

Prayer Devotions



January 2023

Luke 18:1

Pray Always and Never Give Up.

Prayer for Persecuted Church

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 in just the last year

- Over 360 million Christians live in places where they experience high levels of persecution and discrimination.
- 5,898 Christians were killed for their faith.
- 5,110 churches and other Christian buildings were attacked.
- 4,765 believers detained without trial, arrested, sentenced, or imprisoned.

These numbers are heart-breaking. And sadly, they do not tell the whole story.

Please pray:

- Whatever their circumstances, God will give persecuted Christians the right words. (Ephesians 6:19-20)
- That persecuted Christians will understand and find peace in the sufficiency of God's grace, even in their weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)
- That Christians facing hardship will draw from a source of power larger than themselves. (2 Corinthians 1:7-9)
- God be present in their hardship, protecting them according to His will.
- That their witness would inspire those who seek to harm them.

This Month's Countries are some of the most dangerous countries to follow Jesus.

Cuba (Latin America): Dictatorial paranoia / Main Religion: Christianity

Ethiopia (Africa): Denominational protectionism / Main Religion: Christianity

Jordan (Middle East): Islamic oppression / Main Religion: Islam

Daily Prayers for January "This is our time on the history line of God. This is it. What will we do with the one deep exhale of God on this earth? For we are but a vapor and we have to make it count. We're on. Direct us, Lord, and get us on our feet." - Beth Moore

Sunday, January 1st: What better way to begin a new year than on the Lord's day. Some of us will be gathered together with fellow believers in His sanctuary and praising His name. Others may be watching online or will have participated in one of the service options last night and today have an opportunity to reflect on entering into a new chapter. I'd like to apply to the beginning of the year something I do every morning before reading the Word. I pray for God to give me eyes to see, ears to hear, a mind to comprehend, a heart to receive, and a will to obey whatever it may be that He reveals to me as I spend time in His presence. As I was considering the "beginning" of the year and how to view it, I thought about how Jesus used what was around Him to teach spiritual lessons to His disciples and to the crowds. Consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. The sower and the seed. And Paul reminds the church in Rome that since the creation of the world, the invisible attributes of God have been clearly seen and we can understand His eternal power and divine nature by simply observing what's around us. We have no excuse. We need to open our eyes and ears to filter everything through the lens of His authorship and ownership of all of creation. Then ask Him to help us understand how we can learn from our awareness and what it might be that He wants us to see and hear. Ask Him to let it sink deep into hearts that are open to His leading and to give us a determination and a boldness to act in response. It's not enough to just be aware, although that is definitely the doorway. In order for transformation and growth to take place, our knowing has to lead to acceptance and application. And for the truth to set us free, we have to first intimately and experientially know the truth. Jesus Himself told us that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We are surrounded by evidence of Him all the time – He's just asking us to take notice and then *come to know, recognize and perceive* (gnōsesthe) Him in the midst of our daily lives. Lord, we ask that every day You would give us eyes to see, ears to hear, a mind to comprehend, a heart to receive, and a will to obey.

Job 12:7-10; Romans 1:20

Monday, January 2nd: For most of us the decorations have all been taken down. When we drive down the streets in our neighborhoods, houses that one short week ago were ablaze with dazzling lights are now dark. Everything has gone “back to normal.” I wonder how many realize that there’s a spiritual correlation to this physical phenomenon. Do they recognize that the reason lights are so representative of Christmas is because out of the darkness the world received a great light that would be a beacon of hope to all who would choose to recognize and receive it. His light shines in the darkness, but sadly, the darkness does not comprehend it. That’s where we come in. We carry His light in the indwelling Holy Spirit, and it is our privilege to use that power to dispel the darkness. Darkness cannot exist where there is light; the only way for darkness to prevail is when the light has been removed. The dimmer the light, the greater the darkness. That’s why it’s so important for us to let our light shine brightly all the time, overcoming the darkness and bringing at least a glimmer if not a profusion of hope to those who are stumbling aimlessly about. The best way for us to ensure that we’re filled with life-saving light is to stay close to the source because it is, after all, only His light that will overcome the dark. We can’t allow the fact that the Christmas season is behind us to tempt us to stow the lights away until next year. Instead, we should let that transformative power flow through us every day. Make those around you feel like they just drove past the most brilliant display they’ve ever witnessed – enough that they want experience it again and again. Don’t worry if all you feel like you have to offer is a single 15 watt bulb right now. Walk consistently in the light you have. Have you ever been in a cave where the guide turned off their flashlight for a moment and let you experience the utter blackness? Then they lit a single match and you could see again! As you’re faithful with the light you have, He’ll increase the wattage.

Isaiah 9:2, 60:1-2; John 1:3-5, 8:12; 1 John 1:7

Tuesday, January 3rd: They saw Him, but did not recognize Him: Luke 24:16 The event being referenced in this Scripture took place on the road to Emmaus following the crucifixion; yet, the message is relevant for followers of Christ today. On the previous Friday Jesus had been bloodied and beaten for our sins. And so, it is understandable that two followers filled with grief did not recognize the resurrected Lord when they met him on the road to Emmaus. Whatever the reason, these followers saw Jesus but did not recognize him until He broke the bread so that these followers now had the joy of an intimate relationship with Jesus.

We see wickedness and selfishness in human beings all around us. Some people will not speak of sin in their life or the lives of others. Oswald Chambers once claimed such individuals have a view of themselves which includes no recognition of sin at all! He then reminds his readers to reconcile themselves to the fact of sin in human relationships.

