

THE YEAR OF THE

# UNHEARD OF

2020

PRAYER, FASTING, CONSECRATION



FASTING GUIDE & JOURNAL





Hello Connect Church Family, Friends, and Partners,

We are so glad you have decided to participate in an extended time of prayer and personal devotion. There really is no better way to reset our spiritual compass and bring about refreshment in every area of our lives than through prayer and fasting.

This fast was intentionally designed to be flexible so that you can participate at any level. Whether you have done a season of prayer and fasting before, or if this is your first time, you can start where you are and experience what God has in store for you in a powerful way.

This guide provides practical tools to help you navigate your personal 20-day journey. As you read over the information, please consider how it applies to you and your personal circumstances and convictions.

We pray that God will help you set your vision for the year on the things that matter as you commit yourself to Him over the next twenty days. May God continue to bless you and enlarge you as you seek Him first!

Matthew 9:15b (NKJV) But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.

Your DEVOTED servants,

*Ken & Dana*

Pastors Ken & Dana



# 21 DAYS OF PRAYER & FASTING PREPARATION CHECKLIST

## WEEK ONE

Week 1 of the fast typically is the easiest part of the fast because you're excited and very hopeful of the end objective. We suggest you take week one and really prepare yourself mentally for the remaining weeks of the fast so that your finish is as strong as your start. Be intentional about your prayer and devotion time - refuse to allow anything to interfere with this much-needed time with the Lord.

If you have to get to work really early, consider getting up 30 min. sooner so that you can jump start your day

**Week 1: DO NOT EAT/DRINK ANYTHING TILL 12:00 PM (ONLY WATER)** Remove red meats, fried foods, breads, sweets, retail shopping (only purchase items that are needful), caffeinated drinks, and carbonated drinks

## WEEK TWO

Week two is the "this just got real" period! By now, you should be at a point where you've mentally prepared yourself to shift into week two of the fast. Be prepared to feel as if it's pointless, or you begin to feel you're not getting the breakthrough you hoped. This is the period where Satan will send messages that are truly the complete opposite of what God is doing for you during this time of commitment. The key to week 2 is pray, pray and pray.

**Week 2: DO NOT EAT/DRINK ANYTHING TILL 3:00 PM (ONLY WATER)** Remove social media sites, gaming sites and apps, secular music, and chicken, (fish only baked or broiled)

## WEEK THREE

**Week 3: DO NOT EAT/DRINK ANYTHING TILL 6:00 PM (ONLY WATER)** Vegetables only, 60 min of television per day (remaining time should be spent with family, or with God), water only (no fruit drinks, sparkling waters, etc.)

## FASTING

Attend weekly bible study  
Attend weekly weekend worship  
Participate in prayer line  
Commit to following the fasting guide as outlined

# IN 2020, I AM BELIEVING GOD FOR....

## Personal Faith Goals

Spiritual Revival + Physical Healing + Prosperity and Abundance + Generosity .....

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## My Family

Restoration of Relationships + Household Salvation

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## My Ministry

Small Group Growth + Salvation of Colleagues and Classmates

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**...if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. MATTHEW 18:19**

My Prayer Partner: \_\_\_\_\_







THE YEAR OF THE

# UNHEARD OF

*Prayer*

## TIPS ON DEVELOPING YOUR PRAYER LIFE

Remember that prayer does not have to be intimidating or over extended.

Prayer is a simple language from your heart to the heart of God.

Prayer is a conversation, not a monologue. Talk to God and sit quietly and allow him to talk to you.

Prayer allows you to grow in friendship with God.

Prayer allows you to gain power from God.

Prayer moves us from our selfish requests to the submission of God's will.

Prayer allows us to approach God and lay our requests in faith at His feet.

# THE ACTS METHOD OF PRAYER

Use the A.C.T.S. method of prayer during your daily time alone with God.

1. Adoration: Give God praise and honor for who He is as Lord over all.
2. Confession: Honestly deal with the sin in your prayer life.
3. Thanksgiving: Verbalize what you're grateful for in your life and in the world around you.
4. Supplication: Pray for the needs of others and yourself.

During your time of Adoration, here are some attributes of God that you can incorporate: Self-Existence, Transcendence, Eternalness, Omnipotence, Immutability, Omniscience, Wisdom, Sovereignty, Faithfulness, Love, Infinitude, Immensity, Goodness, Justice, Mercy, Grace, Omnipresence, Immanence, Holiness, Perfection... (Read "The Attributes of God: A Journey into the Father's Heart" - A.W. Tozer)

## SAMPLE PRAYER

### **Adoration**

Dear God, I love you. I trust you and you are my shepherd and king. You represent love & goodness. I know that you are all loving and all caring. You are my salvation.

### **Confession**

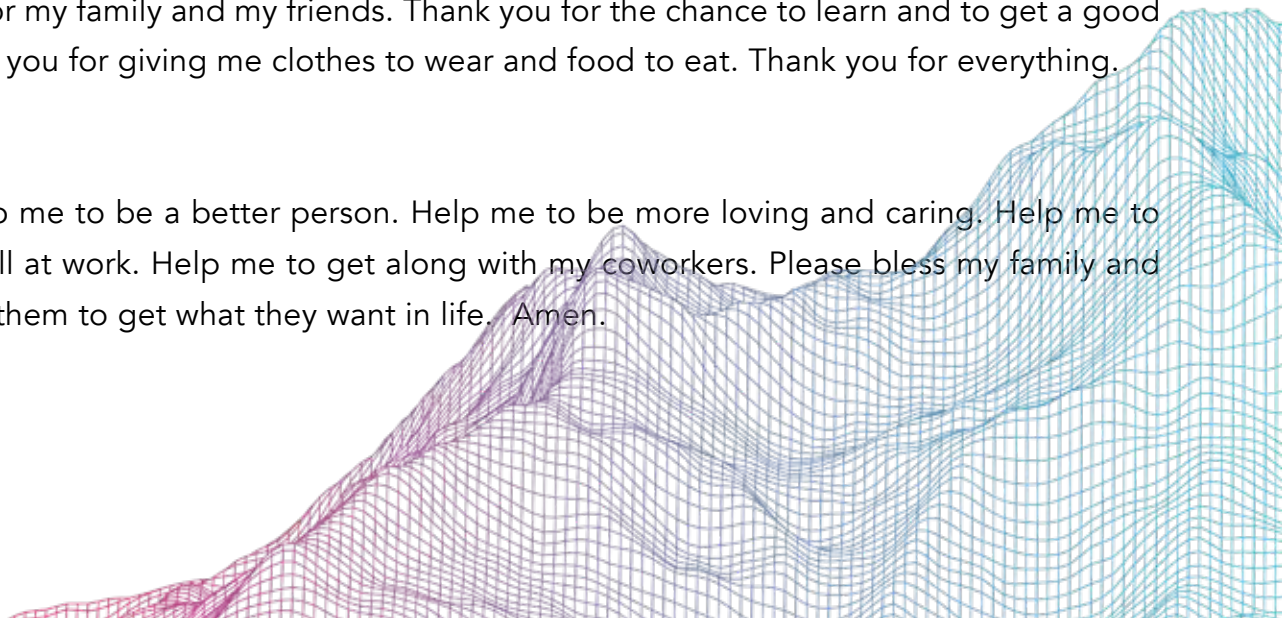
Please forgive me for all of the times that I hurt others. Help me to forgive those who have hurt me. Lord, I want to be a better person, with your grace.

