

# IN TOUCH

DAILY READINGS FOR DEVOTED LIVING DECEMBER 2019



# LIVING A BLESSED LIFE

This year, we explored what it means to be a part of Christ's body and how we are called to participate in His vision for the church.

As we look ahead to 2020, we hope you will join us as we walk through the Beatitudes and discern what a blessed life truly looks like. Discover who you're meant to be in Christ.

Visit us online to learn more about the 2020 ministry theme, *Blessed to Be*.

[INTOUCH.ORG/BLESSED](https://intouch.org/blessed)



BLESSED TO  
BE

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## Here Comes the Bride

→ WHAT BRIDE-TO-BE isn't excited about her own wedding? The anticipation of sharing life with her beloved makes it difficult to wait for that special day. And if you're a believer in Jesus Christ, you will be at the most magnificent wedding of all time—not as an observer but as the one getting married!

The Bible's names for the church, like "family of God" and "body of Christ," reveal how tenderly God views His followers. And one of the most intimate titles is "bride of Christ."

It was the Jewish custom of Jesus' day that after betrothal, the bridegroom would go back to his father's home to build an addition. When it was finished, he would come for his bride to take her there for the wedding. This is what John 14:1-3 is describing: Jesus tells His disciples He's going back to His Father's house to prepare a place—and then He'll

*OUR BRIDEGROOM  
WILL ONE DAY  
RETURN TO TAKE  
US TO HEAVEN.*

return for them so they can be with Him forever.

What a beautiful picture: Our loving Bridegroom will one day return to take us home to heaven. And like all biblical promises, the union of Christ and the church is a certainty. Yet so many people dismiss this truth, since Jesus has been gone for about 2,000 years and life continues on as usual.

How about you—does Christ's return seem like a far-off event with little or no impact on your daily life, or is it the blessed hope to which you cling? In either case, I pray that this month's devotions will increase your expectation and longing for our Bridegroom to come.

# IN TOUCH

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## DAILY DEVOTIONS

FROM THE SERMONS OF CHARLES F. STANLEY

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**“OUR TOP PRIORITY IS WHERE WE INVEST**  
our time, effort, and money. Therefore, to seek God’s kingdom and righteousness means we make the pursuit of Christlikeness our primary goal. Obedience is a sure indication that we are growing in our relationship with the Lord.”

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**—Charles F. Stanley**

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# A Place Called Heaven

JOHN 14:1-3

SUN

1

**IF YOU ASKED A DOZEN PEOPLE** what they know about heaven, you'd probably get all sorts of answers. Even Christians have various ideas about what it is, where it's located, and what it will be like. Some people imagine heaven to be an ethereal, dream-

like place where the inhabitants are vaporous spirits—but this is contrary to what the Bible teaches.

Put simply, heaven is the home of God. Separate from and beyond creation, it's an entirely different realm of existence. But it is a literal place with form and substance, and it contains the holy city. The apostle John had a vision of this place, and what he saw is recorded for us in chapters 21 and 22 of Revelation. A wall with foundation stones and gates surrounds the city, which has a street, a river, God's throne, and the tree of life. All of these are material objects, although they far exceed anything of earthly substance.

Jesus told His disciples that He was going away to prepare a place for them in His Father's house. He also said He'd return to take them there so they could be with Him forever. Then they watched as His resurrected body ascended from the earth and returned to heaven (Acts 1:9). He is still there today in His physical body, sitting at the right hand of the Father's throne.

When Christ returns, He will resurrect Christians who have died, transform the bodies of believers who are still alive, and take us all back to the eternal home He has prepared for all His followers. Only then will we finally understand what heaven is.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: 1 CORINTHIANS 14-16

# What Is Heaven Like?



## REVELATION 21

**HEAVEN IS THE BELIEVER'S FUTURE HOME**, and we've all wondered what it's like. But the Bible gives us only a glimpse. Even if God revealed more in Scripture, we'd be incapable of comprehending it. As earthly creatures, we lack the experience or frame of reference needed to understand the eternal realities of that dimension.

MON  
**2**

Desiring to know more about heaven, some people have sought information outside of the Bible, often in books written by people who claim to have gone there. However, the only legitimate source of facts about heaven is God's Word—nothing else can be depended upon to have a sure foundation in truth.

When Paul was caught up to the third heaven, he “heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak” (2 Cor. 12:4). None of his letters include any details of his experience. God also entrusted the apostle John with a vision of heaven, but human language is inadequate to convey the realities of that otherworldly realm.

Although we may not be able to visualize everything John describes, we can all relate to what he says about those things that are absent in heaven: There will be no more tears, death, mourning, or pain (Rev. 21: 4). What's more, we will never become stressed, exhausted, frustrated, angry, or sick, because our new bodies will be imperishable, sinless, and powerful (1 Cor. 15:42-43). Heaven is a perfect environment with no sin or sinners in it. And best of all, God will dwell among us.

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# Who Will Be in Heaven?

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MATTHEW 7:13-27

**TUE**  
**3** **MOST PEOPLE THINK THAT WHEN THEY DIE,** they are going to heaven. If you asked why, the majority would say they have been good people or their positive deeds outweigh any negative things they've done. Yet the sad reality is, most people will not find themselves in heaven—and that includes some who claim to be Christians.

It may not be a popular topic of conversation, but our Savior knew that hell was essential to understand. In today's reading, He uses illustrations of contrasting gates, trees, and houses to point out that there are only two possible destinies after death: heaven and hell. Jesus is warning us about a most sobering reality—that not everyone who calls Him “Lord” actually belongs to Him (vv. 21-23).

What, then, distinguishes a true follower? John 14:15 tells us those who love the Savior will keep His commandments. This obedience begins with believing Jesus is the Son of God (3:36). In other words, the first step is to humble ourselves before God, admitting that we're sinful and deserving of condemnation. Next, we must call out to Him, requesting the forgiveness for which His Son's blood was shed on our behalf. From then on, we're to live only for God.

If you hear the gospel but stop short of obedience, ask yourself, *Do I fully understand the goodness of God's love?* That should inspire you to obey the Father. Looking good on the outside isn't enough to enter the kingdom of heaven. Remember, to those who truly receive Him, He will give “the right to become children of God” (1:12). Won't you make sure you're among those destined for heaven?

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: 2 CORINTHIANS 5-8

# Discovering God's Will



PSALM 119:105-106

**LIFE INVOLVES ALL KINDS OF CHOICES**—some are small and mundane, while others are more consequential. Including God in our decision-making is always the wisest course of action. Scripture we have memorized is something the Holy Spirit uses to help us discover God's will.

