

UNSTOPPABLE



37 DAYS OF PRAYER



THE CROSSING CHURCH

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to recognize all the great friends and ministers that contributed to these thoughts in 37 Days 2023. Although I composed the material, I have learned from many pastors and authors, without whom most of these thoughts would not be included. The following people are some of the ministers from whom I derive my personal ministry:

Robert Morris, Jimmy Evans, Joyce Meyer, Beth Moore, Brian Houston, TD Jakes, Louie Giglio, Ravi Zacharias, Bill Johnson, Jentzen Franklin, Dr. Michael Brown, Winkie Pratney, Dr. Jim Tucker, Andrew Wommack, Steven Furtick, David Flanders, Chris Hodges, Larry Harvey, Tim Keller, Philip Yancy, Dr. Larry Crabb, Jim Cymbala, Eugen Peterson, Dr. Tony Evans, Christine Caine, Dr. David Jeremiah, John Piper, and so many others over the years.

My wife, Stacy, is a consistent source of wisdom, Biblical insight, and encouragement. Our elders, pastors, staff, and congregation at The Crossing are all major influences of the thoughts and revelation collected in this devotional.

37 DAYS 2023

UNSTOPPABLE

Welcome to 37 Days of Prayer 2022!

UNSTOPPABLE! This very well could have been the title given to the book of Acts. Acts is the history of God and His providence to birth and build His church. It is God's family album of His church from the first day it was born. Over the next 37 days, we will peruse our old family album to get reacquainted with our roots and to know where we've come from, what we're made of, and of whom we have been born. We are the church of Jesus Christ. We are born of God. And His church is unstoppable.

It all began with the angels and all of heaven excitedly crowded around the birth room in anticipation of Jesus' arrival. The upper room was to us what the stable was to Jesus. This is where we had our beginning. And when the day of Pentecost had fully come, a sound was heard as the infant church came to life. Heaven swarmed about this new baby with flashes of fire, worship in every language, and the wind of the Spirit of God, blowing powerfully into the lungs of this precious creation of God.

The infant stage of the church was clumsy as it learned to crawl and then walk in the city of Jerusalem. But that small body of Christ has grown up over the years into the most powerful influence on the earth. And this offspring of God is tough... resilient. The religious tried to kill the body of Christ, but He came out of the tomb. Rome tried to torture the church, and it grew stronger. We have faced attacks, both inside and outside of our walls. Governments, media, demonic spirits, and the devil himself have spent their full resources in attempting to stamp out the church. And with every fight, the church grows stronger and more influential. To date, there are 2.3 billion people on the earth, roughly 1/3 of all humanity, who profess to follow Jesus.

As we enter this new year with the spirit of Antichrist hurling threats towards the church from every cultural co-conspirator, make no mistake about the outcome. No weapon formed against us can prosper. You are not simply a member of a moral organization that carries a better philosophy. You are a member of the church of Jesus Christ. You not only carry His truth; you carry His Spirit.

I have full confidence that as we walk through the book of Acts, you will conclude with me, "Unstoppable." Our God is unstoppable. Our Savior and Lord is unstoppable! The Spirit with whom we are filled is unstoppable! And the church of Jesus Christ in 2023 will be unstoppable.

I pray that God would open our spiritual eyes and ears as we carry His Spirit into this new year, in Jesus' name!



WEEK 1
UNSTOPPABLE PROMISE

JANUARY 1

THE PROMISE OF PENTECOST

Acts 1:4-6

*And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for **the Promise of the Father**, "which," He said, "you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."*

In the 18th century, both France and Britain sat on a powder-keg of social strife. The disparity between rich and poor, brutal and controlling governments, heavy taxation, and other issues brought both societies to a breaking point. In France, the powder-keg blew up into a bloody civil war. In Britain, something very different happened: a remarkable move of God called the Great Awakening.

George Whitefield, the Wesley brothers, and Jonathan Edwards are the familiar names we associate with this awakening. In the first two decades, estimates of about 20% of the population were swept up into encounters with the power of God, radically saved, and filled the churches. In the following decades, great healing took place into society itself as labor laws were changed, slavery was abolished, the rich became generous, and the poor gained new self-discipline as literacy increased.

Two thousand years ago, a small band of fishermen, women, slaves, and other very ordinary folks gathered in an upper room to await the "promise of the Father"— the unstoppable power of God through His church. The world was turned upside down by this power, and it has been unstoppable ever since.

As we enter 2023, America and the world are setting on a powder-keg of strife, evil, hatred, despair, and violence. But the church is sitting on the power of a promise from God. Even as those men and women who entered the upper room in obedience of Jesus, we begin this new year waiting with full expectation on the promise of God to empower us for another great awakening.

Father, we come before You with full expectation of receiving a power from Your Spirit to accomplish Your will for this hour. We are humbled and full of faith that "He who promised is faithful." In Jesus' name, Amen!

JANUARY 2

THE HOPE OF PENTECOST

Acts 2:1-4

On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them.

And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.

Why did God send His Spirit on the day of Pentecost? To the Jew, Pentecost was the feast of first fruits—when the first portions of the harvest were picked and eaten. The feast was established to give thanks to God for His **provision of a foretaste** of an even greater harvest yet to come.

I live with a constant inner soul-tension. On one hand, I am so very thankful to God for the fruit He is producing in me and throughout my life. But on the other hand, I am so dissatisfied with the “amount” of fruit and deeply long to be more productive, more holy, more anointed, more effective, more loving— more! I pray often, “Lord, there must be more!”

I felt guilty for having this apparent ungratefulness until I saw this insight. The Holy Spirit is our first portion of harvest: “...and he has identified us as his own by placing the Holy Spirit in our hearts as the first installment that guarantees everything he has promised us (yet to come). (2 Corinthians 1:22)

How powerful is that? To be filled with the Holy Spirit is to be given a foretaste of something to make us long for more. That longing for more is exactly what God intended. To anticipate, expect, and long for even greater things is not insulting to God’s Spirit. It’s the “hope that lies within you” for more of God. Let’s pray.

Come Holy Spirit! Fill me with hope, longing, and faith for the future. I long to be more holy, more loving, more anointed, more generous, more blessed, and more powerful. You have placed this foretaste in me, and it draws me to You. Thank You, in Jesus’ name. Amen!

JANUARY 3

THE ENCOUNTER OF PENTECOST

Exodus 34:5-9

Then the Lord came down in a cloud and stood there with him; and he called out his own name, Yahweh. The Lord passed in front of Moses, calling out, "Yahweh! The Lord! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness. I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But I do not excuse the guilty. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children and grandchildren; the entire family is affected— even children in the third and fourth generations." Moses immediately threw himself to the ground and worshiped.

Why did God pour out His spirit on the day of Pentecost? Why was this the birthday of the church?

The first Pentecost occurred fifty days after Moses led Israel out of bondage on Passover. Our scripture records this event. Moses cried out, "Show me Your glory!" So God set Moses in a safe place and passed by, allowing him to see His goodness. And then He revealed who He was to Moses. "I am good, gracious, forgiving, and loving. And, I judge the guilty for their sin."

So, the power of Pentecost (the power of the Holy Spirit being poured out upon us and the power of the church) is found in **God revealing Himself to us personally.**

Like Moses, I prayed many times from childhood through my teen years, "Lord, show me Your glory! Baptize me in Your Holy Spirit." I wanted to experience my Pentecost. I was seeking a glorious experience which would result in speaking in tongues or some manifestation. I would eventually experience several manifestations, but not until a far more glorious reality occurred. **God revealed Himself to me.** It's not that my intellect could comprehend Him. Far deeper, every fiber and cell of my body, and every sensory nerve and emotion were made intensely aware of His nearness. And the fire of God infused my life with His HOLINESS! GOD IS HOLY! A deep, reverent fear of God was set as an anchor for my soul, mind, actions, and behavior. And from that beginning, God has led and blessed my life.

Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the Lord is the **beginning** of wisdom." I am so thankful for that "beginning." How about you?

Heavenly Father, show me Your glory! Please set me in a safe place today, and reveal Yourself to me. Holy Spirit, pass by me again! I long to experience Your presence and be forever changed in Jesus' name. Amen!