Jesus never trusted human nature. He placed His trust in the Father and warned us not to trust any assessment of life which does not recognize the role of sin.

With that in mind when we take communion, may we not just see the tokens of Christ's body and blood, but may we recognize and acknowledge by the remembrance of His death the reality of Christ's sacrifice: the only antidote to the sorrow caused by sin.

Wednesday, January 4th: I remember a teacher friend who had a book by Richard Carlson entitled *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff... And It's All Small Stuff!* The premise of this book is that we tend to get all worked up about things that really shouldn't bother us or over which we have no control anyway. However, there are things that we may treat as small through our lack of understanding, perspective, or our insensitivity that are actually a big thing to God. One of those things could be the struggle another person is going through. We don't always see the history that led up to their pain. We need to be able to step back from either a callous or a cavalier assessment of how we think they *should* be responding and instead try to understand from their perspective or simply have a little compassion. We also need to remember that our God is a God of compassion, and just as He comforts us in our afflictions we are to comfort others. If He cares about people and is always willing to listen to their struggles, shouldn't we at least extend them the courtesy of acknowledging their pain or frustration and directing them to the One who can truly comfort them and offer them help beyond what we can do? Another less obvious way in which we sometimes tend to minimize others' feelings is when they relate something they have experienced. It could be trauma, elation, or anything else that they are sharing with us or with a group and we just have to trump their experience with one of our own that we feel is even more traumatic, exciting, or just plain interesting. It's just another way of making someone else feel lesser. How do you think God views that sort of attitude? I think when we read that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, the answer to that question is pretty clear. We are to consider others above ourselves, not in a self-deprecating manner, but in a way that shows them they have value and so do their feelings. This is what Jesus would do. Let's be more like Him.

Colossians 3:12-13; Ephesians 4:32

Thursday, January 5th: One of the failings of our culture and sadly even some who claim to be followers of Christ is a failure to see things from God's standpoint. We have become so inundated with a secular world view that our senses can easily get dulled to the erosion of what we once held to be non-negotiable values and truths. Some things are subjective – others are not. Who serves the best pizza in town is a subjective issue. It depends on personal taste and preference, and what is best for one person may not even be in the running for someone else. Getting closer to home, the style of worship can also be subjective. It should all be glorifying God, but some people are more likely to feel the Presence of God in hymns accompanied by a pipe organ while others prefer a more upbeat and physically active form of worship. As long as both are giving glory to God and bring the participants closer to Him, the style should not be an issue. However, there are some things that are simply not up for debate. How we define marriage and family is not subjective. Neither is what we choose to fill our minds with – be it the music we listen to, what we watch on TV, or the conversations we have when we're not in church. Regularly practicing sin is not negotiable, and a time is coming when we will have to give an account for how well we represented what we profess to believe. This is going to require us to possibly reevaluate how we view our time on this planet and what our goals should be. We can't be part time Christians who compartmentalize our convictions. We need to figure out what we believe about God and His plan for us as well as His power and provision in accomplishing it. Jesus came not only to save us but to show us what walking out the will of the Father looks like. He was tempted but didn't sin, and He has given us His Spirit to empower us to choose the same. He came to serve rather than to be served. We have been blessed beyond the imagination of a large percentage of the world population, and He expects us to steward what we have been given wisely. It probably won't look like "success" to many of those around us, but it will to Him, and that should be what matters most to us. Lord, help us to believe You and serve You to a deeper and more genuine and intentional level. Help us to be the world changers we were created to be rather than just faces in the crowd that are indistinguishable from those who don't know You.

Mark 10:45; John 13:12-14, 20:21; Romans 12:2

Friday, January 6th: It is almost a week into the New Year; 2023 is well on its way. Most have put away their decorations and the holidays are behind them. Some are already looking forward to Valentine's Day (the day to celebrate love). Many have no idea that today is the holiday Epiphany (a greater day of love). The magi or Wise Men are said to have come face to face with the King of the World around this time roughly two years after the star appeared in the sky on the night of our dear Savior's birth. These Wise Men traveled many hundreds of miles to seek out the King, and when they found Him they responded with joy, worship, and gifts. They did not seek anything from Him – just to bask in the glory of Who He is. The Light of this world, the promise fulfilled. Imagine chasing after a star for nearly two years to embrace the greatest love on earth. Is your passion for love this deep? Do you eat, sleep, and take every step to come closer to the inexhaustible, most reliable, infinite love on earth? These Wise Men clung to a hope and passionately sought after The Promise. They knew God's Word, believed God's Word, and recognized His movement. A child was born, King to this universe, and He shall reign forever and bring peace, love, and guidance to all who seek after Him. My question to mankind is, "Are you a wise man?" Where do your priorities sit for 2023? Did you make a New Year's resolution? Or recommit yourself to a healthy habit or activity? How is that going? Are you working hard to achieve, or have you already thrown in the towel? In your own strength, how are these goals working out for you? Did that sting a bit; are your feelings hurt? I don't mean to offend but to enlighten (epiphany). Can I challenge you not to resolve or recommit but surrender your full life to Christ our King. Surrender to these three daily disciplines: Prayer, Silence and Solitude, and Time in His Word. Be as the Wise Men who sought His presence and encountered His inexhaustible, most reliable, infinite love. I share with you an epiphany - Light in the Darkness. A Life surrendered to the King shall see the Light and be the light in this world. A life surrendered to Christ can accomplish more than imagined and overcome every challenge. Follow The Light (Jesus) as the Wise Men did and be all that God has created you to be. It starts with three simple disciplines five minutes per day. And as the Wise Men went the distance, your hunger and persistence shall increase and no move you make will be void of the passionate love of Christ. Wise Men Follow the Light (Love God, Love Others).