WED  
4

There's a two-part process I find beneficial in making decisions, and it can also help you with choices regarding relationships, finances, health, employment, and other important matters. The first step involves assessing the heart, mind, and will. To receive the Lord's direction, we need a clean heart, a clear mind, and a surrendered will. Sinful habits can cloud thinking and keep us from understanding His plan. Confessing our sins and turning from them brings cleansing and clarity (1 John 1:9). A stubborn will that says, "I want my way" prevents us from heeding God's instruction. Instead, we need to lay down our desires and commit to saying yes to His plan.

The second step is to wait patiently on the Lord for His answer. It takes courage to stand firm, especially when others are telling us what they think we should do. Our own emotions may also be pushing us to act now, but we must resist moving ahead of God. To be patient means trusting the Lord while we wait to learn His answer and discover His timing.

Discerning God's plan requires preparation of our heart, mind, and will. It also often requires patience. During our time of waiting, we are to follow His known will—to be a faithful servant in His kingdom, loving Him with our whole heart and loving our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-39).

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: 2 CORINTHIANS 9-13

# Receiving Direction Without Doubt

PSALM 25:8-9

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**GOD WANTS US TO MAKE RIGHT DECISIONS**, which means choices that align with His will. He has promised to give us instruction and direction so we'll know how to proceed (Ps. 32:8).

One way to discover the Lord's will is by following the pattern we looked at yesterday. First, make sure you have a clean heart, clear mind, surrendered will, and patient spirit. Then, add these steps: praying persistently, trusting God's promises, and receiving His peace.

Although we all want quick answers from the Lord, Scripture tells us to pray tirelessly, without giving up. I remember praying daily about one particular need for six months before I received a response. During this time, the Lord showed me that He'd tried to give direction earlier, but I hadn't listened. Fear of failure had been my stumbling block. Once I surrendered my fear, He gave instructions and empowered me to obey. Persisting in prayer positions us to be drawn closer to God, where we are better prepared to hear from Him.

Then, trusting in God's promises will lift us above our doubts into a place of quiet rest. We may not have an answer yet, but in waiting on Him with hopeful expectation, we'll experience His "peace ... which surpasses all comprehension" (Phil. 4:7).

Finally, Scripture urges us to let Christ's peace rule in our heart (Col. 3:15). Doing so will help us find our way past confusion and receive His clear direction without doubting. Discovering God's will is worth every effort we make and any time spent waiting.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: GALATIANS 1-3

# Reaching Closed Minds



ACTS 26:1-20

**DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHOSE MIND IS CLOSED** to the gospel? That describes a lot of people, and we often find it discouraging that despite our prayers for them, they can't see their need for the Savior.

**FRI**

**6**

Responses to the gospel vary. Some people are quick to respond in faith while others resist. Those who reject Christ may respond with polite indifference, or they could be aggressively antagonistic toward those who speak of Him. At times we might wonder if God's message of salvation can penetrate those whose minds are shut.

The answer is yes, and the proof is in Acts 9:1-18—the story about the conversion of Saul of Tarsus (later known as the apostle Paul). Saul was a devout Pharisee who professed faith in God the Father but rejected Jesus as God the Son. Hating all those who followed the Messiah, Saul went to great lengths to persecute believers and coerce them to recant their faith in Christ.

But Saul was no match for the omnipotent God. The Holy Spirit convicted this violent man of his sin, gave him an awareness of his own need for salvation, and revealed that Jesus was the only Savior. Then Saul's spiritually blind eyes were opened.

Today the Holy Spirit is still working to bring men and women under conviction. He uses believers' lives and testimonies to reveal the truth about Jesus to those with closed minds and hard hearts. If you are currently trying to reach someone like this, be encouraged and continue to pray for that person's salvation. Then rest in God's ability to save.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: GALATIANS 4-6

# The Believer's Highest Honor

1 PETER 5:6

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**I REMEMBER ONE OF THE MANY INTRODUCTIONS** I have received over the years. A fellow stood before the audience I would be addressing and said, “It is my pleasure to introduce you to my brother, Charles Stanley, servant of the most high God.” What

a God-honoring introduction that was!

But the title of *servant* is not reserved only for those employed by the church. Jesus’ promise from John 12:26—that God would honor those who serve Him—was made to all believers. We are to approach every activity of our day as if we’re working for the Lord, so that servanthood becomes a way of life.

A believer’s willing acceptance of the servant role is countercultural. The world teaches us to chase after power but advises ignoring opportunities to serve unless there’s personal benefit. The leaders of the early church, however, were taught to see things differently. Jesus instructed them to feed the poor, draw near to those who were sick, and wash dirty feet. These men were honored to refer to themselves as *bondslaves*—in other words, lowly servants.

The Lord has placed each one of us in a position to serve others and thereby serve Him. The feet we wash, figuratively speaking, are those of our family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. We must give our best effort to the relationships and work we have been given in this world. To offer anything less is to refuse the life we have been called to live—a life of service to the most high God.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: EPHESIANS 1-3

# The Call to Serve

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MATTHEW 25:14-30

**SERVING GOD IS NOT OPTIONAL.** People come up with all manner of excuses: too old, too young, too busy, too tired, too sick—and the list goes on. Yet every reason is rendered void by the facts of Scripture, which says that believers are “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

SUN  
8

Service isn’t dependent upon health, age, or experience. I know bedridden men and women who dedicate their day to intercessory prayer. And I’ve met saints who have never attended seminary and yet make a point of discipling new believers. The difference between these folks and those who make excuses is attitude. If we see ourselves as servants, we will be God-focused and dependent upon the Holy Spirit. But if we’re busy worrying over how, when, and at what cost we are working for the Lord, then we are self-centered and, frankly, of little use to Him.

Someday we will stand before God, and He will require an accounting of how we used the talents and spiritual gifts we were given. What can we say to Him that will justify ignoring the opportunities He gave us to use those gifts? No excuse will hold up. Complete surrender to God’s will is the key to pleasing Him.

The Lord gives us talents and abilities for a purpose, and He will equip us for greater service to His kingdom. When we serve Him wholeheartedly, we can look forward to hearing, “Well done, good and faithful servant! ... Come and share your master’s happiness!” (Matt. 25:21 NIV).

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: EPHESIANS 4-6

# Conviction Versus Condemnation

ROMANS 8:1-2

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**OUR HEAVENLY FATHER DESIRES** that we walk closely with Him. To help us, the Holy Spirit guides us on the right path and redirects us when we are headed in the wrong direction. In other words, He convicts us when we are in danger of straying.

Conviction is God's loving hand steering us back to the path that leads to life. To better understand the concept, picture a parent whose toddler begins to chase a ball into a busy street. The youngster has only one desire at that moment: to retrieve the toy. The parent, however, would be negligent if he or she did not stop the child.

