

This Day . . .

A Daily Guide to Living

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J.T. JONES



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Special Thanks

We are the sum total of our experiences.

—Unknown

T*his Day . . .* is a collection of some of my life's experiences that I could only have come from God's omniscient mind for time and place. Thanks to God's providence and to all those who have added to my sum total to date.

A special thanks goes to my mother, Lois Jones, and to my Aunt Elaine Angell. Both encouraged my work and their keen eyes proofread my drafts. When I was growing up, their critical ear for grammar was an annoyance. Today it is valued and welcomed.

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And to Marilyn, who tops the list of my sum total.

Introduction

Why invite a daily devotional along as a companion and guide of your faith journey? That is a fair question that does not have a single answer.

First, a daily devotional helps with the discipline of everyday meditation and prayer. The busyness of life robs good intentions of becoming realities. A devotional is an aid in keeping your best intentions in good repair. It will help keep you focused. The array of distractions that every one of us is obliged to face every day has a way of blurring our focus. A one-page daily meditation followed by a two—or three-sentence prayer is doable for the busiest of lives. The two or three minutes a day that you spend with *This Day* . . . will exponentially grow your faith. Recognizing the busy reader's need for efficiency and the challenges that developing a daily discipline entails are part of the "why bother?" question.

Second, we have a tendency to live in the past or in the future at the expense of the present. Often we try to replicate the past. We rewrite its idyllic calm. We sort out what is pleasing and reject, or quietly forget, the unpleasant episodes of long ago. Or, we can be so absorbed in past hurts, historic wrongs, or childhood abuse that we carry a suitcase of ancient wounds with us. By living in the past, we allow the past to negatively inform our today or trivialize our present being.

The inverse of living in the past is just as toxic to the present. If we constantly look beyond the present as a time of fulfillment, then the present moment is understood as less-than-fulfilling. We plan for that one distant day when we will have the perfect mate, the dream house,

the fulfilling job, the right compensation, the bigger boat, the faster snowmobile, or the children who suddenly realize our true worth. That one day of elusive wholeness, when we will be truly happy, is always in the distant future. By living in the future, we allow the dissatisfaction of the present to rule our lives.

The hope of a balanced life is to live in the present. The past is gone—never to be seen again. The future is an ever-changing mirage that will always remain elusive and distant. We may not live to see the future. We surely will not revisit the past. All we have is this very moment. Spiritual growth lives and has its being in the present moment. Thus, the reason for the title: *This Day* . . .

The hope for the reader is to help establish the daily discipline of spiritual growth by redoubling his or her focus on the present. By fully living in this day, the past and the future take on a new essence in our lives. For today, well lived, is our only opportunity to make all of our yesterdays fond memories and every tomorrow a living hope.

Alongside the reader's purpose in pursuing a daily devotional, are a whole set of questions regarding its origin. Where did this come from? Why was it compiled in this format? What was the moving force behind the effort, and what is the ultimate hope for the reader?

Again, a single answer will not suffice.

First, I wanted to give a lasting gift to the people in my life whom I love most—my family and the congregation I serve as their pastor. If my daily spiritual musings lighten another's load, even for a moment, then the effort is worthwhile. If I can help another form the habit of daily meditation, even for two or three minutes a day, I will have helped nurture spiritual growth. If these pages draw the reader into a new understanding of how to deftly live one day at a time, then the labor has yielded the essence of *This Day* . . .

My second hope was to chronicle a farming culture that is rapidly slipping away. I lived on dairy/hog/grain farm in the upper Maumee Valley on the Michigan/Ohio border for more than four decades. Men and women, who were shaped by the Great Depression and World War II, in turn shaped my life. Many of these were men and women who were educated in one-room schools—some for no more than eight years. All of them had agrarian roots. They lived on and from the land. They lived in a harmony with the seasons, the markets, and the fortunes that befell their kind and neighbors. They lived in a vibrant sense of community that saw the wellness of the whole was predicated on the health of every part. Above all else, they were grand storytellers, and they passed on to me the tradition of storytelling.

The pressures of corporate farming, dismal commodity prices, market and weather uncertainties, and the need for ever more efficiency have drawn the final curtain on family farming. The last act is now on stage. The cast will soon make its final bow. A kindly commentator, whose heart will forever love these kind and wise people, must document the passage. I see my role as keeper and teller of their

story. Their wisdom, wit, and sense of community must be told with respect. A monthly magazine of reminiscence dare not do the job of retelling their story in a sappy fashion. Their story needs to be retold, and it must be told lovingly with its warts, smells, and bruises intact. My endeavor is chronicler and not redeemer or one who wants to reestablish the past.

In the pages of *This Day* . . . the reader will encounter many of these stout characters. These folks were kind and tough rolled into one. They swore a lot, and often had good reason to do so. They were brave risk takers who had insurmountable faith. They were fiercely patriotic. They were believers in Jesus Christ and saw no hypocrisy in smoking and chewing too much tobacco. They were staunch moralists. They were wise, yet they had no letters that followed their names. These were good, yet flawed and complicated people who simply did their best.