### **Thanksgiving**

Thank you, Lord, for all that you do for me. Thank you for dying on the cross to save me from my sins. Thank you for my family and my friends. Thank you for the chance to learn and to get a good education. Thank you for giving me clothes to wear and food to eat. Thank you for everything.

### **Supplication**

Please, Lord, help me to be a better person. Help me to be more loving and caring. Help me to be able to do well at work. Help me to get along with my coworkers. Please bless my family and my friends. Help them to get what they want in life. Amen.





THE YEAR OF THE

# UNHEARD OF

*Bible Study*

**IN ADDITION TO YOUR DAILY BIBLE STUDY BELOW IS A LIST OF OTHER RECOMMENDED READINGS TO ENHANCE YOUR PERSONAL TIME WITH GOD:**

Life Essentials for Knowing God Better, Experiencing God Deeper, Loving God More by Dr. Tony Evans

RePresent Jesus by Dharius Daniels

Creature of the Word: The Jesus-Centered Church by Matt Chandler, Eric Geiger and Josh Patterson

Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth by Richard J. Foster

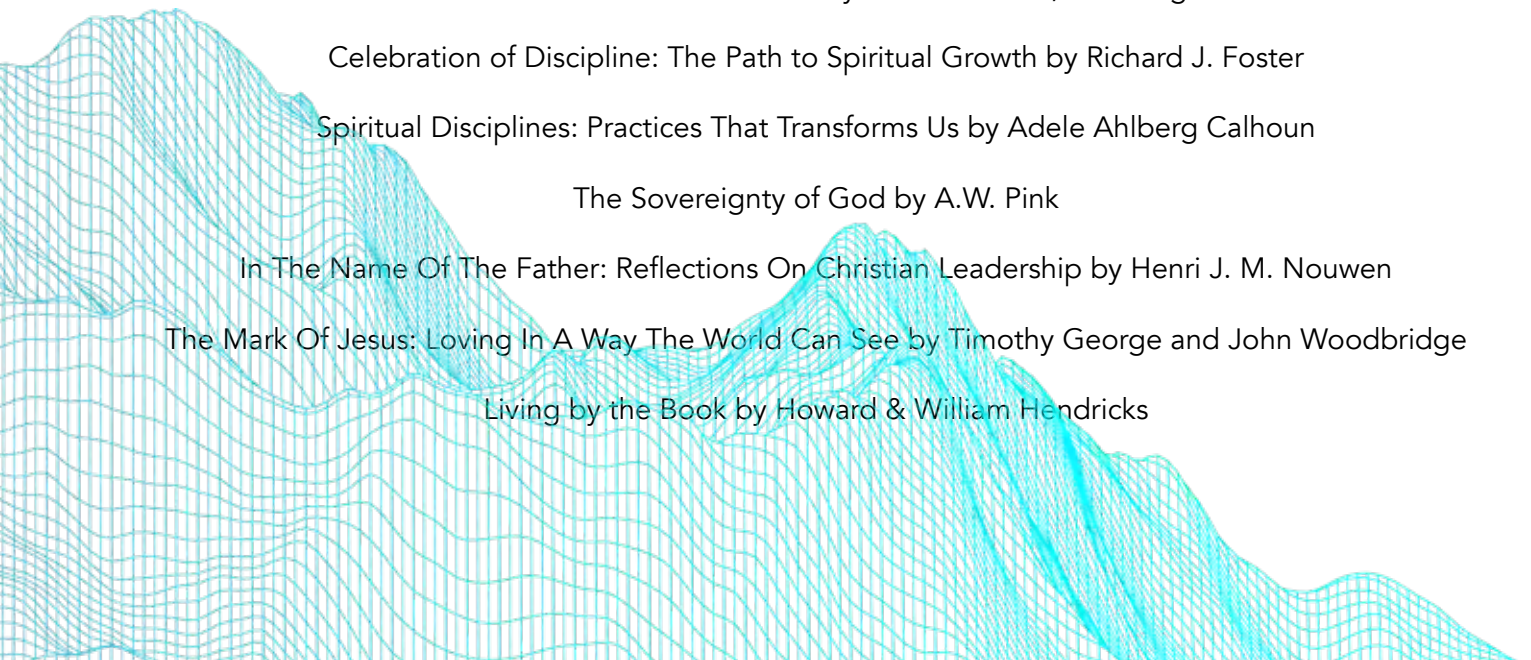
Spiritual Disciplines: Practices That Transforms Us by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun

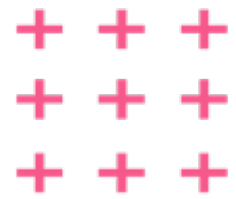
The Sovereignty of God by A.W. Pink

In The Name Of The Father: Reflections On Christian Leadership by Henri J. M. Nouwen

The Mark Of Jesus: Loving In A Way The World Can See by Timothy George and John Woodbridge

Living by the Book by Howard & William Hendricks





# BIBLE STUDY TOOLS

## Tips for Success

- Give God your best you.
- Find an accountability partner who you can connect with daily.
- Journal about your discoveries.
- Consider reading as a couple or family together.
- Aim for 20 minutes.

## Online Tools

### **www.YouVersion.com**

- YouVersion is the leading online Bible website that offers various Bible versions and reading plans. You can access it from your phone or computer.
- Join the Connect Church group to connect with other members or create a group for your Bible study group.
- YouVersion will also allow you to listen to the Bible.

### **<http://faithlifebible.com/>**

- This is an exceptional and free online study Bible that will greatly assist your study with explanations, illustration, maps and other support material.
- Join the Connect Church group to connect with other members or create a group for your Bible study group.