We, like the toddler in this example, view our life from a limited perspective. If our heavenly Father stops us from achieving a desire, it seems frustrating. But we must remember that the Almighty is acting out of His love for us.

Conviction begins even before salvation. The Holy Spirit reveals our wrongs to help us recognize that we need forgiveness. When we accept Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf and choose to follow Him, we are born again. Only then are we free from the penalty of sin. At the same time, we are still human and will make some poor choices. So, even after we are His children, God continues to redirect us.

Conviction is different from condemnation. Remember that "God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him" (John 3:17). So though believers at times will sin, they are justified by Christ's sacrifice and free from condemnation (Rom. 8:1).

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: PHILIPPIANS 1-4

# Conviction for the Believer

PSALM 23

**RECENTLY I SPOKE TO A HEARTBROKEN WOMAN.** Her father was dying, and he was cold toward his family and God. He desired no contact and refused to discuss any spiritual matter.

**TUE**  
**10**

But God is able to reach anyone—even someone hostile to the faith, as we saw with the apostle Paul’s conversion. Yet Scripture also teaches that though the Lord is patient toward man, He may eventually give individuals over to the hardness of their own heart. In other words, He may let them have their own way in rejecting the Savior.

The situation is different for believers, however. When we, in our humanness, continue to sin, the Holy Spirit convicts us so we’ll get back on track. At that point, we can humbly repent and follow Him or ignore His voice and continue to sin. If we persist in error, our Father will keep calling us back. But the danger is that our hearts may become desensitized and we could eventually cease to hear His warnings.

Thankfully, we are children of God, and He loves us too much to let us remain in a sinful pattern. Though chastisement and conviction are never pleasant, He knows our traveling down the wrong road would result in much greater heartache (Prov. 3:12). The Lord is a shepherd, using His staff and rod to lovingly bring us to green pastures.

On the Christian journey, temptations to stray falsely promise to satisfy our longings. Stay closely connected to Jesus through prayer and Scripture. Be listening so you can obey immediately when He calls you to change course. In the long run, living God’s way is what brings the greatest joy.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: COLOSSIANS 1-4

# How God Works

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2 PETER 3:9-18

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**GOD IS AT WORK EVERYWHERE.** In the very first verse of the Bible, He is creating the heavens and earth. In the last verses of Revelation, He is calling people to be saved. Throughout Scripture and in the world today, the Lord is active in the lives of believers and unbelievers, although in very different ways.

We will be able to see God move in our life if we understand how He works—and He operates in both dramatic and seemingly insignificant ways. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, everyone could see by his face that he'd had a dramatic encounter with God. In contrast, Joseph entered Potiphar's household as a slave. That may seem like an inconsequential situation in an incredible life, but it was important to God's plan for Joseph.

In a similar way, God's work in us always has purpose. Our life may seem routine, but God is busy every day conforming us to Christ's likeness. He may allow circumstances we dislike, but those situations accomplish His goal. And we can see from examples like Gideon and Samson that He works differently with each person.

However God chooses to work in our life, we must trust Him. For instance, the Lord promised Abraham a son but silently waited 25 years to honor His vow. What appears slow to us is not slow to God. He is working out the perfect timing of events. Our patience to wait on Him demonstrates our trust, which is rewarded when we come ever closer to God's goal: to become more like Jesus.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: 1 THESSALONIANS 1-5

# Watching God Work

EPHESIANS 3:14-21

**WE HAVE THE PRIVILEGE OF SERVING** a God who does abundantly more than we can imagine. Most Christians go through their daily life with no real awareness that the Lord is at work. However, He is active all the time, orchestrating circumstances, listening to the prayers of His children, and working through His followers to serve others. God is at work in the life of each believer so that He will receive glory and honor.

THU  
12

It is important that Christians learn to see God at work. To do that, we first need to observe how He worked in the lives of men and women in Scripture. It is also essential for us to listen for what He is saying to our heart. If we think that the Lord has never spoken to us, then either we have not been listening, or we do not really expect an answer from Him at all.

To listen and learn, we must have a right relationship with the Lord—this means confessing our sins and choosing to serve Him. We cannot see God at work if we are not prayerful people. Prayer centers our attention on Him. That focus opens us to the fact that we are loved enough to receive direction from our Father.

Frequently though, the problem is that we do not receive guidance *according to our schedule*. Our heavenly Father may work over long periods of time, so we must learn to practice patience. A human parent needs at least 18 years to teach a child how to function appropriately in the world. How much longer must it take God to achieve His goal of conforming us to the image of His Son?

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: 2 THESSALONIANS 1-3

# Immature Faith



MATTHEW 8:23-26

**FRI**

# 13

**WE ALL KNOW THAT THE CHRISTIAN WALK** begins with faith in Jesus for the salvation of our soul. But faith is not a one-time act—it’s a lifelong path. And Hebrews 11:6 tells us why that journey is so important: “Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”

The faith of new believers is immature and often restless because there isn’t yet a deep understanding of the heavenly Father. Therefore, when trials come, the tendency is to look at the problem rather than at God. But as we spend more time studying His Word and growing in our knowledge of Him, our confidence in the Lord begins to increase. The more we learn what pleases Him, the wiser our prayers become.

Another way faith matures is through trials. In today’s passage, Jesus’ disciples became frightened in a storm and cried out to Him for help. We can relate to this scenario—at one time or another, we all have found ourselves in a desperate situation with no way to extricate ourselves. And the words Jesus spoke to His disciples could probably be said to us as well: “Why are you afraid, you men of little faith?” (Matt. 8:26).

We’d all like a problem-free life, but that’s not possible. The silver lining is that trouble can strengthen our faith in the Lord. It’s one thing to read about God’s faithfulness in His Word, but we also need to experience it in our personal life. Each time we’re able to trust the Lord during a trial, we know our faith is genuine.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: 1 TIMOTHY 1-3

# Mature Faith

ROMANS 4:16-25

**ABRAHAM IS KNOWN AS THE FATHER OF OUR FAITH** because he believed God. Although he sometimes struggled to trust the Lord and made a few missteps along the way, his faith continued to grow stronger. He ultimately believed God's promise to give him a son even though he and Sarah were both quite old.

**SAT**  
**14**

This is the path we all take as believers. The walk of faith begins at salvation and continues until we reach heaven. At first we may stumble, but along the way, our focus should begin to shift: Instead of focusing on the obstacles facing us, we look to the Lord. And rather than battle nagging doubts about God's trustworthiness, we'll cling to the knowledge that He loves us and is always faithful to His Word.

