

THE CROSSING CHURCH

# RISE

37 DAYS OF PRAYER

2021



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# RISE!

## **Numbers 23:23-24**

*See what God has done! The people rise like a lioness; they rouse themselves like a lion.*

Welcome to 37 Days of Prayer: Rise! 2020 served as the gymnasium of God by which He produced in us new muscle for His plan in 2021. And so, we rise to the challenge. God has often used adversity to purify motives and strengthen character. David, Joseph, Moses, Jonah, Esther, Jeremiah, Daniel, Elijah, and more were tried and trained in the fire of adversity. And all of these rose to new levels of strength, courage and character to bring about awakening in their day. And so will we. Rise! Over the next thirty-seven days, we will set aside special times of prayer and listening. We are all learning and growing in our ability to discern the voice of God speaking to us. His promise is that we will “seek Him and find Him when we seek Him with all our heart” (Jeremiah 29:13).

I encourage you to organize your day to be sure you have time to pray.

Here are a few ideas:

- Predetermine a time where you are going to pray so you can be the most focused.
- Predetermine a place (it can be your home, office, car, or on a walk each day) where you can be alone for some of that time.
- Take your 37 Days journal and something with which to write.

- Read a devotional and underline things that grab your attention.
- After reading and spending some time in prayer, ask this question: What is the Holy Spirit saying to me today? Write it down.

I always have a separate journal that I will use for the entire year. This is for more lengthy thoughts and writing prayers. I encourage you to use your phone or a paper journal to capture your thoughts and prayers during this time. They will mean more to you in the days to come.

I am so excited for you and what God is going to shape in your life over the next thirty-seven days. You are a member of the Body of Christ and the Word of God to His church in 2021 is RISE!

*Heavenly Father, we dedicate 2021 to You. Glorify Yourself through Your Church. We are honored to love and serve You. Please bless this year to produce exactly what You have in mind. And by Your grace and authority, we rise to redeem this new year...in Jesus' name!*

# 1 DO IT AGAIN! *January*

*I have heard all about you, Lord. I am filled with awe by your amazing works. In this time of our deep need, help us again as you did in years gone by. And in your anger, remember your mercy. **Habakkuk 3:2***

A new year begins today, and with it we find fresh hope in this prayer offered by Habakkuk. Israel was suffering the consequences of rejecting God.

Their economy had collapsed because of drought, and their enemies were overpowering them because the protection of the Lord had lifted. In these hard times, this prophet remembers the works of God in the past and all the stories of the powerful provision of God. He appeals to God's mercy with a heart of awe and humility, "Lord, please have mercy on us now, and do for us what You've done for our ancestors. Do it again!"

2020 has been a warning from God to our nation. Like Israel in Habakkuk's day, we have experienced what life could be like if God lifted His hand of protection and provision from us. It has been humbling, and yet a righteous remnant remains. The restraining power of the Holy Spirit is still working powerfully through the church of Jesus in America. And we have His ear. He is a Father and is anticipating the cry from His children. Today, we start this new year with a unified prayer: Lord, do it again!

*Lord, we know of Your great power to save. We have heard of the great revivals of old and we've seen with our own eyes Your miraculous provision. By Your mercies, we ask You to save this nation. Please bring about a revival to Your church and work Your purpose through us. We know You have done it in times past. Please, do it again! Lord, do it again... In Jesus' name!*

# YOU HAVE AN ANOINTING <sup>2</sup> *January*

*But you belong. The Holy One anointed you, and you all know it. 1 John 2:20*

Let's settle this now. You belong, and you are anointed of God! Anointed simply means God Himself has selected you for His purpose and empowered you to accomplish that purpose. It means you are the exact person God wants for this time and this place in history. You belong!

This is important to settle because, inevitably, feelings and thoughts will arise that cast doubt on your value to God and His attention to you.

"Does this prayer even matter?"

"God is listening to important people more holy and productive than I am."

"Am I just kidding myself that God would even know who I am?"

Sound familiar? Of course it does, because these doubts are common to us all. Remember, we do not resolve what is true about God by how we feel or what seems logical to us. Neither do we conclude what God thinks of us by feelings and logic. We base it on His Word, by faith. Period!

I fight this battle often and have used a prayer proclamation from Scripture for years to counter this attack. Proclaim this over yourself today, for when you accepted Jesus, God gave you everything that is His Son's, including His anointing.

**Pray Isaiah 61:1-2 over yourself with great confidence.**

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, for the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed. He has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of the Lord's favor has come, and with it, the day of God's anger against their enemies. Amen!*

# SUNDAY NOTES



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# 3 GOD'S GOT A PLAN

January

*"People of Israel, listen! God publicly endorsed Jesus the Nazarene by doing powerful miracles, wonders, and signs through him, as you well know. But God knew what would happen, and his prearranged plan was carried out when Jesus was betrayed. With the help of lawless Gentiles, you nailed him to a cross and killed him. But God released him from the horrors of death and raised him back to life, for death could not keep him in its grip."*

**Acts 2:22-25**

The people who watched as Jesus was bleeding and suffering on the cross must have questioned, "How can God allow this?" "Where is God now?" or, "Why would God do this?"

The assumptions about God that resound within those questions are common. Either God is inattentive and unaware of what's going on in our lives, or He's causing it and malevolent about our experience. Either man's evil choices determine what happens in our lives and world, or God controls it. So, which is it?

Some time passed after the cross and the coming of the Holy Spirit before Peter would be able to speak to these questions. He states, "God knew what would happen" by the choices of evil men to betray and crucify Jesus. And those men were held liable for their choices.

Yet at the same time, God had a “prearranged plan” that would be carried out, despite the choices of man. Both the will of man and the plan of God coexist at the same time. But the plan of God cannot be derailed by the choices of man. In fact, God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

2021 may have some similar moments to 2020. Even though we cannot always understand the plan of God, we can rest assured that His plan is good. He knows beforehand what will happen, and His plan is undaunted.

My eight-pound poodle has to have at least one bath a week and periodic visits to the vet. In both events, he considers himself a victim and looks at me as if to say, “I thought you cared.” It’s pitiful. He doesn’t understand that what he’s experiencing is only temporary and completely controlled within a plan—my plan. And my plans for him are for his welfare. He may never understand, but it doesn’t change the goodness of the plan. God’s got a plan!

*Heavenly Father, we honor you today for Your sovereignty. You are never surprised or unsettled by the events of our lives. You have already seen this coming year and provided, in advance, for our welfare. Thank You! We place our trust in You and enter Your rest over 2021...In Jesus’ name!*

# 4 *January* DISCIPLESHIP'S END GAME

*"Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples – when they see the love you have for each other."*

**John 13:34-35**

This week, our focus is on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. What is a "disciple"? Ask any number of Christians and most would say it is a person who practices spiritual disciplines. Memorize scripture, fast, pray, worship, give, serve, witness, and much more. These things are important and helpful, but why? What's the endgame?

I spent most of my Christian life doing these things out of guilt, believing the endgame was to get God to approve of me more. I was working to please God and prove to Him how serious I was about obedience. The problem with that pursuit is you can never arrive. You never stop coming up short of how disciplined you have to be to meet God's standard. The question is always, "How am I doing?" The answer is always, "Keep working, because He's not satisfied."

Jesus brings us some clarity. To start, we have already arrived at being loved, accepted, and approved by God. At the cross, Jesus became our representative, and our desperate need for God's approval and acceptance was gifted to us. Praise God! You've arrived! As a disciple, we practice our awareness of that but we don't have to work for it. We receive it by faith. So why work the "disciplines"?

Jesus gives us the endgame. He said, "Follow Me in the way I love you and love people." He noticed the unnoticed. He was patient, kind, and merciful to every person. He sacrificed and served. Let your mind consider all the ways He loved people. This is what we are ultimately looking to achieve in our follow-ship of Jesus. The question is not, "How am I doing?" The question is rather, "How am I doing loving the people God has placed in my life?"

Let the Holy Spirit bring to mind each one of your family, friends, co-workers, and others whom God has placed in your life. Pray for the character of Christ needed in yourself to love them as Jesus would love them. This is discipleship.