## Tools to Help You in Your Study

- Bible Version  
*Recommended: NIV or ESV (app also available)*
- Study Bible  
*Recommended: Zondervan NIV Study Bible (app also available)*  
*Recommended: ESV Study Bible*
- Bible Dictionary  
*Recommended: Zondervan Bible Dictionary by J. D. Douglas, Merrill C. Tenney*
- English Dictionary
- Commentaries  
*Recommended: Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary, Volume One: Old Testament*  
*Recommended: Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary, Volume Two: New Testament*





THE YEAR OF THE

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*Take the Challenge*

**21-DAY DEVOTIONAL | READING GUIDE**

**THE CHALLENGE:**

This devotional is meant to be a guide as you read through the book of Acts in 28 days. Read one chapter per day in the book of Acts and spend time with God using the devotions and questions provided.

Additionally, we invite you to pray for the specific local and global prayer emphasis that are provided for each day.



One of the most amazing gifts God gives is the gift of sight. Vision enables us to safely navigate through life and empowers us to accomplish many great things in life.

While physical sight is a wonderful blessing, there is another kind of vision that is even more important—spiritual vision. The wise, Holy-Spirit-inspired writer of Proverbs described the importance of spiritual vision this way:

**Proverbs 29:18a (KJV) Where there is no vision, the people perish. ...**

**Proverbs 29:18a (Message) If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves. ...**

The Bible says that people lacking in spiritual vision perish. They dry up. They fail to experience and receive all God has for them. They stumble their way through life with little or no hope, purpose or direction. What a sad way to live.

The sad consequences of poor spiritual vision are observed in an Old Testament story recorded in Numbers 13, 14. The Israelites were poised to enter the land God promised to give them after their miraculous deliverance from Egyptian slavery. Moses appointed twelve men to check out the condition of the land before the entire nation entered. They were instructed to bring back a reconnaissance report to the people.

The “Cliff Notes” version of the events that followed is simple. Ten of the twelve men were afflicted with spiritual myopia. Although they acknowledged seeing the beauty and bounty of the land, what they really saw was problems, giants, impossibilities and looming defeat. Their lack of spiritual vision, and the negative statements that accompanied their blindness infected and afflicted the whole nation. Because of their inability to see God’s promises and the faithlessness that resulted from their blindness, they, and an entire generation of people, suffered the consequences. They perished! Only two of the group—Joshua and Caleb—men with healthy spiritual vision—experienced the blessings of the Promised Land.

Spiritual vision is something we all need to improve. We must consistently ask God to “open the eyes of our hearts” so that we can better see:

- Who God is and what He is saying to us through His Word.
- Our true spiritual condition and deepest needs.
- Opportunities to love and serve others in His name.
- The phenomenal future He has planned for us.

Strong spiritual vision spawns other great qualities in us. It produces faith, hope, confidence, peace and discipline. Healthy spiritual vision enables us to see and embrace the Promised Land God has for us to enter and enjoy.

## WHAT DO YOU SEE?

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**Exodus 19:3 (NLT) Then Moses climbed the mountain to appear before God. The Lord called out to him from the mountain...**

God gave Moses a significant and challenging assignment. After spearheading the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, Moses was now responsible to lead God's people into the Promised Land.

One of the early stops on this journey was Mount Sinai. This was the place where God was to meet with Moses and the people and prepare them for their future as a nation.

As the spiritual leader of Israel, Moses had to do something others were not required to do. In order to lead them forward to their promised inheritance, He had to go to a higher level than the crowd. He had to go to the top of the mountain.

This climb required a great expenditure of energy a great degree of commitment. At the mountain top Moses would receive vision and instruction from God. There he would be equipped for the responsibilities God had assigned to him.

To become a spiritual leader, we too must learn the value of spiritual mountain climbing. We must be willing to expend the energy to get into God's presence—to go to the top of God's mountain. Unless we are committed to climbing the mountain of God, our vision will always be limited and marred. Only at the top of the mountain do we begin to gain God's perspective.

Climbing a mountain is not easy. There are many who are unwilling to invest the necessary effort to seek and find God at a new level. It is more comfortable to stay at the base of the mountain with the majority. But rich rewards come to those who are willing to take their spiritual life to new levels. These folks see and hear things others never see or hear. They experience God's presence and power in ways others will never know. They also are equipped to become true spiritual leaders. They are prepared to spiritually influence and encourage others.

Do you want to be a spiritual leader—someone who influences and encourages others in their spiritual journey, as Moses did? You must be willing to head to the top of God's mountain regularly. As we press to new peaks with God, we develop strong character, toned spiritual muscles, and the spiritual maturity to truly help others move forward in their walk with God.

Remember, when Moses got to the top of the mountain, God was waiting for him there! God is waiting for us too, as we diligently seek Him.

**What steps could you take to begin to take you spiritual life to a new level? What would be the rewards of doing so?**

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# NOTES

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# PRAYER

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**Matthew 26:40-41** Then he returned to the disciples and found them asleep. He said to Peter, "Couldn't you stay awake and watch with me even one hour? Keep alert and pray. Otherwise temptation will overpower you. For though the spirit is willing enough, the body is weak!"

## **How is your prayer life?**

There is no question that evokes as much guilt or produces as many excuses in Christians as this one. We know that we need to pray, but all too often we fail to do it consistently. There is a great deficit in the lives of many believers when it comes to the practice of prayer. The importance of prayer was reinforced by Jesus on many occasions. One of the most sobering lessons Jesus gave us on prayer happened the night before His crucifixion.

On the Thursday evening that preceded Good Friday, following His last meal with the apostles, Jesus went to a special place to pray. In the Garden of Gethsemane, a place where Jesus most likely had gone many times before for the same purpose, He poured his heart out to God. Jesus wrestled intensely in prayer as He contemplated the events that were about to unfold. He knew that the battle of obedience to His Father's plan would be won and the power to fulfill that plan would be found on His knees. The Garden became His prayer closet.

Jesus was not alone there. He had invited three of His disciples to join Him. Peter, James and John were a part of this most important night of Jesus' life. Jesus made it clear that they were there to pray also. They had the privilege of being His prayer partners as He sought the strength to do God's will. Their prayers would help support Jesus in His hour of need, and would also prepare them for the tests they were about to encounter.

At this crucial crossroad of history, with Christ agonizing in prayer, these three spiritual giants fell asleep! How embarrassing this must have been for them. When Jesus came to check on them, He discovered that their desire for sleep had overwhelmed their desire to pray.

Important days are ahead for you. Preparation for these days happens on our knees. Don't let anything keep you from experiencing the privilege and power of prayer.



**Acts 2:37, 38 Peter's words convicted them deeply, and they said to him and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter replied, "Each of you must turn from your sins and turn to God and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."**

Today's passage takes place after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Freshly filled with the presence of the Spirit, Peter stood up and preached the first evangelical message of the church.

