

21-DAY

DEVOTIONAL

BEING WITH JESUS



LEARNING TO ABIDE
IN EVERY SEASON OF LIFE

Day 1: You CAN fast!

Pastor Paul Taylor, Rivers Crossing Church

“Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer. She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she began praising God. She talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem.” Luke 2:36-38

I grew up attending church and hearing a lot about God and Jesus. I sat in Sunday school classrooms with felt boards (Google it if you are too young to have ever seen one!), sweet Sunday school teachers, and other kids dressed in their Sunday best. I then went from my class to “Big Church” as we called it, and sat with all the adults in the pews and listened to the pastor preach and the choir sing. I can honestly say that throughout my entire childhood, youth and early adult years, I never did one study or heard one sermon on fasting!

We actually did a whole lot of eating in the churches I was a part of! The thought of not eating anything or certain things for any period of time seemed so radical. “*Only monks and zealots fast,*” I thought to myself– no, wait, I never even *thought* about fasting!

That may be your story, and I am so thrilled that you are reading this and that you’ve decided to embark on this 21-day journey of prayer and fasting. Whether this is your first time trying to fast or it’s your regular rhythm every January, I want to encourage you to approach your season of fasting confident that you **can** fast!

One of the obscure stories around the birth of Jesus is found in Luke 2. Jesus had just been born and Mary and Joseph brought him to the temple in Jerusalem to be dedicated to the Lord and to fulfill some customs found in the law. As they arrived at the temple, an elderly widow named Anna excitedly greets them and prophesies that their little baby boy is the hope of the world! (Luke 2:38).

I love what Luke says about Anna in Luke 2:37 (ESV), “She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.” Unlike my experience growing up in church, Anna was very familiar with and accustomed to fasting. There is

so much to Anna's story that is worth reflecting on: she dealt with the loss of a spouse, she never had children, and she understood disappointment. Anna was familiar with pain, but never stopped pursuing God and had a passion for His presence and purpose in the world.

But what I want you to see in her story and be encouraged by in your fasting journey is her dedication to making fasting a regular part of her spiritual disciplines and worship. She worshiped *with* fasting and prayer day and night. It was while she was fasting and praying, while she was being obedient to what God had asked, that Anna got to see Jesus and experience His presence literally in her life. If an elderly woman (some scholars insist that she stayed in God's house from the time she lost her husband, meaning that those 84 years were after she was widowed, so she may have been more than 100!) can fast and pray, so can you!

You **can** fast! As you undertake this 21-day journey, know that God's power and presence are available to each of you as you invite Him to change your life, your circumstances, and our city. I can't wait to see how He moves in your life!

Day 2: Choosing Hunger

Pastor Chris Marlin, City Church OTR

*“...for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”
Philippians 2:13*

Whenever I share my testimony, I talk about the first miracle I saw. In college, God healed my friend of terminal cancer during a prayer meeting. I haven't been the same since.

As I've reflected on my faith journey, I realize an equally pivotal moment came years before. I was sitting with some youth group friends discussing a book we'd read about a revival. The author told stories of crazy things happening during this revival— people pulling into the church parking lot and unexplainably bursting into tears. Men walking into the lobby, falling to their knees, and repenting of sin. He even shared a testimony of how one service, the pulpit split in two after an altar call to pursue God more.

A fiberglass pulpit. Split in two. With no one touching it. Again...crazy stuff. Especially for some youth group kids from a traditional church. One friend spoke first and said how amazing that sounded. He wanted to see God move in crazy ways, even though none of this was familiar to him. As he spoke, something sparked in my spirit.

The next friend had a much more “thoughtful” response— *“I bet he's exaggerating to sell books?”* and *“I wonder if they pre-cracked the pulpit to set that up.”* As he spoke, something sparked in my mind. He made good points. There *is* a lot of money in the book game. And pulpits don't usually just split... Then eyes turned to me.

My spirit had been sparked with wonder, then my mind had been cooled with critique. The moment didn't feel significant. I was among friends where either response would be met with grace. And yet, a battle raged inside of me. A battle that I now realize was between cynicism and hunger, and who would have first say over my heart. After what seemed like hours, I spoke. I don't remember exactly what my mouth said. But I remember what my heart felt: *“I must...”*

If there's more to God, *I must* find Him. If He still speaks, *I must* hear Him. If the book of Acts can still exist, *I must* be part of it. During this fast, don't overlook the battle over

the simple moments. Cynicism and hunger are battling for you. Which one will we give the reins of our hearts to?

As you reflect, think about a time you chose hunger *for* God instead of cynicism *toward* Him.

Pray with me: *“Holy Spirit, cultivate a hunger in us this month that sustains us all year. Let us never give the reins of our spiritual lives to anything but You. Teach us to feed our desire for more and starve the critical spirit. Amen.”*

Day 3: A Deep Grief Over Sin **Andy Ziegenfuss, All Church**

“For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.” 2 Corinthians 7:10 (ESV)

This verse is really interesting because it forces us to think about grieving over sin in two different ways. There’s a godly way to do it and there’s a worldly way to do it. There’s a godly way to grieve and a worldly way to grieve. So, what’s the difference and why does it matter?

Well, godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation. I want you to get the picture of godly grief here. It’s acknowledging our sin, it’s feeling sorrow over our sin, and it’s grieving over our sin. It’s a recognition that our sin has offended our Heavenly Father and we need to repent of what we’ve done.

Think of Psalm 51 here, when David has committed adultery with Bathsheba and he is grieving over his sin. He’s crying out for God’s mercy because he knows he has sinned—not just against this woman and her husband, but against God.

“Against you, you only, have I sinned,” he says in Psalm 51:4.

So, he acknowledges his sin, he grieves over his sin, and it produces a repentance that leads to salvation. He turns from his sin because he knows he needs salvation. He knows what he’s done isn’t right and so his grieving leads to action. His grieving leads to a running from sin to the mercy of God in salvation. That’s godly grief. **It’s actionable repentance.** We turn away from our sin and back to God.

But 2 Corinthians 7:10 doesn’t only describe godly grief. Paul gives us a stark warning against worldly grief too. Worldly grief is different. Worldly grief may acknowledge sin, and may even feel sorrow over sin, but it’s not sorrow over hurting someone else and ultimately it’s not sorrow over disobeying God. Maybe it’s sorrow over getting caught. Maybe it’s sorrow over the effects of sin in one’s life—the pain that sin causes. Maybe it’s a simple sorrow over the circumstances in life that are now our sad reality because of our sin.

But this worldly grief never considers Who we've ultimately sinned against. In other words, this sorrowful realization that one has offended the holy God of the universe, disobeyed Him, and many times hurt others in the process isn't a part of worldly grief.

It doesn't lead us to run to the mercy of God or plead for His forgiveness. It doesn't cause us to cry out for the power to turn and not sin again. It never leads us to strive and live with righteousness and holiness for the glory of God.

Worldly grief misses all of that. And in that way, worldly grief doesn't produce repentance that leads to salvation and life. Instead, worldly grief produces death.

