend their entire lives in the pursuit of fortune and fame.

For every Christian, God should be the most important thing in life. Spending our resources and energy chasing money not only makes us guilty of sins of greed, but it also breaks the Commandment of worshiping a false God. Choosing money over God is the same as paying worship to a false idol—a sin none of us wants to be guilty of.

When you pray, God is there for you. Everyone in the Christian fellowship can dip into the well of riches that God has for us, whenever we want. When monetary needs arise, God is there to help us in ways we can't foresee. We should never ask for more than what's required for a happy, simple life. Recognizing that there are far more valuable things than money can open the doors for a carefree, righteous life.

Being close to God has nothing to do with how much money you have. In fact, the Bible states that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God (Matthew 19:24). Take today's devotional as a reminder to let go of your financial troubles. It's always better to gain a little and be on God's side than to gain a lot and be on the side of the wicked and unjust.



AUG 31

The Widow's Offering

They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.

—Mark 12:44

Today's verse is an excerpt from the well-known Bible story of the widow's offering. In this parable, Jesus watches a crowd give money into the temple treasury. Many rich people donated large amounts, but a poor widow came and only deposited two "mites," something near the value of pennies. Jesus said to His disciples that the widow had given more to the treasure than all the others.

It's easy to feel more pious than our neighbors when we put more in the collection box than those sitting on the pew next to us or when we donate more generously to a community bake sale. Whatever the situation, it's important to keep in mind that the Lord doesn't judge us on how much we give. Rather, He makes His judgments on what the donation meant to us individually.

The widow clearly gave much less money than other people. But since she gave every cent she had to the Treasury, and the others donated mere portions of their large estates, her donation was worth more in Jesus' eyes. Jesus saw the situation differently than the disciples who were also watching. The wealthy patrons made sure to jingle the coins and make a show of their large donations, but the poor widow made a humble gift. Hers was the one worth mentioning.

Today's verse isn't to say that the rich are automatically less pious than the poor. It's meant as a lesson in humbleness and sacrifice. Having a giving heart is more important than the amount we give. Become a more cheerful giver, and do as much as you can in the spirit of true generosity.



SEP01

Starting September With Hope

The beginning of a new month offers us a fresh start. It gives us the chance to make new promises, both to ourselves and our heavenly Father. Each time we move to a new chapter in our lives, we must carry hope along with us and be confident that our future is secure. But it's just as important that we choose the right target for this hope.

David was one of the greatest kings in the Bible. He led Israel to growth and prosperity, enjoying both necessities and luxuries along the way. But things were not easy for him. Saul wanted him dead. Rival nations wanted his country. His close associates wanted his throne. Psalm 31 was born from an attempted mutiny, as David was crying to God to help him. He knew the Lord had put him in his position for a reason, and he hoped God would protect him. David leaned on his faith, knowing he would continue to trust God, no matter the outcome.

With the current state of our nation, it's easy to want to put our hope in other things—whether it's in a new job, political leader or ourselves. To face September with the best mindset, however, our hope must be placed in God. Know that regardless of the issues you're facing, He can rescue you. There are no financial burdens too large and no emotional scars too deep. Today, be strong, take heart and face this new month with the knowledge that there is a divine plan just for you.

Love the Lord, all his faithful people! The Lord preserves those who are true to him, but the proud he pays back in full. Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the Lord.

—Psalm 31:23-24



SEP02

*Has he shown you,
O mortal, what is
good. And what
does the Lord
require of you? To
act justly and to
love mercy and to
walk humbly with
your God.*

—Micah 6:7-8

Facing Each Day with Humility

Our world is one of constant competition. People race to have the newest technology, the best house and the most impressive job. We aspire to be better than our neighbors, better than our friends and family. We chase possessions and envy the accomplishments we see from others. Jealousy fuels pride; pride pushes us farther away from our brothers and sisters in Christ. This makes it harder to reach out to sinners—harder to spread the Gospel and show people the true love of Jesus.

This is why the Lord teaches us to be humble. In Micah, God is angry with the Israelites for their lack of honesty and justice. He led them safely from Egypt with prosperity in mind, and yet they turned their backs on Him. You see, Israel became preoccupied by the things that did not matter—temporary pleasures. They abandoned their humility.

When we are born again through Jesus Christ, our lives are no longer about us. In exchange for eternity, we pledge our lives to the service of the Lord. When we become boastful and proud of our earthly possessions and accomplishments, we're putting them above God. His love and His grace far surpass anything of this world, and they should be the things for which we are most grateful. Today, take time to be thankful for what you have been given instead of being boastful. Do not compare your life to others; signs of wealth do not show richness of spirit. Instead, offer love and compassion as you walk each day.



SEP03

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.

—Ephesians 5:15-17

Making Every Moment Count

Hunters often use decoys to attract their game. Some set up fake deer and use antler rattling to simulate the sounds of a battle. The dominant deer will quickly come to investigate the potential threat. After all, he has a group of females to protect if he is to create a new generation.

Once he sees the decoy, the buck will begin showing signs of dominance. He'll stomp his hooves and snort. He'll puff out his chest and hold his head high, showing off the size of his antlers. Unfortunately for the deer, this does two things: it wastes precious energy and puts him in danger.

Sometimes, as Christians, we live our lives like this buck. Insignificant matters (that sometimes aren't even real) make us upset. We lash out with emotion and sometimes even say or do things we regret. Likewise, reacting to little situations can put us in danger of damaging our testimony or pushing people away from Christ.

Instead of reacting to little issues, save your energy for the ones that matter. Instead of spending 15 minutes arguing over a social media post, check in with a relative or friend and pray with him or her. Today, pray for guidance and discernment for situations like these. Spend each moment that you can making a difference.

Concern yourself with the issues that God wants you to and leave the rest to someone else. The time the Lord has given us here on Earth is short. To use it unwisely is to be ungrateful for the gift of the sun rising and the moon setting. Embrace each morning with renewed hope and faith in Christ.



SEP04

We All Need Rest

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

—Matthew
11:28-30

In the modern day, we deal with a lot of stress. There's always pressure coming from somewhere, whether it's work, school, family or friends. Sometimes, it's easy to stay strong and persevere. In other situations, we're only wearing ourselves out. It's important to take the time to regather our thoughts when we are burdened.

Unfortunately, many people choose to bottle up their feelings instead. In this modern age, we have a habit of pushing ourselves too far. A lot of the time we're under the impression that working harder will put us ahead—and it might. But what good is being ahead at work if you've left your family behind? If you're not balancing your own needs and that of your family, you're simply driving yourself into the ground.

Today is a great opportunity for you to lean on the Father and refresh yourself. In this verse, the Lord was addressing the nation of Israel. These people were downtrodden—worn thin by the demands of the Pharisees and left with little energy to continue. If you're feeling the same, do what God instructed: go to Him. Reach out to our Father in prayer and ask for a revival of mind and body.

Today, try to clear your schedule of any non-essential tasks. Surround yourself with positivity. Spend extra time talking with God, and worry not for the past, present or future. The world tires us with troubles, but the Lord promises rest. And our heavenly Father never breaks his promises.



SEP05

*For it is by grace
you have been
saved, through
faith—and this is
not from yourselves,
it is the gift of
God—not by
works, so that no
one can boast.*

—Ephesians 2:6-9

A Labor of Love

Labor Day is a holiday designed to celebrate a time when people came together to make working environments better for all. We use this occasion to take a break from our toil and appreciate everything we have earned through it. One thing we cannot earn just so happens to be the greatest gift this life has to offer: Salvation.

The privilege of going to Heaven is not something people can earn on their own. It doesn't matter how many good works you've completed or what the church thinks of you. The price of our sins is death. It always has been, and it always will be. Jesus sacrificing His perfect life is the only thing that could leverage such a heavy sentence. We do not, and cannot, deserve grace—yet we can gain it.

It is good to honor the workers of our country. Through our struggles to make a living, we face a lot of challenges. But we should also take the opportunity to give Jesus the recognition He deserves. Can you imagine trying to redeem yourself for all of your transgressions without His sacrifice? Each slip of the tongue or hateful thought would have to be accounted for. Frankly, it would be impossible, no matter how dedicated of a worker you are, to deserve salvation.

Today, remember that we serve a greater purpose than ourselves. This means that the things we're working toward pale in comparison to the King of the Universe. Give appreciation to the nation's people (including yourself), but save the glory for God.



SEP06

*No rotten talk
should come from
your mouth, but
only what is good
for the building up
of someone in
need, in order to
give grace to those
who hear.*

—Ephesians 4:29

Goodwill, Not Gossip

Psychologically, people are compelled to try to feel better about themselves. Unfortunately, the most common way to do this is to put others down. That may seem like an easy thing to avoid, but slander can be very sneaky. More importantly, it can be dangerously comfortable.

One of the biggest problems with gossip is that we like to label it as something else. “Letting off steam” or “voicing our concerns” are two ways we cover up the truth. Sometimes we’ll give unnecessary information during prayer requests or by “telling it like it is.” Giving it a title that seems more acceptable, however, is nothing but an invitation for trouble.

Throughout the Bible, there are nearly 15 different mentions of gossip. None of them are positive. Gossip is generally listed alongside sins we tend to see as more serious, such as greed and murder. And yet we continue to spread tales and tear each other down. Remember that when someone gossips it is detrimental to his or her spirit, too.

Whenever you’re talking with other people today, stop and think before you speak. Ask if the information pertains to you at all or if you’re simply sharing it to make conversation. Even if it’s a matter that you’re involved in personally, consider how it could change the other person’s view of someone else. Be cautious in what you say, and turn to a positive topic instead when you have the urge to gossip. The best way to build a kingdom in Christ is to build up each other and exemplify His perfect love.



SEP07

Staying Strong With Forgiveness

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

*—Matthew
18:21-22*

Forgiving someone else can be difficult, especially when they have harmed you personally and your feelings are hurt. It seems, however, that the more you have to forgive someone, the more miserable it makes you. So how can we expect to keep absolving hurtful or malicious behavior? We must think like Jesus.

As you can see, even the disciples struggled with forgiveness sometimes. Humans are emotionally-charged creatures, and whenever our feelings are hurt, it can be difficult to let go. In fact, it can even seem unfair to us. We're left suffering with anger or pain, and in most cases, the one who hurt us walks away without a second thought. In truth, withholding forgiveness is a form of revenge ... but it only hurts us.

Holding onto negative feelings takes up room in our hearts, room that could be occupied by the love of Jesus. If you remain bitter for too long, the sour feelings can spoil positive emotions, like an infection of blame and resentment. When you consider our purpose, however, it may be easier to let those negative emotions go.

If you've been born again, you've chosen to give your life to Christ and live it, to the best of your abilities, just like He did. And Jesus, above all, forgives. He sacrificed His life for things that people like us hadn't even done yet. And even when we stray today, He offers us exoneration. If we want to show His grace, we must do our best to live it. Today, let go of any ill feelings you have. Free yourself of your grudges and make room for love.



SEP08

*Lord, you are the
God who saves
me; day and night
I cry out to you.
May my prayer
come before you;
turn your ear to my
cry.*

—Psalm 88:1

Patient and Persistent Prayer

The Bible offers guidance and persistence in your prayers. It may seem as though asking for the same thing repeatedly is a sign that we don't trust God or perhaps that we're not satisfied with the answers He's given us. In truth, it is this consistent presentation of requests that pleases the Lord and could make it more likely that our requests be granted.

Luke 11:5-13 discusses a parable of two friends. One man keeps knocking on another's door, asking repeatedly for bread. In the story, the homeowner gives the other man bread because he kept asking. The verse also says that those who seek are the ones who will receive.

Other portions of the Bible show the power of persistent prayer, rather than telling about it. Paul pled three times before he was answered. David regularly addresses the same requests throughout the book of Psalms. Jesus himself prayed multiple times before His crucifixion, each time asking the same thing.

Taking our pleas to God delights Him. It may be hard for some people to understand that, since for humans it can be irritating when someone asks for something again and again without respite. From the Lord's point of view, however, things are different. Each time we present a request, we're acknowledging that it is only by His power that it can be done. We're affirming His magnitude, but also our own faith—both of which are beautiful things. Today, do not give up on your requests because they are yet unanswered. Instead pray diligently, and always give glory to God.



SEP09

This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

—John 3:19-20

Separating Our Conscience From the Holy Spirit

Some Christians have been taught that their conscience and the Holy Spirit are one and the same. Whenever they are uncertain about an activity, they believe it's a translation of God's concerns about it. This is because the Holy Spirit certainly does speak to us if we will listen, guiding us with gentle nudges and warnings. But our consciences have not been replaced by the Spirit of God.

As born-again Christians, we change on a spiritual level, but our flesh is still alive and active. The conscience, despite how divine it may feel, is still a piece of the flesh. As we know, the flesh is naturally set against the Spirit. It is developed in a world of sin, over time, through input from other people, and it does not go away after we receive the gift of grace.

As a remnant of your old self, the conscience will still be functioning as your inner voice, but it may be based on a sinful version of yourself instead of the new you made in Jesus. Sometimes it may be right, but we cannot rely solely on our conscience. Instead, we must turn to Lord for guidance. When we pray for wisdom over an activity or subject, He will give us the answer that truly matters – the one from His commands.

Today, take time to consider if you've been following your conscience blindly. Remember that the flesh and the spirit, like water and oil, are not made to mix. Ask our heavenly Father to guide you in your pursuits and show you answers to your questions. His response may even surprise you.



SEP 10

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

—Deuteronomy 6:6-7

Everyday Faith

For many people, it's comfortable to separate their lives into compartments. We divide our week accordingly, and in the process, we may use different aspects of ourselves and our personality to match with the occasion. As a Christian, this can be a mistake.

We're all guilty of making small blunders, such as letting our thoughts wander during a sermon. "What am I going to have for lunch when I leave?" is an all too common thought. Thinking of our next meal is only human, but it's also taking away from time that belongs to the Father. Unfortunately, sometimes the hour-long visit on Sunday morning is the only time God takes precedence.

Everyday faith is something that is very important to have. By constantly placing our emphasis on God, we'll be able to expand and modify our faith to new levels. In addition, this light to the world may be the only example of God's love that some people will see. As Christians, we want to expand the Kingdom of our Father and teach others about the true meaning of love. That is certainly hard to do if you don't show the touch of the Spirit in your everyday life.

Today, pray for immersion from the Holy Spirit. Whether you're at school, work or home, use the same attitude and joy you have on Sunday morning and let others see the light that shines from you; it is the everyday faith that builds us up the strongest. Be a beacon of light every day of the week, not just on Sunday.



SEP 11

A time to tear apart and a time to sew together; A time to be silent and a time to speak. A time to love and a time to hate; A time for war and a time for peace.

—Ecclesiastes 3:7-8

The Cycles of Life and Death

Today marks the anniversary of one of the worst, most devastating events in the history of our nation. Although not a federally recognized holiday, Patriot Day is devoted to honoring the nearly 3,000 men and women who were lost in the 9/11 terror attacks.

The assault rocked our nation to its core, sending waves of confusion, vulnerability, shock and finally anger through the citizens of America. Terrorism, which had once been a distant issue for other countries, arrived on our doorstep. Since that day, the very core of our beliefs has changed. From security in airports to international relations, we'll never be the same.

Anytime we're faced with a tragedy, especially one of such magnitude, it's easy to lose sight of the truth. We let our emotions guide us and find ourselves in pain, discouraged and entirely overwhelmed. Although it is difficult, we must remember that God is always good. He is in control through every moment, no matter how terrible it is. Someday, we will inhabit Heaven and never experience a negative feeling again. For now, we must hold tight to the Lord.

Today, take time to pray in remembrance. In your time of prayer, trade anger for love, as Christ asks us to do. Honor those who have fallen and those who serve to protect our nation every day. Pray for safety, for peace and most of all, for love. Also remember to give glory to God because even in the darkest of times He is, has been, and will always be the source of our light.



SEP 12

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

—*Luke 11:1*

How to Pray

If you're wondering how God wants us to pray, you're not alone. Even the disciples asked Jesus to teach them so they could best communicate with God. Perhaps it does not come naturally to us because we are impure beings or maybe we are overwhelmed at the glory of God. Either way, we must learn to reach out to God through prayer.

Elijah, the apostle Paul, and Jesus all give examples and directions on how to pray. Prayer should be close to us always. King David and Daniel both spoke to God three times per day: in the morning, at noon and the evening. Paul said to pray "without ceasing." We must remember to come to the Father daily, and not only when things are difficult.

It may be easier to consider prayer a state of being rather than a separate activity. With praise for others, we are exalting and engaging in a kind of prayer. When we lift our voice in song, we are praying. And when we close the door to our prayer closets, our prayer becomes more personal.

During that time alone, focus less on how long that prayer should be and more on what you need to say. Jesus spent the entire night praying when He was choosing disciples, but many other examples contain only a handful of words. Pray until the burden on your heart has been given to God.

Other people are hesitant about what to pray for. God wants to build a relationship with us, so pray for everything. He will never tire of hearing from you. Today, find some quiet time and simply talk to God. When your heart and spirit are in the right place, there's no wrong way to pray.



SEP 13

Facing Hard Choices

But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.

—Daniel 1:8

Life is full of decisions. Every single day, we face a barrage of choices: what we should eat, how to use our time, whether to work out or watch television. Years of making these small, regular decisions form habits. We don't often give them much thought, and if they were founded on Godly guidance, there's no reason to worry.

If they are poor decisions, however, they can come together to create very terrible habits. What began as eating out on weekends, for example, can lead us to do so every day and potentially develop an unhealthy lifestyle. But if such a small choice can snowball and affect our entire bodies and wellbeing, what about the larger issues we sometimes face?

We are bound to stumble across these big selections. Will we cheat on our spouse? On our taxes? Will we fall into a cycle of telling lies? No matter which options you face, you can turn to God for guidance and wisdom.

Our heavenly Father is very pleased when we pray to Him, and asking for help when making choices further shows our devotion and acceptance of the fact that we can do nothing without Him. Asking God directly should always be the first step when you're making an important decision.

Turning to the Word is also essential. The Bible can show us examples and give us guidance through all situations, no matter the gravity. Today, take time to examine your habits, both new and old. Search your heart and ask our Father for wisdom to face the decisions of each new day.



SEP 14

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.
—John 13:14-16

Leading by Example

The greatest teacher this world has ever known is Jesus Christ. He demonstrated miracles and insurmountable wisdom to His followers and even non-believers. One of the things that made Him such an effective guide was His willingness to lead by example.