*Heavenly Father, I am honored to follow Jesus in the way He loves. I thank You for Your Spirit who provides love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. Let these flow from me to those You've placed in my life... in Jesus' name.*

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# 5 GOD'S GOT A PLAN

January

*When Simon Peter realized what had happened, he fell to his knees before Jesus and said, "Oh, Lord, please leave me—I'm too much of a sinner to be around you." For he was awestruck by the number of fish they had caught, as were the others with him... Jesus replied to Simon, "Don't be afraid! From now on you'll be fishing for people!" And as soon as they landed, they left everything and followed Jesus. **Luke 5:8-11***

I'm so thankful for Simon Peter. Within all his bravado and apparent, assertive confidence, he was really quite insecure. All of us have insecurities to manage. He was trying so hard to mask a deep sense of inadequacy that probably haunted him since childhood, and the presence of true strength exposed him. I can relate.

Peter must have been thrilled at first for a "man like Jesus" to choose a "man like him." It was a dream come true. And as quickly, he recognized that this was the real deal...this was true strength and holiness, and his was simply a projection of such strength. He self-disqualified to avoid the certain shame that was to come when his real self was revealed. It would be like Arnold Schwarzenegger coming into my gym and saying to me, "I want you to work out with me. And when we are done, you're going to look just like me." Though flattered at first, I would quickly walk out the door without saying, "I'll be back." The difference between us is just too great.

“Don’t be afraid of Me, Simon Peter,” Jesus said, “and don’t be overwhelmed by the gravity of life-change that will be required for you to become like Me. I’ll do the heavy-lifting. There is no artificial timeline, and you get to start right where you are.” Something in Jesus’ voice caused all of these fishermen to leave everything and follow Him. They started.

I always have a bit of tension when I hear the word “disciple”. Having been a believer for all my life, the word can feel more like an accusation: “You should be more like Jesus by now.” This may not be your challenge but, for certain, anyone who looks honestly at Jesus and considers the call to follow Him will be challenged. God always calls us in over our heads so that we have to find His grace. It can be intimidating, but His grace is sufficient. Start today. Start right where you are, by grace.

*Lord Jesus, I am honored to follow You. I’m honored that You call me to follow. But my inadequacies rise to accuse and disqualify me. I need Your help. Today I receive Your grace and strength. I commit to continuing in growing to be like You. I’ll get a little better. I’ll grow a little more like You today...in Your name!*

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## 6 *January* THE DISCIPLE'S PRESSURE

*"But now I am going away to the One who sent me, and not one of you is asking where I am going. Instead, you grieve because of what I've told you. But in fact, it is best for you that I go away, because if I don't, the Advocate won't come. If I do go away, then I will send him to you."* **John 16:5-7**

Do you ever feel like you're just guessing about direction and the will of God? You're not alone. Until Jesus left, no one had to experience this confusion. In every situation, the disciples looked at Jesus' physical face and heard His audible voice. Easy. Clear. Yet Jesus said, "It's better" that He goes away and we have the Holy Spirit, whom we cannot see or hear audibly. "Better," not easier. We put pressure on ourselves because we presume the point of following Jesus is to "get it right" and perform perfectly. If that were God's goal, He would have kept Jesus here.

Here's the point: God is a Father who is training us, His children. He's the Master of parenting and bringing about the best result in our life. And, He's "old school."

When I was seven or eight, my grandfather would let me ride on his riding lawnmower and cut the grass. It was a thrill. But it was a little scary. The smell of gas, the loud engine vibrating, the churning blade slinging rocks as I ran over them... It was a large yard with lots of trees, and I'm sure it looked awful when I finished. Today, my grandfather would be in jail for child-abuse, but back then it was accepted. Grandad was "old school." He trusted me with way more responsibility than I trusted myself.

**Perfection was not the goal—learning to trust his trust in me was the goal.**

Paul knew that discerning the “perfect” plan of God was never the goal. He writes: *Now our knowledge is partial and incomplete, and even the gift of prophecy reveals only part of the whole picture! But when full understanding comes, these partial things will become useless.*

**1 Corinthians 13:9-10**

So, to all my fellow “perfectionist” thinkers who have placed a pressure on yourself to hear perfectly, take a deep breath. You’re normal. We are all working with “partial and incomplete” understanding. Take comfort. God entrusted the exact same Spirit to you and me as He did Jesus. Of course I trust Jesus to hear and obey. But, me? I trust in His trust in me. And with that, my faith and confidence can grow.

*Father, thank You for entrusting Your Holy Spirit to me. And thank You that perfection was accomplished by Jesus on my behalf. Help me to hear You more clearly and cooperate with Your Holy Spirit. I really, really desire to please You in all I do, in Jesus' name!*

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## 7 January THE DISCIPLE'S DOUBLE-TOUCH

*A woman in the crowd had suffered for twelve years with constant bleeding...She had heard about Jesus, so she came up behind him through the crowd and touched his robe...Immediately the bleeding stopped, and she could feel in her body that she had been healed... Jesus realized at once that healing power had gone out from him, so he turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my robe?" His disciples said to him, "Look at this crowd pressing around you. How can you ask, 'Who touched me?'" But he kept on looking around to see who had done it. Then the frightened woman, trembling at the realization of what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and told him what she had done And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. Your suffering is over." **Mark 5:25-34***

She touched Jesus to receive her physical healing. Jesus touched her to heal her dignity. For twelve years, she was required to isolate from temple worship and verbally declare herself, "Unclean." Religious law required it. When you tell yourself something long enough, you simply accept it. Unclean, unimportant, unworthy, unseen, unusable, unlovable, unappreciated...and on and on. I can so relate to this woman, not so much to her physical malady but to her soul. "I have need of Jesus, but I don't want to bother Him."

The disciples would witness this over and over. Jesus would heal the obvious need and then heal the person behind that need. He's doing that for someone right now as you read this. It's "you" He's healing. The real you.

Ravi Zacharias, the great apologist and evangelist who went home to heaven this last year, reflected this so well. He was often in hostile environments answering questions from atheists and intellectuals looking to attack Christianity, creationism, and the like. He explained, "I'm not answering a question, I'm answering a questioner. There is a person behind every question and that is who I want to answer." That's what a mature disciple sounds like.

Jesus "kept on looking" until this woman could be honored for her faith. When He called her "Daughter", her "unworthy" soul was deeply and wholly healed. Today, reach out to Jesus and receive your healing. Open your heart to receive His touch. You are not a bother to Him. You're not less valuable in any way. And, as disciples of Jesus, let's not just meet a need. Let's touch the person behind that need. That's the disciple's "double-touch."

*Father, I reach to You today for my healing. As well, I open to You to heal my soul. Touch me! Help me to remove every lie of unworthiness that repels Your love and affirmation of my soul. Show me those lies and thinking cycles. I break those cycles and receive, upwind of my feelings, Your touch in my soul...in Jesus' name!*

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## 8 THE DISCIPLE'S PRIORITIES

January

*And He turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. **Luke 14:25-27***

Yikes! This is a hard declaration of Jesus, but never skip the hard sayings in Scripture. At closer look, He means that the naturally accepted relational priorities must shift when you become a disciple. In fact, all priorities radically realign under His authority. We, the American church culture, have worked very hard over the past forty years to lessen the radical nature of salvation. We've made discipleship optional. So you can be a convert and secure your eternity in heaven, but not surrender your earthly life and priorities now. Saved, but not surrendered. With this new hybrid option, you say a prayer and glance over your busy life to see where Jesus might fit in. Jesus is an "add-on" to your already busy life. Just one problem: this is not Biblical, nor anything close to what Jesus died to provide.

Jesus directed us to be disciples and make disciples. So, instead of fitting Jesus into your life when convenient, you fit your life into Jesus. You determine to make following His example and teaching your highest governing priority. All other relationships and activities are then aligned by His Word, and life begins to make sense. He gives us no other option.

To be a great athlete or musician, you set a priority and schedule your life around that goal. To be a disciple is the same. None of us do this perfectly and it's not meant to be a weight of perfection. Priorities naturally shift over time and have to be realigned. However, discipline and intentionality are required. And for such requirements, He also provides the grace to accomplish them.

I am particularly troubled about this issue in the lives of God's precious people. Join me in self-examination and prayer.