When it comes to sin in our lives—both the sin that we are guilty of right now and the sin that we may commit today, tomorrow or this week—let's pray that God would give us godly grief over that sin. Let's pray that we would experience deep conviction and turn from our sin back to God.

Pray with me: *“God, I pray for this in my life. I pray that you would cause me, by your grace, by the conviction of your Spirit, to grieve over sin in my life. Like, really to grieve over it, not to treat it lightly. To hate it, to want to turn from it. With everything in me, to want to turn from it. Not to want to turn back to it, but to turn from it. To run to your mercy. To receive your salvation. I want my life to honor you. I want to pursue holiness and Christlikeness and I know I have to turn from my sin to do that so today, with your help and strength, I repent of my sin and turn back to your loving and forgiving arms. Amen.”*

Day 4: But God!

Jennifer Shock, Vineyard Cincinnati Church

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.” Ephesians 6:10

One of the many (some awesome, some not-so-awesome) things I’m discovering as I get older is that I’m not enough. I used to think I was— back in the day when I was entrenched in worldly ideology and focused on my independence and capability. It’s been a minute since I felt so strong. These days I’m mostly aware of my weaknesses; my aching back, my lack of get-up-and-go, my weariness. “I got this!” Nope, I don’t. “You can do it!” Really doesn’t feel like I can.

It’s been such a relief though, as I age, to right-size my own strength. To remember out of necessity that it’s His might I’m relying on, not my own. I don’t have what I’m going to need? Great news! I know Someone who does. Being a leader can feel like a beautiful gift, an awesome privilege, and a huge burden. We can doubt ourselves. We can have a hard time remembering to keep the main thing, the main thing. We can fail to remember that it’s God’s glory we’re after, not our own.

The apostle Paul would likely file the above challenges under the heading “spiritual warfare.” We need to be reminded, again and again, that the battles we fight are not against flesh and blood. The battles we’re fighting are “against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” The enemy and his minions are not interested in you or the leaders of your church standing firm, focused on the gospel of Jesus Christ, pointing people to Him and only Him. We’re at war, and we can barely defend ourselves. *But God!*

He has given us, and your leaders, everything we need: His armor. The armor of the mightiest, strongest, most awesome-in-power God of the universe—*that’s* the armor we get to put on. But putting it on is an act of surrender, and it’s a choice. We can try to fight our battles with the weapons we fashion ourselves; we can try to defend ourselves with our puny, penetrable, opposite-of-bulletproof vests. Why would we want to do that, though? Only those of us who are still convinced we’re strong enough, wise enough, and resourceful enough are foolish enough to fight in the strength of our own might and not God’s. May we repent of relying on ourselves.

Pray for the leaders of your church, and for all of your brothers and sisters, that we daily reach for the armor of God: His belt of truth, His breastplate of righteousness, His gospel of peace, His shield of faith, His helmet of salvation, and His sword, the sword of the Spirit. Then we can stand and fight. Pray that your leaders be filled with His mighty power and that they lead from a place of dependence on His strength and wisdom.

Day 5: Love and Unity Inside of the Church

Matt Jewell, Rivers Crossing Church

“Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.” John 13:35

Over the past several years, I’ve experienced several people I know walk away from the Church or even become openly antagonist toward the Church. This absolutely breaks my heart. Perhaps you can relate to this experience, or at least relate to a yearning for the Church to have greater impact as it carries out its God-ordained mission to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Jesus too cares deeply about the Church and about its witness. During an intimate conversation with the disciples shortly before He was crucified, Jesus issued a command— “As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35, NIV). According to Jesus, the witness of the Church is directly tied to the love that those in the Church have for one another. If we’re committed to loving Jesus, we should be just as committed to loving those who also love Jesus. Whenever we’re tempted to lament over the Church’s waning influence and its witness in the world, we should humbly ask ourselves— what do our words and actions toward those in the Church communicate about God and His gospel to those outside the Church?

Jesus’ command to love one another would be an easy one to follow, except for the reality that people do and say things that make them hard to love. Being part of a local church body doesn’t mean being part of a community where sin, relational conflict, and turmoil are totally absent. This was true from the earliest days of the Church (just read 1st and 2nd Corinthians) and it’s true now. Why? Because none of us, even though we’ve placed our faith in Jesus Christ, have been perfected on this side of eternity. We still battle with our flesh and desires in ways that put us at odds with others. But as the Church, we’re called to love one another in ways that overcome sin, relational conflict, and turmoil and champion the public witness that comes through unity. As the Apostle Paul declared, we’re to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:1a-6, ESV)

Why should we pursue unity through love? Because the God who saved us and who Himself perfectly exists in loving unity– Father, Son, and Holy Spirit–should be more precious to us than any personal preference, grievance, hurt, or conflict we have with another person in the Church.

Thankfully, Jesus didn't command us to love one another– no matter how hard it might be–without empowering us to do so. He's given us the Holy Spirit, our Helper and Counselor (John 14:26, AMP), who produces in us the fruit of the Spirit– love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23, ESV). Is there a person in the Church who needs to experience your love and forgiveness? Is there a person in the Church you need to reach out to and ask for their help or forgiveness? If so, don't delay. The world is watching!

Day 6: An Evangelistic Heart for Our City **Clay Harrington, Vineyard Cincinnati**

“With Christ as my witness, I speak with utter truthfulness. My conscience and the Holy Spirit confirm it. My heart is filled with bitter sorrow and unending grief for my people, my Jewish brothers and sisters. I would be willing to be forever cursed—cut off from Christ!—if that would save them.” Romans 9:1-3

Willing to be forever cursed? Cut off from Christ? Yikes! This is a very strong language Paul uses here to plead his case. To put this passage in context— Paul is sharing, with the Church in Rome, his burning desire to see his Jewish siblings come to a saving faith in Jesus!

Personally, every time I read these words it brings a chilling conviction to my core. Do I share in Paul’s burning desire to see the unsaved saved? Is my heart filled with ‘bitter sorrow and unending grief’ to see the unreached in my city... reached? And do I even want to know the answers to those questions?

Left to our own efforts and energy, we all will fall short of this “Romans 9:1-3 Bar” to see others come to know Him— each and every time! But thank God this evangelistic burden doesn’t come from our desires, but His. Without the empowerment and enablement of the Holy Spirit, we’ll continue making failed attempt after failed attempt trying to go at this alone.

It’s only in the power of the Holy Spirit that our hearts break for the unsaved. It’s only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we long to even want others to know Him because...it’s through the power and infilling of the Holy Spirit that we become **effective witnesses for the King and His Kingdom.**

And this Good News gets even better...we don't need to be forever cursed and cut off from Christ for others to enter into the Kingdom. Our salvation is assured and secure in Him regardless of our feelings or evangelistic competency. We who are *in* Christ are sent out *by* Christ in the power and authority of His Spirit. We are qualified to do the work of an evangelist.

Pray with me: *“Holy Spirit, according to your power at work within me, I pray you fill my heart with bitter sorrow and unending grief for the lost in my city. Teach me how to*

lovingly share with others who don't yet know you. Stir in me that I may burn for you in such a way there's an urgency for the unlikely to come to a saving faith in You. Amen."