In the verse above, Jesus had just finished washing His disciples' feet, offering the ultimate example of being a servant. Even Judas, who would betray Him multiple times, was treated with the same humble favor. In that age, it was usually only the lowest of servants who did such a thing. And yet the Son of God demonstrated love for one another by doing it anyway.

As a Christian, it is more important that you show your faith than simply tell about it. Going to church on Sundays but being foul to your coworkers is certainly not a way to display the love of Christ. People will base their opinions instead on your actions. When you are trying to reach out to others and expand the kingdom of God, it's important that your impression is a good one.

Lots of people can recite Bible verses and information about God, but you'll be most successful as a servant of the Lord if you can interpret that Word into action that others can see. Do not simply talk about love, but live it every day. Reach out unto others, no matter their background or situation. Today, ask God to show you how to provide a good example—how you can show the world your love of Christ instead of just telling about it.



SEP 15

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

—Ephesians 4:25

When Honesty Is Difficult

Many people say that they want an “honest opinion,” but how many are actually prepared to accept it if the feedback is different from what they wanted? How many times do we hold in our feelings around our loved ones so we do not hurt them? When you’re facing difficult truths, it can be hard to offer true honesty.

Knowing how to be kind is crucial to being honest. Christ doesn’t condone hateful words, even if the one saying it is simply purporting to be telling the truth. When you are faced with a situation that requires a painful truth, ask Christ to guide your words.

These truths can be about ourselves or about other people. When it’s an internal matter, we’re reluctant to admit that we’re in the wrong. It’s also hard to apologize sometimes, and many instances will expose us to disapproval or anger from another person. If the truths are centered on someone else, we often want to hold them back so the other person does not become upset. Honesty can be tough sometimes, but it’s also essential.

Bottling up our true feelings is not beneficial to anyone. The longer we allow others to live under a guise of our emotions, the harder it is to explain the truth. Likewise, the more we cover for our own transgressions, the more comfortable it becomes to simply let it continue.

Being honest is like removing a bandage. It may hurt briefly, but it opens up for healing and new growth. Today, pray for the strength to be honest with yourself and others. Offer the truth to your friends and family and acknowledge your own failures. True, Christ-like, unconditional love begins by caring enough to always share the truth.



SEP 16

*Trust in the Lord
with all your heart
and lean not on
your own
understanding; in
all your ways
submit to him, and
he will make your
paths straight.*

—Proverbs 3:5-6

Not Knowing All of the Answers

Many Christians will avoid potentially difficult interactions because they are afraid of being asked questions they cannot answer. As humans, it is natural to fear the feeling of rejection and potential embarrassment that might come along with such an occurrence. As Christians, however, we do not have to be afraid.

There is no way our minds can comprehend the true vastness and power of God. He created the entire universe, from the largest galaxies down to the tiniest functions within our cells. Because God knows the heart and mind of every person on Earth, people will sometimes expect His followers to have an abundance of answers, too. This is not always the case.

We cannot memorize every detail of the Word or of our heavenly Father—but we're not expected to. Our entire Christian lives are filled with growth and development. So how do we face difficult questions? With a bit of preparation and a smile.

Instead of trying to commit the entire Bible to memory, be prepared to dive in for answers. If someone asks you a question you don't know the answer to, tell them that. "I'm not sure. That's a great question, actually. Let's look it up together." In one moment, you have admitted your imperfection, turned to God for guidance through the Word and invited someone else to share it with you.

Today, realize that it's okay that you don't have all the answers. But don't forget you can pray for guidance at any time, and that the Bible is always ready to show you the way.



SEP 17

*We are foreigners
and strangers in
your sight, as were
all our ancestors.
Our days on earth
are like a shadow,
without hope.*

*—1 Chronicles
29:15*

Visitors to This World

When we visit family or friends, we act according to their family rules and culture, respecting their home and property. We respect and honor those who host us. We enjoy our time together and are often left feeling a bit sad and empty when we leave. This translates well to our lives as Christians.

Our existence here on Earth is purely temporary. It is not our home but simply somewhere that we are visiting. Our flesh will end and our spirits will return to God one day in Heaven. Often, however, we forget that our purpose is higher than the world. We strive for earthly accomplishments, reaching the peak of our careers or collecting the most valuable possessions. All of these actions are performed in search of fulfillment for our lives, but none of them can compare to our true purpose.

As Christians, we need to focus on the impression our visit leaves behind, not on furthering ourselves in the games of this world. We are the example of Christ and what you show can alter people's vision and opinion of God. To make the most of your visit, remain humble. Keep a servant's heart and offer yourself to the needs of others. Leave an impression of love and kindness and the people of the world will long for you once you're gone. In fact, they may choose to come with us and find the Kingdom of God through salvation. Today, remember that the tribulations and triumphs of this world are only temporary and that your home in Heaven is being prepared.



SEP 18

*He put on
righteousness as his
breastplate, and
the helmet of
salvation on his
head; he put on
the garments of
vengeance and
wrapped himself in
zeal as in a cloak.*

—Isaiah 59:17

Wearing Armor

Every day of our lives, we are at war. Fear and doubt are our adversaries, and when we give them too much power, they can damage our relationship with God. So how do we protect ourselves from damage and find the strength to push through even the toughest of situations? We put on the full armor of God.

In biblical times, the Roman army was a force to be reckoned with. They were well trained in the details of combat and self-defense. They were also heavily equipped. Spears and swords helped them cut through their enemies. The combination of metal and hide that they wrapped themselves in kept them safe from harm and made them truly formidable. In the same way, we can push through the most difficult periods of our lives when we don the Armor of God.

There are several items mentioned in this passage, including a belt, breastplate, footwear, shield, helmet and sword. Each one serves a different purpose and relates to an aspect of Christianity. The only offensive weapon, for example, is the sword of the Word of God. It is described as living and powerful beyond any other weapon. Whereas the Roman soldiers would cut through their enemies, we can slice through the lies of this world.

With the complete armor, we are protected from the anxieties and oppressions of the world, but we're also able to go further than that and attack his plans. Each time we don our outfit in Christ and spread the Gospel, the tides of battle turn a little more in our favor... even though the winner has already been decided. Today, remember to cloak yourself in the strength of the Word and the power of Christianity.



SEP 19

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.

—Ephesians 3:14-16

“Charging” for Christ

In today’s world, we depend on the power of technology for almost everything. Our cellphones put an immeasurable amount of data directly at our fingertips. We can call out to our friends and family and even get directions on the go. As impressive as these functions are, however, they are nothing without a battery that is charged.

Electricity is required to power most of our appliances and gadgets. Without it, they lose all of their value and do nothing but take up space. Likewise, we Christians must take care to charge ourselves spiritually to make sure we can work for the Lord.

There are several ways we can restore the energy within ourselves through the Spirit. For one, we can take time to reconnect with the people we love and depend on. God never intended for us to do things alone and as the body of Christ, we depend on each other to function and reach out. As David says in Proverbs, like iron sharpens iron, so we sharpen one another (27:17). Don’t be afraid to turn to brothers and sisters of the Lord for advice and encouragement.

It’s also important to pay attention to your health. Proper diet, exercise and sleep cycles will give you more vigor and refresh your passion. Take time to rest yourself mentally and emotionally, too, and you’ll be much better prepared to take on the challenges of the world. Today, give yourself the opportunity to recharge. Closely examine how you’re feeling and nurture your needs accordingly.



SEP20

Envisioning Heaven

At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne.
—Revelation 4:2-3

No one on Earth is certain what Heaven is like, but there's no denying that it's a thrilling and wonderful place. The verses that describe it can only hint at the glory that's in store for us. This place is not only where God dwells (Psalm 33:13), but where Christ is today (Acts 1:11), and where Christians will go when they die.

Although we can't hope to truly comprehend the glory of such a place, we can examine the scriptures and get some vague ideas about what it will look like. In Revelation, we read that the very streets are paved with gold. Walls are created from jewels and the gates themselves are crafted from pearl. Since it is a city built by God and not man, we can also imagine how absolutely perfect it would be. Envision a city with no crime. No pollution or potholes or trash in the street. Because we only know of the tarnished cities that humans build, it's almost impossible to imagine the pristine condition of Heaven.

Even more important than the physical appearance is how our lives will be once we're admitted. There will never again be reason for tears or suffering. After all, in a perfect world, there is no pain. We will not have to deal with sorrow or regret. We'll also be free from all the physical agony this life can bring us. No cancer or heart attacks or Alzheimer's disease. Only happiness and the love of Christ.

Today, take some time to think about what Heaven has waiting for us. Spend moments in prayer and allow yourself to get excited about what your future holds when you enter the Kingdom of the Lord. Consider how you can share that eagerness with those around you, too.



SEP21

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

—John 14:27

The Truth of Peace

Peace is a familiar subject for Christians. It is important to be as kind and forgiving to one another as possible.

Over and over again in the Bible, we're taught the importance of embracing peace. We're taught to forgive seventy times seven and to turn the other cheek. The important thing to remember is that our purpose on Earth is no longer our own. Even when someone has angered us or wronged us, we should be willing to forgive them because it is what Jesus would do. Our venture as Christians is to become as much like Christ as possible, and that includes letting go of ill will.

However, the Bible also recognizes that it is not always going to happen. Romans 12:18 says: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Sometimes people simply will not allow you to be peaceful. For a Christian, this holiday should honor the times that you can let go.

Today, pray for the areas of the world that are torn by violence and for the negative feelings about others that you experience in your own life. Remember that God wants us to carry this mentality into other aspects of our lives.



SEP22

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

—Matthew 5:13

Being Salt to the World

As Christians, our lives are meant to enhance and provide meaning for our time on Earth. Before salvation, we can be likened to a piece of dirt or grain of sand. We were lost amongst countless others and did not have an effect on the things around us. After rebirth, we are called salt of the earth because we change things for the better.

Salt is highly versatile, another reason why we are compared to it. It is used for preservations of meats but also to give flavor and a new desire to use to all sorts of foods. Just as your steak or potato would be very bland and hard to eat without salt, so this world would be intolerable without the positive influence of Jesus and His followers.

In this verse, Jesus talks about how useless salt would be without its flavor. It would be practically indistinguishable from sand and only good to be walked on. The analogy is clear: when we lose our passion and energy for Christ, we're barely any different from how we were before we were saved.

Today, think about how you can provide a positive impression for people you know or for the community. Can you minister to them by inviting them to church or perhaps by volunteering somewhere? As Christians, we bring zest to the world around us, a world that is often covered in darkness and despair. When we are energized through Christ, those around us can see it and joy is spread tenfold.



SEP23

Building Trust With Consistency

*Simply let your
"Yes" be "Yes," and
your "No," "No";
anything beyond
this comes from the
evil one.*

—Matthew 5:37

To be considered trustworthy is one of the highest praises a person can receive. All relationships, whether with business partners, friends, family or romantic interests, are built on a foundation of trust. The reason we value trust so much is that it is not immediately given. Under certain circumstances, a connection may begin with a bit of a head start (such as meeting through mutual friends), but even this can only go so far. There comes a point when any progression toward trust must be earned.

Even once it is established, trust is not guaranteed. It is durable, yes, but a single moment of betrayal can cause it all to crumble. One mistake is all it takes. After trust is betrayed, it can take an immense amount of time and effort to rebuild. In some cases, there is no recovering from broken trust.

That is why it is so important to stand by your word and your decisions, especially as a Christian. We're called to lead lives like Jesus, and that certainly doesn't involve telling lies or betraying those who count on us. To make it easier to support your own decisions, make sure you give prayer in every question. Choose based on what God wants you to do, especially if it's contradicting your own feelings.

Today, remember that trust is more precious than gold or silver. It cannot be bought, only earned with time and dedication. God always keeps His word, and if we wish to be like Him and bring people to Christ, then we must do the same.



SEP24

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

—Isaiah 55:8-9

A Personal Solar System

Our solar system is dependent on the sun. Because of the sun’s gravity, the planets stay in orbit, circling around it dutifully without wavering. The sun also provides the light and heat we need to sustain life. There is a very specific order of the planets, but the sun will never move from the center. Likewise, our personal solar system must put God as the center and the sun.

In our spiritual version of the solar system, the planets can be compared to different aspects of our lives. One planet could be how we use our time. Other planets might symbolize relationships and spending habits. After all, it’s often said that the way people distribute their money shows their priorities, at least in part. Of course there are necessities to pay for, but in principle it is fairly accurate.

Though God wants us to enjoy our time on Earth, it’s important to remember that we cannot take our houses or cars or jewelry with us. Too much care for material elements will merely skew your priorities. A life after salvation is a life that has been wholly dedicated to Jesus and ministering to others. Clinging to the ways of the world will upset the balance of your life.

Today, examine the way your solar system is set up. Are your ‘planets’ orbiting dutifully around God, as they should? Or are they breaking paths and forming clusters within themselves? If you find there are some organizational issues, take the time to pray for guidance and assistance getting them back on track.



SEP25

The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

—Psalm 18:2

A Home Made of Rock

When you're preparing to build a home, the most important thing is having a proper location. The ground cannot be too soft or your dwelling will sink into the ground. If there is too much water, you'll have issues with mold and other damage. Without the right foundation, you might not even be able to build a house. Even if you do manage to construct it, it's very likely to fail and crumble.

Building up your life is the same way. You must have a strong, dependable base through Jesus Christ or you simply put yourself at risk for failure down the road. To create this base, it's vital you have an intimate and evolving relationship with God. It's not enough to pray occasionally or only during times in trouble. You must develop closeness.

Once your foundation is established through your personal connection with the Lord, it's important to also build your walls correctly. You must do more than simply pray. As Christians, we should always want to see others enter the Kingdom of God. Live for Him with your actions as well as your words and you'll be able to demonstrate the true definition of love and what it means to be a Christian.

With a reliable foundation and walls, the roof is included. We're always covered by grace, no matter which mistakes we make in our lives. That means everything you have inside is kept safe and dry. Today, take a look at the spiritual house you inhabit. Is it made to last, or are some renovations due?



SEP26

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.

—2 Peter 1:5-7

Patience Is a Virtue

Patience is something that can be hard to learn just by reading about it. It's easy in concept, but putting it into practice can prove very difficult for some people. Even when you're inherently good with it, lots of practice is still required for mastery. Like most things, even gifts of the spirit, we must practice patience as part of our daily lives.

It's worth mentioning again that this passage puts special and specific emphasis on "without murmuring." You see, patience isn't simply about being able to wait for something. It's about holding tight for as long as it takes without complaint. This lack of protest is important because it's a demonstration of faith. As Christians, we are taught to rely on God for all of our needs. When we're showing patience, we're saying "I know you will take care of this, Lord, and I will wait." It is the duty and joy of a Christian to submit to God's divine will, so despite the difficulty, we must practice patience and positivity in our speech and attitude.

We are not at liberty to make decisions for, or demand action from, God. It should give us some comfort to know that His timing is perfect. Christian patience involves asking with faith and sincerity and knowing we will continue to devote our lives to Christ no matter what the end result of our request is. Today, remember to be patient about the things that you're after and know that nothing is guaranteed except for the love of God.



SEP27

*Hear my prayer,
Lord; let my cry for
help come to you.
Do not hide your
face from me when
I am in distress.*

—Psalm 102:1-2

Asking for Help

There are many different crises and hard situations we face, sometimes on a daily basis. We experience job losses, relationship problems, health issues, family disagreements and so much more. Although many people feel like asking for help is a sign of weakness, it's important to remember that we always have people to turn to.

The first direction you should always turn when you need help is towards God. He wants nothing more than to build relationships with us and to continue to demonstrate His insurmountable love. As a Christian, you should turn to prayer when you are facing a difficult situation. Do not forget, however, that you should be reaching for God every day, and not just when there is an issue. Closeness helps to build faith and make the toughest circumstances easier to weather.

Another way to find the support of our heavenly Father is through reading the Bible. His Word is a living tool that is designed to offer direction and guidance. There are many lessons to be had, and spending time within the pages is a marvelous way to overcome tribulations while also strengthening your faith.

Of course, there is a support network of others, too. Friends, family members and brothers and sisters of Christ are resources that should never be downplayed. Sometimes, God will use interaction between His children to help one another and build closer bonds.

Today, do not be afraid to ask for help. No one can do it all alone, and our heavenly Father does not expect you to. There is no shame in reaching out to others.



SEP28

We continually remember, before our God and Father, your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

— 1 Thessalonians 1:3

Action of Faith

One of the most important parts of being a Christian is our personal relationship with God. We're instructed to pray diligently and spend time studying the Bible. Each day we should reach out to our Father and work on making our relationship more personal and intimate. No matter how strong we are as Christians within our hearts and spirits, we're also called to put our faith into action.

Christians are the body of Christ. We are left here on Earth in His place so we can minister to the lost and help spread the messages of Jesus's sacrifice and the hope for salvation. It's impossible to do that, however, without putting some effort into the world around you.

Ministering to others can be fun and very rewarding. To begin reaching out, however, we cannot be ashamed. Anyone who works with you or knows you in the neighborhood should be able to tell that you're a Christian. Many people hide it in fear of some sort of backlash. No human reaction, however, can compare to that of Jesus. In Matthew 10:33, Christ reminds us "But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven."

Volunteering and donating are fantastic ways to serve, but there are plenty of other ways, as well. Today, ask someone you know if you can pray for them, for any reason. Show the world that you are in no way ashamed, and that you want to help others. Don't just have theoretical faith but have faith in action.



SEP 29

For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.

—2 Peter 1:16

Dealing With Rejection

Everyone has dreams and ambitions. While we should put our main focus on following Christ, that doesn't mean it's a bad thing to pursue goals of our own—especially if they can somehow help your ministry. For example, lots of Christians dream about publishing a book. Unfortunately, lots of these people are also misguided. They think that if God is the focus of their story then He will help them get published. Since we can't know the future or the will of God, we can't discern the truth of such a situation.

It's important to understand that God and man are two very different things. God is the epitome of love, perfection and fairness, and obviously the two are naturally at odds. People, on the other hand, are imperfect. You must remember that rejection from man is a very different thing than rejection from God.

Just because some stranger at the helm of a company doesn't think your material is worth publishing, it does not mean that's true. Your value is not determined by man. It is determined by our heavenly Father, and He values you enough that He sent His Son to die for us. That kind of love is greater than any earthly accomplishment.