*Lord Jesus, I first pray for myself. I want to be Your disciple. I need Your grace and truth to set and align priorities in my life. Thank You for Your Holy Spirit and Word that continues to guide me. As well, I pray for Your Church. Please help Your people and all of those who sincerely believe themselves saved, but have not become disciples. Thank You for Your mercy to awaken and save...in Your name, amen!*

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# 9 THE DISCIPLE'S REALITY

January

*I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.” **John 16:33***

Sometimes life is just hard! 2020 had “many trials and sorrows,” and those can raise questions and doubt. It’s in us to equate our circumstances with how well we are pleasing God. However, your discipline and obedience to God do not always equate to storm-less living. What if you lived better, could be perfect in holiness, memorized your Bible entirely, prayed often, and did great works for the poor? What if your faith were unwavering? What if He gave His full approval to you? Wouldn’t that insulate you from the problems of a 2020 or 2021? No! Jesus did all of these and suffered rejection, hunger, injustice, and death. Job’s friends blamed him for his pain, and sometimes there is simply no equating the two.

Sometimes, you simply bear your cross. Some days, the answer to the question, “Lord, what do I need to do differently to get a different result?” is just keep on going and endure.

Your “cross” is what it costs you to fulfill His call on your life. It’s not the same for everybody, because everyone has different callings. For instance, if you are called to encourage people in their hour of pain, then you can bet that you will experience pain for which God comes and meets you. He’s not called you to a cross that He’s not graced you to bear.

“Take heart” in the Greek means to have courage. God was not surprised by whatever surprised us. And He’s already overcome the obstacle. We endure the circumstance with courage, knowing that a God-ending has already been arranged. So, be encouraged today!

*Jesus, Thank You for overcoming the world’s trials, pain and stress. Thank You that there is nothing we will ever face that You have not already defeated. Thank You for grace to endure and for giving us perspective to see Your hand at work in our lives...in Jesus’ name!*

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# SUNDAY NOTES



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# 10 *January* JUST LIKE ELIJAH

*The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. Elijah was as human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for three and a half years!*

**James 5:16-17**

Say this with me: "Elijah was just like me!" Do you believe this? Do you know what that means for us? Praise God! I, like you, applaud the character and uniqueness of the people in The Bible. I admire their special place in God's heart and the unreachable, unattainable position they achieved because they were special to God. "Oh, to be like Elijah..." But alas, according to the Bible, I am! And so are you! Our goal this week is to overcome the intimidation of a life like Elijah's and join his ranks as viable candidates for the prayer-answering God to answer.

Some years ago, I was at a conference and was asked to lunch by the host pastor of that conference. He had pursued me on several occasions, but I turned down the invitation. Truthfully, I was so honored that he would ask me. But I couldn't get past how spiritually-inferior I felt in the presence of someone who had been used so powerfully by God to touch the world. As I was processing that missed opportunity in prayer, God corrected me for my self-disqualifying insecurity.

He brought a list of people to mind that I admire as great men of God. I wrote them down and asked the question, "What do You see in them that I don't have?" His answer was, "Nothing. You belong at that table." This didn't inflate my ego, but rather convicted me of thinking that I was so uniquely difficult for God to use. I wasn't too humble for God to use in ways equal to these men—I was too proud.

Today, accept personally that the Holy Spirit is saying this to you. There is no difference between you and Elijah. Your prayers can avail as much as his did. So, let us pray!

*Heavenly Father, I come in Jesus' name to surrender all my pride to You. It's my pride that causes me to resist Your love, mercy, forgiveness and power. Heal me from self-disqualifying thoughts and the "uniquely inferior" mentality. The blood of Jesus has qualified me. Thank You that I can call on You, and You answer. You, the God of all eternity, hear me and answer me when I pray...just like Elijah...in Jesus' name!*

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# 11 REPAIR THE ALTAR

January

*Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." So all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the Lord that was broken down.*

**1 Kings 18:30-31**

A personal "altar" is repaired by choosing a place you go to meet with God. For me, it's the church auditorium early in the mornings. I am fortunate to have access to our actual place of worship. At times, it's my office or my car. Other times, it's the hotel from which I write today. Choose a place.

A personal "altar" is repaired by setting aside a time. I love the early morning hours of the day, but we are not all the same. When are you most alert, able to focus and be alone? Choose a time.

A personal "altar" is built when we remember God and worship Him. More than a physical place, it's a place in our mind and imagination. Recall in your mind the times when God has touched you, provided for you and healed you. I believe God uses music and worship to mark times and seasons in our life. When I hear certain worship songs, I am taken to that place and time in my past. I can feel and remember what God was doing during that time. It's a memory altar. This morning I sang, "I worship You, Almighty God, there is none like You." It's an older worship song, but it quickly uploaded a familiarity with God's faithfulness established years ago. Choose to remember and worship.

I have a favorite Bible I use for my altar (quiet) time. It has passages underlined and highlighted. These are the special places in scripture where God has met me. I have kept journals for years, capturing the thoughts God has inspired. It's another way of building an altar.

Though "altar" is not currently a common word, it simply means a lifestyle of honoring a place in your life that is reserved for God, and God alone. Choose a time and place and be intentional. If, because of busyness and the challenges of life, your altar is in disrepair, repair the altar.

*Father, You alone know the deepest secrets of my life. You have a place in my life that is reserved for You and You alone. You call me, by Your mercies, to present my life on this altar (Romans 12:1). So, I receive Your mercies to allow me once again to rebuild this meeting place for You in my life...in Jesus' name!*

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# 12 *January* KEEP PRAYING, KEEP LOOKING

*(Elijah was praying for rain to end Israel's drought)*

*Elijah climbed to the top of Mount Carmel and got down on his knees (to pray), with his face between his knees, and said to his servant, "Go and look out toward the sea." He did, but returned to Elijah and told him, "I didn't see anything." Then Elijah told him, "Go again, and again, and again, seven times!" Finally, the seventh time, his servant told him, "I saw a little cloud about the size of a man's hand rising from the sea." **1 Kings 18:42-44***

There is a "see-nothing" stage to prayer and faith. Faith is the substance of something hoped for, the evidence of things "not seen." (Hebrews 11:1) Sometimes we pray and believe for long periods of time without seeing a thing. Elijah was believing God to end a drought but was not seeing any signs of rain as he prayed. He kept praying and kept looking.

Someone reading this right now is in a drought, not of rain but of faith. You've been praying a long time about a son or daughter, a marriage or a financial, emotional, or spiritual need. I have a prayer request that I have prayed for years with little activity that I can see. Here is the word of the Lord for you today: Keep praying and keep looking.

There is a point in our prayer life when we pray for things so long that we simply concede, "This is not going to change." Or, we become disappointed in God or believe we are simply not worthy of His attention. All kinds of things come up to discourage persistence in prayer, and it happens to all of us.

I've learned something about this particular prayer struggle:

*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. **Philippians 4:6-7***

I have turned over the “anxiousness” for this particular answer to God. It’s His to deal with. And, with thanksgiving for the answer to come, I pray and have peace. This is genuine for me, but it did take sincere surrender to Him. As well, like Elijah, I look for the smallest signs of God’s activity and add faith and thanksgiving. God is at work to will and to work for His good pleasure. Be encouraged!

*Father, Thank You that You are at work for Your good pleasure in our lives. You know the place of anxiousness in our prayer life. You know the person or issue we’ve prayed about for a long time. I still believe You are at work. I give You my anxiousness for the answer. You’ve got this and I rest and give You thanks...in Jesus’ name!*

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# 13 HELLO, JEZEBEL

January

*Jezebel sent this message to Elijah: "May the gods strike me and even kill me if by this time tomorrow I have not killed you just as you killed them."*

*Elijah was afraid and fled for his life. **1 Kings 19:2-3***

Some people will never be impressed with you, no matter what you do. You need to face it. Elijah has just led Israel in destroying Baal worship (or so he thought), called fire from heaven (which is pretty impressive), called on God to end the drought, and the rain is pouring. Then, 1 Kings 18 ends by saying, "God's hand came upon Elijah and he outran Ahab's horses back to Jezreel in the rain." (paraphrase)

Why did Elijah run to Jezreel? This is where Ahab and Jezebel lived. These two people had vowed to kill him, yet he runs to them. Why? I believe he expected them to say, "Thank you Elijah. We've been wrong about you all along and we repent. It's obvious how God's hand is upon you. You're awesome!" Jezebel was not only unimpressed—she doubles down on her threat to kill him! Elijah is devastated.

Everyone encounters the Jezebel experience. She represents that person in your life whose approval you "think" you need in order to fulfill your calling. Something inside of you secretly wants them to notice your value and honor it. Instead, they seem to dismiss what God is doing through you. You are unimpressive to them and it's devastating. They personify that voice in your head that accuses you of being misinformed about God's desire to use you. It is confidence-shaking to all of us when this happens.

