

Prayer Devotions
December 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.

Algeria

Persecution Type: Islamic & Clan oppression, Dictatorial paranoia, Ethno-religious hostility

Main Religion: Islam

Government: President Republic

Leader: President Abdelmadjid Tebboune

Mauritania

Persecution Type: Islamic & Clan oppression, Dictatorial paranoia, Ethno-religious hostility, Organized corruption & crime

Main Religion: Islam

Government: Presidential Republic

Leader: President Mohamed Cheikh el Ghazouani

Uzbekistan

Persecution Type: Islamic & Clan oppression, Dictatorial paranoia

Main Religion: Islam

Government: Authoritarian Presidential Republic

Leader: President Shavkat Mirziyoyev

Daily Prayers for December:

“You can never truly enjoy Christmas until you can look up into the Father’s face and tell him you have received his Christmas gift.” John R. Rice

Friday, December 1st, 2023:

Pray for Jerusalem

More than ever we are witnessing the intense need to be praying not just for Jerusalem but for all of Israel, Palestine, the Middle East and the entire world. David wrote “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. *May those who love you be secure.* May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels.” (emphasis added - **Psalm 122:6-7**) As an Israeli ambassador warned on a recent news broadcast, we cannot limit our attention solely on the immediate conflict because it is only a window on the broader scope of the plans of those who instigated the brutal attack on the Gaza border.

The hatred that is focused against the Jewish people is unimaginable, and the objective of their enemies is to wipe them off the face of the earth. But when we pray for the peace of Jerusalem, we need to pray for more than just a cease fire. Obviously, we desire to see the conflict and the hatred end, but the only way for there ever to be real peace is if they and their enemies encounter the Prince of Peace. Pray that the Jewish people would discover the reality that He really is their Messiah and that He came not only for them but for all who would receive Him.

“God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn its people. He sent him to save them!” **John 3:16-17** (Contemporary English Version) Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

Saturday, December 2nd, 2023:

Let God Lead and Sustain Us In Our Grieving

Now, more than ever before, I hear from folks that one or more of their loved ones have recently either passed away or been diagnosed with a serious illness. I've had my own personal experience with this as well, and it can be devastating. How do we deal with all this heartbreak and sadness? Will the pain that grips our hearts ever subside?

What does God say about grieving?

In His Word, God doesn't specifically tell us how should mourn. But He shows us that He cares about our grief. In fact, Jesus Himself experienced grief when He learned that His friend Lazarus died. Jesus wept. **John 11:35** Even though He knew He would raise Lazarus from the dead, He still mourned with Lazarus' family and friends.

It's so reassuring to know that Jesus has experienced our human emotions because He felt what we are feeling! Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. **Matthew 5:4** He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. **Psalms 147:3** Lean on God and allow Him to continue the process of healing your broken heart.

We can rest knowing that God loves us and that He understands how much we're hurting. Run to the shelter of the Most High. He is our refuge and fortress. **Psalms 91:1-2**

When we are grieving, God offers us His peace, and we stand firm on the promise that He is with us. We can draw near to Him in prayer and worship. He tells us, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. **Matthew 11:28**

While we're working through our grief, the most important thing we can do is stay in the constant presence of God. The Psalms contain many examples of pouring out ones heart to God and notice how many of the Psalms start out with expressions of pain and grief, yet they mostly end with loving words of praise for our Heavenly Father!

When we connect with God, we are able to open our minds and our hearts to the truth that He loves us. He is faithful. He is in control.

Sadly, seasons of grief are inevitable. But we have the hope of Christ, and we know that He is strong enough to carry our burdens. **Matthew 11:30** And we can find solace in the Holy Spirit, our Comforter. **John 14:16**

Let's meditate on this Scripture: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. **Romans 15:13**

Sunday, December 3rd, 2023:

My Portion Forever

My heart and soul cries out to the Living God. You are my salvation. My hope is in you. Your loving kindness brings such deep satisfaction to my soul. I seek to know you and the depth of your love. “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” (Psalm 73:25-26)

You are sovereign over the earth. You order the steps of a good man. Praise belongs to you. “Lord, what are human beings that you care for them, mere mortals that you think of them?” (Psalm 144:3 NIV) Yet you created us in your image. Glory belongs to you. You have created everything. “Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God’s work from beginning to end.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11 NLT) We have no excuse but to acknowledge that you alone are God. “Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness! Tremble before Him, all the earth.” (Psalm 96:9) Your sovereign hand is over the nations. “Cause me to hear your lovingkindness in the morning. For in You do I trust. Cause me to know the way in which I should walk, For I lift up my soul to you.” (Psalm 143:8) It is because of your love, I can say, you are “...my portion forever.”

Psalm 37:23, 2 Corinthians 1:3, Romans 1:20

Monday, December 4th, 2023:

Active Duty

There are currently somewhere in the vicinity of 1.4 million active members of the military in the United States. The latest census puts the population of the US at 331.9 million, so that means that we are protected against enemy assault by a mere .0042% of our entire population. We can feel relatively secure because we know that these are disciplined men and women who understand the concept of being under authority to obey their commanders.

According to the latest figures, there are approximately 210 million professing Christians in the US, of which 140 million are Protestant and 70 million are Roman Catholic. That's about 63% of Americans who say they are under the authority of God. If that is the case, I think there are far too many who would more likely qualify as reserves than those who are in active duty. Casual observation would suggest that there are far too many who are waiting for their personal needs to be met rather than volunteering to submit themselves to the discipline and sacrifice that are required of trained and battle-ready soldiers.