My final hope is to pass on preachable stories to my peers in the pulpit. We come from a tradition of storytellers. Jesus Christ was a storyteller. The gospels are filled with passages that begin with: "He told them the story of . . ." Jesus used parables and stories to convey meaning, truth, and understanding. Stories are portable. The listener can tell and retell them. They cut to the heart of the matter.

Good stories have a lasting quality about them. They transcend generational and cultural boundaries. The worth of story never fades or goes out of style. Every preacher I have met is constantly filtering what he or she hears through a filter that is labeled, "That will preach!" An index has been added for your convenience and for a more efficient use of this text as a preaching resource. All biblical references are from the New International Version (NIV).

These stories will preach, because they speak to the heart of the human condition. The intent is to be readable and retellable. Though not presented in a scholarly fashion, the theology is not thin soup that lacks integrity or Christian focus. Neither is it denominationally specific. These are stories of flawed people who seek a loving God. Nearly always they were successful in achieving that end. That is the good news within the Good News!

My prayer for each of you is that you read, pray, and live in This Day . . .

J. T. Jones

Look to this day,
For it is life,
The very life of life.
In its brief course lie all
The realities and verities of existence,
The bliss of growth,
The splendor of action,
The glory of power—
For yesterday is but a dream,
And tomorrow is only a vision,
But today, well lived,
Makes every yesterday a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well, therefore, to this day.

—A Sanskrit Proverb

Why This Day? The answer is simple: This particular day matters because it is all we really have. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow may never be. This very day, this moment, indeed, the immediate present is where we live. Yesterdays color our today. The dreams of tomorrow help to shape this day. But this day is the only place where life is lived out.

The psalmist put it this way:

Today is the day that the Lord has made; Let us rejoice and be glad in it.
(Psalm 118:24)

Jesus said:

Give us today our daily bread. (Matthew 6:11)

Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

Today is the day of salvation! (2 Corinthians 6:3)

This day is God's gift to you. What you do with this day is your gift to God. Make the most of it, for it is the only day you have.



Prayer: This Day I will need some help in not trying to replicate the past or living in a time yet to come. I will not fritter away the present on disappointing yesterdays or one day in the future when I supposedly have it all together. I will live this day!

January 2

'Tis well an old age is out, and time to begin anew.

—John Dryden

As we stand at a new beginning, a brief outline of what really matters makes good sense. Here are twelve points that lead to living a life of contentment you may want to consider:

LIVING CONTENTEDLY

1. Keep first things first.
2. Dream big dreams.
3. Live with a sense of passion.
4. Never settle for easy answers. Keep on questioning.
5. Be a person of hope, even when it is easier to cave in to hopelessness.
6. Refuse to just go along to get along.
7. Always put community above individuality.
8. Think, act, and live inclusively.
9. There are some things you will never be able to fully explain (Things like prayer, love, hope, faith, heaven, or for that matter, even God). Just remember that prayer, love, hope, faith, heaven and even God do not need your explanation in order to exist.
10. Live so your life has significance.
11. Seek to be a more spiritual being rather than more religious.
12. Look for God in the crowd when you cross the finish line first.
13. Look beside you for God when you stumble and fall.

There, that ought to help with a new beginning. Have a happy and contented new year.



Prayer: This Day is poised at a new beginning. Help me put down the baggage of the past, to travel light, and to live contentedly.

Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.

—Deuteronomy 1:21

My friend, Denny Pressler, keeps me supplied with an assortment of clippings that could be called nuggets of wisdom, bits and pieces of humor, and general good advice. I am grateful for his careful eye and willingness to pass on the following tidbit.

Consider this bumper sticker:

You can tell how big a person is by what it takes to discourage him.

How true! One's spiritual depth is in direct proportion to one's ability to press on in a spirit of hope. The same is true for businesses, institutions, sports teams, nations, and even churches. To be easily discouraged is to have little resolve. To be easily dissuaded is to have small faith.

Thinking that the enormity of a happening is just too big for our meager ability is *not* consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Good News can be understood in many ways. It can be seen through many different lenses. But, the one certain truth of Jesus' teachings is that nothing is impossible for the believer. Thus, there ought not be a Christian who is easily swayed from his or her chosen course. To be easily dissuaded is incompatible with Christ's hope and is positive evidence of puny or lukewarm faith

To be sure, there are challenges that cause us to say, "Wow, that is going to take some doing!" For the community that is grounded in faith, the impossible becomes possible, the improbable is made probable, and the out-of-the-ordinary is achievable. Beyond that, the discouraged find more than enough courage in Christ.



Prayer: This Day I will seek new courage as I meet its challenges. Knowing that I belong to the One of indisputable courage gives me hope even in the face of trial.

