

Devotional Guide

*"Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise,
like a person who **builds a house on solid rock.**"*

Matthew 7:24



**BUILDING
HOPE
FOR TOMORROW**



Connect with God, grow in faith and develop a new healthy
spiritual habit through daily Building Hope for Tomorrow
devotions written by Hope pastors!

Happy Birthday to Us

Happy Birthday, Hope!

It's incredible to look back and consider all the ways Hope has changed in its 30 years; but maybe what's even more incredible are the things that *haven't* changed:

God's word is preached thoughtfully and with care and integrity.

People, maybe you're one of them, have encountered the living God and have had life-changing experiences.

The mission of Hope – to reach out to the world around us and share the everlasting love of Jesus Christ – is as important today as it was on the day it was written.

It's no accident that these things are true, and it's not because of anything necessarily special about Hope (although Hope is pretty special!), but these things are true because of the God we serve and love. God is a God of faithfulness, a God of hope from generation to generation. When Jesus declared to Peter that Jesus would build the church upon the rock and all the powers of hell would not be able to stand against it, it had little to do with Peter and everything to do with Jesus. Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, would do the work. Peter's job was to never forget who Jesus is and the call Jesus had put on his life. Peter would do what he was called to do, and Jesus would build the church.

Hope is not a perfect church. I know that because I'm a part of it, and you're a part of it, and neither of us is perfect! Praise God that Jesus is the foundation and our call is simply to be faithful. To keep doing the things that matter and to look to the next 30 years with hope and excitement and a faith that Jesus will build his church; and we are invited to bring our best and be a part of it!

Prayer

Each day will feature a prayer opportunity, and today is simply an opportunity to thank God for the blessings he has given you. I've heard the question asked, What if you woke up tomorrow with only the things you thanked God for yesterday? I encourage you to take some time thanking God for all the things you may sometimes take for granted. Be reminded of his care and provision for you and ask God to help you remember this moment of gratitude the next time you are feeling like he is absent.

A King's Prayer

Today's Bible reading is a prayer that King Solomon prayed to God at the dedication of the temple. The completion of the temple was a huge milestone and celebration for the Israelites, and the temple dedication marked the fulfillment of promises made and kept over centuries, beginning with Abraham hundreds of years before. The promises had been threatened by famine, slavery, foreign nations opposed to God, and the sinful nature of the people to whom the promises had been given.

And yet, God. God's commitment and enduring faithfulness cannot be undone by human sin.

Solomon knew that the people would need a common vision for their life moving forward, and he understood that it would be God's faithfulness that would hold the people together. He declares: May God be praised! May God never abandon us. May God give us the will to follow his commands. May God bring justice. May God do all of this so that his name will be recognized above all other gods. May God's people always be faithful and obedient.

Solomon's prayer is a beautiful vision of what life with God might look like, if God's people trust their futures to him because of all he has done and they agree to live by his decrees, trusting that God will not forsake them. Many years later Jesus would invite all who are weary and carry heavy burdens to trade those burdens for Jesus' light and easy yoke. He would invite his followers to learn from him, because he is humble and gentle. Solomon's vision for God's people is much the same as Jesus' vision for all who are weary – to come to God, to learn God's way of life, and live in peace and rest.

Part of this vision for God's people was a common place of worship and a place for the Lord to dwell among the people, but it was also accepting a way of life that begins with trusting in God's faithfulness for this generation and for all generations to come!

Prayer

For prayer today, spend some time using the petitions of Solomon's prayer to talk to God. Begin with the prompts below and then continue to pray in your own words.

Praise the Lord for keeping his promises ...

Ask God to go with us in all we do ...

Ask God give you the desire to keep his decrees ...

May God's name be glorified and may justice come quickly ...

May all people everywhere know of God's love ...

Ask God to keep you walking in faith today ...

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Where Hope Is Found

If you are reading this devo on the day it is released, then today is election day. I'm writing this during the middle of October and I confess, as I consider Nov. 5, I feel a bit of anxiousness in my spirit. Whatever happens today, my prayer is that we move forward peacefully and that anyone who knows Jesus would model their response after his lived example.

Psalm 78 speaks a particular word to us today and reminds us where to put our focus. Any of the things we might be tempted to worry about today will not last. Only one thing will. And God has called us on purpose, for a purpose, which is in part to tell future generations about what God has done. If you are a parent or grandparent this is specifically true, but it is also true even if you are not a parent or grandparent in the strict sense of the word. Anyone who knows the Lord shares in responsibility for future generations because we are all called to fulfill the Great Commission – to make disciples near and far.

This is why Building Hope for Tomorrow is so important. Imagine a space in the community where all are welcome and feel safe. Where children can play for as long as they want, where people come together, invited to play pickleball or grab a coffee; and in doing the things they do every day – find a place where they meet Jesus. It's in Jesus where we literally find hope for tomorrow. In Jesus we know that the things of this world, while they are big and have far reaching consequences – they will never be as big or as consequential as the grace of God revealed in Jesus on the cross. The world needs Hope. The world needs to know about Jesus and his love, to have opportunities to experience that love and learn what love does; and to know the joy and peace that are found living under the light and easy yoke of Jesus. This is what Building Hope for Tomorrow is all about!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, today I come before you and confess my sins to you. Lord Jesus, I need your saving work on the cross and I thank you for bearing the consequences of my sin. I thank you God that you have forgiven me and have restored a clean heart within me.

