December 2021

Luke 18:1

Pray Always and Never Give Up
Prayer for Persecuted Church

Pray for those in the midst of persecution

Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. Hebrews 13:3

Global watchdog Open Doors reports that 322 Christians are killed every month for their faith while millions more suffer persecution on a routine basis.

Please pray that these believers will not only stay committed to the call of Christ but also will respond in love to the evil shown by their aggressors. God’s love will open doors for these believers to share the Gospel even more.

This Month’s Countries, these are some of the most dangerous countries to follow Jesus:

- Kuwait
- Kenya
- Comoros
Daily Prayers for December: “If we could condense all the truths of Christmas into only three words, these would be the words: ‘God with us.’ We tend to focus our attention at Christmas on the infancy of Christ. The greater truth of the holiday is His deity. More astonishing than a baby in the manger is the truth that this promised baby is the omnipotent Creator of the heavens and the earth!” - John MacArthur

Wednesday, December 1st: Tis the season to be jolly, and we have much reason to rejoice even if there are circumstances that could tarnish some of what we think should be a part of this time of year. The song may tell us it’s the hap-happiest time of the year, but with supply chain disruptions, runaway inflation, a virus that just won’t go away, and once trusted institutions doling out information that we just can’t believe, some of us may feel like happiness is rather elusive. And in truth, it can be. You see, happiness is situational and temporal. It’s dependent on our circumstances and how we interpret them. Joy on the other hand is foundational and eternal. When we focus on the roots of this season – remembering and celebrating the reality that God became man, Jesus the Son in the form of an innocent and vulnerable baby – we will discover the true wonder and joyfulness we can experience in spite of anything happening around us. This too shall pass is more than just a cliché to somehow get us through the rough spots. This earth is merely prep school. When we latch onto the reality of why Jesus chose to humble Himself and leave the riches of heaven in order to secure an eternal home for us, it’s a game changer. And that’s when we can honestly and enthusiastically proclaim “Joy to the world!”

John 3:16-17; Colossians 3:1-4; 2 Corinthians 4:18
Thursday, December 2\textsuperscript{nd}:  Take up your cross and follow me. There are several places in the gospels where Jesus tells us to take up our cross and follow Him (Luke 9:23 “... And He said to them all, If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me”). When I’ve heard sermons about these verses or read them on my own, the focus has always been on denying ourselves and taking up our cross, rarely on following Jesus.

Recently my husband and I experienced a move and drove from the California central coast to Arizona. He led the way with a 15 ft. U-Haul, and I followed in our jam-packed Toyota. I need to interject at this point that my husband and I have very different driving styles. He is cautious and rather slow, and I zip right along with the traffic and then some! So, when we made the plan to move ourselves, I was dreading the drive. On top of that, we had to unload the truck ourselves into a storage unit once we arrived in Arizona (the drive is usually 8 hours).

What an amazing thing the Lord taught me through this! The drive turned out to be almost stress-free for me. True, I was following the U-Haul for about 9 hours, and going much slower than I’m accustomed to, but I couldn’t believe the peaceful feeling I had. There was no stress as I simply kept my eyes on the U-Haul and followed. I enjoyed the view more, and the slower pace allowed me to reflect. I also did not feel the anxiety I sometimes experience in my unfounded need to get ahead or drive competitively.

Are you catching the spiritual lesson? Instead of forging ahead on our own path, thinking we have the best route, the best speed, the best maneuvers for our journey in life, we learn to simply follow Jesus, keeping our eyes on him, not worrying or comparing ourselves with others or the path God has chosen for them. When we lay down our pride and depend on God to lead us, we find such sweet peace, and often encounter exciting adventures! Let’s ask the Holy Spirit to convict us when we get ahead of Jesus or when we pull over to a rest stop when He’s still moving. Let’s follow Him!
Friday, December 3rd: In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus calls on us to be salt and light. There are so many things that can be drawn from these two metaphors. First, salt was used as a preservative and to add savor to food. It can also be used as a disinfectant or to remove certain stains from clothing or cooking utensils. Even after it loses its saltiness, it can be thrown on a path to prevent the emergence of unwanted weeds. We should strive to never lose that which makes us distinctive, imparts healing, adds flavor and interest, and guards against decay. *Let there be light* are the first recorded words of God in Genesis 1:3. His very first act was to dispel darkness. Jesus Himself, who came to defeat the darkness, is called the Light of the world. When we look at some of the characteristics of light, we see that it is essential for growth, promotes healing, can direct our steps, and keep us from stumbling or straying, and can promote a feeling of general well-being. This is what the Light of the gospel – the Father of lights – His light shining through us can bring to a dark and dying world. Be the salt and light!

Matthew 5:13-16; 2 Corinthians 4:1-6; Isaiah 9:2
**Saturday, December 4th:** One of the problems with being so familiar with the Christmas narrative is that we can easily skim over portions without ever giving them serious thought because we know the ending and the central focus. Absolutely of prime importance is the birth of our Savior, but God has placed such richness in His message, and He has many things for us to glean if we’ll look beneath the surface. Our son was recently married, and in the vows, they had written they both pledged their commitment to one another to remain faithful and to never give the other reason to doubt. I can’t even imagine the anxiety each would have experienced if just prior to the ceremony our son would have learned that his betrothed was pregnant, and his future wife tried to explain to him and all of their friends and family that it was all God’s doing! Joseph had to have felt betrayed and humiliated, and he was undoubtedly concerned with what others would think and say about him… about Mary. At the same time Mary was grappling with all these issues. She had to wonder what Joseph was thinking and whether he would ever be able to truly trust her again. How do you suppose the good citizens of Nazareth were treating her once her condition became evident? But Mary chose to put her full confidence in God’s promise; she more than anyone knew the truth of what was happening, and she was willing to endure the shame because she had already surrendered to His purpose. Saying yes to God entails that kind of surrender. We rejoice at the wonder of redemption through new birth, but we also must embrace the reality that it leads to a cross where a death to the flesh must occur. I need to personally ask myself daily where my focus is – on my reputation or His ultimate plan. Lord, teach me to live out the declaration of the old hymn “I Surrender All.” All to You may I freely choose to give.

