



NEXT LEVEL

A 30-DAY GUIDE TO GROW IN GOD

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Day 1

WELCOME TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Philippians 3:14

I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

Getting right with God is not the end of the race; it is the beginning. Committing to Christ is when the gun goes off to run a race that honors God. We do not run the race because we have to but rather because we get to. We get to be in a loving relationship with the One who has paid the price for us to be forgiven of a debt we could never pay.

Now that is worth our best. What Christ did for us deserves our continued pursuit of Him.

One of the greatest tactics of the enemy is to get us to stop running the race toward Christ and start acting religious. We can get good at acting like we are good with God when we are actually dead on the inside. But God has the power to change your life, not just make you feel good about yourself. The Bible says, "They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly. Stay away from people like that!" (2 Timothy 3:5)

When you give your life to Christ, the Bible says you are a “new creation.” God’s desire is to change you into His image. Whatever you do, don't stop at the place of acting godly.

This resource is all about you intentionally connecting with your Creator and going to the next level in God. Forget pretending and begin to cultivate a real consistency in your walk with Him. When you develop a lifestyle of running toward God, you cannot help but know Him personally and love Him completely.

God is not calling you to a loveless relationship with Him. He is calling you to a life fully devoted to Him. No matter where you are on your journey, it is time to grow in God and go to the next level!

Day 2

PLACING GOD ABOVE ALL ELSE

Matthew 6:33

Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and He will give you everything you need.

Seeking God above all else is one of the greatest challenges in life. It takes constant effort to place God above our career, kids, spouse and calendar. We sometimes think that if we take the time to seek God, it will take away from what we really need to be doing in that moment.

The truth is, when we seek God first and above all else, then He will give us what we need. So often we can let our daily emergencies pull us from spending time seeking God. We need to set patterns and priorities that place God in His rightful place.

The moment we live our lives by Matthew 6:33, we come alive in our relationship with Christ. It is when we seek other things ahead of God that we wonder where God is and why we are not close to Him.

I remember when my wife, Hannah, and I were dating in high school. She frequently ditched me for her friends. That would have been fine if I didn't care much about her. It took her

years to place me above all others. This led to a long period of frustration and confusion for both of us. But when she finally gave me her heart, it felt like relational bliss. And it still does.

This is similar to what many of us experience with God. We like the idea of God, just not placing Him above all other people and things. This leads to much less than God intended.

Placing God above all else is an invitation to experience a relationship with the Creator that is exciting and completely fulfilling.

Day 3

WHAT DOES LORD OF ALL REALLY MEAN?

Proverbs 3:5-6 (NKJV)

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.

The verses above have been life verses for me. They became my life source during a trying time. They have challenged me to trust God with all my heart, not just a part of it.

This is nice to read but incredibly challenging to live out. The kicker is to not lean on our own understanding. It is easy to follow God when we agree and understand everything, but what about the times when our circumstances are crushing? What about the times when we thought something would happen but it didn't? Are we willing to trust Him fully, even when we don't understand completely?

This is the true test of Jesus being the Lord of all. God is either Lord of all or not lord at all. A lord is the boss and complete ruler of his followers (or servants). When we ask Christ to be the Lord of our lives, we need to give up ownership of everything. We entrust our hopes, dreams, family and future into His hands.

As much as this sounds risky, just remember: God created the Heavens and earth. He holds the world in the palm of His hand. It is when we trade all we have that we gain all He has. We gain eternity with Him, peace in this life and hope in every situation life can throw at us.

Make God the Lord of all of your life and He will direct you to places you never thought possible.

Day 4

BUILD A SOLID FOUNDATION

Matthew 7:24

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

What are you building your life on? What is the foundation on which you are constructing your future? The answers to these questions will make or break your spiritual life.

I have worked several summers with my father, who is a concrete worker. I saw firsthand the importance of getting the foundation right before you start building. Before we could pour a basement or garage floor, an inspector had to make sure the foundation was right. I used to think of an inspector as an intruder on the real work.

Now, however, I understand that without someone making sure the foundation is right, many workers would take shortcuts or hide what was really going on. We'd have houses that sink and shift over time, causing them to be torn down and rebuilt.

Jesus is not meant to be an add-on somewhere in your life. He is to be the One that all of your life's weight is on. Everything you do is built on the Solid Rock who will never fail you.

The true test of whether or not Christ is your foundation is found in today's opening verse. Do you listen and follow His teaching? Anyone can hear, but it is those who do something about what they hear that are established in Christ.

A lot of people sit in the chairs of a church but hide the core of who they are. Don't live this way. You are not fooling God. When your entire life is resting on Christ – even during the storms of life – you will be secure on the strength of God.