I pray for our nation today. I thank you for the leadership you have given us and I ask that you be with our next president – that you would guide them and that their heart would be open to you. I ask for your spirit of peace to prevail – both within my own heart and in the heart of our nation.

Father, I ask that you remind me today of your kingdom perspective. You are not anxious or worried. You have called your people to put our trust in you and so I do that today. Show me where I can share your love, show me how I can encourage future generations. Help me to keep my thoughts fixed on the things that truly matter and not to become overwhelmed by things that are temporary. I pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

It's About the People

Maybe it's been a minute since you read the book of Haggai, and if so, let me share with you a bit of what is happening here. Haggai is a prophet who delivered messages to God's people after they had returned from exile in Babylon. As they made their way back to the wiped out city of Jerusalem, there was much to be done for the city to be inhabitable again. The people quickly got to work on their homes and restoring their fields, but the temple that Solomon had built and dedicated in 1 Kings continued to lay in ruins.

This is the situation that Haggai is speaking to. Life had gotten back to "normal" for the Israelites, but they had forgotten God's house. Verse 8 says, "Now go up into the hills, bring down timber, and rebuild my house. Then I will take pleasure in it and be honored, says the Lord." The point of all this is that the Lord did not find it wasteful to invest resources on the physical structure of the temple. The temple was the place where God dwelled with the people, it is the place where they found forgiveness and where they came together as a community. The emphasis on rebuilding the temple isn't nearly as much about the physical structure as it is about what happens there.

The vision for Hope for the next 30 years and beyond, is to be a refuge for the community. Not because we want people to think that Lutheran Church of Hope is great, but because we want them to meet and experience our great and holy God – the God who changes lives and meets us where we are. Yes, the Holy Spirit is with us everywhere but people say it again and again: The air "feels" different in these walls. Maybe it's because there are almost always two or three who are gathered here, but maybe it's also because this already is a place of refuge for so many – and can be a place of refuge for so many more.

Prayer

One of our core values here at Hope is lost people matter to God, and so they matter to us. As you pray today, spend some time asking God to reveal to you how lost people might be found through Building Hope for Tomorrow. If there are places in your heart that are cynical or skeptical, ask God for wisdom to understand what that might be about; and then direct some of your mental energy toward discovering what God is revealing to you.

Don't Miss It!

Earlier this summer and fall there were a couple of nights when the Northern Lights were visible here in Iowa. Many of you had pictures of the incredible display that is usually only visible much further north and during the winter months, and I loved seeing your pictures because I missed it. I didn't realize it was happening but even if I had, I probably would have chosen to miss it. I'm more than a little particular about getting enough sleep, and annoyingly, they are only visible at night. All of this to say, even if I'd known, I most likely wouldn't have made it a priority.

The reality is, we don't have time for all the things we might want to be a priority. And every time we say yes to something we say no to the other possibilities for that moment in time. Some folks are so paralyzed by this they never commit to anything in case something better comes along. But what Jesus is talking about in the passage today is the benefit of committing to the one thing that really matters.

He tells the disciples they are blessed to see the things they get to see, because what they've seen is the Kingdom of Heaven come to earth through Jesus. People have been healed, lives have been restored, nature has been subdued, and evil is on the run.

To see these things happen is a longing that exists within all of us. We were created for eternity and to be undamaged by sin and our souls long for this reality.

The disciples got to see it firsthand, many of you have seen what God can do firsthand, and I too have been blessed to experience and see it in others. It never, ever gets old. And every time we see it, we get a glimpse of what heaven will be, when all of the things that break our hearts are gone forever.

My encouragement for you today is to consider what it means to make Jesus the priority above all the other potential priorities. What might you get to see? What isn't serving you and is getting in the way of making Jesus the one thing? What can God do through you when you let Jesus be Lord of your life?

Prayer

I'm sharing a prayer with you today that someone else shared with me, and it speaks to the competing priorities in our lives – especially when those priorities come from within us. I have it printed in my office and pray it daily and I'm sharing it with you here. I pray it blesses you as it has me.

Lord, if anything is blocking your light in my life, remove it. If I'm sheltering any of your enemies – hate, greed, anger, or envy – take a wrecking ball to the house I've made for them. If my compulsions drive me to things and places that kill my soul, then in your kindness, kill those compulsions and resurrect them as pure desires. I am crucified with Christ. I am raised with Christ. Help my heart and body know it is so. Amen.