Day 7: Go and Make Disciples
Jeff Sharp, Rivers Crossing Church

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”
Matthew 28:19-20

Although Jesus may have been speaking directly to his eleven disciples at this moment, the command to “go and make disciples” was for His Church. This is one of the reasons many people call this passage of scripture “The Great Commission.”

The Church was commissioned by God to go and make disciples wherever God calls them. One of the most strategic ways of fulfilling The Great Commission is by planting churches led by called and passionate people committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Although it may seem like churches are on every corner in our communities, churches are closing faster than they are opening. At the current rate, only one church opens for every four churches that close. Now more than ever, we need to plant churches in our city and around the world.

I think it’s easy to forget that every church was once a church plant! The church you came to faith in or were disciplined in only exists because a group of people committed to the Great Commission stepped out in faith. That’s why all churches must decide if they will be the end of the road or if they will invest resources and people into starting new churches to reach new people in new places.

Spend some time today asking God to create a passion in your life and your church to see new churches started. Who knows, maybe He is calling you to plant a church!

Day 8: All Hands on Deck

John Hendrickson, All Church

“And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” - Matthew 9:35-38

When I was younger, I worked for a major retail chain and every Thanksgiving I would finish my pumpkin pie and immediately feel the anxiety of Black Friday set in. It wasn't necessarily the long hours or the chaotic pace that I feared (to be honest, I found that to be exhilarating). I was fearful of the massive crowds.

The line started forming after Thanksgiving dinner and would build throughout the night. As I watched the line grow, I questioned my capacity and ability to meet everyone's needs. My facial expressions must have matched my thoughts because at that moment my co-workers and friends reassured me that I wasn't alone and reminded me that Black Friday was “all hands on deck.”

This phrase, “all hands on deck,” stuck with me through the years. It means all team members are invited to contribute. No one is exempt from the work.

As we examine the scriptures, we find a similar theme among followers of Jesus. John 14:12 says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do.” Ephesians 4:11-12 says, “He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” Matthew 28:19 says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.”

Throughout Jesus' teachings there is an unmistakable call to action for *all* believers. Why? The harvest is plentiful.

The harvest is made up of your family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and acquaintances. People you interact with on a regular basis who are hurting, broken, lost, and desperate for a Savior.

I don't know about you, but I think it's absolutely incredible that God invites us into the work of ministry. His calling doesn't stop at salvation. God calls us—imperfect as we are—to make disciples, equip the saints, and do His will on earth.

The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Join me in praying for God to send laborers into his harvest: *“God, thank you for the faithful men and women who have given their lives to the work of ministry, missions, and Christian service. We ask that you would equip and empower all believers to boldly share the good news of the gospel, we are expectant that you will continue to raise up passionate and gifted vocational ministry leaders within our churches, and we ask for fresh energy and zeal for our seasoned ministry leaders to stay motivated. Lord, we acknowledge that the harvest is yours. So, as your Kingdom advances on earth may you receive all the glory, honor, and praise. Amen.”*



Day 9: Fill us with Your Spirit
Kristen Fulcher, City Church OTR

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” Luke 11:11-13

I get really excited about giving someone a good gift. It brings so much joy seeing that person you love receive something you put thought into, and maybe even went to great lengths to get or make yourself. It’s a way to show that person that they are seen, known and loved by you.

While I like to go above and beyond for any gift, no one appreciates it more than my niece and nephew. My 5-year-old niece loves the store Claire’s, and just got her ears pierced. So when I saw a Claire’s store while traveling abroad, I sent a photo thinking she would like to see it in another country. Her response to her mom showing her the picture was “Ask Aunt Kristen to buy me some earrings.” So what did I do? I went all over Paris to get the perfect little girl earrings for her birthday. I was giddy through the whole experience— from finding the store, picking out the ones I thought she’d love, and making sure she got them for her birthday a week later.

In this scripture, Luke is saying that God wants to give us the Holy Spirit even more than we want to give good gifts to those we love. Just like my niece asking me for earrings, all we have to do is ask for them. It’s so simple it almost sounds too good to be true. But why is that? Why would we not continuously go to our loving Father asking for more of the gift we’re guaranteed to receive? Maybe we’re afraid we won’t actually get anything, or won’t know how to “use” it. Maybe we don’t feel worthy for God to give it to us when He seems to give so much to everyone else, or it doesn’t show up in the way we wanted it to. Or maybe we’re disappointed because we stepped out in faith before and nothing happened.

I remember the first time I saw someone healed through my hands and prayers after many, many prayers that didn’t seem to get answered—my own healing included. I told a mentor at the time about my experience, amazed that God would use me in such a way. Her response changed my perspective completely: “Expect more of it.” I realized that if I kept asking, kept expecting by faith, and kept taking steps, God would meet

me, even if He didn't show up in the way I was hoping He would. I learned that this is a battle of faith and possible disappointment, but one that ultimately increases my faith and trains my eyes to stay on "things above."

God's desire is to give us His best. He already did that with Jesus. And yet, we still get to experience more depths of his goodness, grace, and power every day. As we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we increase our intimacy with God, fully encountering how we are seen, known and loved by Him. All we have to do is ask Him.

Pray with me: *"Father, thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a gift that makes our faith tangible in so many ways. Increase our desire to be filled with the Spirit more and more. Give us fresh encounters, new gifts, more of your power through your Spirit and opportunities to increase our faith as we step out to see you move. May we come boldly and ask you for more of the Spirit just as a kid would ask their father, trusting that you are faithful to give it. Amen."*

Day 10: Say Yes to Change
Julie Bradford, Rivers Crossing Church

“Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom,” 2 Corinthians 3:17

One of my favorite quotes about change is, “Without change there, would be no butterflies.” Butterflies are the ultimate visual image of change and transformation. To go from a caterpillar to a butterfly is an intense transformation as it fights for its freedom out of its cocoon into the new life that was formed. It *fights* for freedom. Will you fight for yours?

I’ve had to fight for mine. Change doesn’t come easy for me. It probably doesn’t for most of us, I’m guessing. At least, not for pretty much everyone I have met. We say defeating things like, “I can’t change,” or “This is how I’ve always been,” or “It’s too hard.” Well, we won’t change if that’s the attitude and mindset we’re going to have about it.

Change can be scary. There are a lot of “what-ifs” and unknowns, and there is a lot of fear in the unknown. Change is uncomfortable, and I prefer to be comfortable if I can be completely honest. Outside of my comfort zone is shaky ground. I don’t know that *other* zone. It produces anxious feelings.

Actually, *comfort* is my true addiction. This strong desire has led me to seek comfort in lesser ways than from the One who is the ultimate comforter—Jesus! Medicating for comfort shows up in so many ways, like drinking, doing drugs, pornography, gambling or going along with the crowd. For me, it shows up in people pleasing, control, attempting to fix others, keeping super busy, and perfectionism. For years, I lived by the motto (and lie) of, “if everyone else is ok, then I can be ok.” This type of living was chaotic for me—and stressful, to say the least—but despite the stress and chaos, it’s what I knew. That familiarity was a false sense of comfort.