Day 5

LOVE GOD WITH YOUR HEART AND SOUL

Mark 12:30

And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.

As you were growing up, I am sure your parents made you, at one time or another, turn to a sibling and tell them you were sorry for something you did. If they're like my parents, then they even said, "Say it like you mean it."

Now that I have kids, I do the exact same thing. My goal is not to have them just say the words, "I'm sorry." I want them to actually be sorry in their heart for what they did.

God is not interested in our lip service. He is not looking for us to just say the right things. Rather, He wants us to believe completely. Lip service is great if you want a lifeless religion.

When Jesus uttered the words "with all your heart, all your soul," He was taking things to another level. He was giving us the key to the type of faith He is looking for from us.

This verse was Christ's response to the question, "What is the most important commandment?" The guy wanted to know, if there was one thing he could do, what was it?

Do you love Christ with your words or do you love Him fully and completely? Are you committed to the idea of a higher power in your life or are you committed to giving God all of who you are?

Don't go through the motions. Rather, make a decision to love God with all your heart and soul.

Day 6

CROSS THE LINE AND LIVE DIFFERENTLY

John 8:7b-8

“...let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!” Then He stooped down again and wrote in the dust.

This is a fascinating and powerful story. The religious leaders were trying to trick Jesus into saying something they could use against Him, so they brought to Him a woman who was caught in the act of adultery.

The customs of the day were to stone her, but this is when Jesus' grace stepped in. Because they had all sinned before, none of them threw a stone. After they left, Jesus said to the woman in verses 10 and 11, “Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?” “No, Lord,” she said. And Jesus replied, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.”

The world is trying to lure us into sin, and when we do, it will throw stones at us. Jesus is extending His hands of forgiveness and grace. He sees what we have done and has given us a way out – and it is through the price He paid for us on the cross.

But Jesus gives a command after extending His hand. He says, “Go and sin no more.” This is the line in the sand, the moment of crossing over from sin to grace and forgiveness. This is an offer to live forgiven and free. Not a perfect life; rather, a life in pursuit of pleasing Christ. He is saying, “I love you, I forgive you and I want you to make better choices in the future.”

If there are areas of sin in your life, bring them to Jesus. Make a decision to cross the line and live differently. The enemy wants you to put off this decision and have the consequences of sin continue to wreak havoc in your life.

There is no better day than today to go and sin no more. A life of freedom is awaiting your action.

Day 7

ENLISTING IN GOD'S SERVICE

2 Timothy 2:4

Soldiers don't get tied up in the affairs of civilian life, for then they cannot please the officer who enlisted them.

The U.S. Marine Corps has a slogan: “No applications, only commitments.” This is an inspiring statement of an all-in pledge. And it's the only way to have effective soldiers. The thought of partially committed soldiers equates to disaster on the battlefield. If a Marine breaks his enlistment commitment, then he or she will be charged and tried, which could result in jail time.

Unfortunately, many Christians do not share this complete devotion to the God they serve. Many see serving God as a strategy for selfish gain. As long as God is giving them what they want, they are committed. An all-in commitment to Christ is the beginning of a thriving walk with God.

My cousin, Randall Rockman, served as a Marine in the Iraq war and saw some of the fiercest fighting since Vietnam. I asked him about the lack of commitment he sees in the church today, and he said, “Could you imagine what it would look like if Christians had the same commitment to Christ as the Marines have in battle? It would change a city.”

The truth is, this is what God has in mind for you and me. His desire is that we enlist ourselves in a relationship with Him and don't get tied up with the things that could hold us back. We should have a faith that inspires those around us to stand strong and live as a fully devoted follower of Christ.

This all-in commitment brings joy to our officer, Jesus.

Day 8

I HAVE DECIDED

James 1:8

Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.

Toiling on a decision is completely draining. For example, my decisions on which college to attend and what my first job should be were exhausting. I remember being stressed from the weight and impact of those choices and honestly not being sure which was the right choice.

On the other hand, choosing my spouse was easy. I absolutely knew Hannah was the right one for me.

You may find yourself with divided loyalty in your relationship with God. Yes, you love God. But you are not willing to let go of the world. This is the great battle for your soul. This is the place of spiritual exhaustion.

Divided loyalty to God results in great misery. We may even say, "Is this even worth it?" This is when we choose sinful actions and habits. We are tired and worn down. But one thing we have to understand is that a place of complete loyalty to God is a place of rest and peace. Our mind is made up and we will not go back.

I love the old hymn that says, "I have decided to follow Jesus." The song is based on the last words of a 19th century man in northeast India who was faced with a choice: renounce Christ or die. Even amidst threats on his family he said, "Though no one joins me, still I will follow." He was executed while singing, "The cross before me, the world behind me." This was a man whose mind was made up. His boldness reportedly led to the village chief's conversion to Christ.