Friends, the battle is real and we can't wait until the enemy fully engages us to enter basic training. We should want to be numbered with the .0042% - those who have answered the call and are willing to submit to our Commander in Chief. It will involve stepping out of the crowd and giving up some things that are probably deterrents to our ability to be effective protectors of His Kingdom. If that small percentage can be entrusted with protecting our country, then a mere 882,000 Christians could stave off an enemy attack if they are fully enlisted. That's less than .003% of the population! Imagine the effectiveness and impact if we all answered the call and were willing to accept whatever assignment He gave us.

This is where the rubber meets the road. We'll have to leave some things behind, but the stakes are too high to allow anything to keep us from fulfilling His assignment. Consider yourself drafted and reporting for duty. Defend His kingdom and raise His banner. "You are my war club, my weapon for battle— with you I shatter nations, with you I destroy kingdoms..." **Jeremiah 51:20** And always remember, "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds."

2 Corinthians 10:4

Tuesday, December 5th, 2023:

The Hour Is At Hand

If you knew you only had twelve hours before Jesus returned, what would you do?

Jesus TOLD His disciples that His time was short, and the hour was at hand. But do you know what they were doing in the last 12 hours before Jesus was crucified?

Arguing about who was the greatest and sleeping.

And a dispute also developed among them as to which one of them was regarded as being the greatest. **Luke 22:24**

Then He came to the disciples and said to them, “**Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners.**” **Matthew 26:45**

These are the men who were the closest to Jesus. They were there; they saw the miracles and even performed some themselves. They physically walked next to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords; they KNEW they were walking out the fulfillment of prophecy every day. But they were human and “failed” as humans do.

If they had KNOWN, what would they have done differently?

I may not be physically in His presence, but I have seen His hand on my life. Yet, I am like the disciples. I worry about my greatness, how much better MY church is, and if my understanding of the Bible is better than everyone else's.

But I also look around, like the disciples, and KNOW we are living in the days of prophecy being fulfilled.

“**But about that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.**”³⁷ **For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah.** **Matthew 24:36-37**

“**But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.**” **Luke 21:28**

I don't know if Jesus is coming back in twelve hours or 12 years, but I do KNOW the hour is at hand, and I don't want to be caught arguing or sleeping.

So, what can I do? I can love people the way Jesus loved them, I can refuse to argue things that do not affect salvation, and I can be a light, drawing others to the one who can redeem them, Jesus. The hour is at hand. He can come at any time. Will He find His Church, His Bride, arguing, sleeping, or doing what HE called us to do?

Wednesday, December 6th, 2023:

Be Kind

In a world where you can be anything - be kind. What a revolutionary idea! "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ has also forgiven you. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma."

Ephesians 4:32-5:2

Some years back, the Army came out with the slogan "Be all that you can be..." Unfortunately, that idea has been twisted into the concept that there are *no* boundaries on how we interpret it. The original intent was to rise to our highest potential, but now we're being coached to believe that we can play God and choose to be anything that would satisfy our most carnal desires. This ridiculous (and ungodly) notion has been carried so far as to allow a man in India to marry his dog! All we *can* be is far different from what we *should* be.

It all comes down to free will. "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" **Galatians 5:13**. That isn't always an easy thing to do. In fact, it's often the exact opposite of what we want to do, but we must stop for a minute and figure out why we feel that way. A wounded ego? Jealousy? Unforgiveness? Judgmentalism? Identify it and deal with it the same way God dealt with our offenses.

"God our Savior showed us how good and kind He is. He saved us because of His mercy, and not because of any good things we have done. God washed us by the power of the Holy Spirit, and He gave us a new birth and a fresh beginning. God sent Jesus Christ our Savior to give us His Spirit, and He treated us much better than we deserve. He made us acceptable to God and gave us the hope of eternal life." **Titus 3:4-7** (Contemporary English Version) Since we are created in His image and have received the Holy Spirit, He has given us everything we need to make those right choices. Then we can display the fruits of His Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, *kindness*, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The Greek word used for kindness is *xrēstos*. "*Xrēstos* ("useful, kindly") was a common slave-name in the Graeco-Roman world. It "appears as a spelling variant for the unfamiliar *Christus* (*Xristos*). (In Greek the two words were pronounced alike.)" (F. F. Bruce, *The Books of Acts*, 368). You might recognize this as it is derived from an earlier Greek word which meant "anointed" and became the theological term for the Messiah. When you're being kind, you're truly being like Jesus for the sake of others. You can choose to be anything - choose to be kind.

Thursday, December 7th, 2023:

Have Mercy on Your Fellow Slave

When I write a hard-hitting devotional, it is not to attack or make anyone feel less. When I write, it is out of my real-life experiences and lessons God has taught me personally. I am a teacher by trade, so I learn best by teaching others. If I write about it, you can bet that God has been working me through it for a LONG time, and I have finally understood what He was teaching me! Forgiveness is one of those things I STILL wrestle with Him on, but I am learning. So please give me grace as I try to share what I have learned in hopes of reinforcing what I have learned.

Please read **Matthew 18:24-35**

Matthew 18:27-28

And the master of that slave felt compassion, and he released him and forgave him the debt.
28 But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe!'

I am that forgiven slave. I get on my face and repent and beg God to forgive me...then I go and choke those who I believe have sinned against me. Especially members of my family. The next group I have no mercy for is my Church family. I will find offense and hurt in areas that, in the world, I don't think twice about.

Why do I do this? God tells us pretty clearly that this is one of those non-negotiables.