*Philippians 2:5-8; Luke 9:23-24; Galatians 2:20*
Sunday, December 5th: There’s a gift that we can give to virtually anyone – one size fits all. You would be hard pressed to find someone who wouldn’t like to receive it, and it will cost you absolutely nothing. It’s what draws us to God – “The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: ‘I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you you with unfailing kindness.’” (Jeremiah 31:3) It’s His unfailing kindness, His chrēstotēs. The Biblical definition is moral goodness, benevolence, desiring to do good to others; and it’s the opposite of being harsh, sharp, or bitter. In his book Life is Messy author Matthew Kelly refers to it as beautiful kindness, “whether it is the thoughtfulness of a random act of kindness or the heroic kindness that involves great personal sacrifice.” So, I’ll concede that the latter will cost us something, but our capacity to sacrifice will be birthed and nurtured in our daily choices to bless others through simple thoughtful acts – opening the door for the mother with three small children in tow, stopping in the parking lot to thank a member of the armed services, or simply making eye contact with others and smiling broadly. These are ways to show the love of Jesus and His awareness of and love for every person on the face of the planet. And every one of those people carries a burden of some kind, whether it’s big or small, obvious or deeply buried beneath a stiff upper lip. Having someone acknowledge them and show kindness may have a greater impact than you could ever imagine. And on those days when your own burden seems painfully heavy, lifting the spirits of someone else may be a powerful antidote for your own despair. Don’t ever let what you can’t do interfere with what you can. Give a gift that keeps on giving.

Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:12; Jeremiah 9:24; 2 Corinthians 1:3-5
Monday, December 6\textsuperscript{th}:  A SWEET SOUND: I hear a sweet sound. It is the sound of praise rising to My throne room. Your praise is your weapon against all that would come against you and detour your day. Praise Me continually and you will find joy rising from within and bringing you strength to face any challenges. When you praise Me, I send My angels to work on your behalf. Praise opens the door to victory. I love your praise and I inhabit the praises of My people. Your praise is like sweet smelling incense. When you praise Me, the sound of your voice releases your love and adoration to Me. The sweet sound of praise coming from your heart opens the door to My presence. In My presence your soul finds release from the cares of this world. When you praise Me with your whole heart, I am there in your midst. Draw near to Me and I will draw near to you. I will say: Lord, “Because Your love is better than life, my lips will glorify You. I will praise You as long as I live, and in Your name, I will lift up my hands.” Psalm 63:3-4 Lord, You are clothed in majesty. I give You my heart. You are wonderful and I exalt Your Holy name. “I will extol the Lord at all times; His praise will always be on my lips.

Psalm 34:1; Psalm 103:20, 22:3b, 141:2, 34:9, 93:1; James 4:8
**Tuesday, December 7th:** It’s hard to believe that it’s been 80 years since the bombing of Pearl Harbor! I wasn’t even alive then, but it still has a powerful impact on me when I see images of the deadly surprise attack that peaceful Sunday morning at the naval station in Honolulu, Hawaii, killing 2,043 Americans and injuring 1,178 more. Up until this point the United States had been neutral, but within hours of the attack Canada became the first western power to declare war on Japan and the U.S. followed suit the next day. In a sense, we were attacked “while we were sleeping” not only because of the time of day but because we underestimated the capabilities of the enemy, and our focus was on other places that an attack seemed more imminent and feasible. Moreover, there were intelligence indications that there could be cause for concern, but we had not been proactive in maintaining the level of technical knowhow or staffing that might have prepared us to better defend ourselves. Right now, we are in another war against a ruthless enemy that is using tactics that are trying to run under the radar. And we’ve been lulled into complacency while the deadly arsenal is being forged right under our noses. His strategy has been to appear diplomatic and willing to compromise, but it’s all deception. We can’t afford to wait until the battle is dropped into our backyard with devastating consequences. We need to be awake and alert, shoring up our defenses and updating our weaponry. We need to be a people on our knees, fully aware of the enemy and actively seeking the sure leadership of our Commander. He has given us everything we need to stand firm against the attacks and to defeat our adversary, but we won’t do it in our sleep. Father, we know our adversary is walking about as a roaring lion, but he’s only trying to intimidate us into surrender. Remind us that You are the Lion of Judah; You’re on our side as long as we’re on Yours, and no weapon formed against us will prosper.

*Ephesians 5:6-15; 1 Peter 5:8-10; Isaiah 54:17*
**Wednesday, December 8th:** We read in Proverbs 29:18, “Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained, but happy is he who keeps the law.” Some versions read the people perish, and vision (*chazon*) is actually referring to a revelation of God’s will through His prophets or teachers of the word. We are not devoid of having access to His will and word being proclaimed, but there is a dwindling percentage of the population seeking it out or even being willing to listen to it. In fact, much of the vision or revelation is met with derision and condescending attitudes. The evidence is quite apparent in the lack of restraint we see all around us. If only they could see, truly see, where it’s leading them. If only there was someone willing to risk the ridicule because they had compassion rather than contempt for the ones who are perishing and are oblivious to their fate. How fortunate for those of us who know the truth and are striving to honor Him in the manner in which we conduct our lives! The Message expresses it this way – “If people can’t see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; but when they attend to what He reveals, they are the most blessed.” We are the ones who should be displaying the evidence of what God is doing through our lives. We are His prophets – His mouthpieces. How can we denounce their behavior, their stumbling, and their missteps, when in all reality they’re blind? We’ve been called to be a city on a hill. “Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill.” (MSG Matt. 5:14) It’s time for us to step up and be the light, to cast the vision that will set people free and restore our country to God’s Technicolor design.