The Innumerable Good Things of God

On this Friday, let's take a minute and pause, and remember just a few of the things God says about you:

You have been set free from sin and you are a fully adopted member of God's family. (John 8:34-36)

You have been created uniquely and specifically by God. (Psalm 139:14)

Absolutely nothing can separate you from God's love for you. (Romans 8:38-39)

As we go through this campaign of Building Hope for Tomorrow, it would be an unsuccessful endeavor if we raised all the money we needed, but in the process, the members of our community did not grow deeper in their faith. Read that again, just to make sure you remember it. Building Hope for Tomorrow is certainly about positioning Hope for many more years of fruitful ministry, but it's also about strengthening *you* and the *community* for the work that goes along with that ministry. For Hope to be a refuge, a light in the darkness, it will take the enthusiastic participation of thousands of individual lights to shine bright as well.

What proves to be true again and again is that to shine that light and love well, it must come from the core of who we are. And we don't often allow ourselves the experience of basking in how deeply we are loved by God. We fix our thoughts on our shortcomings and our stresses and our disappointments, and as you've experienced, allowing our thoughts to dwell on those things is not the light and easy yoke of Jesus. (Matthew 11:28). But the remedy is to follow Paul's example and fix your thoughts on the innumerable good things of God. And then, when God's voice gets priority in your life, you will be surprised how deeply you will long for others to have that peace too. When you are full of God's love, that's when you will truly have something to give away.

Prayer

This prayer exercise will take a bit of intention throughout the day. What I'd like you to do is pay specific attention to your thoughts. Maybe use your phone to take note of the thoughts that get your attention. Then later this evening, do a bit of an inventory and self-reflection on how many of your thoughts were true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or worthy of praise. This isn't an exercise for you to feel shame, it's an exercise on getting honest with yourself. After you've done the self-reflection, consider this prayer or use your own words:

Gracious God, I ask your forgiveness for my thoughts that are not of you. I ask that you create within me a clean heart. Renew a right spirit within me. Give me the courage and grace to seek your will even in the deepest corners of my heart and mind. Thank you for the easy yoke of Jesus. The gift of abundant life, in this world and with you for eternity. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Our Firm Foundation

Today's reading is the parable of the builders. It's a well-known story of the wisdom of the person who builds their house on a firm foundation, so that when the rains come, the house will stand strong and they will have shelter and safety from the storm. It's easy to understand the point and agree with the wisdom of building life on a firm foundation. Yes! Jesus is our firm foundation! What's not quite as easy is figuring out precisely how to have Jesus as our foundation, and unfortunately none of us knows how firm our foundation is until something comes along to test it.

If you read these verses closely you see the key piece that sometimes gets missed. Jesus said, 'anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock.' The challenging part is that for Jesus to be our foundation, it isn't enough to know what Jesus says. If it's a firm foundation in Jesus that we want, we will have to do what he says.

The more I live and walk with Jesus, the more I realize how much better Jesus' way truly is. I didn't always believe that, and I insisted on learning some lessons the hard way. But when I think about what my life might have been if it weren't for Jesus, about all I can do is stop and approach him with overwhelming gratitude. What drives me to serve as a pastor at Hope is that Jesus saves lives. Period. When you know that you have been rescued, all you want is for other people to have that same life-giving encounter. When I interact with someone who is lukewarm in their faith – maybe they come to church now and then or bring their kids for some things – I know they might know Jesus, but they aren't following him – and it breaks my heart because they are missing out on life and the only foundation worth building on.

As I write this, I'm praying for you, that from God's abundance he would give you exactly what you need and that he would draw you closer to him day by day. That you would come to Jesus with humility and seek to follow him in all that you do; and that you would experience his light and easy yoke and take joy in allowing Jesus to be Lord.

Prayer

Today's prayer is relatively simple. It is the Lords' Prayer. I encourage you to take your time with it and explore the different petitions, making them personal to your life and circumstances, listening for God's encouragement as you go.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever,

Amen.

More Good Things

Happy Sunday, Church!

Today's reading is one of those passages that can easily be taken out of context. It's easy to read that God's plans for us include good things, a future and a hope, and assume that those good things will be the things we define as good. And honestly, maybe they will be. But I think we'd be wise to recognize that our human idea of good things simply cannot compare to God's understanding of good things; and it's likely that God's version of good is far better than anything we could ever dare to dream of!

C.S. Lewis writes that one of the problems with humans is not that we are hard to please, our real problem is that we are quite easily pleased. We settle for all sorts of small things – when God offers nothing less than the kingdom of heaven! We settle for scrolling when we long for connection. We settle for junk food when our bodies need nourishment. We settle for fleeting happiness when God wants to give us deep and abiding joy. Our Bible reading tells us that when we look for God wholeheartedly we will find him, but too often we stop short because we become satisfied by a nibble when God wants to give us the whole meal.

We believe that God's deep and abiding joy is available to all people. That means you, and it means the people in your neighborhood and your child's school and the people driving alongside you on I-235. And if they don't know about Jesus, and what his death and resurrection mean for the world, how can they experience the good things God has planned for his people? We have been given the gift of knowing God and loving him – and we have the responsibility to share what we know with others. This isn't something we *have* to do. It's something God *invites* us to be a part of because God knows being a part of what he is up to will bring us that deep and abiding joy we are after. My prayer for you today is that you won't be easily satisfied! That you would go deeper, seeking wholeheartedly the good things of God; and be ready for him to redefine what qualifies as good.