Matthew 2:1-12; Isaiah 9:6-7; Isaiah 61

Saturday, January 7th: We have a culture that glorifies those who are fiercely independent and have well honed survival skills. The ones who can pull themselves up by their own boot straps. The self-made man or woman. The only problems with that are: first – it’s more of a myth than a reality, second – the premise upon which the idea is based has been skewed over time, and finally and most importantly – it contradicts what God has to say. Most of the stories of “rags-to-riches” fail to mention the influence of family, friends, teachers, coaches and other mentors as well as authors. All of us need the support and encouragement of others at least sometimes, and it’s scriptural that two are better than one. You can accomplish more together, and if you should happen to fall there will be someone there to pick you up. And if you look at the word community, it’s the combination of the prefix “com”, which means with or together, and the word unity as defined by Merriam-Webster is the quality or state of not being multiple: the quality or state of being one, single, whole. We were created to be in community. There is wholeness in our own being and in a greater purpose when we are joined together with others who are like minded. The opposite of being unified is to be divided, and we’ve seen in recent times the chaos that’s created when people are divided. If the body of Christ can come together in oneness and harmony, we can become a reflection of God’s design for His creation – that those who call on Him can be compassionate, reasonable, filled with a dunamis power. “Dunamis represents the kind of power that is an inherent force. It flows from a person to give them the ability to do supernatural things, like miracles or morally excellent acts.” (biblestudytools.com) Working together is anything but a sign of weakness. It is more a sign of the humility and intelligence to know that there is greater power, effectiveness, and safety in community. Let’s make it a priority this year to become more and more of a community of believers who demonstrate to others the beauty of oneness in Christ.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; 1 Corinthians 1:10, 12:25-27

Sunday, January 8th: People sometimes forget that the Bible is a book of history unlike any other because the hero of the story is still living and active, extending beyond the constraints of time. We read of miracles that were beyond what we could even imagine and relegate them to “back then” without stopping to equate that the power He demonstrated then is still very much available. He doesn’t change. He’s the same God and we desperately need Him every bit as much as David did when he faced Goliath or Mary did when she was told she would become pregnant while still a virgin. We can’t afford to relegate the power that parted the Red Sea or fed a multitude on the equivalent of a Happy Meal to past tense possibilities. We need to make calling on Him not only habitual but an essential part of our daily routine. We may think we don’t need daily miracles, but we do need daily provision, and the more we become aware of what He’s doing right now – giving us air to breathe and keeping our heart pumping – and we remember to thank Him for that, the more our faith can grow and we can recognize the possibilities of calling on Him when greater needs arise. It’s a matter of faith. You build faith by exercising it. When David faced Goliath, it was not the first time he had ever had a conversation with His Shepherd. He has been spending a lot of one-on-one time on the hillsides, and he knew that God had helped him slay lions and bears taking care of his own sheep. This built his confidence to be able to tell the giant that coming in the name of his God was a surer defense than a sword and a spear. If He was in the habit of delivering those who called on Him then, we can rest assured that He can still be called on and His power has not diminished. We are told more than a few times that He doesn’t change. As James assures us, with Him there is no variation (state or fact of differing from a former state) or shifting shadow (being affected by changing times or circumstances). God even challenges us to call on Him so that He can answer us with great and mighty things. We need to make it more of a habit in our lives to seriously take Him at His word.

James 1:17; Jeremiah 32:17, 33:3; Matthew 19:26

Monday, January 9th: SET YOUR MINDS: When trouble comes, and it will, "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus", for He alone can shelter you in the storm. He will be your comfort. "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." (Colossians 3:2 NIV). The word says, "(To) Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10) The Lord is on the throne. Look to the Creator of the universe. No problem is too big or too insignificant for the Lord. Surrender your broken heart, your crushed dreams and all disappointed emotions to the One who knows you best. Let Him work in your life to bring good to seemingly bad situations. Holy Spirit will guide you, but you must let go. Start looking at all that is lovely and all that is good and honorable. God's mercies are new every morning. The word says He is singing over you. He has written you on the palms of His hands. God is for you and He can make all things new. Look up today and let the Lord embrace you with the love of His Son, Jesus Christ. "Therefore, since you have been raised with Christ, strive for the things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." (Colossians 3:1-2 Berean Standard Bible).

Philippians 4:8; Lamentations 3:23; Zephaniah 3:17; Isaiah 49:16; Romans 8:31; Isaiah 43:19

Tuesday, January 10th: In Paul's letter to the Corinthian church he reminds them that their battles are not just battles of a fleshly nature but are spiritual and need to be fought as such. He then urges them to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. For some reason, we sometimes can relegate this to following the rules with an almost "grit my teeth and I'll get through this" attitude, when obedience in and of itself isn't the focus, or at least that's what I was reminded of recently. The idea is to take the thought captive as soon as it presents itself. Don't entertain it; don't let it get its foot in the door so it can open up its bag of tricks and captivate you with all the promises it will offer if you'll just give it a try. How often is the initial hook – two for the price of one? We start to rationalize the possible benefits of just sampling whatever is being presented, but when we don't take the thoughts captive they very well may wind up taking us captive. Why do you think they call it a hook? And really good snake oil salesmen know the bait and switch technique. One of the definitions of this strategy is a deception based on a false claim or enticement that proves to be disappointing. No matter how enticing the enemy's promise may sound, remember there's a fatal hook buried in that bait. Don't get taken captive. That means we need a spiritual mindset and awareness to be able to recognize and subsequently reject the deceptive ideas. Simply ask the Father to quicken your attentiveness to what thoughts you're allowing to creep through the front door to your heart, mind and spirit; and if it isn't from Him, kick that intruder out and slam the door. Put it in prison before it imprisons you. When you fix your thoughts on God, God fixes your thoughts.