Peter's audience listened as he proclaimed the reality of Jesus' death and resurrection and the new life that comes by faith in Him. At the conclusion of his message, the people responded. As the crowd heard the truth of the gospel, they came to a point of conviction. They realized that they had to do something. God's message called for their decision. God is constantly speaking to us. He wants to talk to us about our lives, our relationships and our attitudes. He is eager for us to understand what He wants us to do.

As He speaks truth to us, whether it is through our personal Bible study, through times of meditation on His Word or through hearing someone teach us His Word, God is interested in our response. He is watching and waiting to see what we will do with what we hear. When we hear His truth, there are several basic choices we can make. We can choose to obey what we've heard, ignore what He has said to us, totally reject His input, or put off our response to another time.

While anything other than immediate obedience is unwise, it is this tendency to procrastinate our response to God's Word that deserves some special reflection today. Perhaps a story will illustrate this point.

The great preacher, D.L. Moody, was preaching in Chicago an October night in 1871. He concluded his message by saying, "Go home and consider this week what to do with Christ. Next week come back and tell me what you have decided." That night a fire destroyed most of Chicago and this group of people never gathered again. Many of the people who heard the Gospel that night never saw the next sunrise. After that experience, Mr. Moody never concluded a sermon without giving people an opportunity to make a decision for Christ. He never offered them an opportunity to procrastinate their response to God's Word.

Postponing spiritual decisions can be very dangerous. When we refuse to respond to God in the moment, we place ourselves in spiritual jeopardy of missing His best. We open the door for the adversary to come and steal away God's blessing.





**Numbers 8:1-3 (NLT)** The LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron that when he sets up the seven lamps in the lampstand, he is to place them so their light shines forward." So Aaron did this. He set up the seven lamps so they reflected their light forward, just as the LORD had commanded Moses.

## **What is ahead for you? What does your future hold?**

One of the interesting things about the Bible is its future focus. Many times in Scripture we discover God's promises for tomorrow. Over and over again the Lord encourages us to have hope for what is ahead.

We see this forward focus in some of God's instructions to Moses regarding Tabernacle worship in the Old Testament. It is interesting that God told Moses to have Aaron position the lamps in the Tabernacle in such a way that the light was projected forward, not backward. There certainly are lessons here for us—life principles we need to understand and embrace.

Here are a few:

- God's light is always found when we look forward, not backward.
- Looking back in regret is fruitless.
- God has something positive ahead for us—His light is drawing us to our future, not to our past.
- God's light always goes before us.
- We must choose to live with a forward-focus. How is Barnabas' attitude towards generosity in Chapter 4 different than

Unfortunately there are many people who waste a great portion of life worshipping, wondering, worrying or whining about their past. Their hope and joy today is dimmed by the darkness of what was—the deeds, disappointments, defeats, difficulties or even successes of yesterday.

God's light is found when we decide to look ahead, believing that whatever our past has been, it is now past. From God's perspective, yesterday's pinnacles or pits need not hinder us from pursuing an exciting future full of great promise.

## **Make this your prayer today:**

"Dear Lord, Today I pray, in Jesus' name, that you would help me to know that your light is ahead of me. I ask that you help me stop wasting time, energy and focus on what is behind me. Help me to turn my focus to what you have ahead for me. I thank you that your light illumines a path for my future. Help me to daily walk in your light. In Jesus' name. Amen."



**Luke 10:27-30** The man answered, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind." And, "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Right!" Jesus told him. "Do this and you will live!" The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

One day Jesus was asked a significant question by a religious leader, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" This man was interested in hearing what Jesus had to say about the topic of eternity.

Jesus turned the question back to him. The man acknowledged that eternal life is given to those who love God deeply; those who demonstrate this love for God both by the way they live and the way they love others.

Unfortunately this religious man still did not get the full message about salvation. In an attempt to justify religious zeal that lacked in loving involvement with people, he asked Jesus to define "neighbor."

Jesus proceeded to tell the story of a person who demonstrated real love for God and others. It is the familiar story of The Good Samaritan.

The essence of the story is that many people who claim to be religious do not truly understand God's heart. They uncompassionately pass by people in problems and facing pain, avoiding personal involvement and investment. While they may appear to be spiritually mature, externally, engaging in the right spiritual activities, they are missing an essential ingredient of heart—true love for their neighbor.

The story contrasts the responses of folks whose religion is primarily for show with that of a despised Samaritan who had the right kind of religion. He took the time to get involved in the process of helping a hurting man. This Samaritan had a compassionate heart. At his own expense, and sacrificing his own comfort, he made sure the beaten man was cared for and cured. He demonstrated the real stuff of salvation—a transformed heart that loved God and cared for others.

This parable was Jesus' way of creatively communicating how genuine love for God affects us. The saving kind of love for God is the kind that makes us caring and compassionate people. Real salvation causes us to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, AND it causes us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

**How real is your relationship with God? In what ways can you better show your love for God by compassionately caring for your neighbor?**

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**Psalm 37:23 (Amp) The steps of a [good] man are directed and established by the Lord when He delights in his way [and He busies Himself with his every step].**

**Psalm 37:23 (NKJV) The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, And He delights in his way.**

**Psalm 37:23 (GW) A person's steps are directed by the Lord, and the Lord delights in his way.**

## **Have you ever gotten lost trying to find some unfamiliar location or destination?**

How wonderful it is at times like this to locate a guide—someone who knows the way and is willing to show us how to get where we need to be.

One of the most amazing commitments God makes to us is that He promises to be our guide. To think that God takes such personal interest in us and engages with us in such an intimate way is truly incomprehensible. God actually delights in every detail of our lives. Today's verse reminds us that God has a complete knowledge of us. His interest in us is very personal and specific. He knows all the intricacies of our lives, our personalities and our circumstances.

If we are really honest, we might confess that this statement challenges our faith. It is sometimes hard to believe that God knows what is going on with us in such detail. We might believe that He cares for us in a general sense, but it is much more difficult to accept that He is paying such close attention to our lives, actually delighting in the details.

What a difference it would make if we would wholeheartedly accept and embrace the truth and promise enveloped in this verse. It would usher us into an entirely new dimension of trust and peace. It would fill us with a deep and unshakable confidence about successfully traversing the troubles we are facing now and securely handling whatever may come our way tomorrow.

As a part of delighting in the details of our lives, God assures us that He will also direct our steps. Like a good guide, He carefully gives us instructions and kindly intervenes when we are about to head down a path that would damage others or us. While He never forces His will on us, He does step in with warnings, cautions, roadblocks and confirmations. Although we are free to ignore the signs, blow past the roadblocks and disregard the confirmations He communicates to us, He is ever faithful to engage Himself with us as our guide, always leaving the final decisions to us.