Make up your mind and lean on the stability of Christ though your loyal and singular devotion to Him. What is the statement that your life is making: "My loyalty is divided" or "I have decided"? I pray that it is, "I have decided."

Day 9

RELIGION VS. RELATIONSHIP

Matthew 15:8

These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

Jesus did not die on the cross for us to follow some rules. He died for us to pave the way for restoring a relationship that sin so desperately tries to destroy.

The heart of God is for us to be in a vibrant relationship with Him. The question is: How do you follow God? Do you follow Him by doing the right things or by having the right heart? With resounding clarity, the answer should be having the right heart.

Jesus was intense in His interactions with people who were religious (doing the right things) but far from God in relationship. Jesus says in Matthew 23:28, “Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

The call of God is not one of perfection in religious duties; rather, it's wholehearted devotion to our relationship with Him. I am sure you have realized that when you are in love with someone, you want to please him or her. It brings you joy

to do the things that will please that person, even if it means sacrificing something for yourself.

I want to encourage you to pursue deepening and developing your relationship with Christ. The results from this will be a desire to please God. You will do the right things for the right reason from a heart of love. Always prioritize being right with God on the inside, then doing the right things on the outside.

The relationship is far more important to Christ!

Day 10

FOOD FOR YOUR SOUL

Matthew 4:4

People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

The illustration from this verse shatters the spiritual norms. Jesus is saying that as much as we need food, we need the Word of God. We cannot live long physically without food, and we cannot stay passionate for God when we don't eat spiritually.

How do you view the Bible? Is it a collection of some good sayings? Is it a book you read to clear your conscience? Or is the Bible as valuable as food, the very thing by which you live your life and the oxygen to your soul? When the Word of God becomes that important to you, it will change your life and fill your spirit.

My wife cooks a great, well-balanced meal plan. Some meals take 30 minutes, some take two hours, and on some occasions we will heat up leftovers. I think when it comes to reading the Bible, we think unless we have the time to cook up a spiritual filet mignon, then we don't stop to eat. Our Bible sits and collects dust on the shelf because we don't think we have the time to do it justice.

Just like in our lives, sometimes we sit down for a long meal, and sometimes we grab grub on the fly. The point is: It's vital that we eat!

God knows what you need spiritually. If you commit to connecting with God consistently, then He will give you the spiritual food you need. Consistency is the key to going to the next level in your relationship with God.

Do not neglect the Bible, for it is the exact thing that will sustain you spiritually.

Day 11

HOW TO SPEND TIME WITH GOD

Psalm 63:1 (NKJV)

O God, You are my God; Early will I seek You; My soul thirsts for You...

Consistency trumps methods all day long when you're connecting with God. You can have the greatest plan to connect with Him, but if you do not seek God often, then you will not grow spiritually.

With that being said, it is good to have some practical tips on how you can spend your time with God. The ideas below are not to be followed religiously but used as a guide until you find your own stride in your relationship with Christ.

Prioritize a specific time - The best intentions without prioritization are dreams never realized. Put a specific time on your calendar as “God Time,” even if it is only 10 minutes. Many people find that early in the morning is best. Seeking God early can set your day focused on the right things.

Eliminate distractions - A person you're spending quality time with wouldn't like your face to be buried in a screen while trying to have a conversation, and quality time with God does not happen when you're distracted. Turn off your

phone, email alerts and the TV, and hear the voice of God.

Pray - Start out in prayer by being grateful to God and humbling your life to God. Getting your heart right is vital. Playing a worship song as you pray can also get your heart in position to receive from God.

Read - Pick a chapter or two and let it all sink in. The goal is not to check something off a list but rather to hear from God. Great reading plans are available through the Bible app or you can go to Bible.com. These plans can be a great way to keep you focused. Also, the book of John in the New Testament is a great place to start. And a great devotional book, like *My Utmost For His Highest* by Oswald Chambers, is a great supplement (not replacement) to the Bible.

Apply - As you read the Bible, underline things you can apply to your life. The goal of reading is to draw close to God, and as you do so, He will make you more into His image, changing things in your life that do not reflect His character. Don't fight change, embrace it.

Pray - Close your time with God by committing to put into action the things you read and honor Him throughout your day.

The goal is not to instruct God on your needs; it is to hear from and obey Him. He wants you to bring your needs to Him, but don't make that the focus. Drawing near to Him and becoming like Christ is the goal.

Day 12

APPLY JUST ONE THING TO YOUR LIFE

Psalm 27:4

The one thing I ask of the Lord – the thing I seek most – is to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.

