



21 DAYS OF PRAYER - January 9-29, 2022

Epic Church Family,

As we start a new year together as a church family, it's my prayer that 2022 will be a year where we experience significant growth in our spiritual maturity. I believe God wants to AWAKEN our devotion *to* Him and our dependence *on* Him. Let's not settle for where our faith was in 2021!

One of the ways we can increase our devotion and express our dependence on God is through prayer. Prayer is an opportunity to draw close to God and receive the peace of God.

6 Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. 7 Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. - Philippians 4:6-7

Since the beginning of our church in 2013, we have strived to make prayer a priority. Our heart has simply been to "PRAY FIRST." In every situation, whether good or bad, we strive to pray before we act. We want prayer to be our first response, not our last resort.

As a church, we have two seasons each year (January and August) called *21 Days of Prayer*. It's our hope for *21 Days of Prayer* to be an opportunity for us all to draw closer to God and seek Him in a fresh way.

This *21 Days of Prayer* guide was designed to provide a prayer focus for each day. I'm so excited about this guide because one of our group leaders, Dan Bender, has put these daily devotionals and prayers together. I'm looking forward to using this guide over the next 21 days to draw closer to God and I hope you do the same!

I'd encourage you to set aside some time each day using this guide. Maybe include worshipping God through music as a part of this time or use a notebook/journal to write down some of your thoughts. The more we prioritize prayer, the more connecting with God will be a natural part of our lives.

I'll be praying for you to draw closer to God over these next 21 days (January 9-29). If there is anything our pastors or staff can help you with, please let us know.

God Bless,

Pastor Mark

DAY 1 - Sunday, January 9

Happy New Year! Here's to more satisfying days ahead! The fact that you're reading this devotional is a testament to your desire to start the year off on the right footing, with hopes of discovering "BETTER."

It's probably fair to say that the phrase "The way forward..." is familiar fodder for speech writers in framing the state of any particular institution or organization. Yes, we've heard it a lot over the expanse of our lives. Right now, though, like so much other worn-out rhetoric it's lost its "groove," and has been relegated to the "yeah, whatever" bin.

Communicating hope in questionable circumstances like we've been witnessing the last couple of years, can be a daunting task. How would you like to have been Isaiah the prophet...? You may be familiar with the dramatic story of his vision of the Lord of Glory in Isaiah chapter 6. In the midst of all this amazing effect of the presence of God and His heavenly entourage, God asks, "Whom shall I send as a messenger to these people?" The response of Isaiah is as much as to say, "me... me, pick me!" The Father gives him the commission and the words to say, warning Isaiah that they won't listen, won't see, won't try and understand, won't bend their hearts to grasp what the message is. If you're thinking... hey, this sounds like some days with my kids or my co-workers, then you get my point.

Now, stay with me here, it really does get better. Since the beginning of creation, before there was time, God the Father's intent was fellowship with us. It's true that this fellowship was interrupted by sin and the fall, but His intent has never faltered. The remedy for what ails us (sin), has been from the start, the promise and fulfillment of the Messiah, Jesus. Isaiah and all the prophets and the entirety of the Old Testament narrative have pointed to Jesus, both His first arrival and the second coming. You can tick all the boxes showing the completion of the promises of the first advent of Christ. And perhaps some of the indications of the second coming fall into that category as well. Here's the thing: you can trust and rely on the Word of God to deliver. It always accomplishes the very thing He sets it in motion to achieve. *So will my Word be which goes out of my mouth; it will not return to Me void (useless, without result), Without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.* (Isa. 55:11 AMP).

Forgive my rhetorical insertion here, but the "Way Forward" is to *Trust in the Lord completely, and do not rely on your own opinions. With all your heart rely on Him to guide you, and He will lead you in every decision you make.* (Prov. 3:5 TPT).

PRAYER

O gracious and loving Father, help me by your Holy Spirit to "steel" my heart to commit myself, my thoughts, and my ways to You as You have been continually

showing me in your Word. Assist me to remember these great and precious promises and to prefer its joyful message to the rhetoric of the world. AMEN.

DAY 2 - Monday, January 10

On a recent pre-dawn December day I went out for my customary morning walk. Pre-dawn hardly involves much discipline at all deep into December. The sun comes up at what, quarter to eight? At any rate on this day it didn't matter what time it was, waking up was a struggle. Fortunately, getting dressed is almost akin to unconscious breathing.

Psalm 139 indicates that God knows our thoughts, and even before a word is formed on our lips, He knows it completely. This day I didn't give Him much to work with either in thought or word. But the cold morning air and the coffee cup in my hand eased me into a state of awareness. Welcome to the land of the living!

In November of 1731 in Leipzig, Germany, J.S. Bach performed a famous work entitled "Wachet Auf," or Sleepers Awake. It was based on a hymn tune written by German pastor Philip Nicolai in the midst of an epidemic that ravaged his community. 400 years later, it still comforts and inspires.

Consider for a moment, your own state of being awake. The physical & mental aspect of being awake is one thing, and I'll leave you to your own devices to manage that. What about spiritual awaken-ness, the state of your soul? What does it take for you to get "in the zone?" Why should that matter? It matters because the Father is concerned about you in that regard.

