

# 2024 Lent Daily Devotional



**Rev. Dr. Charles H.N. Bobo, Sr., Senior Pastor**  
**Rev. Angela M. Tate, Associate Pastor**



## Count the Cost

Pastor, Rev. Charles Bobo

### Luke 14:28 (NLT)

*“But don’t begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it?”*

I love technology and the continual advancements it continues to make. A couple of years ago, to keep up with technology and to keep my house safe, I invested in a smart lock for my front door. I can remotely secure my house from literally anywhere. It also has a lock pad, where we can punch in a code, and it will unlock the door. Also, I didn’t have to worry about it being connected to Wi-Fi in case the power goes out, because it is powered by batteries.

After a good two years, I began to get a message in my app telling me that the batteries in the smart lock were low and I needed to change them.

Two weeks later, after receiving the notifications, my family and I came back home on a Sunday after church and my son tried to open the door for us. Except the code would not work. I looked at my app, and it indicated the smart lock was offline. The batteries were now dead. Therefore, we had to call a locksmith to let us into our home. And instead of paying the money for a couple of batteries, I ended up paying a locksmith, waiting outside for an hour, and wasting gas to keep warm, all because I did not count the cost of not changing the batteries.

Jesus said in Luke 14:28, “But don’t begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it?” Before you take the chance, and do not take heed to the warning signs, take inventory of how much you will pay if you do not take heed. Will it cost you money? Your time? Your joy, peace, or your mental health? Or all the above?



## Content in God's Presence

Associate Pastor, Rev. Angela Tate

### Phil 4:13 (AMP)

*I can do all things [which He has called me to do] through Him who strengthens and empowers me [to fulfill His purpose—I am self-sufficient in Christ's sufficiency; I am ready for anything and equal to anything through Him who infuses me with inner strength and confident peace.]*

The Apostle Paul in Phil 4:12 says I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. In the New International Version of the bible it reads like this: I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.

The contentment that Paul found isn't common in the world today.

We have become so materialistic. Just look at social media. Every other post is about chasing the bag instead of chasing after Jesus. Every other post after that is about seeking power and prestige instead of seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and watching the bag and all other things be added. And every other post after those is about storing up treasures upon earth where moth and rust corrupt, where thieves break in and steal instead of storing up treasure in heaven.

We have become a people whose contentment lies in our relationships with others; it lies in our employers being able to meet our expectations on the job. We want lives that are free from difficulties. We only feel content if everything is going the way we want it to. And I'm not saying that it is wrong to want a life free from difficulties. As Christians we are following after Jesus, living our lives under a banner of grace and trying to show our gratitude by living like Jesus, but don't be fooled into thinking that means that tough times won't come your way as a child of God. Remember what Jesus said – in this world you will have trouble. He also said, be of good cheer, take heart for I have overcome the world.

The contentment that Paul found is rooted in the presence of Christ; rooted in Christ's sufficiency. Christ's presence infuses us with inner strength and confident peace. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Take some time to reflect on how God's presence in your life has given you peace. Thank God for that peace.



## Gratitude In Enemy Territory

Sis. Gwendolyn Wesley

### Psalm 27:1-3 (AMP)

*The LORD is my light and my salvation— Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the refuge and fortress of my life— Whom shall I dread? When the wicked came against me to eat up my flesh, My adversaries and my enemies, they stumbled and fell. Though a host encamp against me, My heart will not fear; Though war arises against me, In spite of this I shall be confident.*

*“This just in...”* I am almost always leery when I hear these words because too many times, they are followed by a report of something horrific that has happened in my community, the country, or the world. National and local news publications are flooded with stories of unjust wars and a multitude of crimes against humanity. Morality is defined by what makes us feel good and fit in (even if it doesn’t fit). The truth is now the big lie, and the big lie is now the truth.

As Christians, we are living in enemy territory. Guerilla warfare is Satan’s *modus operandi*, and he is good at it! Look how he tempted Christ for 40 days in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). Satan offered what he could not give and what he did not own. He stealthily seeks opportunities to attack us when we are vulnerable. That’s when we get distracted by a need for immediate gratification, not realizing the risks of yielding to temptations until damage has been done.

One might wonder: how do I express gratitude toward God in the midst of all this chaos? Hide the word of God in your heart; know that His promises are true; remember and be grateful for what He has done, is doing and will do in your life. Then declare:

*“This just in...”* God is in control! Satan has been defeated! I am victorious because God said so!

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for surrounding me daily with your protective shield that the enemy cannot penetrate. Thank you, God, for sealing me in your grace in the midst of enemy territory. Thank you, God, for helping me to realize that “no weapon formed against me shall prosper” for you are my refuge and my strength as I live daily in enemy territory. Amen.



## Presents In His Presence

Deac. Christopher Cade

### Psalm 16: 8-9, 11 (NLT)

*I know the Lord is always with me. I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me. No wonder my heart is glad, and I rejoice. My body rests in safety.*

*You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever.*

Do you ever find life lacking? Does something seem incomplete about your life? Do you struggle finding peace? Does joy seem to evade you? Do you feel like you are unfit or not strong enough to handle all that you need to accomplish?

I believe I know the solution to your predicament. You need to spend more time in the presence of the Lord. Everything you need, God has. Everything you desire, God can provide. The things that you are truly searching for can be found in the presence of God. He has it all. When you take the time to be in God's presence, He blesses you with His presents – love, joy, peace, rest, strength, encouragement, and protection.

There is not a specific formula that leads you into God's presence. You do not need to follow a particular set of instructions. You just need to set aside quiet time to commune with Him, and you can enter His presence. God is always available and waiting patiently for you. When you seek Him and are ready to get into His presence, He will be there.

Moving into God's presence is challenging for some of us because it requires us to turn off the noise in our lives. We will need to turn off the TV. We will need to take out the ear buds. We will need to put down the cell phone. If you want to truly be in God's presence, you must focus on Him. There are myriad ways to do this, but they all require commitment and full attention to Him. When you do this, you will be amazed how spending time in His presence will transform your life. When you take the time to be in God's presence, the presents He gives will be exactly what have been missing and needing in your life. I implore you to get into His presence today!



## Gratitude – How do we Respond to God’s Goodness?

Sis. Lolita Buford

### Genesis 8:20 (NKJV)

*Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar.*

In Genesis Chapter 6 we read about Noah finding favor with God, because Noah walked with the Lord. The scripture tells us God honored their relationship and warned Noah of the impending flood. God provided a blueprint for the Ark, shut Noah and his family in, and provided refuge and provision for them as the flood waters cleansed the Earth.

After the waters subsided, Noah and his family left the Ark, and Noah’s FIRST act was to build an altar to God, in worship. Noah was grateful, and he responded by honoring God with the best sacrifice he could give.

How do you respond to God’s goodness in your own life?

We cry out to God, and He responds. But do we stop, like Noah, and acknowledge God’s goodness with gratitude? God desires our worship, and “God worship” goes beyond songs and outstretched hands.

Scripture puts it this way:

Romans 12: 1-2. I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Like Noah’s Ark experience, God has sealed us away and rescued us through Christ Jesus. God says *you* are the best sacrifice you can give in response to his goodness.

As you spend time with Him, allow God to reveal the “parts” of you that still need to be “sacrificed” on His spiritual altar. Think about how these things impact your life, and/or why you’ve held them back from God.

Let today be a day of release on your continuous journey with the Lord. Holy Spirit will do the cleansing work and be with you and in you along the way. We must be willing, as an act of worship, to place ourselves on the spiritual altar of God, and allow the renewal to begin by responding to His Word. The resulting transformation brings Him glory and is for our good.





## Thank you, Daddy

Rev. Mary Adou

### Ephesians 5:20 (ESV)

*Always give thanks to God the Father for everything. Give thanks to him in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Shopping for groceries is always an adventure for me. Recently after shopping, I saw a father walking toward the entrance with his two daughters just as I was leaving the store. Before I passed them, I glanced down at the little girls and gave them a big smile and a little wink. As I continued walking toward my car, I could still hear the excitement in the children's voices behind me as they giggled with glee, excited to be shopping with their father, which was an adventure for them also. Before I reached my car, I heard one of the girls say, "Thank you, Daddy." Because we had already crossed paths, I did not see what the father had done to warrant her thanks. All I heard was her heartfelt thanks, showing gratitude toward her father. But what exactly was she thanking him for? Did he pick her up to carry her into the store? Did he take her by the hand to reassure her of her safety?