JANUARY 4

THE CURSE-REVERSE OF PENTECOST

Acts 2:7-12

They were completely amazed. "How can this be?" they exclaimed. "These people are all from Galilee, and yet we hear them speaking in our own native languages! Here we are— Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from (13 other language groups). And we all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!" They stood there amazed and perplexed. "What can this mean?" they asked each other.

“What can this mean?”

Question: The first sermon and the first worship service of the new church of Jesus were conducted in what language?

Answer: ALL OF THEM!

How powerful! The first time we see the nations listed like this are in Genesis 10 and 11. The people of earth decided to reject God, be their own masters, and make a name for themselves. As a result, God came down and confused their languages at the tower of Babel. It shows that when we choose to be our own lord and savior, the result will be strife: racial and cultural superiority and division, racial and social hostility, and the destruction of human love and trust. Strife rules the day. We live with the result of this curse to this day.

However, on the day of Pentecost, God came down once again to establish a curse-reversing power. The power of reconciliation is present only in the church of Jesus Christ.

All strife is a curse. It's demonic and divisive. On every front in our culture, strife is present: racial strife, gender strife, political strife, religious strife, or marital strife. In fact, try to think of any context in which strife is not an infecting agent.

On a personal level, I think we can all agree that strife has been the most fatiguing struggle in our lives. It causes discouragement, depression, and faith-fatigue. *(To get deeper into this topic, see James 3 and 1 Cor. 3. Also, search Joyce Meyer's teaching on "strife.")*

However, we can each confront the power of strife with the curse-reversing power of the Holy Spirit. And we the church can grow brighter and stronger in being the curse-reversing power of God that welcomes all people into a healing and reconciling atmosphere. Let's pray.

JANUARY 5

THE GOSPEL OF PENTECOST

Acts 2:36-37

"Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

There is a difference between a social "Christian" and a true convert. It's the cut. Have you been "cut to the heart"? What does it mean to be "cut to the heart"?

The people whom Peter was preaching to had been accustomed to identifying with the "group." These same people saw Jesus riding in on a donkey and being worshiped, so they cried, "Hosanna, Hosanna," because they heard the "group" and joined in. A week later, they all shouted, "Crucify, crucify," because that's what the "group" was shouting. But in this moment, the Holy Spirit separated them one by one from the group and convicted them individually (personally) for their guilt in crucifying the Son of God.

Peter had been cut. In Luke 22:61-62, we see Peter denying Jesus for the third time while Jesus was being beaten by the Sanhedrin temple guards. Upon his denial, the rooster crowed, and the Lord looked directly at Peter. They made eye-contact, and Peter was cut. He ran away and wept bitterly. Why?

By this time, the face of Jesus would have been purple and swollen with bruising. Blood was running from His nose and over His eyes. He was spit upon by guards. At that moment, Peter saw that Jesus was dying for him. His sin and weakness had caused Jesus to suffer. In that moment, he was cut to the heart with conviction, knowing fully well that Jesus was suffering because of him.

I remember being in many meetings when the power of the gospel brought a deep conviction into all who were present. In those times, I didn't care what the "group" thought or who was present in the "group." I knew I was responsible before God and had to do business with Him alone to cleanse me of my sin. I was cut.

It has been a while since I've witnessed the cutting power of the gospel. Oh, for a revival of that "power" convicting all to take responsibility for their part in crucifying the Son of God, to be cut to the heart, and be saved.

Father, I ask You to revive the wonder of the miracle of salvation in me. I ask for a fresh anointing to preach the gospel with the full weight of Your power to save. Cut us to the heart. Convict us of sin. Convert sinners. Pour out a revival of power that radically saves people. Use me in Jesus' name, amen!

JANUARY 6

THE SPIRIT OF PENTECOST

Acts 10:43-45

He [Jesus] is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name."

Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message.

Reinhart Bonnke, the great evangelist who saw over 70 million people born again through his ministry, described how his meetings brought such great results. "The Holy Spirit would brood over the crowd awaiting the Word of God. At the preaching of the Word, the Spirit would fall upon the crowds and gloriously save sinners from their condemned lives." What a great picture of salvation! The Holy Spirit descends into our dark and chaotic lives and sets our lives in order according to God's divine design.

Stacy and I have lived under the "brooding" of the Holy Spirit. We have experienced the Holy Spirit falling upon chaotic seasons in our marriage, finances, emotions, children, callings, and all the common issues of life. We have also enjoyed the healing and relief that comes when divine order is restored. The same Spirit that has set our life-issues in order also remains faithful to help us maintain that order. This is our daily pursuit.

How about you today? Is there an area of chaos in which you need the Spirit to come now and bring His divine order? Offer that need up now, and open up to the Holy Spirit's influence upon you.

Heavenly Father, I open afresh to the work of the Holy Spirit. Come and impose Your order in my life. Where there is confusion, bring truth. Where there is malady in my body, bring healing. Where there is tension in my relationships, bring love and forgiveness. Wherever there is disorder of any kind, fall fresh on me. I anticipate a change in Jesus' name. Amen!

JANUARY 7

IT'S TIME FOR FREEDOM

Acts 2:38-39

Peter replied, "Each of you must repent of your sins, turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ to show that you have received forgiveness for your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is to you, and to your children, and even to the Gentiles—all who have been called by the Lord our God."

I love to help people understand the Holy Spirit. It is not possible to completely demystify His activity in our lives, as most of His work is invisible. However, I can assure you that the promise of the Holy Spirit is for you.

I grew up in a church culture that prescribed the way a person can receive the Holy Spirit. It was narrowly defined as a dramatic experience that must include speaking in tongues. Thousands of people were able to receive the empowering of the Holy Spirit from this guidance, and for that, I am grateful. I struggled to achieve this experience and concluded it must be for everyone, except me. I spent years trying to experience this wonderful promise and hoping to speak with tongues, to no avail.

I eventually understood how to begin using my heavenly language in prayer. And as I matured in understanding the Bible, I could see why I struggled. I was comparing other people's exhilarating experiences to my very subtle experience. And I was more focused on an experience rather than a person — the person of the Holy Spirit.

I didn't have manifestations of any particular gifts when I started seeking a deeper empowerment of the Holy Spirit. But He came upon me and in me, and He anchored my life with His HOLY presence. I became acutely aware of God's holiness, and this sensitivity did not come and go. It was not episodic or in need of any event. It was a constant life of reckoning with my God who was HOLY. This resting reality of His holiness has kept me and directed my life from the first day I asked for a greater measure of the Holy Spirit.

Also, we are all wired differently and created by God to receive in different ways. 1 Corinthians 12:11 says, "But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing (gifts) to each one individually as He wills." He works in you the way He chooses, and it's a good work.

One more thought: imagine a bucket of water sitting beside two empty cups. Take one cup, and plunge it into the bucket, filling it instantly and dramatically. For the second cup, lift the bucket, and tip it carefully over the cup. Allow the water to trickle slowly until the cup is filled.



WEEK 2
UNSTOPPABLE FAITH

JANUARY 8

STARE AT JESUS

Acts 3:11-13

The man threw his arms around Peter and John, ecstatic. All the people ran up to where they were at Solomon's Porch to see it for themselves. When Peter saw he had a congregation, he addressed the people: "Oh, Israelites, why does this take you by such complete surprise, and why stare at us as if our power or piety made him walk? The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God of our ancestors, has glorified his Son Jesus.

Upon the miracle of healing this lame man, Peter immediately redirected the people's amazement to Jesus, and off of himself and John. "Why stare at us?"

Recently, God made me aware of a blind spot that was the source of great personal stress. I realized that my confidence in God to engage in the lives of those for whom I prayed had eroded. I was not completely faithless or hopeless. But with the accumulation of disappointing outcomes to prayers over the years, my genuine expectation in the present action of God's Spirit was low. With that, something else was happening. I started taking on the responsibility to try to do the Spirit's portion for people since I wasn't sure He would act. Is that too real?

Without realizing it, I was saying to the church, "Stare at me for results." I was feeling the weight of doing God's part in the lives of others. "Stare at me for financial relief. Stare at me for healing, wisdom, relational peace, and results. Stare at me for miracles to occur in our services." Trying to be God in the lives of others is not only impossible, but a huge stress.

