



# God's Good Gifts

365 DAILY DEVOTIONS

DR. GARY SIMPSON



A black and white photograph of a forest path. The path is covered in fallen leaves and leads into a dense forest of tall trees. The lighting is soft, creating a serene atmosphere.

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DR. GARY SIMPSON

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*God's Good Gifts: 365 Daily Devotions*

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# *Dedication*

*To my wife, Robin*

*You're not just one of God's good gifts,*

*You're the best!*



# Foreword

Dear Reader,

Thank you for your decision to purchase this devotional book. But far more importantly, thank you for your decision to invest in your relationship with Jesus. How does one put a price on the time spent meeting with, talking to, and hearing from our Lord? If time is money, then the time we devote to nurturing our relationship with our Lord and Master is money well spent!

This devotional volume is the result of one man's prompting. Shortly after Covid began (March, 2020), WR Collier, a man of immense faith and a devoted Christian, thought it would be a good idea if I wrote a devotional thought each day to encourage and uplift the local church. Of course I thought it a wonderful idea and countless hours later, I still enjoy and appreciate the opportunity to send out via email, a devotional thought five days a week.

You may have heard about the social scientists who determined that everyone on planet earth is connected by six degrees of separation. Evidently, there is a maximum of only six connections between us and any other human being in existence. I'm not sure how they arrived at

## FOREWORD

that conclusion, but I know that Covid put at least six feet of separation between us. What an unprecedented time in human history! Never did we think that we would or could be separated the way we were. The pandemic struck fear and dread into the hearts of people around the world. Human touch was barred and so scarce at the very time it was so desperately needed. Many people lived and died in isolation. But the physical toll in terms of health was just a part of the picture. Depression and mental health issues exacted incalculable costs. And the spiritual toll?

Well, this was an opportunity to address any spiritual health maladies and to minister to all who could use “a shot in the arm.” At a time when the church was forbidden to meet together, these daily devotional thoughts allowed me to communicate with and to encourage the church in her daily walk with the Lord. These daily devotionals became a tool that God used to help us stay connected when we were forcibly separated. And, as the Apostle Paul noted, I continue to view this opportunity as “a great door for effective work that has opened to me” (cf. I Cor. 16:9).

On another occasion, Paul cited our Lord’s words, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Similarly, it seems that a servant is often more blessed than the one served. I wish to be one through whom God’s blessings flow. And so my prayer is that you will be blessed as you prayerfully read and think on these thoughts.

*Gloria Dei*

Gary

September 2025

# January

## JANUARY 1

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! – Philippians 4:4*

Sometimes it's good just to laugh a little, even when times are difficult and tough. If you've been on Facebook at all recently, then you've seen some of the memes of the Covid virus going around. One "Biblical" meme I saw quoted Jesus' words: "Where two or three are gathered (but less than 10) ...."

On a more serious note, I remember the words of the Apostle Paul when he encouraged the church in Philippi to "rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4). In Acts 16, Paul and Silas were in prison, had been severely beaten, and were in shackles, but they were singing – rejoicing in the Lord! Our times may be unprecedented and uncertain; they may be difficult and troublesome; no one may really know what the future holds. But the good news is that God is still in control and we can rejoice! Let's keep our chins up, laugh a little, and see what God has in store for us!



## JANUARY 2

*When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites.*

– Deuteronomy 17:18

Here's a text that my wife, Robin, reminded me of the other day: Deuteronomy 17:18. When the king came to power in Israel, one of the main responsibilities he had was to write out the Torah – the Book of the Law. Yes, word-for-word beginning with Genesis 1:1.

But it wasn't just busy work. It wasn't just to give him something to do when he was bored! He had to write it out and read it all the days of his life, so that he would learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees.

I'm not saying we're bored, but what better thing to do than to write out God's word, and by so doing, to lay it up in our heart! Robin has copied almost all of the New Testament. How 'bout we join her in doing so? Go get yourself a notebook at Walmart and start writing. You don't have to begin with Genesis. Start wherever you like and write, and think about what God is saying to you in those words you're writing. And have fun while doing it knowing it is time well-spent!

## JANUARY 3

*"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. – Ephesians 4:26-27*

This morning, I got up and told the family that I had a dream last night about a really evil witch. I laughed as I spoke about it and wondered where in the world my mind got that dream or should I say nightmare! It dawned on me that, last night I read about the witch of Endor in I Samuel 28. She was the woman, you'll remember, who conjured up Samuel at King Saul's bidding. The Lord had

turned away from Saul and had become Saul's "enemy" (I Sam. 28:16). What a terrible thought! The next day Saul and his sons died in battle.