Matthew 6:14-15

For if you forgive other people for their offenses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵
But if you do not forgive other people, then your Father will not forgive your offenses.

But I like to hold onto my hurt...my family should KNOW better; my brothers and sisters in Christ should KNOW better. *I* should know better. One of our awesome pastors said this, and it really hit home for me, "Offense builds fences."

When I cling to my hurt, my offense, I am building fences in my family, in the church. But when I forgive, I start tearing those fences down. This builds trust and repairs relationships so others can let go of their offense. And the freedom and healing keep growing. While it may seem like a tiny offense to me, I have no idea what the impact of my forgiveness will have on my family, my church, my community, and the world.

So, today, I choose to be intentional in showing mercy to my fellow slaves. I will assume the best of their intentions, I will give grace as abundantly as it has been given me, and even if someone did intend to hurt me, I will still forgive them. Because I have been forgiven.

Friday, December 8th, 2023:

The Bread of Life

Bread plays a significant role in Judaism. *Lechem* is the Hebrew word for bread, and it's used to represent food and sustenance; it's referred to as the staff of life. It's one of our necessities of life. The loaves of showbread in the Tabernacle were a symbolic acknowledgment that God was the resource for Israel's life and nourishment. When God was delivering the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage, through Moses, He fed them manna - the bread of heaven, and at the Last Supper Jesus broke bread to symbolize His body that would be broken for all of us.

There's another interesting Hebrew word that is linked to bread. The word is *beit* and it means house. When you put these two words together, you get *beit lechem* or house of bread. However, you probably know it as Bethlehem - the place where we find that which we most need for life - Jesus, the Bread from heaven who gives life to all who will receive Him.

In **John 6** Jesus was speaking to the crowd who had followed Him from across the sea after feeding the 5000. He was addressing the fact that they had not come because they saw signs but rather because they had been filled by the loaves. He first told them they shouldn't be so concerned with working for food which perishes, but instead for that which endures eternal life. When they questioned Him about this, He told them, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

He is truly our Bread of Life, and it is fitting that we find in Him what the world considered one of the lowliest of places: in a stable in the small town of Bethlehem - the place/house of bread. We will never find fulfillment in all those things that will eventually perish.

Saturday, December 9th, 2023:

Planting Seeds

Don't you love how Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables? Each parable described something familiar to the people living in that time period but with a new twist to it. While some of Jesus' parables might have made more sense to the first-century crowds than to us (since we don't commonly deal with sheep, talents and wineskins), many did not understand, including the disciples.

When speaking in parables, Jesus wasn't hiding the truth from those who were listening with an open, teachable heart. He knew they would seek to understand. But those whose hearts were unteachable never discovered the meaning. This still applies to us today.

In one of Jesus' parables, He taught about the farmer who was sowing seeds and some seed fell on the path and the birds ate it, and some fell on rocky ground. The plants sprang up quickly because it was in shallow soil, but they had no roots, so they withered and died just as fast. Still other seed fell among thorns and the thorns choked them out. But the seed that fell on good soil resulted in a massive crop!

The disciples didn't understand the meaning, so they asked Jesus to explain it. This is His explanation according to Luke:

“This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

At first glance, we may think this parable is merely a reminder that we need to ensure our roots are strongly planted in good soil. And while that's true, it also reminds us that we are the “farmers” and as we share the Gospel with others, not everyone will be receptive to the message or continue following Jesus due to a variety of circumstances and attitudes.

Yet it remains our calling to continue sowing seeds and helping new believers get connected so their roots are also planted deep in good soil.

Matt 13:1-9 & 10-23; Mark 4:1-19; Luke 8:4-15

Sunday, December 10th, 2023:

Holy Sacrifice

Israel in the Old Testament is a picture of the Church in the New Testament - the covenant people of God. In Ezekiel 36 God promised to return the people to the land and to cleanse it and make it fruitful. We see the partial fulfillment in several places, most significantly when Israel became officially the State of Israel in 1948. According to government statistics, only 20% of the land is suitable for farming, yet Israel exported \$716,000,000 in fruits and nuts in 2022. And even though there is much strife in the country today, God's promise still stands, and so do His expectations.

In verses **Ezekiel 36:37-38** we read, "I will also *let the house of Israel inquire of Me* to do this for them: I will increase their men like a flock. Like a flock *offered as a holy sacrifice*, like the flock at Jerusalem on its feast days, so shall the ruined cities be filled with flocks of men. Then they shall know that I am the Lord." (emphasis added) The blessing came with a new dimension of prayer. The increase would be accomplished through prayer and through offering themselves sacrificially. Does that sound familiar?

Paul writes in the twelfth chapter of Romans that we are to offer ourselves, by the mercies of God, as living and holy sacrifices, acceptable to Him. That means we need to be cleansed by Him first, because the sacrifices were always to be without blemish. Jesus accomplished that for us on the cross, but we then need to be willing to be offered up in order to accomplish His redemptive purposes. The shepherd/king David had the right idea when he penned **Psalm 141** "O Lord, I call upon You; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to You! May my prayer be considered as incense before You; the lifting up of my hands as the evening offering. Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips. Do not incline my heart to do any evil thing, to practice deeds of wickedness with men who do iniquity; and do not let me eat of their delicacies." (verses 1-4)

God has graciously given us access to Him through prayer to accomplish His purposes and to bring peace and prosperity to those who humble themselves, seek His face, repent of any wicked ways, and offer themselves as a holy sacrifice unto Him. (**1 Chronicles 7:14**) His promise still stands. Lord Jesus, quicken our hearts and minds and spirits to willingly give ourselves to You, that Your purposes on earth and for our country might be accomplished. We thank You and praise You for what You have done and for what You will do through Your Church. May we become the living sacrifice on Your altar.