Prayer

Take a few moments to consider what good things God might be offering to you, to Hope, and to the city you live in. Ask God how these things might overlap and how God wants to use you in these spaces. Then you can pray this prayer, or use your own words.

Gracious God – Thank you that you have more to offer me than I realize. Help me to see what you see and to love those who you love. I ask that you continue to create a loving and servant heart within me. Give me wisdom to understand the way my attitudes and behaviors are keeping me from you and from loving those around me well. Thank you for forgiving my sins; the things I have done and the things I have not done. Thank you for Jesus and for his sacrifice. We pray these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

Chosen

An overarching goal of the giving campaign is to connect – connect to God, connect to our brothers and sisters at church, and to connect to our community in larger ways. God is a God of connection. He cares that we grow in relationship with him and with one another. From Genesis to Revelation, God shows us his heart for connection from the very beginning. He wants us to be in an intimate and united relationship with him, and he gives the first humans, Adam and Eve, a choice in that. They can choose perfect unity with God by obeying what he asks of them, or they can choose their own way. We know how the story ends ... sin enters the world and with it, disconnection.

God's chosen people, the Israelites, are the people God has claimed as his. They're connected to YHWH (God's personal name). As they move toward the land God promised them, they are to remain connected to God and to one another through the boundaries God has outlined. Of course, they don't do this perfectly. But one of the things that has always jumped out to me in reading about the Israelites claiming the promised land is that everyone was invited to join them. Even the foreigners – the people who didn't know the Lord yet.

As we read the scripture verses today, we are reminded that we've all had seasons where we might identify more as 'foreigners' with God. Do you know that feeling – God feels far away? We wonder where He is, or why we're facing struggles, trials, temptations, you name it? As disconnected as we may feel, God never leaves us. As the Israelites were God's chosen people in the Old Testament, I have great news for you! You are God's chosen today. You are a royal heir to the inheritance of God's Kingdom (Romans 8, John 1, 1 John 3).

Prayer

If you're in a season that feels disconnected from God, here's a prayer for you:

Lord, your Word is Truth. I know your heart is one of connection. I know that you are present with me by the power of the Holy Spirit. God, would you help me to feel your presence right now? I am not a foreigner to you. You know me; help me to know you better. Show me more of you today. Amen.

If you're in a season that feels connected to God, here's a prayer for you: Father, thank you for your presence in my life. Thank you for your love and your grace and your mercy. Lord, would you show me the people in my life who could use more of you? Help me to be a light to them. Help me to overflow with your love, peace, and grace so they will see you in me. I am your vessel, Lord. Use me! Amen.

Intentionality

My husband and I recently had a conversation about a small group opportunity. When it came down to actually making a decision about going, we landed on, “We just don’t think we have the time.” Can you relate? We both say that small group connection is a priority, but I’m not sure our schedule would communicate the same thing. Our time might be our most precious resource in a world characterized by ‘busy.’

Everyone is “busy.” And, we all have the exact same 24 hours in a day. How will we use that time today? Is there built-in time for you to connect with God through prayer or Bible study – even for five minutes? Do you have a weekly rhythm of connecting to God and community at worship or set aside time to meet in a smaller community, like a small group, on a regular basis? Shortly after my conversation with my husband, I read a quote from author and speaker Stephen Covey – “Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least.” It was convicting! We had to shift our mindset and truly prioritize the things which matter most to us.

As you sit with this, I challenge you to distinguish between “busy” and “intentional.” Sure, your calendar and weekly schedule might have a lot of things that fill a lot of space. But when our mindset tells us we are “intentional” instead of “busy,” we are more cognitively aware that we are in charge of our schedule instead of our schedule being in charge of us.

When the author of Hebrews reminds us to show hospitality to strangers, it’s a beautiful reminder that in everything we do, we communicate something. Where we spend our time and resources communicates a lot about us. If you were to show last week’s calendar to a stranger, what might they notice as a priority in your life?

We never know who is watching, though we can be confident that every second counts and every moment matters. People are watching how you live your life and where your time and energy are going. Do they see Jesus?

Prayer

Lord, I confess that I do not always prioritize the things that matter most over the things that matter least. Show me where I can grow, what I can change, and how I can be more intentional with every moment you give me breath. You are the air in my lungs, the literal Spirit inside me. My time is yours. I surrender it back to you. Amen.

Harmonize and Sing!

Imagine the most beautiful song you've ever heard. Perhaps it was a moment that gave you goosebumps or you could feel the tears begin to well up in your eyes. Maybe the lyrics spoke to you in a special way or a whole bunch of cumulative things made that particular song at that particular moment deeply meaningful. I can't pick just one song or one moment that has made a deep impact on me. At various times in my life, different songs have spoken to me. And consistently, these are songs with beautiful harmonies. The harmony builds and brings the listener in, building deeper connection to the song than if we were to hear only one consistent melody.