In time, our life will begin to revolve around the Lord. When our prayers are not answered immediately, we'll rely on His wisdom and trust He will answer in His way and time. In the midst of frailties, failures, and sin, we'll cultivate a heavenward perspective by means of prayer and meditation on Scripture. And instead of responding to uncertainties with fear and fretting, we'll focus on God's sovereignty and promises.

This kind of thinking, practiced consistently, will lead us into mature faith, which rests in the goodness and sufficiency of God. The Christian life becomes an exciting adventure—a chance to see what God will do next and how He will work out His will in each situation. Then, like Abraham, we'll begin to see our obstacles through the Lord's eyes and grow strong in faith, giving glory to God.

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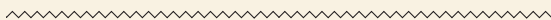
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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: 1 TIMOTHY 4-6

# The Priority Struggle



MATTHEW 6:31-34

SUN

15

**IN EVERYONE'S LIFE**, there tends to be one central issue around which all else revolves. Perhaps it is family, financial security, or a career. In a believer's life, however, the first priority should be to seek God's kingdom and righteousness (Matt. 6:33). People sometimes say, "I've made Jesus a part of my life," but that is not enough. Jesus *is* life for His followers. Without Him, the believer's life has no purpose or meaning.

Our top priority is where we invest our time, effort, and money. Therefore, to seek God's kingdom and righteousness means we make the pursuit of Christlikeness our primary goal. Obedience is a sure indication that we are growing in an intimate relationship with the Lord.

Seeking God's will requires perseverance. Rather than simply taking life as it comes and reacting to each situation, we must make our decisions according to the principles of Scripture. In personal prayer and Bible study, we learn to discern God's will as we become more familiar with what He desires. If we find ourselves veering away from the Lord, we quickly get back on track through confession and repentance.

When you honestly think about your priorities, you may discover that you've been distracted or sidetracked by lesser pursuits. Although Scripture tell us to care for our families and work diligently, putting those things ahead of God is idolatry. Look at your calendar and ask yourself, *What is my priority in life?* If the answer is Jesus, it will be evident because everything else will take a back seat.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: 2 TIMOTHY 1-4

# When God Is Silent

JOHN 11:1-6

**WHEN LAZARUS WAS DYING**, his sisters urgently called for Jesus. Imagine how their grief must have compounded when He didn't instantly respond to their request.

God's silence is difficult to accept. We want Him to leap into action when we call, particularly if we are hurting or afraid. But since He promises to meet our needs, we can be sure that His silence has purpose.

**SILENCE GRABS OUR ATTENTION.** The disciples knew that Jesus could heal, so they must have wondered why He delayed instead of rushing to His friend's bedside. But the Lord wanted them to witness something even greater: His power over death. They had been confused by His statements about conquering death, and they needed to understand that He could fulfill His own resurrection prophecies (Mark 9:31-32). The miracle at Lazarus' tomb was part of their preparation.

**SILENCE TEACHES US TO TRUST.** Mary and Martha sent word of Lazarus' illness because they anticipated that the Lord would heal him. But would their faith waver if that expectation was not met? Martha answered the question by stating, "I have believed that You are the Christ" (John 11:27). And sure enough, the Lord demonstrated His power with a stunning miracle: their brother's return to life.

At times, the only thing we can hear when we pray is our own breathing. That can be frustrating and frightening. But Scripture says God is always with us, and His silence will not last forever (Job 23:8-10; Matt. 28:20). Cling to those promises as you wait for Him to answer.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: TITUS 1-3, PHILEMON

# The Uniqueness of Christ

MATTHEW 16:13-20

**TUE**  
**17**

**MANY PEOPLE TODAY HAVE THEIR OWN IDEAS** about who Jesus is. Some people think He was merely a prophet or good teacher who taught people how to live. Even those who claim to be Christians have some inaccurate views of Him because they haven't based their perceptions on the comprehensive truth of Scripture.

When Jesus asked, "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:15-16). Jesus was unlike any other person who ever lived. He was set apart by . . .

**HIS BIRTH.** Conceived by the Holy Spirit, the eternal Son of God entered the human race through the womb of a virgin.

**HIS WISDOM.** At age 12, Jesus spent three days with the Jewish teachers, amazing them with His divine wisdom and understanding.

**HIS BAPTISM.** Though He was innocent of sin, Jesus asked John to baptize Him in order to identify with the sinners He came to save.

**HIS TEMPTATION.** Though Satan tempted Him in the wilderness, Jesus did not yield. Throughout His life, He fully obeyed every law of God and never sinned.

**HIS MINISTRY.** He challenged man-made traditions and demonstrated the power of God by healing people, raising the dead, and forgiving sins.

**HIS DEATH.** Jesus' death was a sacrifice for the sins of mankind so they could be forgiven and reconciled to God.

**HIS RESURRECTION.** Christ was the only person to ever permanently overcome death through resurrection.

Is this the Jesus you know? He is the only one who can save you.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: HEBREWS 1-3

# The Names of Christ

ACTS 4:8-12

**IN BIBLICAL TIMES**, a baby's name was based on the child's characteristics or a hope or prayer of the parent. The same is true of Jesus, whose name means "Jehovah is salvation." He was uniquely sent from heaven by the Father to be our Savior, and all His names and titles are powerful descriptions of who He is and what He does. What's more, the way Jesus describes Himself in John's gospel provides additional, rich insight into His character and work:

**WED**  
**18**

**THE BREAD OF LIFE** (6:32-40). Jesus Christ is the only one who can truly satisfy our heart and feed our soul with sustenance that leads to eternal life.

**THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD** (8:12). He shines through this dark, sinful world, showing us the way to forgiveness and salvation.

**THE DOOR** (10:7-10). Whoever enters through the door of Christ will be saved.

**THE GOOD SHEPHERD** (vv. 11-18). As our Shepherd, Jesus knows and cares for us—with a love so great that He laid down His life to save us.

**THE WAY, THE TRUTH, THE LIFE** (14:6). Jesus alone is the origin of truth and life, so He is the only avenue by which we can be saved and live eternally.

**THE VINE** (15:1-10). Christ is the source of our spiritual life. Without His abiding presence, we could do nothing of eternal value.

These are just some of the titles that Jesus Christ used to identify Himself, and the Bible refers to Him in many additional ways. Each time you read God's Word, pay attention to the descriptive names of Jesus. Each one will help you come to a better understanding of the One who loves you and came to save you.

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# The God Who Rescues Us

ROMANS 3:10-28

**19** <sup>THU</sup> **WHEN WE TELL PEOPLE THAT GOD WANTS TO SAVE THEM,** they may immediately wonder why rescue is necessary. In their mind, they are in no immediate danger and therefore have no need of a Savior. Before a person can appreciate the good news, he or she has to understand the bad news.