While I do not know what this father did for her in the parking lot of this store, what I do know is that this child was grateful. And as I drove off the parking lot, the Holy Spirit reminded me of just how good God has been to me. I know what God has done for me. The Holy Spirit began to speak, saying that we ought to be like this child. As children of God, we must tell our Heavenly Father, "Thank you."

Ephesians 5:20 ESV says, "Always give thanks to God the Father for everything. Give thanks to him in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Do you tell God thanks for everything? Are you grateful to God for all He's done for you? God is our Heavenly Father. He is our Abba Father. This means He is a loving God who seeks to "father" over you. Bless you. Save you and come to your rescue. Thank your Father for everything. And do it in Jesus' name to the glory of God.



## Is Gratitude Conditional?

Deac. Filippe Cade

### James 1:2 (NIV)

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.*

Think about what this verse is saying. It suggests that we should be grateful for challenges and adversity. Really?!!! Grateful? In fact, the Message version of this scripture even says “consider it a sheer gift.” That sounds so counterintuitive. Who is thankful for tough times? How is that even possible? Well ... those are good questions. Let’s find some good answers.

First, let’s look at the who and determine who the who is. The who (besides a musical group) is you ... and him ... and her ... and them. The who is those of us that love the Lord and are called according to His purpose. The who is those that want to be more like Jesus, whether things are going great or if they aren’t. So now that we know the who, let’s tackle the why.

Why would anyone be grateful for challenging and difficult situations, environments, or circumstances? The answer is simple ... because God is working on us through the tough times. He’s making us tougher, stronger, more resilient, more flexible, more adaptable, more tenacious, and just making us better as we endure and persevere. Think of the technique of processing iron. Iron ore is heated at very high temperatures but only at these high temperatures can the iron, the valuable metal that it is, be extracted and pulled out. We’re the same way. The Lord allows each one of us to be subject to high temperature situations and environments so that he can pull out value from us in the form of perseverance or patience or peace or whatever attribute He desires to make you more mature.

When you find yourself in tough times, I encourage you to operate with a mind and heart of gratitude – thank God for it ... you’ll come through it a better person.





## Don't Forget to Say "Thank You!"

Rev. Joy Rhodeman

### 1 Thessalonians 5:18 (NIV)

*Give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

Hearing my children say their first words has been one of the greatest joys of motherhood. With seven kids, that's quite a few first words; still each time was as special as the first. Like most babies, our little ones started with saying "mama" or "dada." I don't remember the words spoken in between, but I do recall focusing on teaching them critical words "please" and "thank you." There's a simple and practical reason for why learning those two phrases was so important - "please" taught them that we all rely on others for something in this life, and "please" is the humble request for that something. "Thank you" shows appreciation for things that others do for us.

Like a good father prompting his kids to remember their manners, God gives us constant reminders in His Word to be thankful or appreciative for all He does for us. He causes us to be victorious in battle (Isaiah 54:17), forgives our sins (1 John 1:9), provides us with comfort and compassion (2 Corinthians 1:3) and allows all things to work in our favor (Romans 8:28). And there are countless other things that we rely on Him for. So, why is it that we have to be reminded to show gratitude for what He does in our lives?

In Luke 17:11-19, an account of gratitude and the lack thereof, is played out. On His way to Jerusalem, Jesus encounters ten lepers who are desperate for relief from their affliction. Seeing Jesus, they cried out to Him for mercy, and He answered their prayer. Sadly, only one leper came back to thank Jesus for his healing. Jesus' response to this was, "Ten men were healed; where are the other nine... is he the only one who came back to give praise to God?" Great question! Ten lepers humbly requested healing from Jesus, but only one showed appreciation for the healing that he received.

1 Corinthians 4:7 asks, "What do you have that God hasn't given you?" After careful consideration you'll see that God has in fact provided all of your needs and then some. Don't forget to say "Thank You!"



## Anticipating God's Hand

Rev. Dawn Jones

### John 11:38-44 (NIV)

*Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."*

It's been said before that it's easier to thank God for the things that He's already done and harder to thank Him for the things He is yet to do. While this statement is true, let's also consider the relationship between our appreciation for what God **has** done and our anticipation of what God **will** do. Thanking God for the things that he has done in our lives requires us to pinpoint specific moments where it was evident that "God did it." It means that we can see His hand and presence in our lives. This helps develop our faith and our understanding of God's heart and character as we begin to trust Him with our future and anticipate His hand. In short, our appreciation births our anticipation. Jesus shows us this in John 11:38-44. After Lazarus had died, those who loved him grieved and expressed frustration that Jesus did not make it in time. They had the appreciation of the miracles that Jesus had done and knew that Jesus could have done the same for Lazarus. However, they didn't anticipate the extent of Jesus' power.

Jesus addresses this in v. 40-42 when He says to Martha, *"Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God....Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."* Jesus showed them that we can anticipate God's powerful and miraculous hand in our lives because He's done it before. Like in this passage, life's circumstances often make it difficult to anticipate that God will do it again. In those moments, it becomes important to appreciate, show gratitude and praise, for what God has done before. Our faith is then strengthened, and we begin to believe with certainty that God will exercise the full extent of his power and bring forth breakthrough.

Today, practice this by simply remembering! On a sheet of paper, draw a line down the center. On the left side, write 5-10 things God has done for you in the past. On the right side, write 5-10 things that you want God to do for you in the future. Then draw a line that connects your past blessings with future anticipation of God's hand.



## God is with Us

Bro. Armand Buford

### Matthew 1:23 (ESV)

*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us)*

God is with us. God in his divine plan, strategically and mercifully, seemingly relinquished all power and authority to enter humanity's limited abilities. Born amid controversy to a virgin, and born precisely according to prophecy of the Holy Spirit, He is the one chosen. He is the one anointed. He is the promise. The promise that God in His compassion for a world turned against itself, influenced, and oppressed by the enemy, needed the intervention of a savior, to bridge the gap between that enemy's lie, and God's truth. In fact, this child - Immanuel - is the truth. He is the way. He is our life. He is the promise that entered time to give hope to humanity. Hope for a new covenant, built upon this promise. Hope for a new path, built upon this road to redemption. Hope for a new home, built upon this cornerstone. The Word made flesh, with God, was God dwelling among men.

This child, God with us, was destined to lead the way, destined to pay the price for our redemption, destined to defy death, destined to be with us. He miraculously dwells within each of us that he calls us his own when we name Him as our own. With us. To protect, to guide, to save, to love. A love so strong that the creator of the universe desires to dwell with His masterpiece, so He sent his Son, and deposited his Holy Spirit. Giving believers the opportunity to fellowship with him day by day and breach the gap sin established by the first man and repaired by the Son of Man. This love shone forth by a promise of a child, born of miraculous circumstances, born into obscurity, but triumphant throughout eternity. An eternal God with an eternal plan for an eternal love. Immanuel, God with us.

Think about your life and ways that God has been "with you." How has he shown up in unexpected ways? As you go through your day, take time to reflect on his presence in your life, and pay attention to the unique ways he chooses to reveal himself to you.



## Benefits of Being in the Presence of God

Rev. Darlene Davis

### Psalm 16:11 (NKJV)

*You will show me the path of life. **In Your presence** is the fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

We know that we are always in His presence because He is omnipresent and has promised that He would never leave us, but sometimes it should not be just business as usual. Sometimes God chooses to manifest His presence in our lives in a very special way. It is this type of manifestation that the Psalmist talks about in the 16<sup>th</sup> Psalm. The entire Psalm deals with some of the benefits of belonging to God. The Psalmist expresses his confidence in God's safety, His security, His provision, and His guidance. It is an overwhelming assurance or awareness that we are absolutely where we are supposed to be.