Monday, December 11th, 2023:

Watch Your Mouth!

If anyone ever tells you they have no problem controlling their tongue, they're either lying or delusional. What they're really saying - hopefully unintentionally - is that they're a perfect person! James tells us that we all stumble in many ways, and if there's anyone who doesn't stumble in what they say, they're a perfect person and able to bridle their entire body as well. I personally only know of one perfect person, and He is now seated at the right hand of His Father. The rest of us have some work to do.

The tongue may be a very small part of our physical make-up, but it's the most difficult to control. James compares it to the bit on a horse's bridle or the rudder on a ship. Both are seemingly insignificant in size compared to what they are intended to control, but without them the horse or the ship would be out of control and at the whim of their surroundings. A horse needs a trained rider and a ship needs an experienced captain at the helm. You see, it isn't the bit or the rudder - it's the one in control who determines the outcome.

We know that we are all three-part beings - body, mind and spirit - and we know that the law of the Spirit has redeemed us and set us free from the law of sin and death. However, the flesh does not die easily, and we will be at war with it in our spiritual being until the day we draw that last breath. Until then, we need to be very mindful about what comes out of our mouths, and that will be a reflection of what we're taking in.

Jesus made it pretty clear when he addressed the Pharisees in **Matthew 12:34-37**:

"Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that *men will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken*. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." (emphasis added)

Our words have the power to heal and the power to destroy. They can help us to reach a favorable destination, and they can also leave us aimlessly adrift or even shipwrecked.

"Thoughtless words can wound as deeply as any sword, but wisely spoken words can heal."

(**Proverbs 12:18** Good News Translation) We'll never be perfect, but the more we fill ourselves with words of life, the more likely we won't wind up having to eat them. Ask the Lord, "Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips [to keep me from speaking thoughtlessly]." **Psalms 141:3** Amplified Bible

Tuesday, December 12th, 2023:

Christ Has Set Us Free

Imagine if you will, the nation where we live, being filled with corruption, division, confusion, hatred and injustice. All we have to do is turn on the news or read it on our news apps to know we don't have to imagine it; we are living right in the midst of it.

Don't you think if Paul was still alive, the United States would be getting a letter?! And he'd be writing in it ALL CAPS with boldface, wouldn't he?

It's interesting to think that nearly 2,000 years ago, the early Christians were facing many of the same challenges we face today – false doctrine, injustice, confusion, division. And that's why Paul was so passionate about setting the record straight.

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” He was referring to the old law.

When I read that I thought, well, we aren't slaves, at least not in the traditional way that slavery is described. So how does this apply to us? So, I looked up the definition of slavery: bondage, captivity or being held under control.

Then I began to think about all of the things we are slaves to today. Our cell phones. Our busyness. Our status. Our belongings. Our appetites for all sorts of things – food, sex and money. Our comfort. Many of the things that bring us comfort are actually controlling us and leading us farther from Christ. Therefore, we are slaves to them. Whoa!

How does the law keep us as slaves? When someone lives under the law Paul was referring to, they have to obey all the rules and submit themselves to their religious leader's system. Suddenly it becomes all about discipline and obedience and self-righteousness, judgement and pride. When we abandon grace for law, we always lose.

“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Paul showed us that even though we have been set free by Christ, we still need the Holy Spirit to control our lives from within. Through Holy Spirit's love, we have a desire to live for others and not for ourselves. We desire to live our lives to the glory of God because He is the one who made it possible!

Galatians 5 & 6

Wednesday, December 13th, 2023:

I Am A Gift From God

♪ Jesus loves me, this I know, For the Bible tells me so... ♪

I have known my whole life that Jesus loves me. But I was 52 ½ years old when I found out Jesus LOVES me, and I **am** a gift from God. Literally. God gave me to Jesus as a gift.

Once I picked myself up from the sobbing mess on the floor, my self-perception started to change rapidly. How could I discover that I am a gift from God and NOT change my perspective?

Let's go to the Bible. In John 17, Jesus was at the last supper with His disciples and began to pray out loud before them.

John 17:2 "just as You gave Him authority over all mankind, so that to **all whom You have given Him, ...**"

17:6 "I have revealed Your name to the men **whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, ...**"

17:9-10 "I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but on the behalf of **those whom You have given Me**, because they are Yours; ¹⁰ and **all things that are Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine; ...**"

17:12 "While I was with them, **I was keeping them in Your name, which You have given Me; ...**"

It is really easy to look at this and say, "Jesus was talking about the disciples. This doesn't mean me". Keep reading.

17:21-21 "I am not asking on behalf of these alone, **but also for those who believe in Me through their word,** ²¹ **that they may all be one;...**"

Two thousand years ago, right before He went to be crucified, Jesus prayed for YOU AND ME!!!! Because God did not just give the disciples to Jesus, but ALL OF US!!!

17:23-24 "I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and **You loved them, just as You loved Me.** ²⁴ Father, I desire that they also, **whom You have given Me**, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for **You loved Me before the foundation of the world.**"

Verse 23 was a whopper for me. If you had asked me before I studied this, "Does God love you as much as He loves Jesus?" I would have said, "No!"

But today, today I know not only am I a gift from God to Jesus, but God loves me as much as He loves Jesus!!! And just like God loved Jesus, He also loved me and you before the foundation of the world.

YOU are a gift from God.