Still, rejection stings. It is unpleasant to bear and will often discourage people from trying again. If you're dealing with rejection, pray about the path God wants you to take. Sometimes it only takes a bit more perseverance to get the results you want. Other times, projects are better left alone. Today, take the time to ask the Lord for guidance and strength to deal with whatever the future holds.



SEP 30

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

— 1 John 4:18

Leaving Fear Behind

Experiencing fear is, unfortunately, part of the human experience. There are small discomforts and paralyzing terrors and everything in between. Whether or not we will face fear is not determined by our association with Christ. How we react to it and overcome it, however, is.

Fear can be paralyzing. It can make us miserable, creating chaos and pain. Unfortunately, it can be destructive for many. These feelings begin as small thoughts or notions and quickly bloom into intense feelings that bring an undesired reaction. Sometimes the reaction is acting out foolishly and damaging our reputation. Sometimes it's avoiding opportunities to make a difference for the Lord. Either way, we should be aware of the power of fear and work toward not letting it separate us from Christ.

No matter how severe your fears are, they can be overcome. The same God who hung the stars gave His Son to die for you, and with that kind of power anything is possible. The first step to conquering your apprehension is turning to the Lord in prayer. Build a relationship with Him and study His Word. Learn of His devotion to you, and you'll know you never have to face your fears alone. He will carry them for you.

Don't be afraid to ask a Christian friend for help. The network of brothers and sisters in Christ is your best resource aside from prayers and time meditating in the Word. They will be able to offer advice, but you'll also have the chance to expand your relationship with them and grow together under God.

Today, cast your fears on God and no longer be a prisoner to fear.





OCT01

We Are Not Citizens of the Earth

It's no secret that this planet is beautiful. We travel all across the world to see new views from the highest peaks and tallest cities. We reach out into the depths of the sea and the forest to find answers about the Earth and what it has to offer. The magnificence of this planet is nothing compared to the Kingdom of God. As Christians, Heaven is our home and our future—not this world of man.

A citizen is a legally recognized subject of a state or nation. Citizens can be native or naturalized. Once we are saved, we lose our citizenship to this world. Our souls are born again into the Kingdom of Jesus. Even though we keep our temporary residency, we're not at home here. It can be easy to lose sight of our destiny and become wrapped up in this world, but our futures are better than the greatest earthly glories.

It can be sad to think that we're living in a world where we don't belong, but there's a bit of Heaven inside each of us. When we lean on the Lord, we experience a sense of peace and love unlike anything that man can offer. This sensation is a preview of eternity in the presence of the Father.

Do not become discouraged by life's troubles. Work and bills are necessary, but they are not forever. We have peace and glory before us, once we finally make it to our spiritual home.all.

Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in Heaven.

—Philippians 3:19-20



OCT02

Spiritual Battles Within Ourselves

*Let the peace of
Christ rule in your
hearts ...*

—Colossians 3:15

We live in a supremely troubled time. There is murder, rape, hatred for one another and disregard for the law. Many Christians think the nation is spiraling out of control. Unfortunately, as we spend more time in the world, it becomes easier for these corruptions to influence our thinking and behaviors. We can take a closer look and see that most of the evils we deal with come from problems within our own hearts.

There is a natural, dark tendency that comes with the flesh. Human nature is sinful, selfish and vile, and though our souls have been re-created, we still are vulnerable to societal pressure. We're steered by feelings of greed, anger and jealousy. We instinctively try to compete with the world, even though we are given eternity. It's easy to fall into these habits, but it's also easy to recover from them.

As Christians, we must (as the verse says) let Christ rule within our hearts. Our duty is to love and accept those around us—even when we feel jealousy toward them—even when they've hurt our feelings or we disagree with their opinions. To find peace in this world, you have to allow Jesus to steer your thoughts and emotions in the right direction.

Today, be a spiritual victor through battles within yourself. Make sure that loving others is your top priority and pray for guidance over anything that is bothering you. There are lots of challenges to face in this world, but when we place our faith in the Father, we always will be in His care.



OCT03

God Knows the Truth in Your Heart

His eyes are on the ways of mortals; he sees their every step. There is no deep shadow, no utter darkness, where evildoers can hide. God has no need to examine people further, that they should come before him for judgment.

—Job 34:19-22

It can be very frustrating to clean a dog. First, you spend money on grooming supplies, such as shampoos and specialized brushes. Then you've got to get Fido into the shower or washtub. This can be an exercise in itself if Fido is large. Once he or she is restrained, you're still faced with bathing, rinsing, drying and brushing them before your work is done. The worst part, though, is when you open the back door and your dog sails right into the first mud puddle or pile of dirt he can find. Why do dogs do this? Because it's in their nature.

Dogs love smelly things and rolling around outside. It simply is a part of their species. Likewise, people will revert to their true natures at the earliest convenience. It doesn't matter if you clean up every Sunday and take your spot in the front row. What matters are the true feelings within your heart. Our entire nature is rerouted when we're born again through Jesus Christ. Our souls yearn for more interaction with God and to be more like Him. The flesh, on the other hand, wants nothing more than to return to the ways of the world.

It can be easy to revert to our old selves, but it is not good. The only way to reach others is to follow Christ to the best of our abilities and let his guidance make those big changes in our lives. Look at your nature. Would someone who met you on Friday night know you were a Christian? What about your coworkers? People will take notice of the true feelings in your heart, so make sure that they are pulling you in the right direction.



OCT04

Fighting Through Discouragement

I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart.

—Psalm 27:13-14

Life can be discouraging. There's no simpler way to put it. There are countless things that can let us down every single day. Some of them are minor, such as missing a favorite food item at the grocery store. Other events can take a serious toll on our self-esteem and mental state. This kind of incident could be anything from not getting the job you wanted to having a miscarriage. No matter what this world throws at you, God is there through discouragement.

It's especially important for Christians to resist feeling disheartened. You're less likely to reach out to others for Christ when you're disappointed. This poses an issue, since we're the hands and feet that are meant to minister to the world. This is in addition to the fact that God does not want us to feel sad.

Being discouraged also can leave your faith feeling a bit strained. It's easy to think that God isn't listening when things don't go your way. It's important to remember, though, that He always has a plan for us. What may be a painful "no" at the time likely is a blessing in disguise. We have to trust in the future and understand that our Father knows best. Discouragement, essentially, is the opposite of faith.

Today, do not dwell on the events that feel like lost opportunities. Instead, think about the wonderful things God has in store for you. Whenever He shuts a window, He certainly will open a door.



OCT05

City in the Clouds? Where Is Heaven?

But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

—Matthew 7:14

You must be fully prepared when moving to a new home. You have to know your new address and how to get there from your current home. It would be impossible to arrive safely if you didn't know the location of your new house, but that's precisely what Christians deal with when considering their future in Heaven.

Believers face the question every day: "Where is Heaven?" Some people point to Scripture, like Psalm 48:2. In previous versions of the Bible, it has been translated with the phrase, "the joy of the whole Earth is ... on the sides of the north." Could this be a sign about Heaven's location? Possibly. The Word doesn't specify exactly where this Kingdom lies. Many Christians also argue whether or not Heaven is a physical location in the world. Enoch and Elijah, for example, ascended in literal bodies to a new place that's no less real than your own hometown. It's exciting to think about what Heaven has in store for us—even if we're not certain about the specifics.

Regardless of where it is, the city is full of God's glory. Jesus has gone to prepare it for us and ready all the wonders mentioned in the Scripture. We'll have understanding and knowledge beyond our current comprehension. We'll become closer to Christ than ever before and live without sorrow, pain or regret. Today, remember to thank Jesus for the home that you're inheriting in the afterlife. He gave his life on the cross so that we could become citizens of this utopia ... wherever it may be.



OCT06

God Is the Only Way to Thrive

To them God has chosen to make known among the gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

—Colossians 1:27

Anyone who has gardened or owned houseplants knows that there is a big difference between surviving and thriving. It takes a combination of sunlight, water, proper soil and nutrients for the plants to grow strong. They're able to get by on much less, but you won't see the same amount of flowers, leaves, etc. We Christians are just like these plants, in the sense that we require special nourishment through God to flourish.

The soil into which you're planted is your faith. It serves as a reliable and stable foundation upon which the rest you build the rest of your life. To keep this soil moist and conducive to life, you've got to add water, or in this case, prayer. Speaking to God refreshes and satisfies us. Without routine contact with the Lord, you'll begin to wither.

The Word of God serves as the nutrients in the soil. Reading your Bible adds strength and allows you to absorb important information. The sunshine represents the love of God. It is omnipresent (even when we can't see it for the clouds). His love gives you the energy you need to get through the toughest times in life.

Today, make sure that you have everything you need to bloom. If the Spirit tells you that you need more time in prayer or reading your Bible, spend a few minutes today catching up. We have to take proper care of ourselves if we want to thrive. The only way to do that is through a healthy relationship with Christ.



OCT07

Finding Joy Even Through Pain

When I called, you answered me; you greatly emboldened me.

—*Psalm 138:3*

There will be several points in our lives where we feel sorrow. It is an unfortunate reality and a side effect of the sinful world in which we live. No one is exempt from this emotion, and there are several instances in the Bible where such sadness is mentioned. When Lazarus died, for example, Mary and Martha were very upset. Before Jesus came to them, they were suffering on their own. The shortest verse in the Bible mentions the sorrow that Christ himself felt. It says, "Jesus wept" at the tomb of Lazarus. He felt their pain.

There never has been a promise that our Christian lives would be exempt from pain and sorrow. Instead, the promise is that we shall not bear it alone. Jesus feels compassion greater than we can comprehend, and when we are saddened, He feels great sympathy for us. Remember to lean on this relationship in times of tribulation. The son of God lives within you, and His strength is always there to guide you. Armed with this knowledge, you'll find that there is a specific and very strong joy to be found. There is unconditional love for each of us, even during the toughest times in life.

Today, take the time to find the joy that lies within your heart. Whatever you're dealing with is only temporary, no matter how badly it may hurt now. Instead, lean on your relationship with Christ and the knowledge that you're destined for a kingdom where you'll never experience sadness or hurt again.



OCT08

The God of Everlasting Love

The Lord appeared to us in the past, <a> saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness."

—Jeremiah 31:3

There is one aspect of God that appears over and over in the Bible. It is His most dominant attribute and the reason that Jesus was sent to pay for our sins: love. Love is a common theme throughout a huge portion of the stories that the Word teaches us. In fact, the New International Version mentions the word an astonishing 551 times.

There are many different types of love mentioned throughout the Bible. We see affection between parents and children, spouses, siblings, even strangers. None of these human emotions can compare, however, to the love that God has for us. It is more pure than we could ever imagine. His love is far beyond the realms of our comprehension. Even when we're feeling his affection through our blessings and experiences, it's only a tiny sample of what is in store for us.

The circumstances in your life will always change. Sometimes they're for the better, and sometimes they're difficult. No matter what you're dealing with or facing, remember that God's love is unchanging. We can rely on the feeling of acceptance and support in every endeavor. His love endures through all our mistakes and shortcomings.

Today, take the time to thank our heavenly Father for his love; without it, we would have no future. The wages of sin are death, but He cares so much that He sacrificed His son, the purest lamb, just for you. Remember that He is there for you regardless of the situation, and that He will never waver or change.



OCT09

Our Daily Bread, the Bread of Life

Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from Heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from Heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from Heaven and gives life to the world."

—John 6:32-33

Jesus compares Himself to bread in several instances. While He was on Earth, bread was vital for survival. Many poorer families didn't have access to meats or an abundance of vegetables. Ground flour was easy to store and work with, and so it was a staple for every meal. It was especially important for children, because they require more food to grow at a healthy rate.

In this chapter, Jesus performs a miracle by feeding 5,000 people with only two fish and two loaves of bread. There was so much food, in fact, that much of it was left over. This feat is one of the most astounding in the Bible and is a perfect example of the power of God. Beyond the immediate effect of this miracle is the importance of its symbolism. Bread represents spiritual life and nourishment throughout Scripture.

Humans have a natural hunger for something beyond themselves. We're innately drawn to God, and nothing less than his peace can satisfy our yearning. In this way, Jesus is the bread of our spirits. It is only through daily servings of his grace that we can be wholly satisfied. Our hunger will grow without nourishment in prayer and reading our Bible.

Today, take time to feed your spirit. Give glory to God by setting aside a few minutes to pray and come closer to Him. Devote some time to the Word, too, since it is a staple for our souls. When you nourish yourself properly, your spirit will grow strong in the Lord.



OCT 10

Turning From Prejudice

Do not judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

—Matthew 7:1-2

It is human nature to be more critical of others than we are of ourselves. Psychologists have proved that we blame outside circumstances for our own shortcomings, but attribute the same mistakes to personal ineptitude when seen in our peers. Just because it is easy to judge someone, doesn't mean that we should do it.

To be prejudiced means to form an "estimate of others without knowing the facts." Unfortunately, that is easier than ever in this digital age. Many of us see stories all over social media and believe them without hesitation. We form opinions about others in seconds, often without taking the time to consider their point of view or whether we're seeing the full story.

Being prejudiced can be a very serious flaw for a Christian. Jesus loves us all equally. He does not see a person's sins as greater than yours. We must learn to care for one another and leave the judgment up to God, in order to be like Christ and spread the Gospel. It is not our place to condemn the shortcomings of our peers; we are meant only to love them.

Today, focus on ridding yourself of your prejudices. Do not value people based on their political beliefs, sexual orientation, occupation, or hobbies. Their past mistakes and personal choices are between them and God, and we should trust that He will sort out everything accordingly. Focus instead on the fact that they are another creation of our Father and that we should love them as He does.



OCT 1 1

*Love is patient,
love is kind.*

— 1 Corinthians
13:4

Recognizing Love, Part 1

The divorce rate in our country is astonishingly high. Thousands of couples, especially those who are young, end up divorced because they enter marriage not knowing the true meaning of love. Our world is full of sinful things that movies and television portray as love, and some may base their own lives on these outlets. People learn that sleeping together before marriage is not only acceptable, but normal. They see romanticized abuse or harmful habits, such as possessiveness and anger. It seems that many people have lost sight of the true definition of love and have filled in the gaps with things they see in the world.

This chapter is quoted very often, but not many people take the time to fully understand it. We begin this miniseries by breaking down a couple of the aspects listed in this famous verse. First, love is patient. It is taking the time to get to know one another without trying to rush toward physical pleasure. It also means that we should be slow to anger with the ones we care for. Everyone makes mistakes, and we must remember our feelings for them even when we are frustrated. Love is kind. When you are in love, you feel the urge to help one another, with no regard for your personal gain.

Today, evaluate the love in your relationships. Is patience and kindness shown on both sides? If not, spend time praying today for guidance and approach your significant other, too. Even if you've fallen away from these qualities, working together through God can help restore and improve the love you show one another.



OCT 12

Recognizing Love, Part 2

It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others

...

—1 Corinthians
13:4-5

In today's installment on recognizing love, we're going to look at more of the outline laid out in 1 Corinthians to teach us about the kind of love that the Lord wants us to have with others. It is written that love does not envy. This is especially important for Christians. When we let envy into our hearts, it is showing God that we are not satisfied with what He has given us. Being jealous of the other person in your relationship can be very damaging, too. We are made to support one another, not to compare our possessions. The affection that draws us together should not be based on material things.

Similarly, you should not brag to the ones for whom you care. Love does not boast and it will not show pride. When we draw attention to ourselves, we are stealing glory from God. As Christians, our lives are not just ours anymore, and should be used to spread the Gospel and give credit to our Father. Being prideful places your own value above the Lord's and can foster ill feelings in your significant other.

Love does not dishonor others. Each soul on Earth has value to God, and it is not our place to discount that worth. When you are having a disagreement, you should not slander your significant other, even to friends. This is especially true if you are husband and wife. Marriage is a holy union that bonds two souls together. If you cannot depend on your spouse to honor you, who will?

Today, show love to your other half. Ask God to remove envy and pride from your heart and always remember to value and honor one another.



OCT 13

Recognizing Love, Part 3

... It is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

*— 1 Corinthians
13:5*

This installment in Recognizing Love is particularly relevant for today. The culture of instant gratification and selfishness in which we live opens the door for self-serving and petty behaviors. True love, however, is not self-seeking. In fact, it is considerate and altruistic. We should be willing to make sacrifices for our loved ones at the cost of our personal agendas.

Love is not easily angered. Human nature is grossly flawed, and it's very easy to become frustrated with one another. God tells us to protect our spouse and be compassionate. The more quickly we become angry, the more likely it is that we will dishonor or hurt our significant other.

Perhaps the most pertinent part of this section is that love keeps no record of wrongs. It is our instinct to keep count of any time our spouse hurts our feelings or does wrong by us. Rather than letting go of our building grudge, we throw these instances at our spouses during arguments or when we're trying to get our way. A reaction like this is very frustrating and likely will lead to strong negative feelings. This is even more important for Christians, because the entire premise of our faith is love and forgiveness. If you're keeping a record of wrongs, you're going against what Jesus taught us and the reason He died.

Today, let go of any transgressions you might be holding onto. Let them fall into the past, and remember instead how much you care for your spouse. Pray that God will open your heart for selfless means and that He will help you keep anger out of your relationship.



OCT 14 Recognizing Love, Part 4

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

—1 Corinthians 13:5

The last installment in Recognizing Love finishes this incredibly popular section of Scripture to help us understand the love that God intends for us. A healthy, godly relationship will not delight in evil. This can be anything from explicit music to lying. It's a broad statement, but it shows that love is something the Lord created for us, and that it is a good thing when it is real.

Love also rejoices in the truth. This could mean simple and worldly truths, but also refers to the truth about Jesus being the son of God. A foundation in faith is important for a successful Christian relationship. You should spend ample time praying and studying the Word together. When God becomes the focus of your relationship, you're able to experience a pure love between one another and with the Lord.

Love protects, trusts, hopes and perseveres. Most of the time, it's easier (and cheaper) simply to replace a broken item than to try to fix it. Unfortunately, this attitude about possessions translates into many people's relationships. It's easy to be intimidated by the effort that it takes to maintain and repair a healthy love. We're often inclined to turn away and find something new, but this is not what God wants. He will give us trials that we are capable of handling—with his assistance. Just as His love never fails, our own affection should not give up so easily.

Today, examine your love. Does it meet the requirements of the past four days or could it use some work? Ask the Lord for guidance and support, but don't forget to communicate with your spouse. Persevere, protect and you will prosper.