In an instant during one of our revival nights, God delivered me from the stress, opened my eyes to my wrong-thinking, and revived my faith. I am confident in God to be responsible for outcomes. Why stare at me? It is God's honor of His Son Jesus that brings about the praise-worthy results.

How about you? Have you become weighted down by trying to take responsibility for what only God can do? Let's pray.

Precious Father, thank You for always being good and attentive to me. I believe it is You who is at work both to will and work for Your good pleasure. I surrender any weight I have been carrying to make something happen that only You can do. I release this stress and trust You. I turn my attention and the attention of my burdens toward You, in Jesus' name!

JANUARY 9

PRAY FOR BOLDNESS

Acts 4:29-31

"And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word. Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus." After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the word of God with boldness.

Interestingly, the disciples didn't pray for the threats against them to stop. They didn't pray for protection and provision or for the persecution to stop. They accepted that Rome and the religious Jewish system would remain in power and intend to destroy the newborn church. Their prayer? "Give us BOLDNESS! Make us unshakable in the midst of very shaky circumstances." And God did.

I propose that we are in a very similar circumstance today. Our nation and our world are being shaken by the natural consequence of abandoning God and exalting human strength. We could pray, "Lord, make it stop! Make our circumstances change! Make our government godly and our economy prosper!" It's our natural inclination to think that the quest of the Christian church is to make the world stop shaking.

Hebrews 12:27 tells us that the world around us shakes so that the unshakable realities of God are clearly displayed. This causes people to be drawn to God.

It is completely biblical to ask God to change circumstances. But shaky circumstances have always existed and will always exist. However, we can be unshakable and bold witnesses, regardless of the circumstances.

Will you join me today in this prayer? I have experienced this boldness on many occasions and know for certain that God will baptize us with His spirit and boldness.

And now, O Lord, hear the threats in our nation and the anti-Christ spirit that opposes Your church today. Give us, Your servants, great boldness in preaching Your word. Stretch out Your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of Your holy servant, Jesus. Fill us afresh with the power of the Holy Spirit and boldness, in Jesus' name!

JANUARY 10

PATIENT FAITH

Heb 10:35-36

Do not, therefore, fling away your fearless confidence, for it carries a great and glorious compensation of reward. For you have need of steadfast patience and endurance, so that you may perform and fully accomplish the will of God, and thus receive and carry away [and enjoy to the full] what is promised.

When I came into the auditorium for prayer this morning, my faith was infected with resentment and cynicism. I have been praying intensely for several years for God to impact a particular situation for which I am solely responsible. Not only has there been no visible positive change, but things have gotten worse. Driving home last night from yet another failed attempt to bring healing and solutions, I felt myself feeling resentment towards God for His inaction towards this issue. To make things worse, Pastor Joel Osteen was on the TV when I got home preaching, "Have faith, be positive, have joy," and instead of being encouraged, I got cynical (for which I am not proud).

Have you ever had one of these days? I have had a few.

So, I'm sitting quietly (coffee in hand) in my usual spot to pray. I'm not praying or worshiping. In fact, I'm feeling spiritually numb and uninspired to do anything. Then, I hear the A/C unit come on. And for the first time in twenty-three years, the initial surge of air from the A/C blew directly on the open Bible in my lap on the front row. The pages rustled, turned, and came to a stop on Hebrews 10:35-36. I look down to read and hear the Holy Spirit graciously say, "Don't fling away your fearless confidence! For you [Randy Harvey] have need of steadfast patience and endurance..." It goes on to say that God's own soul delights in us when we endure these periods. How encouraging is that?

Be encouraged today! The Holy Spirit is aware of any faith struggle you and I are having. He's not offended or upset with us because we have these struggles. He is here to help. Tell God exactly where you are today, and allow Him to encourage your faith.

Heavenly Father, we confess to having moments of frustrations in our faith walk. Thank You for Your attentiveness to us in our time of need. Thank You, Holy Spirit, for being here to lift and encourage us. We receive Your strength today in Jesus' name. Amen!

JANUARY 11

FAITH TO BE BRAVE

Acts 23:11

*The next night the Lord Jesus came and stood by Paul. He said, "**Be brave!** You have told people in Jerusalem about me. You must do the same in Rome."*

Paul found himself beaten and imprisoned because he preached a clear, convicting gospel message. He was loving but clear. His message was, "God overlooked people's ignorance about these things [idolatry and sin] in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man [Jesus Christ the Messiah] whom he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31).

The clear gospel both convicts and offends. To be convicted is to be found guilty of a crime. In the legal case of the gospel, we are found guilty of the death of Jesus. A humble heart recognizes his guilt and cries for mercy. Upon that cry, Jesus forgives, and salvation occurs. A proud heart is "offended" by the verdict and angrily rejects both the message and the messenger.

The gospel of the early church and the modern-day gospel have at least one glaring difference. To the early church, "offense" was central to the gospel. Today, being unoffensive is central. To remove the offense is to remove the power. Is it not interesting that the greatest social crime of our day is to speak offensively of another person? How cunning of our adversary to create a counter-offensive to the power of the gospel.

C.S. Lewis said it succinctly:

"As Christians, we are tempted to make unnecessary concessions to those outside the Faith. We give in too much. Now, I don't mean that we should run the risk of making a nuisance of ourselves by witnessing at improper times, but there comes a time when we must show that we disagree. We must show our Christian colors, if we are to be true to Jesus Christ."

Paul showed his "Christian colors." The gospel he preached produced thousands of converts. It also offended men to the point of violent beatings and imprisonment. Here, Jesus comes to stand with Paul in his prison cell and says, "Be brave!" Jesus stands with all of us who stand with His gospel. We are not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation. Have faith in the gospel of Jesus. Be brave!

JANUARY 13

TESTED FAITH

Acts 12:1-3

Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James, the brother of John, with the sword.

John's big brother was captured and executed. What went through John's mind? Did he have to fight any doubts about God's faithfulness? Did he question God's fairness? After all, Peter was arrested at the same time, and yet, God miraculously saved him. "Why did He save Peter in answer to our prayer and not my big brother?" Did John think about quitting?

I am placing my Western-Christianized thinking into this early church father's mind. You and I tend to define God's faithfulness by the level of convenience and provision we are currently experiencing. Make no mistake. All of us will be tested in our faith. All of us will suffer disappointment in God for His "apparent" absence or ill-attentiveness.

We don't know what John did, but I'd like to play out a scenario that would fit this man of faith. He was stunned— shocked! Grief and dismay hit him like a ton of bricks. But John was a leader. He had to lead while grieving. He had to comfort his mother, father, and family. While hurting on the inside, he had to encourage the other followers who looked to him for leadership. But at some point, John slipped away to his private place of prayer. I believe he worshiped, not for what happened, but in the midst of his pain. He poured out his heart to God, and the Spirit of God comforted him. Then the Spirit inspired him to write in his journal what would later be printed in the world's best selling book. "*Well James, you and I are both children of God. And it is not entirely clear what we will be or look like when we leave this life. But we know this: we will be like Him. We will be like Jesus! And everyone who has the HOPE purifies and strengthens himself...*" (1 John. 3:2-3). He got up and went back to work.

"How do you know this, Pastor Randy?" Because I've done this on several occasions. And so will you, if you haven't already. God is faithful and present even when we don't understand. Be encouraged!

Thank You Father for Your faithfulness! Thank You for Your presence in our time of need. Thank You for being present in my disappointments and questions. You are my faithful, faithful God.

JANUARY 14

FAITH TO WORSHIP

Acts 16:25-27

Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening. Suddenly, there was a massive earthquake, and the prison was shaken to its foundations. All the doors immediately flew open, and the chains of every prisoner fell off!

Paul and Silas had been arrested in front of their friends and followers. They were stripped and humiliated before Roman authorities and then brutally beaten with rods. Bleeding, bruised, exhausted, and thirsty, they were taken into the dungeon of this prison and locked, feet and hands, into stocks. And they prayed and worshiped.