When I was in Bible college, I had a plan to be a great golfer in my future church. I thought all great pastors must be good at golf, so I took a PE elective in Golfing 101. Yet, I quickly realized I was horrible, and I was not getting better. As much as I wanted to hit that little white ball effectively, I just couldn't.

I learned that one of the challenges for a beginner golfer is that they are trying to implement the 25 things the instructor just told them in a 1.5-second golf swing. I had a golf pro coach me once and he told me to think about just one thing as I am swinging. Once I got that one thing down, I could move on to the next thing. This made a tremendous difference.

When we are reading the Bible, we may come across several things: a promise from God to hold onto, a character issue to work on or a spiritual principle we never knew about. In our desire to do everything God wants us to do, we never really

focus on making anything that we just read a part of our lives. We could read as many as 10 chapters and not take away any one thing.

As you are connecting with God, I want to encourage you to pick one of the things God is bringing to the surface and focus on applying it to your life. Write down that one thing and put it in a place where you will see it. Every time you spend time with God, come away with that one thing.

Over time, you will look back and be astounded by your progress.

Day 13

SEEK AN AUDIENCE OF ONE

Matthew 6:6

But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private.

The context of this verse is to not be like the hypocrites, who want public recognition for their prayer life. Jesus is making a point about the purpose of connecting with God. It is not to feel good about yourself or impress others.

When you spend time with God, it is a time to grow in your relationship with your Creator. Shut the door to selfish motivation and a desire to be known as super spiritual.

I remember a time in high school when I was reading my Bible in the football locker room. I sat right by the door so everyone could see me with my big Bible. My thought was that I would be seen and others convicted.

That was all good until I came across Matthew 6 and had to think twice about my intentions.

When you seek the Lord, seek an audience of One. God should be the only one you care about showing up. You are not spending time with God or desiring to please Him for the crowd's approval.

You seek the Lord passionately and constantly because you want to honor and lift up the One. The one person who matters most!

Day 14

LEARN GOD'S PHONE NUMBER

Jeremiah 33:3 (NKJV)

Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know.

There are several reasons why this verse – also known as God's phone number – is powerful.

For one, we don't have to call God with all the answers. We can come to Him without everything figured out. God is not looking for us to be perfect or all together to seek Him. We can sometimes feel that we need to clean up our lives before coming to God, but this couldn't be farther from the heart of God. His desire is for us to come as we are right now and ask Him.

Another reason this verse is incredible is that God promises He will answer us when we call on Him. God wants to give us direction; He is just waiting on our call. The Bible brings more clarity to what it means to call on the Lord in Matthew 7:7, which says, "Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you."

The heart behind both passages is that we live our lives in pursuit of God. As we're pursuing God through praying and reading the Bible, He will answer us. His answers can come from the Word of God, a sermon at church, an impression in our heart that we cannot explain or a host of other ways.

I need to warn you that God doesn't always answer in the way that we want Him to. Sometimes He answers with "no" or "not now." But the good news is that His ways are above ours and He has good plans for us. It is imperative that we trust God with the answers He gives.

Don't wait to call God only when you have something to say. Call Him often and you will see your relationship come to life. God has some incredible things to tell you, if you will just call upon Him.

Day 15

IT'S QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

Matthew 6:7

When you pray, don't babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again.

More is not always better. We know this – we can go to an all-you-can-eat buffet and have all the food we want, yet not be overly impressed with any of it. Sometimes less is more. The most expensive restaurants are the ones that oftentimes serve the least amount of food on the plate.

We often think that if we just read enough of the Bible we will grow spiritually. This is not necessarily true because we can read something without letting it sink into our heart. When we spend time with God, the goal is not how much or how long but rather how effectively we are letting it sink in and change us. The Old Testament talks about seeking God's face. This is indicating a heartfelt pursuit, not a stale obligation.

The Bible, as talked about in Ephesians 6, is known as an offensive weapon in our arsenal. It has the power to encourage, lift up, change mindsets, provoke us to forgive,

empower us to turn away from sin, strengthen us to live with purity and help us stand for integrity.

However, if we are allowing our eyes to glance across the pages without the words penetrating our soul, we are just performing another religious activity. I would rather see someone seek God for 10 minutes with all of their heart than one hour with a sidetracked mind.

When you seek God, make it count!

Day 16

YOU WERE NEVER MEANT TO BE ALONE

Hebrews 10:25

And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of His return is drawing near.

The concept of “organized religion” has gotten a bad rap, and much of it is deserved. So, it's imperative that we make life decisions that are consistent with Scripture, not based on the errors of people within the church. The people are not who we glorify, Christ is.