Do this, knowing that this is a critical time. It is already the hour for you to awaken from your sleep [of spiritual complacency]; for our salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed [in Christ]. The night [this present evil age] is almost gone and the day [of Christ's return] is almost here. So let us fling away the works of darkness and put on the [full] armor of light. (Rom 13:11,12 AMP)

This past year as we've worshipped together, we've sung together a song written by Andrew Peterson – "Is He Worthy." The uniqueness of this song is that it is a question and answer format which asks whether or not we see what's going on around us... "do you feel the world is broken?" and the congregation answers "we do..." It's hard not to get drawn into this melody and the impactful word concepts it presents to us. It goes soul-deep. It should.

As the Spirit of the Living God moves across this planet today, think about something with me. I told you about Bach's "Sleepers Awake," in 1731, it's interesting to note that the 'Great Awakening' in America also happened in the 1730s. I don't think that's a coincidence. You and I are here in this generation with a grand purpose. "Awake

sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” (Eph. 5:14)

PRAYER

O Lord God of all things, time and history are in your grasp. Awaken our hearts and minds to this thing that you are doing among us today. Enlighten us in your presence here in this moment to leave off our dull and lethargic state of being, energize us with your Holy Spirit instead, and let your great light shine to this people living in darkness among us. Amen.

DAY 3 - Tuesday, January 11

It was March of 2020, in the throes of the Covid pandemic. We were still “worshipping remotely” together as a congregation. The day was a damp, dreary Sunday morning and I was in the mood for a walk and a cup of coffee. A lot of stuff was shut down completely or partially. I knew Tim Horton’s drive-thru was open and a worthy mile-and-a-half trek. I was looking forward to both the walk and the reward at the end of the journey.

Did you know that a drive-through speaker is triggered by the weight of a vehicle? Who knew?! Even a motorcycle would do the trick. But a skinny guy weighing in at a buck-forty doesn’t get it done. Really? I can’t get a cup of coffee? I went around to the drive-up window, and they confirmed my suspicions... no dice. So, I walked back home.

I was unaware, but a young guy in an old, beat-up Chevy Cruze was watching this whole thing play out. As I was walking along back home, I heard a horn give me a friendly “toot,” and a voice calling out “hey..!” A gloved hand thrust a large coffee through an opened car window. “Here you go man... it’s on me. Just be sure you pay it forward, okay?” A smile and off he went. Never saw him again.

There’s something astonishing about how stuff like this happens. A seed is planted intentionally somewhere along the line. It’s good seed. It shoots up and bears fruit. Farmers get it. You get it. And when you stop and think about what’s at the kernel of it (pun intended), it’s HOPE! You’d never plant something without the fervent expectation that it’s going to grow and produce something neat.

What incredible joy bursts forth within us as we keep on celebrating our hope of experiencing God’s glory!

But that’s not all! Even in times of trouble we have a joyful confidence, knowing that our pressures will develop in us patient endurance. And patient endurance will refine our character, and proven character leads us back to hope. And this hope is not a disappointing fantasy, because we can now experience the endless love of God cascading into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who lives in us! (Rom 5:2-5 TPT)

My "coffee angel" demonstrated hope-personified, in that he paid it forward with the hope that it would generate more good will in somebody else's life. If he can do it. I can do it. You can do it. It's a God-thing. You are a God-created creature, made for good works... pass it on!

PRAYER

Lord of all creation, in a word You created light and life and what a joy and wonder to behold as you continue to sustain it all. Remind me how "real hope" doesn't disappoint, doesn't go wide right, but stays straight down the middle because You are the sustainer of all things. You are the One who was, who is, and who is to come! Amen.

DAY 4 - Wednesday, January 12

My friend Mark and I have been sharing adventures for several decades now. It began with a common interest in cycling... "road bikes" as opposed to mountain bikes. For a time our ignorance allowed us to be snobs about our chosen rides. At some point knowledge and humility intervened and we realized that any bicycle is a good bicycle. It's about the ride, the ability to just be a kid again with the wind in your hair.

One year we decided to embark on a 150-mile ride to Syracuse. Training began in March. At the outset frozen water bottles were the norm. But we stayed with it, riding each morning at 6:00 am before work, getting in about 15 or 20 miles. So, suffice it to say, we spent a lot of hours together.

Conversations generally centered on family, faith, and work life. Both of us were engaged in aspects of marketing. His was sales/service, mine was creative/production. On the sales side he was always pushing the envelope of "selling the sizzle" of the steak, get you salivating over the buying experience. Because my side of the equation was more anchored in deliverables, I would always caution, "control the expectations!" His retort was always, "c'mon don't be afraid, it's just a concept." This friendly sparring gave us both an appreciation of the bigger picture.

Healthy tension is hard to come by these days. The prophet Habakkuk (don't worry about the pronunciation) experienced just such healthy tension in his conversations with God. The prophet complains, *"Violence is everywhere... I am surrounded by people who love to argue and fight."* (Hab 1:2-3) God's reply is, *"...look, and be amazed! For I am doing something in your own day, something you wouldn't believe even if someone told you about it."* Two thousand, six-hundred thirty years later this conversation is still relevant!

If we look deeper, we will see something we may otherwise miss. One case-in-point: there are more subscribers to the YouVersion Bible app than ever before. Recently the

number of downloads reached over 500 million. That's an amazing distribution of the scriptures since only 2006. And, okay, there's a big number of those subscribers who were simply augmenting their trove of bibles with one more, but worldwide, there's never been a time like this where the Word is being published and so widely distributed in so many languages. Again, from Habakkuk: "*For as the waters fill the sea, the earth will be filled with an awareness of the glory of the Lord.*" (Hab 2:14) You are a part of what God is doing in your own day. Awaken to this awareness. Speak life right where you are.