Paul would later tell us why he worshiped. *“Oh, that I may know Him... That I might know Jesus both in the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering.”* We can't join Jesus in His resurrection and be powerfully lifted up and out if we've not also been down. Paul knew that authority and credibility, not just to others, but to ourselves, come only from going through pain and difficulty. People are impressed with our strengths, but they connect to us because of our scars. Read the passage again: *“...and the other prisoners were listening.”*

There is a power released when we bring a sacrifice of praise in the midst of pain. I don't know if I can explain why this is. I recently heard a live recording of a friend of mine. She has always been an outstanding vocal performer, and you would know her if I mentioned her name. This recording was at least twenty years old, and the authority and power of God that flowed through her was soul-shaking. In those years, she had been through a devastating betrayal and rejection. She was in her “midnight hour.” Hearing her pull worship and faithfulness from her soul of pain had both a liberating and humbling impact. Her worship set everyone in the room free. So powerful!

Today is not about being a great singer; it is about being a worshiper. Perhaps you are in a “midnight hour.” Worship God! Out of your pain-filled soul, worship Him. I promise you with 100% confidence that freedom will come to you at depths and in ways that can only be experienced through the grace and presence of God. “The other prisoners are listening.” The people around you will also be freed.

Father, today I bring a sacrifice of praise. All my life, You have been faithful. All my life, You have been so, so good. In every painful, disappointing, and even devastating season, You've been with me. I will sing of the goodness of God. I worship You now, in Jesus' name!



WEEK 3
UNSTOPPABLE CHURCH

JANUARY 15

GOD OF THE MOVING CHURCH

Acts 8:1, 4

A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria... But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went.

Our God has never been One to sit still. Throughout the Old Testament, the people of God were nomadic and on the move. God's spirit **moved** over the darkness and chaos in Genesis. He continues to be on the move. He had Abraham leave where he was and move to Canaan. God moved on these early church members through this persecution. He's a "go" God! As uncomfortable as this may sound, the threat of death and destruction in Jerusalem was the catalyst God used to move His church into action.

Famine and discomfort often moved men of God. In Genesis 42, Joseph's brothers went to Egypt because of famine. They were fearful of starving today while God was positioning them for tomorrow. He had already defined His plan to Abraham for a 400-year stay in Egypt. While I'm praying about the discomfort of my current situation, God may be using my discomfort to position me for what's next.

Stephen's execution started this uproar of persecution. He preached about Abraham, Joseph, and then Moses. He was defining the movement of God over time, marching right up to the present moment when Christ had come. And God has not stopped marching.

I believe we are in a similar position today. We've built a church model that's more monument than movement. In order to get us moving, God is allowing discomfort to stir around us. These are exciting times! When we pray for a move of God we generally desire for God to move on us where we are anchored. The idea that God moves in His church causing the church to move is foreign.

We are the church of God, and God is a moving God. Open to His movement in your heart and mind today. Our God is on the move!

Heavenly Father, You are on the move, and I want to be a part. Move on me! Move in me! Move me to where You want me to go. I am open to all You have planned and desire to fully cooperate with Your plan for Your church, in Jesus' name!

JANUARY 16

GOD OF THE PREDESTINED CHURCH

Ephesians 1:11-12

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

God has already determined the destiny of His church. It will turn out as He has planned, and He is good. Be encouraged!

We saw yesterday how God had a plan for Abraham and Israel. “Your descendants will be enslaved for 400 years, but they will come out with abundance and return here to My promised land” (paraphrase of Genesis 15). God set the end from the beginning. He predestined the perfect result according to His plan and purpose.

I learned this morning that most movies are not filmed in sequence. Actually, the ending is often shot first for budgeting and editing reasons. From there, creative changes and editing to scenes and script can occur, but the changes must make sense in accordance with the pre-filmed ending. The project is held in check by the preset end.

God has predestined the church to prevail. Jesus said, “Upon this rock of the gospel, I will build My church. My church will prevail over every strategy, attack, and evil from hell” (Matthew 16:18 paraphrase).

As persecution increases, we need to know that God is not caught off guard. He will use it to fit into His plan. He will edit and guide it to follow His predetermined outcome for His church. He is working everything out according to His plan and the counsel of His will. The outcome is set. God is in control! And our roles and lives will bring praise to God and His glory. Be encouraged!

Jesus, You are the head of Your church! You are leading! You're in charge, and all is well! I am honored and grateful to have heard the gospel and received salvation. Thank You that I am a part of Your body, Your church. Thank you for the peace in my soul, knowing that You have already determined the glorious and victorious outcome of Your church. Your plan and purpose have secured my destiny, in Your name!

JANUARY 17

DEVOTED TO THE GOSPEL

Acts 2:42

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching...

The early church had no buildings, worship teams, social media, or light and stage production. It did not have convenient service times, child care, or any of the modern components of church life. These are all wonderful additives to the church, but they are not the essence. If all of these were removed, would you and I still devote ourselves to being the “church”?

The Holy Spirit established the essentials of the church body. The first one mentioned is “devotion to the apostles teaching.” The gospel of the kingdom was the apostles teaching. They taught what they learned from Jesus first hand. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15).

“Come on, Pastor Randy, we all know about the gospel!” I’m not so sure. I have a gut feeling that 1/3 of church attendance – if not more – would exit nationwide if the gospel of the kingdom was proclaimed.

So what is the gospel of the kingdom? *It’s the proclamation of the rule and reign of Jesus Christ over ALL OF LIFE and His invitation to be saved into His Kingdom through surrender to His Lordship.*

The modern “gospel” has divided our one life into two parts: earth life and heaven life. It presents a salvation in which Jesus saves us to secure our eternal “heaven life” but allows us to continue to be king over our “earth life.”

Dallas Willard critiqued this modern message against scripture. He said, “It is left unexplained how it is possible that one can rely on Christ for the next life without doing so for this one, trust Him for one’s eternal destiny without trusting Him for ‘the things that relate to present Christian life.’ Is this really possible? Surely it is not!”

I don’t write this to be harsh or critical of the church. I write to revive devotion to the gospel that proclaims, “Jesus is both Savior and Lord,” over our lives. This is essential to being the church.

Lord Jesus, I proclaim You as Lord, Savior, and King! I surrender to Your rule and authority over my life. Please forgive my lack of devotion to Your message. I devote myself to Your gospel and consider it an honor to proclaim Your kingdom, in Your name!

JANUARY 18

A CULTURE OF AWE

Acts 2:43

A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders.

“Awe” is the fearful respect and sense of wonder in the presence of a superior power. When the early church gathered, they anticipated the power of God affecting their gathering. They experienced His miracles, His presence, and their deep dependence on Him.

The early church also experienced the terror of God’s holy presence. In one service while taking up the offering, God struck two members of the church dead for lying to the Holy Spirit. Ananias and Saphira were a married couple who sold property and made a good profit. It was their money, and they didn’t have to give it. However, they decided to give a portion of it and keep some for a rainy day. Again, this was no sin. BUT they wanted to give the appearance of being sacrificial and generous. They lied about what they profited from the sale and gave the pretense of giving their all. God’s holy presence and their pretense were irreconcilable. Holiness is powerful, cleansing, and healing. But it is also dangerous and to be revered with ultimate awe.

I’ll say it. I am awe-numb. I think we all are to a degree. And “awe” cannot be taught. I just spent the last hour reading the finest writings on the subject and then realized these authors are awe-numb as well. The aspiration of “awe” can be prescribed, but this has to be experienced. Worship gives us our strongest opportunity, and I can testify to sensing His holy presence in our worship.

Will you join me today to fervently ask God to melt the numbness and familiarity off our hearts? Let’s seek God to manifest His presence in such a way so as to restore the essential of awe back to His church.

Holy God, we all join together today in humility to seek Your presence. Forgive our pretense. Forgive and heal our numbness and awe-less approach to You. We call on You to manifest Yourself in our midst. Manifest Your holiness. Manifest Your power. With sincere longing and humility, we ask this in Jesus’ name!

JANUARY 19

SPIRIT EMPOWERED MISSION

Acts 2:40-44, 47

And with many other words [Peter] testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them... And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

The mission of the church is to “go and make disciples of all people.” This includes being a living witness and able to share the gospel. Peter, full of the Holy Spirit, did this with outstanding results. Preaching of the saving work of Jesus and having many people convicted and saved was normal to the early church. It was essential.

God never expects us to accept the weight of the mission without also being filled with the power to accomplish it. However, let the weight of this mission increase your desperation for more of His spirit.

