

First Thing

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.—Mark 1:35



JESUS HAD BEEN UP LATE THE NIGHT BEFORE, concluding a long, intense day of ministry. People were clamoring for His attention; desperate needs pressed in on Him endlessly, as word spread of His supernatural power over demons and disease. Yet at the break of day, our Savior was found in a quiet place, away from the crowds, seeking and enjoying fellowship with His heavenly Father. This was not something He “had” to do—it was His supreme delight.

By comparison, many believers I’ve known approach their “quiet time” with a sense of obligation; they dutifully go through the routine but have little sense of actually meeting with God. Others struggle with consistency; they’ve failed so many times, they’re tempted to give up—or already have. Still others have no personal devotional life at all, and have no idea what they are missing.

And then there are those few whose lives evidence the sweet, rich fruit of meeting with God on a consistent basis. The fragrance of their lives makes me long to know Him in a deeper way.

You see, more than a duty of the Christian life, a daily devotional habit is an incredible opportunity to know the God of the universe. Amazingly, He has issued to you and me an invitation to draw near to Him, to walk humbly and confidently into the Holy of Holies, to enter into a growing love relationship with Him.

Jesus said, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink” (John 7:37). This devotional collection is for thirsty souls. It is an invitation to come to *Him*. So come and drink deeply. Let Him quench your thirst, day after day. And then watch as rivers of living water flow out through you to quench the thirst of those around you.



*Do you think of a daily devotional life as a duty or a delight?
Ask God to make you thirsty—to increase your desire to enjoy
daily communion with the Lover of your soul.*

One Thing

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after.—Psalm 27:4



HOW WOULD YOU FINISH THIS VERSE FROM PSALM 27? If you had to boil down the greatest desire and longing of your heart to just “one thing,” how would you summarize it? If only a single sentence could be spoken of you at the end of your life, what would you want it to be?

Our response to these questions offers an explanation for much of what we do—our choices, our priorities, our use of time, the way we spend our money, the way we respond to pressure, whom or what we love. So it’s worth thinking about. Our “one thing” matters.

King David landed on the following answer: If I could only ask the Lord for one thing, it would be this—“that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.” His number-one priority was to *live* in the presence of the Lord, so that he could *look* on His splendor and glory and *learn* the heart and ways of the Almighty.

And, no, David didn’t do it perfectly. He blew it in some of the most crucial relationships of his life. But because the Lord had placed this passion in his heart, his Lover-God would not let him go. With a confronting, convicting, cleansing love, God continued to pursue and restore him.

One might have wondered at points, *Why does God bother with a guy like David?* The same reason He bothers with any of us—because He is a Lover in pursuit of relationship. And because His love for unlovable sinners puts His amazing grace on display. Even when we fail to live the “one thing” we most desire, we can be assured our God will keep working—stripping us of lesser loves, drawing us to Himself—till He becomes our sole consuming desire.



Try writing out your “one thing” response, and put it in a place where you can be reminded of it throughout the year ahead.

Untold Riches

. . . that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being—Ephesians 3:16



DEEP INSIDE THE EARTH ARE VAST RICHES still waiting to be found. Some experts estimate that six billion dollars' worth of sunken treasure lies undiscovered, scattered across the darkened ocean depths of the globe. The world's deepest gold mine, located near Johannesburg, South Africa, extends two full miles into the earth, having produced more than a hundred million ounces of pure gold—three thousand tons—since it first began operations. The Driefontein mine employs nearly 17,000 people working in shifts that span all day every day, gathering gold from the earth.

And still there's more—this one mine is expected to produce at least a million ounces a year, for the next twenty years.

Yet God's riches go deeper still.

The Bible talks about the “riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience” (Rom. 2:4), the “riches of his glory” (9:23), and the “riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight” (Eph. 1:7–8). Yet unlike the riches on the ocean's floor, which could all be collected if someone knew how to reach them—unlike the riches of a gold mine, which are eventually extracted until no more can be found—the gold in God's mine will never be emptied. It is limitless. Inexhaustible.

God will never experience economic collapse or uncertainty. Instead, the Scripture promises that He will “supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19). His ever-available provision will never strain or drain the budget of the Most High. Rather, He will continue pouring into your life from His fathomless resources. Whatever your need, whatever the deficit, the riches of God are always more than what's required.