Every one of us is in need of rescue because we are all sinful and worthy of God's eternal condemnation and punishment. No matter how hard we try, "there is none who does good, there is not even one" (Rom. 3:12). This means that we lack the ability to make ourselves acceptable to God. In other words, we're eternally doomed unless God Himself intervenes on our behalf. And that is exactly what He did.

In order to rescue fallen humanity, God ordained a plan for mankind's salvation before He even created the world. Since His attribute of justice could not be set aside, an acceptable substitute was chosen to bear the condemnation and punishment that sinners deserved. The only one qualified for this mission was His beloved Son, who took on human flesh and lived a life without sin.

The gift of forgiveness and reconciliation to God is free to all who will receive Jesus Christ and believe He made atonement on their behalf. There is no condemnation for those who take refuge in Him. But those who reject His offer of salvation will have to bear the penalty for their sins themselves.

Christ did everything that was necessary to rescue us. All we have to do is believe and entrust our life to Him by faith.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: HEBREWS 7-9

# The God Who Chooses Us



EPHESIANS 1:3-12

**THERE'S NOTHING MORE HUMBLING THAN SALVATION.** We might like to think we did something that made our heavenly Father look down and say, “Now, there’s a person worth saving,” but this simply is not the case. We had absolutely nothing to offer God except our sin. And what’s more, today’s passage tells us that “He chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (v. 4). How could we possibly take any credit for something that happened before we were born?

FRI

20

God chose us, not when we were saved but before we had done anything noteworthy—in fact, long before we even came into existence. Our part was simply to respond to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, the offer of forgiveness by the Son, and the love of our heavenly Father. That should remove any sense of pride about how we were saved.

What’s even more amazing about our salvation is its permanency: Choosing us to be holy and blameless before Him *forever*, God predestined us to become His adopted children and heirs of His kingdom (vv. 4-5, 11). Our future in heaven is not only free from the penalty and power of sin but also free from sin’s very existence. Never again will we succumb to unrighteous desires or even battle temptation.

In light of this loving rescue plan, we marvel at the fact that God knew us before we were born and chose to save us. My friend, we should fall on our face before Jesus Christ in humble adoration, praise, and gratitude for His great love and mercy.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: HEBREWS 10-11

# A Perfect Sacrifice

LEVITICUS 22:17-21

**21** SAT **IN THE LAW**, God gave the Jews strict rules regarding sacrificial animals. Each was to be without defect, or He wouldn't accept it—in fact, when the Israelites offered blind, lame, and sick animals, the Lord angrily called them to account (Mal. 1:8).

The early system of spilling blood to cover sin foreshadowed the Father's ultimate redemption plan: He gave His Son to die in the place of corrupt men and women (John 3:16). To be an acceptable sacrifice, His Son would have to be perfect too, and only a member of the Trinity would be able to remain sinless in life on earth.

But divinity could not be bestowed on a child after birth. That is, the sacrificial Lamb needed to be both God and man from the moment of conception. So Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit and came from heaven to Mary's womb without human intervention. Unlike every child born of a woman and a man, Jesus arrived by the Holy Spirit, untouched by Adam's original sin.

Our salvation depends upon Jesus' flawless nature because, as God made clear to the Israelites, only a perfect sacrifice would do. Jesus was the perfect Lamb, unblemished in every way, and that's why God accepted Christ's sacrifice. The way we lay claim to the offering made on our behalf is by placing faith in Him.

Do you trust that God's demand for justice was met through Jesus' death? Do you believe that His death frees you from the condemnation your sins otherwise deserved? If you're unsure, take a moment to reflect on God's sacrifice, and ask Him to guide your heart.

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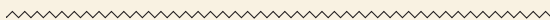
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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: HEBREWS 12-13

# Forgiving Those Who Fail Us



ACTS 7:54-60

**I WONDER IF THOUGHTS OF STEPHEN'S MURDER** entered Paul's mind while he was defending himself before the Roman tribunal. Although the apostle's friends, disciples, and converts had not come to support him, he didn't want the heavenly Father to discipline any of them (2 Tim. 4:16). Paul offered a prayer of forgiveness, just as Stephen forgave all of the men who were involved in stoning him to death.

SUN

22

Believers need to accept that forgiveness is the right response when others cause hurt. Grace is not only the Lord's mercy *toward* us; it is also His mercy flowing *through* us. Pardoning others is an aspect of becoming more Christlike—holding a grudge does not fit the new Spirit-filled person we became at salvation.

What's more, we must remember that Jesus Christ paid the sin debt of those who harm us, whether they accept His free gift of grace or not. Even so, no one claims that forgiving an offense is easy to do. Some people inflict such terrible evil on others that they seem undeserving of clemency. But it's important to understand that offering mercy is far better than living with the alternatives: Bitterness, revenge, and anger can gnaw at the spirit until good will is consumed, health is depleted, and thinking is clouded.

The Holy Spirit will help us forgive. He gently draws out our hurt, betrayal, and anger—and then refills our heart with mercy. Only when we are fully yielded to Him can we say with Stephen, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" (Acts 7:60).

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: JAMES 1-5

# Christmas Giving

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MATTHEW 2:1-12

MON

# 23

**WHY DO WE GIVE GIFTS AT CHRISTMAS?** When we were children, presents were the highlight of the season, and for some of us, the joy of giving and receiving gifts has not waned. Some people wonder what all this has to do with the celebration of Christ's birth. But there *is* a connection—although nothing came wrapped in paper, the occasion was marked by extravagant generosity.

**GOD GAVE HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON.** This was greatest gift ever given, because His precious Son was the only one who could die as a sacrifice for our sins.

**MARY GAVE HER BODY AND REPUTATION.** When the angel told her she would bear the Son of God, Mary responded, “May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Although this was a glorious privilege, it also included the loss of her reputation. Her engagement to Joseph was as binding as marriage, and to be found pregnant before the actual ceremony would have been scandalous in the people's eyes.

**THE SHEPHERDS GAVE A TESTIMONY.** After hearing the birth announcement from the angel and seeing the newborn Messiah, they couldn't keep the news to themselves. They told everyone what they had heard and seen (2:17-20).

**THE MAGI GAVE GIFTS AND WORSHIP.** Having traveled a long distance to find this new King of the Jews, they fell to the ground in worship and offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matt. 2:11).