The Bible says that the good person is one who trusts that God knows and cares about all the details of his or her life. They also willingly follow in the steps He ordains for them, knowing that God's ways and will are always best. Such a person becomes rooted, established and secure. They get to experience God delighting in their life.

## **How easy are you to guide? What will you do to become more guidable?**

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# NOTES

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# PRAYER

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**Jeremiah 1:10 Today I appoint you to stand against nations and kingdoms. You are to uproot some and tear them down, to destroy and overthrow them. You are to build others up and plant them.**

Most of us are familiar with renovation projects. To renovate something simply means that we take what is there, in its present condition, and make it new; we rework it into something different and fresh.

Renovations require a lot of time, effort, expense and expertise, but they are worth it. When the project is done, restored beauty and strength become evident to others. When we first come to Christ, He starts renovating our lives and relationships. He begins major construction in our hearts. He reworks our lives, restoring the damage done by the devastation of sin and disobedience. His goal is to make us into a beautiful new dwelling, worthy of His abiding glory and presence.

In today's verse, the prophet Jeremiah was called by God to get involved in a spiritual renovation project in Israel. He was called to uproot, tear down, destroy and overthrow negative strongholds and lifestyles. He was also instructed to build up and plant new and better patterns of living among God's people. It is a classic picture of what Jesus does in us when we come to know Him.

First, old stuff has to be removed. This means that Jesus busies Himself demolishing, ripping out and destroying the useless garbage we've accumulated over time. The rotten areas of our lives are removed. The worn and torn areas are replaced and revitalized.

Once the garbage is removed and the demolition has been completed, the real transformation begins. With a wonderful set of blueprints in hand, Jesus begins teaching us new ways of thinking and begins building into us new life habits and attitudes. He introduces a fresh palette of colors into our lives—colors that reflect His character, His pleasure and His will. We begin to act and respond differently. Our heart feels new—better than ever before. While spiritual renovation is a lengthy and painful process at times, it is necessary and ultimately rewarding!

The changes that Jesus makes in us are not merely cosmetic. They are significant, lasting changes that go to the core—the foundation—of who and what we are. These renovations allow us to function more effectively and efficiently for God. As He works on us and in us, our spiritual confidence increases and we become more useful to Him and winsome to others. We become the beneficiaries of a heavenly makeover!

**What specific changes is Jesus trying to make in your life right now? How are you responding to His efforts to renovate the way you think and act?**

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**Luke 21:34 (NLT) Watch out! Don't let me find you living in careless ease and drunkenness, and filled with the worries of this life. Don't let that day catch you unaware, as in a trap. For that day will come upon everyone living on the earth.**

**Luke 21:34 (Message) But be on your guard. Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap....**

One of the toughest things we are ever required to do is wait. Waiting can be unpleasant and wearying. While waiting, we can become distracted and lethargic—kind of disconnected and dull.

Today's passage is all about waiting the right way for the next most important event in history—the return of Jesus Christ. The Bible promises that one day Jesus Christ will return. Jesus Himself gave us instructions to wait with eager anticipation and in daily expectation of His Second Coming.

Jesus understood the inherent dangers associated with waiting. He warned us about temptations that accompany the anticipation of fulfilled promises that are delayed.

Because none of us knows the time of Jesus' return, we are tempted to dismiss it from our minds as an event that should concern us right now. If we think of Christ's Second Coming at all, it is usually something we project into the distant future. It doesn't occupy a prominent place in the forefront of our thoughts as imminent and important today.

According to Jesus, this tendency to project His return somewhere far out in the tomorrow's of time makes us vulnerable to spiritual insensitivity and apathy. We soon become deluded by the seemingly urgent desires, demands and duties of the immediate. We become distracted by the appeals, attractions and activities of the world. This results in spiritual dullness and disconnectedness. We are lulled into a false sense of spiritual security. The urgency of the today's moments is lost.

When we lose the sharp edge of expecting and preparing for the return of Jesus Christ, we not only endanger our spiritual future, we also become less effective in leading others to life-changing faith and growth in Christ. Dull axes don't work very well. Dull, apathetic believers don't either!

How do we stay sharp in our personal walk with Jesus Christ? How do we maintain an effective edge in reaching people with the love and message of Jesus? We must keep the Second Coming of Jesus in the forefront of our thoughts consistently. It needs to be something that motivates us to live purely and wholeheartedly for our Savior. Our eager expectation of Jesus' return should inspire us to give our all in getting the message of the Gospel to as many people as we can in as many ways as we can.

**When was the last time you really thought about the Second Coming of Jesus? What impact would an awareness of the imminent return of Jesus have on your life? What practical steps can you take to sharpen your expectation of Jesus coming again?**

# NOTES

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# PRAYER

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**Job 18:16 Their roots will dry up, and their branches will wither.**

How lively and fruitful are your spiritual branches?

Today's verse addresses the issue of our spiritual vitality. It is taken from the book of Job. A little information about this verse is helpful for our understanding and application of it.

While Job was facing great pain and all kinds of difficulties in life, one of his friends, a man named Bildad, insensitively suggested that Job's problems were the result of his sin. Although Bildad's assumptions were wrong and his attitude critical and cruel, his words to Job represent a powerful and important truth. He identified one of the terrible effects of sin; a dry, dehydrated spiritual root system.

Many Christian believers are living in this condition. Their spiritual roots are dry. They are suffering from internal drought. There is little or no growth or fruitfulness in their lives. They have forfeited their peace and joy. As a result of this condition, some withdraw from their spiritual commitments, and others begin to abandon their faith altogether. This condition of spiritual dryness becomes a serious threat to their spiritual well being.

To remedy this condition we need to understand its causes. The nourishment we need to maintain a healthy, growing relationship with God is supplied through our spiritual roots. If we fail to hydrate these roots regularly and properly, we eventually suffer the consequences—we begin to wither and die. Fruitlessness externally is the result of spiritual root problems—dryness and death internally.

It is easy to ignore a root problem. Because it is out of sight, it usually is also out of mind. It takes time for the results of spiritual dehydration to appear. Ultimately the branches that are seen reveal the underground problem that has been hidden. By this time our situation has likely become critical and dangerous. Dry roots result in a weak structure—a tree that is vulnerable to destructive, adverse forces and ravaging insects and diseases. How do we solve the problem of such dryness of spirit and soul? We must discover God's watering process.

God has provided a plentiful water supply for us. His presence is this supply. The solution for keeping a healthy, vital spiritual root system that produces flourishing, fruitful branches is found through frequent encounters with God's presence. As we recognize our need for spiritual hydration, we must make the commitment to cultivate a regular pattern of exposing ourselves to the life-giving, refreshing and renewing presence of God.