OCT 15

Everyone Sins

For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

—Romans 3:28

The Bible teaches us that man is inherently impure. We are tainted both by the sin of our hearts and the world in which that we live. Because of this, we do not deserve a place in Heaven. In Romans 3:23, Paul the apostle noted, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Even non-Christian sources have documented the wicked ways of the human race. The ancient Greeks, for example, recognized our shortcomings when Aristotle wrote that there was "no good in mankind." Our tarnished nature can be traced back to a single mistake in the Garden of Eden and the first example of the devil's trickery.

Once Adam and Eve ate the apple, they were removed from the Garden. At the same time, they fell from God's grace. From that moment forward, it should have been impossible for people to earn a place in Heaven. An eternal home still is unobtainable without the help of Jesus Christ. The only reason that he had to sacrifice his perfect life was so imperfect beings like us could earn grace. As Christians know, it is only through accepting his oblation that we become destined for eternity.

Still, many people in the church seem to think that our deeds increase our favor with the Lord. They don't. We could never perform enough service to undo our own sins. It is important to reach out and contribute within our communities, but it is not enough.

Today, make sure you're not neglecting your personal relationship with God through your deeds. Our first priority must be loving and serving Him. Helping others is a great thing to do, but only if your motivations are for His glory and not your own.



OCT 16

Being Peacekeepers

*In peace I will lie
down and sleep,
for you alone, Lord,
make me dwell in
safety.*

—Psalm 4:8

This world and the world of Heaven are incompatible. Yes, our God created Earth, but it has become tainted with sin. Conflicts rage across nations and within them. This country is arguably more divided now than it has ever been. The downward trend of Christianity is likely to blame. As more people turn away from the Lord, they make room for hatred and intolerance to tear us apart.

As a Christian, part of your duty is to be peaceful (though complacent) with your fellow man. Even when you strongly disagree with someone, you should be able to respect their difference in opinion and realize that God loves them just as much as He loves you. We are the hands and feet of His mission, so it is important that we represent the glory of Christ in all that we do. That is why remaining peaceful is crucial whenever possible.

But how can we find peace with one another when their opinions or beliefs are so different from ours? Only God can help with that. We must realize that we were in disagreement with Him before we were saved. Humans are cloaked in sin and He is righteous perfection. And yet, Jesus loved us enough to sacrifice His life so we could have an eternity that we do not deserve. That is the peaceful attitude that we must try to adopt in order to make a difference in the world.

Today, make peace with God. Reach out to Him and ask Him to purify your thoughts and your heart so that you may help others. After all, the only way to keep the peace is to know it intimately.



OCT 17

Persevering Through Temptation

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.

—James 1:13-14

We face temptation in our world every single day. There are instances as small as eating an extra cookie and ones as large as committing adultery. Some people believe that they should be exempt from such desires once they are born again, but God never promised that we would be without temptation. Even Jesus had to deal with such impulses during His time on Earth. The Bible says that He was "tempted in every way, just as we are—and yet He did not sin."

We can't expect to be as sinless as Jesus was. It simply is not possible for the flesh to change its desires. However, we can spend more time within our hearts and minds to train for victory over these urges. One of the best ways to prepare to face these challenges is by reading the Bible. It outlines countless situations and decisions a Christian should make. Studying God's will can help you remember what He would want and make the correct decisions.

Prayer also is vital to resisting temptation. We strengthen the bond between us when we speak to Jesus. He will offer you guidance for your decisions. Plus, the more frequently you communicate with Him, the more natural it will be to consider His will in your actions. Forming intimacy with God is training.

Today, try to call out for help whenever you are feeling tempted. Pause before you make a decision and think about what the Word of God says you should do. In most cases, your spirit will know even before you ask. What's more, every victory over desire feels so much better than succumbing to the urge ever could.



OCT 18

Loneliness Hurts, But We Are Never Alone

*My soul yearns,
even faints, for the
courts of the Lord;
my heart and my
flesh cry out for the
living God.*

—*Psalm 84:2*

Loneliness is one of the greatest issues people face today. It is a sharp and cold blade into our emotions and it goes against our very nature. Feeling alone is the leading cause of suicide in our nation, and suicide is the third highest killer among students in the United States. Loneliness ranges in severity for different people, but it is not something to be taken lightly.

We deal with several different kinds of loneliness. Most people envision solitude when you talk about being alone, but there are other descriptions. If you're dealing with an emotional or physical burden that is not affecting others around you, you're experiencing the loneliness of suffering. Depression and loss can lead to a loneliness of sorrow. Guilt, judgment and fear all can create their own particular feelings of being alone.

No matter what type (or types) of loneliness you're dealing with, remember that it is just an illusion made by the devil. We are never truly alone. Our Father is beside us every moment regardless of how painful it may be. As born-again Christians, our souls do not simply belong to us anymore. Christ becomes a part of us, and we pledge our lives to His service and teachings. It may be difficult to keep in mind sometimes, but you are never alone.

Today, have faith in the presence of God and know that He is by your side. Talk to Him about your feelings and the isolation that is gripping your heart. He will listen, and He will guide you. He will even carry you.



OCT 19 Purity of the Heart

*Blessed are the
pure in heart, for
they will see God.*

—Matthew 5:8

Everyone wants to be happy. The pursuit of peace and contentment is responsible for countless wars, dollars and journeys. Humans will go to the ends of the earth while searching for a sense of fulfillment. Unless these efforts involve God, they are in vain.

Our souls need the presence of God. We're incomplete without His grace. The feeling of emptiness and longing will persist as long as we are without Him. The only way for us to experience true happiness in this world is by purifying our hearts and placing our relationships with Christ at the top of our priorities. Altering our priorities this way frees us from one of the strongest emotions: envy. Christ completes our lives and fills the emptiness for which we try to compensate with material possessions. After these chains are broken, we no longer feel jealousy for things of the world.

When we allow Jesus to take control of our lives, it will affect more than just our personal feelings. When we feel the peace and grace of God, we'll be able to offer that same love to our fellow man. Other people will be able to see the peace within your heart that comes from a relationship with the Lord.

Today, refocus your pursuits on the things that matter. Ask God to help you eliminate the unnecessary desires from your heart to make room for His purposes. Purify yourself from worldly wishes and you'll be able to reach more people with the beauty of the Gospel.



OCT20

The Dangers of Complacency

*I know your deeds,
that you are
neither cold nor
hot. I wish you
were either one or
the other! So,
because you are
lukewarm—neither
hot nor cold—I am
about to spit you
out of my mouth.*

*—Revelation
3:14-15*

Jesus said that society would be permissive before He returns, just as in the days of Noah. The world in which we live is flooded in immorality unlike anything we've seen in centuries. Society has become wildly hedonistic and vile. Many believe that what we are seeing is human nature running rampant without the interference from and reliance on God.

One reason the conditions of the world have gotten so bad is because Christians have become complacent. We would rather sit by and watch the demise of our fellow man than get our hands dirty or risk upsetting them. This attitude is the complete opposite of what Jesus taught us.

The church functions as the hands and feet of Christ, reaching out into the world to do His work and minister to the world around us. We must remain enthusiastic and passionate if we wish to contribute properly to God and save others. In Romans 12:11 it says, "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord."

Complacency also is dangerous, because we're putting our personal comfort above the will of God. Ministering may not always be easy or fun, but He never promised that it would be. The purpose that we serve is far greater than any of our own emotions.

Today, ask God how you can be zealous for Him. If you feel compelled to reach out and offer advice or to stand up for your faith, then do so. Do not sink into a sea of complacency.



OCT21

The Satisfaction of Righteousness

And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

—Philippians 4:19

People need food, so God provides rain and sunshine. Grass and grain begin to grow and are then made into food for livestock or ground into flour. We cook the flour and meat to make our meals and satisfy our hunger. People also crave love and acceptance. Again, God provides the means to fulfill our needs. He connects two hearts with affection and they are drawn together in marriage to form a unified soul that is born of love.

All of our needs will be satisfied once we give our lives to God. After all, if He ensures that even the tiniest sparrows are taken care of, imagine the lengths He will go to for the children made in His image.

There is satisfaction guaranteed for all who choose to follow Christ. Things may not always be easy, but no disciple will be left unprepared for the future. The stories of the Bible fill our hunger for knowledge. The need for friendship and acceptance is met through fellowship with others. When you choose a path of righteousness, God will plan for every aspect of your journey.

It's important to remember that this adventure will not be a smooth one. Jesus never said that we wouldn't suffer, only that we would be strong enough to endure and that we wouldn't have to go through it alone.

Today, find peace in the fact that your future is paid for. Stop worrying and trust that all of your needs will be met at the right time. That is the satisfaction of righteousness.



OCT22

Growing in Faith by Experience

My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you.

—Job 4:5

When you're trying to learn a new skill, where do you begin? Most people will begin with some form of research. The first step to horseback riding, for example, may be to read a book about being around horses and becoming comfortable with them. All the notes in the world may not fully prepare you to step into the stall of a 2,000-pound Clydesdale that is more than 7 feet tall. Reading is helpful in many situations, but offers no comparison to the benefits of experience. Our journey with Christ is the same.

Reading the Bible is very important for building a relationship with God, but we still need to experience Him in other ways. It is not enough to do research through the Word if you are not pursuing personal intimacy. Spending time in prayer is another part of Christianity that you can't neglect. It helps you to gain meaningful guidance about your life and how to live it in accordance with God's will. Going to church also provides valuable background and knowledge to enhance your faith. Simply attending services is not enough to be saved, but services are fantastic tools to help you learn about the word of God.

Having experience with the Lord is also vital when you're trying to minister to other people. When you have your own testimonies, your statements will be much more powerful. As you spend more time growing in your faith, God will give you the stories you need to spread the Gospel.



OCT23

The Purest Joy

*Go, eat your food
with gladness, and
drink your wine
with a joyful heart,
for God has
already approved
what you do.*

—Ecclesiastes 9:7

What makes you joyful? Do you enjoy completing accomplishments at work? What about spending time with your friends and family? Or perhaps you feel cheerful when you're working on your hobbies? Many things in life bring us happiness and contentment, but they all pale in comparison to the truest form of joy—a relationship with God.

We can find happiness in the world, but it is only in passing. In relation to eternity, our lives are little more than a flash in the pan. When people and activities of the flesh fail you, you can (and should) turn to Jesus.

Jesus is the opposite of sadness. He is the destroyer of discouragement and mender of broken hearts. He alone is able to repair the damage that this world does to us and make us whole again. His love offers the greatest feeling of joy that we can experience.

If you need more joy in your life, turning to God is the only way to achieve it. Whether you're suffering from depression and anxiety or simply feeling a bit stuck, Jesus has the solution. Coming to know Him and to rely on Him allows you to dispel worry about the future or regret for the past, while feeling a peace that transcends our very comprehension.

Today, allow yourself to be joyful. The debt of your sins is paid, and as a Christian, you have secured a perfect future in eternity. Let go of your worldly desires and focus on the fact that God loved you enough to sacrifice His son to save you.



OCT24

Fixing Boredom in Christianity

We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

—Hebrews 6:12

What do you believe is the biggest issue facing our youth? Sex? Drugs? Sociologists say that boredom is the greatest problem. A lack of purpose leads people to making poor decisions—many times, just because they can.

The infamous Hampton Beach Riots of 1964, for example, shook New Hampshire. There were hundreds of arrests and injuries, plus property damage and social upheaval. A large portion of those involved offered a rather unsettling answer when asked why they did it: “Just for the hell of it.”

Being bored means not having a purpose or meaning for your time and actions. As a Christian, bored is the last thing we should be. The creator of the universe sacrificed His son to save you, because He dearly loves you. He has orchestrated an intricate plan just for you, and you have a divine purpose. If you’re feeling bored, it means you’re wasting the potential that He knows you have.

Fixing Christian boredom begins with prayer and supplication. You need to ask God to show you your purpose and the direction He wants you to go in to serve Him best. A good way to freshen your resolve is by abstaining or fasting. Even this small sacrifice for God can help you get back on track and reorganize your priorities. Spend time in the word. Oftentimes, Christ will use the Bible to speak to us and change our situations.

Today, ask yourself if you’re feeling bored with your Christianity. If the answer is yes, then it may be time to rearrange your life. There is a way that you can use your idle time to help God—you just have to find it.



OCT25

Learning About the Savior of the World

They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

—John 4:42

When you want to learn more about God, it's only natural that you turn to the Bible. It is, after all, the most extensive collection of information available about the creation and development of the universe. The Bible moves from the beginning of the universe to the end of the world as we know it—and everything in between.

Did you know that other sources mention the savior of the world? The Roman historian Tacitus, for example, mentioned Jesus Christ. He corroborates books in the New Testament on elements of Jesus' death. These four accurate pieces of knowledge include the Latin word *Christus* (used to refer to Jesus and often mistakenly taken as a name instead of a title), the beginning of the Christian movement, Jesus' execution by a Roman governor, and time of his death (during Pilate's governorship).

Another strong piece of historical evidence comes from Josephus, who was a Jewish priest. You can find indirect mentions of Jesus in both of his great works. In Jewish antiquities, however, there are two direct references. Josephus says, "the brother of Jesus-who-is-called-Messiah," to identify Christ's brother, James.

These two examples are, perhaps, the most prominent, but the world is riddled with secular historical evidence about the existence of Jesus Christ, the son of God. If you're dealing with any sensations of doubt, simply look at the information available to ease your uncertainty. Today, take heart knowing that our savior was and is a real person.



OCT26

How Christians Should Love

*This is my
command: Love
each other.*

—John 15:17

Love is a beautiful thing. It is a wonderful sensation and the very foundation of our relationship with Jesus. The word itself is mentioned more than 500 times throughout the Bible, so we know how important it is.

There are a few guidelines for how Christians should love one another. The most important thing to remember is that our purpose is to be like Christ. His love for us was so great that He endured incredible torture and sacrificed His own life to save ours. Our human emotions can never compare to this perfect form of love, but when we love through our relationship with God, it offers the same transcendental peace.

God loves us unconditionally. No matter what we have done or said, He still believes we are perfect and worth saving. He also desires a personal relationship with each of us. To love as a Christian, you should always accept and appreciate those around you. It doesn't matter whether they are total strangers or our children. We are commanded to care for them as He does.

It can be difficult to care for others who have differing opinions or to whom we cannot relate, but it is crucial that we do so. After all, didn't the Lord still love us in our sinfulness? He is the epitome of grace and glory, and we are machinations of sin and filth. If He can love us so wholly, we can pass tolerance and affection on to our neighbors.

Today, tell someone that you love him. Take time to consider where they are coming from and what they are going through. And remember, Jesus sees each of us with the same incredible worth.



OCT27

Walking With Christ

*Blessed are those
who hunger and
thirst for
righteousness, for
they will be filled.*

—Matthew 5:6

Walking is a wonderful activity. There are health benefits that come from moving your body—your muscles grow stronger and you burn calories and fat. As you travel, you'll also experience new sights, smells and sounds. It is a useful way to detoxify you from the overabundance of technology that we see. When you start walking with friends, those benefits are increased even more. That's why it's so important that we spend time walking with Christ.

There is no more thrilling feeling than knowing that the creator of the universe wants to know you personally. How exciting that the God, who hung the stars, desires your attention and love. Walking with Christ is something we should do throughout our Christian lives, and it has all sorts of benefits. Our faith is like the strengthening muscles—it builds through use and personal experiences with the grace of the Lord. We lose "fat," which in this case is worldly desires and thoughts that hold us back. The new scenery that we see represents the testimony that we will uncover and develop for God.

The most important part is the fact that we're growing closer to Jesus. The more time we spend in prayer and living in His word, the better we will know Him. When He is more involved in our lives, it'll be easier to make the right decisions and have faith that our futures are taken care of.

Today, go on a stroll with God. If it's been a while, that's okay. He appreciates every step that we take toward Him, and walking close to His side is the best way to change your entire life.



OCT28

You Are God's Harvest

The land yields its harvest; God, our God, blesses us.

—Psalm 67:6

Fall brings dropping temperatures, vibrantly colored leaves and a sudden overwhelming presence of pumpkins. This is when farmers gather the fruits of their labors and value the results of their work. They take these vegetables from the ground and feed families across the nation. In many ways, you, too, are a product of harvest.

Vegetables grow from the ground. Likewise, humans come from a filthy world of sin and pain. We're brought up from the bottom of the natural order. On our own, we could never hope to do more than return to the earth, potentially leaving behind another generation of crops.

Jesus comes to us when we are ready, bringing us to grace. He "harvests us" from our surroundings and provides a new destiny far greater than anything we could have achieved without Him. But first, He must wash us clean. Just as potatoes have to be scrubbed of their grime, our souls must be renewed in His grace and glory before we can be used. This is our salvation, as we are reborn through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Our salvation prepares us, and then God's harvest moves on to help the world. We can "feed" others the word and spread the good news. Today, ask yourself if you're ready to be used, or if you need to be washed clean again. The Lord is always willing to freshen and make use of His crops—in this case, His children.



OCT29

Fighting a Beaten Foe

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

—Hebrews 4:12

People like to place bets. Humans love to take a chance on gaining something just for being right, whether it's horseracing or UFC fights. The biggest battle in the world is "rigged," so to speak. We know that choosing Jesus is choosing the winning team.

To overcome the devil, we must recognize that he is God's enemy and that God has already defeated him. The Father sent His son as a living sacrifice for our salvation. Although the crucifixion of Christ may have seemed like a win for the devil, Christ's resurrection provided us the ultimate victory. When our Lord bowed His head and said, "It is finished," our triumph over Satan was complete. Ultimately, we have won the war.

This reassurance should help us as we face the daily battles, the temptations and struggles. The devil seeks to steal our joy, to discourage us, to cause us to question our faith. As Christians, we must resist Satan. The Bible says he will flee from us if we do. And how do we resist this enemy? Our weapon is God's word. When the devil tempted Christ, Jesus' response was to wield scripture like a "sword." That is why it is important to study and memorize God's word.

Today, take the time to celebrate that your fate is already won. We can have triumph over the devil, simply by believing in Jesus and accepting Him as our savior. After all, everyone likes an easy bet.



OCT30

The Compatibility Between Religion and Science

He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him.

—Daniel 2:22-23

For some reason, many people believe that there is no way to strike a balance between science and religion. Christians fear that science is trying to disprove the existence of a creator. Scientists assert that no mind could be behind the processes of this world. In reality, this isn't true at all. Science is a way to show the complexities of God's design and how His beautiful world works.