PRAYER

How deep will you lead me O lovingkind Father? Let me not be afraid. Draw me into this conversation and "teach me to do your will, for you are my God. Cause me to know that path I should follow, for I lift up my soul to you." (Ps 143:8) Amen.

DAY 5 - Thursday, January 13

There's a band I like, called Caedmon's Call that started up in the mid-nineties. Their website bio describes them as "The band that felt like the kid in the youth group who fought through the malaise of church culture and found an authentic faith..." Maybe that's why they resonated with me, since at that time I was working with my church's youth group, and I could relate to that kid.

I loved their lyrics and the poignant way they could turn a phrase and cut straight to the heart, mostly because it was so consistent with the scriptures. Here's a snippet of one of their songs "Let Me Be" ...

*Lord, You are the maker of my heart
The framer and reshaper of my soul
Master and creator, healer and sustainer
I will put my trust in You alone*

*Teach me to be faithful to confess
In this way my spirit will be blessed
Though my sins are daily, You have loved me greatly
Removing them as far as East from West*

*Let me be open, let me be humble
Let me find the joy of my salvation in Your cross
Let me be broken whenever I stumble
Let me remember the great mercy of my God*

I tend to like music that provides the soundtrack if you will, for my life. Maybe you're the same way. I think it's an act of grace where I'm being shaped and formed by the things which God uses to get my attention. He weaves His way into my understanding

of Himself through common means. Most of the time, I don't even see it coming. It's there, in those moments where He inserts the wedge of brokenness.

Repentance is hard. Author John Bevere defines it like this: *Repentance means changing our mind so deeply that it changes our personality from the core of our being.* Do you ever feel like at some point God's going to get fed up with your constant pattern of fall / repent, fall / repent, fall / repent, repeat? I know I'm tempted to feel that way... a lot! The thing is, it's like learning to walk, it inherently includes a fair amount of falling down. But look at you now, you scarcely think about walking at all.

In His great and incomparable mercy, the Father knows this about us. Jesus once healed a blind man who at first saw "men as trees walking." Bizarre as that seems, Jesus did not abandon him but touched him once more and he saw clearly. He sticks with us while our sin problem is fixed. And we can be glad for this truth in Hebrews 7:25 - *Therefore He is able also to save forever (completely, perfectly, for eternity) those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to intercede and intervene on their behalf [with God].* Take it on trust. Smile knowing that if you keep His commands, you are in His love and care.

Now to Him who is able to [carry out His purpose and] do superabundantly more than all that we dare ask or think [infinitely beyond our greatest prayers, hopes, or dreams], according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20,21)

DAY 6 - Friday, January 14

My house was built in the 1920s. Over the last 34 years I've been updating, improving, and restoring the place. The restoration aspect of it always gives me pause to think about how the original craftsmen built the place with only hand tools. Common hammers, saws and chisels, planes and rasps were the means of making the wood do what it was meant to do – make a functional and beautiful dwelling place.

Hyssop was a tool. David, the psalmist, requests in Psalm 51:7 *Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean; Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.* He makes this request of God acutely aware of his offenses and the need for forgiveness. This is that same psalm where David later in this pouring out of his heart says, *Create in me a clean heart and renew a loyal spirit within me.*

There are numerous references to hyssop in the scriptures from Exodus to the crucifixion to the book of Hebrews. From the standpoint of botanical science, it's hard to know precisely what the nature of this plant was, other than it was used like a sort of brush or applicator especially with the blood of sacrifice. It was used in the first

Passover to apply the blood of the sacrificed lamb to the doorposts of the dwellings of the children of Israel. It also shows up in the account of the crucifixion.

The commonplace is frequently unnoticed in our day-to-day existence. This wispy plant or herb was so “everywhere” in the Mediterranean region as to be unremarkable. And yet, it has been forever relegated to a place of prominence because of its appearance in the scriptures. But what about it? Why should it matter? Its lesson to us is that God uses the commonplace like a tool to apply uncommon grace to our lives. We don’t often get to decide the means of delivery for the demonstration of the Father’s love toward us. Elijah was fed by ravens. Ravens don’t generally kill what they eat, they work off of what has already been killed (think roadkill) and/or what they can steal. Either way, do you want to put that in your mouth?

It is enough for us to be open and humbly disposed to receive what He has prepared for us regardless of the delivery system. Expect it to be unremarkable. But do expect it.

PRAYER

O gracious Adonai, the heavens and the earth are full of your glory. All created things come from you and belong to you. By all means, You draw us and deliver to us your extravagant love and mercy. Open my eyes and make me aware, awaken my heart to receive from you in the simple and ordinary things today. Shine Your light in and through me as I walk along before you. Amen.

DAY 7 - Saturday, January 15

How often do you think about your food? Okay, well maybe now if you’re engaging in a fast, really often. But what I am going for is not on the visceral level. What I mean is, did you ever think about where it comes from and what it goes through before it ends up on your plate?

Take bread for instance. It’s made from flour, yeast, egg, oil, salt, maybe a bit of sugar, water. The mixture gets smooshed together, stretched, beaten, rested then beaten again before it ends up in the oven to turn into that delightful crusty goodness.

But, before it becomes flour (which is an indignity all its own), the grain is planted in soil carefully prepared to accommodate its nutritional needs. Mark 4:28 describes it like this: *The earth produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head [of grain], then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop ripens, he immediately puts in the sickle [to reap], because [the time for] the harvest has come.* After harvesting, the kernel of the grain is separated from the husk or hull and then, it’s sent to the mill to be crushed into flour. But not all the grain is destined for the millstone. Some may be set aside to provide seed for the next crop.