If you have been hurt by someone who calls themselves a Christian, don't reject church altogether. You need to forgive and move on. It's like the popular saying: Do not throw the baby out with the bath water. Just because you see a tub full of dirty water, don't throw out what is most important. Just because you've had a bad experience, don't throw out God, the Bible and the church.

Church was not designed for perfect people. It was created to be a hospital for the hurting. We all have dirt in our soul that needs to be cleansed by God. And the enemy of our soul is desperately trying to separate us from the people of God.

The Bible says in 1 Peter 5:8, “Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.” I'm sure you have seen what happens on the animal shows when a lion sees a small animal separating from the herd.

Don't minimize church to a place where you purge your guilty conscious because of your attendance. Church is a place that is full of life, where you can hear God's truth and where you can connect with other people who can lift you up in life. There is incredible power when you are linked up with other strong believers.

You were not meant to be alone. You were created to be connected, growing and safe within the family of God.

Day 17

VALUE WHAT CHRIST DIED FOR

Ephesians 5:25

... just as Christ loved the church. He gave up His life for her...

If we are not careful, we can make the Gospel revolve around us. We can see ourselves as the center and main character of the story. This is a prideful place to be. Remember, it is Jesus who came down from Heaven, lived a perfect life, carried the sins of the world and died for all. We are a part of His story. We must value God's story and the things that matter most to Him.

It is vital to understand the heart of God in relationship to the church. He died for all of us, and the way He chose to carry this legacy is through the local church. As the local church stays on mission and makes disciples, Jesus advances in the hearts of His people.

I cannot overstate the importance of getting yourself and your family into a local church where you are growing in God. When you are in the right church, you will be spiritually fed, connected to great people and unleashed in your part to play in advancing God's movement.

My wife and I value the wedding ring on her finger for its sentimental and monetary significance. When I purchased the ring, it was a huge financial sacrifice and the best I could do. Infinitely greater than a wedding ring, though, is the incredible price God paid for the church. The price was His best, a perfect sacrifice paid with the blood of the Son of God.

The church is His chosen discipling method. It is not just a place to squeeze into our busy lives; it is a place of great value to the heart of God. Because He loves and values the church, anything less than love and value from us would be offensive.

How much do you personally value the church? Is it one of the most valuable things in your life? If not, change your perspective to line up with God's love and value for His church.

Day 18

FIND YOUR FOXHOLE FRIENDS

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble.

A foxhole can be referred to as a defensive fighting position. I can only imagine what it must have been like in World War II, in which my grandfather fought. I know it would have been immensely more encouraging to have a great warrior next to me in a foxhole than be there alone.

God has great people who are willing to go through life's great battles with you. A foxhole friend will be there to pick you up when you fall down, and they will reach out when you need to be lifted up.

The question is: Do you have some foxhole friends in your life? I know you have several hundred friends on social media, but do you have someone who is in the trenches of life with you? Hundreds of superficial friends do not replace the rich and meaningful relationships that God wants for us. Make sure you have the right foxhole friends.

And be aware – there might be some people in your life right now who are in the trenches with you, but they're actually pulling you down. God intends for you to find godly people who can push you and strengthen you in the things that matter most, such as your faith, love and purity.

If you find yourself in a place where you do not have a godly foxhole friend, I want to encourage you to begin praying that God will bring a few trusted people into your life. Put yourself in places where great godly people are. Start spending more time investing in the relationships which have the potential to become a Godsend in your life.

Life is immeasurably more meaningful with great foxhole friends.

Day 19

TAKE A RELATIONAL RISK

Galatians 6:7

*Don't be misled – you cannot mock the justice of God.
You will always harvest what you plant.*

The Bible is loaded with illustrations about sowing and reaping. The principle is simple but unbelievably powerful: You will not harvest what you have not planted.

This is clearly seen in the relationships we have in our lives. Often times we complain about how we are lonely and do not have meaningful friendships. We think that great people should just flock to us and pursue us. But that is not how this world works, and if you have that mindset, you will live a lonely life. If we are going to have the people in our lives that God intends for us, then we are going to have to start sowing and planting. We need to take relational risks.

We can have a tendency to hold on to our comfort, which is the very thing we must be willing to let go of if we are going to develop new and great friends. Fulfilling dreams never come to those who are unwilling to take a risk. The same is true here.

You may have close friends who live far away, but I believe God has some great people – nearby – who can change the game in your life. Be willing to go into a season of taking relational risks. It may not always work out, but I can promise that sitting back and wondering why people are not chasing you down for friendship will not lead to your desired result.

You cannot mock the justice of God. If you want great godly friends, then you will have to take relational risks.

Day 20

WORSHIP THE ONE WHO WON IT ALL

Psalm 100:4

Enter His gates with thanksgiving; go into His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him and praise His name.