If you are you wondering if change is actually possible or whether you’ll just fail yet again, there is hope! Like my friend Austen said, “real change is possible and Jesus wants to do it in your life.” The real question is, will you let Him? Will you trust Him enough—even if it’s just a mustard seed—to show you the next right step and give you the courage to take it?

I let Him, but not without a little kicking and screaming! I personally have found freedom and peace outside my comfort zone through my relationship with Jesus Christ, and I got to know Him through working the steps at Celebrate Recovery.

Are you trying to change in your own power? Do you give up completely when you have a slip-up? Are you seeking perfection over progress? If you answered yes to these questions, again, there is hope! Freedom is waiting for you outside of your comfort zone!

Jesus + working the steps + community = real and lasting change. This has proven true in my experience and in the testimonies I've heard of the many others who live in freedom and lasting change! We cannot change or break an addiction in our own power, and we cannot do it alone. God designed us to live in community and He told us to be careful about our thoughts.

What mindset are you living in? What identity are you answering to? What we believe has a dramatic effect on our lives. Jesus said, "*What you have believed will be done for you!*" It is a principle of life that works negatively or positively.

Along with some discomfort, change does also require action and courage, but thankfully courage isn't the absence of fear. In the words of John Wayne, it's having fear but saddling up anyway!

Here's some comfort. Don't think about changing *forever*. Think about changing *today*. Let today be **day one** instead of one day! Nothing *changes* if *nothing* changes— so what is one tiny change you can make just for today? Ask God. He will tell you! He promises to! When we place our hope in God, scripture says our strength will be renewed. Step into the mindset to expect change. Believe, even if it's a mustard-seed-sized belief, that God has the power to help you change and then be open to the new path He so lovingly desires to show you.

So, will you say, yes to change? Will you saddle up for freedom?

Day 11: How Hungry Are You?

Michelle Santora, City Church OTR

*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied”
Matthew 5:6*

When I was in high school, I was part of a small church in Central Florida with less than a hundred people on any given week. My pastor decided to lead a class on theology with the handful of high school kids we had. We called it “The Dead Theologians Society.” At the end of the class, he gifted each of us a coffee mug featuring one of the theologians we’d studied who most closely connected with us. I still have mine. It’s got a sketch drawing of Martin Luther on it and a quote, “The Bible is a remarkable fountain. The more one draws and drinks of it, the more it stimulates thirst.”

More than a few times over the years, that quote has rattled around in my head and my heart, reminding me of the power and importance of feasting on God’s Word, regardless of how hungry I feel for it. In some seasons, the hunger seems to come easily. In other seasons, I’ve had to remind myself to eat— that the discipline of drawing and drinking and feasting on God’s Word and listening for Him is itself a way to get hungry again. To see our lives, our churches, and our city changed, we’re going to need to be hungry for the living and active Word of God.

Hebrews 4:12 “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

It’s a two-edged sword—a tool in the hand of a loving Father—that the Holy Spirit will use to refine us and mold us to be more like Jesus, to carry the Kingdom throughout our city. And we don’t just need a hunger to read it or hear it, but a hunger to listen to it and obey it. Because it’s not just words on a page, it’s the living and active words of a God who loves us, longs to speak to us, and wants us to live into the fullness of who he created us to be.

As you reflect, ask yourself: on a scale of 1-10, how hungry are you for God's word right now? What’s a passage or story in the Bible that gets you fired up that you can revisit when you need to renew your hunger for God’s word? How has God spoken to you through His word recently?

Pray with me: *“Father, thank you for giving us your word and speaking to us through it. Give us a hunger and a thirst for your Word that can only be satisfied by you. Every time we read it, show us in a fresh way how it is alive and active. Let it show us more of who you are and the Kingdom you’ve invited us to build with you in our city. Amen.”*

Day 12: Our Relationship Roadmap

Becky Ziegenfuss, All Church

“And further, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Ephesians 5:21

Every year, I spend time with young adults walking through a current book on relationships and dating. We dig into the stuff (and I mean *all* the stuff) that comes with two people getting to know one another and eventually falling in love. I love to hear their thoughts, dreams, struggles and frustrations with the whole process. We share life experiences and lessons with the hope that they can find the healthiest person who will eventually love them with the most amazing, Hallmark movie kind of love.

However, we live in a day and age where the emphasis on healthy relationships and healthy marriages has dissolved into a culture of hook-ups, casual commitment, and the hope (but not determination) that two people might actually last forever. What has brought us to where we are?

There have been books written on the impact of social media, the danger of instant gratification, the ease of access to porn, and the addiction to variety, all of which have a direct correlation to the impact on the marriage union today.

What I love about God’s word is that it never changes and has something to say about everything we encounter. Jesus has a *lot* to say about our relationships. Marriage is an earthly representation of Jesus’ relationship with His church– that’s *us*!

Ephesians 5:21-33 gives us a beautiful picture of God’s design for us as we pursue a lifelong partner. It’s pretty radical by culture’s standards: a wife is to submit to her husband (as she does to Jesus), a husband is to lead and love his wife (as Christ leads and loves his church), a wife is to respect her husband and a husband is to be willing to lay down his life for his wife. Really? *This* is the blueprint? This certainly shakes things up.

But, God’s Word is a perfect roadmap. We believe it, and so we trust it. What if, for the single guy and girl, you only pursued someone whose life is centered on Jesus, who chooses sacrifice over self, holiness over impurity, and righteousness over the world? How would that shape your future marriage? How much time and emotion would you save for the right one? How much more prepared would you be for forever?

For those who are in it, those whose “I do’s” were years ago, what if starting today you could look for the most selfless ways to love your spouse, the most generous explanations for weaknesses and faults, and the most gracious opportunities to shower love and respect on the one God brought to you? How would things shift? Imagine the peace that would fill our homes, the security our kids would experience, the legacy we would leave behind for the next generations.

I realize that many of you are in a hard, seemingly impossible season or circumstance, but God promises us that with Him, all things are possible. He is in the business of turning ash into beauty, making the broken brand new, and redeeming what was destroyed.

One of my favorite passages in Scripture is Joel 2:25-26 "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm...you will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the Lord your God, who has worked wonders for you."

That is a promise. God is for you. He is definitely for your marriage. Invite Him today to do something amazing in your relationship. He's the Healer, He's the Hope-Giver, He's the Miracle-Worker.

Day 13: Open Doors

Daniel McKee, Vineyard Cincinnati Church

“I want them to be encouraged and knit together by strong ties of love. I want them to have complete confidence that they understand God’s mysterious plan, which is Christ himself. In him lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I am telling you this so no one will deceive you with well-crafted arguments.” Colossians 2:2-4

As we devote ourselves to prayer throughout this journey together, Paul encourages us to be watchful and thankful. To be watchful is to remain completely alert to danger and opportunities. Yet, we live in a modern culture addicted to distraction. To remain alert and aware of the opportunities around us would require many of us to intentionally put away our digital devices and lift our eyes to what surrounds us. What might we be missing? Do we notice the facial expressions of those who serve us a meal or help us check out at a store? Are we aware of the Holy Spirit’s prompting to speak a word of encouragement or care?

