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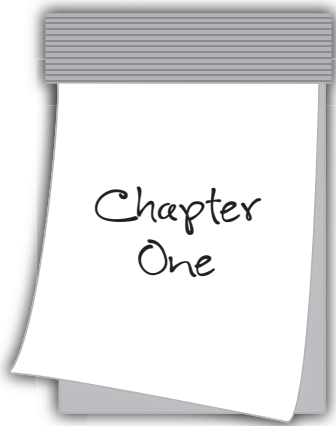
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Celebrating a
New Year



As you read the Bible you will observe in the Old Testament the principles of giving the “first fruits” to the Lord.

*Honor the Lord from your wealth
And from the first of all your produce;
So your barns will be filled with plenty
And your vats will overflow with new wine.*

—PROVERBS 3:9–10

I once heard a Christian leader share how he had taken this principle and applied it to his time. He showed how as he gave the first few minutes of the day, the first day of the week, and the first part of the year to the Lord, he had experienced great blessing. His words certainly got my attention, and I began to ponder how I might apply them to my life. Though I was already making some attempt to give the first few minutes of each day and the first day of the week to the Lord, I had never thought about giving the first few days of the year to the Lord. On that April evening, I made a notation on my daily planner in the next year’s January to give the first few days to the Lord.

THE GIFT OF DAYS

When January arrived I found myself worn out. However, as a professor in a college I had a few days before my classes began, and I told the Lord that I desired to present the days to Him for His purposes. Of course this should be true of any day, but in these few days I was able to be more available to Him.

As I sought the Lord a few ideas came into my mind. One was to go through my belongings and give away clothes and other things that I had not used in a few years. This enabled me to begin the New Year with a uncluttered apartment. As I looked through some past journals written during the last few years, three things began to surface. Then the idea came to me to let these be my key three prayer requests for that year. These three prayer requests

became the framework for the goals I set for that year. (See Practical Help 2, page 24.)

How can one get started setting goals? The apostle Paul referred to his salvation experience as having been “laid hold of by Christ Jesus.” He described his pursuit of God’s plan for him as to “lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12). The idea is that when God saves an individual, He has on His heart a plan for him. Goal setting is not to be an exercise of planning out “our” dreams, but rather laying hold of the dreams that God has put in our minds and hearts as we delight in Him. The achievement of this is referred to as a “prize” that one is to pursue with all their heart (verse 14).

WORTHWHILE RESOLUTIONS

Take out a sheet of paper and on the top of it write this question: “God, what do You desire me to trust You for in regard to my life?” This is the starting place for your goals. It does not need to be completed in one sitting. Keep it before you and trust God to make it clearer as you seek Him day by day. Ask Him to both clarify it and confirm it.

At the beginning of each year, trust God for goals during the year that will aid you in fulfilling your life goals. I have found it helpful to use these categories (see Practical Help 1, page 22):

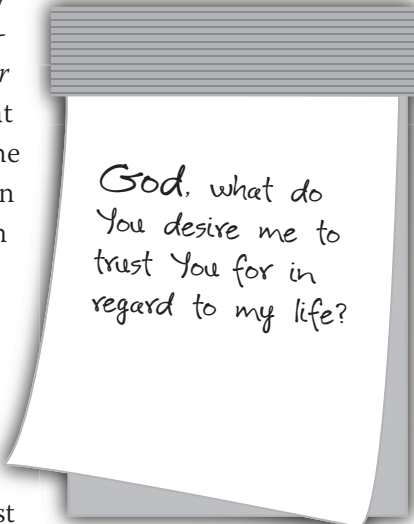
GOALS

- Spiritual
- Relational
- Financial
- Intellectual
- Recreational
- Vocational
- Physical
- Family

You should not necessarily feel compelled to use all these categories, and you may find it helpful to add others. These goals are to aid you in staying on course to fulfill God’s will.

Andrew Murray speaks of three stages in the Christian life. The

first stage is characterized by making resolutions and determining to keep them in *your* strength. The failure that comes from this leads to the second stage of the Christian life. The first stage of “I can do it” is replaced by “I can’t” —when you feel that setting goals will only lead to failure and defeat. The third stage is characterized by the attitude of “I can’t, but I must and I am going to trust God to do it.”



God, what do
You desire me to
trust You for in
regard to my life?