**Are you spiritually dehydrated? What adjustments do you need to make in your life priorities to make sure you are getting the spiritual water your roots require?**

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**Proverbs 14:10 (NLT) Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can fully share its joy.**

Life can be very hard at times. When we look at the world with discerning eyes and sensitive hearts, we see and sense the pain that is carried by people all around us. As we attentively listen to the words beneath the words, even in some of the most casual conversations, we will often hear hurts that are still unhealed.

The tendency we have, as human beings, is to become self-focused, primarily consumed with our own difficulties, disappointments and struggles, without giving much thought to or care for the things others are feeling and facing. Life becomes all about us.

This kind of self-absorption leads us down the slippery slope of self-pity. If we are not careful, we are soon carrying the proverbial “chip on the shoulder,” reacting in frustration and anger to those who do not seem to understand or perceived plight in life.

Many people live this way. They are so wrapped up in their own pain, and in their need for everyone to cater to it, that they never reach out and care about the challenges and difficulties of others around them. They never learn the valuable lesson of understanding others. The Bible is very clear about life’s pains. It tells us that in every person’s life there will be some bitter pills to swallow. No one has a perfect life. No matter how together someone may look externally, how many benefits and blessings they appear to have, how strong they may seem to be and how many things they have going for them, we all have our own tough times and bitter experiences.

One of the greatest ways to find healing for our own hurts and resolution for our personal disappointments is to cultivate understanding of others. Understanding is the ability to grasp, empathize and sympathize with the pain or problems of others. Understanding does not simply commiserate with someone. In its healthy form, understanding reaches out to help a hurting person rise above their difficulties and distress. Real understand lifts others to new levels of hope and trust in God.

When we seek to understand others, helping them bear their burdens, we force our focus away from our own concerns. We also open our own heart to the flow of God’s healing, strengthening grace. Giving to others is one of the surest and quickest ways to receive what we need from God.

**How understanding are you? What can you do to develop a greater degree of sensitivity and understanding of others? What specific steps can you take today to help someone who is hurting?**

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**Philippians 1:4-6 (NIV)** In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

## **Have you ever started a project that you did not complete?**

I am sure that all of us have dedicated ourselves to some task, starting it with great fervor, only to lose interest in it before completion. Starting something is always much easier than finishing it. Even when we begin a task or project with enthusiasm and excitement, other ingredients are required to take that project to the end. That "something else" is called commitment and persistence.

Although we as human beings often fall short in the areas of commitment and persistence, and therefore do not complete everything we begin, there is one who never fails in His commitment and persistence. Even a brief study of the Bible reveals to us the portrait of God, our heavenly father, as one who not only begins good things, He also completes them.

Today's passage is a reminder of God's commitment to complete every good work that He begins. As the Apostle Paul writes to the believers in the Macedonian city of Philippi he declares that there is something that he is absolutely confident about concerning them. Not only is he confident, he also wants these believers to be confident as well. The Greek word for "confident" in this passage literally means, "to seek to persuade, to be persuaded, to free from fear or doubt." The Amplified Bible says, "and I am convinced and sure of this very thing..." What was Paul convinced and sure of, and what did he want these Christian believers to be convinced and sure of?

He was confident that the one who had begun a good work in their lives wasn't going to leave the project partially completed. When Christ began a good work in transforming the lives of these individuals from darkness to light, from sin to righteousness, from pain to peace, He also committed himself to persistently work until the job was done! All He asked of them was their obedience and cooperation!

Often we look at our lives and all we see is, what seems to be a big mess. We see walls that need to be rebuilt, foundations that need to be laid, and holes that desperately need to be mended. In our desperation, we wonder if the project will ever be completed. We wonder if God perhaps has forgotten about us or lost interest in us, or grown tired of helping us!

We must remember the words given to us by the Holy Spirit. The Lord desires to deposit within us a deep, abiding confidence that He never gives up on us, no matter how "messy" the project may be. He will persistently work with us because He's committed to us. He has promised to carry on His good work in us until that work is completed!

## **How confident are you of the promises of God to your life?**

Allow the Holy Spirit to deposit within you a deep abiding confidence regarding the Lord's commitment to you!



**Romans 12:11, 12 (NIV) Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.**

Have you ever felt like your spiritual energy was depleted? I am sure we all have experienced times in our lives when we felt that our spiritual batteries were drained.

In this passage the Apostle Paul provides us with a clear admonition regarding the importance of maintaining our spiritual energy in the midst of the ever-present pressures of daily living. There are many potential obstacles facing us as Christian believers. Perhaps two of the most common obstacles are spiritual apathy and discouragement.

“Apathy” is defined as “indifference, lack of interest or concern.” Spiritual apathy involves the loss of our spiritual concern. We grow cold in our relationship with God. We may continue to attend church, we may even maintain some level of communication with God, yet, internally, we have lost our enthusiasm for Christ and His Kingdom. In the words of the Apostle Paul we “lose our spiritual fervor and zeal.”

The other dangerous obstacle that must be avoided, if we are to live a joyous Christian life, is discouragement. The discouraged person is the one who has grown tired and weary from persistent pressures, unfulfilled goals and uncooperative circumstances. Discouragement is one of the most serious diseases of the soul. It depletes us internally, robbing our hope, casting shadows of doubt on our faith.

Today’s passage instructs us to avoid both of these deadly traps. We must not lose our spiritual zeal and fervor. We are also instructed to maintain a patient hope during our times of difficulty. How do we fulfill these instructions? The Holy Spirit gives us an important key. We are to be “faithful in prayer.” The believer who makes a commitment to faithfulness in prayer will find that their spirit is recharged, refueled and refreshed. A consistent and disciplined prayer life is a pathway to the streams of quiet waters where our spirit and soul is regularly restored.

Perhaps you feel like your spiritual battery has lost some of its charge. Maybe you have been discouraged over certain events that have recently occurred in your life. Seek the renewal of the Lord. You can overcome apathy and discouragement. Commit to spend time with God daily and boost up your spiritual energy!

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**John 14:27 (NIV) Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.**

How much peace do you possess in your life? One of the things we all search for and seek after is peace. Peace can be defined in a number of ways. It's a word that is used to describe "a state of tranquility or quiet." It's also used to describe "harmony in particular relationships." Peace is something that all of us desire in our personal lives, as well as in our interpersonal interactions with others.

One of the greatest hindrances to peace, personally and interpersonally, in our society today, is something called stress. The Christian psychologist, Archibald Hart, states in one of his books that "the time is rapidly approaching, if it hasn't already arrived, when we will be dying less and less from infectious disease but more and more from the ravaging effects of too much stress."