So, what is there to do about it? You can become angry at your father, mother, spouse, child, friend or enemy to whom you assign this “spirit” and sometimes it becomes necessary to break a relationship. I have had to do this in the past. The other option is to retrain your mind to look for those who are receptive to the work of God through you and focus on them. Jesus told the disciples to bless those who receive their message and shake the dust off their feet from those who do not (Matthew 10:14). Keep moving.

We are all going to be opposed in our calling. It’s a sign that you are called. Pray for those who seem to dismiss you, but keep your heart pure. Focus on closing the opening inside of you that gives place to this opposition. It is hard and we all have to work on this. Be encouraged!

*Father, Your approval and calling is truly all I need, but I have been hurt and discouraged by the natural opposition from people. I realize this is part of being human and part of being called. I know You’re using this people to strengthen me. I forgive and bless those who have spitefully dismissed me. Thank You for healing me today...in Jesus’ name!*

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# 14 *January* OVERCOMING DISCOURAGEMENT

*And he prayed that he might die, and said, "It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!"* **1 Kings 19:4**

*Don't panic. I'm with you. There's no need to fear for I'm your God.  
I'll give you strength. I'll help you. I'll hold you steady, keep a firm grip on you.*

## ***Isaiah 41:10***

Elijah is completely spent. He did everything he thought God wanted him to do and it still made no difference. At least, none that he could see. Despair comes when you do the right thing and still get a wrong result. Ever been there?

And how does God respond to Elijah's depression? He bakes. That's right! (1 Kings 19:4-8) He baked a cake on a hot stone. No wonder we crave baked cookies when we're depressed. It's in the Bible!

I draw out this little detail to highlight the personal nature of our God. In the desert, Moses got a burning bush. Jonah got one big fish. The disciples got 153 little fish. At the tomb of Lazarus, Martha said, "Jesus, if you hadn't been late, my brother would be alive," and she gets a lecture on His resurrection. Mary says exactly the same, but gets a tear. Lazarus hears his name and is revived from the grave.

Sometimes we need a creative miracle and other times we simply need to rest. Sometimes we need to be anointed with oil and other times we need to stop eating things fried in it. Sometimes we need a word from God and other times we need to make a decision. Whatever we are needing, God knows. Everything is not spiritual. Sometimes its physical, chemical or psychological.

Discouragement has many contributors. Ask God for help today and remember that He knows exactly where to start. He is so wise.

*Father, You are filled with all wisdom and know exactly where to start my healing process. Thank You for being so attentive to my life. I submit any despair or discouragement trying to birth in my life. And thank You that You've already established the path to my healing ....in Jesus' name!*

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# 15 *January* EARTHQUAKE, WIND & FIRE

*"Go out and stand before me on the mountain," the Lord told him. And as Elijah stood there, the Lord passed by, and a mighty windstorm hit the mountain. It was such a terrible blast that the rocks were torn loose, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire there was the sound of a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. **1 Kings 19:11-13***

Elijah was well aware of where God had taken him. He was at Horeb, better known as Mt. Sinai, where Moses had received the law and seen the glory of God. God revealed Himself to Israel there in earthquakes, fire and great demonstration. I've always read this encounter between God and Elijah as a point of impatience on God's part. The tone seems harsh, but it's actually just the opposite. God was being very gentle with Elijah. He was showing His great and awesome power while being gentle with how He was healing Elijah's heart.

Isaiah describes the coexistence of both a tender, gentle healer...a Servant-King:

*"A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench; He will bring forth justice for truth. He will not fail nor be discouraged, till He has established justice in the earth; And the coastlands shall wait for His law."*

**Isaiah 42:3-4**

A “bruised reed” refers to a person who looks good on the outside but is inwardly crushed and broken. It takes gentle hands to repair a reed like this and keep from breaking it. A smoking candle refers to person who has no more fuel. “I’m done. I’ve got nothing left.” This was Elijah.

At the same time, God is a God who “established justice.” This means to set things right. He puts all things in right relationship to all other things. It takes Kingly authority and power to do this. Elijah was experiencing the God of the gentle, healing whisper, as well as the King of justice who can answer with fire and earthquakes. He was healing Elijah while reassuring Him of His authority and justice against his enemies. The God who holds you gently is the all-powerful King of justice. Be encouraged!

*Lord God, You heal and protect me. You speak gently to me and I am comforted. You roar with all authority at my enemy, and I am safe. Thank You for not shaming me for my weakness. You restore my soul and I have great hope in You...in Jesus’ name!*

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# 16 *January* WHAT'S NEXT?

*So he (Elijah) departed from there and found Elisha plowing with twelve pairs of oxen... Elijah passed over to him and threw his mantle on him. He (Elisha) left the oxen and ran after Elijah ... Elisha took the pair of oxen and sacrificed them...arose and followed Elijah. **1 Kings 19:19-20:1***

What's next? Does God even know what's next for you and for me in 2021?

Elisha has been getting up every morning for years working the family farm. His dad presumed he would inherit the farm, as all good Jewish sons do, but Elisha had an inner tension privately brewing as he plowed behind those oxen. "Is this really why I'm here on this earth?" "Why am I so restless and imagining life beyond the farm?" "Is there a 'what's next' for me?"

Elisha did not have a clue that God had been preparing his "next" on Mt. Sinai while talking to Elijah. God had placed that restlessness inside of him so that by the time Elijah walked past him, he would run after him.

How about you? There are a few of these opportunities in a lifetime. A season of life once fruitful and fulfilling has become safe and familiar. A battle is waging inside that no one knows about but you and God. Do I stay here on the familiar farm or run after the unknown God-opportunity that's passing by? Faith vs familiar?

In my youth, I was blessed to have a musical gift. Playing bass guitar came very easy to me and my identity was shaped around being the “bass player.” But a private inner tension kept challenging me that there must be more to my life. In premarital counseling, a pastor surprisingly asked me to be the Student Pastor of his church. I laughed at him and turned him down. But that night, I couldn’t sleep and realized his invitation was my Elijah passing by. And, I ran back to the church to quickly accept the very next day. Like Elisha, I had no experience, knew nothing of where it may lead, but somehow knew I was to drop everything and follow that opportunity. That’s was 30+ years ago.

I’ve had several versions of this experience as God leads me from one season of focus to another. He always knows what’s next. He’s the one stirring you now and “familiar” will likely be the biggest challenge to your faith.

So, what will it be? Elijah is passing by. What’s next?

*Heavenly Father, I want to do Your will. I want to follow You. Help me not miss or shrink back from the next opportunity You have for me. I trust You to keep leading me and I will be faithful...in Jesus’ name!*

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# SUNDAY NOTES



# 17 *January* BE TOUGH & WIN ANYWAY

*Then the king promoted Daniel to a high position in the kingdom, lavished him with gifts, and made him governor over the entire province of Babylon and the chief in charge of all the Babylonian wise men. **Daniel 2:48***

The Bible could be retitled, "Letters from A Loving Father." Knowing that God carefully and intentionally pinned these sixty-six letters to speak to me, I like to boil down the overall theme for each letter after reading it. For me, Father God wrote the letter of Daniel to ensure I get this message: Be Tough and Win Anyway!

Here, Daniel has been taken from his home country as a teenager, enslaved, and forced to learn a foreign language and culture. Dreams of marriage and family forever dashed as he was likely made a eunuch. He would never see his mother, father, or homeland again. Yet, we see how God raised him up in the worst of dream-dashed circumstances to succeed and prosper anyway.

Rise! That's the word of God for you during these thirty-seven days. 2020 was a "dream-dashing" year. Hopes and plans for how life would turn out were, in some cases, forever destroyed. Perhaps you're facing the death of a hope. The death of a hope for your health, finances, family, business, child, or some other area of life. God has a word for you. There is another way things can turn out. He is never defeated. You can win anyway.

*Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us ... And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.*

**Romans 8:26-29**

Be encouraged, today! The way we envision our success may not happen, but God is never limited on the ways He can work things out for His glory and your good. Rise! Win anyway!

*Father, Thank You that You are at work in my life. I release my plans and hopes for the way I thought things would turn out. I trust You, regardless of these circumstances. You wrote a letter just for me in the Bible to make sure I knew I could still rise. I can win anyway...in Jesus' name!*

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# 18 TOUGH-MINDED

January

*But Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's choice food or with the wine which he drank; so he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself. **Daniel 1:8***

Babylon took control of Daniel's circumstances, but Daniel refused to give his circumstances control of his mind and character. He made up his mind. You and I must do the same.