Thursday, December 14th, 2023:

The Road Less Traveled

Most of us would have to admit that we prefer small crowds, especially when it comes to a church service...or a sports event. Don't misunderstand - we may love the excitement of the crowd, but we hate the disadvantages. Good seats are hard to come by and parking can be a nightmare! A smaller gathering is so much more convenient. As one pastor described it, we would prefer to worship at the altars of comfort and convenience. Large crowds are more difficult to control.

The problem with that in the church setting is when God moves, crowds gather. In fact, even when Jesus tried to find some seclusion, the crowds would follow after Him. When He needed rest and took a boat to the other side of the lake, the people heard of it and walked from various cities around the lake in order to take advantage of every opportunity to hear the good news He was sharing and to hopefully be witness to a demonstration of one of His miracles. In doing so, both He and those who followed Him were going against the religious leaders of the day. They were willing to risk losing their standing as good Jewish men and women who were welcomed in the synagogue.

We have to learn to “work the crowd”, so to speak, without fear or frustration. Peter feared the crowd that shouted “Crucify Him” and hid out with the rest of Jesus’ followers after they had seen Him crucified on a Roman cross. And then, Jesus once again radically changed their understanding by appearing to them and promising the gift of the Holy Spirit. Now Peter boldly addressed many from that same crowd with the pointed accusation that they had crucified the One who was their Messiah, and 3000 were baptized as a result. First, however, he had to assure the crowd that the elation they were seeing in the disciples had nothing to do with the consumption of alcohol! Peter no longer feared the crowd because he knew his message was life altering and worth the risk of confrontation from anyone in the crowd.

Rather than trying to blend in with the crowd, we need to be willing to take the route that may seem more challenging. Robert Frost described it as the road less traveled. If the name of Jesus is being lifted up and exalted, if more and more people are witnessing His glory revealed, the crowds are going to grow. At the same time, the crowds who stand in opposition to Him are growing as well. That means there are going to have to be more Christ followers who are willing to be all in and to stand boldly in proclaiming His truth. Just remember, even when it feels awkward and threatening, we have His Holy Spirit beside us, and that less traveled road we choose is the road to redemption and eternal life. It's well worth taking.

Friday, December 15th, 2023:

Saturate Your Soul

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16).

Colossians indicates that the Word should dwell in us richly. What better way to discover what God wants than to saturate our souls with His specific teaching! If the Word within us is rich, so also will be the guidance that God sends through that Word. There are biblical principles that we should know. Read the gospels until their teaching is second nature. Study the epistles and the Revelation. Immerse yourself in the prophets. Commit Scriptures to memory and feed your soul with them. There will be no specific guidance if we are disobeying the general principles of godliness that are ours for the learning. If this step is not taken, then we will not be guided well. Obey what you know. Refuse to disobey what you know, and then God can give (you) specific steps to take.

Lord, there are so many times when I don't know what to do, and wonder what Your will for me is in certain situations. Help me to remember to go immediately to Your precious Word, which clearly helps me to know what You desire of me, even if my specific need is not addressed. As I learn to dwell more deeply in Your Presence, please help me to trust Your heart to guide me.

--Adapted from **Power Praying (Hearing Jesus' Spirit by Praying Jesus' Prayer)** by David Chotka.

Devotion originally submitted through Harvest Prayer Ministries: Connection for Everyday Life Nov 4th, 2024.

Saturday, December 16th, 2023:

Time to Pray

We are surrounded by people who are hurting, scared, lonely, marginalized, or just plain frustrated. And maybe that describes us! We can't solve all the world's problems and neither can any government or other institution or ideology, but we have a powerful resource at our fingertips and on the tips of our tongues that we can't afford to ignore or minimize. It's called prayer.

When Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them, king Hezekiah prayed to the Lord, and the Lord answered through the prophet Isaiah "Because you have prayed to Me..." (**Isaiah 37:21**) The results were a complete defeat of the enemy, not at the hand of any military force, but as a result of the angel of the Lord striking down 185,000 of the Assyrian army. The question might arise - what if Hezekiah hadn't prayed?

When we pray, it opens the door to unlimited possibilities for God's intervention because we are acknowledging that any positive outcomes will be because of Him. Of course, James cautions us that we need to ask in faith, believing that He hears and will respond in His timing. It's not the same as wishing on a star. It's about putting our confidence in the One who created the stars, knowing that He is more than able to do beyond what we can even imagine because He's God.

Don't let the idea that you "don't know how to pray" keep you from crying out to Him or even simply talking to Him. Even the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, so if you feel a little inadequate, you're in good company. And Jesus didn't scoff at them or throw up His hands in frustration. He simply taught them to pray to their Father, who happens to be the creator and ruler of the entire universe but sees them as just part of the family. It's personal and intimate. And Jesus gave us permission to ask in His name, not as some magic formula but because He is seated in heaven with His Father and has instructed us to ask according to the Father's will and in the authority of the Son.

Every believer has that authority to bring our requests before Him, and that includes our own personal questions or needs as well as those of others. He has assigned us all to be His ambassadors. Ask Him to give you an awareness to the needs of others, even if it's the person ahead of you in the checkout line who might share an offhand remark about limited resources or a sick child - anything. Simply say - let's pray, and then offer up a one-sentence prayer to the Lord. Don't over-spiritualize it or look for a response. Simply move on and let God take over from there. In doing so, you're honoring Him with your willingness to bring Him into the needs of another and you're opening the door to their receiving a touch from the God they may not ever know. It's always a good time to pray!