Isn't it comforting to know that no matter what is going on around us we are eternally safe and secure in God? We are hedged in; there are boundaries that are placed around us by God that keep the enemy at bay. He cannot interfere with our eternal rest. All things are really *working together for our good*. God has a plan for our lives, and His Spirit will guide us along the right path. He will tell us when to turn and when to walk straight ahead. He will *show us the path of life*.

Reflecting on all of these blessings of protection, provision and guidance propels us into the manifested overwhelming presence of God, where we can experience the fullness of God's joy. Jake Kail explains the difference in His omnipresence and His manifest presence this way: "His omnipresence means he is everywhere; His manifest presence means He is **here**. It is tangible." It is experiencing the closeness of God in such a way that you know that you know that He is right here with you; Your joy is complete You are overcome by His presence. Today reflect on God's omnipresence in your life, then pray for his manifest presence.

*Holy Spirit, You are welcome here;  
Come flood this place and fill the atmosphere.  
Your glory, God, is what our hearts long for -  
To be overcome by Your Presence, Lord.  
Let us become more aware of your presence ..... Kari Jobe*



## God is Speaking, Are You Listening?

Rev. Helen R. Bryant

### 1 Samuel 3:8-10 (NLT)

*So the LORD called a third time, and once more Samuel got up and went to Eli. "Here I am. Did you call me?" Then Eli realized it was the LORD who was calling the boy.*

*So he said to Samuel, "Go and lie down again, and if someone calls again, say, Speak, LORD, your servant is listening." So Samuel went back to bed.*

*And the LORD came and called as before, "Samuel! Samuel!"*

*And Samuel replied, "Speak, your servant is listening."*

Samuel was raised in the church by Eli, the high priest, but he didn't know the voice of the Lord yet. One night he heard somebody call his name. Three times he heard his name and each time he ran to Eli thinking it was him calling. Twice Eli told him to go back to bed, that he was just hearing things. The third time, Eli realized it was the Lord calling Samuel, so he told him to go back to bed and if he heard the voice again to say, "Speak Lord, for your servant hears." So, Samuel went and lay back down, and sure enough, the Lord called him again. This time he did as Eli told him and answered, "Speak, for your servant hears."

Maybe like Eli or Samuel, you didn't realize it was the Lord speaking to you. Or maybe like Moses, you heard Him but kept making excuses.

If ever there were a time for us to listen to God when He speaks, it's now. It's now time for us as Christians to be purposeful listeners, ready and willing to obey the command of our Lord.

Listening to God is an essential part in walking with God. We cannot walk with God or live a godly life if we don't know how to listen to Him.

Think about it: Has God spoken to you and you didn't listen?



## Whenever, Wherever

Sis. Nia Hodges

### Psalm 95:2 (NIV)

*Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.*

Growing up, I thought that there was a time and place for worshiping God. We worshiped God every Sunday morning at church. Of course, we would pray throughout the week, attend bible study, and pop in for the occasional evening service, but real worship was for Sunday morning, right? The Sabbath. Sunday was God's Day.

As I got older, I found myself trying to remain "cute" in worship. I wouldn't clap too long. I wouldn't respond too loudly to the pastor. I would never let people see me cry. Now, imagine if God tried to remain "cute" in His giving. What if He minimized the grace and favor over my life? What if He only answered my calls on Mondays or Tuesdays? It sounds crazy, but that is how many of us continue to treat God. We place Him on a schedule, and during what should be His time, we continue to worry about others.

The New International Version of this passage says to "extol him," meaning to praise Him enthusiastically. Think about the last time you were enthusiastic about something unrelated to God. Now, compare that thing to God. You can't, can you? It seems almost childish to try and compare something created to the Creator. Our enthusiasm becomes misplaced when we try to define good for ourselves. In my attempt to remain "cute," I had determined what should be deemed as good behavior despite receiving clear instruction in Psalms 95. The Message version says to "march into his presence." I love a good choir march in! I used to think it was theatrical, but God deserves all that and more! Your gratitude should shake the room! Your worship should never cease! If God is covering you seven days a week, then you should be praising Him in the same manner.

Take a moment and do a heart check. Ask yourself: Does my level of praise match God's level of grace over my life? If not, repeat after me: God, I'm sorry for minimizing my gratitude. You are worthy of it all.





## Illuminated Walk

Rev. Ronald Bobo, Jr.

### John 8:12 (ESV)

*Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

Many of us can recall as a child how much the dark really scared us. Most children love a good nightlight or a cracked door when going to bed. There is something about the shadows and unrecognizable shapes in the dark that let our young minds worry about the potential dangers that lurk in the shadows, even though those shadows were a combination of our known surroundings and the absence of light.

In the dark, our visual sense vanishes, and we are unable to detect who or what is around us. We rely on our visual system to help protect us from harm. We associate the unknown with the color black, in the absence of our sight unveiling a dormant threat. Darkness will give us a false sense of isolation even when we are only a few feet away from welcomed company. At an early point in our lives, we instinctively acknowledge the value of light.

The same way the physical self needs light to feel safe, comforted, and even alive, our spiritual self is in need of a light in the person of JESUS to also feel safe, comforted and even ALIVE. Jesus refers to himself as the "light of life." Jesus gives little explanation of his words because in the most natural sense we NEED light in our lives.

We need light to:

**SHINE ON US...**(John 8:12) When we are exposed to Jesus, our life changes for the better and he now lives in us.

**COMFORT US...**(Romans 13:12) Put on the "armor of light". We are protected by Jesus.

**GUIDE US...**(Psalm 119) He is a lamp to our feet and a light to our pathway. We follow his lead!

We are grateful in knowing our God shows up for us in dark places in our lives. How and where can you also share this light as a blessing to others?



## The Gateway of Gratitude

Rev. Marlon Rhodeman

### Psalm 100:4 (ESV)

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!*

In Psalm 100:4, we find an invitation that transcends time and echoes through the corridors of our hearts: "Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name." These words by the psalmist beckon us to approach God with a spirit of gratitude, recognizing the profound connection between thanksgiving and worship.

Imagine entering the majestic gates of a grand palace, each step filled with awe and reverence. Similarly, the psalmist invites us to enter the presence of God, not with demands or complaints, but with hearts overflowing with thanksgiving. Gratitude becomes the key that opens the gates to communion with our great and mighty God.

Gratitude is not merely a polite gesture; it's a profound acknowledgment of God's goodness. When we enter His gates with thanksgiving, we acknowledge His sovereignty, mercy, and faithfulness. This act of gratitude prepares our hearts for genuine worship, creating a sacred space where we can encounter the divine.

"Praise his name" is a directive that goes beyond lip service. It's an invitation to let the melody of praise resonate in our hearts and spill forth from our lips. Praise is the natural outflow of a heart attuned to God's goodness. It transforms the act of worship into a symphony, where every note is a declaration of His majesty and love.

As we meditate on Psalm 100:4, let's pause and reflect on the state of our hearts. Are we approaching God with thanksgiving, acknowledging His countless blessings? Is our praise a heartfelt response to His faithfulness? Let the psalmist's words inspire a shift in our perspective – from petitions to gratitude, from casual worship to a symphony of praise.

Let's be intentional about entering into God's presence with a heart brimming with gratitude. Take a moment to list specific reasons for thanksgiving, and as you worship, let your praise be a joyful expression of love and adoration for the One who invites you into His courts. May our lives be a continual entrance into the gates of thanksgiving and the courts of praise.



## It's Not Too Late

Deac. David Johnson

### Philippians 1:6 (NKJV)

*being confident of this very thing, that he who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.*

One day during recess at Lincoln School, a six year old first grade boy went to the chalk board and drew a crude picture of a cowboy. The boy grew to love art, especially cartoons. In elementary school he participated in art contests, painting Halloween images on store windows in his small hometown where he won recognition.