Faith and fear coexist at the same time in each of us. Faith is our "pro-active" determination to believe God. Fear is our "re-active" response to our circumstances. If we do not make up our minds to trust God, then we will naturally be controlled by reacting to our circumstances. Our mood and character will be controlled by the events of the day. It's a choice. Make up your mind.

Our "Babylon" is the cultural worship of sensitivity and feelings. It seems well and good, but it's a demonic strategy to enslave Godly character and sacrifice Biblical truth at the altar of emotion. Sadly, a majority of America has bought in. I cannot control the culture in which I live, but I can control how I think. I have made up my mind and I am stable. My feelings will not control my thinking, and my circumstances will not dictate my mood for the day. I have made up my mind and so can you. You're stronger than you think!

This is God's word to you, today:

*You (God) will guard him and keep him in perfect and constant peace whose mind [both its inclination and its character] is stayed on You, because he commits himself to You, leans on You, and hopes confidently in You.*

**Isaiah 26:3**

**Be tough minded!**

*Heavenly Father, You've not allowed circumstances in my life to go beyond what I'm capable of enduring and overcoming. I have the mind of Christ.*

*I can think like He thinks in every situation. Fill me with Your Spirit.*

*Empower me, today, to subdue my feelings, take thoughts captive, and be tough-minded...in Jesus' name!*

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# 19 *January* TOUGH PERSPECTIVE

*Hey there! All who are thirsty, come to the water! Are you penniless? Come anyway – buy and eat! Come, buy your drinks, buy wine and milk. Buy without money – everything’s free! Why do you spend your money on junk food, your hard-earned cash on cotton candy? Listen to me, listen well: Eat only the best, fill yourself with only the finest. Pay attention, come close now, listen carefully to my life-giving, life-nourishing words. I’m making a lasting covenant commitment with you, the same that I made with David: sure, solid, enduring love. **Isaiah 55:1-3***

Today, I am intrigued by what’s not in the book of Daniel. Daniel, unlike Elijah, never asks, “Why is this happening to me?” It would have been a legitimate question, but he knew. He was familiar with the prophecies of Isaiah who predicted this discipline of God:

*And they shall take away some of your sons who will descend from you, whom you will beget; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon. **Isaiah 39:7***

Even when we are in terrible circumstances, we can find peace and strength if we can see what God is accomplishing through those difficulties. Israel had lost their love and loyalty to God. Babylon was God’s tool of discipline, but not simply to satisfy His anger and justice. In His love for people, He was giving them the “thirst” to draw them back to Him. Do you see it?

Could it be that the God who gives water freely also gives “thirst”? Or that the God who gives the bread of life also provides the “hunger”? He’s the God of all comfort so could He, as well, provide the “discomfort”? Re-read the verses from Isaiah 55 above with this perspective of His love.

God loves people so much that He can awaken the soul-thirst in a person that they may be returned to Him. Is there someone in your life that needs to be saved? Pray, today, for God to supply the “thirst” and trust Him, even if circumstances in that person’s life become uncomfortable. Tough perspective.

*Jesus, You are the Bread of Life and the Living Water. I ask You, today, to create the thirst and hunger necessary to save my friends and family. Draw them to Yourself. If I must endure hardship with them so that they can recognize their thirst and be saved, then so be it...in Jesus’ name!*

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## 20 *January* TOUGH WORSHIP

*"If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. But even if he doesn't, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up."* **Daniel 3:17-18**

This is as real as it gets. Three young men determined that their worship was reserved purely for the One deserving and, when brought to the place of reckoning, they stood for God. How can you not love their toughness? "We know our God is able to save us from your authority, but even if He does not save us, let me make it clear: We won't bow."

It's effortless to worship God for wonderful things He's done in the past and/or the exciting things we anticipate for the future. But when you're in the "now" of a threatening opposition, it takes tough worship. These men stood for God, but He didn't rescue them from the fire—He came into their fire and went through it with them.

Chris Davenport of Hillsong United wrote a song called, "Another in the Fire." He got the concept and began writing it with another writer who was going through tough times. Just before the song was to be recorded, he received a diagnosis of autism for his two-year-old son. Devastated and disappointed in God, he backed out of the recording. He said, "I'm not sure I really believe anymore." His friends rallied to him and challenged him to worship God in the middle of his "fire," and he did. It was powerful! You can watch that night of worship on YouTube. I encourage you to go do just that.

*O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; And in the night season, and am not silent. But You are holy, Enthroned in the praises of Israel.*

**Psalm 22:2-3**

Praise enthrones Jesus as King over the ground you're on now. The situation you're in now becomes holy ground. Praise Him upwind of your feelings. Enthroned Him as King of your fiery furnace. This is tough worship.

*Heavenly Father, we enthrone You King of our life. You are worthy of praise when things are going great and You are worthy when I'm in difficulty and do not understand Your plan. I know there will be Another in the fire, standing next to me. You are the God of my "now." You are always with me.*

*I praise You, today...in Jesus' name!*

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# 21 *January* TOUGH CONVERT

*Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down. **Daniel 4:37***

Wait—did that say Nebuchadnezzar praised God?! Yes!

If you've had a chance to read the book of Daniel, you know Nebuchadnezzar is the villain. The bad guy. He attacked Jerusalem and took the best and brightest captive. He stole all the gold and silver elements from the Temple of Solomon for himself, then he destroyed the temple. He attacked a second time, killing thousands and completely destroying the city. He had Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego put in a fiery furnace for not worshipping his god. He was a narcissistic, cruel, heartless, idol-worshipping, pagan king—and that was his “good” side.

At first read, it appears that the king of Babylon took Daniel captive. However, a second read reveals how God took Nebuchadnezzar captive through Daniel. He had never met anyone with a God like Daniel's. Captivated! God would give Nebuchadnezzar dreams, and Daniel would interpret them. On several occasions, he made laws to protect the worship of God. Ultimately, God humbled him to the point of madness. He went insane and ate grass with the cattle until he was humbled, then God restored his mind, his fortunes, and his greatness. Best of all, Nebuchadnezzar opened his mind and heart to the greatness of God. And by all appearances, Nebuchadnezzar went to his grave as a worshipper of God. How about that for Old Covenant grace?

No one—no one—is too far gone for the aggressive grace of God to find and redeem them. We have baptized people in our church whom no one could believe. “I just can’t believe they got saved.” I love it!

Today, let us pray for those people you think impossible to be saved, and let’s be encouraged to never give up on anybody. Nothing is impossible for our God, and no sin is any match for the blood of Jesus. Be encouraged!

*Jesus, today, I thank You for Your sacrifice. Thank You for the gospel. I believe the gospel is the power of God to save anyone. I pray for the power of God to overtake the most unlikely candidates for salvation. I pray in faith for them, today...in Jesus’ name!*

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## 22 TOUGH TRUST *January*

*"My God sent his angel to shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, for I have been found innocent in his sight. And I have not wronged you, Your Majesty." The king was overjoyed and ordered that Daniel be lifted from the den. Not a scratch was found on him, **for he had trusted in his God.***

***Daniel 6:22-23***

This is my favorite story from the book of Daniel. After being deceitfully set up by dishonest politicians, Daniel was sentenced to die in a lions' den. The king regretted signing the law, but could do nothing to stop it. Daniel was guilty of prayer to God. He was dropped into a den of hungry lions (that's never good). After a sleepless night, the king rushed to the den to see if Daniel survived. God saved him from the lions as an angel shut their mouths. The evil politicians were sentenced to that same lions' den, and the big cats crushed them and their families before they hit the ground. Daniel trusted in his God.

Trust God. Two simple words so familiar they've lost their gravity. Trust God! You will mouth the words as you read aloud the following,

*"Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge God and He will make you paths straight."*

***Proverbs 3:5***

You likely learned this in a Sunday School class or at the knee of a godly mother like I did. Trust God. I don't doubt we are Bible-believing. I do question if we are Bible-functioning. We give hearty assent and applause in our minds to this admonition to trust God but, when we get to the lions' den, will we trust God?

In the early 90's, my sister died at a young age of cancer. I was trusting God for a different outcome, but was disappointed. Just before she passed, God asked me a question: "If I don't heal her, will you trust me anyway?" I ultimately said, "Yes...I've got nowhere else to go." I was trusting God for an outcome, as we all do at times, but when that outcome wasn't met, I got the chance to trust in a Person in the middle of a disappointing outcome. That's tough trust.