Philippians 4:6; James 5:16

Sunday, December 17th, 2023

It's in the Details

I've been camping out in Ezekiel, and chapters 40-46 deal with all the details of the restoration of the temple and its dimensions, the division of the land, requirements pertaining to sacrifices and priestly duties...all in very specific terms. I have to confess that I found myself less than enthusiastic about my daily quiet time and I was questioning the Lord about why it was so important. I mean, SO much detail.

And then I was reminded of a familiar phrase, "The devil is in the details." That didn't sound like a very spiritual answer for me, so I began to do a little research, and as He always seems to do, God began to open my eyes. Both the history behind the phrase and an underlying truth emerged that gave me new insight. It seems that the original was a German proverb which translated "God is in the details" and was made popular in the late 1800s by German architect Ludwig Mies Vander Rohe who wanted to always remind one that a job well done needed to be attributed to a higher power.

So how did it get hijacked? German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche played on the original phrase to explain that when things go wrong it can often be attributed to a failure to pay attention to "minor" details. Isn't that just what the enemy wants to do? He wants us to minimize the need to actually follow the Word of God as the source of all truth. He wants to twist it, and he started his tactic long before the German proverb. His classic line is, "Did God *really* say?"

We have to come to the place where we acknowledge that "Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another - showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way." (**2 Timothy 3:16**) It's not just useful - it's essential! When we decide we can handpick the parts of Scripture we want to follow and discount the ones we don't particularly care about, we're playing right into the enemy's hand. Our God is the same yesterday, today and forever, and if He has given us clear and specific guidelines, we can be assured that the details matter, and any failure on our part to follow His instructions will only lead to a less-than-desirable outcome. Both He and the devil are "in the details" but only one wants to see succeed. **Hebrews 13:8**

Monday, December 18th, 2023:

Tis the Season

We've all heard the familiar phrase, "Jesus is the reason for the season." It's certainly true, and it helps us keep our focus off all the commercialism and instead on what the message of Christmas truly is. However, it would do us all well to shorten the message a bit to simply - Jesus is the reason.

God coming to earth to redeem us and give us not only the hope of eternal life but the power to walk in righteousness should be ample reason for us to be rejoicing and celebrating what He has done for us every single day of the year. This time of year, it's easy to get caught up in all the preparation for family gatherings and parties and candlelight services, but let's be honest; once all the celebrating has become a memory, the everyday routine can also distract us from focusing on Him and spreading the good tidings of great joy.

We can't allow anything to rob us of the wonder of who He is, and we need to take advantage of every opportunity He gives us to share that with those who either don't understand or choose not to acknowledge what all the celebrating is really about. Stores are more likely to be frequented with harried shoppers, and you might be amazed at the positive response a simple smile or friendly gesture might induce. It could open the door to a conversation and possibly even a chance to invite someone to church. More people are open to attending a service on Christmas Eve than probably any other time of the year.

Demonstrate what it means to be filled with joy to the world - and don't forget love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control while you're at it! Maybe through you "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light, and those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them." When He truly is your Prince of Peace, you'll extend the hope and joy of the season well beyond December because **He is** the reason. Unto us a child is born - Glory to God in the highest! **Isaiah 9:2, 6**

Tuesday, December 19th, 2023:

The Gift of Hope

Scripture: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." - **Isaiah 9:6**

During the Christmas season, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the ultimate gift of hope to the world. In a world filled with darkness and uncertainty, Jesus came to bring light and everlasting hope. His birth fulfilled the promises of God and reminds us that no matter what challenges we face, there is always hope in Him. Let us embrace the gift of hope that Christmas brings and share it with others.

Wednesday, December 20th, 2023:

The Gift of Joy

Scripture: "I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." - **Luke 2:10-11**

The birth of Jesus is a source of great joy. The angels announced this good news as they appeared to the shepherds. The birth of Jesus brings joy because it signifies God's presence among us and the hope of salvation. This joy fills our hearts and brings us closer to God. Let the joy of Christmas fill your soul and radiate to those around you as you share the good news of Jesus' birth.

Thursday, December 21st, 2023:

The Gift of Peace

Scripture: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." - **Luke 2:14**

Peace is often associated with tranquility and absence of conflict. However, true peace, as the angels proclaimed, is found in a relationship with Jesus Christ. Through His birth, Jesus brings us peace with God and inner peace in the midst of life's storms. This Christmas, let us dwell on the peace that Jesus offers, finding solace in His presence and spreading His peace to others.

Friday, December 22nd, 2023:

The Gift of Love

Scripture: "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him." - **1 John 4:9**

Christmas is a time when we commemorate the incredible love of God displayed in the birth of Jesus. Jesus came to earth, not as a ruler or a conqueror, but as a humble baby to show us the depth of God's love for humanity. His life and sacrifice on the cross epitomize love in its purest form. As we celebrate Christmas, let us extend and share this love with others, just as Christ loved us.

Saturday, December 23rd, 2023:

The Gift of Salvation

Scripture: "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." - **Matthew 1:21**

The most significant gift we receive at Christmas is the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. His birth marked the beginning of a journey that led to the cross, where He offered Himself as the sacrifice for our sins. Through faith in Jesus, we are reconciled to God and granted eternal life. As we celebrate Christmas, let us not forget the profound significance of Jesus' birth and the salvation that it brings.