*What are some needs you are experiencing at this time?
What are some of the “riches” He has promised to supply to meet your need?*

His Smile

*The LORD make his face to shine upon you
and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his
countenance upon you and give you peace.*—Numbers 6:25–26



WHEN GOD'S FACE SHINES UPON HIS PEOPLE, it means He takes pleasure in them. I think of a high school athlete who's been sitting on the bench for most of three seasons, but finally, in the last quarter of the last game of his senior year, he gets into the game and scores a basket. Where does he immediately look? He looks to his coach, to his teammates, to his dad in the stands. He wants to see that smile. He wants to know they are pleased.

Often in life we must deal with the frowns of those whose acceptance we crave. You may have experienced rejection from one or both of your parents. Perhaps your spouse is cold, inattentive, and distant. Or maybe your boss constantly belittles you in front of others. You long to be looked upon with favor and grace.

When Jesus came to earth, He put a human face to God. Jesus was God smiling upon His people, becoming flesh so we could *see* the blessing and love of the Father. “In the light of a king’s face there is life, and his favor is like the clouds that bring the spring rain” (Prov. 16:15).

Yes, we know we’re dealing with One who can see right through us, before whom all things are “naked and exposed” (Heb. 4:13). But because Christ bore our sin on the cross, taking the full brunt of God’s frown and the rejection we deserved, the *terror* of His face has become for us the *favor* of His face. And with the smile of God, we can survive the frowns and rejection of life.



What does it mean to you today to know that God smiles upon you and looks upon you with favor and grace?

A Great Big Thank-You

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.—Colossians 3:17



WHERE DOES GRATITUDE RANK on your list of Christian virtues? In an arsenal that's supposed to include things like mountain-moving faith, radical obedience, patient long-suffering, and second-mile self-denial, *gratitude* can feel like an optional add-on. Nice if you can get it, but not all that critical to making life run the way it should.

And yet this issue of gratitude is far more significant than its lightweight reputation would suggest. What appears at first to be merely an accessory—an accent piece—is in reality a much weightier, much more powerful, much more necessary component to your Christian life.

Try, for example, to sustain persevering faith—without gratitude—and your faith will eventually forget the whole point of its faithfulness, hardening into a practice of religion that's hollow and ineffective.

Try being a person who exudes and exhibits Christian love—without gratitude—and over time your love will crash hard on the sharp rocks of disappointment and disillusionment.

Try being a person who sacrificially gives of yourself—without the offering being accompanied by gratitude—and you'll find every ounce of joy drained dry by a martyr complex.

True gratitude is not an incidental ingredient. Nor is it a stand-alone product, something that never actually intersects with real life, safely denying reality out on its own little happy island somewhere. No, gratitude has a big job to do in us and our hearts. It is one of the chief ways that God infuses joy and resilience into the daily struggle of life.



Where do you most notice a lack of gratitude in your life as you go about your day? What tends to fill the spaces in your heart left vacant by its absence?

Healing Climate

Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.—Proverbs 16:24



IF YOU LOOK UP THE WORD *HEALING* IN A THESAURUS, you will likely find words like *therapeutic*, *medicinal*, *curing*. What a blessing it is to experience physical healing from sickness, to feel yourself getting stronger, able to function freely and normally again. An even greater blessing, however, is when God uses you as an instrument of *spiritual* healing in the lives of others.

“A gentle tongue is a tree of life,” Scripture tells us (Prov. 15:4). It can refresh the weary. It can provide support for the anxious. It can minister grace to young and old alike. It can even defuse tense situations, preventing misunderstandings from progressing into bitter conflict.

When the men of Ephraim hurried to meet Gideon, furious that he hadn’t included them in his historic assault on Midian, thereby making them feel left out of the victory, his humble response put an end to the discord. “What have I done now in comparison to you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the grape harvest of Abiezer?” . . . Their anger against him subsided when he said this” (Judges 8:2–3).

We, too, can create a calm, healing climate in our homes, churches, and workplaces by the way we respond to those around us, even when they’re not acting as they should. Soft, gentle words minister grace, strength, and encouragement—words like, “I love you,” “I’m praying for you,” “I’m sorry I treated you that way,” “Would you please forgive me?” “I appreciate you so much.”

May God keep watch over our lips, using them to heal, rebuild, and restore.



Who needs to hear something from you that would help restore emotional or spiritual health? Write a note, make a call, go out of your way to be an instrument of healing in someone’s life today.