The first disagreement between science and religion may have been due to Galileo. He's credited as the father of modern science, and in the 1600s, he determined that Earth revolved around the sun (not the other way around, as most people believed at the time). There was a ripple of discomfort and disbelief among the religious leaders. If we were God's most prized creation, how could we only be a part of a larger solar system? Further, how could they explain the way the sun and the moon rise and set in the sky?

Eventually, everyone reconciled. Galileo's evidence proved that he was correct. Religious leaders learned to use the new information as a means of explanation, instead of resisting it. Since that time, we've seen again and again that science and religion are highly compatible. You can understand the way that God designed the human body and how He built this delicately balanced planet, just for us.

Today, take some time to reflect on the way that our heavenly Father has engineered this world. He has given consideration to every detail, from the scales on a butterfly's wings to the waves of the ocean. Truly, we live in a world of miracles.



OCT 31

Spooky Things and Spider Webs

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

—Ephesians 2:10

Halloween is a time when the nation focuses on everything scary. People dress up like all manner of supernatural entities, from werewolves to demons and all creatures in between. It can be an uncomfortable time of the year for many Christians, especially since some people take things too far or seem to worship the dark side of life. There are two things to remember, though: We are not alone, and God is always working.

Even on the darkest of nights, Christ is with us. Things can become overwhelming and even terrifying in life, but there's no reason to fear. The worst parts of life will pass, just as everyone removes their costumes after Halloween.

Many people are afraid of spiders, but they're still another creation from the mind of God. They can be pretty unnerving, but they're actually beneficial. They trap other, harmful insects such as mosquitoes so that we don't have to deal with as many of them. One of the most interesting aspects of spiders is their ability to create a web. Spiders are small, but they can create surprisingly large and intricate structures – with the help of our Father. This serves as a reminder that no matter how many people are against us or how small we may feel, we can accomplish great things.

This Halloween, take the time to recognize the darkness and scariness. If we're never exposed to the worst parts of life, we can't fully appreciate the wonderful things that Heaven holds in store for us.



NOV 01

The Daily Work for Christians

When learning a new skill or habit, it takes a bit of work before you're able to implement it fully. Whatever the switch is, you must consciously decide to make it. Research shows that it takes anywhere from 21 to 66 days before the new action is fully habitual. Despite what some people think, this information holds true in our spiritual lives.

You see, some people think being a Christian involves a spiritual experience (a conversion), and then it's done. The truth is that yes, the people are saved, but they are not reaching their full potential. There is much more to Christianity than that; it is a daily process whereby you grow to be more and more like Christ.

New Christians are like babies. They must be fed on the simple things of the Bible to grow in their faith, and they must learn to "walk" in Christian life. Like an infant, they will stumble, fall and make mistakes, but they should never stop growing. Sadly, many remain spiritual babes all their lives.

To mature as a Christian, you must study God's Word. We are all commissioned to share the Gospel with others, but how can we do so if we don't know the Bible? When we know the Scripture, we can defend against those who doubt or question our faith.

In addition to studying, we must also pray. Prayer is an important building block in the life of a Christian. Pray about everything and for everyone. Pray without ceasing. Today, make sure you spend enough time practicing these good habits to grow in your faith.

... Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

—Philippians 1:6



NOV02

*I want to know
Christ—yes, to
know the power of
his resurrection and
participation in his
sufferings,
becoming like him
in his death...*

—Philippians 3:10

Relying on His Presence

What is the greatest trademark of a reliable friend? Sound advice? Similar interests? People actually place the highest value on a friend who is always there for them. This reliability is harder to come by in this increasingly selfish society. However, there is one relationship that we can always count on for love, support and presence: our connection to Jesus Christ.

In this world, it's easy for us to let our balance between world and spirit slip a little ... especially when things are going well. Many Christians turn to God for help in their hour of need but neglect to praise Him throughout the mediocre and high points as well. This, however, does not sit well with the nature of our souls. We depend on the presence of Jesus to guide us and support us, and so we must lean on Him in our everyday lives.

Fortunately, this is rather easy once we put effort toward drawing closer to Him. His presence is always within us and around us. Even through the smallest actions and circumstances, the Lord does not leave us alone. He desires nothing more than to form a bond with each of us. When we spend time reading the Word and praying to God, we are actually strengthening a friendship that no worldly connection can hold a candle to.

Today, take time to notice the constant presence of God. Know that He loves you more than you can fathom, and He will always be by your side, ready to offer guidance and support to His children.



NOV03

God Is Sufficient

For in him all things were created: things in Heaven and on Earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.

—Colossians 1:16

We live in a culture of more. We're trained from an early age not to be satisfied with anything we have. The media and our social interactions repeatedly tell us that we're simply not good enough. It tells us, instead, that our stomachs should be flatter and our teeth whiter. We should have perfect hair to match our perfect fashion sense. We're not validated unless we have sprawling homes and a garage full of vehicles to show off.

But none of this is true.

The world will always look for ways to steal our joy and confidence. It will overwhelm us with goals that are simply unobtainable. We'll constantly be compared to other people ... and it's all okay. The world is wicked, and there is no hope to save it. But with a personal relationship with Christ, you'll find that the requirements of the world are not important.

Our souls are designed to need Jesus. He's the final piece of the puzzle—one that cannot be replaced by anything else. When you know God, you know the purest and most powerful joy that man can feel. You also come to know that He is more than sufficient. There is no need to compete in the ways of the world when your heart is full of acceptance and perfect love.

Today, take time to re-prioritize your life. Are you wasting energy chasing the dreams of this world? It's the nature of the flesh to do so, but when you focus on your spirit, you'll see that you already have everything you need.



NOV04

Enjoying Your Christian Life

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

—Romans 15:13

For some reason, many people associate the Christian life with boredom. They believe that a life after salvation is one without fun or enjoyment, but that's not the case at all. God is the creator of fun, and He wants His children to have a good time while they're part of this world.

One of the best ways for us to enjoy ourselves is through fellowship activities. Many Christian groups take normally secular recreations, like zip-lining and paintball, and show others how much more enjoyable these activities can be with the peace of God within your heart. They also use these ventures to grow closer together and create a more affectionate community.

There's a reason why it's important to have fun as a Christian: People learn by watching us. This is especially true of young children. If your kids or neighbors see you dragging yourself to church but excitedly planning for the weekend, they'll think your salvation doesn't mean as much to you as worldly things. They'll often adopt the same attitude themselves.

We are the hands and feet of Christ, and so we're called to do His work in the world. For some people, you may be the only example of Christianity they ever see. The task of ministering to them is much harder, however, if our actions teach them something different from what we say.

Today, take time to enjoy yourself. Let the peace of God fill your heart and be seen by everyone around you. After all, being a Christian doesn't mean you have an aversion to fun.



NOV05

All Our Suffering Is Fleeting

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

—James 1:2-3

God never promised that our Christian lives would be without suffering. In fact, the Word says the opposite and uses verses like James 1:2-3 to prepare us for the fact that there will be pain. Some people think it's not fair that they still have to deal with hurt and discomfort, but these emotions are important tools for strengthening your faith.

Belief and trust that is untested is also unproven. If God does not watch for our reactions during the stormy times, how does He know we will turn to Him? He also uses tribulations to test our response once the suffering has passed. After all, how can we minister to a lost and dying world if we don't have our own experience needing faith?

There will be dark times, even for Christians. Sometimes it will seem like the trials never end or that we will never recover from the strain. It's important to remember that this isn't true. All our pain in this world is only temporary. God will likely fix your situation and restore the balance in your life. Even if He doesn't, however, you're still destined for an eternity without pain or sadness. Our earthly lives are brief in comparison to eternity ... just a quick flash in the pan.

Today, find peace knowing your trials are only temporary. No matter how hard they may seem, they will pass. And in the meantime, they serve as fantastic practice to improve your testimony and demonstrate a living Christian example for those around you.



NOV06 **Abundant Life**

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

—*John 10:10*

God wants His children to be happy. He wants to see us prosper and be filled with joy. If it were not so, would He have sent His son to our wicked world as a sacrifice for our sins? Of course not. Our heavenly Father made this plan so we could spend the rest of eternity by His side in a perfect world without pain.

Jesus did not only come to prepare us for our future beyond the world, however. He died upon the cross so that we could also have life now – and have it abundantly. Christ was the greatest teacher that humanity has ever seen, and He gave us lessons to help every single day. Jesus taught us how to have practical faith instead of simply following the patterns of religion. He brought the information we need to deal with the largest of issues and celebrate our happiest days.

Some Christians mistakenly believe, however, that “abundant life” means a surplus of money or worldly possessions. It is true that some of us will experience better financial situations, but it is not what Jesus had in mind. Instead, God promises spiritual abundance for us. Our salvation gives us access to the greatest feelings of love, acceptance and peace that humans can feel. Only a relationship with the Lord will fill the empty spaces in our lives, because that’s precisely how God designed our hearts to work.

Today, remember to thank God. Thank Him for loving you enough to send His son to be slain. Thank Him for making it possible for us to have this abundant spiritual life. Thank Him for the supreme love only He can offer.



NOV07

Hesitating in Darkness

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

—John 1:4-5

If you get up in the middle of the night, it can be hard to find your way. Humans don't see very well in darkness, and as a result, we hesitate. Even though we're familiar with the layout of our homes, we still stumble through it without the presence of light. Nowadays, many people use their cellphone flashlights to illuminate their paths.

This is true on a much grander scale as well. Our world is one of terrible darkness and sin. We see corruption and hatred every single day. In fact, it seems like the darkness of the Earth is getting even stronger. The planet is plagued by pollution, hunger, war and death. In an environment like this, it's no wonder people hesitate, stumble and fall. We can't tell where we're going or how far we are from our destination.

The only way to see through such turbulent times is by the light of God. He alone is able to light up our paths and make sense of the shadows that plague us. When we turn to Him and ask for guidance, we'll soon have illumination all our own.

Just like our cellphones, we should keep God at the ready. If every Christian took Jesus everywhere they went, can you imagine how much light we could cast into this world? You could stop hesitating in the darkness and show the way for others when they see the love of Christ through you.

Today, make sure you have the light of God on hand in this dark world. Pray and ask Him for guidance and to show you the safest path through our planet of corruption.



NOV08

Preparation for the Soul

*Create in me a
pure heart, O
God, and renew a
steadfast spirit
within me.*

—Psalm 51:10

To bake a cake, you must have the right ingredients. You must combine them correctly, put the batter in the pan and place it in the oven. If you're any less prepared than that, you're likely to have a mess on your hands instead of a dessert. Likewise, we must ready ourselves for the guidance of God before we can lead successful Christian lives.

Many religious people teach ways of grace to people who are not equipped to change. What does that mean? It doesn't matter how much time you spend reading the Bible if you don't have a pure heart as a platform to accept the benefits. Jesus does not provide salvation to those who haven't accepted Him as their Savior and allowed Him to come into their souls.

Similarly, the church can teach about purifying motives, actions and desires for the rest of eternity, but deceitful hearts cannot be changed. When we accept Jesus, we allow our old selves to die. It's vital that we let go of these portions so we can make room for renewal in Christ. Only after we have the proper equipment (a purified heart and soul) can we truly take advantage of His teachings and grace. Once we do this, we're able to begin reaching out and ministering to this lost and dying world.

Today, ask yourself if you're full prepared to broadcast grace. If you're not sure, spend some time talking about it with God. It may be the perfect opportunity for you to re-cleanse your heart and freshen the priorities for your life.



NOV09

*Lord, you alone are
my portion and my
cup; you make my
lot secure.*

—*Psalm 16:5*

Having a Spiritual Security System

One of the most effective ways to protect your business or home is to install an electronic security system. A setup like this provides monitoring for a huge number of problems, from carbon monoxide poisoning to burglary.

In reality, our physical being is not the only aspect under attack. Most assaults actually come from the spiritual realm, as the devil tries to hurt us and steal our joy. If you would buy protection for your home, why not invest in some security for the most important aspect of your existence – your soul?

Building a personal relationship with Jesus is the only way to prepare yourself for the attacks that the enemy is guaranteed to make. This level of intimacy with the Lord is often enough to scare off the devil, and in essence eliminate a huge portion of your problems. Even when the attacks can't be prevented, having God on hand and close by is the healthiest and most effective way to get through a hard time.

Your spiritual security system should also include a support network, just as home monitoring services can contact authorities. Other Christians can help guide you through whatever struggles you face. Depression, pain, guilt, anxiety ... none of these is a match for the love and glory of God and His children.

Today, evaluate your security system. Are you protected from attacks by the devil? If he does strike at you, do you have the proper support group and intimacy with God to get through it? After all, there's no greater investment than your soul.



NOV 10

Seeing Satan's Work

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the Gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

*—2 Corinthians
4:4*

"The god of this age..." sounds quite ominous, doesn't it? When God cast Satan from Heaven, he took hold in the world. His purpose is only to hurt us and try to lead us astray, even hide us from the love of Christ. Unfortunately, he's rather successful at his job, and we can see his work throughout our world.

The entertainment business is one of Satan's most powerful tools. Yes, there have been non-harmful and even Christian platforms, but this is not the case the majority of the time. Graphic novels are teaching that sex before marriage is both permissible and favorable. Movies and television glorify violence and disobedience. They show lying as a normal part of life. Music brags on the power of drugs or alcohol to have a good time.

Political and educational leaders have also been set up in line with the devil's plan. Sin is becoming more and more permissible ... even celebrated in many cases. Some professors or other teachers try to nullify or disprove God's enduring Word. ... And that only scratches the surface.

These works of Satan are most harmful to the minds of the young, especially if they do not have family or friends who are Christians. Teenagers are wildly impressionable by nature, but without access to the love of God, they will fall deeper and deeper into the ways of sin.

Today, pray that God will protect your mind and the minds of your loved ones from this sinful assault. Ask Jesus to help you eliminate Satan's work in your own life so you may live better and more easily reach out to others.



NOV 11

The Costs of Living

Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

—Ephesians 6:11-12

For everything in this world, there is a cost. Even when we are born-again Christians and protected by God, we should not expect things to be easy. He never told us that triumph was guaranteed, but made sure we have the teachings we need to endure whatever life throws at us. Our right to practice religion in God's name is protected by the sacrifices of thousands of former and current members of the military.

Today is Veteran's Day, a day to honor and remember those who helped cover the cost of our opportunity and freedom. Many soldiers have given their lives to keep this country safe, just as Jesus sacrificed His for the security of our spiritual future. Without the brave legions of souls before us, you might not be reading this devotional today.

The terror attacks of 9/11 cost us more than any tragedy in decades. When the planes hit the World Trade Center towers, more than 2,000 innocent lives were taken. This blatant assault cost us peace of mind, a sense of security that we have yet to regain. You see the changes in airports and border patrols as fear continues to drive us to extreme preventive measures.

No matter how high the cost of our lives, Jesus is there to support us through the good and the bad times. Today, spend time honoring the veterans who have served this country. Pray that God will protect our men and women of service, and thank Him for keeping us under His wing throughout such trials.



NOV 12

Triumph and Personal Handicaps

Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

—John 13:7

Dealing with a physical or mental illness can be very difficult, especially for a Christian. We often feel that it's unfair for us to suffer through a problem like that when we're under the protection of God. It is even more disappointing when we pray for healing but God does not grant our request. Sometimes though, we simply have to accept the cards we are dealt. As terrible as they can be, afflictions of the flesh are not the worst things that can happen to us.

Attacks on the soul are the most painful and most dangerous, and they can cause the worst end result. The devil will try to make us doubt our God and turn us from Him in retaliation. Sometimes Satan uses physical and mental illnesses to attack the soul, but in many cases, this backfires.

Even with handicaps, people are capable of great things – especially when they have the creator of the universe at their side. Handel composed *The Messiah* with only one side of his body working. His right arm was paralyzed. The famous author CS Lewis battled depression and still managed to write one of the most successful young adult series of all time. We don't have to be free from affliction, but rather we should learn how to triumph in it.

Today, remember that God is with you throughout your problems. He knows exactly what you're feeling, but He also knows the plans He has for you. Try changing your perspective on your illnesses. Instead of "look what I'm dealing with," show everyone "look what I have accomplished with Christ, despite my ailments."



NOV 13

God IS Love

*Whoever does not
love does not know
God, because
God is love.*

— 1 John 4:8

God is the epitome of love. Some people think love is only part of His nature, but in reality it is the very foundation of His existence and our relationship with Him. Consider the sacrifice that was made when Jesus came to Earth. The Father sent His only son to death, just so we might live. The son came without a moment's hesitation and carried out His purpose. He endured immeasurable pain and embarrassment just to save the souls of sinners like us.

At any moment, He could have called down a legion of angels to take Him from the cross and wipe out His persecutors ... but He didn't. He hung beside those two thieves until His last breath faded in His lungs. Only pure love could compel Him to sacrifice His perfect life to grant eternity to sinners like us.

Because God IS love, God gives love. He covers all who come to Him with His grace and gives abundant life. However, our human nature sometimes misconstrues the meaning of love. People are frequently under the impression that loving someone means doing everything for them or perhaps going to incredible lengths to prevent their discomfort. God's love is much purer than that; God's love is fair. It is created in justice and righteousness and not the selfish ways of man.

He did not promise that our lives would be perfect, but instead that we would be perfectly loved.

Today, take time to realize just how loved you are. Always know that Jesus cares enough to die for you, despite your mistakes and shortcomings.



NOV 14

The Beauty of Trust

Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers, and blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord.

—Proverbs 16:20

Trust can be a hard thing to come by. Humans are selfish by nature, so you must earn the right to be relied upon. Still, even the ones we learn to trust can betray us in an instant if they choose. To trust is to give someone else power over you willingly. It usually only takes one bad experience for us to shut other people out on a grand scale, simply because being betrayed hurts so much. A single person can taint our view of our friends and family and rob us of the ability to trust anyone else, at least for a while.

People are inherently flawed because of the sinful world we live in. A great way to become more trustworthy to others is to build a personal relationship with God. He will guide your heart about keeping information safe and secure. Prayer and time in the Scripture, for example, can help you resist the temptation to gossip. But still, even with the assistance of the Lord, humans are not perfect. So is there anyone you can truly trust?

Yes: God. He will never betray us. Unlike people, there are no selfish purposes for the Lord to serve. It's actually quite the opposite. We are His children, and He is the very embodiment of love. To break our trust would go against the very fundamentals of His existence.

Today, even though others may hurt or betray you, know that you can always trust in the Lord. He is eternal, omniscient and devoted to each of His children.