In Junior High School his art teacher, Mr. Dawson, arranged for him to design and paint a mural in the school cafeteria. In High School he drew weekly cartoons for the school newspaper. His art teacher, Mrs. Baumgardner, suggested he go to college, major in Art, and go to work for Disney. Upon graduation and after winning the privilege of designing his graduating class yearbook, the young man went away to college where he was met with discouragement. Dean Sparkman said forget art: "You'll be 50 years old before you profit from a degree in Art. You should pursue a different field, like engineering." The young man changed directions, but the gift inside him did not die. By fate, his gift took a technical turn, and he gained employment at a large aircraft company as an illustrator, where he excelled. On his own, he submitted cartoons to several magazines but was met with rejection. One editor critiqued his work saying it was "too Morrie Turner." Little did he know, Morrie Turner was a popular Black cartoonist.

One day he rededicated his life to Christ and found his gift could be used at his church, creating banners, anniversary programs, ad books, etc.

To this day he still uses the gift God placed in him so many years ago. Dean Sparkman was not only right but prophetic; it was at age 50 the man started his own graphics business where he profits from his art.

He is being used mightily at his current church designing and building such things as a stage, a kiosk, media booths, a camera platform, credit union counters, and props for special days. After many years he still finds joy in using his gift to the glory of God.

Your challenge: Determine what your gift is. Don't be discouraged; develop it and use it to the glory of God. Thank Him everyday for beginning a good work in you, knowing He will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. Amen.



## Obedience and Faith

Sis. Pat Allen

### Genesis 22: 2 (NLT)

*“Take your son, your only son—yes, Isaac, whom you love so much—and go to the land of Moriah. Go and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will show you.”*

For those who grew up in a Christian family surrounded by a Christian community, accepting Jesus Christ, as Lord and Savior at an early age, was almost automatic and expected. After learning more of the scriptures and stories in the Bible, though, some may want to place stipulations on God regarding their Christian life.

For example, take the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis. God commanded Abraham to present Isaac as a burnt offering to Him. Abraham then took his son, whom he loved dearly, and in obedience to God, prepared him as the burnt offering. Isaac, seeing this preparation asked his father, “where **is** the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “God will provide...”

After hearing about this story, some for fear of failing, may want to seek God to implore Him not to test their obedience in this manner. However, when these scriptures are read more carefully, one will find there is more to this story. Not only did God provide the test, He also provided Abraham with a way to succeed, not only in obedience, but also in demonstrating his faith.

Abraham demonstrated his obedience when he prepared Isaac as the burnt offering. God had commanded him to do so, so Abraham, without hesitation, took Isaac the next morning to deliver him as the burnt offering. Abraham demonstrated His faith in God when he answered Isaac by assuring him that God would provide the lamb. Even as Abraham prepared his son, he continued to express faith in God.

During this Christian walk, tests will come. God uses tests to strengthen us and to increase our faith. Attempting to limit God’s power or prerogative, is not the answer. When tests come, we must discipline ourselves to meditate on His word, welcome the Holy Spirit, and pray for His guidance. When this approach is taken, God assures us of His love by providing a way out or through, and thus, our faith is strengthened. In other words, when we keep our hand in His hand, we learn that He won’t let us fail! Hallelujah!!



## Claiming the Abundant Life

Sis. Shantana Stewart

### John 10:10 (NKJV)

*The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.*

The velvet voice of gospel musician Jonathan McReynolds pours a generous offering of "Just to Know Him" into my ears from my car's radio.

"Aah, there goes 'my radio husband,'" I coo in response.

Samuel scowls as he says, "Mom, he's like 30 years old."

Sydney rolls her eyes to add her disapproval; "He doesn't even know you."

While it's fun to trigger my young people, I know I'd be escorted from the premises as a stalker at McReynolds' home,

In contrast, you and I can know Jesus who is simultaneously 100% God and 100% man. He wants us to know Him and knows what's best for us.

Here are three things Jesus did that we can also do to claim the abundant life He died for us to have.

Jesus prioritized spending time with the Father in daily prayer. Jesus made it a priority to draw strength and wisdom from God and the Holy Spirit (Luke 5:16).

Jesus pleased His Father and fulfilled His assignment. Because of Jesus' practice of spending time in the presence of God, He understood what He should and shouldn't do. While Jesus called people into the kingdom of God and ultimately died on the cross for our sins, He didn't entertain people who tried to force Him to be king (John 6:15).

Jesus served humbly. Although His schedule was packed, He did not serve His Father or the many people who needed Him for healing, food, etc., begrudgingly. Jesus had a magnetic personality and was even loved by children. (Philippians 2:5-11).

I may never know Jonathan McReynolds, but I'm grateful each day I can decide that I'm "Movin' On" with Jesus.

*Jesus, we desire to know not just about you, but to know you. As life happens, help us rely on you for help. Holy Spirit, remind us about stories from Jesus' life that can guide and empower us to do what He would do in our situation. We are grateful for the abundant life that is available to us; help us not to settle for anything less.*



## Joy in His Presence

Rev. Jennifer Strayhorn

### Psalm 16:11 (NASB)

*You will make known to me the way of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.*

When my husband and I were in our dating phase, we spent hours and hours on the phone. That time on the phone allowed us to share values, likes, dislikes, hopes, dreams, goals, and much more, with or without words. As we made plans for our future together, we got to know each other intimately. It allowed us to experience boundless joy when we were in each other's presence.

Think about the person you know or the one who knows you intimately. Those moments when that person responds to an unspoken need warm your heart, and they bring you closer to them and deepen your connection.

Psalm 16 is a *miktam* - a clever/wise sentiment of faith. In Psalm 16 David emotes his complete trust in God, who is his refuge and protection (v.1); his fervent hope for the afterlife (v.5-6); and his joy in His presence (11). I love how David shares his deep-rooted need for and confidence in God. David experienced God's protection when fighting Goliath (1 Sam.17) and ran to God as his refuge when running from Saul (1 Sam. 20). Confidently knowing that God would guard all that was his, he had steadfast hope in his inheritance (v.6). So in this psalm, David expresses with a cool, calm cadence that in God's presence he has found unbelievable, inexplicable joy that soothes, secures, and sustains him.

When we choose to spend time in the Word of God, we learn what God values, likes, dislikes, and that He knows us intimately. We discover that in Him we are secure, which deepens our connection to Him. We can be like David when facing our "Goliath" or dealing with our "Saul." We can experience unshakeable trust, hope, and joy. Spending time with God allows us to see that His path for our lives is better than anything we contrive. Prioritizing time in His presence seems counterintuitive. If I spend time with Him, I won't have time for anything else. However, God's "time management" plan is the best I've found. When we give Him first place, He manages our pace.

Ask God to help you daily order your steps in His presence by making His Word your priority. There is boundless joy in His presence!

What hinders your time in the Word?

Do you have joy in God's presence amid life's challenges?





## Are You Using All of Your Strength?

Rev. Burton Barr

### Psalm 28:7 (NLT)

*The Lord is my strength and shield. I trust him with all my heart. He helps me, and my heart is filled with joy. I burst out in songs of thanksgiving.*

A little boy was playing in his backyard one day when he noticed a huge rock that was in the middle of the yard. He decided to move the rock so he would have more room to play. He pushed the rock as hard as he could, but it would not budge. He tried pushing it from another angle, but still, the rock would not move. Becoming frustrated, the boy sat down and tried to shove the stubborn rock with his feet. The rock would not move.

His father glanced out the window and saw him struggling with the gigantic rock. He went outside and watched his son as he toiled intensively, trying to move the rock. Finally, he said, "Son. Are you using all of your strength?" The boy said that he was. His father stood there, watching his son as he strained and struggled with the enormous rock. He asked his son again, "Are you using all of your strength?" Again, the boy said that he was.

His father stood there, watching his son grunting, groaning, and sweating as he desperately tried to move the humongous rock. He said, "Son. Are you sure you are using all of your strength?" The boy was almost in tears when he said, "Yes Dad. I am using all of my strength." His father put his hand on his son's shoulder and said, "Son. You are not using all of your strength. I know, because you haven't asked me to help you."

David said, "The Lord is my strength" (Psalm 28:7). When things get rough and we find ourselves struggling, trying to move the gigantic rocks that life throws in our paths, instead of calling on God and asking for His help, we are determined to move them ourselves.

I don't know what your situation is or what you are going through right now. But God is watching you. He is asking, "Are you using all of your strength?"