Planting and harvesting is a constant life and death cycle. It is the spending and reproduction of life to invest in yet another life. Jesus exemplified this when He said in John 12:24-25... *"I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels – a plentiful harvest of new lives. Those who love their life in this world will lose it. Those who care nothing for their life in this world will keep it for eternity."*

Can I put myself out there and be that vulnerable for the sake of love and the Kingdom? I think I have to. My experience of eternity depends on it.

PRAYER

O Father, when I pray, give us (me) this day our (my) daily bread, remind me that Jesus is that bread, broken for me that I ask for. I need you every hour, every minute. But I also must remember that Jesus became broken bread and poured out wine for my sake and asks me to follow Him in a similar manner. Yet I don't have to feel intimidated, because His yoke is easy and His burden is light. Amen.

DAY 8 - Sunday, January 16

I hate boxing. Here's the story. Now apart from being my weakest sports trivia category, it's also something that was never a big attraction in family circles. Nobody boxed. Nobody went to boxing matches. Okay, we've established my ignorance on the subject. So, why then, when I was a college freshman, did I agree to go to the gym and "spar" with my roommate, Rich Bagatelli? (not his real name) Rich managed to convince me that I could do this being somewhat athletic and quick. He would, of course, "take it easy" on me. Outfitted with gloves and helmet, I gave it a go. The headache went away a few days later. I never went sparring again.

My ignorance and lack of conditioning did not serve me well on my foray into the "ring." My relentlessly foolish self would find this truth to repeat itself many more times in life (one-too-many hits to the head apparently). Over time the evidence would become strong in favor of preparing and conditioning before engaging in new things and/or grandiose plans. Success requires self-discipline & self-discipline requires focus and submission. I believe that realization is present in anyone we perceive to be really good at what they do... athletes, musicians, visual artists, scientists, engineers. The fact is natural talent and ability only get you in the gate. Making something of that gift takes practice – a lot of it. Oh, yes, and there's one more thing... humility.

Paul the apostle speaks to this "self-discipline" concept a little in I Corinthians 9:27 – *But [like a boxer] I strictly discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached [the gospel] to others, I myself will not somehow be disqualified [as unfit for service].* Here's the nugget you and I need to refine: the gift of God in Jesus Christ is amazing; it gets us in the gate. Still, our dependence on the grace of God is

unquestionable, and it is His continuous work in us that will bring us into ultimate unbroken fellowship with Him. Yes, we have responsibility to walk before Him in step with His Word as obedient disciples on this planet. Our abilities and gifts can only be made to shine more brightly as we submit our souls to the One who gives us all things freely.

PRAYER

Lord Christ, You are both the gift and the giver. Drive this truth deep into my soul and make me to know your presence in this moment. The scriptures tell me that I should let Your Word live in me with rich meaning. Bring this living Word to the surface of my life today and help me to give it first place in all I think, say, and do. Assist me to remember that it is You who is at work in me to give me the desire and the power to do what pleases You. Amen

DAY 9 - Monday, January 17

There's this song I've heard by Sandra McCracken entitled *Age After Age*, and its refrain tells of how we tend to benefit from standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. One phrase in the song at the end goes: *"Age after age of all the heroes and soldiers; God, give me sight and make me brave... as I am standing on their shoulders."*

How easy it is to lose sight of the hardships that people who came before us endured so we could have it better. My grandparents left Europe for a better life in America. They endured the great depression. Dad fought in WW II to preserve liberty for people not just here but on the other side of the globe. My life as I know it depended on their determination and commitment to something higher and better. Their goal was never 'establishing a legacy,' it was life, hope for the future. You and I are that future and in some ways it's a future they never got to see.

Isn't it ironic that our collective independence actually was dependent on those who came before us? There is a conscious setting-aside of privilege or preference that is required when we decide to 'go for it' in life's circumstances and opportunities. The goal is invariably to achieve something better with a view toward the future, toward hope. So, you submit to what it takes to get there. Abraham left Ur behind, Moses left Egypt, Ruth left Moab, the disciples left Jerusalem. The book of Hebrews cites those who went before us: *These were the true heroes, commended for their faith, yet they lived in hope without receiving the fullness of what was promised them. But now God has invited us to live in something better than what they had—faith's fullness! This is so that they could be brought to finished perfection alongside of us. (Heb 11:39-40)*

And you and I... what are we committed to surrender of ourselves in order that others may live? *Awake my soul and sing of Him Who died for thee and crown Him as thy*

matchless king for all eternity - so go the words to the old hymn, Crown Him with Many Crowns. Maybe it begins with us cultivating a deeper sense of worship toward the One who left heaven behind, all for us. We are standing on His shoulders.

PRAYER

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right and steadfast spirit within me. Certainly, I recognize that I am not here in your presence by my own merits, but because you've made it possible through the surrendered life of Jesus who knows me and redeems me in spite my tendencies. Lead me in a worshipful attitude in my life today, make it stick. Gratefully, I am your servant. Amen.

DAY 10 - Tuesday, January 18

One of the best features of the YouVersion bible app is the seemingly endless variety of devotionals. They span a huge range of authors and subjects and run from 3 days to weeks or even months-worth of daily readings designed to help you as you follow Christ.