**Romans 10:14-15; Isaiah 61:1-3**
**Thursday, December 9th:** Growing up in the Midwest, the Mississippi River was a very big deal. It’s the second longest river in the United States and it is a huge provider for the U.S. economy. It reportedly accounts for 92% of the nation's agricultural exports and 78% of the world's feed grains and soybeans. From its humble beginnings in Lake Itasca, it steadily gains strength from the many tributaries that feed into it. Some of these are quite noteworthy on their own – the Ohio, the Missouri, the Illinois, the Arkansas, the Wabash, and the Red River – but it’s when they flow into the mighty Mississippi that their full impact and potential is realized. And these have their own tributaries which feed into them. Think of the body of Christ as the Mississippi and individual churches as the tributaries. It is at its greatest strength when all the other rivers and streams are joining in with it. You wouldn’t fill a bucket of water from mouth of the river and expect to be able to identify which parts of the water were from the Missouri River versus the Ohio or the Illinois. They merge to become one integral body, and as such there is a multiplication of their potential to achieve so much more than they would be capable of independently. Part of the definition of a tributary is owing obedience or paying tribute to a sovereign. When His universal church understands that our part is to be a tributary, each adding our unique attributes and strengths to a larger entity with a common destination, the possibilities are exponentially greater than what we could achieve alone. And we all should be in obedience and paying tribute to our Sovereign King. Let the rivers flow!

Isaiah 43:19; 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 11-13; Romans 12:4-5
Friday, December 10th: ANGELS ARE WATCHING: Jesus gave His life as a ransom for many. “But to all who believed Him and accepted him, He gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:12). My children, I have not left you helpless in a fallen world. I have sent you the comforter, the Holy Spirit to lead you and guide you into all the truth. I am for you and not against you. I am the light that shines in the darkness. As the world seems to grow darker, I am your salvation from the darkness. You are in this world, but you are not of this world. Your battle is with the unseen spirit world. "For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12) The battle is not yours to fight alone. I am always with you, and I will fight for you. The victory is yours, but the battle is Mine. Your spiritual enemy wants to intimidate you with fear. Fear is a weapon the enemy uses to get you distracted from My power. The enemy cannot stand against My word. My word is a sharp two-edged sword that pierces the darkness. My word is living and active. I declare that you are more than a conqueror when you use the word as your weapon against the enemy. When you speak My word, I send angels to watch over My word and perform it. I say, “Fear Not”. Know this My dearly beloved: “I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you." (Luke 10:19)

Matthew 20:28; John 16:13, 8:12, 15:19; Romans 8:31, 37; Joshua 1:9; 2 Chronicles 20:13; Hebrews 4:12; Psalm 103:19-22; Isaiah 41:10
Saturday, December 11th:  It started out as an ordinary night, probably pretty much like every other night for the shepherds outside Bethlehem. How could they have ever imagined the miraculous, life-changing sequence of events that were about to unfold? It began with the appearance of one angel standing before them, and then they were surrounded by the glory of the Lord. Their initial reaction was terror, but the angel reassured them and then shared the amazing news of the birth of their Messiah. And suddenly a multitude of angels surrounded them praising God. We don’t really know how long the angels hung around, but once they left, the shepherds immediately went to Bethlehem to verify the story, and once they had done that, they told everyone they saw about it. And everyone who heard it marveled. Although none of us were personally present at the announcement, we all have that same story to tell. How often do we actually share it? If we are truly as convinced and amazed as the shepherds were with this wonderful news, we should want to share it with others, and who knows but that they too will marvel. People are more likely to attend church at Christmas than any other time of the year. Start asking Him who He wants you to share the joyful news with and invite them to the Christmas Eve service so they too might experience the wonder.

Luke 2:8-19; Isaiah 6:8; Mark 16:15; John 4:35-36; Acts 2:39
Sunday, December 12th: I love the fact that our church chose the name Pure Heart. That should be the desire of everyone who calls themselves a follower of Jesus. Unfortunately, we don’t hear much about purity in our culture; in fact, quite the contrary would be true. Immorality and sensuality are not only accepted but are promoted as being natural and the idea of purity is viewed as being quaint at best. But regardless of what the culture may be telling us, purity matters to God so it should matter to us as well, no matter what age we are. It’s something that encompasses every aspect of our lives: what we watch; what we listen to; how we act, speak, and dress; and what we tolerate or dismiss as being not “that” bad. We can’t very well bemoan the lack of wholesomeness in the next generation and point an accusing finger at the influence of society if we’ve sat idly by as they became immersed in it, or worse, we’ve been sending mixed messages through our own behavior. We can’t expose our eyes and ears to impurity and expect to have pure minds. We can’t produce righteous living if our hearts and minds have been polluted. Purity and righteousness are an outcome – the byproduct of spending time in the word and falling in love with the author. The greater our intimacy with Him, the more our hearts and minds will be transformed into His image and a life of greater purity with come from the inside out. Father, forgive us for times when we’ve been too permissive in what we allowed into our lives; help us to guard our eyes, our ears, and our minds against the entrance of anything impure or unholy.