Instead of obeying the Lord and consulting with him, Saul resorted to doing his own thing. He consulted with the dead, using a witch. There is good reason the Lord prohibits his people under the Old Covenant from consulting with mediums, spiritists, seances, witches, and sorcerers. I believe in the reality of such phenomena as revealed in the Bible. God forbids his people from dabbling in those things because they are real, and when we mess with that stuff, we are bound to get hurt. Personally, I believe we need to take the spirit world seriously – there are wicked spirits out there who would love to harm us. I am not going to allow any such being under my roof. That's why I do not read the horoscopes in the media, or play ouija board, or mess with tarot cards, etc. My thinking is that if it is not from God, then it is from Satan, and I do not care to give him a foothold in any way (Eph. 4:27; see also Gal. 5:20).

## JANUARY 4

*For the Lord has chosen Jacob to be his own,  
Israel to be his treasured possession. – Psalm 135:4*

One of my favorite passages of scripture is: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you might declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (I Pet. 2:9). This passage not only sheds light on our identity in Christ, but also gives us our purpose as his people. The idea of being chosen reminds me of what Jesus said to his disciples in John 15:16 – "You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." There Jesus too combined his disciples' identity with their purpose/mission. In Ephesians 2:10 Paul wrote to the church: "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which he prepared in advance for us to do" – another passage

that proposes our identity in Christ and then attaching to that identity our purpose/mission.

Our identity in Christ Jesus is sealed. It is who we are. There is no changing that unless we choose to make shipwreck of our faith. We belong to Jesus and “nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). The question is: Given our unprecedented present circumstances, what good works may we aim to accomplish, and how do we achieve those goals? Maybe it’s a matter of writing a comforting note to someone who’s down. How about an email of encouragement? This may be a good time to do some personal inventory – in what areas of my life may I improve and how? Remember, God has already prepared those good works – it’s for us to be alert to what he wants us doing and to resolve to do them.

## JANUARY 5

*So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, O guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones. Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings.*

– Ezekiel 28:16-17

I don’t think about Satan too much (I try not to). But when I do, one of the passages that comes to mind is Ezekiel 28:11-19. This is a passage wherein which God sends a message to the king of Tyre via his prophet Ezekiel. It is a prophecy against the king in which God compares him to Satan and his fall. This passage sheds much light on our theology of Satan including his origin and how he fell from God’s grace and presence.

The text explains Satan’s beauty before his fall; he was the “model of perfection;” God ordained him as a guardian cherub; he “walked among the fiery stones” – imagery for heaven itself – in God’s very

presence. He was blameless from the day he was created until wickedness was found in him. God created him perfect – and gave him the option of rebellion. Satan decided to rebel against God and God expelled him from his presence. Satan's sin: pride, among other things mentioned. And as Satan's end will ultimately be eternal punishment, so would the king of Tyre ultimately be punished.

An interesting vignette indeed, shedding light purposefully on our arch-enemy Satan. The good news: we are more than conquerors through him who loved us! Jesus has already won for us the victory. And as the song, "The Song of the Soldier" intones, "Rise ye children of salvation, all who cleave to Christ the Head; wake, arise oh mighty nation, 'ere the foe on Zion tread." We're on the winning side – God's side, and we get to look forward to a great reward in heaven.

May God bless all our efforts as we serve him and live out his will for our lives!

## JANUARY 6

*"Come, " he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat and walked on the water to Jesus. – Matthew 14:29*

Jesus wasn't the only man who walked on water – so did Peter! I love the title of the book by John Ortberg, "If you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat." This title, hinting at Peter's story, is one of the reasons I wanted to preach ever since I was little. I wanted to walk on water – well, I wanted my life to have significance and meaning. Little did I realize back then that God gives everyone of us significance and meaning as his children. We have purpose and value; we've been given a mission – the Great Commission. As believers in Christ we are all priests, no matter what our occupation (cf. I Pet. 2:4ff).

The fact is, we've all been called to step out of the boat. But don't be fooled; it is only by the power of God that we walk on water. Jesus reminded his disciples, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jno.

15:5). It is the same power that raised Christ from the dead that is at work within each of us (Eph. 2:18-21). And it is through faith in him that we access his power. Anything good we do is attributable to God and his glory.

The questions to think about this morning are: How is God calling me to get out of the boat today? In what ways is God asking me to leverage faith in him? How is God wanting me to walk on water this day? How is God wanting me to glorify his name in our present circumstances? It is for each of us to contemplate these questions and to respond responsibly as good stewards in his service.

May God bless each of us as we strive to serve him today.

## JANUARY 7

*I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.*

– I Corinthians 3:6

Like most people in my generation, I learned to drive using my dad's VW Bug. I'm glad I learned to drive using the Bug because it was a standard and it's like learning to ride a bicycle – once you know how, you never forget. One of the great inventions of the 20th century is the automatic transmission because it made driving a car so much simpler and allowed almost anyone to drive. Automatic transmission vehicles now are so ubiquitous that relatively few people know how to drive standards.