Today, we will ask God to open doors for sharing His love and for our awareness to step through that door into conversations of hope and blessing. I confess that I am often too caught up in my agenda that I miss the open doors around me. Yet, when I pause and live watchfully, I find I am invited into the great adventure of listening to the Spirit. It’s truly the most fun and fulfilling experience of life. Opportunities abound as we ask God to lead us and as we choose words of grace and truth for those we encounter.

Paul is writing this from prison, and he’s not complaining. He’s asking for courage and opportunities for the gospel to advance.

While not even close in comparison, one day I tore a ligament in my thumb playing basketball and had to see an orthopedic doctor. As I went into the office, I sensed the Holy Spirit speaking to me that there was someone I needed to notice. As the nurse walked in I could tell that her eyes were downcast. I tried to cheer her up at first and engaged in friendly conversation to begin. After a while, I asked if there was anything I could pray for her about. She shared with me that she was really struggling with a challenging situation in her family and losing hope. I let her know that God sees her and cares for her family as well. We prayed together and her eyes lifted with hope as I talked about the grace of God and His love for her.

After the doctor came in and the appointment was coming to a close, I was struck by this thought and shared with her, “What if God loved you so much that He allowed me to tear the ligament in my thumb to share with you today?” We both paused at the thought and thanked God for the divine appointment and open door for His grace. Father, I ask you to develop a watchful and thankful heart in me today. What is distracting me from being fully aware and grateful?

Jesus, I ask you to give me courage to care for others as you’ve cared for me. What keeps me from speaking of your amazing love to those around me?

Pray with me: *“Holy Spirit, I ask you to open doors for me to share the good news of forgiveness, connection with God, eternal hope and life that is truly life today. Who would you lead me to share with today? Amen.”*

What names or opportunities come to mind?

Day 14: Gifts and Seeds

Katherine Marlin, City Church OTR

“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.” 1 Peter 4:10

I tried my hand at gardening years ago, more so as an experiment and to see what herbs I could grow. I quickly fell in love with the hobby and particularly one aspect of the process: seeing seeds sprout. It feels kind of miraculous to watch something that was tiny, brown, and dull transform into little, vibrant, green leaves only a few days later. Eventually, with care and some natural resources, the seeds turn into beautiful flowers, fruit, or vegetables for us to enjoy.

I see a lot of similarities between spiritual gifts and seeds. They are something God created and given by Him, and these gifts need to be cultivated to be beneficial for others. Seeds also come in all kinds, producing many different flowers, just as there are a variety of spiritual gifts. All gifts are important and offer a variety of ways for God to move and show His love.

In 1 Corinthians 14:1, one translation starts with *“Let love be your highest goal!”* We aren’t using these gifts to impress others or make ourselves look good; we are using these gifts to share love. Scripture then calls us to *“eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit.”* In this new year, it seems like the perfect time to try something new and eagerly desire a gift of the Spirit. Maybe you have always wanted the gift of healing; pray for God to send people who need healing your way and pray for them. The more we step out to see God move, the more likely we’ll actually see God move. Maybe you’ve thought you might have the gift of encouragement; try encouraging one person each day and see how the Lord uses it to bless others and share His love.

In this new year, I encourage us to put to work the spiritual gifts God has entrusted to us. Just as I get excited seeing the seeds come to life and produce leaves and flowers, I know God loves seeing the gifts He’s given out being used and shared to love others!

As you reflect, ask yourself– what spiritual gift(s) do you think God has entrusted to you? (You can find lists of gifts of the Spirit in Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 28). How could you use that gift to serve others around you? Is there one gift that you want to “eagerly desire” and ask God for?

Pray with me: *“Father God, we come to you in this new year wanting to see you move in our lives and the lives of those around us. We know that one way you move is by using us as your children through the spiritual gifts you’ve given us. Help us to steward well the gifts you have already given, and eagerly desire other gifts of the Spirit. We want to build your Kingdom here on earth. We love you and trust you as a good gift giver. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”*

Day 15: A Culture that Honors
Pastor Matt Massey, Vineyard Cincinnati Church

“Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” 1 Peter 2:16-17 (ESV)

I was at Lifetime the other day, and a big dude (almost as big as me 😊) was wearing a military shirt that said, “Honor those who deserve it!” That caught my attention. At a very quick and visceral level, my mind could agree with that. “Yeah, only honor people that I ‘think’ act honorably or honor those that honor me. Honor people that I like, that like me or are like me and only honor those that act like me or those I agree with.” I quickly discarded that as I thought, “I don’t think that sounds much like Jesus. And whatever I sow I’m gonna reap. I don’t want that.”

And then I quickly thought, “Man, we have a *lot* of dishonor going on in our culture right now, don’t we?” Social media is a cesspool of tearing people down and dishonoring people we disagree with or are jealous of. Politicians dishonor one another all the time and disparage the other person just because they disagree. Cancel culture is rampant and we as Christ followers are no different. We treat people who don’t agree with our theology as less than or we diminish and disregard those that are different from us. We *all* do it *all* the time.

As Christ followers, we have the opportunity to share the gospel more powerfully and purposefully if we create the culture of honor that Jesus intended us to create. When we show honor, we show Jesus. Creating a culture of honor cannot be left to the subjectivity of the current culture. Honor is *from* God *to* all of us and must be displayed through us.

Anyone created in the image of God is deserving of honor. Peter says, “Honor everyone.” Not just *some* but *all*. All people are in the image of God, so all people deserve honor and dignity regardless of who they are or what they’ve done. The context of Peter’s words is reminding the people of God of our powerful identity in Christ. Thus, we can live freely showing that identity by showing people honor.

So what is honor and how do we create a culture of honor? Honor means “to give weight, to give value and esteem and dignity to others.” People, by the very nature of

being in God's image, deserve to be given "weight, value, esteem and dignity." Again—even when they act dishonorably, and even when they don't honor us.

Peter doesn't stutter in his words— *honor everyone*. All people at all times. Choosing to honor doesn't mean we will agree with people. It doesn't mean we lay down and become doormats, and it doesn't mean that we do whatever others tell us to do. But it does mean we will see people as Jesus sees them and sees us. It means that we will give dignity and esteem to others at all times.

Philippians 2 is such a strong reminder of how Jesus honors us. Paul reminds us, "*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*" Philippians 2:5-7 (NIV) If Jesus honors, then so must we. So how do we do this? A couple things to apply in all of your relationships:

1. Honor sees people. Sees others as God sees them.
2. Honor shows grace. Remember the grace we've been given and give it away.
3. Honor calls out gold in others. For every one negative we call out in another, we should fill that with 5-6 life-giving pieces of gold about them.
4. Do conflict in love. When we do the first three things, we won't avoid conflict and won't do it in anger, but we'll do so in love.