Can you imagine what it would be like to be at the Super Bowl, your favorite team is playing, and after the game-winning touchdown, none of the fans cheered? That is inconceivable! The inward joy from your team winning the greatest prize would cause you to erupt with external expression.

This is an illustration of how simple it is to sing worship songs to God. It is not complicated. When you are grateful for God paying the price for your ultimate prize – salvation – you can't help but do something. True worship always starts with your heart. Because of the internal gratitude, external expression is automatic.

It is always comical to me how we can cheer, clap and lift our hands so quickly over sports, but when it comes to the worship portion of a church service or our personal time with God at home, it seems more like a funeral.

My goal is not to get people to act crazy; rather, it is for them to see how simplistic worship is. You are happy for what He has done, so you react with praise. Next time you're singing songs to God, think about what He did for you. It will cause you to forget who is around and focus on Him.

Worship is a critical part of our lives, both in our personal time with God and at church. We must get our eyes off of our circumstances, successes and failures, and fix them on God. It's when we begin to look up in worship that the shackles and weights that hold us back in life begin to fall off.

If you have not made worship a part of your Monday-through-Saturday routine, then put on some worship music and sing to God with a grateful heart. Next time you're in church, fix your eyes on the One who won it all for you. Singing songs at church is not intended for you to pass time or look religious; it is to give you an opportunity to connect with God in a profound way.

Singing worship songs to God is simple: He won for us, so we celebrate Him.

Day 21

UNLEASH YOUR PURPOSE

Romans 12:4-5

Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body...

When you invest yourself by serving in your local church, you are fulfilling a major part of your spiritual purpose. The Bible says that it is God's desire "that not one should perish." It is His heart that all would come to know Him.

If we are going to create the type of churches that impact a city, then it is mission-critical that we all jump in. The church is not simply about a pastor preaching and people listening. It is about a pastor who equips and unites people to make a difference.

When a part of the body, let's say a hand, says, "I don't want to be a part of the body," the body cannot function at its maximum capacity. You are a part of the church body and an important part of the mission! The gifts and talents that God has given you need to be unleashed within the context of the local church.

There are consumers and contributors within a church. I believe God has called us to move in a progression from consuming to contributing. I love that my kids are consumers right now. It would be weird if it were any other way. However, there will come a time when they grow up and will need to transition into a contributing member of society, utilizing the natural gifts God has given them.

The same is true for you. The church is powerful and influential when the people of God selflessly unleash their potential within a church that is focused on a city.

Don't sit on the sidelines any longer. Jump in the game and make a difference. When you team up with your local church, unleashing your gifts and talents, you will come alive spiritually like never before. The church will reach its potential when people selflessly give their time, talent and treasure.

What are you waiting for? Eternity is at stake for the lives of those in your city. It's time to go all in and unleash your purpose through the local church.

Day 22

RETURN WHAT HE ALREADY OWNS

Proverbs 3:9-10 (NKJV)

Honor the Lord with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase; So your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine.

People in church will nod their heads in agreement with the challenge to honor God with their lives. But when it comes to money, stay away. Giving seems to be a taboo topic in and outside of the church.

Money is a real test of the human heart. Jesus knew this – that's why 16 of the 38 parables are on the subject of finances. In fact, there are 1,000 verses on prayer and faith but more than 2,000 about money and possessions. The Bible says in 1 Timothy 6:10, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.”

Finances seem to be one of the things we are unwilling to honor God with. In the opening verse today, Proverbs 3:9-10, God is instructing us to give of the "firstfruits," meaning the first of our income. This is a challenge to prioritize giving before anything else. We shouldn't pay all of our bills and then give if there is some left over. God is not interested in leftovers but rather the first of our increase.

Some people say that tithing – giving 10 percent – is not a New Testament principle. Jesus says in Luke 11:42, “But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.” Jesus says tithing is something “you ought to have done.” He is validating the priority of giving 10 percent of your income back to God. This is actually a great deal. God owns it all and we get to keep 90 percent.

The point here is that you give and love God, not just one or the other. Remember, nobody pulls a U-Haul trailer behind a hearse. We brought nothing into this world and we cannot take any earthly possessions with us. God really does own everything. We are just stewards for a while.

Do not allow the love of money to have such a grip on you that you refrain from putting God first in returning what He already owns.

Day 23

CHANGE INTO HIS GLORIOUS IMAGE

2 Corinthians 3:18

And the Lord – who is the Spirit – makes us more and more like Him as we are changed into His glorious image.

When a child is born, one of the first things people do is try to identify who the baby looks like, Mom or Dad. After having children myself, I think this is somewhat comical due to the fact that babies rarely look anything like their parents on day one. But after some time, there is no question that you can see more and more similarities between the baby and their parents.