We will all face some version of this. I encourage you as strongly as I can to refresh your trust in God. In the coming years, times are going to become more difficult. We must trust Him even when the circumstances make no sense. You can do this. Tough trust.

*Father, I trust You. I place my trust in You. You set the boundaries of blessing and challenges. You tell the attacker, "This far, but no further." You hold time in Your hand and say, "This long, but not forever." Even when I do not understand Your ways, I will trust You. I trust You, God! In Jesus' name!*

23  
January

## OUR REASON FOR TOUGHNESS

*(Daniel's Vision of Final Judgment)*

*I watched as thrones were put in place and the Ancient One sat down to judge. His clothing was as white as snow, his hair like purest wool.*

*He sat on a fiery throne with wheels of blazing fire,  
and a river of fire was pouring out, flowing from his presence.*

*Millions of angels ministered to him; many millions stood to attend him.*

*Then the court began its session, and the books were opened.*

*As my vision continued that night, I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal—it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed. **Daniel 7:9-10; 13-14***

Daniel is a book of prophecy. The last third of the book deals with the last days of earth and the ultimate judgment for mankind. This is a chilling scene. The courtroom is prepared and the throne of God is in place. Millions of angels, millions of men, women, boys and girls from every tribe and tongue surround this great court. "All rise!" The Ancient of Days comes into that courtroom in indescribable glory and power. He takes His seat and opens the books. He begins making final judgments on kings, rulers, the anti-Christ, one after the other being subdued by His awesome judgment. It is final!

And then, another enters the courtroom. It's the "Son of Man." It's Jesus! It's the Lamb of God, the Savior. It's the Advocate of all who have given their lives to God through Him. And in power and justice, He displays the stripes and scars of His sacrifice. He calls for justice. "I plead on my client's defense. I plead the blood. I paid their penalty. Your justice has been satisfied!"

We will all experience this moment. And as we sit today, I am so aware of this fleshly tent that would not survive His holy judgment. But because of Jesus, this will be a wonderful and glorious day. He will stand me before God, holy and blameless on this awesome occasion. Thank You, Jesus!

Let Jude lead our final prayer and praise as we conclude our time with Daniel. All RISE!

*Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen (Jude 24-25).*

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# SUNDAY NOTES



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# 24 *January* DISCOVER PURPOSE & MEANING

*As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.*

**Genesis 50:20-21**

Much is made of the word “purpose,” today. It’s a cultural buzzword and commonly used as if we all mean the same thing when we say it. Immediately, thoughts ignite of personal achievement (college, career), meaningful relationships, acquiring money/possessions, recognition of others (what others think), or reaching the point of being able to play hard (travel, leisure, etc.).

No matter where you go to find it or how you medicate your soul because you feel a void, life has no meaning without purpose. So, what do we do? This week we will answer that question as we walk with Joseph and ask the question, “What is the purpose of God for my life?”

**First: It all starts with God.**

*For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels – everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him* **Colossians 1:16**

**Second: It will ultimately find its result with people.** For God so loved the world (precious people) ...that He took action and gave His only Son to that ultimate purpose.

Joseph discovered the purpose for his trials, pain, long-waits, and injustice. He found greater meaning from God when he realized he was chosen by God to “preserve many people alive.”

We all thirst for purpose and meaning. We usually ask, “What am I supposed to do?” The better question is, “To whom has God sent me?” God is shaping your life by the chisel of pain and grace to reach people. So, what person or persons have you been designed to save? Think about it!

*Heavenly Father, warm my heart toward the person or people I am to touch, today. Stir compassion in me and teach me to be sensitive to Your nudges towards others. All the pain and struggle I've been through in life, please use it for Your purpose. Use me, in Jesus' name!*

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# 25 *January* GOD CHOSE YOU

*"I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb.*

*Before you were born I set you apart  
and appointed you as my prophet to the nations." **Jeremiah 1:5***

*You didn't choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce  
lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my  
name. **John 15:15-16***

That's amazing! God knew us before we were born, and He determined the reason we would be meaningful to His plan on the earth. Every human is born with God's blueprint planted on the inside of him/her. If we never meet the Architect, we never understand His blueprints. Adam and Eve spilled the purpose puzzle-box all over the ground. How and where we fit became confusing until Jesus came. When we accept Jesus as Savior, we surrender to the Architect, the One who holds the box cover, and we can now be "fitly joined together" in our right place in the plan. It starts with God and salvation.

If we don't know God or we are not convinced that He has chosen us, we start reaching for purpose out of wrong motives. Personal attention, applause, guilt, fear, anger, pride, money, insecurity, dad/mom approval issues, and all sorts of motives can fuel us. In short, love for God and love for people is the proper motive-fuel you're built to run on.

You'll never feel more alive than when you've been used by God to touch another person. You will experience His love in you, through you and to you. There's nothing like it. This is purpose-targeted living.

You don't choose a purpose. You discover it in surrender to God. Like Joseph, our calling (purpose) is most often unveiled a little at a time as opposed to a spectacular epiphany. You may have a burning bush or Damascus road experience, but more likely it will unveil gradually. Joseph had a dream, but didn't have a clue what it meant. He gained clarity through one experience after the other. God designed you and holds your plan. Discover it one clue at a time. Be encouraged!

*Father, You knew me before I was ever born. You created me to fit Your plan, and I am so hungry to please You and fulfill all You have planned for me. I surrender. And whatever You have to do in me to prepare me for fruitfulness, I say, "Yes." I trust You...in Jesus' name!*

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# 26 *January* BIG TRIALS BIG SAINTS

*I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her there.*

*I will return her vineyards to her and transform the Valley of Trouble into a gateway of hope. She will give herself to me there, as she did long ago when she was young, when I freed her from her captivity in Egypt. **Hosea 2:14-15***

God uses big trials to make big saints so He can use them in big places. Don't fear the "desert." God will "**transform our valley of trouble into a gateway of hope.**" Praise God!

Israel was led by God into the desert. This is where their idols were exposed and removed. It's also where they experienced God. They had learned about God in the temple, but they experienced Him in the desert. There is a difference.

Joseph went through a desert that appeared to be evil. He was betrayed by family, falsely accused, and imprisoned. He must have felt forgotten by God, as these events went on for years. He didn't understand until years later when he said, "What appeared at the time to be evil, God used it for good" (paraphrase).

2020 has been a desert year, and you may be suffering now from its effects. We all have desert seasons, with or without a 2020. Don't fear the desert. God does not waste our pain. He is forging the man or woman we really want to be during these times. I don't want to be a philosopher of God with head-knowledge only. I want to be a witness! If I read about what happened in a certain situation, I can tell you what I read. But if I was standing there when it happened, I am a first-hand witness. The credibility of my testimony is now authoritative.

From philosopher to witness, that's what the desert accomplishes. It's God's way.

God will transform your ***"valley of trouble into a gateway of hope."***

*Thank You, Father! Thank You for being at work in me, both to will and work for Your good pleasure. You have led me through the valley of the shadow of death to create hope for someone else. Use all my pain and heal others through me....in Jesus' name!*

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# 27 TRIALS BRING HUMILITY

January

*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor.*

**James 4:10**

Joseph had a dream. In it, he saw his brothers and family bowing down to him. He got excited and told his brothers (daddy's favorite boy was not very smart), then his brothers tried to kill him.

Pride is an issue for all us. It is innocent in the sense that we don't always realize we're being prideful, until we realize our own arrogance. Purpose, calling, and meaning start with a dream in our heart, and a dream easily ignites our ego and longing to be applauded by others. Joseph blurted out this dream thinking his brothers would say, "Well, Praise the Lord, Joseph! How blessed we are to get to bow down to you." But, instead, they tried to kill him.

Trials bring humility. And humility precedes God raising you to places of influence. Remember, it's just human to hear the word "purpose" and begin envisioning an impact on people where you receive the most glory. After all, if you achieve the purpose of God for your life, and that will involve helping people, wouldn't that lead to applause and thankfulness coming your way?

God's purpose is not the place that brings you the most glory—it's the place where you bring Him the most glory. Those are two different positions.

I found, when I became a pastor, that my calling gave me far more opportunity for humility than for glory. God has a way of calling you in so far over your head that you can't help but know how dependent you are on His grace. His grace, His glory. He's doing this in you, as well.

Humility is your friend. Embrace it!