NOV 15

Feeling Compassion

*Dear friends, let us
love one another,
for love comes
from God.
Everyone who
loves has been
born of God and
knows God. ...
And he has given
us this command:
Anyone who loves
God must also
love their brother
and sister.*

— 1 John 4:7,21

Most Christians find it easy to love God. Once you are saved, you are certain He has a purpose for you. We feel Him tugging at our hearts and helping to guide our decisions along the right paths. We sing His praises and come together in large groups just to give Him glory. Our entire culture as a church is based on honoring our heavenly Father. While it is wonderful and necessary for us to care for God this way, it is not our only obligation.

None of us are worthy of the glory of God. We are all sinners, and we fall short of our potential every day. Despite that, Jesus overlooked our shortcomings and sacrificed His life to save us. He knew every person has potential and every person deserves compassion. The entire mission of Christianity is to be more Christ-like to bring people to the Gospel. Love is the very foundation of the Lord and if we don't extend it to others, we are not correctly doing our job.

There are all sorts of events and tragedies across the globe that call for sympathy. We should always have compassion for fellow man. This is especially true for those who have views that oppose our own. We cannot win people to the kingdom of God by pushing them away; we must draw them nearer with love and understanding.

Today, take time to pray that God will give you greater compassion. Ask Him to let you see other people of the world as He does – imperfect, but made in his image and deserving of love.



NOV 16

... One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

—Ephesians 4:6

God Is More Than Our Savior

We know there is no way for man to earn a place in Heaven on his own. We are simply born unclean and unworthy, and the conditions of this world serve to push us further and further into sin. Through Jesus Christ, however, we are granted a spot in a perfect eternity. This is the fundamental basis of Christianity, of course, but there is so much more to our God.

All Christians should know about the Holy Trinity. There is the Father, who is the creator of our universe. The son is Jesus, who died so we may have salvation. The Holy Spirit is the force that works upon our hearts both before and after we give our lives to Christ. The Father, son and Holy Spirit are all separate platforms, but they are a part of the same God.

Each interacts with our life in a different way and time. Together they meet all our spiritual needs and give us the highest sense of fulfillment. But God is also meant to be a friend – someone whom we can build a close relationship with and confide in. He is a guide who shows us the right path, even when it is too dark to see ourselves. He is a protector who fights against the advances of Satan and his attempts to cause us pain. He is a teacher whom we can model our lives around. He is all these things, but He is more. He is love and knowledge and compassion beyond our very comprehension.

Today, ask yourself how many of these aspects of our Lord that you see. Remember that He can provide everything you need for spiritual fulfillment.



NOV 17 **A Chance to Become New**

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

—2 Corinthians 5:17

Imagine that you're sketching out a picture using a pen. You've not been working long when you make a mistake and leave an unsightly black mark across the page. You could write over it and try to hide the error, but there is no way to remove the ink. Instead of working around it, you simply crumple up the page and start over.

Sometimes, we could use a fresh start in life, too. A perfect example of this new beginning is when we become saved through Jesus Christ. We are made fresh and new, with all our past transgressions behind us. He takes out the impurities and places the Holy Spirit within us so we will always have the presence of God. Each of us has a chance to begin a brand new life with divine purposes, instead of merely drifting through a lost and sinful world.

Even if you're already a Christian, Jesus is always ready to provide renewal. Our flesh remains tainted, although our spirits are cleansed. There are still daily battles against temptations and other impure thoughts. It can be easy for us to slip and fall. Fortunately, God is there for us no matter what our past deeds include. No acts of man can gain entry to Heaven, and none can take away our salvation. The Lord sustains and refreshes us, so long as we believe.

Today, ask yourself if you could use another clean page. If you've fallen short of the glory of God, let that fact stay behind you and focus on making this day a new beginning, where your first pursuit is a relationship with Christ.



NOV 18 Handmade Treasures

*The Spirit of God
has made me; the
breath of the
Almighty gives me
life.*

—Job 33:4

When you visit county fairs or auctions, do you notice the value people place on handmade things? Items like quilts and paintings are much more desirable than articles that are mass produced. Production lines can actually be very efficient and successful, but there is something sentimental about owning an object created by the hands of another person.

Do you know that you have the same wonderful value? You are fearfully and wonderfully made, directly by the hands of God. Even though there are 7 billion people on the planet, there is no one quite like you. It can be easy to think of ourselves as insignificant, because the world is so large, but we are precious to Him.

Throughout the Bible, God tells us repeatedly of our worth. In Matthew, we see that He is acutely aware of every sparrow, and He ensures that each one is cared for. We're also told that each of us is far more valuable than many of the little birds and, therefore, taken better care of.

The maker of the universe knows precisely how many hairs are on your head. He knows your thoughts and dreams (perhaps even better than you know them). If you struggle with your sense of self-worth, know that you are nothing short of a treasure in God's eyes.

Today, take a moment to appreciate your own value. The struggles of life make it easy to forget just how important you are. You are unique, priceless and deserving of happiness.



NOV 19

Listening to Our Conscience

Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace.

—2 Corinthians 1:12

God never puts us in situations that we are not prepared to handle (at least with some assistance from Him). He offers the right knowledge and spiritual tools to rise up to our challenges, as any good teacher should. As a Christian, God gives us a special guiding hand to help steer our daily decisions in the right direction. This inner sense of balance is our conscience.

Conscience is defined as “an inner feeling or voice viewed as a guide to rightness or wrongness.” Everyone has one, and it is programmed differently, depending on the way we’re raised and what we are exposed to. Humans are sinful by nature, and the world around us can increase this. Reading literature, watching movies, and listening to music can all affect our natural conscience (for better or for worse).

This inner compass changes, however, once we accept the grace of God. He imparts a piece of the Holy Spirit onto us, and it modifies our conscience for the better. For the first time, can stop and consider how each situation will affect our new lives in Christ. We get to experience a living influence from God in everyday life.

It’s important for Christians to listen to their consciences. This little voice can help you avoid potentially disastrous situations by putting the will of God first. Today, make sure you pay attention to that guiding feeling in your heart. Remember that God speaks to us in gentle nudges, and your conscience is one of His favorite tools.



NOV20

He Hears Our Cries

The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles.

—*Psalm 34:17*

There's an expression people have quoted from the depths of the sea to the far reaches of outer space for years. It originally comes from the extraterrestrial monster movie, *Alien*. The work is strongly fictional, of course, but the hero says something that rings very true in the real world: "In space, no one can hear you scream."

Of course, most of us will never visit the depths of the ocean or the far reaches of outer space, but it's still just as unnerving. The idea that we could be so grossly isolated and unable to call for help threatens our need for companionship and safety. No matter how unsettling the phrase may be, it's not true.

Our God is always with us. It doesn't matter if we're sent into orbit or sitting on our living room couch, His ears catch our prayers in each and every situation. Jesus went to incredible lengths to secure our place alongside Him in eternity and He will not abandon or forsake us under any circumstance.

Feeling alone can be scary. You can be truly isolated or feeling emotionally secluded, but you don't have to deal with those feelings alone. When you need support and guidance, our heavenly Father is only a word away.

Today, take heart in the fact that you have a constant companion. It doesn't matter what you're going through or where your travels take you, our loving God always makes time for His children and does all He can to keep us safe.



NOV21

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.

— 1 Peter 2:11

A World Driven by Pleasure

The laws of physics determine there must be an energy source to produce motion. Your car, for example, must have electricity or gasoline to travel. Your body needs proper nourishment before you can move around. Gunpowder and a fuse propel a cannonball. The world we inhabit is no different. To feed this spiraling, downward motion of our society, something must be driving the change.

Our world is one that is fueled by pleasure. People abandon their consciences for the now every day. Instead of fighting for a spot alongside God in eternity, they throw away their own value for sexual sins or the physical and emotional high offered by drugs and alcohol. It seems we can no longer see the repercussions of our actions, and instead we make decisions based on the sensations of the current moment.

This kind of world can be very dangerous to inhabit. Even Christians are not exempt from the temptation and influence that society offers. Indeed, the devil makes it easy to fall into routine and neglect our duties to God. Fortunately, Jesus can help us fight through this world driven by pleasure.

When we're reborn as new creatures in God, He fills a portion of our hearts that was previously empty. Humans try many things to fill that hole, such as drinking or casual sex, but nothing works. This longing is designed only for God and it presses us to get closer to Him with each day. Only when we close this gap are we relieved of our worldly temptations and fueled by love.

Today, see what is driving you. Is God your source of fuel, or are you trying to use other things to find happiness? If so, ask Jesus to renew your heart and mind for His purposes.



NOV22

Building a Home That Will Last, Part 1

*So this is what the Sovereign Lord says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who relies on it will never be stricken with panic."
—Isaiah 28:17*

There are three basic needs that must be met for our flesh to survive. We require food, water and shelter. These homes are an important part of keeping us safe, and are the only way we can survive spread across all regions of the Earth. We know the right materials and techniques must be used if we're to have homes that are sturdy and worth living in. The same is true for our spiritual homes: Without a proper foundation and structure, they are likely to crumble.

When building a home, the first step is to prepare the foundation. You must clear away the rocks and trees to reach the level ground. Then, the surface must be tightly packed to support the weight of the structure. This is the same concept Jesus uses to cleanse our souls when we are born again. He clears away the broken feelings and impure thoughts to dig down to our bare souls. Then He washes our souls clean and prepares them to hold grace.

After all the preparation, the foundation is laid. In homes, this structure is usually concrete or cinder blocks – strong materials that do not rot or yield to other forces. In our spiritual lives, the foundation is the Holy Spirit. It enters our hearts and creates a new desire for holiness. On this, we build the rest of our soul.

Today, check the condition of your spiritual foundation. Are there weeds and rocks trying to overshadow it? If so, clear away what is unnecessary, so your basis in God can stand strong.



NOV23

Building a Home That Will Last, Part 2

*You have been a
refuge for the poor,
a refuge for the
needy in their
distress; a shelter
from the storm and
a shade from the
heat. For the
breath of the
ruthless is like a
storm driving
against a wall...*

—Isaiah 25:4

Once your foundation is established through the Holy Spirit, what is the next step in building your spiritual home? You must frame your walls. This is a very important step for the final look and strength of a house, and it is vital for your spirit as well. Literal homes use wooden boards, but you need to shape yourself by reading the Scripture.

The Bible provides a living word to help us grow. It changes each time we read it, calling out to us in different ways and offering constant guidance. The more you learn about God's teaching and the history of Jesus, the easier it is for you to stay strong in your faith. When choosing a frame for a physical house, you want to select materials that will last. Likewise, it's crucial that you remain diligent and spend time in the Bible to keep your spiritual substructure from deteriorating.

After the walls comes the roof. For a Christian, we should cover our lives in prayer. We're instructed multiple times throughout the Bible to pray about everything and to do so without ceasing. When your life is formed under the cover of prayer, it is infinitely easier to keep out the weather, or impure thoughts and behaviors.

Finally, the walls and interior must be finished. We do this by building our testimony and offering an atmosphere of acceptance and love. You see, our spiritual abodes are not only meant to protect us, but also to draw other people to the grace of God when they experience that safety firsthand.

Today, check your frame, roof and walls. Each of them must work with the others and be maintained through an active relationship with Christ.



NOV24

*Let us come before
him with
thanksgiving and
extol him with
music and song.
For the Lord is the
great God, the
great King above
all gods.*

—Psalm 95:2-3

Giving Thanks

This month is a wonderful time to give glory to God! On Thanksgiving, we celebrate our gratefulness, and there is no one more deserving of praise than our Lord. Even though we are grossly undeserving, He made it possible for us to enjoy eternal life alongside Him in Heaven. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross should take precedence on this day, but there are so many more things for which to be thankful.

We should sing the praises of our Father because He is always with us. He guides us, even in the smallest decisions, looking out for our happiness and well-being. He makes sure we are never alone, whether we're feeling isolated physically or emotionally. Our Father created an entire suit of armor for us so we may face our challenges without fear. Truly, we are blessed beyond belief and loved beyond comprehension.

And still, there is more for which to be thankful. Although things are not always easy, we do not have to worry about the future when we are children of God. In addition to the spiritual preparations, He meets our other needs as well. There are miracles every single day, and He uses them to ensure His followers have the food and necessities to keep them safe.

We can give praise for our future, too. Once we leave this world, we'll have a permanent home in the Kingdom of God. We'll live in mansions and be free from pain and sorrow.

This month, give thanks! There are countless reasons why God deserves our gratitude and love, and Thanksgiving Day is a fantastic time to praise Him.



NOV25

Greed and Possessions

Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless.

*—Ecclesiastes
5:10*

SALE! During the holiday season, many people throw their manners and caution to the wind in favor of savings ... savings on possessions they likely don't need. It is a day fueled by greed and selfishness. There is nothing wrong with searching for a bargain, of course, but we must be extra careful to show restraint on this day.

Each year, sales are getting earlier and earlier. Greed is poisoning the holiday devoted to gratefulness.

If you're considering going to these sales, take time to pray to God first. Ask Him what He wants you to do with that time. How will you influence your family if you forsake time with them in search of lower prices? This is especially important to consider when you have young children, since they are so easily impressionable. Even our smallest actions can influence them in big ways, and as a Christian, Thanksgiving should be properly honored.

An alternative is to do your shopping online. You can avoid the angry crowds and long lines while spending more time at home with your family and friends. You can even complete your purchases quickly and quietly—the rest of your family doesn't have to know you "went shopping."

Today, carefully consider the effect your actions have on others. If you choose to join the shopping crowds, do so responsibly and with grace.



NOV26

Trusting What We Do Not Understand

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

— 1 Corinthians
2:5

The word “mystery” is used quite often in the Bible. The Apostle Paul, in fact, used it 21 times, just in his Epistles. It makes such a frequent appearance in the word of God for a simple reason: Many of the Lord’s methods and ways are far beyond human comprehension. Sometimes we can look to science for an explanation on His machinations, but other times we are left to wonder.

For some people, it’s hard to trust things they cannot understand. In fact, humans have an instinctive fear of the unknown and the surprises it can offer. Just think about the number of stories and movies written to speculate the things that live within the ocean or up in space. Even the Bible mentions monsters of the sea, such as Leviathan. We always assume the worst about what we cannot see or wrap our minds around.

Faith works in an opposite manner. We are instructed time and time again to put our trust in God and His ways, even though they are beyond us. This is a broad direction, and it applies to many aspects of Christian life (such as the creation of the universe). More often than not, what is least understood is an unfortunate circumstance. Car accidents, cancer and emotional injuries are experiences we don’t want to endure and we often question why we need to. These same events are part of a specific plan, however, and no matter how painful they are, we are not at liberty to question. We can’t fully comprehend His workings.

Today, just trust in God. Let your faith be the guide and hold fast to his promises, even when you’re hurting.



NOV27

Why We Should Be Happy for Tribulations

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

—Romans 5:3-5

Have you ever experienced true darkness? Not emotional darkness, but absolute lack of light? When you compare the inside of a cave, for example, to a starless night, you see how light “regular darkness” truly is.

The same is true for our spiritual lives. Unless we experience sadness, pain and disappointment, we will never appreciate what Heaven has in store for us. When God gives us tribulations, He isn't trying to hurt us. He is preparing us for the future. Each time we come through a trial, we are stronger emotionally, and we are stronger through our faith. When we know from experience that God will deliver us from our problems, it's easier to face the bigger issues with an even greater sense of confidence in His promises.

It's almost impossible to be thankful for pain and suffering, illness and death. Truly, it goes against the nature of our flesh and the workings of the world. But when you are a Christian, every trial can be an exercise in your commitment to your faith. Each new test only shows that the Lord has incredible plans for you. Remember, to launch an arrow forward, you must first pull it back.

Today, rejoice in the tribulations that our Father has given you. He is testing you because you are worthy, and because He must give you the strength and experience to fight your future battles. Pain is uncomfortable, but it is only temporary. Our encounters and resilience through God is forever.



NOV28

The Son of God and Man

But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

"I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

—Mark 14:62-63

We are taught consistently that this world and the world of God are incompatible. The Earth is a place of sin and evil, and the Lord is the epitome of love and perfection. So how is it that Jesus was the son of God and the son of man? That's precisely what makes His sacrifice for us so special.

Jesus was born of a virgin chosen by God, bringing Him into this world in the most perfect way possible as a man. Since He was conceived through Mary only, His conception was also divine. He is the only one to ever be born of both worlds. Adam and Eve were created from the dust of the Earth, and the angels were made in Heaven. Christ's unique life was the only one equipped to be of man, but also completely without sin.

There will come a time (or many times) in a Christian's life when they will be asked, "What think ye of Christ?" It's important that we are prepared to answer, but also that we believe what we say.

Christians, by definition, believe Christ was the true, living son of God and man. They know He was born to this Earth and that He led a life completely without sin (although not without temptation). They also know He is still alive, preparing a place for us in Heaven so we can join Him and the Father after death.

Today, ask yourself what you truly think of Christ. Do your beliefs line up with what the Bible tells us? Are you ready to share your thoughts with others?



NOV29

The Desire to Live

For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

—Hebrews 13:14

Within each of us is an inherent will to live. Our flesh is programmed to put self-preservation first in all things. Likewise, the soul has a desire to continue on. That is why even when people are worn thin from aches and pains in their old age, they are still not tired of living. God designed us with this desire for a simple reason: He wants the same thing.

We are His children, and just as any good father should, He desires to know us and spend time with us. Salvation and grace are the most wonderful gifts we can receive, because they give us the chance for our souls to carry on forever in the presence of God.

The reach of our desire is huge. No other creatures want such a thing, and yet we will go to the ends of the Earth in search of something to supplement the emptiness we are born with. But there is a reason this demand is so great within us: Nothing but the love of God can satisfy it.

Even with abundant possessions or money, we are not full. Drugs and alcohol offer some a temporary bliss, but it is not enough. Our desire to live and live fully is a brilliant orchestration of the Lord that ensures we cannot be completely happy without Him.

Today, rejoice in your desires and seek the one who can fulfill them. Know that your will to live indefinitely will be granted, so long as you believe in the miracle of Jesus.



NOV30

The Remedy to Guilt

*With it he touched
my mouth and said,
“See, this has
touched your lips;
your guilt is taken
away and your sin
atoned for.”*

—Isaiah 6:7

Guilt. It's an ugly word that describes an even uglier feeling. The emotion is defined as "the state of having done a wrong or committed an offense," and it can be such a powerful adversary to happiness.