This is similar to our walk with God. The longer we follow Christ, our Heavenly Father, the more and more we should reflect His character and likeness. He didn't save us from sin for us to continue looking like the father of sin.

People often say, "You are a product of your environment." The truth is, no matter what your environment is, if you surround yourself with God daily, then you will be a product of grace, love, forgiveness and second chances. God's desire is that you follow Him so closely that your entire life is a

reflection of His glorious image – not that people see you as glorious but rather that people see Jesus in you.

My hope is that when people think of me, they see the characteristics of the God I serve. Are you looking more and more like your Heavenly Father?

Day 24

WALK IN GOD-GIVEN FREEDOM

John 8:36

So if the Son sets you free, you are truly free.

There is a tragedy taking place amongst the followers of Christ. God went to the cross and paid the full price to set us free from our sinful past, yet for some reason, we have a tendency to hold onto guilt and shame.

If God has set us free, we are “truly free.” We are no longer bound by the guilt of what we have done. God says that He casts our sin as far as the east is from the west.

You have a choice in your freedom. God desires to cast your past so far away that He doesn't even remember it anymore. A classic move of the enemy is to rehash old mistakes. The Bible says the devil is the accuser. He wants to depress you by accusing you of things God has already paid for with His life. Jesus did not go to the cross for you to live a life bound by sin and all its side effects.

This is the incredible part of the “good news”: If you have put your faith in Christ, then you are free!

God has forgiven you, but the big question is: Have you forgiven yourself? Make a decision today to stop believing the lies and start walking in your God-given freedom.

Day 25

DITCH THE BAGGAGE

Hebrews 12:1

... let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up.

When I was young, I used to think it was cool to carry a huge, hockey-sized bag to the airport. You know, the ones with no wheels, so you end up lugging around 50 pounds on a sacrificial shoulder. Nowadays, I don't like carrying anything. But if I have to, it must have wheels.

God wants to carry the weight of your over-sized bag of sin. Actually, He wants to get rid of it altogether. Today's opening verse is an invitation to ditch the sins that you are bent toward.

Sin is like fire – we think we can get close and even hold it without getting hurt. But just like a fire, sin is never satisfied. It wants to continuously consume whatever is in its way. The sin that so easily trips us up always looks attractive. That's why it is easy for us to trip.

We need to stop entertaining the things that will destroy us – destroy our integrity, our purity and our heart for God.

The wake of sin is destroyed families, broken hearts and deep pain. The goal is not to find a way to carry the things you may struggle with; rather, it's to ditch the baggage. Let go of the things that slow you down and rob you from the future you dream of.

What in your life are you flirting with that you know you need to let go of? The happiness you desire is right on the other side of taking action. Lose the weights you have carried your whole life.

Day 26

FIGHT BACK AND FORGIVE QUICKLY

Ephesians 4:26-27

And “don’t sin by letting anger control you.” Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil.

It's very easy to allow something small to become a big deal in our lives. All the enemy needs is a small wedge of hurt to open the door to a broken relationship.

This example of a foothold from Ephesians is a military strategy. An enemy can create great gains with a small win. For example, General Joshua Chamberlin and his Union troops in the Civil War's Battle of Gettysburg defended a hill that was crucial in maintaining control. Their opponents in the Confederacy knew that if they could take over this one hill, it would break the line of defense and possibly lead to their victory.

If the devil can win a foothold in your life, he has the high ground that can cause a domino effect of pain and regret. The way to fight back is to forgive quickly. Don't let anger, hurt feelings or bitterness stay in your life.

But what if we are justified in our offenses? What if the other person is wrong? What if it is their fault?

The battle in our lives is letting go, even in our justification. We need to forgive others for their sake, but we also need to forgive for our sake. I have seen people live with years of anger, and it has crippled their lives.

Unforgiveness is a poison that can effectively sabotage our joy in life. Jesus could hold our sins against us and banish us to an eternity of separation and hell, but He doesn't do this. He promises to forgive us.

Who do you need to forgive today to push out a foothold? Follow the advice in Ephesians and forgive quickly, before the sun goes down.

Day 27

LOVE MUST DEFINE US

1 Corinthians 13:3

If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

Love is the trump card in the eyes of God. If we had to choose only one word to describe Him, it would have to be "love." Jesus said that the two most important things are to love God and love people.

In 1 Corinthians 13:13 it says, "Three things will last forever – faith, hope and love – and the greatest of these is love." Arguably the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16, says, "For God so loved the world that He gave..." (NKJV).

You could be the richest man in the world and give all your money away to the poor, but with the wrong motivation you could completely miss the mark. The reason is because God is after your heart. You can mask who you are on the inside by the religious things you do on the outside.