2 Corinthians 10:3-6; Isaiah 26:3

Wednesday, January 11th: Every year we hear stories of people who have gone hiking and failed to properly hydrate themselves. Dehydration can have some serious effects on our physical bodies, such as heat injury. If we don't ingest enough fluids when we are actively working or are exposed to extreme heat it can lead to cramps, heat stroke and even seizures caused by an imbalance of electrolytes which help carry signals from cell to cell. Then the normal electrical messages can become mixed up and this can lead to involuntary muscle contractions and sometimes to a loss of consciousness. And one of the most serious and life-threatening complications of dehydration is called hypovolemic shock. This occurs when low blood volume causes a drop in blood pressure and a drop in the amount of oxygen in your body. All of this simply because we don't consume enough water. Worse yet is when we suffer from a spiritual form of dehydration. When we fail to replenish our souls with the living water that only comes from God there can be more potentially fatal consequences. In the Bible, living water is representative of the Holy Spirit and the word of God. When we neglect this life giving resource, the messages we receive and the way we interpret them can become mixed up and we get out of balance. In such a state it can be easy for us to get misled and make unwise decisions in which direction we should be going and how to navigate. We're more likely to accept worldly advice because we aren't fully engaged in our spirits, and in a sense we aren't conscious of the leading of the Spirit because we haven't been refilling our supply of living water. Relying on what the world has to offer is like thinking an alcoholic beverage will satisfy your thirst. Its immediate effect may relieve your thirst, but ultimately it will leave you dry, disoriented, more dehydrated, and dissatisfied. Only when we turn to His provision will we find an infinite supply that will never run dry. Lord, give us the wisdom to thirst after Your living water. Help us to remember that it's a daily need in our lives and one we can't afford to neglect.

Psalms 42:1-2; John 4:13-14, 7:37-38

Thursday, January 12th: **Get Thee behind me, Satan: Matt.16:25** These words were a rebuke to Peter who had not properly understood God's plan. A few verses later Jesus says whoever will save his earthly life by renouncing the Gospel will actually lose the coming life with God. The comment follows a warning to "beware of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees" which follows the claim they had substituted "the commandments of men" for the commandment of God. (15:3-9) Jesus called them hypocrites and added, "Every plant which My heavenly Father hath not planted shall be rooted up." Like the people of Jesus' day, we live in a culture that values the ways of man over the ways of God.

Friday, January 13th: Have you ever noticed how often trials and tribulations are mentioned in scripture? We know that encountering tribulations is a given, so it makes sense that we should seek to understand how we are to weather them and what their purpose might be. One of the definitions of a trial is a test to determine the quality of something, but a trial is also defined as a painful experience. Within the Christian meaning, trials and tribulations are more than just hardship. It is through trials that our faith is tested, and our devotion to Christ can grow from this suffering. It occurred to me that if you simply transpose the vowels in trial it becomes trail. So perhaps we should consider trials to be a trail for us to become stronger through our testing, and the testing of our faith produces endurance and a greater depth of faith in the provision we have through Jesus. Just as He told us that in this world we *would* have tribulation, He also gave us the reassurance that He has already overcome the world. One of my favorite verses in the Bible is in Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesus. He ends this beautiful prayer with the mind-blowing declaration, "Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask of think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen." When you break that down it's almost more than the mind can even comprehend. First is His ability to do beyond anything we could even dream up. Then He tells us that this is because that's the kind of power that is working *in us* and the promise is to the Church for all generations *forever*! This is what we can draw on to discover the right trail to make it through any trial we might encounter, knowing that His love has been poured out on us, equipping us to persevere and producing in us a tested (proven) character that will reflect His glory and will not disappoint. Wow! And this is why we can actually count it all joy. It's proof of not only His love for us but also His confidence and desire in drawing us closer to Him and in giving us greater strength that we might better represent Him. Praise God.

John 16:33; Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4, 12

Saturday, January 14th: The most precious gift one can receive is life. People will go to extreme measures to preserve or extend their lives and will fight to their last breath to protect the lives of those whom they love. We place so much value on this life, but to what extent do we truly value our eternal spiritual life? Do we guard it as fiercely as we do our physical existence and are we as mindful of where those we love will spend eternity? You may have heard of books such as *Heaven is Real* or *90 Minutes in Heaven*, and they reassure us that a glorious afterlife is not a myth, but conversely Hell is also a reality and it's not one that anyone would want to experience. There's even a book by Bill Wiese titled *23 Minutes in Hell* which recounts in graphic and vivid detail the deafening screams of agony, the unquenchable searing flames, the isolation and utter torment and hopelessness he experienced before the mighty hand of God pulled him from the pit. What he describes was not a near-death experience but more of a vision not unlike Paul had in 2 Corinthians where he was taken up into heaven. Mr. Wiese expressed what he thought were three possible reasons he was given this vision. Understanding the severity of Hell should make us more appreciative of our own salvation. This should cause us to walk in a healthier fear of the Lord. He is by far the best friend we could hope for, but He is also a holy and righteous judge. And finally, it should create in us a deeper sense of compassion for the lost and a passion to show them how to avoid such a heinous eternal sentence. Why would anyone intentionally choose to refuse the free gift of salvation? Maybe because they've never heard of the reality of their two options. Or maybe because they've never actually believed in life after death. How about you? We all have only two choices: believe in Him and accept His gift of life or depend on our own resources and take a chance that this is all there is. He doesn't send anyone to Hell – they simply refuse His offer of Heaven. Choose you this day.