Interestingly, in the Septuagint (LXX) – the Greek version of the Old Testament, the work of God is often referred to as being “automatic.” The word “automatic” refers to that which works “all by itself.” Thus, an automatic transmission changes gears “all by itself.” Theologians sometimes refer to God as the “Prime Mover” – the one who moved first; all by himself; with no help from others, to do what he did and continues to do.



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Paul used a gardening analogy in I Corinthians 3:6f where he noted: “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow....” The fact is, God could get the job done all by himself, but he privileges us by including us in his work. We get to plant and water, but again, God is the one who makes the seed grow. I remember how my four-year old son and I used to mow the lawn – I’d use the real mower and he would push his plastic toy “mower” behind me. He was always so proud when we finished mowing (and so was his dad). And I wonder if God feels similarly – when we join him in his work.

Let’s take advantage of the privilege of joining God in his work. He has called us, invited us, encouraged us to participate with him in his ministry to this world. Although he could do his work automatically, let’s not deny ourselves the blessing of being co-workers with God in his ministry!

### JANUARY 8

*As the deer pants for streams of water so my soul pants for you, O God.*  
– Psalm 42:1

When I got up this morning, I opened the blinds and saw a herd of several deer in the front yard just outside my window. They were all grazing on the grass while one found the birdbath. I am sure that he expected to find water in it, but there wasn’t any. It brought to mind the passage that David wrote in Psalm 42:1 – “As the deer pants for streams of water so my soul pants for you, O God.”

I had to ask myself the question: Do I really pant or long for the Lord the way this deer longed for water? Or like this deer, who was barking up the wrong tree when he sought water in my empty birdbath, maybe I look for the Lord in the wrong things/places. Not that the things of this world are intrinsically evil, but we should be on guard against attempting to satisfy ourselves with those things when only the Lord

can truly satisfy. This passage speaks to our priorities and where our true fulfillment lies.

May God bless us all as we seek fulfillment in him!

## JANUARY 9

*The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God.*

– II Samuel 6:7

The Biblical story of Uzzah is one that always sent chills down my spine. The story is recorded for us in II Samuel 6 and you'll remember how it tells of the oxen stumbling as they pulled the cart upon which rested the ark of the covenant. Uzzah, who was not to touch the ark, took hold of it presumably to steady it and God struck him down and he died. That story always underlined for me the strictness and the severity of God. The story of Uzzah always seemed to emphasize for me the awesome power of a God who would use his power almost mercilessly. I always felt somewhat sorry for Uzzah – after all, he had good intentions; he was just trying to save the ark from calamity. Isn't that a particularly harsh punishment for someone who was just trying to help? How do we reconcile this incident with a God whom we know to be a loving, just, merciful kind of God?

When we think in terms of Israel's relationship with the Lord at this time, we find them in rebellion against God. They had not complied with God's commands in regard to the ark. They showed little respect for God's presence, his power, and majesty. God should have destroyed the entire nation! He should have put them all to death. He should have meted out punishment on every one of his people. But he didn't. He rightfully punished Uzzah and extended an incredible amount of mercy toward every other Israelite.

Uzzah's story, rather than being one depicting a merciless God, depicts a God who is merciful. God is shown to have immense patience and

long-suffering toward a stubborn and obstinate people. Uzzah's story shows God's love, kindness, mercy, and patience toward his people. Through this story, Israel also learned respect for God's holiness – a respect that was essential to the well-being of the nation. What an amazing God and Father we serve!

## JANUARY 10

*Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." – Matthew 26:38*

Dread! Sometimes we live in dread. We go from fretting about one thing to fretting about the next thing. At times it feels as though we are always worrying about something. Mom told me years ago that 90% of the things about which we worry never come to pass. And when they don't, we find something else to fear and dread.

I've been thinking this week about how Jesus must have felt about 2000 years ago when he thought about his Passion week. He knew exactly what awaited him when Friday came. It was that to which his whole life on earth pointed – the divine and eternally purposed, salvific work on Calvary culminating in your hope and mine. He could have refused to go through with it, but he did not.

The differences between the way Jesus dreaded and the way we do – well there are many, including, but not limited to:

1. The spiritual implications and ramifications of the dread of the cross are beyond our comprehension.
2. Jesus knew how much he ought to dread. He didn't dread too much. We simply dread too much.
3. He also knew exactly how to handle his dread (with faith and prayer). Most of the time we do not. I'm convinced fear is incompatible with faith.

The older I get, the more I believe that maturing in Christ has much to do with keeping things in perspective. All too often, the things about which we worry, fret, and concern ourselves are simply not worth that dread. Faith helps us keep things in perspective.

Let's think about what Jesus went through and how he handled what must've been the most dreaded ordeal of his life – the Passion week some 2000 years ago.