Called by His Name

*You are to be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy,
and I have set you apart from the peoples
to be Mine.*—Leviticus 20:26 NASB



IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, Israel was set apart by God to be a “holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). This didn’t mean their *conduct* was always holy or that they were inherently more upright than anyone else. God called them “holy” because He had set them apart from other nations—a distinction and privilege that came with an obligation to live holy lives.

But not only were they set apart *by* God; they were set apart *for* God. The biblical concept of holiness carries with it a sense of belonging to God, much as a mother might claim, “These children are mine.”

I remember first discovering as a child something of what it means to be set apart for and by God. My parents established for us what they felt to be wise practices and limitations for our family. At times we would complain, “But everyone else . . . !” Their response was often along these lines: “But you don’t belong to ‘everyone else.’ You belong to God!” They convinced us there was something special about being set apart for God rather than being squeezed into the world’s mold.

Being set apart for God is not a punishment. It is not an attempt on God’s part to deprive us or condemn us to a cheerless, joyless lifestyle. It is a privilege—a call to belong, to be cherished, to enter into an intimate love relationship with God Himself; to fit into His grand, eternal plan for this universe; to experience the exquisite joys and purposes for which we were created; to be freed from all that destroys our true happiness.



*What difference would it make if you were more conscious
of being set apart by God, for God? Thank the Lord for the
privilege of belonging to Him, and ask Him to make your
life reflect that high calling today.*

A Thousand Things

Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? It is higher than heaven. . . .—Job 11:7



YEARS AGO, I HEARD PASTOR JOHN PIPER make a statement that resonated deeply in my heart. I've shared it countless times since: "*In every situation and circumstance of your life, God is always doing a thousand different things that you cannot see and you do not know.*"

Just in case you flew by that sentence too quickly, go back and read it again. Let the eternal perspective of this statement become permanently etched into your thinking.

I repeated this line recently while talking with a mom whose daughter has chosen a prodigal lifestyle. Looking back at me through tears, even as her face showed visible signs of hope and relief, she said, "I need that quote hanging in my home where I can look at it all the time." It's a truth we *all* need hanging in our hearts.

Regardless of what crisis or complexity may be threatening to engulf your life, *God is at work*. You may not see it, but you need to know it's true. And He's not just doing one or two or a few things in that situation. He is doing *a thousand* or more things.

Although at times He may allow us to see some of His purposes, enabling us to say, "Oh, that makes sense," the vast majority of what He is doing is behind the scenes, providentially obscured from our finite view.

You will never be able to fully fathom what God is doing in your life. You cannot possibly see the end or the outcome of each situation. *Not yet* anyway. But you can be sure that He knows what He is doing. He is God and He is working—purposefully, skillfully, lovingly. And one day when you look back on your journey from heaven's perspective, you will see His hand in all those inexplicable circumstances, and you will say with wonder and worship: "You have done all things well!" Count on it.



How might your attitude toward a knotty problem be different if you were convinced He was carefully overseeing every step and detail along the way and doing countless things to glorify Himself through that situation?

The Ministry of Encouragement

*For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love,
my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been
refreshed through you.—Philemon 7*



AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, the Boer republics were waging war in South Africa with the armies of the British Empire. During one protracted siege in the city of Ladysmith, a woeful citizen began wandering the streets, certain that doom was imminent, speaking demoralizing words to the soldiers. He never fired a shot for the enemy, but his discouragement was ultimately deemed a chargeable offense. When brought before a court-martial judge, he was found guilty and sentenced to a year's imprisonment.

Discouraging others, it seemed, was against the law.

Most of us would probably be a little nervous if discouragement were actually declared illegal. But I do believe one of the most needed ministries in the church today is the ministry of encouragement. Even the apostle Paul frequently made reference to other people who had helped him in his ministry; he treasured their friendship and support. They were a “comfort” to him (Col. 4:11), translated from the Greek *paregoria*, from which we get our word “paregoric,” a medicine that soothes an upset stomach. Encouragers soothe and comfort our hearts, giving us new hope, energy, and confidence. We all want to be on the receiving end of encouragement. But we need to be on the giving end, as well. Thirtysome times in the New Testament, we read of things we are to do for “one another.” Be kind to one another. Love one another. Among them is the exhortation to “encourage one another” (Heb. 3:13 NASB). When we represent the “God of endurance and encouragement” in this way (Rom. 15:5), we actually become a channel of His grace to others.