We, as a body of believers, united in Christ and on a mission to do what Jesus calls us to do, live as harmonies to one another. We're each a little bit different, gifted with unique strengths and talents that God has appointed for you and for me, and we could do life – even the Christian life – alone. But what's a harmony by itself? Better yet, what's a melody by itself? It's a little hollow, empty, and you can feel there's supposed to be something more.

We, church, are the something more. We are invited to live our lives connected to one another and to our Creator and Savior. As a church body, everyone's gifts and strengths are needed so we have the most robust, deeply beautiful, harmonized choir the world has ever seen or heard. Everyone has a part to sing and a life to live out that is uniquely theirs. We're far better together, church. We have the opportunity to invite everyone to join this beautiful song – to sing their part and to experience the robust and miraculous movement of being people united in Jesus Christ. This is a movement that no one is going to want to miss!

Prayer

Good and gracious God, you direct my steps and take delight in every detail of my life (Psalm 37:23). I have strengths and gifts that are unique to me. Direct my steps so that I may use them for your glory and direct my path so that it aligns with the desires of your heart. May my desires be your desires. May my life be a harmony in your great choir. I trust that you know the path better than me. So I trust you to be my guide on this journey and in this choir. You're the director; I will follow you. Amen.

United in Christ

We are one body, united in Christ. That's a core value here at Hope. As your body functions, each system, each organ, down to each cell and the tiny organelles that make up our cells, have a specific role to play. Everything needs to work together for you to function properly. If the church is a body, united in who and where God has called us, then we – all together – are all the pieces that make it 'go.'

The early church started simply by word-of-mouth. People couldn't stop talking about the resurrected Messiah, this Savior, named Jesus Christ. As this news spread, people were risking their lives to talk about it and start 'being the church' together. The early church had no choice but to wholly depend on one another. They were the first (really good, but certainly not perfect) example of one body, united in Christ. They were united, they testified powerfully, there were no needy people among them, and they shared everything they had. Every person was a piece of the system that made it 'go.' And that early church spread like wildfire!

Even today, each one of us has something unique to share with those around us. When the church functions the way that God planned for it to function, there should be no needy people among us; we should be completely united in the mission God has called us to. What stops you from bringing your unique gifts and resources to give in service to the body of Christ? Perhaps we think "no one wants what I have to offer ... or I don't have anything to offer ... or someone else will surely fill that need ..." and the list goes on.

Our resources, our talents, our unique gifts are not really ours, church. They are God's! He is the one who has gifted us with our things and talents and resources. And giving them back to Him is simply an act of surrender in which we acknowledge, "Lord, you can do far more with my strengths, talents, and resources than I could ever do with them on my own." What if ... there could be no needy people among us? What if ... the church could share everything we have? What if ... we could all be united in heart in mind? It's possible, church!

Prayer

Simply repeat this over and over again today – I give everything and everyone to you, Lord. I trust you. Amen.

Curious, Not Offended

Think of an example in your life or in the world that you would characterize by the words “holy and united.” Maybe there’s a person that comes to mind (...Jesus?! Always a right answer at church!). Maybe you’re in a small group or church fits those words. Or, maybe nothing came to mind. In our cultural climate, “holy and united” seem few and far between.

Throughout Scripture, God is pretty clear that His people are set apart; they’re different than the world. His people are also called to be united – united in forgiveness, love, and peace. A misconception of our world is that to be united means that we need to be the same. We need to be of the same mind, same beliefs, same agendas. *Unity* in Christ does not equate to *uniformity* in Christ. For those who like a simple equation, unity \neq uniformity.

Instead, as Paul writes to this early church in Colossae, he reminds them that they might get offended by a brother or sister in Christ. It was a reality of their world then and it’s certainly a reality of our world today. Because they aren’t exactly the same, there will be differences of opinion. He encourages them, “make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you.” Why? Because the Lord forgave you.

I’m fond of saying that when we’re offended, we stop listening. Instead of being offended, what might happen if we were curious first? Rather than standing on the defensive, putting up walls when we hear or see something that could be upsetting, what if we asked questions that began with “Help me understand ...”

God chose you to be the holy (set apart) ones he loves. What does that look like? It looks like unity – a united body on the move characterized by mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, love and peace. A people who stand united and curious, actively working toward peace and love.

Prayer

Lord, show me the places where I could be more curious than offended. Build me up in more forgiveness and love. Let my light shine as a peacemaker in your Kingdom, standing united with my brothers and sisters. Fill me with more of you today. Amen.

Attached to the Vine

Healthy things grow! As we focus on building connection, with each other and with God, it is crucial that we remain attached to the true vine – Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. “For apart from me you can do nothing,” Jesus says to his disciples here in John’s gospel. What does it mean and what does it look like for you to remain in Jesus?