## JANUARY 11

*Oh, how I love your law!*  
*I meditate on it all day long.* – Psalm 119:97

I didn't count the chapters nor the verses but I've heard that Psalm 119 marks the middle of our Bible. I've heard differently – it depends on how one counts the verses, which version of the Bible one uses, etc. If it is true that the middle is Psalm 119 – how appropriate!?! It is one in which David praises God for his word. One cannot miss how much David expresses his appreciation for and love of the text. It is a beautiful passage which in the Hebrew Bible is divided into 22 sections corresponding to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet – aleph through tau. Each paragraph contains eight verses. One oft quoted verse is number 11 – “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” Another is v. 105, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

Oh, to be known for “bibliolatry” – holding the Bible in such high esteem that we might be accused of worshiping the Bible. We do not want to worship the Bible, neither the angels of heaven. But we would do well to develop within our hearts so deep an appreciation for God's message that we could say with David, (vv. 14-16):

## GOD'S GOOD GIFTS

*"I rejoice in following your statutes  
as one rejoices in great riches.  
I meditate on your precepts  
and consider your ways.  
I delight in your decrees;  
I will not neglect your word."*

May God bless each of us with his peace.

## JANUARY 12

*O Daughter of Zion, your punishment will end;  
He will not prolong your exile. – Lamentations 4:22*

Yesterday I mentioned the beautiful poetic piece by David – Psalm 119, a psalm that is divided into 22 sections corresponding to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Another passage of scripture in which each consecutive verse begins with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet is the first chapter of Lamentations.

Lamentations is believed to have been written around 588 B.C. right before the fall of Jerusalem in 584 B.C. What a dark picture the prophet of the Lord, Jeremiah, painted. Quite depressing really – God meting out his wrath on his own people. A rather graphic depiction of the terror that awaited the city of David.

We sing a song:

*"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,  
His mercies never come to an end;  
They are new every morning,  
Great is thy faithfulness."*

Look it up – Lamentations 3:22f. In the midst of Judah's darkest hour,



the Lord's love is steadfast and faithful. His mercies never cease. He is a great and faithful God!

What a good God we serve! Amen!

## **JANUARY 13**

*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.*

– Matthew 4:1

Have you ever wondered why we are tempted in so many ways? We are challenged in so many ways every day. Why so many temptations? Why so many different kinds of temptations?

One of the Desert Fathers, Mathois, shed some interesting light on the way Satan tempts us. He noted: "Satan does not know which passion will seduce the soul, and so he scatters his tares in it without direction.... If he knew what was most tempting to a soul, he would not scatter such a variety of temptations" (as cited in Ward, 2003, p. 96). In other words, Satan tempts us indiscriminately until such time as he finds a temptation that will "work." And that is a comforting as well as daunting thought. Satan may not know us as well as we might have thought. Hence his need to try all sorts of temptations. However, when he does find a weakness, we may be sure that he will do his utmost to get us to succumb to that temptation.

Paul the apostle offered a great word of encouragement in this regard. In I Corinthians 10:13, Paul wrote: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." Definitely one verse among my favorites. Satan cannot make us do anything. As long as God's Spirit lives in us, Satan cannot.

## **Reference**

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## JANUARY 14

*His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me." – John 2:17*

I'm in II Kings in my daily Bible reading. One cannot help but notice the contrasts drawn between the "good" kings and the "evil" ones from both the northern and southern kingdoms. Both Judah and Israel had their God-fearing kings and their kings who did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

Maybe like you, although I've read these passages before, I find myself rooting for these guys almost as if I was watching them live. Whenever I come to a new king being installed, I read hoping that he will have done what was right in God's sight. For far too many of these kings, however, the text notes: "He did evil in the eyes of the Lord. He did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit." How disappointing to read those words, and I feel let down. What a shame! These kings wielded such great power and influence to turn the people to God, but they spurned those opportunities to serve the Baals instead and to lead the Lord's people astray.

On the other hand, it is exciting to read of all those kings who did right in the eyes of the Lord. Many of these kings were teens or preteens when they were appointed. They chose to do what was right in spite of the wickedness of their fathers. It is invigorating to read about these young kings who used their influence to lead the people to worship the only true and living God. It is stirring to read about how they smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles, demolishing the high places and temples of Baal, and at times even killing the prophets of Baal. Wow, what zeal for the Lord!

I'm reminded of another great man who was consumed with zeal for the house of the Lord (cf. Jno. 2). Oh, to have that kind of zeal for our Lord! What do you think, what does that kind of zeal look like for God's people today?

## **JANUARY 15**

*Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. – Isaiah 64:4*

I'm currently in the Book of I Chronicles in my daily Bible reading. And so far, I'm not impressed. Well, I don't mean any disrespect at all, but the first several chapters make you feel like you're in the doldrums. They're filled with genealogies of people whose names are almost unpronounceable and we know nothing about these people – their names are merely mentioned. I mean this is just not like reading a good novel – but then maybe it's not supposed to be!

The fact is, this is God's word and it is his message to us. Although we may not always know why God's Spirit saw fit to include certain passages in his word, we know it is his word and that in and of itself should suffice to garner all the respect and reverence we should have for it. Instead of racing through the drier portions, maybe we should appreciate the fact that God reveals himself to us through even those passages like the first part of I Chronicles.