Although materialism and commercialism have hijacked the tradition of gift giving to some degree, we must also remember the true generosity that is at the heart of Christmas.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: 1 PETER 1-5;

# The Generosity of Christ

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PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

**THE CHRISTMAS SEASON** offers a wonderful opportunity to show love and appreciation for others by giving gifts. God the Father set the precedent by giving His Son to the world, but we must not forget that Jesus Himself was characterized by selfless giving. Generosity isn't measured as much by our gift as it is by the sacrifice required to give it. So, what did God the Son give up when He came to earth as a tiny infant?

**TUE**

24

**JESUS GAVE HIMSELF AS A SERVANT.** We know that He was God's servant because He did and said only what His Father commanded. But Jesus didn't stop there. The Creator and Ruler of heaven and earth also became a servant to sinful mankind. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, and taught the multitudes. But His humility didn't stop there.

**JESUS GAVE HIMSELF AS A SACRIFICE.** He humbled Himself to die on a cross, bearing the Father's righteous wrath and judgment for our sins. Although He was holy and pure, He gave Himself up to be beaten, tortured, mocked, and executed by sinful men.

**JESUS GAVE HIMSELF AS A SAVIOR.** Now all those who believe in Him can be forgiven, reconciled with God, and saved from the penalty of eternal punishment in hell. But that's not all. He also gives us eternal life and the promise of an inheritance in heaven.

We can't imagine what it was like to leave the glories of heaven to come to earth as a human being. All we can do is thank Jesus for the indescribable gift of Himself.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: 2 PETER 1-3

# Characterized by Giving

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-15

WED

# 25

**CHRISTMAS IS TRADITIONALLY THE TIME OF YEAR** when many people freely demonstrate generosity. Since Jesus' birth, life, and ministry were characterized by giving, His followers should also be known for that trait—but not just in December.

Generosity is part of our identity in Christ and should be our natural response to God's blessings and provisions. Jesus Himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). The New Testament church demonstrated this when they shared possessions with one another (2:44-45).

Sometimes we become rather inward-focused in our Christmas giving. We buy gifts for our immediate family and maybe even for extended family or close friends. But what can we do this Christmas to extend generosity beyond our own homes?

In today's passage, Paul mentions the generosity of Macedonian churches that collected an offering to send to the poor saints in Jerusalem. In a similar way, we might give some of our Christmas spending budget to a family, friends, or neighbors who need it. Or we can give the gift of service, which could be as simple as babysitting, cleaning a house, or visiting a nursing home or hospital. And if we have a useful skill, we could offer our expertise in that area to help someone.

Giving reminds us that God is the source of all we have, and the most precious gift He's given us is eternal life. We share that gift with others when we give our time and our money, because generosity reflects the lavish love and grace of God.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: 1 JOHN 1-5

# Lessons From a Life Well Lived



2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8

**PAUL'S SECOND LETTER TO TIMOTHY** was written from prison. This time the apostle felt certain that the emperor would have him executed. But God's faithful servant was ready to take the next step of faith.

**THU**  
**26**

We shouldn't be surprised that Paul met death with calm acceptance. He lived every day—from his conversion on the road to Damascus to his final moments—in service to God, which meant consenting to whatever hardship he was asked to bear in Jesus' name. "I have fought the good fight," he wrote to Timothy (2 Tim. 4:7). From Paul's many letters, we know that he battled the same enemies we face—the flesh (Rom. 7:14-15), the world (1 Cor. 4:11-13), and Satan (Eph. 6:12). These passages are a reminder that Paul wasn't more holy than us; he had to persevere by faith. And the same is true for us today.

Even with his profound wisdom and skill as an apostle and missionary, Paul wasn't so different from ordinary you and me. He was not perfect and he had spiritual defeats. But Paul didn't stay down. He got back into the fight. For this and for the life he lived, he anticipated rich rewards in eternity. And he pointed out that heaven's treasures were "not only to me but also to all who have longed for [Jesus'] appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8 NIV).

Paul struggled and agonized, as believers today often do. But he kept the faith, and you can as well. Fight the good fight, friend. Battle your enemies by choosing to trust, obey, and rely upon the Lord. You will bring honor to Him and store up treasures in heaven for yourself.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: 2 JOHN, 3 JOHN, JUDE

# Brokenness: The Way to Blessing



2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10

**FRI**  
**27**

**NO ONE ENJOYS HEARTACHE.** Yet God uses pain to mold His children. Although times of happiness are wonderful, times of suffering tend to produce more growth.

Brokenness can highlight parts of us that try to act independently of God. If we have unsundered areas of our life, they may hinder our Father's purposes for us. But in His skillful and loving way, our Father uses our circumstances and discomfort to reveal how dependent on Him we truly are.

The apostle Paul experienced this. After being saved on the road to Damascus, he still needed spiritual growth in order to be most effective for Christ. Therefore, God allowed some type of affliction, which the apostle termed a "thorn." Three different times, he pleaded with the Lord for its removal, but the thorn remained. Remarkably, Paul's response was gratitude. Even more, he wrote, "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

Like Paul, we can dislike suffering and yet still be confident that God is growing us. His purpose is that we walk in intimate oneness with Him and serve effectively according to His purpose and will. To accomplish this, He has to break us of our resistance and self-reliance.

If you truly desire to live for Jesus, trust Him enough to pray, "Lord, more than anything else in life, I want to live for You. Please challenge any areas that are not in complete submission to Your will."

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: REVELATION 1-4

# Promises for Painful Times

2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18

**YESTERDAY WE LEARNED ABOUT BROKENNESS** as a tool the Lord uses to mold us into His likeness. God's followers desire this outcome, yet the process is a painful one. That's why the Lord gives encouragement in a number of ways.

**SAT**  
**28**

First, God disciplines with love. Just as parents redirect their children's behavior out of love, the heavenly Father has our best interest in mind when correcting us. It's not out of anger that He allows suffering.

Second, God gives us hope through His Son. He doesn't want our suffering to debilitate us, but when it feels like too much to bear, the promise of eternity and Christ's presence keeps us from despair (2 Cor. 4:18). Our Father wants us to grow in Christlikeness, but He doesn't want to break our spirit.

Third, God brings clarity through difficult times. As we learn that His ways are higher than ours, we gain greater understanding of His amazing attributes. At the same time, our self-awareness starts to sharpen, and old unproductive thought patterns begin to fade.

Fourth, God promises that He'll never desert us. Brokenness can bring a feeling of emptiness as we are losing things that once captured our loyalty. But our Father replaces those with Himself—and He is vastly more satisfying and dependable.

Fifth, the Lord is patient. He knows our background and thought patterns but also sees the end result and knows the journey is worth it.

When you face hardship, remember God's promises and keep your eyes fixed on the goal. He wants to help you reach your full potential.