## The Axe is at the Root: Repent or Perish

Bro. Orlando Bryant

### Luke 13:6-8 (NIV)

*Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' " "Sir," the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"*

I am thankful for the man who took care of the vineyard. For I was like that tree, but the Lord called me to repent and turn from my sin and turn to him. As I repented, His mercy stopped me from perishing. His grace! His grace! His grace saved me and continues to keep me. I have a story to tell as I reach out to others about a Son who takes care of what His Father planted. It's time to repent and experience His presence so you will not perish.

I repented at a late age in my life. It's not too late for you. Will you repent?



## Omnipresent

Sis. Nia Hodges

### Joshua 1:9 (NIV)

*Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.*

When I was a child, I thought that the words “omnipotent,” “omniscient,” and “omnipresent” sounded really cool. I didn’t know what they meant, but it seemed like a good way to describe God. The prefix “omni,” Latin for “all,” can be placed in front of a variety of words, but the three written above encompass the true nature of God – having unlimited power, knowing everything, and being everywhere all at the same time. Initially, it was difficult for me to wrap my mind around it. “...for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” Wherever? Meaning that I will never be alone? Even in the middle of the night when I’m up contemplating my purpose in life? Or on the job when I feel like I don’t belong? Yes! Yes, yes, yes!

Joshua 1:9 is just one of the many instances where God promises to remain with us. We might commit sins that put space between God and ourselves, but He is still omnipresent. We have a playbook on how to remove that space and renew our courage through Christ. Now you might be saying, “I know all of this, but I still struggle with fear.” That, my friend, is called spiritual warfare. It’s important to recognize the battle. Being a Christian does not mean we will never struggle with things like fear or discouragement. Being a Christian means that we have an omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient God to walk us through that valley.

Take a moment to think about something you are struggling with. What is causing you to feel discouraged or fearful? Now, repeat after me: God, thank you for your continuous presence in my life. Because of You, I can do ALL things! The fear and discouragement I am feeling is no match for You. Renew my mind and invigorate my heart. In the name of Jesus, Amen.



## Am I a “Scaredy Cat?”

Sis. Gwendolyn Wesley

### Joshua 1:9 (ESV)

*Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.*

Growing up, many of us have experienced fear of the “boogey man.” He hid under the bed waiting to steal our souls just as soon as we fell asleep. He lurked in the shadows, following us, ready to pounce when no one else was around. The boogey man even knew our thoughts and anticipated our next moves, showing up to block our paths of escape. I admit that I was once a “scaredy cat.” As I grew up, however, I learned that the “boogey man” was not real; he was simply a figment of my imagination. I had given him too much credit and too much power.

In our spiritual lives, Satan is that “boogey man,” but **He is real**. He plants doubts in our minds that can cause us to live beneath our calling. Look at these truths: God is omniscient (all-knowing); Satan is not. God is always omnipresent (everywhere at once); Satan is not. God is omnipotent (all-powerful), the author and finisher of our faith. Satan is not. God can do anything but fail; Satan continues to fail and has already been defeated.

When faced with challenges, I now ask myself: “Am I standing on a springboard that will strengthen my faith and glorify God? Or, has Satan fooled me to see a perilous cliff that will lead to my demise because I am yielding to fear of the “boogey man?”

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for allowing me to live daily in your presence, where fear and doubt have no place. Lord, please give me a spirit of discernment to recognize that you are with me always - loving, guiding, protecting, and ordering my steps that I may be strong and courageous in all circumstances. Amen.



## I Won't Complain

Sis. Tenecia Strayhorn

### Ephesians 5:20 (NLT)

*And give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

"I hate doing the dishes." "Why do I always have to clean my room?" "Sweeping is so boring!"

These are the complaints I often hear from my kids when they are asked to do their household chores. Honestly, sometimes I can't blame them. I don't like doing chores either. However, I always remind them to be thankful that they have chores to do.

Having to clean your room means that you are blessed with space all your own. Washing dishes means you have eaten several good meals today. Sweeping means you have shelter to protect you from the outside elements. Even the uncomfortable, boring and laborious tasks remind us of the goodness of God, and we should always be thankful.

Have you complained about having to go to work or about how much your kids get on your nerves or about the crazy politicians in our government? It's easy to find things to complain about, but I think it's just as easy to find things to be grateful for. Yes, your job may be difficult, but God has sustained you and provided a way for you to pay your bills. Be thankful. Yes, your kids are doing the most and you just want a minute to breathe, but what a blessing it is to have someone to love and love you back unconditionally. Be thankful. Yes, our government officials may do some crazy things, but we are in a country where we have the power to vote and don't live in a dictatorship. Be thankful.

Even our trials and difficult situations make us better. Because of who our God is, we always have a reason to be thankful. How can you flip the script on complaining and give thanks to God for EVERYTHING?



## Forgiveness

Bro. Courtney Strayhorn

### Matthew 18:21-22 (NLT)

*Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!"*

#### 1) How often do you forgive the people who sin against you?

Think about a time when someone close to you played you. Maybe you gave them money or offered them to stay at your home or something else. And they always take advantage of what you give them. They never pay you back, and they're always looking for an opportunity to get what they want. How do you deal with it? Peter asked Jesus how many times to forgive someone. Jesus said 70 times 7.

#### 2) Do you act on emotions or do you settle with that person?

The scripture says the kingdom of heaven can be compared to the king who wanted his servant to repay the debts he owed him. The servant, who owed millions of dollars, begged for forgiveness. The king ordered to sell his family to pay off the debt, but the king ended up having pity on his servant and forgave his debt. This same servant left and went to collect a debt he was owed, but he did not have any mercy on the man who owed him, and he threw the person in jail until he was able to pay off his debt. Many people were very angry with what the servant did. They went and told the king. The king threw this man in jail and tortured him until he paid his debt in full. That's what the lord will do to us if we refuse to forgive our sisters and brothers.

Prayer: Dear God, help me not to have hate in my heart and to forgive those who hurt me and sin against me. Give me wisdom, knowledge, and better understanding of how to forgive and show mercy towards those who take advantage of me. Amen.





## Be Thankful

Rev. Burton Barr

### 1 Thessalonians 5:18 (NLT)

*Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.*

I broke my foot a few years ago when I fell off a loading dock. The doctor put a cast on my foot that went from my toes to my knee. I was confined to my house, and the only way I could get around was by using crutches, a walker, or rolling around in an office chair.

I sat home having a pity party with myself. I started thinking about all the things I couldn't do and the places I couldn't go. I was tired of those crutches. I was tired of that chair. I wanted to throw that walker off the back porch.

Then I came to myself. I broke my foot. So what. I should be thankful that I didn't break my neck. I couldn't get out of the house. So what. I should be thankful that I had a house. I couldn't take my food downstairs and eat in front of the big screen TV. So what. I should be thankful that I had food.

We should stop complaining and feeling sorry for ourselves because of what we don't have and start thanking God for what we do have. There is always someone worse off than you.

I thought about the time I walked to church on an extremely hot day. I was getting angry because I had to walk. I heard someone behind me, whistling. When I turned around, I was shocked at what I saw. It was a man in a wheelchair with no legs. As he passed me, he smiled and said, "Beautiful day, isn't it?" Then he rolled along, smiling and whistling.

I had two good legs and was complaining because I had to walk. There was a man with no legs, but he was able to enjoy the beauty of life. Be thankful for what you have.



## Are You Still Enough to Hear God's Voice?

Sis. Candice Farrell

### 1 Samuel 3: 8-10 (NLT)

*So, the Lord called a third time, and once more Samuel got up and went to Eli. "Here I am. Did you call me?" Then Eli realized it was the Lord who was calling the boy. So he said to Samuel, "Go and lie down again, and if someone calls again, say, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." So Samuel went back to bed. And the Lord came and called as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel replied, "Speak, your servant is listening."*

Have you ever been going about your day, checking off tasks on your to-do list and essentially operating business as usual? Prayer? Check. Taking the kids to school? Check. Complete Work? Check. Make Dinner? Check. We often measure the success of our day by checking off tasks, but what happens when we have a quiet thought or voice telling us to reach out to someone or perform an activity that is outside of our usual routine? Do you question why this occurred or why you had that thought?