What an awesome God our father truly is! Let's always praise him for who he is – the one who alone is worthy of all our worship, praise, and adoration.

## **JANUARY 16**

*This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. – I John 3:19-20*

Just finished reading a book by Stroh (2015) in which he quotes a certain Vaclav Havel: "Hope... is the certainty that something makes sense no matter how it turns out" (p. 210). The statement immediately reminded me of a couple of Biblical passages: Hebrews 11:1 – "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Also, that oft quoted passage in Romans 8:28 – "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."

Getting back to Havel's statement, I wonder how he could make that statement with such assurance if he was not a believer. Surely, we who believe in the God of the Bible, we of all people, can bank on this statement. Even when things do not turn out right and don't make sense to us, we can rest assured that God knows exactly what is going on and he is still in control. We are going to experience some tough things in life – difficult things for which we have no answers. Some may call it trite or clichéd, but the fact is, God has the answers. He will make sense of it; he knows everything (I Jno. 3:20). And at some of the most trying times in our lives, that may be all we need to know!

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## JANUARY 17

*When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. – Ruth 1:18*

Although she would never admit it, my daughter Charlyn, is quite an artist. Below is a photo of one of her works that made me think a little more deeply about the text she quoted.



The text is Ruth 1:16 – "...Where you go I will go...." If anyone has heard the words of this text, it was probably at a wedding ceremony – ironically not the context of the passage in Ruth at all. As you know, this was Ruth's vow of loyalty to her mother-in-law, Naomi.

What might well be a far more appropriate application of this Old Testament text is to see it as predictive of our response to our Father today. Is it not amazing to see how many texts in the Old Testament foreshadow our walk with the Lord even as New Covenant people? Ruth's response should epitomize our response to God as he invites us to walk and live with him. And that is not necessarily an easy thing to do. God never promised us the proverbial "rose garden." He never said our voyage would be through only calm waters. All too often we would love to choose our own path – you know, the easy, fun one with the fewest hassles. But God calls us to walk his path, his way.

The most appropriate response: "Where you go, I will go."



## JANUARY 18

*Woe to him who says to wood, "Come to life!" Or to lifeless stone, "Wake up!"  
Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in  
it. – Habakkuk 2:19*

Sometimes people ask difficult, deeply theological/philosophical questions, like "Where did God come from?" I like telling people that I know where God came from. And I can prove it to you from the Bible – check out Habakkuk 3:3. Now you know where God came from too!

On a serious note, the passage just ahead of this one is 2:20 – "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him." What a powerful statement. It might remind us of the hymn we often sing with the same words. Traditionally we've sung this hymn most often at the beginning of a worship service – to sort of calm everybody down and to let everyone know that we ought to be quiet because we're beginning our worship service. And there's nothing wrong with that. But that's not really the context in which the passage occurs.

Let's back up to verse 18. Here the prophet wrote about idols and questioned the value of these lifeless, speechless, breathless, gold and silver covered, wood/stone carvings. People speak to these idols and call them to "come to life" and to "wake up." These lifeless idols/gods, however, are silent, impotent, worthless.

In contrast to these lifeless, impotent, silent gods, our God is alive, infinitely powerful, and he speaks. When he speaks the whole earth falls silent. Who would dare utter a word in the presence of God Almighty? Let all the earth be silent before him!

Indeed, the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.

## JANUARY 19

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. – I John 5:13*

Don't you just love the way the Preacher concluded the Book of Ecclesiastes? In chapter 12:13 he wrote: "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." It is interesting that in the Hebrew text, the word "duty" is not there. Our English translators did us a "favor" by inserting the word "duty" for us. Yes, translating means doing a little interpreting too.

In this case, however, I am not sure that they have done us a great favor. The Hebrew text reads: "...for this is the whole of man." The NIV translators give us the idea that fearing God and keeping his commandments is our duty (only). The word duty may conjure up negative ideas of slavishly having to accomplish a set of chores – a burden, an obligation, drudgery. This is not the idea conveyed in Ecclesiastes 12:13.

There is so much more to keeping God's commandments. It is who we are (identity); it is something we get to do (privilege); it is what God prepared in advance for us to do (blessing); it is God's best for us (reward). Many people view the Christian way of life as restrictive, impeding, and hindering the exercise of their freedoms – having to comply with all sorts of negatives – "thou shalt not..." We can't do this and can't do that and they want to be free from those prohibitions. But God's commands are in our best interests only. Obedience is for our own benefit. John the apostle put it this way: "This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome" (I Jno. 5:3).

Ecclesiastes 12:13 tells us that this is what we are about; it is our all; it is what life is all about. I love the way Paul wrote about it in Colossians

3:4, “When Christ, *who is your life*, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (italics mine). What a privilege to live our lives as God’s people!

May God bless each of you as you serve him today!