This is another reason why God is so amazing: He has leveled the playing field. It doesn't matter how much money you have, where you grew up or who your parents are ... because

what you do is not more important than your love for God and people. God desires for you to be defined by love as well.

How can we call ourselves Christians if we don't reflect the most important trait of the God we serve? The last thing the world needs is a mean Christian. Love must define us.

Allow the love that God has for you to permeate your life to the point of total saturation. May your life be branded with love as your dominant trait.

Day 28

HOPE COMES FROM HIM

Proverbs 13:12

Hope deferred makes the heart sick...

Hope is a powerful force. With it, we are on top of the world. Without it, we are down and discouraged.

I have heard it said that hope is the favorable expectation of something good. One principle we must grab a hold of, if we want to stay stable and faith-filled, is that our hope operates independently from our circumstances. If we are only filled with hope and joy when things are going well, then we will be riding a horrible rollercoaster.

Where does true hope come from? Psalm 62:1-2 says, "I wait quietly before God, for my victory comes from Him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress where I will never be shaken."

Our hope must be anchored in God. He is our victory. We win in the end. Heaven is our destination. Anything we face now is only temporary compared to an eternity with God.

When our hope is rooted in the Fortress that will never be shaken, we can face life's ups and downs with constant

confidence. This is not a fake or manufactured joy. We may not be happy with everything that happens in life, but that will not steal our hope on the inside.

We must make a choice to place our hope in Christ alone, instead of the fickle circumstances and feelings we all have. Make the decision today to place your hope in Him alone.

Day 29

TRADE TEMPORARY FOR ETERNITY

Matthew 6:19-20

Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in Heaven...

It is so easy to make our lives about stuff. Our homes, cars, clothes and other possessions can dominate our minds. Creditors don't help us forget. We can get trapped into a popularity contest of accumulation. Who has what? Where do they live? How much money do they have?

The problem is, everything we own and care so much about is all temporary. The real place where we should be stockpiling wealth is Heaven. The only things we can truly store up are souls won to Christ. That new car is really cool, but in light of eternity, it really does not matter. When we get to Heaven, we will not wish we had the house on the hill, we will wish we did more to bring people with us.

Think about someone who is close to you but far from God. Maybe it is a neighbor, a coworker, a family member or a friend who does not have a thriving relationship with God. I do not believe it is an accident that God has you in their life.

There is a story in the Bible of a guy who goes to hell and is begging Abraham to send someone to tell his family about God, so they don't have to experience what he is going through (Luke 16). This passage is a kick in the pants for us who have the opportunity to tell others about God. How tragic it would be if someone close to us went to hell and we never said anything to them.

So many times we feel like people will shoot us down, so we don't take the risk. It is so vital that we don't say no for them. Our job is to let people know about God and how they too can experience forgiveness, and we need to leave the results up to God.

God is waiting to do the supernatural in the hearts of people through your natural conversation with them. God wants to use you as a catalyst to initiate a life-changing moment in the lives of those you care about. You can share your life-changing story, invite them to church or pray with them to receive Christ. Let's not wait for someone else to step out. If not you ... who?

Trade the pursuit of temporary things for stockpiling Heaven with souls won to Christ. This is your moment of action. This is your moment to make an eternal difference.

Day 30

LOOK UP AND YOU CAN GET UP

Colossians 3:2 (NKJV)

Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.

There is an old proverb that tells the story of a mule that fell into a dried-up well. The farmer didn't see much worth in either, so he gathered some neighbors to help bury the mule.

To everyone's amazement, with each shovel full of dirt thrown on the mule, he shook it off and took a step up. Eventually, the mule climbed right out of the hole because he didn't let the dirt stay on him. He used it to take a step each time.

In life, we will face things that have the potential to keep us down, but we need to fight back with the Word of God. The passage above has helped me for years to not focus on the discouragement and disappointment that was flung my way but rather see the great things that God has for me. When we watch the news, get a bad report, have relational conflict or struggle financially, it is easy to get down. But when we look up, we can get up.

In Genesis 15:5, God tried to encourage Abram: "Then the Lord took Abram outside and said to him, 'Look up into the

sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!" God had to get Abram out of his tent, his negative mindset and his discouraged place to see what God saw.

I want to encourage you to set your mind on things above. Set your mind on being forgiven, restored, given a new beginning, bursting with a thriving relationship with God, and filled with peace. God has great things in store for you, but we can forfeit His favor when all we focus on is the dirt being flung on top of us.

It is all about what you make bigger in your life. Is your problem bigger than your God? Decide today to make God big.

Today is the day to look up and it won't be long before you get up.

If you would like more resources to grow in God, go to:
www.ThriveChurch.com