I want to focus on just one aspect of how we are filled with the Holy Spirit. I recognize there are many experiences, both grand and subtle, and we have spoken to some of these in our studies. I want to suggest a motive and inspiration for seeking more power from the Holy Spirit.

Motive? I used to pray for God to financially bless me and never thought much about the why. One late night over twenty years ago, I was watching James Robison as he requested financial gifts to help thirsty people in Africa. As a pastor, I have seen hundreds of appeals for missions' money and had grown a bit cold to them. But on this night, God gripped my heart for all the precious men, women, and children who didn't have clean water to drink. I cried as I watched. “For just \$4,000, a water well can be dug, and clean water can be supplied.” That was a lot of money for me at that time, and I was unable to help. But a deep work of God was established, and I prayed, “Lord, never again can I bear to see such great need and not be able to help. Bless me so I can supply blessings to those in need.” My motive for asking for blessings was healed. And I have been blessed.

God's spirit is poured out on those who long to see people saved but do not have the current ability to reach them. Would you ask God right now to burden you with someone who needs salvation? Let Him break your heart for their rescue. With that person in mind, ask Jesus to baptize you with the power necessary to see them saved.

JANUARY 20

STEP FORWARD AND TRY AGAIN

Acts 2:14

Then Peter stepped forward with the eleven other apostles and shouted to the crowd, "Listen carefully, all of you, fellow Jews and residents of Jerusalem!"

"Then Peter stepped forward..." Simon Peter was neither an eloquent man nor well educated. But he **stepped forward** when the time was right. He took his place.

Jesus first found Peter cleaning his nets and boat after a failed night of fishing. He was tired from and discouraged by his failed fishing trip. But Jesus speaks to Peter the words that would shape their relationship. "Go out deeper, and try again!"

Peter spent several years attempting to find his spot on the team. He tried to step forward on many occasions and seemed to awkwardly fail. He tried to manage Jesus from going to the cross and got rebuked. He tried and actually walked on water before sinking and got corrected. He tried to defend Jesus with a sword and messed that up. He tried to stay faithful to Jesus but ended up running. But through it all, he kept feeling the words of Jesus encourage him: "Try again."

The church is made up of all kinds of people. It takes everyone finding their spot on the team. It takes people like you stepping forward.

As I prayed for you today (you, the one holding this devotional and reading it now), I heard the Spirit say clearly, "Step forward." Perhaps you've had some tough experiences in church, or you have tried before to serve and do ministry, and it didn't go well. Maybe you've just been in a season of waiting. Try again.

Confront any timidity or insecurity you're feeling. Those are common feelings to us all. We need you. The Spirit is calling and encouraging you today. All you need to say is, "I'll try." Step forward.

Father, I pray specifically for the reader of this devotional. I pray for courage to act. I pray for healing over past experiences that cause doubt or fear. I ask You to stir vision, desire, and faith to serve Your body and the cause of Christ, in Jesus' name!

JANUARY 21

THE CHURCH REFRAME

Acts 5:38-39

*"So my advice is, leave these men alone. Let them go. If they are planning and doing these things merely on their own, it will soon be overthrown. But **if it is from God, you will not be able to overthrow them.** You may even find yourselves fighting against God!"*

Gamaliel was the most respected rabbi of his day. He warned the Jewish religious leaders not to kill Peter and John. They fully intended to do so until the rabbi wisely reframed the conflict. "If this is from God, you don't stand a chance." I believe this was a work of the Holy Spirit through Gamaliel.

Think with me back to the famous conflict between David and Goliath. For forty days, the 9-foot giant trash-talked King Saul and the armies of Israel. They were terrified of this beast and his superior strength. But David was anointed by the Spirit of God. He didn't approach Goliath as the others. He **reframed** the conflict into something far larger and more significant. It wasn't a bully against a shepherd. It wasn't the Philistines versus the Israelites. It was even bigger than good versus evil in his eyes. Goliath spoke out against and threatened everything David held dear. This was about his faith, his calling, and his God. David reframed the fight to be between God and His enemies. From that viewpoint, he acted in faith with courage and won the day.

We are the church of Jesus Christ. We are largely untested against serious persecution, but tensions are rising. Our faith, our God, our Savior, and all we hold dear are coming under attack. If the fight is between the local church and the culture, we fear. If it's between the local church and the government, we fear. If it's a war with controlling social media platforms, we fear. But if we see the rising Anti-christ's taunting and threats to be against God Almighty, we can run with courage to the battle line and know God will prevail.

The church has faced centuries of persecution, attacks from without and within, wars against it, and communist suppression. Yet we are 2.3 billion strong and unstoppable. Why? Because God is unstoppable, and we are in His hands. Reframe the argument. Reframe the conflict.

Thank You, Father! You are our God and the One who fights our battles. We trust in you. Please help us reframe our thinking. Open our spiritual eyes to see You in this fight with us. If God be for us, then who or what can be against us? Praise be to our God, in Jesus' name!



WEEK 4
UNSTOPPABLE
TRANSFORMATION

JANUARY 22

CONVERTED TO SEE

Acts 9:3-6

As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you, lord?" Saul asked.

And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

Paul had no idea what God had hidden in him. He never knew God had called him to be an apostle for Jesus. He didn't know he had books in him that would be inspired by the Holy Spirit and included in the Bible. He was completely blind to what God had planned for his life... until the Damascus Road.

Paul started out on the road to Damascus with the intent to arrest Christians, both men and women, and drag them to prison in chains. Instead, his caravan was pulled over by a Light. "Saul of Tarsus, you are under arrest! Come out with your hands up and your knees bowed. I am Jesus, King and Lord of all! Today I am ending the way you look at your life. And when I remove your blindness, you will see yourself and the world through My eyes" (Pastor Randy paraphrase). Is that not a beautiful picture of salvation?

In my twenties and thirties, I had no desire or vision for being in church ministry. I did it, but with an attitude as if I were too good for such a "lowly" career. Then I was humbled. For two and a half years, I walked the Damascus Road, and Jesus opened my eyes to His vision for me. It was hidden in me the whole time, but I had to have a change of heart in order to see it. Today, I can't imagine a more joyful life than the one Jesus awakened to me.

You and I are currently blind to something God has hidden in us. You can't see it. Your spouse, family, and parents can't see it. The people around you can't see it. Jesus has already set an appointment with you to show you the light and give you vision.

I want to appeal to the one reading this today who is aware that something is hidden in you. You know it's there, but you can't see it. We will pray now for Jesus to meet you at your Damascus Road.

Dear Jesus, I want to see! Will You please come and meet with me and open my eyes? If I am on the wrong road, will You please stop me and give me vision for where You want me to go? I fully trust that You have graciously hidden Your call within me. I trust You to reveal Your plans and guide me in Your timing, in Your precious name!

JANUARY 23

CONVERTED TO BOLDNESS

Acts 4:13

The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus.

Just months before, Peter had denied Jesus under the pressure of being associated with Him. John ran away as well. Now, in what seems to be a blatant disregard for their personal safety, Peter and John begin to boldly speak the name of Jesus and confront those who ordered Jesus' crucifixion. This is the power of conversion we seek.

From birth, Peter and John's capacity for fear and pressure predisposed them to back down and run away. Their education and respect in the social order of Jewish culture were also limited. Their capacity to purposefully impact their world was extremely limited and set in stone... until they were converted by Jesus. Changed! Transformed! Completely different!

On many occasions, I have shared the natural limitations of my temperament and personality type. By nature, I am an introvert and enjoy time alone. I am very content to let others lead. By nature, I am a Phlegmatic/Melancholy, which is the worst combination of personality traits (according to "experts") that one can possess as a leader. But I have been with Jesus most of my life. I have been empowered by His Holy Spirit and now live by the capacity of His Spirit, not the restricted capacity of my nature.

This is real! This is the boldness that our early church fathers demonstrated. Have you experienced this powerful conversion? Boldness of spirit is available now. Let's ask God.

Heavenly Father, fill me with boldness! Change me – spirit, soul, and body. I surrender the limited capacity of my nature and restrictions I have placed on myself. I receive the capacity and boldness of the Holy Spirit. Do in me all that is necessary for the people around me to know that I've been with Jesus, in His name!

JANUARY 24

EMBRACING CHANGE

Acts 6:1a, 2-3

But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent... So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, "We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program. And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility."