Acts 4:12; John 3:16-18; Mark 9:43; 2 Thessalonians 1:9

Sunday, January 15th: I like words. Choosing just the right word can be so powerful, and often there are subtle nuances to a particular word that can add such a depth of meaning in its use. One such word is *sanctify*. Peter urges us to sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts so we will always have a ready answer for anyone who wonders where our hope comes from. What he's telling us is to understand with utter confidence and assurance that He is indeed over all, in all, and in control. When we really know and accept this, there's nothing that can faze us! Sickness? He's got that covered. Finances? That too. Relationship woes? All means all. Walking through these things may not always be easy, but we have this hope – this confidence in the One who is walking beside us and can be trusted to always lead us in our best interest. Let's *sanctify* Him in our hearts: set Him apart as holy, act with confidence and proper respect, and regard in our actions that He is indeed Christ our Lord.

1 Peter 3:15; Isaiah 41:10; Psalm 56:3

Monday, January 16th: **Both you and I will be helped: Romans 1:12** The Scripture speaks of the church as the body of Christ. The components of that body will have different functions, but all are part of the body. Paul tells the recipients of this letter he wishes to join them in order to "impart some spiritual gift" that he has. (V.11) At the same time, Paul recognizes they have and will be sharing their spiritual gifts with him. Paul is pointing out that just as three strands woven together in a cord will be stronger than an individual strand, Christians need to work together. It is when we come together that we nourish one another. Thus, Paul warned believers not to forsake the coming together of fellow saints.

Tuesday, January 17th: In a conversation with a relative who is in missions, they were relating how this past year had been a difficult one for them because they were serving in an area that wasn't necessarily their gifting, but they knew it was where God wanted them during this particular season. This brought up the suggestion that this could be a time that God is using to stretch them. It was mildly both apropos and ironic because they are facilitating a home that ministers to and affords support to young women who are pregnant and unwed. But as we talked the analogy became more and more meaningful. An unplanned pregnancy is a picture of carrying the promise of a new life, but the time between conception and birth will involve a waiting or gestation period that cannot be expedited and will at times be very uncomfortable and inconvenient. We can't predict with 100% accuracy exactly when this new life is going to be mature enough to present itself, and even then there will be a time of adjustment. When God is birthing something new in us, it may not always be comfortable or convenient and it might make us feel awkward and even fearful because we're not sure if we're ready for it. It may even feel like we're trapped in a situation or place that we'd rather not be and we don't see the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. But when the time is right, He will bring it to completion. That's when we understand more fully what it was that He was doing all along, and the joy of this new aspect of our life will be more than enough to compensate for the times of discomfort and uncertainty. He is the ultimate Creator, and everything He creates is good, so don't worry if you develop a few "stretch marks" along the way as He stretches your understanding of the direction your life is going. He's just expanding your influence and productivity in His kingdom. Here's to a year of stretch marks and new beginnings.

Romans 8:22-25; Habakkuk 2:3

Wednesday, January 18th: There are some things that are replenishable and others that are not. One of our most precious commodities would fall into the “not” category and that is time. In researching God’s perspective on how we utilize the time He has allotted us I discovered that Psalm 90 is actually a prayer of Moses, considered the greatest prophet and the man with whom God spoke face to face. This would be someone we should probably give heed to. In this Psalm Moses prayed to the Lord to teach us to number our days that we might present to Him a heart of wisdom. Even Ben Franklin once quipped, “Do you love life? Then don’t waste your time! For that is what life is made of.” Our lives consist of a string of moments: 60 of them every minute; 3600 per hour; 86,400 in a day; 604,800 a week; 31,449,600 every year. In that year the average person will spend on average 10,512,000 of those moments in time sleeping, so that leaves 20,937,600 moment by moment choices we have as to how we will invest in the remaining time. This puts an entirely different slant on the expression “killing time”. You see, when we allow laziness or self-indulgence to fill up too many of those moments, we literally have killed them. We can’t hit the restart button and retrieve them – they’re lost forever, and so might be some positive outcome from an intentional activity that the Lord had presented to us and we brushed it aside. So many of the joys and victories of life are lost, or killed if you will, on the altar of wasted time. This is why the apostle Paul warned the Ephesian church to be careful how they walked, choosing to walk wisely and making the most of their time because the days were evil. That pretty aptly applies to today as well. And King David prayed that the Lord would cause him to see how transient our time here really is. C. T. Studd, who gave his life to serve in China under Hudson Taylor's China Inland Mission, wrote a stirring poem that contains the following lines - *Only one life, twill soon be past, Only what’s done for Christ will last.* This is not to preclude any form of pleasure or leisure, but it should cause us to give more intentional thought to where we invest our brief stay here and to pray for direction in how to wisely make use of it.

Psalm 39:4-5, 90:12; Ephesians 5:15-17

Thursday, January 19th: TRUST: "The Lord is King! Let the earth rejoice! Let the farthest coastlands be glad." (Psalm 97:1 NLT) He rules over all the kingdoms of the earth. "Acknowledge that the Lord is God! He made us, and we are his. We are His people, the sheep of His pasture." (Psalm 100:3 NLT) The times and the seasons are in His hands. Do not fear if you receive bad news. Trust only in Him and lean into the Holy Spirit for comfort, peace and direction. The Lord is your strength. Just trust and see God working to bring about His purposes in the earth and in your life. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. (Proverbs 3:5) Let your voice of praise raise up a sweet melody to the Lord. Surrender your fears in the presence of the Lord. As you praise and worship, your burdens will become lighter and peace will fill your soul. Seek His presence and be filled with joy. Rest assured that the Lord will lift you above the cares of this world as you look to Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith. Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in Me."