Often, we are too busy to ignore the noise of the world to recognize when God is talking to us. We think that God speaks to us in huge revelations, and while He has that ability, He also speaks in subtle whispers, or by sending a servant. In the quiet moments of our lives, God beckons us to listen with an open heart, just as He did with Samuel.

In the Bible passage, Samuel heard the voice of the Lord and responded, "Speak, for your servant is listening." This position of humility and openness is the key to recognizing and understanding God's guidance in our lives. Given the busyness of life and some of its challenges, it is critical that we seek the Lord's direction and be still long enough to listen and hear his words. Like Samuel, we may need guidance and discernment in recognizing God's voice; therefore, it is important that we also seek wise spiritual counsel to assist us in hearing the voice of the Lord.

God may be calling us repeatedly, waiting for us to acknowledge his presence, while we are busy carrying out our duties of life. But are we attuned to his voice in the middle of the noise that life creates? Are we willing to take the same posture as Samuel?

As we seek God's voice, let us stand in assurance that God is ready to speak to us, but we must be willing to listen and hear his voice. In hearing God's voice, we find direction and can have a deeper relationship with our Lord and Savior. Will you be like Samuel, anxiously awaiting His voice or will you go on business as usual?



## Gratitude: Flowing and Showing

Rev. Jennifer Strayhorn

### Colossians 2:6-7 (AMP)

*Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in [union with] Him [reflecting His character in the things you do and say—living lives that lead others away from sin], 7 having been deeply rooted [in Him] and now being continually built up in Him and [becoming increasingly more] established in your faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing in it with gratitude.*

One of the many things I love about being a grandmother is when my grandchildren express their gratitude toward me. It energizes and motivates me beyond words. But I can tell the difference between a genuine or contrived show of appreciation. When a grandchild displays genuine thankfulness, their face lights up, sometimes there is a loud verbal expression, and often an accompanying hug or written expression. When it is contrived, there is typically a prompt from a parent or another person encouraging them to say thank you. I respond to both, yet the exuberant overflow of gratefulness demonstrated lingers in my mind and moves me to do more the next time than I may have planned.

Paul wrote this letter to warn the believers in Colossae of doctrinal error and to encourage them to live out their faith. He reminded them that they were “In Him.” They were taught to be rooted, built up, and firm in their faith in Christ. He sealed this statement with a reminder to “overflow with gratitude.” I believe that Paul wanted gratefulness to show on their faces, in their countenance, and that it should include a noticeable declaration.

Because we have received Christ and walk in union with Him, there should be a deep level of abiding gratitude that resides in us. As we experience God’s presence, protection, and provision daily, at some point we should articulate an exuberant overflow of thankfulness. God recognizes and responds to a genuine display of gratitude. If my heart leaps for joy when my grands are thankful, I can only imagine how God’s heart is warmed by this utterance from His children. When thankfulness to God flows from our lives, it shows in all we do!

Does your life “in Christ” exhibit gratitude or an attitude?

How can you show an overflow of gratitude today?



## What's Your Delight?

Rev. Roshaunda D. Cade

### Psalm 27:4 (NLT)

*The one thing I ask of the LORD — the thing I seek most — is to live in the house of the LORD, all the days of my life, delighting in the LORD's perfections and meditating in his Temple.*

I love being a mom. Sure, my children work my nerves sometimes, but I find that I can't get enough of them. I am constantly amazed by my children.

When they were small, I enjoyed watching them discover the world around them. When they were in elementary school and middle school, I enjoyed watching them discover themselves and how they fit into the world around them. When they reached high school, I enjoyed watching them discover how they could impact the world around them. And now that they are young adults and venturing away from home, I enjoy watching this entire process unfold all over again - discovering the world around them in new ways; discovering themselves in their newly acquired independence; discovering how they interact with the world as adults; and discovering how, as adults, they can impact the world.

I always want more time with my children. Yet I recognize that as they get older, I won't be able to have a front-row seat to see how their lives unfold. So I've asked them for the gift of their presence. This past Christmas, I told them that moving forward the only gift I want from them is the gift of their time - to be able to spend intentionally designated time with them, to delight myself in them.

But do I delight myself in the Lord?

Do I allocate time to sit in God's presence, so I can discover more about the world He created? Do I seek Him out to learn how he created me to fit into the world? Do I meditate in His temple to understand how I can impact the world around me? And do I willingly go back for more and more of Him?

While I will never get the amount of time with my children that I want, I can always go to God and delight in His presence. He is always available and ready to meet with us.

I invite you to spend time today delighting in God's presence. I find a good way to start is to spend time outside marveling at the intricacy God used when He orchestrated the entire universe. Then go back for more tomorrow. Once you start, you will never get enough.



## The Cross Room

Rev. Burton Barr

### Matthew 16: 24 (NKJV)

*Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."*

A man became overwhelmed by the trials and tribulations that he was going through, so he complained to the Lord. He said, "Lord, this cross is too much for me to bear. I just can't handle it anymore." The Lord said, "OK. Just lay it in the corner, go into the cross room, and pick out another one."

The man was surprised and elated when he heard that. He said, "Do you mean I can choose any cross that I want?" God said, "Yes, my son. You can choose any cross that's in the room." The man was happy. He was finally going to get rid of that big, heavy cross.

When he walked into the cross room, he was amazed at what he saw. There were thousands of huge, enormous crosses. Some of them were so tall he couldn't see the top of them. Some were so wide; he couldn't see around them. He could not believe how big, heavy, and rugged the crosses were.

Finally, he spotted a tiny cross that was lying in a corner. He was so excited, he ran over and picked it up. He had found the perfect cross. He told the Lord that he had found the cross that he wanted. God asked him if he was sure that he wanted that particular cross. The man said, "Yes Lord. This is the cross I want." The Lord said, "OK my son. You can have that one. But I must tell you, that is the same cross that you came in here with."

The next time you want to complain about how difficult your Christian journey is, step into the cross room.



## A Christmas Education?

Deac. Euclid Strayhorn

### 1 Thessalonians 5:18 (ESV)

*Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

"Gratitude is an emotion, the core of which is pleasant feelings about the benefit received. At the cornerstone of gratitude is the notion of undeserved merit. The grateful person recognizes that he or she did nothing to deserve the gift or benefit; it was freely bestowed" (Emmons 2004: 5).

It was a winter trip to Chicago in the early years of our marriage, and our oldest son was about three or four years old. We were driving to Chicago to spend Christmas with Jennifer's family. We drove a Buick Skyhawk car that rode close to the ground, and the floor of the car was always cold. That year as we drove, I was flying. I had a pretty good speed going, trying to make it to Chicago before the snow came. The weather kept getting colder, and ice on the road was building up and getting to the point where it was hard to drive.

I remember going over this one hill past Springfield, and we were neck to neck with other cars when all of a sudden, our movement slowed down. My car was running, but the engine was racing without moving. The engine had literally burned out. We had slowed down; we were coasting, and we were in the middle of nowhere. The car rolled to stop, and we were stuck on that cold highway. I managed to push the car over a hill, and we coasted to a place where we could actually get off the highway. The blessing was that we found a dealer connected to our local car dealer in Saint Louis. Here we were stuck in the middle of nowhere, and I was just praying to find somewhere to keep my wife and my son warm. We managed to get to a local motel, and the car was towed to a local dealer. We found out the cost of the engine was covered and all we needed to do was manage to get a ride home to Saint Louis.

It's amazing how God works to take care of you in the midst of troubles. I managed to get a hold of my brother. Bear in mind that I love my brother as much as possible, but he never could follow directions. There was no GPS in those days! Here we were sitting in a hotel lobby and I was just praying: God, Lord help him get to where we are so that we can get home. And something told me to go outside, and lo and behold I went out and saw him driving past the motel. I ran out waving my arms, and he saw me and turned around. Now that trip was a learning situation where we were incredibly thankful to God for allowing us to have insurance to cover the car and have God's grace and mercy, which covered our safety and our well-being. We were thankful that God's grace covered us as we headed back home. And I think we did manage to make it to Chicago that year for Christmas. We got the car fixed, and it was nothing but God's grace that got us where we needed to go. So incredibly thankful for that ride, that trip, and for God's grace in our lives.