Recently, I took up with an interesting one, "Goliath Must Fall – Winning the Battle Against Your Giants." The seven-day devotional by Louie Giglio is derived from a lengthier book by the same name. In it, he points to a passage from Psalm 23 – "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." There, he says, "Jesus promises to lead you, guide you, and protect you... not in the absence of your foes, but in their very presence." How encouraging is that?!

As we run up against the opposing forces in the universe that vie for power and control over anything and everything it can be daunting. I am tempted to think that anything I can do is too small and insignificant in the face of it all. But then there are these truths that bleed through all the morass and the chaos that run counter to the world's prevailing wisdom.

Truths like: "the meek will inherit the earth; My strength is made perfect in weakness; I give grace to the humble but resist the proud." Such is God's way. You and I may be inclined to think that the smallness of our efforts won't amount to much, but we would be wrong. Galatians says, "...don't allow yourselves to be weary in planting good seeds, for the season of reaping the wonderful harvest you've planted is coming!"

PRAYER

Father and God of all creation, I confess that the 'hidden things' in this world, in this walk with Christ, confound me. I know that I need to just rest in the truth of your word, but sometimes that feels harder than it ought to be. Help me to grasp that you've prepared a table for me in the presence of my enemies and that I can simply enjoy your company and the things that you've set before me for my health and nourishment. Like

Thomas the apostle, Lord, I do believe, but help me in the places where unbelief still hides. Amen.

DAY 11 - Wednesday, January 19

Amazing as it may sound, the wit and wisdom of a six-year-old, can sometimes stop you in your tracks. One day recently, Andrew, who's six, was heard to complain, "I just need more 'yes'... I don't get enough 'yes' today." His complaint was that every request he made yielded a response of no or not now. Certainly, I think we can all relate to those days. It does get exasperating and annoying, especially if the request seems "reasonable." Some days we just don't get enough "yes."

The Psalmist David has a way of baring his soul that makes you feel as if you're in good company, especially when he appeals to God for things that are "out-of-sorts." In Psalm 6 verses 2 & 3 he says... "Please deal gently with me Yahweh; show me mercy, for I'm sick and frail and weak. Heal me, Yahweh, for I'm falling apart. My soul is so troubled; but you, Yahweh – how long?" It is as if David taps into his six-year-old logic when in a sense he says hey, I'm dying here... how can I bring you praise if I'm dead? Little kids have a flair for the dramatic.

But David is nothing if not tenacious in his heart after God, because soon enough in Psalm 6 he proclaims "Yes! Yahweh my healer has heard all my pleading and has taken hold of my prayers and answered them all." And while it is not clear how long a period elapses before he receives his answer, the fact is, God hears and answers prayer. In James 5:16 we find that confession and prayer are the remedy for the restoration of our souls... "the heartfelt and persistent prayer of a believer can accomplish much." And James goes on to cite how that Elijah was also just an ordinary human being who prayed. The results were powerful. Don't sell yourself short, but also don't forget to watch for the answers. They're the best part and worth the wait.

PRAYER

O loving Father, child-like faith is hard to come by some days. A heart that is beaten down and battered can't easily find the patience that it takes to wait for an answer to prayer. But wait I will, because you are a good Father who delights in giving good things to His children, of whom I am one. Let me know the joy of these good things and rest in knowing that you always hear me. Amen.

DAY 12 - Thursday, January 20

I am a word-nerd. Take for instance the word 'etymology.' It's the study of the origin of words. For some reason, where words come from fascinate me. There's no better language on earth that is so full of words borrowed from other languages and cultures than English. We grab words and phrases from classical languages like Greek and Roman. Most European languages influence English in some form and they derive their

origins from a combination of the classical languages with Celtic and ancient Nordic dialects. Then there are eastern influences like Yiddish and Arabic that mix into it all. Add a smattering of indigenous dialects, shake it all together and voila! – English.

Here's a word for you... **render**. It has meanings that some dictionaries break out in 23 different categories – music, art, processing, building, etc. One meaning of particular interest to me is the notion of melting down something to extract impurities, leaving only the purest and best properties of something at the end of the process.

Now then, here's where it gets "nerdy." Surrender. Since we just saw the word render a few thoughts earlier, we have a little grasp of that concept. Add three letters (sur) to the front end of render and you have surrender. So what?! Well, for what it's worth, sur is a French derivation that means over and above or in addition to. We have words like surcharge, surname and survive. So, let's add 'sur' to render and drill a bit deeper into what this means to us in a sense of the Christ-life.

To surrender is counter to our natural inclinations. But it is essential that we embrace this notion as we follow Christ. It took me so long to get comfortable (and I'm still not there yet) with the idea that problems, troubles, inconveniences, struggles, whatever you want to call them – are all an important part of the work that the Holy Spirit does in our lives. They are the tools, the fire of refinement that makes good things come out of ridiculous pain. The problem is that we live with great expectation, based on biblical promises of future hope, that don't square with present problems.

1 Peter 1:6 & 7 says, "Be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold – though your faith is far more precious than mere gold." But for that to happen, we need to surrender ourselves to the process that will render us pure.

PRAYER

How deep Your love for us is O Father. Yet, I want to squirm away, out from under the pressure and away from the refiner's fire. But You know what's best. Wonderful are your works and my soul knows it very well. Help me to keep my mind steady on you this day, because I know in that way, I will find the peace and Your presence that my heart craves. Amen.