Oftentimes our guilt is misplaced. The devil uses our vulnerability to tear us apart and fill us with doubt. Once it's inside, we tend to hide the guilt from others. It weighs us down, eats at our happiness and even our zest for life. In some cases, people are so overwhelmed with the suffering, they choose to end their own lives rather than continue to push through.

Whether it is deserved or not, guilt is a dangerous emotion. It can fester over time and completely change the way we think. Christians, especially, should be cautious about it. When we suffer through guilt, we're in essence denying Jesus' sacrifice. He died on the cross to forgive all our wrongdoings. Holding onto a specific mistake or choice means you're trying to make it greater than His death. But no sin is greater than the price He paid.

Focusing on guilt also steals the glory from God. The energy we use to feel sorry could be used instead to minister to those around us and offer the Lord the praises He deserves. He is much greater than any of our sins.

Today, remedy your guilt by strengthening your bond with God. Spend time in the Scripture and learn about the people whom Jesus chose. None of them was without shortcomings and sins and he does not expect us to be either. Accept the grace that is offered, and don't waste another minute in the past.





DECO1

Our Giving God

It feels good to give something to another person, doesn't it? There's a satisfaction that lights up our souls when we do right by others. This affinity to give to others is something that comes with a rebirth in Christ, and the reason is simple. Our God is a giving God, and we are called to be more like Him.

There is no force that is more generous than our Father. First, He gave us life by creating Adam from the dust. Then He gave us the Earth itself, allowing Adam free reign of the Garden of Eden and the food that grew within. When He realized that the first man was lonely, He gave Adam a companion, Eve, designed just for him.

God has a long history of simply giving to us, but the most important gift is His Son, Jesus. Can you imagine loving someone so much that you would send your only child to die for him or her? Our heavenly Father feels that way about us, and He made that sacrifice so that we could live with Him for eternity.

This month is a wonderful time to practice the art of generosity. There are many families less fortunate than your own. Taking the time to reach out to them can change their entire holiday season. Today, give something away to someone else. It doesn't matter if it's something as small as a compliment or as large as a car. Go forth and give with love in Jesus' name.

*And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming,
"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and
gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love
and faithfulness."*

—Exodus 34:6



DEC02

Finding Peace in the Busy Season

The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace.

—Psalm 29:11

December is one of the most wonderful months of the year, but it's also one of the most hectic. Sales are popping up everywhere. People are scrambling to finish their gift shopping and to make plans for Christmas and New Year's Eve. The roads and sky are bustling with families traveling to be with one another. It's a jovial sort of chaos, but it's chaos nonetheless.

It can be easy to get wrapped up in the seasonal pandemonium, but we should still take time to speak with God. After all, Jesus' birth is the true reason for the season. It's a great opportunity for us to spread generosity and goodwill to our fellow man, but we're still called to honor our Savior.

The great thing about our relationship with God is that He's always with us. At any moment, we can reach out to Him and ask some clarity and calm in our lives. Even if it's only a few minutes in prayer, the Lord can settle the mayhem in our hearts and minds. All that we must do is surrender to Him and allow Him the power to make changes within us. It's especially important to take a step back and reprioritize in busy times like these.

Today, take the time to create some calm in your life. Reach out to God and ask Him to pass a soothing hand over your mind and heart. There's nothing wrong with getting things done, but our priorities are clear as Christians: we need to continuously make time for our relationship with God and His purposes.



DEC03

A Cure for Everything (Turn to God With Troubles of All Sizes)

*The Lord is good,
a refuge in times of
trouble; He cares
for those who trust
in him...*

—Nahum 1:7

Many video games have health potions that the players can use. These magical little bottles instantly heal injuries, cure poisoning and more. Characters often keep a stock of them on hand and take a few gulps when needed. This kind of medicine is steeped in fiction, of course, but wouldn't it be nice if there were an equivalent to treat the problems of human nature in the real world?

Of course, that would be incredible. But what if this magical medicine was even stronger than that? Take a moment to imagine a cure for racism or greed. Picture a remedy that could end violence and anger with one swallow. Consider how this same incredible substance could toss drug addiction into the past. It's almost impossible to comprehend the implications that such a cure would have. Most incredible is the fact that such a cure exists—and we all have immediate access to it.

The Holy Spirit is ready to come into our hearts and make things new. A dose of grace is all it takes to flush the negative emotions and actions from our souls. Frequent dosing will keep the illnesses of our hearts from coming back. If everyone accepted this treatment, the world would be a new and wondrous place.

Today, take a dose of the cure if you need it. We all stumble at some point, and it's easy to fall into negative behaviors and un-Christian mindsets. Luckily, it's just as easy to self-medicate through a relationship with God.



DEC04

Putting Your Hope in the Right Place

*Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*

—Psalm 42:5

In this life, we hope for many things. Even when our souls have been purified in the Lord, our flesh has a natural desire to further itself in this world. We spend lots of time wishing for things that may be temporarily beneficial to us but don't actually matter in the end. Job promotions, buying a new car, a bonus at work, winning the lottery... all dreams that just about everyone hopes for. When we dump our energy into such daydreams, however, we're wasting force that could be better used elsewhere.

As a Christian, there's only one place that we need to direct our hope: God. He has promised to take care of us and to see us prosper, and that's all we need. When we daydream about things that could happen in our future, we're essentially telling God that we know more about what we need than He does—and that's never true.

There's nothing wrong with looking for opportunities, so long as you do so in moderation and don't let such pursuits take priority over your faith. Pray often for guidance in any pursuit, but, more importantly, trust that God will take care of your future and give you everything you need.

Today, remember to keep your hope in a prosperous place. Everything of this world will fade, but God's love and glory lasts forever. It's only through Him that we can have eternal life, and serving His will should always be our top priority.



DEC05

Experiencing Joy Across Realms

Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you.

—Isaiah 12:6

In our world, it seems that we're not allowed to be proud of our relationship with God. People love to celebrate the secular in grand and disproportionate ways. For example, we often throw monumental birthday parties when our children turn 16, and yet we offer no formal celebration if they become saved through Jesus? If you do choose to advertise your religion more strongly, people are quick to call you an "extremist" and say that you're taking things "too far."

What an unfortunate reality to deal with. Nothing on this planet can compare to the glory of God, and yet we're at risk of being ostracized by family, friends and colleagues if we take our salvation "too seriously." This shouldn't be too surprising, however. Our world is full of evil and sin. Satan uses this to his advantage. He tries to force ill feelings on us about sharing our faith with others. After all, the more people that we recruit for Christ, the fewer he gets to keep for himself.

You should never be afraid to fully display your faith, even when those around you do not agree with it. At the very least, your dedication to Jesus will be recognized. In some cases, seeing another person support Christ so passionately will spark curiosity in nonbelievers and encourage them to start asking questions.

Today, don't be afraid to show your joy across realms. The grace of God that makes your spirit happy can be praised in the flesh too. Show the world your favor for Christ and He will show his favor for you in front of the Father.



DEC06

Making Time for God

*Blessed is the one
who always
trembles before
God, but whoever
hardens their heart
falls into trouble.*

—Proverbs 28:14

The one thing that all Christians have in common is their belief in God. Even when opinions and backgrounds may differ, they come together through the Father. Unfortunately, there's something else that many of them have in common: a claim that they don't have time for God.

If you ask a Christian how often he or she reads the Bible or prays, you might not get a straight answer. "When I can" is an answer that many people fall back on. This is usually followed by "I'm just so busy with work" or a similar excuse. We get so wrapped up in everyday life that we allow the world to start pushing us away from Christ.

It's dangerous to not make time for God. You see, anything we do when we should be praying and reading the Bible is something we're putting ahead of the Lord. Even though it's almost always unintentional, we're still setting up idols.

As a Christian, you must make time for God. Research shows that you need to do something 21 to 66 days in a row for it to become habit. So that's what you've got to do with your time for Jesus. Dedicate a few minutes to prayer and Bible study each day. Even if you start out with 10 or 15 minutes, it's an important first step. Stick with it until it's a natural thing for you to have time for God.

Today, make time for Him. The next time that you're absently scrolling through Facebook or lost in the TV, stop entertaining yourself with the world and reach out for the Father instead.



DEC07

The Truest Justice

When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers.

—Psalm 21:15

Have you ever gotten a speeding ticket? Many people have. Citations for speeding are common. When these tickets bring us to court, however, a significant portion end up being thrown out. Usually the judge simply feels generous or thinks the speed violation is too small. We rejoice when something like this happens to us, but the truth is that it's inconsistent with justice. No matter how small the infraction, we owe something when we sin by breaking a law. Someone (whether it's us or another person) must pay the price.

Unfortunately, many people think that relaxing in the context of justice is showing love. Parents, for example, will let their kid do just about anything because they don't want to hurt the child's feelings by disciplining him or her. Although their hearts are in the right place, this can be a dangerous notion. If a child is taught that there are no consequences to breaking the rules, then why should he or she follow them in the first place?

God is an example of true justice. Each time that we sin, we deserve death. Although He loves us more than we can comprehend, God is just enough that He will follow through our punishment and give us what we deserve. However, Jesus came down and paid our fine, in essence. He covered our mistakes by giving His own perfect life, and when we choose to give our lives to Him we can escape the price of our sins in a fair and honest way.

Today, give thanks to our just God. Know that He will always rule with a firm but gentle hand.



DEC08

Overcoming Racial Tension

*Hatred stirs up
conflict, but love
covers over all
wrongs.*

—*Proverbs 10:12*

There's no question that we still face racial tension in our nation. Often, it's blown far out of proportion by the media, but it's important to know that there are some real instances of this problem. We Christians should never practice racial ideas, and we should do what we can to diffuse them when they come from other people.

Being racist goes against the Bible. Jesus didn't come and die on the cross to save only a certain group of people. He gave His life so that anyone who believes can have eternal life. He loves each and every one of us. No one person can gain more favor in His eyes than another. God doesn't play favorites either, and He doesn't care about our skin color or accent. Why should He, when He is the one who created our differences?

To combat racial tension, we must first remove it from our own hearts. We have to accept the fact that we are the same in God's eyes and that His grace is designed to fit anyone. Once we purify our own beliefs, we can begin ministering to others through love. Even the smallest acts of kindness can go a long way.

Today, make sure your heart is clean of any racist feelings. Give those emotions over to God, and let Him fill the space with love and acceptance instead. Also, take the time today to love someone who is a different race. It could be something as simple as a smile in passing or something more powerful like praying together. Reach out into the world with an open heart and open arms.



DEC09

The Age Limits of Grace

Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.

— 1 Timothy 4:12

For some reason, many Christians seem to think there's an age limit to grace. Perhaps they feel like the young cannot comprehend the weight of their decisions or that the elderly have wasted their lives. God's salvation is not designed just for one group of people. It is made to be accessible for anyone and everyone that desires it. In John 3:16, the Bible tells us, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Usually, our concerns about age do come from honest intentions, especially with children. We want to make sure they fully grasp the magnitude of their decisions and how they will change their lives. If anything, we should be encouraging to the younger generations who seek salvation. The sooner they come to God, the more time in their lives they'll have to offer to His cause. Children can provide a lifetime of service for the Lord.

Ultimately though, it doesn't matter what we think. God loves each and every one of us equally, and is just as thrilled for every new soul that joins Him. It doesn't matter to Him if they're a child at vacation Bible school or a senior on their deathbed.

Today, remember not to place age limits (or any other kind of limit) on grace. It is designed to reach across all situations and people. He brought salvation to us as a perfect opportunity for our imperfect lives.



DEC 10

Why Some Are Lost

"In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness, I will have compassion on you," says the Lord your Redeemer.

—Isaiah 54:8

Something that nonbelievers question often is how a righteous and merciful God could allow anyone to remain lost. After all, isn't He supposed to be all-loving and fair? The answer is yes. And it's because of these traits that some of His children remain lost to the world.

God gave us free will so that we would be able to come to Him by choice. If we served Him without another option, it would just be slavery (and that is the last thing that He wants). He loves us enough that He sacrificed His son for us, but also so much that He would rather see us walk away than to hold us against our will.

This isn't to say that He has not done everything in His power to prevent us from turning the other cheek. He sent His son to teach us how we should behave and treat one another. He crafted the Bible to function as our daily guide and offer instructions on being saved. He has made the way clear. We must only follow.

One reason why humans have a hard time understanding God's actions is that we cannot fully comprehend His nature. He is holy above all else, and cannot tolerate when sin is in His presence. Even though He cares for us so greatly, He cannot turn against the foundation of His being. He is also just. For the same reason, He cannot forgive us of our sins if we do not ask. Jesus accepted our debt on the cross, but we must give out lives to Him to receive this charity.

Today, say a prayer for those who are lost that they make the decision to come to God. Because following Him by choice is the only way.



DEC 1 1

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

— 1 John 5:14

The Power of His Hearing (How God Can Process More Than Our Most Advanced Technology)

What's the most powerful piece of technology you own? For a lot of us, the answer is our cell phone. It's able to make calls while texting, surfing the internet or even browsing Facebook. There's no secret that our intelligence is becoming more and more advanced every day. But even the strongest devices have their limits.

Conference calling is when several people are part of a single phone call. It's a wonderful substitute for in-person meetings, especially when large distances separate those involved. There is a limit, however, to how many people can participate. On our cell phones, the number is quite low. Usually about five or six total lines can join in a single call. Any more than that and the device or the network won't be able to handle the amount of data.

With that in mind, it is almost impossible to imagine the listening and processing power (so to speak) that God has. He has the capacity to hear, to understand and to respond to the prayers of every single person on Earth. Our technology is incredible, yes, but instead of a handful of conversations, He can manage billions! And in 6,500 different languages! Truly, the power of God is beyond our wildest imagination.

Today, give praise to our powerful Savior. Know that every prayer you utter is heard and understood by the creator of our galaxy. It is hard to comprehend, but His abilities serve as a reminder of the greatness of the One we serve.



DEC 12

“Why Me?”

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

—2 Corinthians 1:3-4

This month, we have already discussed how our righteous God can allow His children to remain lost. Another question that believers and non-believers ask is, “Why do we (especially those who have given our love to Christ) suffer?” Some people feel as though a fair and loving Lord would never allow for a world full of such pain, particularly for His followers.

The biggest thing to understand is that this world is not of God. Yes, He designed it and formed it to keep us alive, but the foundation of the planet is different from Him. The world is ravaged by sin and evil, and it has been since Adam and Eve partook in the forbidden fruit. Our heavenly Father, on the other hand, is the epitome of holiness and righteousness. The misfortunes of the world are not necessarily His will, but a side effect of the tarnished planet that we call home.

God also allows His children to suffer to make us stronger. He gives us what we can deal with (with His assistance, of course), and each time we triumph, it’s experience under our belts. We cannot hope to know the details of His plans for us, but we do know that previous victories prime us to overcome more in the future and to share our testimonies with others.

Today, do not worry about your suffering. Any pain on this Earth is only temporary, and God does not wish to hurt us. Once we accept His son as our Savior, we have a future in eternity without another ounce of suffering or discomfort.



DEC 13

A Finished Work

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

—John 19:30

There's something satisfying about completing a project, isn't there? We get to wrap up our hard work and take a look at our finished accomplishment. Usually there's a weight lifted from our shoulders too. Depending on the size of our task, sometimes we even use the opportunity to celebrate. However, the most important project that the world has faced has already been completed.

As Jesus hung suffering on the cross, He told us that His work was done. Those words were the last to leave His lips before He died for our sins. You see, His entire life was a project. He had to grow up from a young boy, face temptations and live an entire life without sin. The hardest part of His assignment, however, came at the end. He was betrayed by His own followers before being tortured and left to die. He fought against the grip of death, but ultimately, He knew that His purpose had been served and so released His spirit so that His flesh could die.

The completion of his work is the single most important thing in our lives. Without it, we would not be eligible for eternal life. However, that doesn't mean that all projects are meant to be finished. God's work in our hearts is something that never ceases. He must purify and guide us every single day as the tarnish of the world tries to take hold of our minds. Since this work is never done, Jesus will never cease building us up and refining our spirit.

Today, give thanks to God for all our projects. Rejoice in the finished ones, like Jesus' sacrifice, but also those assignments that take constant care. Know that the Lord will never leave a project undone, and so never forsake a child of His.



DEC 14

To Our Neighbors

The second is this: "Love your neighbor as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these.
—Mark 12:31

What is your definition of a good neighbor? Is it someone who lets you borrow his lawnmower? A friend across the street who greets you as you come home? Maybe you simply want someone quiet who keeps to herself. Every person has a different ideal type of neighbor, but Christians should always be the number-one selection.

The world is full of prejudices, especially against Christianity. Non-believers seem to have a poor view of us and the way we act. It is not entirely our fault, but we are partially to blame. For some reason, we have a tendency to congregate amongst ourselves only. When Jesus walked the earth He visited the hurt and the sick. The people that we would probably consider "trash" were the ones that He knew needed Him the most. God doesn't discriminate with His love, but unfortunately, we fall short sometimes.

To be a good neighbor, we must be good to our neighbors. God calls us to always offer a listening ear to them. We should love them greatly, no matter how different they may be than us. We should treat them as family, because we are all children of the Lord. That can seem like a pretty big task and in truth, it's impossible to do on our own. We have to first love God before we can love one another in the way that He intended.

Today, ask God to show you the ways of a good neighbor. Pray that He would open your heart to their pleas and that you'll be equipped to set aside any differences. And remember, neighbors are not just people who live in proximity to us. They are also all the souls that we encounter at work and passing down the street.



DEC 15

Stability and Steadfastness

He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is the key to this treasure.

—Isaiah 33:6

Have you ever missed a step or stumbled going down the stairs? It's a very scary feeling. Your heart usually jumps right into your throat. Your hands and legs will move wildly, instinctively, as you try to regain your balance. Sometimes, you cannot recover from the mishap and end up falling down entirely. Just the same, there are instances in life that leave us scrambling to keep our footing.

There are many events that can throw us off balance. It could be a car wreck, sudden medical expense or storm damage to your house. Other problems make us stumble even harder, like a death in the family or going through a divorce. The whole world is an unstable surface just waiting to make us falter.

What if you could always have someone there to catch you when you take a misstep? How much more likely would you be to keep your footing when you stagger if there was an extended hand waiting to grab you? For Christians, this isn't a daydream. It's a reality.

No matter how rough things gets, the Lord is always there to catch us. If we stumble, He'll take us in His arms and keep us upright. If we fall, He'll pick us up off the ground and set us back on our feet. He'll even tend to the cuts and scrapes we might have from crashing to the floor.