Let’s first focus on what it means to grow in connection with God. “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted!” As we grow in our connection with God, that looks like spending time with him – “remain in me.” How do you spend time with God? Do you have a daily and weekly rhythm? How do His words remain in you? Is there Scripture you enjoy reading and re-reading? One of the ways I enjoy just being with God and in his word is through worship music. Often, there will be direct quotes from Scripture that will run through my mind because I heard them in a song. Daily devos or Bible reading plans are also helpful tools as we learn to simply be in the Word. As you dive into these devos, I encourage you to sit with the Scripture verses for a little bit of time. Maybe read them a couple times per day and ask God, “Lord, what do you have for me in this today?”

Then, as we grow in connection with others, Jesus tells his disciples, “When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples.” By first remaining in Him, we then bear fruit. Remember, healthy things grow! We begin to bear fruit as people attached to the vine. Think fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are things that help us grow in connection with others. Imagine if in every conversation each day you could offer more of these fruit than the day before! Imagine the compounding impact in your life when you take small steps daily to remain in the vine! God has great things for you – remain in him!

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, that you are the vine! Thank you that I simply get to be with you. Help me to bear good fruit and stay connected to you all the time. Show me the moments where I leave the vine, unintentionally, and decide I am in control. I confess there are times I try to bear my own fruit. Forgive me and bring me back to you so that I may produce more and more good fruit every day. Amen.

Devoted

We live in a culture that really likes convenient and comfortable. In my convenient and comfortable life, I confess that I have not **devoted** myself to fellowship, sharing in meals with my fellow believers, and to prayer. The Greek verb that we translate 'devoted' literally means "to be steadfastly attentive to, to continue all the time, to persevere and not to faint." To be steadfastly attentive to, to continue all the time, and to persevere in prayer, fellowship, and the teaching God has for me is not convenient! I tell myself I have other things that require my time and attention, like family or work or activities, and those aren't bad things. And, when we first focus on **devotion** to the things that bring us closer to God, we can show up in more fullness, grace, and love for the things and people we love.

The early church we read about in Acts **devoted** themselves to a life characterized by fellowship, learning, and prayer. Honestly, the world the early church was formed in was not comfortable or convenient. They really didn't have much else to lean on – they had God and one another. We might venture to say it was actually easier for them to devote themselves to these things because they literally didn't have much – not many material possessions, physical wealth, or devices that demanded their attention. And because of their devotion, they saw signs and wonders, they worshiped freely with one another at the Temple and in their homes, they praised God, and the Lord continued to add more and more people to this huge Jesus party – on Earth and in heaven!

As a church, we have a vision to make heaven more crowded. This happens when we **devote** ourselves to the things that God knows will help us overflow to the world around us – fellowship, His teaching, and prayer. I know it is probably more convenient to 'fit in' these practices when it works for you. I also know that God doesn't 'fit in' our box. Our devotion to Him, above all else, as inconvenient and uncomfortable as it might be, results in an overflow, revival, and massive Jesus-party that the world around us can't miss. Don't miss it! Be in awe – watch for the signs and wonders!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I want to see your signs and wonders! I want to be in awe of you every day! Lord, help me to devote my life to you. Show me how I can grow in that today. One step at a time, one minute at a time. Help me to grow closer to you so that I can shine your light more and more. Jesus, we want your party to come to Earth and to make heaven more crowded! Amen.

Love in Action

John 3:16 is arguably the most famous Bible verse and is often called the “Gospel in a nutshell.” It is taught in Sunday School classes and many of us had to memorize it at some point during our confirmation days. When the cameras scan the crowds in major sporting events, you can often spot a fan holding up a sign with John 3:16 on it.

Maybe because the verse is so well known and heard so often, we’ve become desensitized to its impact. As the giving campaign moves towards its climax in a few days, it’s good to recenter ourselves in this “Gospel in a nutshell” so we remember to keep the main thing the main thing.

John 3:16 begins with this life-changing statement: because God loved, he gave. Giving is a sign of love, a concrete gesture of the abstract concept of love. Giving is love in action.

My husband does not appreciate dandelions in our lawn, but when I see them, I’m reminded of a wilted dandelion “bouquet” handed to me by our two-year old daughter. She loved, so she gave me something she thought would make me smile. Her “bouquet” didn’t just bring a smile to my face, my heart overflowed with love for her!

When we love, the impulse is to give. And there are more impactful gifts than material ones. Think of how timely the gift of good advice can be. Or the thoughtful gift of a loved one’s full attention. Or the precious gift of someone’s time. We know these gifts of love can brighten our day, change our attitude, impact our life.

So, are we surprised when God himself gives the greatest gift out of his love for us? God gives Jesus so we can be a part of his family, we are called beloved daughters, sons, friends! When we experience the incredible gift of love we’ve been given, our reaction is to want to share that love with others.

Let’s keep the main thing, the main thing – God loved and gave, so we love and give, sharing what we have so others can experience God’s love themselves!