## JANUARY 20

*For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. – Ephesians 2:10*

In one of my sermons, I spoke about God’s excellence – his over-the-top, indescribable goodness, for which there is hardly an appropriate English word or phrase. It’s the Greek word “arete” and denotes God’s character as being perfect in excellence. When we compare any “goodness” of our own, ours pales ridiculously. Some might say that our righteousness is as “filthy rags” in comparison. And while this comparison may have some level of validity, this is hardly what the quoted text means.

Open your Bible to Isaiah 64:6. Isaiah the prophet mentioned that “all our righteous acts are as filthy rags.” In my experience, these words have usually been taken to mean that even the best things that we do as God’s people are a stench to God. All the good things that we do are worthless in God’s estimation. All our good deeds are as “menstrual cloths” (the Hebrew text for our euphemistic English translation “filthy rags”) in God’s sight. All of our best thoughts, intentions, actions, words, deeds are nothing but trash in God’s opinion. My question: Is that really what the Prophet Isaiah meant?

Let’s look at the context again. In the verse immediately preceding our text, Isaiah contrasted “those who gladly do right, who remember your ways” with those who “continued to sin against” God’s ways. This was Israel’s perpetual problem – a continual wrestling with whether to obey God and follow his ways. When Israel chose to serve the Lord, he

gladly acted in their behalf (v. 4) and came to the help of those who did what was right (v. 5). It was when Israel chose to continue in sin that even their “righteous acts” became as “filthy rags” in God’s sight.

To be sure, God prepared good works in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). How can a good work become a filthy rag? What makes the difference between some act being good or a filthy rag? Answer: The heart with which it is done. Our righteous acts could be either God-honoring or God-insulting. They can be either God-glorifying or as filthy rags in God’s sight.

How is God going to view our righteous acts? The answer depends on your heart and mine. Do we gladly do right, remembering God’s ways, or are we continuing in our own sinful ways? This answer determines whether our righteous acts glorify God or are considered as filthy rags. Continue to do good with a good heart and your righteous acts will never be filthy rags!

## JANUARY 21

*As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. – I Thessalonians 2:7*

I love the way the Apostle Paul addressed the church in Thessalonica. Twice in I Thessalonians 2, he addressed the church as an apostle and wrote about the way the apostles treated the young church. In verse 7, he noted that the apostles treated the church gently and compared that relationship to the relationship between a mother and her children. A mother “cares” for her children who are “loved” by and “dear” to her. Even so, the apostles had dealt with the church. The apostles had shared not only the gospel with the church, but they had shared their very lives as well.

Moreover, Paul compared the relationship between the apostles and the church to that of a father and his children in vv. 10-12. A godly father

encourages, comforts, and urges his children “to live lives worthy of the God, who calls them into his kingdom and glory.”

What a wonderfully tender, compassionate revelation of the relationship between the apostles and the church. Dare I say that the apostles emulated, in this respect, the God who called them into relationship with him. He is the same God who calls you and me into relationship with him even today. He is a good God, a God who is tender, compassionate, kind, loving, gentle, encouraging, comforting, and one who calls us all into relationship with him as his children!

May you be blessed by the God who acts as the perfect father and the perfect mother to you and me.

## JANUARY 22

*A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. – John 13:34*

The Jewish people were very well familiar with the part of the Bible they called the Torah or the “Law” – the first five books of the Old Testament. One passage that every Jewish person learned from early childhood was what they called the “Shema.” Deuteronomy 6:4 records that statement for us – the “Hear O Israel.” Shema in Hebrew means “to hear.”

What exactly was it that the Jews had to hear? To what was it that the Israelites had to pay close attention? You probably know it well too. “The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” The oneness or unity of the triune God is profoundly inexplicable. Nevertheless, it has grave implications for the people of God. According to Jesus (Matt. 22:37-40), the first and greatest command grows out of this statement – to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. The command second to only it also comes from this statement – to love your neighbor as yourself. God’s nature – his unity and love – are inextricably related. This passage says that you simply can’t have one without the other.



I'm convinced that one of the best ways to love God is to love our neighbors. Let's take time to think about who it is that God wants us to love today. And a corollary – how may I show my love for that neighbor? Let's be intentional in the way we live.

May God bless us all as we think and act in obedience to his will.

## **JANUARY 23**

*Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.  
Each day has enough trouble of its own. – Matthew 6:34*

Just a short note today, but a powerful and pertinent one nevertheless.

The Apostle Peter encouraged his audience with the words of I Peter 5:7 – “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” We know that we should not worry (Matt. 6) or be anxious (Phil. 4:6), but when we succumb to that temptation, we ought to cast our anxieties on him. Why? “Because he cares for us.” What an amazing God we serve!

I pray this thought comforts you today.