2 Timothy 2:20-22; Psalm 51:10-12; Proverbs 4:23-27
Monday, December 13th: There would be little argument that we’ve needed to learn some adaptive skills in the last nineteen months. We’ve been faced with challenges that were different from anything we’ve experienced in the past. Wearing masks in public places was mandated, schools were closed, churches were considered non-essential, businesses that had been around for decades closed their doors, toilet paper was rationed, our borders went from porous to wide open, and divisiveness and lawlessness became more and more commonplace. Many have longed for the return of comfort and convenience, and when that has not been as forthcoming as desired, they’ve resorted to complaining and criticizing. As Christians, what should our response be? Maybe God is asking us to be set apart – consecrated – in order to develop a deeper conviction about what we believe and why we’ve been allowed to go through this refining period. Maybe the comfort and convenience have lulled us into a complacency that is keeping us from becoming everything we were created to be. Change is seldom comfortable or easy, but it’s the only way to be refined. Refining is a process, sometimes involving intense heat, but the purpose is to remove impurities to produce a purer form in order to improve something to make it more effective or valuable. This is what God’s desire is for us and it should be our desire as well. Lord, give us open hearts and minds to accept the process of consecration and purification. We choose to humbly yield to Your purpose behind the disruption. Change our hearts.

Psalm 66:10-12; Proverbs 17:3; 1 Peter 1:6-7
Tuesday, December 14th: On a recent walk a friend and I noticed an animal had burrowed under the sidewalk just a foot or two from a tree. This particular tree, incidentally, was on Pure Heart’s campus by the children’s building. Immediately we were aware of this rodent’s nefarious plan – hidden underground it would feast on the roots of a healthy tree and damage it. I did a little research and discovered that they usually go after the tap root which is the main artery for the tree; the smaller roots branch off from the tap root, but once it is attacked the tree is not only weakened, but it can even die. This reminded us of how the enemy likes to operate. He likes to go after us where it will do the most damage, but he also like to operate subversively, and he knows that younger trees are still in the process of developing their root system and consequently are more vulnerable. This is true of both literal children and of those who are spiritually young. That’s why it’s so important for us to be mindful of the enemy’s schemes. We need to be on the lookout for signs that he’s in our territory, we need to be proactive in establishing barriers to protect ourselves and those in our “family”, and we need to teach practical skills to combat his attacks. Lord, keep us alert to the devil’s schemes, teach us to use every tactic you have made available to us to defend against and to actively defeat him, and remind us to continually be teaching all Your children to do the same.

Proverbs 22:5-6; Deuteronomy 11:18-21; James 4:7-8; Ephesians 6:10-18
Wednesday, December 15th: There are a lot of misconceptions about prophecy and its role in the modern-day church. Many associate it with strictly predicting future events, and that is definitely one of the aspects of prophecy, especially in the Old Testament where there are in the neighborhood of 350 prophecies relating to Jesus that have been fulfilled! But there is more to prophecy than foretelling what is to come. In a broader sense, prophecy is hearing a word from the Lord and repeating what He has said with the goal to edify and encourage the one or ones to whom it is directed. Handling accurately His word is a weighty responsibility and should always be taken very seriously. A true prophet would not be self-focused or seeking personal recognition. This is why I always have a personal check in my spirit when someone loudly proclaims, “Thus saith the Lord!” In fact, often I think quite the opposite is true; the one to whom the word is given may have a certain degree of hesitation, and that’s not a bad thing. If we feel the Holy Spirit has given us a word for someone, we need to first make sure it lines up with the Word and then we might ask Him for a little confirmation. If it truly is from Him, He will honor your sincere desire to honor Him. We’ve all probably heard stories of those who have approached someone with “a word from the Lord” that was discouraging, not in line with Scripture, or so weird it made you want to run in the opposite direction. James Jones the Kool-Aid king presented himself as a prophet and duped over 900 souls to drink a flavored concoction laced with valium and cyanide and they lost their lives as a result. This, however, should not cause us to shy away from prophecy, or to throw out the baby with the bath water. The apostle Paul urged the Corinthians to earnestly desire spiritual gifts, but especially that they would prophesy. Heavy responsibility, but what an amazing privilege to have God trust you to be His instrument of encouragement, instruction, comfort, or possibly grace filled conviction in the life of another. The truth is all Christians can hear from God for the purpose of edifying others even though not all have the gift of prophecy. Just like not everyone is an evangelist, yet we are all expected to share the gospel when He presents us with that opportunity. And whenever someone gives you a word from the Lord, ask Him to confirm it. So Holy Spirit, we are asking you to give us ears to hear and hearts to desire Your gift of prophecy. Sharpen our senses to discern when You are prompting us to share Your heart’s message with others and give us the confidence to follow through in a manner that will resonate with them and will bring honor to You.