John 14:1; Daniel 4:17; Acts 1:7; Psalm 112:7; Ephesians 6-10; Psalm 16:11

Friday, January 20th: In talking with a friend who had attended last month's Darkness to Hope service, they were expressing how last year was a very different and challenging year for them. Their entire routine had been radically altered, but when they listened to the stories of the struggles of others it made them thankful for the blessings they still had. We oftentimes will use the expression, "There but for the grace of God go I." I had never really thought about that expression until this conversation with my friend, but it made me realize that as believers we are always walking in the grace of God. We just have a tendency to take it for granted or maybe minimize the magnitude of how great His grace is. I began to think back on some of the answers to prayer for myself just in the past year. Some of them were beyond description and I have not ceased to continually thank Him and tell others of His unspeakable power and mercy. But others were not so profound, yet His intervention was still a significant part of the equation – just not as obvious or seemingly spectacular. I had to stop and ask His forgiveness for rejoicing in the big things while almost taking the others for granted. We need Him every hour! They should write a song about that. And for those of you under the age of 50, someone did. A young wife and mother in 1872 was performing her normal household tasks one sunny June morning when she was suddenly so overcome with the nearness of God that she questioned how anyone could ever live without Him, whether in joy or in pain, and she penned the beautiful hymn "I Need Thee Every Hour." We can't live without Him whether we acknowledge it or not. His grace provides us with our very breath and the blood pumping through our veins, and His grace can walk us through every minute of every day in the assurance that with Him we can handle anything and everything we encounter, great or small. Thank You, Jesus!

1 Peter 5:10-11; 2 Corinthians 9:8; 2 Timothy 1:9

Saturday, January 21st: We were created to be relational. Relationships can challenge us and offer support in our pursuit to grow and change in godly, healthy ways. We live in a much more mobile society than our grandparents and even possibly our parents did. My mom lived in just two houses growing up, and that was only because they moved from the farm into town so my grandfather could open a garage in a rural community of no more than a few hundred people. My grandparents continued to live in that same home until they were no longer able to do so. This created such a sense of familiarity and stability, and part of this can be lost when we are constantly pulling up roots and relocating, even when it might be just to a different part of town. When God created the idea of community, it had more to do with His Church than with an address. Church is meant to be a place where you can be part of a larger family and be known in more than the most casual sense. A place where you feel a sense of belonging and recognition. When this is missing, we seek out substitutes for acceptance and community in bars, clubs, or even in gangs. Obviously when you are part of a larger congregation you can still have that sense of invisibility and not being connected, but in order to grow spiritually and become grounded emotionally it's important to have a smaller circle where you can feel safe to share. We need to move beyond superficial conversations which precede a hasty retreat back into our safe little bubbles. Iron can't sharpen itself; it needs to come into contact with another entity. This is what community offers. How can we know that what we believe is valid if we never test it or allow it to be challenged? What better way to strengthen our beliefs, broaden our understanding, and upgrade our arsenal of weapons for combating the enemy than to share with others who are fellow believers. Why do you think there's so much verbiage in the Bible about "each other"? We can't bear one another's burdens if we don't know what they are. In order to encourage one another and stimulate them to good deeds, we need to be in relationship. We need a community...a crew. Don't settle for stagnation, isolation and mediocrity. Become part of a small group and grow.

Galatians 6:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:11, 14; Hebrews 10:23-24; Romans 12:10-15

Sunday, January 22nd: The direction our country has seemed to be heading as of late tends to display a rather sloppy attitude toward what forgiveness really is and how it should be exercised. What forgiveness is *not* is pretending there was never an offense and that those who abuse the practice of being forgiven need never be held accountable. What's especially disturbing is that it's the authorities, the ones who should be enforcing the laws, who are promoting this bending of the rules regarding accountability. Students are allowed to rack up thousands of dollars in debt to obtain an education that is intended to afford them a sustainable income and then expect the government (aka tax payers – us) to pay for it and “forgive” their debt. Doesn't it say something in the Bible about considering the cost? There is a cost behind every act of forgiveness, and all of us need to let that really sink in from both sides of forgiveness. Our ability and our expectation to forgive are both rooted in the forgiveness we have received at the expense of Jesus' sacrifice. The cost was greater than we could ever afford, yet He willingly offered it. It was an act of acknowledging the offenses, but in order to receive the benefits of the forgiveness we need to be in agreement with Him that we don't merit but desperately need this generous act. This is what should cause us to cherish our forgiveness. And this can then become our motivation for extending forgiveness to others. It will cost us something; it will mean absolving the offender from their debt. Their acknowledgement of their complicity is then between themselves and God. You see, people don't need forgiveness unless there is guilt. Our responsibility is to extend to others what has been extended to us. May we pray from our hearts, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

Luke 17:3-4; Ephesians 4:31-32; Colossians 3:13

Monday, January 23rd: Sometimes we have this skewed idea about what pastors do all week when it isn't Sunday. Sure, we know they write their messages and prepare lessons, and maybe they perform a wedding or funeral or counsel with someone, but beyond that? They carry on their shoulders the profound responsibility of shepherding a flock – and in our case, a very large flock – that actually belongs to a very powerful Master. The duties of a shepherd in Biblical times were onerous: ensure that the sheep were fed what would nourish them as needed – milk for lambs and pleasant pastures for the more mature, lead them on the correct paths, protect them from hostile forces, teach them to stay together and to listen for and respond to his voice, lovingly provide discipline when they strayed from the flock. Our pastors carry these same responsibilities, and they know that the sheep don't belong to *them*, and that the very lives of the sheep in their care depend on their fidelity to the directives of the One to whom the sheep belong. We need to appreciate, encourage, and pray for our shepherds. Father, we ask You to faithfully lead and empower those to whom you have entrusted us that they may fulfill their calling with joy and excellence.