Stress can be defined as "pressure that is exerted upon our lives physically, spiritually and psychologically." I recently discovered an interesting list of things that can cause stress in our lives. One author states that "stress can result from anything that: annoys you, threatens you, prods you, excites you, scares you, worries you, hurries you, angers you, frustrates you, challenges you, or criticizes you. As we can see from this list, not everything that might cause us stress is necessarily negative. In fact, stress can actually result in positive growth in our lives. The issue is not whether we will experience stress; the critical factor is how we will respond to it when it does arrive in our lives.

In today's passage Christ speaks to His disciples during a time of great stress in their lives. After walking with Christ for three years they suddenly found themselves facing the reality that He was soon going to depart from them. The thought of this was too much for them to bear. Christ knew that this was both a difficult and challenging time for His disciples, a time that called them to new growth. Growing through this stress required supernatural peace. In these words, Christ promises something to His disciples, a resource that would carry them through their time of stress. It was His peace, a peace that would overcome the fear and turmoil in their hearts.

Perhaps you are facing some stress in your life today. Reach out and receive the peace that passes all understanding. Receive the peace of God in your life today!

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**2 Kings 5:14 (NLT) So Naaman went down to the Jordan River and dipped himself seven times, as the man of God had instructed him. And his skin became as healthy as the skin of a young child's, and he was healed!**

You have heard it before—"Winners never quit and quitters never win!" The famous American football coach Vince Lombardi frequently reminded his players of this life principle—you will not win if you quit too soon.

There are many victories, breakthroughs, successes and achievements that only come after long seasons of, what seems like, fruitless effort. Tedious research, tireless practice, persistent efforts, patient investment, persevering prayer, long-term labor usually pays off, eventually.

The sad reality is that many of these pay-offs never come simply because people give up—they quit too soon. Days, weeks, years, decades of working and waiting, with little to show for it, can take its toll on your heart and soul. Let's be honest, it's hard to keep going when everything inside you is screaming "quit!"

While there are times to "throw in the towel" in pursuit of something, there are many more times when we need to "remain in the ring." Many people "leave and lose" when victory is right around the corner. There's a great story in the Bible that reminds us of the power of persistence, especially in our obedience to God. It's the Old Testament story of Naaman. You can read about him in 2 Kings 5.

Naaman contracted the deadly disease of leprosy. He was directed to the prophet Elisha for a miracle cure. Elisha gave Naaman instructions that he did not like. These instructions confronted Naaman's pride and tested his patience. He was told to go and dip himself seven times in the Jordan River. God promised that in doing this he would be healed. After much protest, Naaman finally agreed to obey God's instructions.

It is very important to see that Naaman's healing happened after the seventh dip. Dips one through six seemed to make no difference in his condition. Nothing improved and nothing changed until Naaman completed his seventh immersion in the muddy waters of the Jordan. But his persistent obedience paid off. On the seventh dip, healing came, breakthrough happen, the victory was won.

What if Naaman had stopped on dip two, or four, or five, or six? His story wouldn't be in the Bible. We know about this man because he didn't quit too soon!

**What about you? What are you about to quit? A job? A marriage? An exercise program? A commitment? A prayer?A \_\_\_\_\_ ?**

Think hard before you do. Maybe, just maybe, it's too soon to quit!

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**Romans 13:11, 12 (NIV) And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.**

We all know what it is like to hear an alarm clock sound at the appointed time each morning. When the sound of our alarm clock reaches our ears each morning it's a declaration that a particular time has come. It's time to arise and prepare to fulfill the responsibilities that are scheduled for our day.

In today's verses the Apostle Paul reminds us of the critical nature of the days in which we live. He gives us a three-point call that should direct our thoughts, attitudes and actions every day.

First, we are called to "understand the present time." He describes the present time as an hour when "our salvation is nearer than when we first believed." In other words, the present time is the time when the consummation of all things, the Second Coming of Christ is approaching.

With this in mind he gives us a second call, "The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber..." Because that day is rapidly approaching we cannot afford to spend our days in spiritual slumber. It's time to rise up from our sleep and decide to seriously serve the Lord. Third, if we are going to effectively serve the Lord we must be properly dressed for our responsibilities and challenges. He reminds us that we are to take off a certain set of clothes and put on another. We are to "put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light." We are to be prepared for "that day" putting on the right clothing!

We are called to awaken to the reality that Christ is coming again. It's time to awaken. It's time to seriously consider the priorities of our lives. It's time to take off the "deeds of darkness" and be dressed in the "armor of light", prepared to win each battle against the influences of the world, our flesh, and the attacks of the devil!

Consider making today the day that you wake up to the alarm clock and give your life completely to God.

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**Genesis 25: 27-34 (NIV)** The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob. Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" (That is why he was also called Edom.) Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright." "Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?" But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.

Board games are very good at teaching us how to think strategically. Checkers, for example, while less sophisticated, intellectually challenging and time consuming than chess, it still requires a similar skill—strategic thinking. Consistent winners are strategic in their thoughts and actions. They think through the positive and negative implications of their moves before they make them. A strategic checker or chess player is always several steps down the road in their mind. They know where they are going and how they are going to get there. Each move is appropriately considered in the light of the desired end result.

What is strategic thinking? Thinking is strategic when it goes after long-term goals and advances. Thinking is strategic when it focuses on a bigger picture, a greater purpose, and a positive plan for the future.

The opposite of strategic thinking is short-term thinking. Short-term thinkers yield to the wants, desires and pressures of the immediate at the expense of the truly important. They are unwilling to invest spiritual, mental and emotional effort and energies in considering the implications of their decisions, actions or attitudes for the future—their future.

One of the saddest examples of non-strategic thinking is seen in the story of a man in the Bible named Esau. His short-term mindset cost him his destiny. Esau's failure should cause us to stop and think about the way we are living our lives. All of us sacrifice certain possibilities and potential for our tomorrows when we fail to think and live strategically today.

Living strategically starts with a goal. In the personal realm, it involves identifying and defining the kind of person we want to become in character and skill in the next one, five or ten years, and setting in motion the decisions and disciplines that are required to get us there. It involves getting rid of habits, behaviors and attitudes that are robbing us of our spiritual, mental, emotional and relational potential, no matter how deep-seated they are or comfortable we are with them.

**Are you a strategic thinker? How would you benefit from strategic thinking?**

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**Acts 7:10 (NLT) ... And God gave him favor before Pharaoh, king of Egypt. God also gave Joseph unusual wisdom, so that Pharaoh appointed him governor over all of Egypt and put him in charge of the palace.**

God has a unique plan and purpose for your life. There's a work He wants you to do that no one can do quite like you. Certain resources are essential for effectiveness and success in God's assignments for your life. Two of these essentials are favor and wisdom.