1 Corinthians 14:1-5; 2 Peter 1:20-21; 1 John 4:1
**Thursday, December 16th:** As a child I remember the anticipation by this time of year as to what would be waiting for me come Christmas morning. Sometimes what I was hoping for would be very realistic and attainable, other times not so much. I never did find a pony under the tree. But more often than not there would be one of my wishes neatly wrapped waiting for me. As I got older and more savvy, I came to realize that just wishing for something wasn’t enough. If there was something I truly wanted, it meant I had to come up with a plan as to how I would be able to attain it. It was going to involve some effort and sacrifice on my part. If you desire to be promoted at work, you don’t sit at your desk every day and hope that your boss gets the message and acts on it. Instead, you apply yourself to every task at hand and you verbalize to the powers above you what your aspirations are. As a Dusty Springfield song from the 60’s went, “Wishin' and hopin' and thinkin' and prayin', plannin' and dreamin’…” about getting the affections of someone wasn’t enough – positive and intentional action was required. The same is true of our freedom and the Christian values upon which our country was founded. As President Reagan stated, “Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was once like in the United States where men were free.” We were founded upon Biblical values according to a Christian worldview. This is the basis of our standards, but we have been idly standing by and watching them erode for several decades. We absolutely must be on our knees petitioning our Father to intervene, but we are His body. He chooses to work through us, and that means we don’t lie in bed and hope we’ll find a pony under the tree, nor do we sit at our desk and wish for a better job if we’re not being diligent in performing the one, we’ve been given. Be realistic about what we’ve forfeited and what we must regain if we’re to continue to honor God with the blessings He chose to shower on us as a nation. Then ask Him to show you what He wants you to do to reverse the tide, ask for His Spirit to direct and empower you, and demonstrate your trust in His direction by acting on what He reveals to you. Our hope and our future depend on it. This is on our watch. *Isaiah 1:16-26; 1 Peter 1:13-15; James 1:22-25*
**Friday, December 17th:** WHISPER MY NAME: Come into the secret place. I am calling you to come closer in My presence. Come to the secret place and abide under My covering. I know you have a longing to be filled deeply with the joy of knowing Me. I am walking with you daily and ordering your steps. I am just a whisper away. Just call out My name “Jesus” and enter into My presence. Lean completely on Me and I will give you peace and I will give you strength. In My presence you are filled with the Holy Spirit. When you go out from My presence you will go out with joy. The joy of our friendship will sustain you each moment as you walk with Me. Listen to My voice and don’t follow the voice of a stranger. I have given you the mind of Christ and filled you with wisdom and understanding through My word. Your obedience to My word opens new doors for you. When I open doors, no one can shut them. I have given you spiritual eyes and ears to discern what the spirit is saying to you. Follow Me and I will lead you in the way I have prepared for you. The plans I have for you will be a joy to your heart. Seek Me with your whole heart and you will find Me. I am waiting for you to come into the secret place. It is here that you will find the joy that the world cannot give. “He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the almighty.” Psalm 91:1

Saturday, December 18th: We can get so concerned with maintaining the status quo that we miss out on the tremendous possibilities of what more there could be. It hinges on whether we’re self-focused or God focused. Where is our treasure found? King Herod had done a very efficient job of orchestrating and securing a position for himself as king of Judea, but he was never able to win acceptance with the Jewish population. Nevertheless, he consistently sought ways to subtly manipulate or brutally control those who opposed him. In fact, he was so obsessed that he became paranoid about losing total control of his realm that he murdered members of his own household. Needless to say, when three magi arrived from the east seeking directions to the new king who had been born, Herod was more than a little unhinged. Little is actually known about these three men, but the term magi suggests that they were most likely from a religious sect, possibly in Southern Arabia, where astrology and the interpretation of dreams were practiced, and the prediction relating to Israelite messianic expectation dating back to the Queen of Sheba may have been what set them on their quest. The important factor is that they were in search of truth. In His sovereignty, God had allowed them to see the star and they were willing to leave behind whatever comforts they had at home to set out on an uncertain voyage in order to confirm what they believed the star represented. Once they found the Christ child and had worshipped Him, confirming what they had believed about Him whom they were seeking, God warned them in a dream to return home by a different route, avoiding revealing the truth to Herod. After all, his search was not for truth but for dominion. Let us approach the babe in the manger with hearts that are willing to see Him as our true King, humbly offering Him our finest gifts, and placing greater value on finding His truth than preserving our illusion of being the masters of our fate. “King forever, ceasing never, over us all to reign.” (verse 2 - We Three Kings of Orient Are)

Psalm 25:5; John 1:12-14; Romans 8:5-8
**Sunday, December 19th:** We are told that the Berean Jews were more noble-minded – *eugenesteroi* – than those in Thessalonica. So, what exactly does that mean? It tells us they were more open-minded toward the truth; they weren’t prejudiced or suspicious of others whose ideas challenged their own, but they were willing to give them a fair hearing. When Paul and Silas shared the gospel with them, they received it eagerly and then went home to search the Scriptures for themselves to verify what they had heard. In both cities these were the religious crowd – those who had been hearing teaching from their holy writings – yet their responses were quite different. How do we respond? Are we offended when what we hear doesn’t line up with our preconceived ideas? Do we close our ears and our minds and begin to find fault with those who challenge our traditions? We would be comfortable in Thessalonica. Or maybe we get our ears tickled by new ideas and readily buy into them because we’ve heard that those who are delivering the message have impressive credentials or their delivery is smooth, and their message sounds conducive to fitting in with our personal preferences. According to Proverbs that’s being naïve and lacking sense. Our aim should be to emulate the Bereans, testing the spirits and determining if what we are hearing lines up with the Word and then asking the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth. God is still in the business of doing new things, and none of us is beyond receiving revelations into His word. That should make us excited to search the Scriptures daily, eager to learn and to grow up in all aspects into Him.

*Proverbs 14:15; Ephesians 4:14-16; John 16:1, 13; 1 John 4:1-6*
Monday, December 20th: It may sound like a dichotomy, but the highest calling we can aspire to would be that of a servant. The problem many have with this is we get so preoccupied with titles and recognition that we forget that servant hood is actually our first calling, and the more humble we are, the higher He will exalt us. We have some pretty impressive role models to follow: Paul, Simon Peter, James, and Jesus Himself referred to themselves first and foremost as servants. “Paul, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ…” (Romans 1:1), “Simon Peter, a bond-servant…” (2 Peter 1:1), “James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ…” (James 1:1), “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve…” (Mark 10:45). Paul urged the Philippians to do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind to regard one another as more important than themselves. Or as it’s expressed in The Message, “Don’t push your way to the front; don’t sweet talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.” It isn’t about receiving the credit, it’s about kingdom purpose and exalting Him above all else. True success in His kingdom is not how many people we have under us but how many people we serve. It’s His kingdom and we’re all builders under His guidance, allowing Him to work through us. Again, looking to Jesus as our example, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of an excruciating, humiliating death, and for that reason God highly exalted Him. We need to be willing to die to ourselves if we’re going to find true life and purpose. And the only reason we should want to be promoted would be to broaden our sphere of influence to bring others up higher with us that they may also become more intimate with the One we ultimately serve. Even as we do it to the least, we do it to Him.