The early church was growing by the power of the Spirit while experiencing the pain of change. And with that change came the "rumblings of discontent."

Remember: Healthy things grow. Growing things change. And change always brings new challenges and opportunities.

As a church leader for over thirty years, I have experienced this progression continuously. When the church had 100 members in attendance, everyone knew each other, and the social environment was tightly knit. But as the church grew in numbers, that "family feeling" was less tangible, and there were "rumblings of discontent." As the church continues to grow in health, it continues to change. Additional staff, pastors, lay leaders, programs, ministries, worship styles, service styles, and on and on the changes have come. With every change, there has been the "rumblings of discontent" from various people. They are not bad or evil. These are normal people who crave stability and react to the tension of change.

On a personal level, the transformation process involves change. When you experience true conversion, you begin to experience change. Some change is radical. As in the church example, when God begins to grow your heart for people and your ministry call to influence, there will be "rumblings of discontent" in some of your friends. Some will question your motives as if you're trying to exalt yourself above the established group and pecking order. This is only one way your personal growth can be challenged. Whatever the challenge, you and I must consider the call of God on our lives and the people to whom we are called to touch. Embrace the change.

As a "stability-lover," I take to change slowly. It causes me tension in more severe ways than other people, but this is where I've grown in trusting God. Facing the tensions involved with change has trained me to find stability in God and move forward in faith. Deeper trust leads to greater health.

Heavenly Father, I embrace the change. You are at work to make me look like Jesus. I trust the changes You are making, even though it's painful. Strengthen me today to resist the temptation to cling to predictable stability at the cost of my calling, in Jesus' name!

JANUARY 25

HUMILITY BRINGS FREEDOM

1 Peter 5:6-7

Therefore humble yourselves [demote, lower yourselves in your own estimation] under the mighty hand of God, that in due time He may exalt you, Casting the whole of your care [all your anxieties, all your worries, all your concerns, once and for all] on Him, for He cares for you affectionately and cares about you watchfully.

To hear this coming from Simon Peter is beautiful. His life was transformed from being a pretender of confidence, to a powerhouse of power because of the work of humility.

Humility is not hard to understand; it is simply being realistic. Think about it. God's mighty hand has provided everything in our life that is worthy of any glory. In light of this, He gets the glory. The more accepting I am of this reality, the more influence or exalting God gives me. And that's freedom.

I heard Dallas Willard speaking to college students regarding humility. It was simple, challenging, and very liberating. His three points were the following: never pretend, never presume, and never push.

1. Never Pretend

Think of all the energy we spend trying to figure out what would impress others so they will exalt us by their esteem. And think of the freedom we would experience if we didn't live concerned about what other people think. Our Christian faith is not a performance or an act.

2. Never Presume

We are never to presume that we are deserving of some applause, credit, honor, or position. We needn't presume that we are superior or inferior in our comparisons with others. Simply be who you are without presumptions.

3. Never Push

Stand for God. Stand for truth. Stand for the cause of Christ, which is the salvation of souls. Witness to others, but let God do the pushing. Let God open doors and others' hearts. Surrender the need to control outcomes. Surrender control, and trust God with the outcomes.

(cont. on next page.)

JANUARY 26

SET FREE TO SET FREE

Acts 16:27-31, 33

The jailer woke up to see the prison doors wide open. He assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword to kill himself. But Paul shouted to him, "Stop! Don't kill yourself! We are all here!" Then he brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household." ... Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized.

Paul and Silas were miraculously set free from their chains. However, God didn't set them free to leave, but to stay. Paul and Silas were set free in order to bring salvation to the jailor and all his family. They were set free to set others free.

Why is the transformational work of the Holy Spirit so important? I have spent the better part of my Christian life seeking to be more holy, more faithful, more disciplined, and more biblical; all with the goal of being more pleasing and acceptable to God. There is certainly some good in this approach, but it keeps the attention on *me*. I'm wondering if perhaps, many of us have spent most of our time in pursuit of being better Christians, so God would be more pleased with us. I'm not suggesting this is wrong, but just incomplete.

While reading through the book of Acts, I see a needed adjustment. The work of Jesus made me acceptable to God. God gifted that acceptance to me by grace, and I receive it through faith. I can't improve on Jesus' performance. But the work of the Holy Spirit is to make me a witness to others. His work is to clean me up, renew my thinking patterns, convict and correct my character flaws, and give me gifts to make me a more credible and attractive witness. He's not cleaning me up so that I feel better about my performance before God. It's to make me a better on-ramp for my family, neighbors, and guys at the gym. He is setting me free so that I can set others free.

This is exciting! Instead of spending countless hours asking, *How am I doing?* and measuring progress by how few sins I've committed, how about we go back to the early church measurements of spirit-fullness? What if we ask, *How am I doing in loving and touching the people in my sphere of influence? How are the people around me being affected by the freedom I'm experiencing?* Praise God! We've been set free to set others free.

Come, Holy Spirit! Come into my life, and work Your work. Make me a credible witness so that the people I love will be drawn to Jesus. Change me, fill me, and shape me so that You touch every person You've assigned my life to touch, in Jesus' name!

JANUARY 27

TRUE CONVERSION CONTINUES

Acts 2:40-42

*And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And **they continued steadfastly...***

George Whitefield, one of the revivalists of the Great Awakening, was asked how many people were saved in a meeting where he had preached. He answered, "I don't know. We shall know more in six months." Whitefield did not consider a person's initial response to be the indicator of true salvation. It was verified by their life-change and continuity over time.

Whenever the gospel is preached, we know the power of God is present to convert people. But even Jesus indicated in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13) that we cannot really tell if a person is truly born again by an immediate response. He described four human heart conditions: shallow, entangled with life, easily robbed by the devil, and healthy. Only the healthy heart maintained the seed and continued on to produce fruit.

I write this today to highlight the transformation process as essential to salvation, not optional. Our current church culture has created a "salvation" that requires no transformation or discipline. But how is it possible for the Holy Spirit of God to enter our fleshly lives and make no changes? It's simply not possible. Salvation is both an event *and* a process. There is a first day of salvation, but it is evident over time by the effects of the Holy Spirit changing our thinking, behavior, attitudes, and our life.

If you are sensing conviction at this time, simply ask God to save you and fill you with His Holy Spirit. If you know you are born again but feel weary with the journey, ask the Holy Spirit to help you. He is our helper. He gives us grace to live the Christian life with evidence of His present influence. If you've gotten lazy in your lifestyle, I challenge you to recommit your life to Him and do as the early church did: **continue steadfastly** in the Word, the church, and loving people. Be encouraged and CONTINUE ON!

Heavenly Father, thank You for Jesus! I so want to be saved and receive the free gift of salvation. I want to be filled with Your Holy Spirit, changed, and transformed. I ask You for the power to love and follow Jesus. I thank You for Your grace to continue on, in Jesus' name!

JANUARY 28

CREDIBLE PROOF

Romans 12:2

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

How can we have a week of pondering the transformation process without looking at Romans 12:2?

Two year ago, I started a new nutritional diet discipline along with cardio and weight training. My starting weight was over 200 pounds, and I had no idea how out of shape I had become. In six months, I lost over thirty pounds and had to replace all my clothing to smaller sizes. (I don't say this to brag, as I should have never allowed myself to get that out of shape to begin with.)

Immediately, pastor friends and church members began to ask me what I had done. Why? Because they could see the results. I had become a visible, credible witness for this nutrition process. Funny, but no one had ever asked my advice on health or nutrition before this time. I'm sure I could have read books and googled accurate information that may have helped them. But available information was not enough. A visibly changed life motivated them.

This is the whole reason for being transformed by the renewing of our minds. It's not simply to have more holy information to share; it's so that our life might "PROVE what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

The early church did not change the world by better information. They changed the world by being credible witnesses. They did miracles, and no one could argue. They walked in confidence and boldness that caused the religious class to marvel. They took beatings and suffered imprisonment without intimidation or fear, and no one could argue. Historians say that the movement was unstoppable because they died better than any people had ever died before. They worshiped God while being burned with fire and eaten by lions. They didn't simply have a better philosophy of Christian faith. They were themselves the evidence: transformed people.