## **JANUARY 24**

*“Abraham is our father,” they answered. “If you were Abraham’s children,”  
said Jesus, “then you would do the things Abraham did.” – John 8:39*

On many occasions, Jesus used what the people said, to teach a much-needed lesson. Matthew 12:46ff shares just such an event. Someone in the crowd told Jesus that his mother and brothers wanted to speak to him. Jesus then replied with a question: “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Jesus told the crowd that his family was each individual who did his will. His mother, sisters, and brothers, are they who do what he says.

It is human nature to organize, categorize, quantify, and classify. We like pigeon-holing everything – even or maybe especially people. We've devised all kinds of ways to sort and group. We classify people by race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, political party affiliation, language, age, education, social status, religion, skin color, where people reside, what car they drive, what they wear, health, looks, and the list seems to go on forever. You name it, we have a name or classification for it.

In the end, there is only one category that really matters. That category is whether one is part of Jesus' family. Have you noticed how many categories are not controllable? So many of the categories by which we are judged are not up to us. We have no control over whether we are black or white, etc. But Jesus says that we have control over the one category that really counts. We have control over whether we belong to Jesus' family. That's decided by doing his will. Simple, is it not? You don't even have to be able to read to get that right!

## JANUARY 25

*Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. – Jude 3*

It is so important that when we read God's word, we read it in its proper context. It is so easy to take a single verse and interpret it to mean whatever we desire. Take for example, Jude 3. A beautiful passage wherein which Jude exhorted his readers to "contend for the faith...." These four words have been sadly misused to justify all kinds of abuse of those with whom Christians have disagreed. "Contending for the faith" has been used to mean that we must fight tooth and nail for our views and slaughter any brothers or sisters who do not think as do we. The phrase "to contend for the faith" has been used to warrant wielding the sword of the Spirit to slash, maim, and slay any believers who harbor differing opinions.

Jude, however, offered a different idea of what it means to “contend for the faith.” Look at vv. 20-23. Here Jude defined for us exactly what he meant by asking his audience to “contend for the faith.” And how do we do that? By building each other up in the most holy faith and by praying in the Spirit. He told his readers: “Keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear – hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.” Quite the opposite of wildly wielding the sword of the Spirit, fighting for the faith means that we behave gently, mercifully, kindly, prayerfully, fearfully, and in love, as we build each other up and save those who are on the brink of trouble. Did you notice how often Jude mentions the word “merciful?” How different Jude’s interpretation is when we read the text in its context!

May Jude’s understanding of contending for the faith bless you today.

## **JANUARY 26**

*And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.* – Philippians 4:19

In one of my sermons, I talked about our definition of good and that we may need to revise how we think about what is good and what is bad. God’s definitions are the ones to which we need to subscribe. Here is part of the reason for that:

James wrote: “ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (Jas. 1:17). Notice two or three things about this statement:

1. God is the originator of everything good and perfect. In the context, James just wrote that God cannot tempt us; that is,

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nothing bad comes from God. We cannot blame bad things on God. Truly nothing is ever his fault.

2. The corollary is that nothing good comes from the evil one. Any “good” that Satan does or allows, is designed to hurt and destroy in the end.
3. Notice also the imagery of the heavenly lights and shifting shadows. If God is the originator of those heavenly lights, there cannot be any darkness in him whatsoever. Our God is a good God – perfectly good – excellent in every way. There is none like him.
4. If this is who God is, and if this is how he blesses us, then we have every reason to show our appreciation for who he is and what he does for us.

When we count our blessings, let’s be sure to give our Father the gratitude he deserves!

May we all be richly blessed.

### **JANUARY 27**

*The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.* – Exodus 14:14

During the early days of the Covid, I ordered an item over the internet. By the time it should have arrived, I checked the status and found that the delivery had been delayed due to a “natural disaster.” My mind immediately questioned what had happened. Of which natural disaster had I not heard? And then it dawned on me that it was probably the Covid issue that had caused the delay.

That inconvenience is trivial in comparison to what some endured because of the virus. It is at times like this that we may take great comfort in the words of the well-known psalm: “God is my refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble...” (Psm. 46:1ff).

A beautiful psalm indeed – all the way through v. 11 where the psalmist wrote: “The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.” Look at v. 10. “Be still and know that I am God.” How we struggle to “be still.” Not just in mind, spirit, soul, and heart, but in body as well. This passage always reminds me of what God, through Moses, told his people to do when they were about to cross the sea in Exodus. 14. The Israelites were hemmed in on all four sides – the sea in front, mountains on either side, and the entire Egyptian army behind them. They had nowhere to go. They were between a rock and a hard place. Can you sense their fear and panic beginning to set in? Moses answered them with the words: “Be still.” Don’t do anything – just sit and watch! Look at what God will do. The Lord will fight your battles for you, if you let him. You need only to be still – even physically. The Israelites did not have to lift a sword, a shield, or a spear. They merely had to watch the deliverance the Lord would accomplish. You know the rest of the story.

Why did the Holy Spirit include this story in his message to us? Well, maybe we may yet have something to learn about what it means to “be still, and know that I am God.” May God bless you with his message today.