Philippians 2:3-9; Matthew 23:10-12, 25:40
**Tuesday, December 21st:** Today is officially the first day of winter and we typically associate the changing of seasons with changing weather. In the wintertime in the Midwest where I grew up, winter was a time when everything slowed down and we had to make adjustments to adapt to harsher conditions. But it was of no use to mourn the loss of greenery and temperate weather; we just needed to learn to appreciate a different beauty and purpose to be found in the stillness and the starkness. The same can be said for spiritual seasons we go through. If we spend all our time longing for what was, it robs us of the joy and purpose to be found in what is. For everything there is a season, and there’s a time for every purpose under heaven. Many are questioning if these are the last days, and there are certainly indications that it could be the case. However, anyone who tells you they know this to be absolutely true is a liar because Jesus Himself said that even He and the angels don’t know the time – only the Father does. (Matthew 24:36) What I can say with absolute certainty is it’s the last days for us! We have been strategically placed in this particular place and season for a reason, and Jesus is always the reason for the season no matter what time of year it might be. Despite what may appear to be a bleak or hostile environment, we know that He has a purpose for us and that we have been equipped in what has preceded this season with everything we need to do battle. Turn bleakness into blessing and help transform the prevailing climate from hostile to hopeful. Be like a crocus. This tenacious flower has been known to push its way up through the snow, causing it to be a symbol of joy and the promise of rebirth. What an appropriate time of year for us to convey Christ as the promise of joy and a new birth! And for those of us who already know Him as our Lord and Savior, we know that newness of life is just around the corner for us no matter which side of heaven we occupy.

**Ecclesiastes 3:1-2; Jeremiah 5:24; Acts 1:7; Colossians 4:2-6**
Wednesday, December 22nd: There was a provocative Christmas song some years ago entitled “Mary, Did You Know?” We know that the angel appeared to Mary and told her that she would conceive through the power of the Holy Spirit and bear the Son of God who would be given the throne of David. Pretty impressive, to say the least. But, as Paul Harvey used to say, “And now the rest of the story.” The song poses some questions for Mary. Did she know that He would walk on water? ...heal the blind, lame, and deaf? ...calm storms? ...be her Savior? …become the perfect Lamb of God? Her initial response to the angel’s message was that she was humbly the Lord’s bondslave. When she visited her relative Elizabeth, who was already carrying the unborn John, the baby leapt in her womb and Elizabeth immediately recognized the Presence. Mary rejoiced beautifully with what has come to be known as the Magnificat. Would her response have been as joyful had she known the full extent of what this would entail? Would ours? Is ours? We merrily celebrate the coming of Messiah in the manger, but His message to us is to join Him not only in the wonder of His miraculous birth and life but in the trials and death to the world that will bring eternal joy. The Christmas tree becomes the cross. Lord, help us to fully embrace the entire message and journey. Fill us with Your Spirit to receive both the blessing and the burden with equal joy and submission. May our response be that we are Your bondslaves, willing to be whoever You have called us to be.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20; Galatians 2:20
**Thursday, December 23****rd:** Could you not watch with Me? Matthew 26:40

Our family had just sat down in the booth. The kids had been looking forward to an ice cream treat. The youngest ran his hands over the top of the table. Then he put his hand underneath and pulled a piece of dirty gum from its hiding place. "Put it down Sammy," I directed. "We don't eat A.B.C. gum." With a questioning look on his face, he dropped the gum. "A. B. C. gum, Sam," I explained, "is not a brand; it's gum that has already been chewed."

As an adult, I recoil at the thought of someone chewing another person's A.B.C. gum; but on reflection I have no problem with A.B.C. news. In this busy world it's a lot easier to go to Google or to have someone else pre-chew and predigest the information I use for my decisions. In fact, it's easier to have the Pastor read my Bible for me and share the Readers Digest condensed version on Sunday. During the week I can watch Christian T.V. while others worship for me.

That piece of gum Sammy picked up reminded me I was willing to settle for someone else's relationship with God. I was deceiving myself by thinking I was building my relationship with God; but I wasn't benefitting from the alone time I could have with Him.

Lord, I repent of choosing the easy way over the narrow way. Help me, Lord, to make You my number one priority.
Friday, December 24th: I remember one Christmas when two of our nieces had come to our home to celebrate and to open presents. Daddy was a doctor, so suffice it to say they were not in want. We had been quite extravagant in buying them gifts, yet after opening multiple packages the older of the two cried out, “Lori got one more than I did!” Rather than being grateful for the many gifts she had received, she was instead focused on trying to compare who had been the most blessed, and she felt she had gotten the short end of the stick. As ridiculous this attitude seems, we all can fall prey to a form of it at times. When someone else gets a promotion that you’ve been working for; when you receive a gift that you initially appreciate, but within a short time you begin wishing you had a later addition or an upgrade. The enemy puts these thoughts into our minds because He knows how powerful it can be when we are living lives of gratitude to our heavenly Father. When we truly experience His goodness, we don’t need any counterfeits to make us feel satisfied. And it isn’t that God frowns on us having things. He is more than happy to give us gifts to bless us as long as we don’t value the gift above the Giver. In fact, in Proverbs 3:9-10 we read, “Honor the Lord with your possessions, and with the first fruits of all your increase; so your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will overflow with new wine.” That doesn’t sound like God is opposed to us having “plenty”. The problem arises when the plenty becomes our priority rather than Him. We can also play the pseudo humility card and have a poverty mentality that keeps telling us we should never spend on ourselves for what may be thought of as extravagant items. If God has blessed us financially and we are tithing and going beyond in generosity, I think He may be blessing us to enable us to feel pampered and appreciated sometimes! Daddies love to give good gifts. If He is our treasure and that is where our heart is, we don’t need to worry. Like Paul learned to be content in all circumstances, let us also have hearts that are filled with gratitude – not coveting what others have or feeling guilt for what we do have. He’s a good Father; appreciate His gifts.