In the Old Testament we find the story of a young man named Joseph. God had a plan and purpose for his life. God wanted to use Joseph to lead a nation through a time of trouble. He wanted to use Joseph to establish a safe haven for his family in the midst of terrible famine. The story of Joseph's life is fascinating and very instructive. We see how the dream that called Joseph to his life purpose at 17 years of age was fulfilled many years later. Over these long years, God took this young man through all kinds of situations to break him, mold him, and transform his character. Joseph needed to develop the inner qualities that would make him ready to handle the responsibilities God assigned him.

After years of walking through refining circumstances designed by God to mature him, Joseph was prepared for his biggest God-given life assignment. He was ready to be used by God as a leader. Joseph was no longer driven by a dream; he was deeply dependent on his Lord.

The Bible is very specific about the qualities—the resources—that enabled Joseph to be effective and successful in his God-given assignment. Note the two things God gave Joseph that gave him success: FAVOR and WISDOM.

Favor is the Greek word "charis." It's the root word for the English term "charisma." Favor is the gracious gift of influence, open doors, acceptance, prepared and paved pathways for building meaningful, strategic relationships and experiencing unprecedented positive opportunities. It comes from God and releases blessings to us that we could never accomplish or achieve by ourselves. When we see it and experience it, all we can do is appreciate it, praise and give God the glory for it.

Wisdom is deep insight, understanding, prudence and incisive perception. It's the right application of knowledge. This too is a gift from God. While we're told to work hard in gaining wisdom, it ultimately comes from God, who is the Source of all wisdom.

Joseph couldn't get his job done without God's favor and wisdom. Neither can we! Think about a time in your life you witnessed God's favor. What did you learn about that situation?

### **Here's a prayer for you:**

"Dear Lord, I pray for your favor and wisdom to rest on me today. Help me to lean into you and on you. Grant me meaningful and strategic relationships to accomplish your will. Open doors for me that only you can open. By your favor, pave the pathway before me so that your purposes are fulfilled through my life. Grant me the wisdom I need to do the work you want me to do. In Jesus' name. Amen."



**Matthew 26:75 (NIV) Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: “Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly. Have you ever failed at something? Of course you have. We all have.**

You didn't learn to walk without stumbling and falling. You didn't learn to ride a bike without some skinned knees along the way. In fact, it's highly likely that your first attempts at most new things failed. Failure is usually a part of learning, growing, of developing abilities and skills.

While it's easy and acceptable to embrace failure when it comes to new learning experiences, we often struggle to get past other forms of failure—failed judgment, failed relationships, failed assignments, failed business. These often leave people with crippling shame and haunting regrets.

There's no doubt that some failures are more costly and serious than other ones. It's also true that certain kinds of failure should be conscientiously avoided. We should never nurse a cavalier attitude about moral and character failures. We should never take lightly the impact of choosing sinful and evil actions over godly and good ones. These mistakes hurt God, us and others. They often carry significant consequences, and rightly so.

So how does a person handle serious and significant failure? What should their response be to the life mistakes and messes they make? How does a person deal with the consequences of their mess-ups without becoming emotionally defeated and spiritually destroyed by them? They must get up and get going again! While the consequences of certain failures have to be understood and appreciated, and messes have to be handled, staying down does no one any good. Rising up, receiving God's forgiveness, seeking forgiveness from others and forgiving oneself is the way to turn things around.

The only one who wins when someone stays down is the devil. He loves to pound people with the ugly parts of their past. He specializes in grounding people. He's a master craftsman when it comes to condemnation. He sells folks the lie that it's all over. He tries to make your failure final.

Many people in the Bible failed. Did you know that the great Apostle Peter failed miserably? The guy that walked on water messed up! When Jesus needed him the most, Peter denied Him, not once, but three times!

After Jesus rose from the dead, He went to Galilee and found a despondent, defeated Peter, restored him and got him going again. Not too many days later, after being filled with the Holy Spirit, this same man—Peter—preached the first recorded message of the church and three thousand people gave their lives to Jesus Christ. (See Matthew 26:69-75; John 21:1-17; and Acts 2:14-41.) That's a major turnaround! Jesus helped Peter get up and get going again.

**How do you handle your mistakes and failures? Do you tend to run to God for forgiveness or walk away in defeat?**

If you've fallen, don't stay down. Get up and get going again!



**Proverbs 27:4 (NLT) Anger is cruel, and wrath is like a flood, but who can survive the destructiveness of jealousy?**

**James 3:15 (NLT) For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.**

One of the most destructive forces in people's lives is jealousy. Think about some of the folks in the Bible who were damaged or destroyed by it. Here are a few examples:

- Cain killed Abel partly because of jealousy. (Genesis 4:3-8)
- Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery because of jealousy (Genesis 37:11).
- Korah, Dathan and Abiram were put to death because of their jealousy toward Moses and the impact this spiritual poison had on God's people (Numbers 16).

Think about all the emotional energy that is expended, all the hatred that is spawned and all the relationships that are ripped apart because of the demonic spirit of jealousy. Think about the sibling rivalries, the office politics, the hidden envy that breed distance between people, and the inner turmoil and pain jealousy causes us. It is a high price to pay for something that brings nothing but negativity and destruction into our lives.

Over the years I have watched jealousy ruin some potentially great people by turning them into small-minded, unproductive, bitter people. I have watched disorder and evil spring up in families, businesses, friendships, and even churches, all because someone gave a place in their heart to the demonic spirit of jealousy.

The bad news is: All of us are vulnerable to this spirit. The good news is: God can help us avoid and overcome it.

Here are some things that will help us steer clear of jealousy, or clean it out if we have already been infected by it:

- Own up to it and confess it to God as sin. Don't justify it.
- Stop comparing yourself and your circumstances with others. Comparisons always deceive us. Things look better, fairer, greater for others than for us. When we are in a comparison mode, we, more often than not, end up feeling sorry for ourselves. Remember, "the grass always looks greener on the other side of the fence!"
- Begin practicing gratitude. One of the greatest antidotes for the poison of jealousy is to purposefully count our blessings and openly express our gratitude to God and others for them.
- Do good to those you are feeling jealous toward. Force yourself to do and say nice things to them. You will be amazed at how these actions will counter-attack jealousy in your heart.
- Stay alert to signs of jealousy in your heart. Jealousy is very subtle. When we observe distance in our relationships, disorder in our interactions and anger in our hearts it is a good reminder to find out what's behind these reactions. One possibility is Jealous

Make it a priority in your spiritual growth to identify jealousy patterns in your life. Prayerfully ask God to help you overcome those patterns. Let's ask God to help us live a jealous-free life!



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