## JANUARY 28

*But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. – Galatians 4:4-5*

We all have scriptures that feature among our favorites. John’s writings have to feature among mine. In chapter 2, the apostle wrote about the wedding feast in Cana. After Jesus performed his miraculous changing of water into wine, John recorded for us the words of the master of the banquet: “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now” (Jno. 2:10). What a powerful statement!

## GOD'S GOOD GIFTS

John profoundly used the words of the Master of Ceremonies to point to Jesus and his ministry. Notice two important things about this event:

1. “You have saved the best till now.” In a long line of prophets, Jesus had finally arrived. God had saved his best “prophet,” his one and only Son, till now. Jesus was finally here. God’s promised Messiah was on the scene. God had fulfilled his word; kept his promise. And Jesus was the best – God’s best for you and me. Notice also the irony – it wasn’t the bridegroom who had saved the best – he was merely among all who enjoyed the beneficence of Jesus’ first miracle. God had saved the best till now in more ways than one!
2. Notice too how Jesus’ appearance on the scene had upturned the way things were always done. The good wine was traditionally served first so that people could enjoy it and then after they had imbibed a little more than they should have, the lesser quality wine was served – when the people might not have made the distinction between the two. But at even this late a stage in the game, Jesus’ wine was noticeably choice. Jesus’ way of doing things was unconventional; back-to-front, upside-down, we might say. But then again, Jesus’ kingdom has always been an upside-down kind of kingdom, when contrasted with the kingdoms of this world.

I’m eternally glad and thankful to be part of God’s kingdom, aren’t you? What a blessing it is that God saved the best till last!

## JANUARY 29

*Come, my children, listen to me;  
I will teach you the fear of the Lord. – Psalm 34:11*

Not too long ago, I viewed a TedX talk by a rather erudite professor who gave a lecture on some of the greatest thinkers of the last 2500

years. Beginning with the great Greek philosophers, Aristotle, Euclid, Plato, and Socrates, he wound up his presentation with some of our extant movers and shakers, including Jeff Bezos.

One of the categories he denoted was that of the religionists including Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, and Confucius. The obviously atheistic speaker warned his audience about the dangers of religion and commented on how damaging these religionists, especially Jesus, had been to his vocation.

It was at this point in the lecture that my hackles went up and I found myself at odds with what he was saying. You'll be proud of me – I listened all the way to the end of the presentation. The speaker was well-informed, well-read, astute, and articulate. Just horribly deceived about Jesus the Son of God.

And I wonder at times how someone so well-educated could be so deceived. The Apostle Paul addressed that issue in II Thessalonians 2:9-12 and blamed God for this deception! Yes, you read it correctly – God sends such people a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie. But ultimately, God does that because they themselves “refused to love the truth and so be saved!” So no, we really cannot blame God, and neither did Paul; unbelievers have only themselves to blame. And I can't help but feel for those who do not believe.

The takeaway here is: What are we doing to reach our unbelieving neighbors? What can we do to introduce them to the only one who can save? I'm reminded of the song: “Lead me to some soul today; O teach me Lord just what to say....”

May God bless our efforts to throw out a lifeline today.

## **JANUARY 30**

*And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit. – Ephesians 1:13*



## GOD'S GOOD GIFTS

One of the great things about being brothers and sisters in Christ is that we are in Christ! Have you ever thought about the magnitude of the blessing of being in Christ?

That is exactly how the Apostle Paul began his epistle to the Ephesian church. He mentioned the blessing of having every spiritual blessing in Christ. Evidently the apostle was genuinely thankful for the blessing of fellowship in Christ – he wrote the words “in Christ, in Him, in the One he loves, in Christ Jesus” many times throughout his epistle. Next time you read Ephesians, count the number of times (highlight it with a marker) and analyze how he used the idea of being “in Christ.” It really makes for an interesting study.

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen” (Eph. 3:20f).

### **JANUARY 31**

*In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

– James 2:17

Empirical studies have shown that 64% of trainees fail to retain their learning if they are not provided opportunities to practice what they learned. We cannot genuinely call it learning if the students cannot recall it. This is an interesting educational principle that was touched on by James the Lord’s brother some 2000 years ago.

In 1:22, James exhorted his audience not to deceive themselves by being merely hearers of the word, but to do what it says. It reminds me of the old joke about the hitch-hiking man who asked the taxi-driver how to get to Carnegie Hall. The taxi-driver replied, “Practice, practice, practice.” The fact is that we’re all just practicing this thing we call the Christian life. None of us has it down pat. None of us is perfect in the ways we think or live. Someone mentioned years ago that God doesn’t

expect perfection he expects direction. We may modify that statement slightly by saying that God doesn't expect perfection, but he does expect us to practice! As we do so, we will also "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (II Pet. 3:18).

May God bless us all as we practice (what we preach).

## DR. GARY SIMPSON



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