If you want to motivate people to better health, show up in shape! If you want to win the world for Jesus, show up changed! Show up bold! Show up loving people! Be transformed by the renewing of your mind! Show up!

Change me, Lord! Transform me! Do in me all that is necessary in order for Your good, acceptable, and perfect will to be proven to all who observe my life, in Jesus' name!



WEEK FIVE
UNSTOPPABLE CALLING

JANUARY 29

CALLED BY GRACE

Galatians 1:15-16

But even before I was born, God chose me and called me by his marvelous grace. Then it pleased him to reveal his Son to me so that I would proclaim the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles. When this happened, I did not rush out to consult with any human being.

One of the most remarkable concepts of scripture is the plan God has for our lives. Here, Paul is pondering God's "marvelous grace" in calling him from birth to the Gentiles. Paul, the devout Jewish law-keeper and student of the finest rabbi of his day? Paul, the zealot who applauded the gory killing of Stephen... who aggressively hunted and imprisoned men and women who followed Jesus?

Wouldn't it make more sense to have Paul converted as a child? Wouldn't it be more like God to catch Paul before he tortured and arrested innocent Christ-followers? If God chose and called Paul from birth, why did He wait so long to reveal Jesus to him?

Why did God wait so long to save John Newton? He was raised by a Christian mother but became a ruthless slave trader. Imprisoned for rebelling against his military authority, he ran from God and all authority and made his living selling other human beings as though they were animals. If Newton was chosen and called from birth, why did God wait so long to reveal Jesus to him?

First, God has given each of us the will to choose or reject Him, and we can reject God and our calling. But second, God is a redeemer. What looks like wasted years to us are redeemable to God. Paul would have a deeper understanding of God's grace because of the depth of his own depravity. And Newton would eventually meet Jesus and experience God's grace. Out of his deep appreciation for the redemption of God, he would write a hymn that would become the anthem of the church: *Amazing Grace*.

Be encouraged today! There is nothing we've done nor pain we've endured that can't be redeemed by God. There is no person so far from God and so deep in sin whom God can't redeem. God redeems our lives and wastes nothing in shaping our calling.

Father, thank You for saving me! You chose and called me from birth, and at the right time, You revealed Your Son to me. Use me now, I pray. Redeem all the wasted time and broken parts of my life for Your glory, in Jesus' name!

JANUARY 30

THE PRIVILEGE OF CALLING

Acts 9:15-16

But the Lord said, "Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake."

Suffering? Paul suffered greatly because of the call of God. He would be executed because of the call. And yet, he would declare it a privilege to suffer the loss of all things and to fellowship with Jesus in His suffering (Phil. 3:7-11).

If you asked me today what I question most about my journey with God, my answer would not be, *Why do bad things happen to good people?* Nor would it be, *Why do You allow suffering?* or *Why has it been so hard?* It would be, *Why did you call me? Why have I been privileged to represent You and do this work of ministry?*

I think we can all relate at some level to this question. With all of my failures, quirks, sins, weaknesses, moodiness, doubts, complaints, angers, fears, and inconsistencies, how has God been so faithful to keep me and not remove His call? If I were God, I would have fired me thousands of times by now.

And yet, upon further consideration of the people God redeems and calls according to His purpose, it's just like Him to call me. Peter over-promised and under-delivered out of insecurity. James and John had anger issues. Thomas doubted, and Matthew cheated people on their taxes. Paul had a religious and murderous heart, full of pride and superiority. All of these men quit at least once on their commitment to Christ. But God chose them, redeemed them, and turned the world upside down.

You and I can honestly question our character and qualifications for being called by God, but don't let those questions cause discouragement over your call. Today is an opportunity to worship and appreciate God for His great grace toward us. He has graced us with the privilege of carrying His name. What a great and humbling honor!

Thank You, Jesus! You have saved me and called me by Your name. You have redeemed me and given me the great privilege to minister for You. I worship You for calling me. I am humbled and honored. Make me great at what You've called me to do for Your name's sake. Amen!

JANUARY 31

THE CHALLENGE OF THE CALL

Acts 6:8-10

Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people. But one day some men [many anti-Christ religious Jews] started to debate with him. None of them could stand against the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke.

This confrontation would escalate into a brutal attack on Stephen and cost him his life.

Stephen, with his many talents, was willing to do the menial work of handing out food, cleaning, and serving behind the scenes, along with the dangerous work of confronting his city with the gospel. In his short time of service and in his death, Stephen is a great example of selflessness and character under fire.

Most of us won't die the death of a martyr, but Jesus still calls us to die to ourselves and serve one another. We are called to people. And serving people means we're going to get hurt in the process. If we're not careful, the pain involved in our service can cause us to ultimately despise those we once felt called to love. We may think at this point, *People are in the way of my ministry.*

I have witnessed many precious ministers (not just professional clergy) abandon their calling because of the pain and rejection involved. I have also experienced resentments toward people and even resentment towards God because of this pain over the years.

I write this to you today to encourage you in your call to serve people. It's hard, unfair, and unjust at times. But think of all the lives who benefit from your investment. For their sake, keep going! Consider it a fellowship of suffering with Jesus, and receive His grace to endure today. Don't quit!

Jesus, thank You for not quitting! Thank You for suffering the pain of rejection in order to save me. Heal me of my wounds. Strengthen my soul. Fill me with Your spirit! I release all resentment towards people and look to You to be my strength and power today, in Your name!

FEBRUARY 1

CALLED TO ENCOURAGE

Acts 9:26-27

And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles.

Barnabas is a hero in the church. It takes courage to vouch for another person who has baggage and history working against him. Saul's reputation disqualified him, and the disciples weren't buying it. "But Barnabas."

Barnabas's real name was Joseph, but the apostles renamed him, "Son of encouragement." And here we see him stand in the gap for the man who would become one of the world's most powerful preachers of the gospel. The disciples received Barnabas' encouragement and brought Saul (later Paul) into the group. And what a difference Saul would make to the team.

One encourager can change everything. As we discussed in yesterday's devotional, opposition and discouragement will accompany your calling. But having a Barnabas or being one for someone else can make all the difference.

I recently received an email from a man who was on an oil rig at 12:30 in the morning. He said he felt led to tell me his story of how God was working in his life through The Crossing. It was so powerful to read how God radically changed him and redeemed his life and family. That encouragement fueled faith and courage deep into my soul. It pushed me forward. Praise God!

You are an encourager. You have faith to lend to another person today, and your encouragement could make a world-changing difference. Take every opportunity to encourage the people around you. Also, don't shrug off the encouragement that comes to you. Receive it as fuel from God. Be encouraged!

Father, thank You for Your encouragement today. Fill me with faith so that I can give it away to others who are in need. If there is anything in my soul that naturally rejects the encouragement You send to me, heal me now, in Jesus' name!

FEBRUARY 2

CALLED AND SENT

Acts 13:2-4

One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Dedicate Barnabas and Saul for the special work to which I have called them." So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them and sent them on their way.

Every believer is called. This is not just for professional clergy. Romans 8:30 expresses this clearly. But calling and sending are separate matters. Calling is the *what* and *whom* you are called to. Sending is the *when* and the authority to do it.

Paul is "called" to the Gentiles in Acts 9. But he is not "sent" until Acts 13, thirteen years later. These years were for training his character and building a relationship with the governing authority of the church. God's process for bringing about ministers with authority has not changed.

I have observed vast numbers of talented ministers (clergy and lay ministers alike) in the past number of years who have little authority. Our culture exalts talent and celebrates fast starts. But God has a process for developing us so that we carry His authority into the arena of ministry. Talent without authority is no match for the spiritual war in which we find ourselves.

David was fifteen at his calling and thirty at his sending. Joseph was called at seventeen and thirty at his sending. Moses was called from birth but sent at eighty. Jesus, the Creator of the world, was called from birth but not sent by the Holy Spirit until He was thirty. And Jesus was distinguished because He spoke with authority.

It is not possible to fully explain this concept in a short devotional. Here are some concise next steps: Desire authority (anointing) above all else. Serve, even if you feel you're serving beneath your capacity. Wait, even if you feel you're ready. Stay humble, even if you feel you deserve recognition. Be in relationships with godly authorities from whom you can take direction and correction. Trust God!