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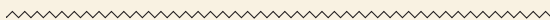
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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: REVELATION 5-8

# Praying in the Spirit



JOHN 14:16-21

SUN

# 29

**I AM CONVINCED THAT IF WE TRULY UNDERSTOOD** what takes place during prayer, we would call upon the Lord more often and with greater confidence. The believer's prayer isn't simply spoken into thin air; we have the Holy Spirit, who communicates for us and carries our needs to the Lord.

The Holy Spirit is part of the Trinity, so He knows the mind of God intimately (1 Cor. 2:11). Omniscient and omnipotent like the Father, He fully grasps the circumstance we are praying over—even the parts that remain unseen or utterly confusing to us. Also, the Spirit dwells within every believer and knows each one's mind and heart. With this full knowledge, the Holy Spirit can carry out His responsibility to make sure our petitions match God's desires. Toward that end, He speaks in our spirit and opens our mind to Scripture.

The fact that God gives His Spirit to all believers reveals the value He places on communication between Him and His children. And so, our heavenly Father provides the best possible Helper to ensure that we can be in tune with His will—in other words, wise, patient, and fully yielded to Him. But we'll have none of those qualities unless we are habitually talking with the Lord.

Christians don't need to feel guilty for being uncertain about how to pray. The indwelling Holy Spirit knows our needs and desires—as well as the mind and will of the Father and the details of every situation. He speaks to God on our behalf while teaching us to pray accordingly.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: REVELATION 9-12

# God Values Endurance



HEBREWS 11:23-29

**AS HUMAN BEINGS, WE OFTEN HAVE A DIFFICULT TIME** perceiv-  
ing what the Lord is doing in our life. We are limited by the  
passage of time, the confusion of present circumstances, and  
a lack of understanding regarding God’s goals and His means  
of accomplishing them. That’s why studying the lives of men and women  
in Scripture helps us see how the Lord worked in previous generations.  
God’s relationships with the faithful in earlier times are helpful examples  
for us today.

MON

30

When we face uncertainty, we can look to Moses’ example. His life was unpredictable and full of hardship, yet he “endured, as seeing Him who is unseen” (Heb. 11:27). In Greek, the root word for “endurance” refers to the capacity to bear up under difficulty. Moses successfully persevered under pressure by keeping his focus on God rather than on the events surrounding him.

From Moses’ example, we learn that this is what the Lord desires for us as well. Although we may want out of a difficult situation as soon as possible, this may not be God’s aim. It is not His goal to make us as comfortable as can be but, rather, to transform us into the image of His Son. And endurance helps us get there.

If God calls us to endure pain, hardship, or uncertainty, we can find encouragement in knowing we’re never alone. Part of “seeing Him who is unseen” is realizing that God’s grace and comfort carry us through every situation. The Lord doesn’t want us to simply grit our teeth and bear hardship; He desires that we trust Him and bring glory to His name through our dependence.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: REVELATION 13-17

# An Encounter With God

ISAIAH 6

**TUE**  
**31** **EACH SUNDAY COUNTLESS PEOPLE CONGREGATE** in church buildings to worship God. But for many of them, going to church is merely an item on their checklist—an activity that fulfills their “spiritual duty.” Although they may be moved by the music and sermon, they quickly lose the feeling and return to a life in which God seems distant, and the world’s pleasures begin to look more attractive.

Isaiah’s time apparently wasn’t so different from ours. Listen to God’s assessment: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught” (Isa. 29:13 NIV).

What is the solution when God’s people begin to take Him for granted? Isaiah’s encounter with the Lord in today’s reading provides a good example. When he saw God’s awesome holiness, Isaiah was filled with fear and profound awareness of his own sin. In distress, he cried out, “Woe is me, for I am ruined!” (6:5). After being cleansed from his sin, his one desire was to serve the Lord as His prophet, and he said, “Here am I. Send me!” (v. 8).

Although it’s unlikely we will experience a vision like this, every time we open God’s Word, we have an opportunity to see “the King, the LORD of hosts” (v. 5) as Isaiah did. What’s even more amazing is that this majestic, holy God invites us into an intimate relationship with Him through His Son.

If your spiritual life has become too mechanical, it’s time to approach your time with God differently. Pray for a heart that is open to a true encounter with Him, and wait patiently for His provision.

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BIBLE IN ONE YEAR: REVELATION 18-22

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1 Kings 20:17

They did eat. Then he arose, and went after the Syrians, and ministered to him.

**See-Also's: Ministered to Achan**

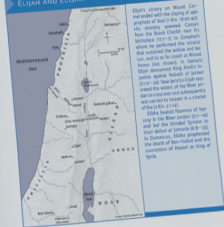
**20** And he had broken the king of Syria's parable and his two kings with him, and there were thirty and his host together, and he went and hearies, and chariots: he he went and besieged Samaria, and warned against him.

40 And he sent messengers to Achan king of Israel to the city, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, I will deliver thee, and thy city, and thy wives also, and thy children, and the goods that are in thine house, and take it away.

41 Then the king of Israel called all the lords of his land, and said, Mark, I pray

Matthew 24:12-13, Mark 13:9-10

ELISA



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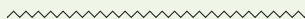
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## Let Me Count the Ways

With all our heart, soul, mind, strength, and ...



➡ WHEN WE LOVE SOMEONE, how do we let the person know? It may not be easy to find the perfect way. Shakespeare famously wrote his beloved was more lovely than a summer's day, and poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning used her pen to "count the ways" she loved her soon-to-be husband. Another woman, centuries earlier, chose a radical public act to say something similar—to Jesus.

Continued on pg 40



**READ** *To get the most from this study, read Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:1-9. But first, ask that the Holy Spirit guide you into the truth available in the passages. Permit yourself to ask questions that may not have answers. Wonder aloud, imagine the scene, and take note of anything that surprises, confuses, or even offends you. Remember, God is the best teacher.*

**Key Passage:** *Mark 14:1-9*

**BACKGROUND** At this point in the Gospels, Jesus has nearly completed His earthly ministry and is dining with friends. In a few days He will celebrate the Last Supper with His disciples and then be crucified. Among His followers are men and women who have become wholeheartedly committed to Him, understanding and believing that He is the Messiah. One of them enters this story to give the Lord an astonishing gift: an anointing with perfume worth about \$20,000 in today's currency.

**REFLECT** A characteristic of love is that it demands to be expressed. But we often struggle to find words or actions strong enough to adequately convey our feelings.

→ The story tells us the woman entered the room where Jesus was sitting, “broke the vial [of very costly perfume] and poured it over His head” (v. 3). The vial was made of alabaster, a soft stone, and was probably imported from Egypt. Why do you think she chose to break it then? What connection can you see between breaking the vial and her desire to honor Jesus?