*Who has refreshed your heart with their love and encouragement?
How could God use you today to refresh the hearts of His people?*

The God Who Pursues

*“Return, faithless Israel,” declares the LORD.
“I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful.
... I will not be angry forever.”—Jeremiah 3:12*



GOD HAD TOLD HIS PEOPLE through the prophet Jeremiah that He remembered what it was like in the early days of their relationship—“the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride”(Jer. 2:2). He remembered the sweet, simple, pure-hearted affection the children of Israel had once felt and demonstrated toward Him. Perhaps He was thinking back to those days when they sang His praise at the Red Sea, or when they stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, saying, “All that the LORD has spoken, we will do” (Ex. 19:8).

But something had changed. His people had forsaken Him. More than merely forgetting Him, they had turned their backs on Him to follow other lovers, becoming “treacherous” and “unfaithful.” So in Jeremiah 3, God makes His case against His bride. He is heartbroken by their appalling infidelity. He uses the graphic language of harlots and whores to describe the depths of their wantonness, things we don’t even like to say in polite company. He speaks as a jilted, betrayed lover.

Yet He never ceases to be a lover—a reconciling, redeeming God who relentlessly pursues His wayward bride, pleading with His people to come back, in spite of how gravely they have forsaken Him, forgotten Him, and followed after other suitors.

This is the gospel—the good news—the gospel for *saved* people, the gospel we need preached to us every day of our lives, reminding us how God continues to seek us and woo us back to Himself. He wants a restored relationship. He pleads with us to return and when we do, He promises to extend mercy and heal our faithlessness.



Is there anything that has drawn your heart away from the devotion and love you once had for Christ? Do you need to return to Him? Remember—as badly as you want your fellowship back, He wants it more.

Pray for Us

You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted to us through the prayers of many.—2 Corinthians 1:11



I DON'T THINK WE CAN EVEN BEGIN TO FATHOM the effect of our prayers on the lives of others, nor of the effect of their prayers on us. Actually, I believe much of my life is the product of prayer, and of a praying great-grandmother in particular.

I never met "Yaya," my father's Greek immigrant grandmother. She lived in upstate New York with her two sons, two daughters-in-law (who were also sisters), and four grandsons (one of whom was my dad), all in the same house.

My dad's cousin Ted shared a bedroom with Yaya when he was a little boy. I've heard him tell of nights when she would be on her knees, praying in her native tongue as he went to sleep, praying for her family, including the salvation of my dad who chose a rebellious, destructive path until the Lord captured his heart in his midtwenties. On some mornings, Ted told us, he would awaken to find Yaya *still* on her knees, having prayed through the night.

Yaya didn't live to see my dad converted to Christ; she never knew any of her great-grandchildren, most of whom are walking with the Lord today and raising godly families of their own. Her prayers planted seeds that are still producing fruit today for God's glory.

Perhaps you know what it is to cry yourself to sleep at night, concerned about a child or grandchild, a hurting relative, a prodigal. You may feel as if you have nowhere else to turn but to prayer. *Then pray.* When you are at your wit's end, not sure what to do, pray. And *keep* praying. Because someone needs you. In fact, many of us are counting on you to "help us by prayer." In the end, perhaps for generations to come, "many will give thanks . . . for the blessing granted through [your] prayers."



Take time right now to pray for one or two people who are most on your heart. God is working. Don't stop praying!

The Battle after the Battle

Abram said to the king of Sodom . . . “I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’”—Genesis 14:22–23



ABRAM HAD JUST FOUGHT AND WON an impressive victory against a massive military alliance from the east, in the process, rescuing his nephew Lot, who had been taken as a prisoner of war. This was a public battle, a supernatural outcome, a God thing.

But when Abram returned home, he was faced with a second battle—a private battle. We can all relate to those moments in the afterglow of a significant victory, when we are vulnerable, depleted, and tired and when it is easy to forfeit much of what we have gained.

Returning home victorious from the major battle, Abram was met by two kings. Melchizedek, the *king-priest of Salem*—thought by some to be a preincarnate appearance of Christ Himself—fed Abram with bread and wine, blessed him in the name of God Most High, and led him to worship. The *king of Sodom*, on the other hand, while appealing for the return of any captives taken in battle, bargained with Abram by encouraging him to “take the goods for yourself” (Gen. 14:21). *You deserve it! Indulge yourself in the rewards of your labor.*

Abram could have justified accepting the pagan king’s offer in a hundred ways—some of the same ways we often do after exhausting our energies, especially after a major season of hard work and effort. But he had sought his refreshment first in the fellowship and presence of the Lord, and as a result was able to resist the temptation to seek relief in fleshly pursuits or temporal rewards.