*Father, I humble myself before You, today. Forgive me for competing with You for Your glory. It's Yours. All the glory is Yours. Please position me where I can truly bring You the most glory...in Jesus' name!*

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## 28 *January* BE FAITHFUL WITH NOW

*Potiphar realized that the Lord was with Joseph, giving him success in everything he did. This pleased Potiphar, so he soon made Joseph his personal attendant. He put him in charge of his entire household and everything he owned. **Genesis 39:2-5***

*If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities. **Luke 16:10***

Pursue excellence! This is a core value of our staff and leadership. In essence, it means act like Joseph. Be faithful with now. Whether big or small, he was faithful with every task, and God continued to bless him for his faithfulness. Before Joseph could govern Egypt and provide for Israel, he would clean toilets in Potiphar's house and fold towels in the county jail. And he did it faithfully.

God builds integrity by the little things. If you're faithful with little things, He'll put you in charge of larger ones. Leadership is not built by the big things. Big crisis will reveal the leadership gift, but it's developed in the little things. Integrity is built in the unspectacular choices of life, when you do the right thing even when no one is looking.

Be faithful with now. Take every opportunity to touch people now. Your purpose is not on hold, awaiting a grand arrival. It's your everyday life of mostly mundane acts of faithfulness. It's now! Smile at people. Lift the attitude of the room when you walk in. Send a text to encourage someone today. Take the opportunities you have now. Make a difference today!

*Father, thank You for the opportunities You give me, today. Open my eyes to see and give me sensitivity to know when I can encourage another person. I will be faithful in the small things. Thank You for the opportunity to build integrity into my life....in Jesus' name!*

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## 29 *January* REFINER'S FIRE

*So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you have to endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. **1 Peter 1:6-7***

Read this scripture slowly. I recognize that talking about the trials of Joseph can be intimidating or possibly discouraging, but don't be discouraged, my friend. Be truly glad. I mean that.

We sang a song at the first of 2020 called "Refiner," and God took us seriously. We sang, "I want to be tried by fire. Purified. You take whatever You desire. Lord, here's my life." There was something special on that song then. There still is today.

Joseph, Daniel, Job, Moses, Elijah, David, Peter, and even Jesus were tried in the fire. This Scripture says it will purify your faith to a genuine quality. Genuine.

I was listening recently to several Christian ministers talk among themselves. I could hear myself in their conversation and language. They were saying "Praise the Lord," and "Amen," and things that are great statements and Biblical. But the way they sounded was so... "churchy." I know I sound judgmental, but please hear me—I was fearful of how I sound.

I have sounded like that and understand how routine can erode sincerity. I've been in church-life long enough to know how to enter my "character" and speak from the memorized script. On cue, I know my "line" but no longer deliver it with believable conviction. It's an assumed character. It's performed correctly, but it's not genuine. Oh, dear Father, I do not want to live like this. Deliver me. I want to be tried by fire. Purified.

Is this too real for you?

Jesus warns believers in this condition to buy from Him "gold refined by fire" (Revelation 3). Oh, the beauty of pressure and the refining fire. You and I have some really valuable treasure to give to this world. It has the power to save but it gets covered up with a lot of pretense. The refining process restores the awe back to our life. That's what I want and what I want for you, too. That's why Peter can say, "Be glad." Your faith is being proven genuine. Purify me Lord.

*Holy God, You are a Refiner's Fire. You purify and refine for Your sake, but also for ours. We want to be deeply genuine and honoring of You. We want our faith to be genuine. We trust You to take us through the refining process so that our faith may be proven genuine. In Jesus' name!*

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# 30 *January* THE PURPOSE HOUR

*"Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name."*

**John 12:27-28**

Jesus was under tremendous pressure. The time of His crucifixion was upon Him, and He's tempted to pray, "Lord, save me from this hour." But with great courage and confidence in God, Jesus states, "This is My hour. This is the hour I was made for. Father, glorify Your name through Me this hour" (paraphrase).

Hear me, O man and woman of God! You have been known by God before you were born. He has gifted you, anointed you, and prepared you for this time. It is natural to want to pray, "God get me out of all this. This pressure is too great. Save me from this hour." We all feel that tension and have prayed that prayer. But it is for this purpose you came to this hour! You were born for 2020! You were selected for 2021! You're the exact person for your family, your wife, or your husband that God intended. Young student, you're the exact choice of God for your school and friends. You are perfectly designed and prepared by God for your friends, neighbors, and business associates. You have everything you need for life and godliness in this hour.

*This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go!*

**Joshua 1:9**

Be confident, friend! Perhaps you've been brought to this marriage, business, church, circumstance, relationship, ministry, or place in life for such a time as this. Endure with great courage, knowing that God is at work in you, both to will and work His good pleasure. Receive the grace and encouragement of the Holy Spirit. Greater is He who is in you than he that is in the world. By God's providential grace, this hour (2021) and your purpose are a match made in heaven!

*My Father, I pray a special blessing on this reader, today. You have arranged for them to be reading this and You are speaking by Your Spirit into their soul. Give them courage! Give them strength! Give them power! Give them grace! I thank You that the Spirit of the living God is upon them an He has anointed them to accomplish everything You've entrusted to them...in Jesus' name!*

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# SUNDAY NOTES



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# 31 *January* OVERCOMERS

*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God. **Revelation 2:7***

Thus far, we've spent a week with Jesus, the ultimate One who rose to overcome. As well, we walked with Elijah, Daniel, and Joseph, all overcomers from whom we can learn and gain insight. This week I want to focus on how you and I become "overcomers."

To all seven churches in Revelation, Jesus ends with the words, "To him who overcomes," and then makes a promise. It's a little scary at first glance because it sounds like He is saying that we must perfect our performance by overcoming certain things or we do not go to heaven. If that's true, that's a problem.

Understand, you have a position as an overcomer that you received by grace when you accepted Jesus as your savior.

*For every child of God defeats (overcomes) this evil world, and we achieve this victory through our faith. And who can win this battle against the world?*

*Only those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God.*

**1 John 5:4-5**

The Bible is stating that those of us who have “believed on Jesus as the Son of God” have overcome. This is a **graced position** and accomplished by Jesus. It’s as if you were an injured member of a football team who won the Super Bowl. Even though you couldn’t contribute even one time during the season, you still get the championship ring. The other players actually did the work, but you are still considered a champion. Jesus overcame the world and is our Champion. We join the team when we get saved. So, we are victors. We are overcomers equal with Him, though He did all the work. Praise God!

So, there is a **position** of overcomer. But there is also a **practice** of overcoming. This will be our focus.

All of us have something we are trying to overcome. It may be a sin that seems to own us. It may be thinking cycles, emotional issues, relational tension patterns, moods, or self-sabotaging habits. These come at different times and different intensity levels. Whatever it is, be of good cheer! Jesus has overcome the practice you’re trying to overcome (John 16:33).

*Thank You, Father, for making me an overcomer when I received salvation.  
Please help me now gain victory over my practices. I anticipate Your help  
this week...in Jesus’ name!*

# 1 February OVERCOMING SIN

*Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt.*

*And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone. **Psalm 32:5***

*Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. **James 5:16***

I recently was in prayer, confessing sin to God. I asked, "Lord, am I too old to expect You to forgive me? I'm a pastor and have followed You all my life. Is there some point when You say, 'You've been at this too long to still be coming to expect forgiveness'?" Anyone else?

Thank God for David. Most of the great men of God also have their sin made available to us in the Bible. You and I are not different. As long as we are in these bodies of flesh, sin will be an issue to one degree or the other. Paul says it clearly:

So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it. And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't (Romans 7:17-20).

This is not a scripture that gives us an excuse to surrender to sinning. It is full transparency of the fact that everyone alive in a human body—young or old, man or woman, newly saved or crusty old saint—has sin living in your flesh.

So, step one to overcoming sin: Be real! Don't act as though you're too spiritual to be tempted by some sin. Shame will beat you to death if you think there is some point in time when you should be over being tempted. Be honest. Stay humble.

Step two: Talk openly with God about your struggle and guilt. Forgiveness is the number one need of mankind. Like water and food to our body, forgiveness is a necessity (1 John 1:9).

Step three: If you are trapped in a habitual sin, talk to another person. Find a godly friend whom you trust. Arrange time with them so that they can be a source of accountability. All sin need not be shared with others, but patterns of sin need the power of another in order to be healed (James 5:16).

Step four: Get back up! It's our pride that causes us to beat ourselves up as though we don't need the blood of Jesus just like everybody else. The righteous person sins, but gets back up. (Proverbs 24:16). So, get back up!