→ The perfume is identified as “pure nard,” the oil of a flowering plant from India. It was extremely expensive and no doubt rare and hard to obtain in Israel. Have you ever wanted to make a gesture of love to someone but had trouble finding anything “good enough” for that person? Does it surprise you someone might feel this way about Jesus, or do you yourself feel this way about Him?

→ Those present are “indignant” at the woman's extravagance and

**LOVE DEMANDS  
TO BE EXPRESSED.  
BUT WE OFTEN  
STRUGGLE TO  
ADEQUATELY CONVEY  
OUR FEELINGS.**

complain about the waste when there are better uses for something so valuable (vv. 4-5). But to this woman, pouring her treasure out over Jesus' head is preferable. What do you think of her action? Try to recall an extravagance that you've seen made to honor Jesus—something extreme and seemingly frivolous. Did the expenditure make you uncomfortable? Is there a verse in this story that changes your opinion?

**CONTINUING THE STORY** Within the week, Jesus' crucified body will be laid in a tomb—and because of the Sabbath, there won't be time for it to be properly anointed by His followers. (That's why, in 16:1-6, several women go early on Sunday morning with spices for the anointing, but it is too late—by then, the Lord has already risen.) So, while the woman in this story cannot realize that her oil will be the only timely preparation for His burial, Jesus knows.

**REFLECT** The woman apparently wanted to demonstrate her devotion and sought a gesture fit for a king. Jesus tells the onlookers that she has done “a good deed” for Him (14:6). The phrase has the connotation of a noble, virtuous act; some translations call it “a beautiful

**SHE BROKE THE VIAL  
OF COSTLY PERFUME ...  
JESUS FEELS THIS SAME  
URGENT, BURSTING LOVE  
FOR YOU, MAGNIFIED  
MANY TIMES OVER.**

thing.” Imagine Jesus telling others this about something you've done for Him. Does the story make you wish to change your own life?

→ Breaking and pouring out something very precious was meant to show Jesus—and everyone present—great love for Him. You may relate to the feeling of loving someone so much you feel you might burst if you don't find a way to express it. Consider that several days later, Jesus broke His own body and poured out His blood for this woman and for us. How does it make you feel knowing that He has this same urgent, bursting love for you, magnified many times over?

**REFLECT** Many people are speaking in this story, from the other dinner guests to Jesus Himself. In fact, it was probably a rather noisy scene. But the woman is silent; only her actions are reported. Continued on pg 42



→ Though the disciples suggest the perfume should have been sold to benefit the poor (Matt. 26:8-9), Jesus defends the loving gesture, saying, “Whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me” (Mark 14:7). What does the woman’s silence tell you about the relationship between

focus and action? Between love and opportunity?

→ When it comes to expressing love, a focused heart and willing hands are what’s needed to make the most of the moments we have.

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**REVISIT** *Over the next several weeks, use this section to review the study and consider how its message applies to your life.*

**In Matthew 22:36-37,**

Jesus said the greatest commandment is “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” The words are simple, but what does it really look like to love God—does it mean church attendance? Service? Obedience? Actually, all these are included. But it may be surprising to realize that, as this story shows, expressing love for God has similarities to showing love for people: lavishing attention, giving special gifts, and telling the world how wonderful our loved one is. And a heart overwhelmed by love can’t help but do such things.

→ Scripture has many beautiful examples of people who found ways to express love for God despite the cost. Think of: Daniel, who risked his life in Babylon to show God loyalty; Mary, whose body made Jesus’ birth possible; and perhaps even the boy who gave his lunch at the feeding of the 5,000. Can you name others whose gifts to God inspire you?

→ What opportunities do we have today to love as the woman with the alabaster jar? Since Jesus is not here in body, what can you do to honor Him? Your answer might be something very private, between you and the Lord, or it might be something

you want the world to see—for His glory.

→ Try to think of a time you’ve given a gift at great cost to yourself: financial, time, or perhaps emotional cost. This might even be the gift of forgiveness or an undeserved mercy. Which was stronger at the time, the sense of loss at what you were giving away, or joy that you had this thing to give?

→ A radical gift may always involve a sense of sacrifice. But the pain of relinquishing something valued will be greatest when we give from a sense of duty. When we give from a place of love, on the other hand, joy takes over.

NOTES .....

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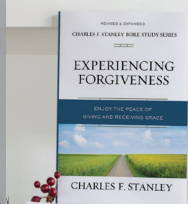
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## Not in It Alone

BY JOSEPH E. MILLER



**ON A FREEZING WINTER DAY IN DECEMBER 2003**, Donna Davis, head in hands, leaned on the desk in her Philadelphia home. For years it had been the spot where she experienced God's peace as she read her In Touch daily devotions. But now she couldn't focus. *Why would anybody put a* **Continued on pg 46**



*gun to someone's head?* she continually asked herself. *Why my son's?*

On November 30 Ricky Davis, 23, was home, sitting at the dinner table with Mom, Dad, and his two siblings. Only hours later, he was shot and killed during an armed robbery. As it turned out, Ricky was murdered by someone he knew.

Bereaved, his mother did all she could to get through each day. After an acquaintance told her about a just-formed group that might help, she attended Mothers in Charge, an organization founded by fellow Christian Dorothy Speight-Johnson. A grieving mom herself, Speight-Johnson lost her son Khaaliq in 2001. He was killed in retaliation for breaking up a fight—all over a parking space. At the gathering, Davis was comforted by knowing she wasn't alone.

The two women recently reconnected over coffee. In the decade and a half since they first met, the women have transformed the pain of their losses into positive outreach efforts. Davis returned to school for a master's degree in education. She now mentors children at a domestic abuse center. Meanwhile, Speight-Johnson's passion for change has expanded to serve several major cities. Over the past 16 years, her efforts have helped thousands of families and effected legislation aimed at curbing violence.

***THROUGH HER WORK  
WITH YOUTHS IN CRISIS,  
DAVIS HOPES SHE CAN GET  
THEM TO SEE VIOLENCE IS  
NEVER THE ANSWER TO  
LIFE'S PROBLEMS.***

The organization's message is that violence can impact people regardless of where or how they live. "No one is safe until we are all safe," Speight-Johnson says.

Looking back, Davis understands that the man convicted in Ricky's death had problems of his own. *You were in that much pain that you had to take somebody else's life?* she imagines herself saying to him. Through her work with youths in crisis, Davis hopes she can get them to see violence is never the answer to life's problems.

With renewed vision, Davis returns each morning to her desk to read the In Touch daily devotional and listen to Dr. Stanley's program. She is encouraged that God could use one man to minister to millions. Her field of ministry may be smaller, but Davis nevertheless tends to it with similar courage and conviction.



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