Sunday, December 24th, 2023:

A Tiny Baby

Man was made in the image of God. Man was created in perfection but by deceitful temptation, God's beautiful creation yielded, and sin entered the hearts of all mankind. Then mankind was separated from God. Isaiah the prophet, proclaimed God's word in Isaiah 9:6 "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. "The stage was set for the virgin birth of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. In a dream, Joseph heard the Angel of the Lord tell him that Mary would give birth to a son and his name was to be called Jesus, "because He will save His people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Behold, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel" (which means, "God with us") (Matthew 21b-23) The innocent, tiny babe was born for the purpose of saving us from our sins. How was that possible? Jesus would one day be condemned to death, and he would die a cruel death. God's only Son, the Lamb of God, died for our sins by being crucified. Jesus sacrificed his life so we could be restored to our Heavenly Father. We celebrate the birth of Christ at Christmas because if we call upon him in true repentance, He will save us from our sins. He is:

"WONDERFUL, COUNSELOR, MIGHTY GOD, EVERLASTING FATHER AND PRINCE OF PEACE."

And so much more!!

Have you experienced the love of this Tiny Babe? Have you opened the door for him to come into your heart? "...Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Corinthians 6:2) Jesus died for us, so that we could know him. Jesus, The Prince of Peace, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. You are exalted!

Gensis 1:27, Gensis 3:1-5, Matthew 1:20, John 19

Monday, December 25th, 2023:

Great Joy

The book of Luke records the birth of Jesus Christ and as the story goes, there were shepherds tending to their flock of sheep. Suddenly, "...an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people." (Luke 2:9-10) What must the shepherds have been thinking about the announcement. What did it mean? What joy? And to all people? Here it is "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:11) Jesus, the Son of God, born to bring great joy. Jesus was born to save us from our sins. Jesus, the light of the world, born to bring great joy to mankind. The Son of God in the flesh. He walked as we do on the earth, but He was the sinless Son of God. He healed the sick, cleansed the lepers, caused the blind to see, raised the dead and fulfilled prophecy when he died on the cross. Everything he did brought great joy, including his death and resurrection. Heaven rejoiced at the birth of Christ. "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth, peace, goodwill toward men!" (Luke 2:13-14) Heaven rejoiced! We can rejoice because we too can know the Savior. We celebrate Christmas and proclaim the birth of Jesus Christ and all that it means. So, we also say: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" (Luke 2:14)

Romans 6:23, John 8:12, John 1:1, Matthew 4:23, John 9:11, John 11: 43-44, Psalm 22:1-18

Tuesday, December 26th, 2023:

Special Gifts

Most of us will be both giving and receiving gifts this month. Some will possibly be considered mandatory, but others will carry a special significance because of the relationship between the giver and the recipient. As Christians, we know the greatest gift is the Father's gift of His Son, and Jesus gave the greatest gift of Himself so that we might receive the wondrous gifts of redemption and the Presence of the Holy Spirit, who is God Himself coming alongside us and dwelling within us. These gifts would be representative of the Hebrew word *matan* which is "a gift given when the recipient needs something and the giver enjoys no benefit from offering this gift other than that he has donated to fill the receiver's need." (Rabbi Shiomo Aharon Wertheimer) They fill our greatest needs, even when we don't recognize them.

What's really amazing is that it doesn't stop there! The Holy Spirit has some very special gifts for us, but sadly there are many who never choose to receive them, or worse, refuse to believe that they're real or relevant. Would God honestly give us something that wasn't both good and for our good? Parents love giving gifts to their children that will bless them. "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" **Matthew 7:11** If we're going to become all we were created to be, receiving the powerful gift of the Holy Spirit is not optional. In fact, without Him we're setting ourselves up for mediocrity at best. Praise God, He has given us free access to the power that can heal the sick and raise the dead. All we have to do is ask. Why not put a heart that is in tune with our Father's heart on our Christmas list this year. "Now thanks be to God for His indescribable gift [which is precious beyond words]!"

2 Corinthians 9:15

Wednesday, December 27th, 2023:

Check Your Thermostat

We're in one of the seasons in Phoenix that requires us to regulate the temperature in our homes. Only a few months ago we desperately needed to cool things down, and now we require some heat, at least at night, in order to be comfortable. We check the thermometer when we're not feeling totally comfortable and adjust the thermostat accordingly.

According to Cheryl Sacks, our homes also have a spiritual climate, and as Christians we can either be thermometers that simply reflect the atmosphere in our homes or thermostats that regulate it. It isn't difficult to determine the atmosphere; the power of His Presence is reflected in harmony, joy, peace, love, hope, kindness, respect, humility. Conversely, a negative environment is characterized by chaos, control, hopelessness, bitterness, anger, sarcasm, impurity, fear. If we passively accept such an environment, we're just being thermometers, and you can be sure that everyone in that home is being influenced by the atmosphere!

We can't allow the enemy to be in control – his agenda is to steal, kill, and destroy. God has given us spiritual authority, but we need to ask Him to come and rule in our homes, and that means we need to make it evident that He's welcome there. We need to honor Him in our choices in music, what we watch, and how we personally treat and interact with other members of the family. The more members we can get onboard, the more powerful the impact. Worship and heartfelt prayer are two of the most potent weapons against the enemy. Use them. Be sensitive to the prevailing climate in your home, and when you sense a needed adjustment, become the thermostat! **Philippians 4:6-7**

Thursday, December 28th, 2023:

Pick Your Battles

When my kids were in their teens, I heard some advice that helped me avoid many frustrations, diffused many potentially volatile exchanges, and possibly prevented fractures or worse in our relationship. Simply put, when in a “discussion” over something that does not have damaging eternal consequences, learn to say, “You know, you *could* be right.” It was a good way to avoid escalation over something that wasn’t really that important.