Prayer

Prayer project:

- Think of several gifts you’ve received because someone loves you
- Think of several gifts you’ve given because you love someone
- Pray and thank God for the people who love you and the people you love and ask how you can show your love even to people you don’t know

The Best Hope

Hope is a funny thing. And I'm not talking about Lutheran Church of Hope, though we are definitely funny!

I'm talking about hope that is both an emotion and a way of thinking. Hope imagines and reaches for a better future. The emotion part of hope is a sense of trust in others and a feeling that you can both care for, and be cared for, by others. People with strong relationships tend to have more hope. The thinking part of hope is the ability to work towards that preferred future and knowing the steps to take.

Hope is a powerful thing – people who have hope, despite being imprisoned in concentration or prison camps, are more likely to survive and patients with hope often respond better to treatment of their illness.

Since hope is so powerful, what do you place your hope in? Looking at our culture, a visitor from another planet would assume many of us hope in our jobs, our bank accounts, or our retirement plans. Others seem to trust in their educational achievement or athletic ability. Others put their hope in position or power or popularity. And others hope in their family or friends or networks of acquaintances.

Hoping in these things isn't bad ... until they fail. Jobs are lost, popularity wanes, age impacts our athletic talents, family and friends are only human and mess up. Is there someplace we can put our ultimate hope that won't fail and leave us hanging?

Our Bible verse for today gives us the answer. The prophet Isaiah told the people of God they should put their hope in the servant who would not trample on others, who would speak softly and not harshly, and who would bring justice to the world (Isaiah 42:1-4). Matthew quotes this verse, pointing out that Jesus is the servant God sent into the world, to be the hope of the world.

Jesus brings our best future, greater than we can imagine! Jesus is the one we can trust. Jesus cares for us. Jesus knows the way, and shows the way, to the life of joy and love and peace we long for.

When we hope in Jesus, we know our future is bright, regardless of what today looks like. And that hope (including the church) is something to be shared with the world!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Jesus is the hope of our world. Help me to hold onto Jesus as my best hope and show me how I can share that hope with the world around me. Amen

What Is Reliable?

What do you think of when you hear the word reliable? I think of all those things in life that I assume are going to be there and work the way I expect them to. I want my hot water heater to be reliable so I can take a hot shower every day. I want my phone service to be reliable so I can text family and friends. I want my car to be reliable and start every time I push the button.

So, when the electricity is out because of a severe thunderstorm that brought down powerlines (just before we were leaving for vacation) I was not happy I couldn't look forward to my hot shower before we got on the plane. When the nationwide Verizon outage happened several weeks ago, I was frustrated because my phone wouldn't send texts – and because I couldn't check the news on my phone, I didn't even know there was an outage until six hours after it began. And it's inconvenient when I forget to throw my car keys in my purse before I head out the door to drive to work and the car won't start. At least *that* problem is easily fixed!

I want things to be reliable and I avoid anything that's unreliable.

Then why do many of us rely heavily on our money to make us happy when it can be very unreliable? Anyone who watched the housing market crash during the Great Recession of 2008 experienced that firsthand. Obviously, this problem didn't just materialize in our world in the last few decades – Paul wrote to Timothy in the first century AD about this very same problem. And centuries before Paul, God told Moses that when the Israelites came into the Promised Land, they would become prosperous and forget to rely on God (Deuteronomy 31:20).

In our culture, money allows us to take care of our basic needs, but when we have accomplished that, God reminds us that “true life” comes when we use our money to do good, to be generous, and to share. It is investing in *relationships* that we find the “life that's truly life” (1 Timothy 6:17, NIV).

And the most reliable relationship? That's with God! Invest in *him* – the return on that investment is eternal!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, you always keep your promises even when I struggle to keep mine. Teach me to invest in relationships, with my family and friends, with my co-workers and acquaintances, and especially in my relationship with you. Amen

The Courage to Share

Have you ever experienced a similar scene in your house? Our girls were playing quietly together while I folded laundry when I heard one child wail, "It's mine!"

"No, it's mine!"

"No. It's. Mine!"

"MOM!!"

If you are a parent, you've refereed this kind of spat many times, and hopefully used it as a teaching moment about sharing with a playmate. If you were ever a child, you were one of the major characters in this little drama, whether the scene played out with a sibling or a friend and whether you remember or not. Learning how to share is one of the foundational lessons each of us needs to conquer in order to get along with others.

Sharing is a hard thing for kids to do ... and for adults, if we are honest with ourselves. That "selfishness" gene seems to be pretty dominant in the human makeup. Selfishness is linked with fear – fear of not having enough, fear of losing out, fear of being left behind, fear of not being loved, you name it.

Yet one of the most common phrases in the Bible is, "Don't be afraid."

We are reminded in 1 John 4:18 that God's perfect love casts out all fear. When we are unafraid, we are free to share.

Earlier in Hebrews chapter 13, the author warns us not to neglect to show hospitality to strangers because we may be in the midst of a holy encounter. Now, near the end of the chapter, this warning is expanded beyond simple hospitality. We are to actively do good and to share what we have.