1 Chronicles 16:34; Philippians 4:4-8, 11-13
Saturday, December 25th: We all should have something that really motivates us. Something that makes us want to reach higher...become better...something beyond the mundane. For the magi it was a bright star shining in the east that sent them on a quest that took several years! (Sorry, but all those nativity scenes depicting the wise men at the manger are in error.) Among other things, magi were students of astronomy, and as a result they felt compelled to seek the meaning of that brilliant star. The outcome of their quest was great blessing and a sense of fulfillment. In Psalm 84, the psalmist exclaims how blessed is the one whose strength is in the Lord and in whose heart are the highways to Zion. This may sound a little strange, but the underlying meaning here is that true blessedness comes from having a fixed star – a destiny – to which we aspire, and that can only be found in Him, in the person of Jesus - the babe in the manger. This is where we will find our strength, and when this is our pursuit, we are given grace and glory. No good thing will He withhold! The implication is that we need to be restless and discontented if we are not actively journeying a path that leads to Him. Praise God that He has revealed to us how to find Him and ask Him to stir within you a feeling of dissatisfaction in pursuing anything less. Fix your eyes on the brightest star – our true north.

Psalm 84; Philippians 3:13-14
Sunday, December 26th: You’ve probably heard the antiphonal phrase: God is good, (response) all the time; and all the time, (response) God is good. The more we get to know Him, the more we understand the magnificent, extravagant, unmerited blessing of that truth. Here are a few select passages to give you cause to rejoice in Him: Romans 11:33 – Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! (NAS); James 1:17 – Every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven. The gifts are rivers of light cascading down from the Father of Light. There is nothing deceitful in God, nothing two-faced, nothing fickle. (MSG); Psalm 18:30 – As for God, His way is blameless; the word of the Lord is tried; He is a shield to all who take refuge in Him. 145:17 – Everything God does is right – the trademark on all His works is love. 147:5 – Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite. (NAS & MSG); Jeremiah 32:17 – Ah Lord God! Behold You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You. (NAS); 2 Samuel 22:32-34 – For who is God, besides the Lord? And who is a rock, besides our God? God is my strong fortress; and He sets the blameless in His way. He makes my feet like hind’ feet and sets me on my high places. (NAS) Take some time during the busyness of the holidays to really reflect on all He is, and as you bask in the glory of Him, thank Him for inviting you to become a part of His family – with all the benefits!

1 Chronicles 29:11-13; Ephesians 1:3-6
Monday, December 27th: I love hiking, and especially when it involves climbing to higher elevations. There’s something so exhilarating about meeting the challenges, overcoming obstacles and finally being able to look out over the landscape below. And there are definite advantages to being at a higher altitude: less pressure, less pollution, less atmospheric turbulence, a wider field of vision, and everything below appears smaller. When you’re standing at the top of the mountain there’s a sense of freedom and peace. Jesus is calling us to His mountain top. He wants to take us higher than we ever thought we could go, and He warns us that it won’t always be easy and there will doubtless be times when we want to turn back or maybe just stop short of the summit. But He promises that He’ll be right there with us, and when we persevere, we’ll find that the higher we go with Him, the less pressure we feel. We won’t feel so much like we’re being corrupted or polluted by every breath we take; things won’t seem so tumultuous; we’ll see the bigger picture and many of the things that seemed so overwhelming before will diminished in our perception of them. It can become a turning point in our journey. Think of Abraham and his walk of obedience with his son Isaac to the mountain that God chose, or Mount Sinai where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, or the mountain where Jesus took Peter, James and John and they experienced the transfiguration! The participants were forever changed because they had seen a new and different aspect to the character of the God whom they served and trusted. He became bigger and yet more personal at the same time. Accept His invitation every time it is extended and then allow what you experience to cause a shift in how you see your relationship with Him and with His creation. Let it shape you and transform you so that you’re better equipped to fulfill your own mission and so you can help others embark on their climb. And let it become so etched in your memory that whenever you begin to get trapped into the pettiness and tedium of the mundane you can mentally revisit the splendor and clarity and be refreshed anew.

Exodus 24:12; Matthew 17:1-8; 2 Peter 1:16-18
Tuesday, December 28th: THE KING’S DELIGHT: I am the Lord and I do not change. The earth and its fullness belong to Me. My throne is in heaven, and I reign over the nations. In the beginning I spoke to the darkness and said, “Let there be light: and there was light.” (Genesis 1:3) Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer who formed you from the womb: “I am the Lord, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who by Myself spread out the earth.” (Isaiah 44:24) I chose you for My own. I sent Jesus into the world, as the light of the world. Jesus came to bring you good news and set you free from bondage. Jesus came to open blind eyes. When you give your heart to Jesus, My Son, you are brought from death to life. I will set your feet upon a rock. I will declare you righteous and give you authority in My kingdom. You are royalty in the King’s family. You have inherited the delicacies of the King’s table. You are the King’s delight. You have been given a new life, a new heart, and new riches in Christ Jesus. I have declared you not guilty for I have forgiven your sin and cleansed you in the blood of Jesus. You are wearing the Robe of My Righteousness in Christ Jesus. I am anointing you to go forth and shine to the world around you. Step into the new you. Leave the past and go forward. You are more than a conqueror. You have hope for the future. Draw close to Me and I will draw close to you. I love you with an everlasting love. Come, abide in Me.