It is in the spirit of the third stage that one finds freedom in setting goals. Therefore, I state my aspiration for the New Year in prayers and dependence on God. I have sought God for the past twenty-five years to give me three key prayer requests for the year. These three prayers set the foundation for any other goal for the year.

LOVE AS THE FOUNDATION

The first year I did this I came to grips with the importance of love.

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1–3)

Whatever love was, I could not help but conclude that it was unquestionably preeminent. I also noted the truth of 1 John 4:19: “We love, because He first loved us.”

If love was the most important thing in life, and if my love for God and others is only a response to His love for me, then I sensed what I needed to trust God for that year—“Lord, overwhelm me with Your love for me.”

How do you know if you are overwhelmed with love? It is when you sense that He loves you in a way that no one else ever will or can. It is coming to grips with the truth that you desire and need One to love you who cannot get His mind off you. Listen to Psalm 139:17–18:

*How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand
When I awake, I am still with You.*

God is constantly thinking about you!

This familiar passage opened up to me. Even Romans 5:5–10 took on new meaning one summer day that year when emotionally I was feeling ungodly. God set His love upon us when we were ungodly, helpless, sinners, and His enemies. These are not only verses to share with the unsaved but also to digest each day as a Christian!

Every time I saw a verse that encouraged me to love, I began to step back and ask God to show me how He loved me that way first. Remember, “We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). For example, God tells us that a “friend loves at all times” (Proverbs 17:17). I would respond, “Lord, I know You desire me to be that kind of friend, but first help me to digest that You are that kind of friend to me!”

Include in your plan seeking the Lord and asking Him what He desires to do in and through you that year.

Verse 9 of Proverbs 17 tells us that while repeating past failure is one way to separate intimate friends, forgiveness is a way of seeking to build a relationship of love. This is what God desires for us in our human relationships with each other, and it is based on what He does for us. In our relationship with Him, what would it be like if every time you awakened, God reminded you of every failure you have ever done? That is not how He treats His children because He is seeking to build a loving relationship with them! These are some of the insights God gave me in response to trusting Him that year with the prayer “Overwhelm me with Your love.”

How can you celebrate each New Year? Include in your plan seeking the Lord and asking Him what He desires to do in and through you that year. Then trust him to do it (see Practical Help 2 for an example of some of my past years’ prayer requests)! Remember that He is a living God and He responds to the humble prayers of His people. We will talk more about goals in the next chapter.

PENNY’S Thoughts

We have friends down the block who followed the leading of the Lord and hosted a gathering with friends to seek Him together as they welcomed the New Year. What a great idea! Here is their invitation:

NEW YEAR’S PRAYER AND PRAISE

But you, dear friends, devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and requests . . . building yourselves up in your most holy faith. Colossians 4:2; Ephesians 6:18; Jude 1:20

The occasion was held on the evening of December 31 starting around nine o’clock and going until midnight. In this case, families left their children with babysitters so the adults could

Include in your plan seeking the Lord and asking Him what He desires to do in and through you that year.

spend time praying in the New Year. You might want to hire child care in the home of the host; whatever works for your situation.

After a time of refreshments, the host led out, following the ACTS model of prayer. This model is practical for both personal and corporate prayer, and is adaptable for all ages. That time was so special that the guests wanted to do it again the next year!

ACTS:

A—adoration. Praise God for who He is; His name, attributes, character. If desired, sing hymns of praise and adoration.

C—confession. Humble yourselves before God, confessing any known sins and asking His Holy Spirit to reveal sin you might not be aware of.

T—thanksgiving. Look over the past year and thank God for answers to prayer, specific blessings, and so on.

S—supplication. This is the time in your prayer to make your requests according to His Word. For New Year's especially, you might direct prayer toward the salvation of family, friends, coworkers; personal spiritual growth; the universal church; the persecuted church; our nation and its leaders; ministry in our homes, workplaces, neighborhoods.

PRACTICAL Help 1

Holiday Prayers and Goals for a New Year

This is a sheet I pass out to my family members as an encouragement for each of us to put down our goals for the New Year.

These are six possible things to trust God for during the holidays and the coming year.

1. Trust Jesus to enhance your relationship with Him.
2. Trust Jesus to give you rest and refresh you.
3. Trust Jesus to show you how to be a vessel of love.
4. Trust Jesus to keep a measure of discipline in your life.
5. Trust Jesus to prepare you for any special temptations.
6. Trust Jesus to give you His goals for the New Year.