So let's create a culture of honor in and through our lives as Jesus has done for us.

Day 16: What a Mess I Had Made
Beth Guckenberger, Vineyard Cincinnati Church

“As you learn more and more how God works, you will learn how to do your work. We pray that you’ll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul—not the grim strength of gritting your teeth but the glory-strength God gives. It is strength that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy, thanking the Father who makes us strong enough to take part in everything bright and beautiful that he has for us.”
Colossians 1:9-12

Squinting, I see shacks in every direction—homemade out of plastic, wood, scrap metal, broken block. I’m visiting the families inside to see if they have a special “Easter burden” we can pray for this morning.

“Who am I kidding? Easter burden? Try daily burden,” I think as I see women washing clothes in a river and babies walking around without diapers. Our family was living in Mexico as missionaries, and although the scene was familiar, it was never easy.

“Mom, we haven’t been down *that* road yet,” my daughter Emma points to a pathway leading toward the riverbank. Having already heard about more needs than I can help, I am wearing down.

“Okay, one more,” I say. I playfully tousle her hair. *“Lord, give me strength.”* It has been a season of feeling like we have more work to do than we can possibly accomplish, more children to reach out to than we have helpers, more funding needs than anyone can meet. I walk down to the shacks lining the river. “Buenos días,” I greet the little girl standing in the dirt. “Are your parents home?”

“Not now,” she answers shyly, her eyes full of fear.

Not wanting to scare her, I try a different approach. “We’re here to pray with anyone who wants to talk to God about the worries they may have. Do you have something you want to pray about?”

“Sí, I have something I am worried about,” she says. “Will God do anything about it?”

“He is not a magician, so we can’t ask Him for a trick, but we can share with Him how we are feeling and what we’re afraid of, and He’ll comfort us as we begin a relationship with Him. Would you like that?”

She leads us into her one-room home. Inside are five small children, the youngest is in diapers. There is no food, and the lack of cleanliness makes me wonder how long she has been left in charge.

“We’re hungry,” she simply states. She doesn’t ask for her parents to return, or a bike, or a better house. She just wants food for herself and her siblings. I begin, “*Lord, would you bring nourishment for these children? Amen.*”

Then I decide I can “fix” the problem. After promising we’ll return, Emma and I walk to a nearby food stand, where I buy several days’ worth of groceries. I hope this will be the answer to their prayers. We return and arrange the food on their makeshift table.

“I’m going to let the pastor know about your needs. I’ll keep praying for you and for your mother’s safe return.” I hug her. I feel good inside, we are leaving them in a better situation than we found them. As we walk away, I put Emma on my shoulders. When we’re about a block away, Emma yells, “Mom, turn around, go back! There are people all around those kids’ house!”

Sure enough, I hadn’t even noticed we were being watched as we walked back to their home earlier, our arms full of groceries and my heart full of good intentions. All the neighbors knew those kids were alone, and now they’ve come to steal their food. By the time we reach the door of the shack, a number of very unfriendly people are milling around. Crying, the oldest girl looks accusingly and says, “Is this how God answers prayers?”

Flustered by her question, and by the people standing around, I panic. “*Oh God, what’s going on? Please intervene!*” What a mess I had made. To be honest, I wanted to be able to imagine those children filling their bellies so I would not feel so guilty about filling mine. “*Lord, forgive me!*” As I cry out in His name, my heart is flooded with

peace. I know He's staking His claim over this shack. It feels like a wind blowing, but there's no movement in the trees. Where the Accuser had been just moments ago, stirring up fear and trouble, the army of angels is beginning to swoop in. One of the Enemy's favorite tricks is to fill the air with fear, but now, slowly, people begin to walk away. The *Prince of Peace* was here.

The children and I walk over to a woman in the community who is respected and knows everyone. "These kids' mamá disappears for days at a time to work," she says as she scolds them, "Why didn't you come out sooner and ask for help?" She sets out some warm tortillas on the table. "I will keep an eye on them until their mamá comes home" she says. I nod in appreciation. The oldest girl, falling into a heap, begins to cry softly. Emma and I hug them goodbye, and I let this woman minister to them with an understanding of that life I do not share.

House by house, I had gathered the community's Easter burdens in my own basket, trying to figure out how to fix everything until I lost sight of why I was there—to listen and love. Burden-carrying can do that to you—it clouds your vision. I can feel sick for little ones who bear burdens they weren't meant to. I want to blame someone. The government, society, their families, the economy, war... But it's all of those reasons and none of those. God asks us to go (both locally and globally) and be present in hard stories, to make room for Him to heal. He asks us to listen and work with strength that's not our own. When I am tempted to carry what's not mine, I remember how easily I can make it worse without intending.

I love studying the Bible and all its nuance and complexity, but, in the end, it's pretty much summed up in two words: *come* and *go*. God has invited us into a relationship with Him, "Come to me" (Matthew 11:28), "Come to the waters" (Isaiah 55:1). The Spirit says "come" over and over again, and we are to come. The second word is "go." "Go into all the world" (Matthew 16:15), "Go, stand and speak" (Acts 5:20, KJV). There's a rhythm of coming and going, and if we just come and don't go, we miss the opportunity to fulfill God's will through our lives, but if we just go and don't come, we miss the opportunity to be filled by God and know Him.

So, in stories I go into and don't know how to minister or what to share, what's to be my response? Pray for His strength, connect with others, listen, love well– and in doing so, lighten the burden in *His* name, and not my own.

Day 17: A Solid Foundation in an Ever-Changing World

Kirsten Minor & Morgan Williams, All Church

“You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.” Psalm 139:1-6

We hear so often that time goes far too quickly— yes, the days may be long, but the years are short. In a world where being busy is our second nature, keeping up with raising and teaching children of all ages can be tiring. If you have a toddler, elementary-aged child, preteen, or teenager in your home, you know that they are fumbling their way through challenges at even younger ages than we as parents and leaders ever thought possible. Maybe you have a young family member or friend that comes to mind. No matter who that person is in your life, there is an urgency for a foundation that won't be shaken as they grow in this ever-changing culture.

Partnering with parents and families is a joy as a ministry leader, and we know that the work is never done. While the church isn't the only place the next generation can meet Jesus, it's where they can find community, love and encouragement. When a child's knowledge of their loving Heavenly Father starts at a young age, our prayer is that they hold on to that for the rest of their days. The busy days in ministry with babies, kids, and teens are a privilege as we walk alongside families in laying the groundwork for a life-changing relationship with Jesus. We want to support and empower the parents and people of influence in our kids' lives to stay strong in the valleys and rejoice with them on the mountaintops.

As parents, friends and ministry leaders, there are days when fear of the world's influence creeps in. It can feel like a heavy weight as we raise and guide the next generation, with every parenting or teaching decision feeling more important than ever before. As we lead the next generation, this privileged role is massive, but the weight is not ours to carry alone. We can rest in this truth from Philippians 4:6-7: *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

Our Father wants to lead us as we disciple the next generation, but we must surrender our decisions and discipleship moments and offer the kids we love so deeply to Him

every single day, humbly reminding ourselves that they are His. We can have confidence that God hears us and knows our deepest desires for the kids we love.