## Life's Busyness, God's Presence

Sis. Shay Davenport

### 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NIV)

*Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

Hustle and bustle...go, go, go...  
an appointment here, a deadline there,  
my children's activities everywhere!

Oh, let's not forget three virtual meetings today,  
And in-person meetings tomorrow.  
Date night with my spouse,  
Not even a chance to lounge around the house!

Gathering with family,  
Gatherings with friends,  
Lord, I figured it out...  
Being grateful for your presence is a most precious WIN!

This is the busyness of life that some may live. Worried about yesterday, occupied with the task of the day, and preoccupied with what is yet to come tomorrow. These feelings come naturally for all of us. Taking time to give thanks to our Lord for choosing us as faithful stewards over life's circumstances exemplifies maturity of faith and pleases God. Life brings about joyous moments, sorrowful times, periods of sustainment, and intervals of questioning His presence. Spending time with him through prayer, song, meditation, and worship; and showering Him with adoration, praise, thankfulness, and appreciation allows us to offer Him all the glory He is due!

In the midst of my busy agendas two phrases remind me of how grateful I am to be in an ever-evolving relationship with God: 1) "But God..." and 2) "When I look back over my life..." Meditate on these phrases, and your earnest heart of gratitude will SHOUT because of His past, present, and future presence in your life.

- But God, you kept me from losing my mind today.
- When I look back over my life, I am grateful for my stewardship assignments.
- But God, you provided safe travel to and from here and there.
- When I look back over my life, thank you for the time to spend with family and friends.

Prayer: Lord, I am grateful for the tasks of this life that you have given me to steward! Your Word tells me to pray continually. It is a glorious feeling to be in your presence and be able to shower you with a heart of gratitude while seeking your guidance in all that I do.



## How strong is your Faith?

Bro. Courtney Strayhorn

### Matthew 9:18-19, 23-26 (NLT)

*As Jesus was saying this, the leader of a synagogue came and knelt before him. "My daughter has just died," he said, "but you can bring her back to life again if you just come and lay your hand on her." So Jesus and his disciples got up and went with him.*

*When Jesus arrived at the official's home, he saw the noisy crowd and heard the funeral music. "Get out!" he told them. "The girl isn't dead; she's only asleep." But the crowd laughed at him. After the crowd was put outside, however, Jesus went in and took the girl by the hand, and she stood up! The report of this miracle swept through the entire countryside.*

Having strong faith and trust in God means believing him no matter what happens. Faith is defined as belief and trust in and loyalty to God. We often agree and say we have faith, but as soon as we have trials and tribulations, our faith tends to diminish. We can't let it be that easy for our faith to disappear when we run into trouble. Our faith is always being tested, like when we are distracted by our flesh or when we think God hasn't given us what we deserve. Can we persevere like the Roman officer?

#### 1) What does your Faith look like?

Often when God is looking to elevate us or bless us in a new season, we are faced with challenges and distractions that make it hard to be focused or obedient. I wonder if we delay our blessings when we put off what God has told us to do. God wants a closer relationship with us, and we have to trust him and learn not to lean on our own understanding!

#### 2) Do you trust and believe God like you say you do?

You probably do trust and believe God like you say you do, but you may find there are times when people mistreat you, or you think you can say or do anything, and then it becomes a struggle. We have to remain obedient and listen to God when he tells us what to do instead of listening to the world; otherwise, we will reap the consequences.

#### 3) How do we strengthen our faith?

Our faith can be strengthened when we look at our own lives and look at the miracles God has performed. Keeping us alive and waking up everyday are miracles we shouldn't take for granted. What has God healed you or your family from?

Prayer: Dear Lord, strengthen my faith where I am weak and also help me not fall astray to the world's way of thinking. Continue to be with me wherever I go and strengthen my wisdom and knowledge and give me a better understanding of your word. Amen.



## Gratitude and Presence

Sis. Yaya B.

### 2 Timothy 1:7 (NKJV)

*For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love and of a sound mind.*

Have you ever entered into a season of uncertainty, lacking gratitude, feeling powerless, unloved, confused and weary of the future?

Believe in your ability to seize this current season of your life with the power of God, the love of God, and a sound mind as you trust in God's ability to protect you no matter what goes on around you in this season. When you trust in God's Ability to supply your need as the world around you hurries in a frenzy, frightened by the thunder of life, the atmosphere within you must remain at peace and calm. You must be still.

Nothing - NOTHING - is too hard for God! Be reminded of God's Sovereign Power. Your core identity is in Christ Jesus. The power of God that has given you a high calling in Christ is the same power of God that has created the trees and the bees that you see, and even human beings. If you take a moment right now to pause and look around you at all that God has created, you will be encouraged to rest in the certainty of God's power and His faithfulness.

When you experience the supernatural power of God that places you above your current circumstances, the love of God protects you, and you receive a sound mind that shields you in the midst of the rain, so that you are well prepared to receive your harvest of many blessings. You are well equipped to seize a season that presents itself as thunderous, yet with a glorious end result! In the midst of the uncertainty that you may be navigating through, do not fear. Instead be grateful for the POWER, LOVE, AND SOUND MIND available to you in Christ Jesus.

Derived from Yaya B.'s ebook *The Four Seasons: Debunking the Fear of Uncertainty*



## God's "Receipts"

Sis. Lolita Buford

### Psalm 46:1 (AMP)

*God is our refuge and strength [mighty and impenetrable], A very present and well-proved help in trouble.*

I love the Amplified version of this scripture because it places extra emphasis on God's might. It also prompts us to reflect on the proven track record of God, even, and especially, when trouble is present.

The word refuge creates a picture in my mind of a person running out of a storm to find shelter. When I ponder more deeply and really consider God's position, not only do we run to him, but He seeks *us* out to surround us with his impenetrable strength. He is always with us in our "right now." There've been times in my life when I was either headed towards trouble or right in the middle of it, and the Lord himself rescued me. In moments when my faith feels weak, or I'm facing a new challenge, Holy Spirit prompts me to pull out God's "receipts" and remind myself of who He is, and of his *proven* track record in my life. No matter what comes, I'm reminded He is present, and that's enough.

I encourage you to do two things:

1. Reflect on a time (or times) in your own life when trouble was present, and God rescued you. Maybe you were headed towards trouble and God redirected you.
  - a. What was the situation?
  - b. Jot down the ways in which God sheltered you and made his presence known.
2. Think about a present-day challenge you are facing; apply the lesson in this scripture. The Psalmist declares God is a present and well-proved help in trouble, and that HE is mighty! What initially seems insurmountable, can never compare to the impenetrable might of our God. I encourage you to cast all your cares [all your anxieties, all your worries, and all your concerns, once and for all] on Him, for He cares about you [with deepest affection, and watches over you very carefully]. 1 Peter 5:7 Amplified Bible

Rest in this: The Lord is present and ready to prove himself strong on your behalf.



## God, Thank You for Remembering

Rev. Dawn Jones

### Psalm 139:17-18 (NLT)

*How precious are your thoughts about me, O God.*

*They cannot be numbered!*

*I can't even count them;*

*they outnumber the grains of sand!*

*And when I wake up,*

*you are still with me!*

My friends often make fun of how difficult it is for me to remember a person's name. I have been guilty of meeting a person and forgetting their name soon after they tell me. I'll remember your face and almost every detail you share with me concerning your life, but your name will leave me as quickly as it was given. I can't explain how or why this happens, but it does. What can I say - I'm human. In our humanity, it's hard to truly imagine what it means to be fully known and unforgettable. Often, we forget and need a little reminder to recollect the facts of life that we once claimed to be unforgettable.

For God, forgetting is hard. He thinks of us often and His thoughts toward us are good. In this psalm, David is acknowledging God's character and omniscience. Life for David wasn't easy. He had many enemies and challenges during his life. But one thing he was certain of was who God was. Even in the moments when He wanted to doubt, he always found his way back to believing. He knew that he just needed to call on God and find his way into God's presence. In Psalm 139, David's reflection of God's extensive knowledge of him was spoken of with such admiration! David was almost in awe at the way God considers him. God thinks of us the same way. God knew us before we were conceived (v.16), knew us while being developed in the womb (v.13/15), and He knows every day from birth to death (v. 16b). Not only that, but His thoughts toward us are precious and immeasurable. His presence never leaves us! You are much too precious for Him to leave you unattended.