Holy encounters can happen when we share a meal with others and also when we share our time with a stressed parent or our expertise with a struggling co-worker or our money with a cause that brings justice and expands God's kingdom on earth.

Lean into God's perfect love and don't be afraid to share!

Prayer

Prayer project:

- Name a fear that leads you to be afraid of sharing
- Now ask God to show you how that fear limits the abundant life he wants for you
- Ask God's perfect love to cast out your fear

Forest or Trees?

How are you feeling about the state of the world? Think things are going well or are you overwhelmed by the challenges facing humanity?

It only takes one look at the news to begin to lose hope – the problems seem so huge! How do we unite a country divided by political fights? How do we deal with the crisis of mental health issues children and adults are dealing with? How do you combat the rising epidemic of loneliness?

Sometimes when we look at problems, we see the forest and miss the trees.

The Israelites were traveling in the wilderness when God gave Moses the instructions to build a beautiful space where they all could gather to worship. Can you imagine what the average Israelite thought when Moses shared the plan – the needs were so great, but each person individually had so little. They were wandering in a desert, after all! I'm sure people wondered if their little contribution would make a difference.

But just as a few fluffy snowflakes, piled up together, can stop traffic, so does each little offering make a difference. In fact, each offering is called sacred, holy, set apart, special, not just the big contributions.

We may not be able to unite the whole country, but we can provide spaces where people can get to know one another and find common ground. We may not be able to solve the overall mental health crisis, but we can provide opportunities for people to connect and feel seen and valued. We can tackle the loneliness problem one smile and one conversation at a time.

This campaign is the opportunity to do your small part. Added with all the other small parts, we can build a beautiful gift to share with our community – a space to find healing and love.

Each gift, large or small, is sacred, and will make an impact that touches eternity!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, the problems in our world seem so big and I feel so small in the face of them. Please show me one small way I can be a part of the solution and give me the strength to move forward in the path where you are leading me. Amen

Taking the Test

If you are like most people, you don't like tests. Even though I've taken innumerable tests throughout both of my careers, I still detest them.

Apparently, God isn't a fan of tests, either. Many times in the Bible, we are warned not to put God to the test. This is because when we test God, we want him to prove to us that we can trust him. But God's character is to be trustworthy. So when we test God, we are challenging him to prove something we should already know and understand.

But what if God challenges us to test him?

The prophet Malachi tells God's people that the Messiah is coming, and great abundance and joy will follow. But the people are skeptical – they've been waiting so long, they aren't sure whether they can trust God's promises anymore. So God challenges them – if they obey God, the windows of heaven will be opened and blessings will pour down.

When I imagine the windows of heaven opening, I think of rain coming down to water a dry land and how wonderful it is to stand in that rain, with my face tilted to the sky.

What blessings does God want to shower on us? Is it a renewed faith? A renewed relationship? A renewed neighborhood? The thanks of a grateful stranger, the smile of a child, the visitor who will become a friend? The laughter of a teen, the relief of a parent, the shining eyes of a senior?

Give it a shot – test God! Give to the Building Hope for Tomorrow campaign what God lays on your heart and watch the blessings overflow!

This is one test you want to take!!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, what do you want to do through me to move your mission forward in our community? Show me the blessings you want to shower on me, my family, and the world around me, and ignite my heart to move forward with you. Amen

A Cheerful Heart

What makes you cheerful?

Maybe it's a great cup of coffee with a friend. It could be walking into the house, smelling the chocolate chip cookies that just came out of the oven. It might even be crossing off the last thing on your To Do list.

Was giving on your list of what makes you cheerful?

To be honest, giving doesn't immediately make the top ten of my "what makes me cheerful" list, especially when I'm feeling pressured to give to a cause that I don't have much stake in. The exception is when the Girl Scouts come calling – I'm happy to give to the cause that rewards with Thin Mints!

Too often we give because we're made to feel guilty, or the pressure tactics are so effective that we give grudgingly, or more than we really wanted to offer. That's not God's heart – it never has been. All the way back in Deuteronomy, God tells the Israelites that when they give, they should not have a stingy heart (Deuteronomy 15:10). What matters to God is the attitude we have when we give. It is better to give a small amount with a heart filled with gratitude, than a large amount with a heart that makes Scrooge look joyful!

Paul lays this out very clearly in 2 Corinthians. We are to give as we feel led by God, not because some super salesperson or marketer knew how to push our buttons. The only person we should be discussing our giving with is God (and our spouse, if we have one!). We are to be happy to share what we have, not reluctant or hesitant. If we're listening to God, the amount won't be too much or too little, but exactly what is best for you and your family and your faith.

You don't have to be cheerful for God to love you, but if you are able to give cheerfully, your relationship with God will be strengthened!

And that's ultimately what this entire campaign is about – strengthening our relationship with the God who already loves us and sharing that love with the world around us!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I want to be a cheerful giver because you cheerfully give me everything I need. Touch my heart with your love and teach me to be your hands and feet in the world, joyfully sharing with the world around me. Amen



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