1 Peter 5:1-4; Col. 1:25-29

Tuesday, January 24rd: God, forsake me not until I have showed Thy strength unto this generation: Psalm 71:18 In Peru there is a member of the pineapple family, the Paya Raimondi, which may not flower for eighty to 150 years, unlike a desert flower which rushes to bloom after one brief rain. This plant waits for many rains before sending a flowering stalk over 40 feet into the air. Then a multitude of flowers bloom and send out a great quantity of life-bearing seed. Scripture reports that Abraham, Noah, and Moses required many years of growing before the fruit they were destined to produce could come forth. Thus, the Psalmist highlights an important role for seniors who have had many years of God's favor on their lives is to witness God's strength in their lives. Also remember not to grow weary in doing good. Be ready to witness both in season and out of season.

Wednesday, January 25th: THE LORD BLESS YOU: Every day can be a new beginning. Bring your thoughts before the Lord. Talk to Him like you talk to a close friend. Take time to dwell in His wonderful presence and let Him set the course of the day. "Give unto the Lord the glory due His name." (Psalm 29: ...) "Put on the garment of praise." (Isaiah 61:3) "Sing a new song to the Lord. Let the whole earth sing to the Lord." (Psalm 96:1 NLT) Paul gave this advice: forget about what lies behind and "press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:14 NLT) Now is the time to move forward with new zeal and a spring in your step! The Lord is on your side. Lean into the Lord. He is your strength and your helper. He will carry you on "eagles' wings." This new day, rise above and go beyond anything that weighs you down. The Lord's plans for you are for good. Look to Him to guide you. "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace." (Numbers 6:24-26)

Isaiah 40:29; Exodus 19:4; Jeremiah 29:11; Psalm 32:8

Thursday, January 26th: Even school children, at least those who have grown up in church, are familiar with the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego being thrown into the fiery furnace and emerging unscathed. Everything about them that was set apart for the Lord was miraculously protected from the fire – “...the fire had no effect on the bodies of these men nor was the hair of their head singed, nor were their trousers damaged, nor had the smell of fire even come upon them.” (Daniel 3:27) This is despite the fact that in his indignation and rage the king had ordered the fire to be made seven times hotter than normal, so much so that the men who threw the three Israelites into the fire *still bound* were killed. What struck me about the fact that they were still bound when they were thrown into the fire is that the king marveled that he saw four men *loosed* and walking about freely in the midst of the blaze, and he described the fourth man’s appearance as being like a son of the gods. There are many opinions and interpretations as to the identity of this fourth figure in the fire, but the reality is that we know it was the assurance of the protection and ever present power of God Himself intervening on behalf of those who honor Him and refuse to bend the knee to any other. Whether it was Jesus Himself or an angelic being is not the issue. What matters is the three were protected and unharmed by the fire because of a holy presence, and the only thing that the fire destroyed were the cords that had bound them. The men weren’t saved from the fire; they were saved in the midst of the fire. It’s the promise Isaiah had written about some 100 years prior. “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. *When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you.*” This promise still holds true today if we will just believe that He really is willing and able not only to protect us from the effects but to walk alongside us in the midst of our trials, reassuring us that we will come through unscathed. The outcome for Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego was the pagan king acknowledging the sovereignty of Almighty God and giving privilege and honor to these men for their unwavering trust in Him. We can rest assured that our King will also be pleased with us when our trust is firm because we know that He is a rewarder of those who have faith in Him and diligently seek Him.

Daniel 3:23-24, 27; Hebrews 11:6; Proverbs 3:5-6

Friday, January 27th: Lord, forgive us for wanting our ears tickled more than we desire to be fed what will challenge us, strengthen us, and cause us to push the pause button long enough to digest the truths that have the power to effectively change us. It grieves me when I hear people ask who's preaching on the weekend because it will determine whether or not they show up. Our answer to that should be that the Holy Spirit will be speaking but we aren't 100% sure who He's chosen to be the messenger. Granted, some deliveries are more moving to listen to, but if your doctor prescribed a life-saving medication for you I'm pretty certain you would listen intently to the directions on how to take it, and you would most likely prefer to have written back-up to reinforce those instructions just in case you forgot any specifics. To piggy back on that analogy, we also wouldn't want our physician to only give us reports to make us feel good about ourselves. We prefer a degree of bedside manner, but it is imperative that we be told an accurate diagnosis of our current state of health and what we need to do to combat whatever may be threatening that as well as changes we may need to make to equip us to stave off further attacks. A spoonful of sugar may help the medicine go down, but we need to remember that that's just a tactic to get children to take the medicine they need to be healthy. We are no longer to be children who have to be tricked or cajoled into doing the things we know are necessary for our spiritual strength. Pray that all of us would consider every time we are exposed to the word as an opportunity to not only be inspired and encouraged but also to be taught, warned, redirected and trained on how to live righteously.