In the moments when you feel alone, remember that God is with you. In the moments when you feel invisible, remember God sees you. In the moments when you feel forgotten, remember GOD REMEMBERS YOU! I want to challenge you to remember that today.

Here are 2 options to choose from:

1. Every time you sit down to eat a meal or snack, I want you to say, "Thank you God for never leaving me. Thank you for never taking your eyes off of me. Thank you for remembering me."
2. Set 4 timers for times of your choosing. When the timer goes off, pause to thank God for being with you, see you, and remembering you.

Notice how this makes you feel throughout the day. Do you feel closer to God? Do you feel more visible to Him?



## Circle Back

Rev. Michael Bobo

### Luke 17:11-19 (AMP)

*While Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem, He was passing [along the border] between Samaria and Galilee. As He entered a village, He was met by ten lepers who stood at a distance; and they raised their voices and called out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When He saw them, He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were [miraculously] healed and made clean. One of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, glorifying and praising and honoring God with a loud voice; and he lay face downward at Jesus' feet, thanking Him [over and over]. He was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten [of you] cleansed? Where are the [other] nine? Was there no one found to return and to give thanks and praise to God, except this foreigner?" Jesus said to him, "Get up and go [on your way]. Your faith [your personal trust in Me and your confidence in God's power] has restored you to health.*

It's easy to forget to say thank you. As children, we often didn't say thank you to our parents or guardians for keeping us clothed and a roof over our heads. Or for cooking dinner every night. It's easy to say thank you for what we think are big things. But it's easy to forget to be grateful for the simple and consistent blessings in our lives.

In the text, the ten lepers came to get healed by Jesus, and He healed them. But only one of them came back to say thank you. The rest of them left without a second thought. Maybe the others were so excited, they simply forgot. Maybe they were grateful, but they never stopped in their amazement at their miraculous healing. Even though Jesus changed their lives in an instant, they still didn't say thank you. Even though their entire social status was changed after their encounter with Jesus, they didn't come back. One man realized that he was completely healed and refused to go another step without loudly praising God for what he had done. He was intentional about honoring God and showing his gratitude.

Two things about showing gratitude stuck out to me in this passage. The first is that the man saw that he was healed. Sometimes we need to stop and look. God is moving and making ways, whether he's moving the mountain or strengthening you to climb it. God's goodness and blessings are all around, if only we would stop long enough to see.

The second is that man circled back to God. He acknowledged the healing then made his way back to say thank you. We have to be intentional about showing our gratitude to God. Sometimes the crowd says it's not normal or socially acceptable to circle back to thank God. Sometimes it's easier to take the credit for yourself. But you have to make up your mind about seeing God's goodness and then choosing to praise Him for it.

Challenge: Get a gratitude journal. Look for the goodness of God in your life and circle back to say thank you. It may be hard at first, but the more you look for His goodness, the more you will see it!





## Grateful Praise

Sis. Shay Davenport

### Psalm 100:4-5 (NKJV)

*Enter into His gates with thanksgiving,  
**And** into His courts with praise.  
Be thankful to Him, **and** bless His name.  
For the Lord **is** good;  
His mercy **is** everlasting,  
And His truth **endures** to all generations.*

The hymn, "Thank You, Lord," was penned with these lyrics:

Thank you, Lord;	You've been so good;
Thank you, Lord;	You've been so good;
Thank you, Lord;	You've been so good;
I just want to thank you, Lord	I just want to thank you, Lord

The gracious lyrics and melody of this song penetrate your heart to reflect on who God is and His faithfulness towards you and others. The repetition of the stanzas expresses and emphasizes the songwriter's thoughts with a climactic build up of gratitude. The lyrics allow for us to paint a mental picture of how God's ever-presence has impacted our lives. Simply put, the hymn invokes a period of reflection and an exaltation of grateful praise.

One of the definitions of reflection is serious thought or consideration; an idea about something, especially one that is written down or expressed. Reflection is more than a walk down memory lane. Reflection is more than an "I remember when." Reflection is an intentional learning process by which we analyze the experience, why it happened, what was the impact, and if this experience should happen again.

As Christians, we are to reflect on who God is and His goodness. Your reflection of Him acknowledges his presence in and over your life. Your memories of the low periods in your life should remind you that it was Him carrying you through. Your memories of being hired even when you didn't feel as though you interviewed well, should remind you that He is good. Your memory of being so caught up in a sinful web, should remind you that His mercy is everlasting.

Reflect on the lyrics of this hymn "Thank You, Lord." Reflect on the impact that His presence has had in your life and give the Lord your grateful praise!

Prayer: Lord, with a thankful heart I come to give you the glory and praise. You have been faithful and good to me. I know that I have had some missteps along life's journey and I am thankful that you carried me through. Amen



## The Apostle Paul - A Posture of Gratitude

Rev. Gwendolyn Packnett

### Philippians 3:10 (NLT)

*I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death*

### Philippians 4:11-13 (NLT)

*Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.*

By the world's standards, Paul had it all. He was a prolific scholar, born into privilege and influence. He would misuse his power and influence to persecute believers in Christ Jesus. Because God knows the plans He has for us, (Jeremiah 29:11), Saul, renamed Paul, would come to know Jesus in a profound and transformative way, a way that moved him from the secular to the sacred! Paul became the very kind of believer he once persecuted. Though now a fervent believer, Paul's journey wasn't without hardships; he experienced floggings, beatings, shipwrecks, imprisonment, and more (2 Corinthians 11:24-29). During his wayward times, God's hand was still on Paul.

The transformative power of Jesus found Paul consumed with wanting to know more about the Savior, and a desire to tell others He is Savior and Lord of all! As a result, he wrote letters to churches about serving Jesus and established Christian churches.

Perhaps it could be said Paul demonstrated a posture of gratitude for how the Savior delivered him from darkness by literally shining His light on him. Paul's posture of gratitude for his deliverance and a life transformed in Christ caused him to declare all else in life is rubbish in comparison to really knowing Jesus! Paul declared a desire to know HIM in his fullness, (Philippians 3:10). When we truly relinquish our lives, we will truly come to experience knowing Jesus, and HIS unconditional love. We will experience a resolve in HIM.

Paul's conversion also caused him to declare you can learn to be content, despite your circumstances or season of life, (Philippians 4:11-12), for we can do ALL things through Christ who strengthens us!

Question: How can we learn to be content in ALL things?



## Oh, Give Thanks

Associate Pastor, Rev. Angela Tate

### Psalm 136:1 (NKJV)

*Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.*

Psalm 136 is referred to as the “Polyeleos,” which is translated as *many mercies*. It is also referred to as the “Great Hallel,” meaning great praise. One can infer from these two descriptions that we are to give the Lord great praise because of His many mercies. And not only are His mercies numerous in nature, the scripture tells us that His mercy endures forever.

The psalm recounts for its readers the greatness of God our creator, the power of God our deliverer, and the compassion of God our Father and comforter. The psalmist very carefully, meticulously, and patiently lays out all that the Lord has done over the course of history and pauses between each declaration to remind us that His mercy endures forever. What if we began to think about all that the Lord has done over the course of our lives so we can see that the Lord’s mercy, in fact, does endure forever.

I can’t speak for you, but my Polyeleos might read a little like this:

To Him who kept me safe through childhood trauma,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
And brought me out on the other side victorious,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
With a plan and a purpose that I could never design for myself,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
He took my every flaw, my every mistake and worked it out for my good,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
Who looked upon my sinful state,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
And shed His blood so that I would not have to be eternally separated from  
His love,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
Who became my Savior and changed my name from death to life,  
For His mercy endures forever.  
Oh, give thanks to the God of heaven! For His mercy endures forever.  
Now it’s your turn. Make a list of all the ways God’s mercy has shown up in  
your life and give thanks.





# REACH: IN OUT ON UP



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