*Thank You, Jesus. Any sin overcoming me, You've overcome on my behalf.*

*I call on Your blood and power to break habitual sin in my life. I am an  
overcomer...in Your name!*

## 2 OVERCOME DECEPTIVE THINKING CYCLES

### February

*We use our powerful God-tools for smashing warped philosophies, tearing down barriers erected against the truth of God, fitting every loose thought and emotion and impulse into the structure of life shaped by Christ.*

### **2 Corinthians 10:5-6**

The way we experience life is the direct result of how and what we believe. “What are my conclusions?” “What verdicts about me do I accept as final?” We intuitively search for the evidence to validate the “verdict” we accept. For instance, if I conclude I am a victim, then everyone around me becomes a potential victimizer. I interpret the evidence around me such as eye-rolling, yawns, disinterest, or the inattention to my social media post as villainous. When we are comfortable in the posture of being offended, we actually don’t need another to aggressively offend us, we simply need someone else to blame for our offense. We become the hunter while projecting ourselves as the hunted.

This is a “thinking cycle.” We don’t all have the same ones, but we all have them. So, how do we overcome a thinking cycle? **Change your verdict by a disciplined choice based on God’s Word!**

John 8:32 says, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” So, we find the truth in God’s Word about ourselves. That is your new verdict or conclusion. In this case: In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Romans 8:37). You are not a victim, you are a VICTOR! That’s your new “verdict,” based on the Bible.

You will not feel it at first. You may never feel it. But with a new verdict, you now begin looking for evidence to support this verdict. Life is a search. Our minds, emotions, and spirits are always searching for evidence to support our conclusions. Right verdict, right evidence-search! And with a new evidence-search comes a righteous thinking cycle. You are set free by the truth! Be encouraged!

*Father, this is easier to explain than to accomplish. Give me wisdom to see where my thinking cycles are infected and unreceptive to Your truth. Lead me to Your verdicts and lead me to see the evidence that validates that truth. Interrupt my search for lies and lead me to truth...in Jesus' name!*

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# 3 OVERCOMING A CRITICAL ATTITUDE

February

*Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us. Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other. **Romans 12:3-5***

I find there are generally two poles in the Body of Christ. Like a north and south pole, believers seem to hover around one or the other. There is a sort of high-experience, miracle-expecting pole with less interest in routine, theological rigor. This would be your charismatic and Pentecostal types (of which I am one). And then there is the intellectual pole interested in the history, theological exactness, and mundane disciplines. These consider the other pole to be over-emotional. Likewise, the experiential pole considers the intellectual pole to be void of the Spirit. The truth is, we need both. One is not better than the other. We both need each other.

I found myself judging both poles all the time in my mind. I would see something in church, on TV, or at a revival and presume it was my job to place a "grade" on it.

God convicted me. I recognized that I thought I was the standard by which God would move. I judged the validity of how God was working in other people by how He worked in me. After all, how could God use, touch, or speak through another person in a way He had never worked in me? How arrogant! I repented and have a sensitive area in my heart when I sense criticism arising.

I raise this today because I think it's human nature to judge others based on how God works with us. This could be a big change for you and me if we can see it. Give it some thought!

*Heavenly Father, forgive me for arrogance. Forgive me for making judgments on precious people within whom You are working. Make me aware of unrighteous criticism. I commit my thoughts and words to speak in faith over Your body....in Jesus' name!*

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# 4 February OVERCOMING PERFECTIONISM

*I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.*

## ***Philippians 3:12-14***

This is my favorite scripture. I love them all, but this one is like an old and faithful friend that comes to stand with me. You need a few of these in your arsenal.

I love it because it keeps me “reaching.” I spent a lot of years trying to perfect my motives and my personal holiness. I thought I could be used of God once I had these areas perfected. I saw God blessing another friend of mine in an outstanding way, and it made me mad because I knew how arrogant he was—I don’t know another way to say it. I know him well enough to make that observation (reference yesterday’s devotional).

While complaining in prayer, Simon Peter’s life came to mind. Truthfully, he was full of himself and struggled with pride up to the day of Jesus’ resurrection. That didn’t stop Jesus from using him greatly. Why? Jesus didn’t expect Peter to be perfect before He used him. And, He doesn’t expect that of me or you. Praise God!

I have not become perfect or achieved all the levels of purity in my motives, thoughts, actions, and life, but I keep reaching. I wasted a lot of time trying to get good enough to be used. God was not waiting on my perfection—I was!

You may be reading this now and a light is coming on. Hello, Perfectionist. I say that with a smile as a comrade. You don't need to get your life together before God will use you. Start reaching. Start looking to go forward and trust God to work on your character while you're on your way. Be encouraged!

*Father, thank You that Jesus accomplished my perfection for me. You are the potter and I am the clay. You are working on me, in me and through me. Use me in this imperfect condition and help me trust Your grace, lest I disqualify myself...in Jesus' name!*

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# 5 *February* OVERCOMING DISAPPOINTMENT

*I will sing of the Lord's unfailing love forever! Young and old will hear of your faithfulness Your unfailing love will last forever. Your faithfulness is as enduring as the heavens. **Psalm 89:1-2***

When life doesn't turn out the way we expect, there's disappointment. When God doesn't act like we thought He should, there's disappointment. Job, school, marriage...or when my child didn't become what I had hoped and dreamed, there's grief and disappointment. In the grief that only comes from deep disappointment, remember these things.

**God is good!** This has to be an unmovable, bedrock truth in us. God told Moses, "I will make My goodness pass before you..." Whatever has happened, steady yourself with this immovable reality. If you do not do this, you will immediately begin to accuse Him. Regardless of what has happened, God is good. The problem, if there is one, will not be on His end.

**Be raw!** Go to God bearing every private thought without pretense. Don't accuse God, but tell Him how deeply you hurt. Jeremiah would tell God, "It feels like You let me down." You won't scare Him off by being gut level honest. "I'm so disappointed and I really thought You would intervene. I don't understand." Be real.

**Accept!** When you don't understand, it doesn't mean God's done something wrong. It just means you don't understand. A precious grieving wife said this to me as I arrived at her home just moments after her husband had passed away. He was so young, and I was frustrated with God for not healing him. She encouraged me when it was my job to comfort her. Sometimes God requires our faithfulness without understanding.

**Worship!** I know that sounds crazy, and I don't fully know how to explain it. I just know that worship subdues my temptation to accuse Him and opens a flow of grace. Worshipping in pain has been one of the most memorable experiences of my life. Trust me on this one. Worship. A worship song was written from the Psalm above called, "Goodness of God" (Bethel Music). Give it a listen.

*Heavenly Father, all my life You have been faithful. All my life You have been so, so good. With every breath that I am able. Oh, I will sing of the goodness of God. Amen!*

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# 6 THE LORD BLESS YOU

February

*The Lord bless you and keep you;*

*The Lord make His face shine upon you,*

*And be gracious to you;*

*The Lord lift up His countenance upon you,*

*And give you peace.*

*So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them.*

**Numbers 6:24-7:1**

As we conclude our time of prayer for this new year, let us declare the blessing of God upon our families, finances, time, and all that God is yet to do in 2021.

Israel was in a new season. They had just been delivered from Egypt and found themselves at the foot of Mt. Sinai. They didn't know God well beyond what their forefathers had spoken. This was their first experience with Him. They were scared, insecure, fearful, and unsure.

God gave Aaron a blessing to declare every day. God's blessing has to do with the end of a thing. It means His full intent will ultimately be realized. You're going to land on your feet. It doesn't mean there won't be trying times or the discomfort of a wilderness, but it does mean His full intent is guaranteed at the end.

We had no idea what we were facing when we concluded our prayer time last year. Little did we know how trying the year would be. Yet we landed on our feet. The blessing of the Lord is upon us. His grace and divine enablement will strengthen us. His face will shine on us. He sees and knows what we're feeling and what we're going through. We will not be overlooked and He will give us peace. This is not a peace due to peaceful circumstances. Rather, it's an inner peace knowing He's got this. He has placed a seal of blessing on our lives to assure His ultimate will and desire for our lives will be realized. Our final prayer will not actually be a prayer. God wrote this Himself to Israel. Now, it's for us. Declare this blessing over your home, family, marriage, finances, time, and future.

God bless you!

Before God, in faith, I declare this over all our lives in 2021:

*The Lord Bless you and keep you! The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you...And give you peace. Amen!*

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Cover art: Sterling Polnick