2 Timothy 3:16-17; 1 Peter 2:2; 1 Thessalonians 2:13

Saturday, January 28th: Becoming like Jesus for the sake of others. It's one of the foundational beliefs or goals of Pure Heart. So what would that look like? The obvious answer to that question would be to search what the Scriptures have to say to reveal His character to us, not only from what others said about Him but what He Himself revealed through His own words and through His actions. When James and John asked Him to grant that they would be able to sit on His right and left when He entered into His glory, He told them they didn't really understand what it was that they were asking. All of us would have to admit that it would be pretty awesome to have such a place of honor. But Jesus' response to them was that there is a price attached to such a request, and that the real objective is to learn to serve others. He goes on to tell them that this was why He came – to serve and to give His life to ransom not only their lives but the lives of any who would accept Him as Lord. He even told them that, "The more lowly your service to others, the greater you are. To be the greatest, be a servant." (Matthew 23:11 TLB) The word that He used in that context for servant is *diakonos* and was used to describe those who advanced the interest of others even at the expense of their own interests, or one who promoted the welfare and prosperity of the church. We read in Paul's letter to the Philippians that even though Jesus was God, He took on human flesh in the form of a bond-servant. Paul instructs them (and us) to do nothing from an attitude of selfishness, but rather to humbly regard the needs of others and to serve them with the same attitude that was seen in Jesus when He was willing to not only become one of us but to offer Himself as propitiation. That means there needed to be a sacrifice made to cancel our debt of sin, and Jesus knew that the only way to achieve that was with a perfect sacrifice – Himself. He isn't necessarily asking us to give our physical lives, but He could be. What He is asking of us is to be willing to serve others in His name, whether that be feeding the hungry, greeting people at the door to let them know they are seen, or maybe even going to a foreign place (either around the world or around the corner) and sharing Him with those you encounter. We are to be good stewards of His manifold grace. Let's figure out where and how He would have us serve Him as we serve one another, and then do it with gladness. As Joshua said, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

Mark 10:45; Galatians 5:13-14; Philippians 2:3-8; Joshua 24:15

Sunday, January 29th: At a time when it can be so easy to become frustrated, irritated, and possibly motivated to speak out or even lash out with rhetoric that may be less than Christ like, it would serve us well to take a deep breath and seek to take some advice from wisest ruler in Israel. In Proverbs 25:15 King Solomon spoke to the urge to respond in a knee-jerk or argumentative manner. “By patience and a calm spirit a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft and gentle tongue breaks the bone [of resistance].” (AMP) And to put it in even simpler terms, “Patient persistence pierces through indifference; gentle speech breaks down rigid defenses.” (MSG) I like that. Two words that we don’t especially like to hear are perseverance and patience. We would prefer fast and easy, but in order to persuade someone rather than alienate them by trying to force our ideas and agendas on them, we need to use a gracious approach rather than a bulldozer. As an old saying goes, you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. Flies (and people) are more prone to be drawn to something that is sweet rather than sour or bitter. And the proverb suggests that it’s something that is practiced over time. It’s patiently and persistently being kind and respectful. It doesn’t imply weakness – only meekness. *Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary* defines meekness as: not easily provoked or irritated; patient under injuries; not vain, or haughty, or resentful; forbearing; submissive. And the Greek term for meek – *praus* – means demonstrating power without undue harshness. This is what ultimately brings triumph. Jesus even told us that it is the meek who will inherit the earth. It actually takes a stronger person to turn the other cheek and choose the higher road, but the long term outcome is so much better than simply “winning and argument” at the expense of possibly losing a friend or your reputation. To go back to the wisdom of Solomon, “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city.” Harsh or careless words only stir up anger whereas a gentle answer can stop the quarrel dead in its track. Go for the glory.

Proverbs 16:32, 25:15; James 3:17

Monday, January 30th: INCLINE YOUR EAR: "And be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable and perfect will of God." (Romans 12:2) The word will transform your mind and so your thinking will be in line with God's will. The word is "a sharp two-edged sword"(Hebrews 4:12) cutting out what is false and sowing the truth. You will find things of the world have less and less value as you "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly."(Colossians 3:16) The word of God satisfies the longing soul. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never disappear." (Matthew 24:35) The words of God are pure. "They are more desired than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb." (Psalm 19:10) The word will be your guide. Solomon penned these words to live by, "My son, attend to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Let them not escape from your sight: keep them within your heart, for they are life unto those that find them and health to all their flesh. (Proverbs 4-20-22)

Psalm 107:9; Psalm 12:6; Psalm 119:105

Tuesday, January 31st: Proverbs 28:14 presents something of a dichotomy. It tells us how blessed is the man who fears always! Somehow, the idea of fear and feeling blessed don't seem to belong in the same sentence, but the best way I can come to an understanding of what the psalmist is expressing is from personal experience. When I was quite young, my brother and our cousin and I "escaped" Grandma's house to go for a walk in the snow and possibly look for swans at the pond. We were sternly cautioned to stay off the ice! Of course, our adventurous spirits exceeded our healthy fear of our parents' admonitions and we walked out onto the inviting ice on the pond, only to learn how cold the water was beneath the deceptively appealing surface. The "fear" we should have had was not so much for the inevitable reprimand we knew we would receive, since the evidence of our disobedience was obvious. Instead, it should have been a fear based on knowing their love for us that was the basis for their warning. When we have that healthy "fear" of God – when we trust Him, being obedient to His superior wisdom which is founded on love for us – we can be assured that the result will be a blessing, and we won't wind up cold, shivering and all wet!

Proverbs 3:5-6; Deuteronomy 6:23-25