DAY 13 - Friday, January 21

I sort of have this loosely assembled and very changeable bucket list (in my mind). Among the laundry list of things to experience is travel. Specifically, my wife and I want to hit as many of the National Parks as possible. The plan is to do a lot of camping, and we don't mind driving. That said, it's been something of an ambition of mine in this loosely assembled list, to drive the entirety of U.S. Route 20, not necessarily all at once.

It runs clear across the country from Massachusetts to Oregon. I've driven it in New York, parts of Pennsylvania and Ohio as well as Iowa and Illinois. On a good day, with the wind at my back I could stand in my backyard and practically hit Rt. 20 with a rock. Yes, it's close to where I live literally and figuratively.

Periodically, early in the morning when there's no traffic on U.S. 20, I stand in the middle of the road and look down both directions, mindful that the highway stretches coast to coast. I wonder what it's like at either end at that moment, and at other points along the stretch a time zone or so away. Of all the 3,365 miles of U.S. 20, I can only be at one point on it at any given time. But the timeless Great I AM, is not so limited. He sees me, and He's with me where I am. He knows my faults and failings (my sin) and as I confess these to Him, He removes them from me as far as the east is from the west. I don't know how He does all that, but I am glad he does it.

PRAYER

Today, O Holy Lord, I will take note of where I am. I have a sense of where I am going. But in everything I will defer to Him who has given me breath. You O Lord know when I sit and when I stand, you know my thoughts and my words. As I travel down the road of this day Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Teach me to do your will, for You are my God; Let Your good Spirit lead me on level ground. Amen. (Ps 119:105, Ps 139:2,4, Ps 143:10)

DAY 14 - Saturday, January 22

One November morning, I got to thinking about life with my dad. We were never really at odds beyond the typical disagreements between fathers and sons like my hair, my choice of friends and various generational expectations. He was a good, faithful man who loved God and his family. But my wonderings on this particular morning got me to question how and why we never really had any deep heart to heart conversations. There was always discussion about baseball or politics or social issues and the 'ever popular' weather. But we never went "deep." I don't know why. Then, when he was dying of cancer, there was a lot more time to talk, and defending vulnerability was less important. We went deeper, and I got a glimpse of the inner dad I had so grown to love.

What about me? Will I submit to being vulnerable to my children? Can I humble myself to serve their changing needs matter-of-factly? And what about that conversation with them or anybody for that matter? What do I have to hide? What have I got to lose?

Love requires vulnerability. Jesus demonstrated that so perfectly. John chapter 15 recounts how Jesus spoke to his disciples in words that describe how deeply he loves them. "...love each other, just as I have loved you. No one has greater love [nor stronger commitment] than to lay down his own life for his friends. You are my friends...

I have chosen you... purposefully... This is what I command you; that you love and unselfishly seek the best for one another." (verses 12 through 17).

We have our limitations as we love. It seems we can only go so far. For us to love with "reckless abandon" feels ridiculous. The Father's love for us on the other hand? Reckless abandon is not so far-fetched.

PRAYER

O gracious and loving-kind Father, your deep love for us is truly vast beyond all measure. I want to, need to reflect your love, at least to be consistent with what I say I believe about you. Guide me in obedience. Steer me in the right direction as I attempt to demonstrate selfless love for others. Awaken my soul to understand that going deep may cost me. But You have called me 'friend,' and I can trust you. Amen.

DAY 15 - Sunday, January 23

In meteorological terms, we are about a month into winter. Fortunately, the essence of Christmas still lingers in our minds and hearts a bit. In *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, first book of C.S. Lewis' much-loved series the *Chronicles of Narnia*, a witch has put a spell on the land of Narnia and it became a place of "always winter, but never Christmas." Sure, sometimes it feels that way around here when winter grows long, but we know better.

A boy named Edmund, in the book, is held captive by the witch. Aslan, the lion, is a 'Christ-character in the story. He offers himself instead of Edmund to pay the death penalty for treason against the witch. After Aslan's miraculous comeback to life, he declares, "...when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead... Death itself would start working backwards."

Jesus calls us to lay down our lives as a demonstration of love. And of course, we can only do that because He loved us first. To 'cede' something is to give over or to surrender something. To intercede is to act on behalf of someone for a cause. As we pray for one another, we take that other person's part, surrendering ourselves and joining with them in their situation. Someone we know may be enduring a "winter of discontent," a setback, a disappointment for a season. Galatians 6:2 in *The Passion Translation* puts it this way: "Love empowers us to fulfill the law of the Anointed One as we carry each other's troubles." You and I are enabled to pray and to act. We should do this. We can do this. We are doing this. Keep up the good work (2 Thes 3:13).

PRAYER

O gracious Lord Christ, we love because You first loved us. Awaken my heart to this truth and bring to mind the faces and the lives that need your strength and favor in this moment, this season. Inform my thoughts and my actions with good things that I might

be consistent in this life with you and your church. Be with me in this good work as I help "death work backwards" in the life of your dear ones. Amen.

DAY 16 - Monday, January 24

There's a convenient and fun app on my phone which is a favorite go-to when the need arises for just the right word, or the meaning of that word... Dictionary.com (clever, huh?) Everyday it shoots me a 'word of the day.' Sometimes these daily nuggets are so obscure as to make one wonder, whaaaat, when will I ever need that?! Interesting, none-the-less.

Recently, will-o'-the-wisp popped up (a term more than a word, actually). I had no idea what it was. I'd seen and heard it before, but no clue. It turns out that it's a naturally occurring light phenomenon seen at night in marshy or swampy ground. In short, it's the spontaneous combustion of swamp gas, the result of decomposition of organic matter. Who knew?