Paul gave the same kind of advice to Timothy when he told him to avoid foolish and ignorant disputes. **(2 Timothy 2:23)** We would all do well to heed that admonition in all of our conversations. God is more interested in healthy, godly relationships than He is in who knows more than the other person. We need to value people over proving a point if the point is not going to have an eternal negative consequence in their lives. If it **is** something that is pivotal in their belief system, say a quick silent prayer and then approach it with love. And as a former principal once told me, sometimes “crazy” has a point! None of us truly has all the answers, so we should learn to listen with loving hearts and open minds. And if necessary, be willing to concede – they *could* be right! **Colossians 3:12-15**

Friday, December 29th, 2023:

What Would Jesus Do?

You may remember the WWJD bracelets back in the 90's that seemed to be everywhere. What Would Jesus Do? The idea was that wearing it as a bracelet would act as a reminder to stop and consider what Jesus would do before doing something that might be a sin.

But how do we really know what Jesus would do in any given situation?

The Bible tells us to look to Jesus as our example. **John 13:15 & 1 Corinthians 11:1** And we are told to follow in His steps. **1 Peter 2:21**

Our decisions must be grounded in the intentional truth of God's Word and not based on our own personal opinions. If you were to ask ten people what Jesus would do in a certain situation, you'd most likely hear ten different responses. We tend to have our own idea of who Jesus is and what He would do so our first step should be to focus on His example and make sure God's Word is what's informing us.

Can you think of a time when you were exhausted from your crazy busy day, and you got a call from a friend or family member who needed you to come over to help with a situation? I don't know about you, but my first thought would most likely be to ask if it could wait or to create an excuse for why I couldn't make it. But What Would Jesus Do? Would He ignore someone in need because He was exhausted or would He show compassion and help them? **Matthew 14:14**

How awesome is it that we don't have to guess or wonder what He would do? We already have the Word showing us exactly what He did do – and that's what we should do.

We need to be completely honest with ourselves when we feel the urge to do something we know isn't what Jesus would do. It's easy to justify sinful behavior and convince ourselves that it's "not that bad." Remember that the heart is deceitful. **Jeremiah 17:9** And our enemy who wants to destroy us is the father of lies. **John 8:44**

It's not enough to lean on our own understanding of who Jesus is and what He would do, we need to ask Him what *WE* should do. We should be praying, "Jesus, what should I do in this situation?" **James 1:5** It's vital that we seek the Lord's guidance daily, hourly, moment-by-moment. **1 Thessalonians 5:17**

By studying His Word and staying in contact with Him through prayer, we will know what Jesus would do, and by His example, we will also know what we should do.

Saturday, December 30th, 2023:

And That's the Truth

Josh McDowell's *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* and Lee Strobel's *Case for Christ* in some ways are just remakes of the Gospel of Luke. All three were written by very well-educated men who were presenting irrefutable evidence to the common man that the Jesus story was and is real. And God gave wisdom and revelation to two modern day non-Christians to give validity to His message just as He gave inspiration to a non-Jewish man to write a considerable portion of the New Testament. Matthew, Mark and John wrote from personal interaction with Jesus. Luke, being a man of science, in addition to relating the eyewitness account of the disciples very likely interviewed other eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus such as Mary, the mother of Jesus, and possibly Elizabeth and Zacharias, the parents of John the Baptist.

Luke was writing to a man we know little about. Theophilus was most likely a non-Jewish friend or acquaintance of Luke who had become a believer, and Luke wanted to give reliable and relatable evidence to him that all he had been taught about Jesus was true. Luke even wrote to him a second time to relate the powerful results that followed in the lives of those who believed - it's called *The Acts of the Apostles*. These two books comprise over 25% of the New Testament. For me personally that reveals a part of God's heart. Gentiles could only have a theoretical understanding of Jewish law and culture, so they would need things explained in "their own language" so to speak. God sent His Son in human form so that all of humanity could relate to Him personally. And that is what the Christmas story is all about.

I think God sometimes chooses reliable sources who couldn't be accused of being prejudiced by their own background in order to silence some of those who are skeptics. Interestingly, one such skeptic had been Zacharias who questioned the angel who told him that Elizabeth would conceive, and he was silenced for the duration of her pregnancy! Praise God, skeptics are given second chances, and quite often third, and fourth, and fifth...so, don't ever lose heart if God has told you something He wants you to share with a doubter and they seem to be reluctant. As long as He keeps prompting you, you keep pressing in, always combining the unmitigated truth with a heart-felt desire to see them rescued from the ultimate consequences of their unbelief. He wants the whole world to know. **Luke 1:1-4; John 3:16**

Sunday, December 31st, 2023:

My Hope

“I’m about to burst with song; I can’t keep quiet about you. God, my God, I can’t thank you enough.” (Psalm 30:12 MSG)

My heart longs to be in the presence of the Lord. You are my safe refuge. I know that you look down from heaven and see everything that is going on. You are in control. But at times, my heart is overwhelmed with the news headlines. It is easy to feel helpless when the world is spinning in constant chaos. Jesus told us beforehand that we would have tribulation. But he didn’t leave it there. He gave us assurance to trust him because he “...overcame the world.” (John 16:33) So, we turn to the Lord for hope. Our faith tells us we will spend eternity with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, that is our hope. Your word tells us, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord. (Isaiah 55:8) It is easy to put our focus on fear, but this is not how we are to live. Over and over your word urges us to “fear not”. “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” (2Timothy 1:7) I will seek your presence and let my praise rise to you. I will find joy in your presence. “You are my hiding place. You shall preserve me from trouble, You shall surround me with songs of deliverance. (Psalm 32:7)

John 3:16, Psalm 16:11