Psalm 47:8, 40:2; 2 Samuel 9:13; Isaiah 61:1, 10; Jeremiah 31:3; Ezekiel 36:26; Malachi 3:6; Matthew 16:19; 1 Corinthians 10:26; Romans 8:1, 37; Ephesians 2:1; James 4:8
Wednesday, December 29th: There used to be an expression, “As American as baseball, hot dogs and apple pie.” It meant something – there was an identification and a sense of comfort and simple values. Less than a year ago we saw some major cracks in this understood set of what seemed unquestionable ideals when Mr. Potato Head became genderless, and Dr. Seuss was accused of being xenophobic. Now it seems that superheroes are being rebranded to make them more “culturally sensitive” and relatable to the masses. Superman’s motto, which used to state that he fought for truth, justice, and the American way, has been adjusted so that he now fights for truth, justice, and a better world. As if the American way is somehow outdated, too exclusive, or not in favor of a better world. And it is no longer Clark Kent, the mild-mannered reporter, who is this superhero. It is now the progeny of Clark Kent (aka Superman) and Lois Lane. And Jon Kent is bisexual. This is what kids are reading in comic books and what we will no doubt be viewing soon on the big screen as representative of an entity we are supposed to admire and want to emulate. Seriously? Whatever happened to having a moral compass and godly values? Right now, it feels like we’re going downhill fast on a 10% grade, the slope is covered in black ice, and we can’t seem to find the brakes. The solution is painfully simple and should be imminently obvious, but unfortunately there currently seems to be a majority who refuse to accept it because it would require humility and an admission of self-serving motives that place self at the center of the universe. That’s why “I” is the center of pride – because “I” can’t see beyond what will promote self-interest above all else, and certainly is not willing to bow to an authority that asserts that the flesh left to its own desires will eventually destroy us. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are contingent upon a nation being under God. If we are willing to humble ourselves under His mighty hand, then we will have positioned ourselves to be exalted by Him. Our unalienable rights were endowed by our Creator. We dare not lose sight of that. Thank You, Lord, for the amazing freedoms and blessings you have showered on us. Forgive us for taking them for granted and for abusing them beyond Your boundaries. We humbly submit to Your sovereignty and pledge to You our undying allegiance. May we once again be one nation under God.

2 Chronicles 7:14; James 4:1-10
Thursday, December 30th: About ten years ago a missionary friend obtained dual citizenship – she was a native of Kansas, but she was assigned to a base in Australia and had gone through lengthy process of obtaining her citizenship there as well. I remember thinking it was so cool that she had citizenship privileges in two countries. But in reality, I have dual citizenship as well – and so do you. So does every person on the face of the earth. We all are citizens of our country of origin, but we are also citizens of a spiritual realm. We either belong to the kingdom of God or the kingdom of darkness, and when we leave our earthly home, we will take up fulltime residence in our spiritual kingdom. Just as my friend was able to choose her second citizenship, we also have a choice to make. To make that choice we should look at the characteristics of the two kingdoms. Every kingdom has a ruler who has dominion over its citizens. These citizens are expected to adhere to certain rules and customs in order to ensure the dominion of their territory, and they will be distinguished by how they represent the character of their sovereign. One ruler believes we can all be our own gods and we should pursue whatever makes us feel good in the moment. The other believes in discipline and delayed gratification in order to build character, avoiding behaviors that would be detrimental in the long run. We are born with dual citizenship, but the default is the kingdom of darkness. To retain that affiliation, all we have to do is reject the offer of entering into the kingdom of light. And unlike the rigorous process my friend had to go through, all we have to do enter into the light is accept the free offer and pledge our allegiance to our new King. No paperwork, no fluency or government test to pass, no hassle. And when it comes time to change our residence, one destination is a fiery inferno and the other is Paradise with the lover of your soul. Are we making it our custom and habit to exhibit the light of Jesus in our daily conduct, or are we walking in self-centered interests, more concerned with fulfilling our own desires and by default serving the prince of darkness? It’s too important a choice to put off – choose you this day. The citizenship is free to us, but it came at a very high cost. Honor the King of Kings who paid the price and is offering you a free pass.

John 3:19-21; Ephesians 2:1-10; Matthew 25:31-34, 41, 46
Friday, December 31st:  There are a number of ways that people choose to spend the last day of the year. Some people will go out to celebrate the end of one year and ring in the new, and they will do this with partying and sometimes drinking to excess. Others may heave a sigh of relief that it’s a chapter that can be closed and will go to bed early, hoping for a brighter tomorrow. Few I would expect will look back on the events of the past year and think it was the best of times and our country is headed in the right direction. For many it held growing frustration and concern, and for some it involved painful loss. Two respected men from different centuries had some sage advice on how to deal with a challenging past. The apostle Paul commented on his own strategy – forget what was and move forward to a better goal. And in like manner, C.S. Lewis said, “Getting over a painful experience is much like crossing monkey bars. You have to let go at some point in order to move forward.” We have hopefully learned from what we’ve gone through, and hopefully we’ve been seeking what the Lord wants us to do in response. We can’t change the past, but we have unlimited potential for charting new paths and discovering fresh strategies for facing our tomorrows. The future won’t be brighter unless we implement changes that will make it so. Expect challenges. Expect struggles. Expect breakthroughs. Expect to see God perform miracles in and through His church. And look forward to developing a deeper relationship with the One who holds the keys to eternity. He knows the future, every day is a gift to be appreciated and used well, and we can trust Him to always safely guide us to our desired havens. He has placed eternity in our hearts!

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Psalm 107:28-30; Philippians 3:13-14