Psalm 24 declares, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him." This is a familiar passage if you've trafficked among bible believers for even a short time. The passage pays homage to God as the master and creator of the universe. This planet alone has so many phenomenal and intriguing aspects to it on just the nature side of things. Phosphorescent swamp gas is just one marvel.

Consider just the physics of light and how this first element of all of creation is so essential to life. The parallels of physical creation with life in the Spirit are magnificent teachers for us if we will attend to their lessons. In the case of the will-o'-the-wisp, here's what I see: that the emissions of the decomposing matter, the daily dying to self, renders light out of darkness from His Word hidden deep in the soil of my soul. Out of the swamp all around us, His light shines out. What an amazing God we serve and worship, and we are His, and He is ours. Armed with this knowledge, joyfully press on into your swamp today. Blessed be the Lord Adonai, the God of the Universe.

PRAYER

O Masterful Creator, Our Father, "Let there be..." you said, and all things by the word of your command came into being. I am one such thing, formed by the dust of the earth and the breath of your mouth. My heart and soul cannot but long for you when I see, when I take notice of all you have done. Open my eyes that I might see your truth in the word and the world you have formed all around me. Praise the Lord O my soul! Amen.

DAY 17 - Tuesday, January 25

As embarrassing as it is to admit, up to this point, I have never intentionally read through the Bible, end-to-end, in a year. Yup! I've read pretty much all of it in pieces (yes, even Numbers and Lamentations), but not as a whole. But this year, 2022, all of that changes. I'm doing it!

So-far-so-good. It has been an enjoyable daily endeavor that has reminded me of some things that I'd forgotten about, especially in the Old Testament narrative of Genesis. The other day I was reading the account of Isaac and Rebekah. There was an episode where a famine arose, and they were forced to move to the land of the Philistines. Conflict rears up over water rights between the herdsmen of the Philistines and Isaac's herdsmen. Every time Isaac's guys dug a well, the Philistines claimed it was theirs. Isaac's men moved on. Again, they dig a well, the other guys lay claim.

Ultimately, they move on several more times, out to where they dig another well and finally, there is no dispute, and they name the place appropriately 'Open Space' or Rehoboth. Then, one more time Isaac and Rebekah move on to Beersheba, and the Lord appears to Isaac and reaffirms the covenant of Abraham with him. Isaac builds an altar there, worships the Lord, sets up his camp and... digs another well.

Reflecting on all these goings-on in the life of Isaac, I noticed that so many times in my life I had inadvertently been moved along because of conflict not necessarily of my own making. Each time, I was refreshed by the well of God's providence, but then was constrained to move on again, where His provision was once more in abundance at that next place. Had it not been for the conflicts, I would never have moved. I would never have tasted and seen that the Lord is good through so many ways and means. He gives me good reason to stop and worship Him gratefully, and it is there yet again that I find the well of His provision. "For your tender mercies mean more to me than life itself. How I love and praise you, God!" (Ps 63:3)

PRAYER

O Lord, you are so faithful, keeping your covenant from generation to generation, even to our children's children. Help me by your loving Spirit, to remember how you have always provided, because You are the Lord who provides. Draw me in to worship you. Teach me how to worship in a way that pleases you and refreshes my soul. I will wait for you. Amen.

DAY 18 - Wednesday, January 26

Isn't it funny how language changes over time? We are in an era where scientific and technological advances have occurred so quickly that certain words and expressions are about to fade into obscurity. Putting the cart before the horse; like a broken record; carbon copy; audio tape; fax me... in one more generation these phrases may be completely gone and forgotten. My maternal grandmother lived to be 104 years old. She was around when houses were first electrified, and she saw the telephone replace

the telegraph, flying went from biplanes to supersonic aircraft and a moon landing. That's a lot of change.

When I first became a serious believer, my friends handed me a King James bible. (Apparently that was the version Paul used, or so I heard.) At any rate, the experience of this newness of life was oddly immersed in the context of hard-to-understand antique English. Common words had completely different meanings. It was no wonder so much odd behavior and confusion prevailed in my circle of friends. Here's one; "My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness." (Ps 63:5) Really? "Fatness...?" Most of us are working hard to remedy the "fatness" thing, especially after the holidays.

Fortunately, for you and me at this point in time, we have access to numerous options of English Bible translations that are designed to help us drill into the kernel of the meaning of what the scriptures are telling us. Sometimes there's just such a refreshing transformation of understanding that happens as we compare verses across different versions of translations. It's very exciting. But let's get back to this fatness idea. Psalm 63: 3 through 5, raises a voice of praise to Our God because of his loving provision for us, it celebrates this goodness and abundance on the level of holiday feasting...

"Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips shall praise You. So will I bless You as long as I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name. My soul [my life, my very self] is satisfied as with marrow and fatness, And my mouth offers praises [to You] with joyful lips." This is "fatness" – joy, satisfaction - at its finest. It's okay to be fat or phat. You choose.

PRAYER

For your tender mercies mean more to me than life itself. How I love and praise you, God! Daily I will worship you passionately and with all my heart. My arms will wave to you like banners of praise. I overflow with praise when I come before you, for the anointing of your presence satisfies me like nothing else. You are such a rich banquet of pleasure to my soul. (Ps 63:3-5 TPT) Amen.