Here is an example of how you might pray:

“Dear Lord, during this year I ask that You show me how to be a vessel of Your love. Develop my character so I reflect Your love. Show me where I need to reach out, perhaps to neighbors who may need kindness.” [for children: “Help me be a friend to ____ at school/church. Sometimes the kids make fun of him/her and it’s hard for me to be nice. Please help me and help ____ know You love him/her.”]

“Lord, You know that I’ve been critical of my boss. I am often tempted to talk about him to my coworkers, and I usually give in to this temptation. Keep the goal before me of being alert when I am tempted and to call on You to resist.” [for children: “Dear God, help me not join in when kids are making fun of our teacher.”]

Consider goals in some of these or other areas; here are a few examples to get you started, though your list might look very different!

SPIRITUAL LIFE: memorize ten new verses of Scripture; invite a particular friend or neighbor to an event at church; follow a Bible-reading plan

RELATIONSHIPS: cultivate existing ones and reach out to make new ones; be intentional about spending time alone with each child

PHYSICAL/CARE FOR BODY: walk three times a week

INTELLECTUAL GROWTH: read ten books during the year

FINANCES: make a budget and evaluate purchases each month

RECREATION: sign up for a _____ class with _____

VOCATION: attend a conference; learn a new technique

SCHOOL/ACADEMICS: finish homework before leisure time

OUTREACH: sign up to be a pen pal to someone in prison

OTHER:

PRACTICAL HELP 2

Examples of First-of-Year Prayer Requests

(These are some of the request that I have prayed over the years. Choose a few that are most meaningful to you. You may want to adapt these for your children, depending on their maturity levels.)

- Overwhelm me with Your love so that I can respond by more fully loving You (I John 4:19).
- Open my eyes to see the beauty of Your character in a way that wins my complete heart to You.
- Restore me to my first-love relationship with You (Revelation 2:4).
- Teach me what it means that all things belong to me in Christ (I Corinthians 3:21–23).
- Free me from any unhealthy compulsions.
- Teach me both the obstacles and the refreshing insights that lead to true joy.
- Enable me to love with *Your* light load and reject all false burdens that lead to a false compassion.

- Show me how and when to benefit from the discipline of silence.
- Open my eyes to see Your adequacy and generosity.
- May my imagination be fully presented to Your control.
- Overwhelm me with Your mercy.
- Deliver me from my fears by letting me seek God at every point of fear (Psalm 34:4).
- May my eating, exercises, and dress be under Your control.
- Show me how I fail to enjoy the grace of God in the Christian life.
- Teach me Spirit-led praise in my life.
- Guide me in processing all unrighteous anger in my life.
- Build a godly contentment, humility, and fear of You in my life.
- Teach me to enjoy life to the glory of God.
- Lead me into a refreshing and encouraging intimacy with You and Your people.
- Give me an eternal perspective that grasps the reality of heaven and hell and my role as a pilgrim on this earth.
- Show me how to be used by You to raise up prayer among Your people.
- Give me wisdom to understand my role and responsibility as a parent.
- Give me wisdom to have a healthy view of myself.
- Develop in me a Spirit-led initiative and deliver me from an unscriptural passivity that causes me to be influenced in ungodly ways.
- Flood my heart with a knowledge of Your acceptance and understanding.
- Develop in me a fear of God.
- Develop in me a heart of praise.
- Give me godly ambitions for eternal things.

- Show me how to devote myself to refreshing prayer and love the world through my prayers.
- Show me how to honor You by using Your Sabbath principle.
- Guide me to fully obeying You in seeking to win the hearts of my family to the Lord.
- Develop in me the heart of a “Mary” who knows how to enjoy You and live in peace (Luke 10:38–42).
- Put in me a trust in Your sovereignty in my life.
- Let me give You the firstfruits of my money and my time.
- Let me remember the truth that I walk with an all-powerful God each day.
- Put in me a trust in regard to the results of all ministry efforts (Mark 4:26–29).
- Build in me a heart of worship, to love, fear, and seek God.
- Enable me to fulfill my vows to You.
- Build the sense of responsibility in me and my family and grace us with the capabilities to do our responsibilities.
- Put in my heart an awe of You that leads to an intimacy with You.
- Teach me and my sons what it means to be a man and prepare us for all that it is to lead.
- May I be emotionally focused on Christ and not an idol.
- Give me the time alone I need to stay refreshed in You.
- Give me an understanding of what it means to live under grace and let me display this to my loved ones.