Today, don't be afraid if you stumble. Jesus is always there to catch us and even the worst events of this world are only temporary. His love and grace is forever.



DEC 16

A Throne Built from Grace (Compare the Materials That Man Uses)

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

—Hebrews 4:16

What do you picture when you hear the word "throne"? Of course, you see a grand chair, but, in your mind's eye, what is it made out of? The oldest throne room that we have discovered comes from Turkey. It was made of adobe, which is a building material created from mixing earth and organic material.

Throughout history, man has used a variety of other elements to build these grand seats. Wood was common for centuries, often covered in gold leaf and cushioned with velvet and jewels. As technology advanced, skilled blacksmiths carved thrones out of metal. They were intricately forged and heavy and made to withstand the test of time and to show the grandeur of the leader who sat on it.

Even the most beautiful of man's creations, however, cannot compare to the throne that is in Heaven. We do not know for certain what it looks like, only that the scene is more incredible than anything we can comprehend. But the throne itself... what is it made of?

Until we join the Lord in Heaven, we won't know for sure. What we do know, however, is that regardless of the physical material, the throne of God is made of grace. It is carved from love, justice and righteousness like our world has never seen. It is nothing but holy, nothing but pure and powerful. And thanks to the generous Lord who sits upon it, we Christians will get to experience it one day.

Today, remember that even the least glorious of God's possessions is better than the greatest of this world. However blessed you are now, it's merely a sample of what's to come.



DEC 17

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.

—Matthew 6:19

Dust to Dust (Possessions Mean Nothing)

What is your most prized possession? Some people are most proud of their cars. Others like to show off their houses. Cell phones, computers and collections of all sorts earn important places in our hearts. Placing this kind of emphasis on your possessions, however, is a poor decision.

Any time we praise something more than our relationship with God, that thing becomes an idol. Even though the Lord is righteous and loving, He is also jealous with His children. The worldly items that we cling to the hardest are the ones that are most likely to be lost as a result of His ire. We are even warned in the Ten Commandments not to make idols for ourselves.

Loving our material things is a waste of time too. The hours that we spend washing that car or redecorating that house are fine in moderation. After all, we still are inhabitants of this planet, even if it is only temporary. It is when we become obsessed with such actions and give them priority over our Christian lives that trouble starts. At that point, we're taking time we could be using for God and throwing it into the things of the world.

Today, do not let your focus be wasted on things of man. Everything that you own, including your body, was raised from the dust of the earth; and that is where these things shall return. Instead, place your emphasis on spiritual treasures. Build a relationship with God and reach out in His name—and then you shall find true riches.



DEC 18

Bringing our Problems to God

Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken.

—Psalm 55:22

Talking to figures of authority can be quite nerve-wracking. Usually it's someone like a boss or a principal—someone who has direct jurisdiction over you and who is entitled to make decisions to change your life. This sort of power makes them seem intimidating, but it also changes the way that we interact with them. Many times, we'll hide details or even blatantly lie to them because we fear repercussions. Ironically, God is the one with the most power and is still the one that we should trust the most and be the most willing to communicate with.

You see, there is nothing that we cannot come to God with. He orchestrates the entire universe, but He also cares for every feather on a sparrow. No problem is too big or too small to reach for His help. There's also nothing that we can do to make Him lose favor with us. He is the very definition of love, and He cares more about His children than anything else. So long as we believe in Him and in the sacrifice of His son Jesus, no deeds of the world can cause Him to stop loving us.

The Lord already knows our most intimate dreams and thoughts. He is fully aware of the situation, so there's no need to drum up an explanation when we are talking to Him. He knows every side and every detail, even before it plays out in our lives.

Today, don't be afraid to talk to the "boss." He wants a relationship with you. He's always willing to hear your problems and to help you solve them.



DEC 19

Truth Is Not Always Pleasant

Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.

—John 4:21

When we think of God, we should think of everything good. Everlasting love and far-reaching grace are just two of His countless qualities. Even our pictures of Heaven are filled with perfection. Many of us imagine fields of flowers and mansions of marble and gold. It's no wonder why we associate God with all things pleasant. However, the things that are best for us are not always easiest.

Tearing off a bandage hurts. The adhesive tears out our hairs (and even some skin, depending on the chemicals used). However, the wound beneath is able to breath better once the Band-Aid is off. The same is often true for the truth that God gives us: it's greatly beneficial, but not pleasant to endure.

This kind of truth comes in many forms, but most often, He works through our conscience. We have to be still and listen hard to catch such a gentle and quiet voice. Because of this, He knows that we are giving Him our full attention just to hear it. However, the softness of this guidance compels many people to ignore it—particularly when it comes to relationships and other temptations of the world.

Today, take time to listen for the truth, even if it's not what you want to hear. The Lord will always have your best interest at heart. It doesn't matter if you understand His reasoning or not—you need to obey God. Ask Him to provide you with veracity and to open your heart so that you may make the right decisions in His name.



DEC20

The Definition of Idolatry

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

—Exodus 20:4

This month, we've talked a lot about idolatry. That's because this time of year is far busier than usual and is often driven by desires for material things. The combination of these two factors creates a great opportunity for idols to find their way into our lives.

Before we can avoid idolatry, we have to understand what it is. It is having anything that comes between you and God. It doesn't matter if it's your family, career or favorite TV show—there is no justifying its importance, because nothing matters more than your relationship with God and His Son Jesus.

When you elevate something of the world ahead of your relationship with our Savior, it's a slap in the face to Him. Jesus sacrificed His life so that we would not be held responsible for our sins. He completely resisted temptation for more than 30 years so that His blood would be wholly innocent. Then He endured unimaginable torture. He was whipped and beaten—disgraced in front of the entire city—and yet He did not protest. He fought his way to Golgotha where He hung in the sun until His last breath faded away. Nothing that this world can offer has such value.

Today, remember to enter this holiday week with your priorities set straight. Give all of your love to Jesus first, and He shall purify it and return it to your family. Be thankful for the gifts that you receive, but know that they will return to dust in the end. Celebrate our Savior's birthday by making sure there are no idols competing with Him for glory.



DEC21

*I sought the Lord,
and he answered
me; he delivered
me from all my
fears.*

—*Psalm 34:4*

Dealing With a Storm of Anxieties

Worry is simply a part of human nature. Once our souls are purified through Christ, the flesh still remains anxious. It is understandable, since our world has pressured us immensely. This modern life is full of one worry after another, without ceasing. Sometimes the fears are personal, but sometimes they are for our nation. Even beyond that, we fear for the condition and safety of the world. Through this storm of anxiety, there's only one shelter that will work.

God promises that He will give us peace when we need it. We are told over and over again that He has an intricate plan for us and that our futures are secure. The Bible also instructs us not to worry and gives us the only other option that Christians should consider: turning to God. We should never try to find peace in the ways of the world, because this world is not made for peace.

Philippians 4:6 says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." It can be hard to let go of our worries, but this is a guarantee that they'll be taken care of.

Today, don't be afraid of the storm. It does not matter how many problems you are facing or how big each of your fears is. Our Savior can calm the raging seas of our anxieties, but He can also walk on water. Lean on Him, and He will not let you drown.



DEC22

Setting Goals

So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.

—2 Corinthians 5:9

We see many social media posts including the word “goals.” It began as a silly trend among the younger generation, but now millions of people are comparing their lives to one another to set these goals. Most of them are harmless and show respectable aims for the future, such as owning a dog or decorating your first house. Setting goals for this world is a good way to keep us motivated, but we have much bigger objectives too.

As a Christian, our number one goal is to love Jesus. We are meant to follow in His footsteps and become an outlet for his works. When we give Him our full attention and love, we’re able to purify our hearts and souls and become a new creation in His name. We can achieve this goal through time in the Scripture and by praying frequently and passionately. Each moment with Him makes us closer to God.

Another Christian goal is to love one another. This can only be accomplished with help from Christ. We must experience His great love and acceptance before we will be properly equipped to offer that same affection to other people. When we know Him intimately, He will work through us to touch this lost and dying world.

Today, think about your goals in Christ. If you don’t have any, it’s time to create some. If you do, ask yourself if you’re meeting your own expectations. Could you be working harder to grow in your Christian life? Remember, the only way to reach your goals is through diligence and hard work.



DEC23

The Greatest Giver

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

—Romans 8:32

What's the most precious thing that anyone has ever given you? If you're married, it may be your wedding ring. It could be a family heirloom that has been passed down for generations or something as simple as your favorite stuffed animal. In our lives, we experience a lot of wonderful presents from wonderful people. But there's one giver who is greater than all the rest.

Our means limit the value of our gifts. Sometimes, cost is the barrier that prevents us from offering the best presents. Other times, we may not know someone well enough to choose the right item. Sometimes, we run out of shopping time or aren't close to any good stores. There are countless reasons why we cannot give perfectly, even when we're trying. That's okay though, because there's one who can give superbly every time.

God knows exactly what's best for us when we call upon Him. In fact, He knows even better than we do what will benefit us in the long run. His power and grace are limitless and eternal, and ready for us to embrace. He hears us when we pray and will grant us blessings greater than we could even imagine. Trusting in Him is trusting in a future where we are provided for and endlessly loved.

Today, remember that you don't have to be the greatest giver, because you are guided and protected by one beyond our comprehension. During this holiday season, abundantly give the gift of prayer. Our Father knows what every soul needs.



DEC24

A Miracle Birth

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about...

—Matthew 1:18

It's always hard to sleep when something big is coming the next day, isn't it? Our minds wind up with excitement and end up spreading tension throughout our entire bodies. We toss and turn and usually don't get any rest at all. But even the biggest events of this world are still entirely insignificant in comparison to what God can do. Can you imagine the excitement that must have been flowing through Heaven the day before Christ was born?

Angels must have been chattering amongst themselves happily, perhaps leaning to get a view of Mary and Joseph's journey. The Father and Holy Spirit were probably busy finishing the final preparations, like ensuring that there would be room in the stable. The mansions and streets of gold must have been electrified with anticipation for this special birth.

Jesus was conceived unlike anyone before or since. He was created as the Son of God, but also the Son of Man. His mother, Mary, was a virgin at the time of His birth. She was like a young lamb, pure and innocent of the sins of the world. Because of this, she could give birth to a divine child... one who was human enough to pay for the sins of mankind yet holy enough to rise from the dead. This incredible orchestration was God's most wonderful gift to us.

On this Christmas Eve, give praise! Tomorrow marks the day when our Savior was born and the course of the entire world was changed forever.





DEC 25
- Christmas -

Digging for the Meaning of “Merry Christmas”

“Merry Christmas.” It’s a phrase that has been uttered countless times this month—and especially today. We use it as an expression to wish others well. The word itself is defined as “cheerful and lively,” and it only makes sense that it is what we should want for our friends and family on this holy day. Did you know, though, that the word comes from even greater meaning?

The word “merry” can be related to another word: “gallant.” These two terms share a similar Anglo-Saxon heritage. They were related to a much grander scale than simply to be happy. “Great” and “mighty” are derived from the same line. So what does this mean? Are we not supposed to enjoy ourselves on Christmas?

Of course we should rejoice! This was the day that the Savior was born—the day that led to His death on the cross so that sinful humans could enjoy a seat in eternity. Today is definitely a day for joy, but it’s also a day of grand truth. Jesus was the physical embodiment of God, and this is the day when He debuted in our world, thus proving the promise of God. This occasion is nothing short of great. It is incredible, beyond our very comprehension.

Today, tell your friends and family “Merry Christmas.” Tell them that today is a day of greatness—a day for joy, love and hope. Tell them that Jesus loves them and that through Him, all things are possible. Even everlasting life.

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.

—Matthew 2:11



DEC 26

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.

— 1 Corinthians 12:4

What's in a Gift?

Lots of people see the gifts as the entire reason for this season, but this is far from the truth. We know, of course, that our focus should be on Jesus. That is not to say, however, that the practice of gift-giving is bad. It is actually a great way for us to show our friends and family members that we care about them. Sometimes, it can even be a way to minister to the lost with feelings of kindness. The gifts that we give, however, must be carefully chosen.

It is a delicate balance to find as a Christian. We want to present our loved ones with something that they will enjoy, but we also do not want to put too much emphasis on material possessions; after all, even the most luxurious gift of this world can't last. When choosing a gift, it's important to meet with God in prayer about it.

Look for something that's an expression of love. One of the most common ways that Christians give to one another is by making homemade items. Sometimes, it's something edible—like cookies or jam. The present could also be something crafted, like a hand-painted sign or custom coffee table. Works like this are sentimental and do a wonderful job at conveying your feelings. They're also usually less expensive, which leaves more money to be spread around other ministries, like buying presents for the less fortunate.

Today, be thankful for the gifts that you have received, whatever they may be. Also, do not stop giving just because Christmas has passed—the world can benefit from generosity every day.



DEC27

The Bricks of a Broken Home

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

—Revelation 21:4

All across this nation, there are broken homes. This crumbling of families and relationships is one of our greatest social issues. It could even be argued as the base from which other societal problems have arisen. It's something that we have dealt with increasingly, but it seems as though most people are simply willing to accept the statistics as the "new norm."

Our homes are where we develop the foundation of our beings and personality. When we're raised in the glory of Christ, we know His word and will. When we're raised among sin and hatred, however, it becomes second nature to us. Children see divorce, fighting, cursing and drinking—and they assume that it happens in every family. They adapt to such habits quickly, and before long, those habits are deeply ingrained in the child's attitude. Once they're grown, these damaged and misled adults go out into the world and further spread the evil ways of the world.

The only way to fight against this plague of divorce and unhealthy relationships is to turn to God. We must study His word and pray together if we want to learn the errors of our ways. It's necessary that we put Him first, even in our marriage, so that He can show us the right direction. Broken homes make broken lives, but God is the healer of all things. It is with these new bricks in faith that the walls of your relationships may be repaired.

Today, check on the condition of your own home. Are your priorities in order? Do you set a good example for your loved ones? If you answer no, turn to the Lord for help quickly. He can heal the damage before it's too late.



DEC28

A World of Requirements

If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

—Romans 10:9-10

The world is absolutely full of requirements. In most cases, we have to earn a high enough GPA in high school to get into college. From there, we must work for our degree and present that diploma to get a job. Sometimes even that's not enough. Businesses will ask for experience or special skills too. And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

We need the right credit score to buy a house or a car. You're required to get a driver's license to be on the road, or a permit to hunt and fish. There are even restrictions for how short you can be to ride roller coasters! Everything, it seems, has a long list of "musts" before you can take part. The exception to that rule, however, is with your salvation.

To make it to Heaven, there are only two things we must do: believe in Jesus as our Lord and Son of God who was raised from the dead, and profess our faith to others. It's almost ironic that earning eternal life (which we can never hope to deserve) is so freely given to those who take God into their hearts. Isn't it amazing how wonderfully blessed we are?

Today, don't worry about the requirements of the world. It can seem pretty intimidating to try to make headway, but God will always provide for you. If you meet the requirements of salvation, your eternal future is guaranteed and all else becomes insignificant.



DEC 29

Our Instruction Manual

*Listen to advice
and accept
discipline, and at
the end you will be
counted among the
wise.*

—Proverbs 19:20

Any time you buy a new appliance or gadget, it comes with an instruction manual. It's a good thing too, especially when it's a piece of technology that you're unfamiliar with. Once you review the directions in the book, you'll be ready to use your new device much more smoothly. In the same way, God prepared the Bible for His children so that they may be ready to function in the world.

It's important to spend time reading the Bible, especially if you're a new Christian. This is the best way to learn not only about God's expectations for you, but also how He wants you to achieve them. Reading some Scripture every morning, for example, gives you a fresh boost of instruction to prepare you for the day.

The Bible also functions as a troubleshooting guide. We can learn a lot by simply reading through it, but there are specific verses we can turn to when a problem in our lives needs fixing. Going over the Word can give you strength, put your mind at ease, take away fear for the future and so much more. There isn't a single trouble for your soul that can't be treated by referring to the Word of God.

Today, refer to your instruction manual. Whether you need special guidance or just a daily touch-up, there's no better place to find what you're looking for than the Bible itself. Read through it, pray about it and let it work through your heart and out into the world around you.



DEC30

Preparing for a New Year, Part 1

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds

—Ephesians 4:22-23

It's almost time to embrace the new year. As we get older, each new year seems to go by faster than the one before. Surely this one has held its fair share of trials and triumphs for you and your family, but now it's coming to a close. The best way to prepare yourself for a new year is to mimic the process that God completed during your salvation. First, you must discard the old and cleanse your soul. Then, you can make room for the new blessings.

Ready yourself on this day. Search your heart and identify all the negative feelings hiding within. Find the hatred or guilt or anger that has built up, and give it all to God. Ask Him to relieve you of it so that the space in your heart can be filled with something greater. You should also seek to forgive anyone who has wronged you, no matter how painful it may be. If we are to be like Christ, we must forgive as He does.

This is also a good time to realize that the past is the past. There are important lessons that can stick with us, especially if they help to build your testimony, but many of the happenings of this year should be let go. We cannot make room for new memories if we are not willing to part with the old.

Today, complete this first step of preparation so that tomorrow, on New Year's Eve, you can be ready to start the new year fresh.



DEC 31

*...and to put on
the new self,
created to be like
God in true
righteousness and
holiness.*

—Ephesians 4:24

Preparing for a New Year, Part 2

Today is the last day of December and this year. Yesterday, we worked to eliminate the turmoil from this year that had latched onto our hearts. After all, you must clear a garden before you can plant it. Now, we are going to focus on planting the seeds of God into our hearts so that this new year can be fruitful in the spirit.

The first thing to do is to pray to God. Ask Him to refresh the Holy Spirit within you and make your spirit and mind ready for His purposes. Tell Him to take control over your life and to provide you with guidance today, tomorrow and for the entirety of the next year.

Next, you must spend time in the Word. The best way for us to grow spiritually is to study the Bible. We find instruction, hope and problem solving throughout all chapters of the Book. In fact, God uses this to speak to us more often than any other platform. Make an effort to spend a few minutes reading His Word today, and it will soon become a habit that you can use every day.

Today, be ready to take on this new year! Know that God will be with you every step of the way, and that each time you ask, He will refresh you and cleanse your soul. It is impossible for our flesh to turn away from thoughts and temptations of the world, but if you run to Him, He will wipe them away as often as you need. So go into the new year remembering that you are a new creature in salvation and face the world with hope and faith.

