

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of December 31, 2017

Weekly Prayer: O God, you sent Christ to live among us, the true light that entered this world and cannot be extinguished. As we enter a New Year, guide us through all the dark stretches of our lives. Help us to see more clearly your glorious light while we work to push back the darkness and live as children of light. To this end, prepare us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Monday, January 1, 2018

Scripture: Philippians 3:10-14

The righteousness that I have comes from knowing Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the participation in his sufferings. It includes being conformed to his death so that I may perhaps reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead. It's not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus.

Observation: In these words, so fitting for New Year's Day, the apostle Paul testified about how he kept reaching to grow into all God called him to be. As The Message renders these verses, he said, "I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me....I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back."

Application: In verse 13, Paul shared an essential truth in pursuing God's goals: "I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me." The process of growing spiritually focuses on what is to come, not what lies behind. Are you letting anything from your past define you in the present? If so, ask God to help you let it go. Focus your energy on the year ahead, not the things (bad or good) in the past.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, make it more true of me this year that "the goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus." Keep my eyes on the prize of the ultimate goal of life in your kingdom. Amen.

Tuesday, January 2, 2018

Scripture: Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.

Observation: We value the fresh start(s) each New Year brings. But even as we celebrate the New Year, we are aware that each human year brings some disappointments and pain, too. But we can remember that the Bible's grand story ends in Paradise restored. Images drawn from the prophet Isaiah (especially chapters 28 and 65) pictured the world as God meant it to be, with no pain, suffering or death. There, "the one seated on the throne" made a better promise: "Look! I'm making all things new," truly new.

Application: The ancient world relied on city walls and strong gates to shut out danger. In that world, Revelation said an amazing thing about God's eternal city: "On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there" (Revelation 21:25). As 2018 begins, many of us have to deal with strong feelings of fear about whatever we are facing and even events in our world. What "walls and gates" are you counting on which may sometimes fail? How does Christ's presence today calm your fears?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I thank you for the gift of life, for the chance to start this year as your child. And I thank you for the assurance you offer me of an eternity with you, in a world where we never have to shut the gates to lock out danger. Amen.

Wednesday, January 3, 2018

Scripture: Romans 8:22-28

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Observation: The past week, we have seen all sorts of reviews of the past year. The end of one year and the start of another is a time to review 2017. We are inclined to focus on our own triumphs and regrets. Romans 8 suggests a different perspective. Why not see to what extent we can identify how God has worked for our good in all things during the past year?

Application: The apostle wrote that even when we find ourselves at a loss, "the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans." Do you see prayer as just a time when you figure out what to talk to God about? Reflect on the amazing mystery that God does not just passively listen to your prayers, but actually helps you pray. If there are questions and pains that leave you speechless, lay them before God today.

Prayer: Loving Lord, I want to trust you. I need to live in your hope. Go with me into this New Year, that I may face none of its days entirely in my own strength. Amen.

Thursday, January 4, 2018

Scripture: Colossians 3:12-17

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any

of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Observation: As Colossians described the qualities of truly holy living, the letter didn't say we are "called into an organization," but "called in one body." The image suggests that Jesus connects us to each other organically, like a leg or arm joined to a body. We are part of something greater than ourselves.

Application: About year 100 AD, Pliny, a Roman official, wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan calling Christianity a crime, and asking how best to stamp it out. It was clear that Christians' ultimate allegiance was to God, not Caesar, as their ruler. Which parts of this passage most describe your life as a Christ-follower? Which parts challenge you to keep growing?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, shape my heart more and more each day to live a life of "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience." I can't do that alone, but you promise to remake me in your image—and I thank you. Amen.

Friday, January 5, 2018

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Observation: "Love keeps no score of wrongs" is a difficult ideal, perhaps an impossible one to live fully in this life. Paul knew that: "Now we know in part," he said in verse 9. But ideals matter. You can see the results of unchecked "keeping score" by looking at Palestinians and Israelis, and dozens of other hostile ethnic groups. Nearer home, you can study thousands of broken relationships. And remember: Paul sent these words originally to church members who were feuding over status and rank.

Application: This passage gives us a compact list of how love does and does not act. Which of the items listed do you value most from someone else? Which is the most challenging for you to offer to another person? How are you opening your life to God's influence so that you can grow in these qualities?

Prayer: Loving Lord, every day I want to love as you love. Every day, at some point, I fall short of that ideal. But every day your love enfolds me, and I trust it to help me keep growing toward the kind of life you call me to live. Amen.

Saturday, January 6, 2018

Scripture: Romans 8:31-39

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with

him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Observation: The apostle Paul sent the Romans quite a list of challenges: “trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword.” He’d faced all of these and more (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:23-27), but he was not complaining. He wrote the list to say, “In all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us” (verse 37). No matter what life throws at us, we, too, can march with Paul and a long line of believers in God’s eternal victory parade.

Application: Paul asked two compelling questions: “If God is for us, who is against us?” and “Who will separate us from Christ’s love?” He phrased both in a way that assumed the answer was “Nobody and nothing!” Has your life so far pretty much worked out the way you’d hoped, or have you had significant hurdles and pain to overcome? What spiritual “anchors” keep you connected to God’s love and the hope and peace God offers, even when times get difficult?

Prayer: All powerful God, whatever comes my way, hold me close in the shelter of your love. Thank you that, through you, I can win a sweeping victory in “all these things.” Amen.