With the knowledge that our uphill battles in raising and teaching this next generation are no surprise to our Father—the One who created us and gave us life—we want to pause and pray. The very same God that can count the hairs on each child’s head knows exactly what they will face and is not surprised by any of it. He wants *us* to set an example in coming to Him, knowing Him, and finding our hope in Him. When the next generation watches us surrender our worries and fears to our Father, may they then grow to trust in a God who knows their future and their plans, and who promises them hope (Deuteronomy 29:11).

What a hope we have from a loving Father that He is in all of the details and the daily struggles. No matter the age, we should pray diligently for the kids in our lives: they are the future leaders in their workplaces, homes, and churches. Just as they are beautifully made in the image of God, they are such precious gifts to us as parents, grandparents, ministry leaders, volunteers and friends. We pray for their daily routines and sporting events, for their conversations with friends and dinnertime discussions with parents, and that their light for Jesus will shine so much brighter than the social media posts on their feeds. Hebrews 13:8 says, "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.*" May we raise up the next generation with Christ as their constant in a world that is ever-changing.

Pray with us: *"Father, we pray for the next generation. We thank you for who you have created them to be and we lift up their lives to you. We pray their hearts will be close to yours and that discernment, biblical knowledge and understanding will be established and fed at every stage of their lives. We pray you will help us hold them close and that they'll choose the path that honors you in every big and in every small decision. We humbly pray that the Church would be a catalyst, a support and a safe place to land as they navigate this world. We pray they are bold in sharing their faith and lighting this world. Father God, we pray for revival in the next generation. Amen."*

Day 18: Remember Who the Real Enemy Is
Farrah Taylor, Rivers Crossing Church

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Ephesians 6:10-12

You wake up one day and your alarm doesn't go off. What in the world? It always goes off! Why, on the day of your biggest presentation of your career, did the alarm fail to make that annoying buzzing sound to wake you up in plenty of time for coffee, a shower, and to review your notes? You are barely going to have time to get dressed and run out the door!

You get in your car, race to work, and pop a tire on the way only to discover that you failed to renew your AAA membership. You call your spouse and they start chastising you for not being more intentional with planning ahead and getting things done. The little words spoken between the two of you are like sharp little knives toward each other, and terrible thoughts about one another start entering your mind, reminding you of past wounds. You finally arrive at your job only to get the phone call you have been dreading for some time. Tests that you had done showed some irregularities and more intensive scans will need to be run. Seriously? What a day. Have you ever gone through something similar (or worse) and wondered if that was a spiritual attack or merely just a bad day?

C.S Lewis said, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves (the devils) are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.”

If you are a believer in Christ Jesus, more often than not, at some point in your walk with Him, you will most certainly be in one of these three seasons in life—you just finished getting through a turbulent time, you're in one currently, or you're about to enter into one.

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

According to Jesus, it’s a matter of *when* we go through difficulties and not *if*, so how do we know when it’s our flesh (sinful nature reigning), the fallen world we live in, or the enemy coming to steal our joy as believers? Thomas Adams said, “If God were not my friend, Satan would not be so much my enemy.”

First, we need to know what Satan’s job is and who he is. A lot of us think that he will not be vicious, that he’ll play by the rules, go easy on us and not be as “bad” as some make him out to be. In scripture, Satan is quite the contrary. His main focus and job is to come and destroy any work the Lord is doing in us, through us, and to us.

Anything that takes glory away from God is his main objective. The devil is the enemy of the followers of Christ and of God himself. He is called a traducer, a slanderer, prince of this world, accuser, master of death and destruction, and a liar. He has every motive and intention to steal, kill, and destroy anything and anyone resembling and carrying the essence and being of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 5:8 tell us to *“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”*

So, not renewing your AAA membership– you probably just need to get more organized. Fighting with your spouse and allowing animosity and bitterness toward each other? That might be the enemy jumping in to attack you at *just* the right moment. He tends to join our negative thoughts when we leave a crack in our spiritual doors, taking full advantage of any emotions that the Lord would want us to surrender to Him instead.

I remember a time when it felt like I was getting attacked from every angle by everyone and everything in my life. The Lord often speaks His truth to you in a way you can best hear and understand it.

He gently said to me a line from a movie that I had recently watched at the time, that He knew I would understand. It was from the movie *Hunger Games* where the main character started not to trust her greatest allies because of what her circumstances

looked like. I heard a very well-known line from that movie at the exact right moment to clarify and bring peace to what was going on in my life. *“Remember who the real enemy is...”*

The real enemy is Satan and I understood that God was showing me that it wasn't the people around me attacking me, but that Satan was using them to say and do things to attack me. When I was able to understand the situation at hand, it shifted my perspective and then I was able to read just my battle plan and start fighting in the spirit realm and not fight with the actual person.

The enemy, most of the time, speaks to the animosity and unforgiveness that we might have been holding onto in our hearts. The adversary of our soul will take every opportunity and advantage he can to enter into our lives at the right moment. More often than not, due to our own sin and bad choices, we are holding the door open for him to walk through.

But sometimes, attacks from the enemy will be unprecedented. Sometimes you can't distinguish between what is real and what is from the enemy. When the enemy speaks, it's a voice of confusion, hatred, condemnation, isolation, selfishness, and self-righteousness. So, when he is speaking things that “feel” like truth to us, how do we overcome these attacks?

You must be drawn so near to Christ that His thoughts become your thoughts and His ways become your ways. The Devil devours unwary people by tempting them to sin—by convincing them that sin is a more rewarding master than Christ. Satan does not just attack us from the front where we can clearly see him coming, he attacks from every side. So, we are to be on guard. We have to be so familiar with God's voice that we can distinguish it from our own voice and our enemy's.

The closer we draw to God, we *will* have the ability and power in Christ to resist whatever temptation the enemy is dangling in front of us! We will start being able to distinguish his voice from our own. God's voice will start being the one we adhere to and consciously align and ultimately the truth will be what sets us free.

So, think about this when you feel like you are facing trials of many kinds or when you feel like the enemy is trying to destroy what God has done in you and your family's life. You have the power in Christ Jesus to take every thought and make it captive to Christ.

Taking his lies and lining them up with the truth of God is how to defeat the enemy's work in your life. Satan simply cannot be where God's presence reigns.

Next time you feel like the world and everything in it are falling in on you, remember that you are an overcomer because of the Spirit of the mighty God inside of you! Ask Him to fill you afresh with His spirit and help you to see the truth!

Day 19: God's Heart of Generosity

Tyler Jarvis, Vineyard Cincinnati Church

"Remember: A stingy planter gets a stingy crop; a lavish planter gets a lavish crop. I want each of you to take plenty of time to think it over, and make up your own mind what you will give. That will protect you against sob stories and arm-twisting. God loves it when the giver delights in the giving." 2 Corinthians 9:6-7

If you're anything like me, I'm not much of a gardener. I've never actually been on a farm (other than picking apples in September or pumpkins in October) and I don't know the first thing about how to grow plants. However, I do know that if you don't tend to plants, they won't grow.