We are sure to lose the “battle after the battle” if we do not quickly receive the provision, rest, and replenishment of soul that Christ, our King of Salem (peace), offers.



When you finally unwind from a period of great exertion or responsibility, what kinds of temptations are you most likely to be vulnerable to? How could you better prepare for the “battle after the battle”?

Heart Health

"I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and will give you a heart of flesh."—Ezekiel 36:26



OVER AND OVER AGAIN, Jesus looked the most religious men of His day in the eye and confronted them concerning their obsession with putting on a good appearance and an impressive performance, while their hearts were empty and corrupt.

It didn't matter if they tithed everything they owned, down to the herbs; or if they washed their hands every time they ate and could quote the Law from beginning to end; or if they scrupulously observed every feast day, fast day, and Sabbath day; or even if everyone else respected them as devout believers. If their hearts weren't right, *they* weren't right. And if ours aren't right, neither are we.

The medical profession stresses the importance of regular checkups. Anyone with a family history of heart disease is encouraged to get his or her cholesterol tested. We don't assume that just because we look fine outwardly, we have nothing to worry about. If our heart is not functioning properly or we have a blockage in our arteries, we want to know about it so we can do whatever is necessary to deal with the situation.

Should we be any less concerned about our *spiritual* heart condition—especially when we realize we all have a family history of “heart disease”? We need to regularly ask the Lord to diagnose conditions we may be unable to see in ourselves. For the good news of the gospel is that the Great Physician has made available a cure for our deceived, diseased hearts. Jesus came to do radical heart surgery—to give us a *new* heart; to cleanse and transform us from the inside out.

 *How long has it been since you took time to let the Lord give you a spiritual heart checkup? Has His Spirit identified any heart issues you need to allow Him to address?*

Bottom Line

I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.—2 Timothy 1:12



ONE OF THE CHALLENGES of complete surrender to Christ is that we have no way of knowing all of what that surrender might entail down the road. Some of us might be more inclined to yield our lives to Him if He would hand us a contract with all the details filled in. We'd like to know what to expect: "What will this cost me? Where will God expect me to go? What will He ask me to do?" We want to see all the fine print so we can read it over, think about it, and then decide whether to sign our name.

But that's not God's way. He says instead, "Here's a blank piece of paper. I want you to sign your name on the bottom line, hand it back to Me, and let Me fill in the details." Why? Because He is God; because He has bought us; because He is trustworthy; because He loves us; because we exist for His glory, and not for our own pleasure.

Signing that blank paper is risky . . . if God isn't real, if He cannot deliver, or if He is ultimately proven a liar. But the reality is that we have nothing to lose by signing the blank contract. Oh, we may lose some things that certain people consider valuable or essential. But in the eternal scheme of things, we cannot lose, because He is completely trustworthy.

If we will let Him, God will fill in the details of our lives with His incomparable wisdom and sovereign plan, written in the indelible ink of His covenant faithfulness and love.



Have you ever "signed your name on the bottom line," fully surrendering your life to God without expecting Him first to fill in the details? Does that seem scary to you? What truths can help you make that kind of surrender and live it out day by day?

Yours for Life

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.—2 Peter 1:3



WHEN I HEAR THAT WORD “GRANTED,” I think of someone who receives a scholarship to help lower the cost of his college education. It’s a gift. He doesn’t have to pay it back. Or I think of a researcher applying to a foundation for funding on a potential project. If the request is approved, he is issued a grant to be used in the pursuit of that program or endeavor. And though the foundation will want to know how the money is used, they do not consider their investment a loan. It’s a gift—a grant.

God has “granted” magnificent gifts to us, His redeemed people, by virtue of “His divine power.” He possesses the full ability and resources to do this. And unlike a college scholarship or charitable grant, which might not be enough to cover the entirety of a person’s need, God’s gracious gift has already provided us “all things” that are necessary for pursuing a godly life, for worshiping Him well and applying His Word.

We now have *all* we need for salvation, *all* we need for sanctification, *all* we need for every step, every season, every struggle and strain of life.

You say you need the power to be more patient and disciplined? *You have it.* You need the desire to be more caring and thoughtful? *You have it.* You need the resources and enablement to keep you from being overcome by fear, discouragement, and doubt? *You have it.* These have all been “granted” to you so that “you may become [a partaker] of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).



How would you approach your day differently if you really believed that God had already granted you all you need to overcome yourself and your sin? Thank Him for His divine power and grace!