DAY 19 - Thursday, January 27

House of worship. Sounds kind of pompous and sort of pretentious to me anymore. Maybe it's because I have long since stopped imagining that worship can only be done in a specifically set aside piece of architecture. It's weird to think about the whole historic progression of worship in our relationship with our Lord and Creator. How did we move from praise and sacrifice to God under open skies as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did, to magnificent opulently appointed structures on the opposite extreme? As Mark Rouse would say, "don't hear what I'm not saying..."

I appreciate the many astounding places (including Solomon's temple, of course) that reflect the heart of worship in the gifts of congregations and talented architects over

the millennia. Many of them just take my breath away. In many ways these places have been built as reminders for subsequent generations that there is a God who lives, who is worthy of our worship.

The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac & Jacob as they traveled around the promised land were constantly erecting altars and landmarks to commemorate notable encounters with Yahweh. It's what was called an Ebenezer. The idea of such reminders is useful given our knack for forgetting such important things in the day-to-day ebb and flow of life. We all have reminders of momentous occasions in our lives. There are of course wedding rings, retirement watches, various trophies, and commemorative pieces. They identify us with a moment in time and/or a commitment to something or someone. Yet, they are only symbols of these things and not the substance of them.

What do you have to remind you? What is the substance of your worship of the Living God? It is His Holy Spirit alive and active within you as a believer, drawing you near, informing your heart to turn toward Him as the leaves of a plant turn toward the sun. Stir up your heart. Feed the flame of desire for Him. "Awake my soul and sing of Him who died for me, and hail Him as your matchless King through all eternity."

PRAYER

O everlasting and Living God, Your word tells me that if I will draw near to you, you will draw near to me, and that I can depend on your embrace, that you will not turn me away. Help me to grow my heart of worship, to expand my capacity for your place in my life. I lift my hands and the work of my hands to you, and my voice to praise you for all the good things that you are working in me by your grace. Praise the Lord, O my soul! Amen.

DAY 20 - Friday, January 28

There was this Presbyterian pastor who desired to get some quality time with his collegiate son while he was home on break for several weeks before the start of the winter/spring semester. The man decided that he and his son would go winter camping in Algonquin Provincial Park in Canada. Both men loved the outdoors. Both were seasoned campers. Neither had ever camped outdoors in tents in the winter before. They researched necessary equipment, bought essential additional gear, invited a few other friends to join them, and off they went on their foray into the wilderness. It became an annual tradition.

Over the years it gained momentum and became something of a retreat/outing for the church's youth group. Clusters of college and high school students together with hardy and willing adults trudged through the Algonquin wilderness on snowshoes and found what others before them had discovered, that there's nothing like winter in the woods to gain an appreciation of solitude in God's presence.

The fellowship was always phenomenal. At the center of the campsite and the agenda was the fire. It started with some white birch bark, some dead pine twigs and branches and worked its way into a substantial campfire. At the outset, we'd carve out a space in the snowpack to get as close to the soil as possible. Time passed and the little carved out space became a rather large bowl of glazed snow that we gathered in. We cooked on it, dried and warmed our gloves and footwear near it and engaged in good conversation there. The fire was our survival. It did more than provide an aesthetic ambiance, we needed it.

As a fellowship of believers, we also travel through the wilderness together. We are well-equipped to survive the elements of our environment. At the center of it all is a fire which is essential to the preparation of our nourishment. This fire warms us, provides us with more than an aesthetic to gather around, and is the center for our conversation together. This fire is worship. Our collective purpose is centered on the fact that we are worshippers of the God who Lives among us – Emmanuel. Mindful that it is He that has made us and sustains us, we lift our lives to Him in grateful praise. Fan the flame. Revel in its warm glow.

PRAYER

Loving kind Father, worshiping you is not a matter of the right place, but with a right heart. Your Spirit longs for sincere hearts to adore you in the realm of Spirit and truth. Shape and form my heart to be one that pleases you in worship. Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me, as the psalmist wrote. Make your light shine through me and warm the lives of those who need it most. Amen.

DAY 21 - Saturday, January 29

We can't come into this point of our 21 days of prayer and fasting and not acknowledge that this is the final day. And just so you know, there will be a test... because if you take anything at all away from this experience which you didn't know before, IT WILL BE TESTED.

While I have fasted previously, I've not ever fasted like this before. The experience has given me at least one important observation. I didn't think that the ability to actually focus on prayer would be enhanced at all... but it was.

God is faithful. Whatever we give to Him in sincerity, He so lovingly accepts and treasures. It's like preschoolers' art on the fridge... what my stuff lacks in finesse, he patiently receives and looks forward to the next demonstration of effort. This is the heart of the Father who *"...kept track of all my wandering and my weeping. You've stored my many tears in your bottle – not one will be lost. For they are all recorded in your book of remembrance."* (Ps 56:8 TPT)

Let's close with this excerpt from Malachi 3:16-18... "Then those who feared the LORD spoke with each other, and the LORD listened to what they said. In his presence, a scroll of remembrance was written to record the names of those who feared him and always thought about the honor of his name. "They will be my people," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. "On the day when I act in judgment, they will be my own special treasure. I will spare them as a father spares an obedient child. Then you will again see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not."

PRAYER

Father, as the deer longs for the water brooks, so my soul pants longingly for you. I know that you are sure to reward me with your presence when I look for you. Continue to awaken my soul and my mind to the workings of your Holy Spirit in this world in this age. Stir up the gifts within me and make me generous to give of them so that others may taste and see that the Lord is good. This is my prayer. Amen.