When I was in first grade, my elementary school sent everyone home with an evergreen tree and told us to plant it. I told my parents that afternoon, "I know exactly where it should go" and proceeded to plant this tree at the very back corner of our backyard. I had it all planned out; it was the spot that had the most sunlight, would be covered at times but also would be able to get enough rainfall, and would be in perfect view from my bedroom window. Everyday for a year I would take my little watering jug and water this one little tree in the back corner of our yard. I wanted to make sure that this tree would grow tall and strong.

As I reflect on that little tree, I wonder if God was inviting me to learn how to be a "lavish planter" even with a little tree in my parents' backyard. I wonder if God was showing me that generosity is about "why" to give as opposed to just "what" to give. When we read the biblical story, God models generosity not out of any obligation, but out of a love that he lavishes on us, like water to a thirsty plant. From the garden He created for Adam and Eve; the Promised Land that He gave the Israelites out of Egypt; all the way to the gift of Jesus—the One who paid the debt of sin that we never could—God has modeled a heart of generosity out of a deep love for His people. When we are generous, we are acting with a similar character to the very heart of who God has always been and always will be.

What would it look like to shift your mentality of generosity to model the heart and character of God? Later in 2 Corinthians 9, Paul quotes the psalmist which says: *"He throws caution to the winds, giving to the needy in reckless abandon. His right-living, right-giving ways never run out, never wear out."*

Let us be the type of people who model God's heart of generosity.



Day 20: Lasting Spiritual Growth through Radically Ordinary Means

Brad Young, All Church

“Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” Colossians 3:9–10

If you have placed faith in Christ as your Lord and Savior, then you are a new creation: forgiven, redeemed, made new. However, we must recognize that we are not what we will be, free from the power and presence of sin, until Christ returns (1 John 3:2). We have already been forgiven, we will one day be glorified, but we are currently being renewed. There should be an active ongoing maturing happening for every believer. So, how do we cultivate this spiritual maturity? In our age of immediate gratification and quick-fix methodologies, we can be tempted to look for the “Five Easy Steps to Rapid Spiritual Maturity.” However, the Bible tells us we grow like trees, not like weeds (Psalm 1). We grow slowly, in significant ways, over long periods of time— not abruptly. Patience is needed. Lasting spiritual growth is the result of radically ordinary means maintained over a lifetime.

Before we talk about the means of biblical growth, let’s establish the goal, because pursuing the wrong end will lead you to the wrong means. The apostle Paul in Romans 8:29, speaking of God’s purposes for us, says, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...” Regardless of what one believes about predestination, this verse makes clear that God’s ultimate goal for every Christian is that they would be conformed into the image of His Son. This means the goal of spiritual growth is not to be a better version of yourself, rather it is to be like Christ (1 John 3:2); to be an image of your Creator. So, how does this transformation happen?

In John 15, Jesus tells us that we cannot bear Christlike fruit unless we abide in Him. He goes on to say, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (John 15:10). Obedience to God’s Word is the means by which we abide in the love of God and so grow to be like Him. This is not legalism (the belief that we earn salvation through our obedience) for we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone apart from any of our works (Ephesians 2:8-9). This is, however, an invitation to walk in a deeper relationship with God (Leviticus 11:44; John 14:15; 1 Peter 1:15–16). As you read the

Bible, ask yourself “What does this teach me about God and how must I live in light of who He is?” By the power of the Holy Spirit, God promises to use knowledge of Himself in His Word as a means to grow, mature, and transform us. (Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 3:10).

When you read and obey God’s Word, the promises and commands of scripture are planted in your heart. It is a daily practice of cementing yourself in God’s story of redemption. It is a discipline of trusting God’s will over your own. It is a choosing of God himself to be your joy. There is no substitute for Bible reading. We never graduate from this discipline. Be a tree that plants your roots daily and deeply in the scriptures (Psalm 1:1–3). If you want to grow to be like Christ, the means are not flashy. Pick up the ordinary practice of reading your Bible every day to encounter God, do what He says in His Word, and abide in His love. Let the Bible be a lamp to your feet and a light to your path on this long and steady journey of Christlike formation (Psalm 119:105). Read, encounter, obey, abide, and you will be transformed.

Pray with me: *“Father, I thank you for the gift that is your Word. Thank you that by it you have given me a way to know you for who you are and to know your love for me in Christ. Would you give me the desire to be in your Word every day? Please give me eyes to see your beauty and glory as I read. Convict me of my sin and show me where I need to repent and faithfully walk in obedience to you so that I may abide in your love. Satisfy my heart with your steadfast love. Lead me today by the light of your Word. Amen.”*

Day 21: You Are Still Standing

Josh Pocock, Rivers Crossing Church

“Indeed, everything is for your benefit, so that grace, extended through more and more people, may cause thanksgiving to increase to God’s glory.” 2 Corinthians 4:15

Grace, relationships and thanksgiving. 2 Corinthians 4:15 is a beautiful verse when read by itself. But just before this, Paul talks about being confused but not in despair; being broken but not completely destroyed. Then he closes this part of his letter by saying even when our outer person is destroyed, that internally we refuse to give up.

Leave it to a man who was beaten with rods a few times, stoned, and shipwrecked more than once to tell us to find thanksgiving in the midst of life crumbling around us. After all, this is the same man who also said, “To live is Christ and to die is gain.”

Over the last 21 days, you had the opportunity to fast. Regardless of what you chose to fast from, I am sure some moments were challenging— an unexpected and sugary gift left on your desk at work, a night of watching playoff football with the boys. We do this fast every single year with my wife’s birthday falling on January 19th, so I understand that the challenge can be very real. After all, how can you truly celebrate and honor someone’s life when you are trying to prop a candle up in the middle of a bowl of rice and beans?

And while the idea of giving up sugar for 21 days feels very simple on day 1 and quite challenging on day 17, it is important to remember that everything is for our benefit. **Especially the hard things**—like standing in the company breakroom while your coworkers sing “Happy Birthday” and you try to avoid explaining to everyone why you aren’t having any cake.

So as this fast ends, take time to do two very important things. First, celebrate! Whether you spent 21 days as a vegetarian or went water-only for the last 3 weeks (only do that if God is clearly telling you to do so) spend time in thanksgiving today. Know that this process grew your faith and increased your relationship with Christ. Maybe pull out an old journal and write down everything God revealed to you during this fast. Or set down this devotional and go for a 15-minute walk and just allow God to tell you how proud He is of you.

Second, spend some time thinking over some past shipwrecks. Dig deep. Go to the back of the closet. What are some of those moments in your life that really knocked you down? Those moments that made you feel crushed, persecuted and confused? And now remind yourself that you are still here. You are still standing. And then give thanks again. Because as Paul says, your trials have a way of bringing about thanksgiving to increase God's glory when those moments are shared with other people.

We are all in this together! And now let us sit in expectation at what God can do in our own city because a number of us chose to unite together, fast, and worship the one true King!