Father God, I desire to live and walk in Your authority. I ask You to fill me with Your Spirit and anoint me to carry out my assignment. I submit to Your plan. I trust You to shape and empower me. Thank You in advance for all the lives who will be affected because of Your anointing on my life, in Jesus' name!

FEBRUARY 3

CALLED TO THE ONE

Acts 8:27-29

The Ethiopian eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and he was now returning. Seated in his carriage, he was reading aloud from the book of the prophet Isaiah. The Holy Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and walk along beside the carriage."

This encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is one of my favorite passages in Acts. This precious man had been enslaved as a child and castrated. He was the property of the queen and could never hope for a life and family outside of being a slave. He had heard of the God of Israel and rode a wagon for six weeks just to meet this God. No doubt he heard all about Jesus the Messiah: friend of sinners and Savior of all. He had to wonder: *Does God accept eunuchs? I've been a throw-away my whole life... Does God care about me?*

Meanwhile, Philip is busy preaching to large crowds of people in Samaria when God speaks to him, saying, "Leave these crowds for now. I have one person I want you to go to and let him know that I have not overlooked him."

As Phillip explains the gospel in Isaiah 53, I believe he directs the eunuch to the passage of Isaiah 56:3-5:

"And don't let the eunuchs say, 'I'm a dried-up tree with no children and no future. For this is what the Lord says: I will bless those eunuchs... I will give them—within the walls of my house— a memorial and a name far greater than sons and daughters could give. For the name I give them is an everlasting one.

It will never disappear!" How powerful!

Who is the "one" God is sending you to today? Someone has God's attention, and God is looking for someone to love and attend them today. Why not you?

Father, I want to be used by You today to touch one person. Highlight that person to me today as I go about my business and work. Give Your compassion and love for them. And stir Your message in me that I might represent You well today, in Jesus' name!

FEBRUARY 4

CALLED THROUGH CONFLICT

Acts 15:36-41

Paul said to Barnabas, "Let's go back... to see how the new believers are doing." Barnabas agreed and wanted to take along John Mark. But Paul disagreed strongly, since John Mark had deserted them... Their disagreement was so sharp that they separated. Barnabas took John Mark with him and sailed for Cyprus. Paul chose Silas, and as he left, the believers entrusted him to the Lord's gracious care.

Can you believe it? Even Paul and Barnabas had difficulty working together! The Holy Spirit had set these two apart and called them to work together. And they did it very successfully for a while. Here, Paul will not accept John-Mark because of his past disloyalty, and Barnabas refuses to go without him. They exchange words and frustrations, and they separate.

Now this is not a funny incident, but I have to admit that I'm laughing a bit as I write today. I'm laughing in relief, knowing the most anointed, godly, and brilliant Christian leaders still have times when they have to separate because of the tension and inability to work together any longer.

I have been in church life for over thirty years. In that time, I have had pastors and staff that I thought I couldn't live without. I knew they were called here and God had brought them. Some have left under very healthy conditions, but a few have been under frustration and tension. It happens! Most of the tense departures have been reconciled.

I feel like I am writing to someone today who knows the pain of a Christian relationship that ended badly. A friend, co-minister, or maybe even a romantic interest that seemed to be brought together by God, and yet it separated. *I thought I heard God. I thought we were supposed to work together.*

Even when God has orchestrated a working friendship and partnership, the potential for relational strife is possible, if not probable. Relationships are work, and at times, we simply fail. Other times, it's actually time to separate as the season has changed, and two people are being led in different directions.

(Cont. on next page.)



CONCLUSION
UNSTOPPABLE YEAR

FEBRUARY 5

GOD INTERRUPTS

Acts 22:6-8

"As I was on the road, approaching Damascus about noon, a very bright light from heaven suddenly shone down around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' "'Who are you, lord?' I asked. "And the voice replied, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene...'"

Saul was confidently headed down the wrong road, clear in his own mind about his purpose. Clear about the objectives of stamping out Christ-followers. Clear about what Bible verses substantiate his quest. And then SUDDENLY, Jesus blocks the road. Jesus interrupts Paul's life and authoritatively changes the course of his days forever.

The book of Acts is a revelation of the active love of God to interrupt our lives. When the church was lifeless and dead, He interrupted. When religious leaders, like Saul, were stuck in wrong thinking and wrong conclusions, He interrupted. When overlooked and undervalued people, like the Ethiopian eunuch, were traveling on a hopeless road back to a hopeless life, He interrupted. When a person, like the jailor, despaired so much as to attempt to take his own life He interrupted. When people, like Peter, were hopelessly in bondage and imprisoned He interrupted. Praise God! He interrupts!

Last night in this hotel room, I praised, prayed, and cried. My own heart was (and is) so refreshed with faith that God loves me enough to interrupt. I love all that God has accomplished through my life, but I've constantly wrestled with an inner tension, *Is this all you intended? Am I doing something, thinking something, not doing something, or hindering what You've intended to accomplish through my life?* I know there is more of the Spirit of God available, but I question whether this "old wineskin" has any more capacity. *Can I change, or am I maxed as to my usefulness to God?*

Praise God! Praise God! Praise God! God loves you and me so much that He will interrupt our ruts. He will interrupt our patterns. He not only has new wine to pour in and through our lives, but He will also expand the wineskin. The wineskin of our lives is all the limiting factors and ruts that have limited our capacity for usefulness. It's the road our life is on. And praise God; He interrupts!

Heavenly Father, thank You for interrupting my life. Please don't stop! Please interrupt any patterns of thinking or habits of life that have limited what You have intended for me. I don't know how to change life-long patterns and expectations, but I know You can change me. I'm counting on Your Holy interruptions this year, in Jesus' name!

FEBRUARY 6

2023: IT'S IN YOUR HANDS

Acts 21:12-14

When we heard that (danger was ahead), we begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem. But Paul wouldn't budge: "Why all this hysteria? ... You're looking at this backwards. The issue in Jerusalem is not what they do to me, whether arrest or murder, but what the Master Jesus does through my obedience. Can't you see that?" We saw that we weren't making even a dent in his resolve, and gave up. "It's in God's hands now," we said. "Master, you handle it."

You did it! You've given God your first and best, "your prayer has been heard, and your gifts to the poor have been noticed by God" (Acts 10:31)! I am proud of you!

In our final text, Paul is facing uncertainty in Jerusalem, and his friends become taken with fear of what may happen. "Change your plan, Paul!" they said, "Surely God has not called you to face such dangerous circumstances." But Paul was not given to fear. He spoke by the Holy Spirit and said, "I am not afraid of what might happen to me. I am excited about what God is going to accomplish through me in the midst of this current chaos." This is the mental and spiritual disposition of a person of faith.

As we enter this new year, we are not given to fear. We have spent the last 37 days examining the history of God and His church. God was faithful then, and He has always been faithful to preserve, empower, and lead His church. We are His church. You are His child. God is unstoppable! His church is unstoppable! His Spirit in you is unstoppable! And we are filled with faith and expectancy of what God is going to do in us, through us, and for us in this new year.

I would like to bless you and commit this year into the hands of our unstoppable God. Agree with me in this prayer of blessing:

(Cont. on next page.)

FEBRUARY 6
2023: IT'S IN YOUR HANDS
(CONT.)

Heavenly Father, You are our unstoppable God! And You are a God of blessing. Bless the one reading these words. Bless and prosper their understanding of Your Word. Bless their time with You. Bless their spiritual ears to hear and eyes to see. Bless their spiritual growth. Bless their soul and inner thoughts with faith, hope, and understanding. Bless their minds with fresh and creative ideas. Inspire them by Your Holy Spirit. Bless their relationships with peace, love, and unity. Bless their finances to prosper. Allow them financial overflow in order to bless more and more people in need. Let them prosper in equal proportion to their soul prospering. Bless their marriages and families. Bless their health and physical bodies with strength and energy. Bless Your church, oh Lord! Bless The Crossing Church to accomplish all that You've intended. Bless this year, oh God! "2023 is in Your hands now. Master, You handle it." In Jesus name...

AMEN!

Prayers and Reflections — Pastor Randy Harvey, *Senior Pastor,*
The Crossing Church

Editors — Andrew Hendrix, Lauren Hendrix, Joanne Hillman

Web — www.thecrossing.cc

Cover Artwork — Skylar Stigmon, *Church Media Squad*