January 4

*And when you pray, do not keep babbling like the pagans,
for they think they will be heard because of their many
words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows
what you need before you ask him.*

—The words of Jesus as recorded
in Matthew 6:7–8

My friend, Denny Pressler, passed the following clipping to me. Consider the number of words it takes to convey an important thought. Consider these:

Pythagorean Theorem:	24 words
Pledge of Allegiance:	31 words
The Lord's Prayer:	66 words
Archimedes' Principle:	67 words
The 10 Commandments:	179 words
The Gettysburg Address:	286 words
The Declaration of Independence:	1,300 words
The U.S. government regulations on the sale of cabbage:	26,911 words
Eternal Hope:	26 words

Denny's clipping seems to prove that wordiness is all a matter of perspective. Sometimes heaping on more words does not necessarily convey more wisdom. Perhaps this is a strong argument for shorter sermons.

The gospel of Jesus Christ has an economy of words. It is likely that the conservation of words is what the Gospel writer, John, had in mind when he penned the heart of the Easter message: *For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.* (John 3:16).



Prayer: This Day I will practice an economy of words in thanking God. Thanks, God. Amen.

*Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out,
a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted,
where no thief comes or moth destroys.*

—The words of Jesus as recorded
in Luke 12:33

According to an article in the *Antique Trader*, the estate of the King of Cowboys has fallen on hard times. Roy Rogers' family was forced to auction a number of Rogers' memorabilia to pay the inheritance tax that had been levied on the estate. The top item in the auction was Roy Rogers' custom-made saddle. It brought an amazing \$412,500.00! That's a lot of money for a saddle. Especially when it only cost a fraction of that amount when Roy Rogers had it commissioned in 1950.

The family said they hated to see the "King of the Cowboys" stuff having to go under the gavel. They spent some time evaluating what to offer and what to keep. Finally, after much heart-rending thought, they selected forty-four items to list in the public auction. The family felt some measure of relief that they were able to save Roy's horse, Trigger, from the sale. You see, Trigger went to the taxidermy shop after his death. Roy had him stuffed. So, there they are—a saddle-less stuffed horse and a half million bucks in tax receipts.

Keeping a stuffed horse and selling a \$400,000+ saddle seems like a dubious choice. What are you going to do with a stuffed horse and no saddle? And, even more puzzling is the saddle itself. Roy's side of the saddle was beautifully tooled and studded with rubies. But, what about Trigger's side of the saddle, was it tooled? Or, was the horse's side of the saddle left rough?

And, what about the winning bidder? The article said that he bought it as a surprise for his wife. Now, that would be a surprise if one of us came home with a half-million-dollar saddle and said, "Honey, look what I got for your pony!" Most likely, most of us would be stuffed and standing right beside old Trigger if we pulled such a stunt.

Fame and fortune is not all that it is cracked up to be.



Prayer: This Day I will weigh up what really matters. I will inventory my holdings in heaven and keep them in good order.

January 6

*The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,
the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.*

—The words of Jesus as recorded
in Matthew 21:42

When we finished the new log cabin on the Clam River, we had a large pile of knotty pine left over. It was scarred, twisted, and warped. The boards were too flawed to use. The problem was that these boards had been finished with a wood preservative, so they could not be returned to the supplier. What do you do with a pile of warped boards?

My Scottish blood would not allow these boards to be the guest at a hot dog roast. And I had already moved the pile a half dozen times. Something had to be done, but what?

First, I cut out all the bad spots. If there was a serious blemish, a deep scar, or busted edge, it was cut out and thrown away (hot dog roast material). I then had an even larger pile of shorter boards. But I made a surprising discovery. The twisted and warped boards were manageable in shorter lengths. It took some time and much fitting, but the once-warped boards created a respectable wall in the basement.

As I was building that wall with what was once rejected material, it dawned on me how much that pile of boards is like life. Get rid of the garbage and it becomes manageable. Beyond that, taking life in smaller bites makes the overwhelming doable. The shortened, once-warped boards are a metaphor for “One day at a time.” Like any intentionally-lived life, the twisted boards did not make a perfect wall, but one that has worth and value.

From a pile of flawed lumber, I discovered that if you get rid of the junk and take life in small pieces, great things happen!



Prayer: This Day I will offer the lumber of my life to be used as material to build a temple to God. Today, in the hands of the Master Carpenter, I will gladly be God's less-than-perfect raw material.

The greatest poverty in the world lives between your ears.

—Paul Bradley

One day a father of a very wealthy family took his son on a trip to the country with the firm purpose of showing his son how poor people can be. They spent a couple of days and nights on the farm of what would be considered a very poor family. On return from their trip, the father asked his son, “How was the trip?”

“It was great, Dad.”

“Did you see how poor people can be?” the father asked.

“Oh yes,” answered the son.

The son went on to say, “I saw that we have one dog and they have four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden, and they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lanterns in our garden, and they have the stars at night. We have a small piece of land to live on, and they have fields that go beyond our sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We have walls around our property to protect us; they have friends to protect them.”

With this, the boy’s father was speechless. Then the son added, “Thanks, Dad, for showing me how poor we are.”



Prayer: This Day I will take inventory of my wealth with the knowing that it cannot be tallied on a balance sheet. Today, I will realize that poverty of the spirit is the greatest deprivation of all.

January 8

The spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

—The words of Jesus as recorded
in Luke 4:18–19

My father believed in people. He was a caring man with an inexhaustible sense of optimism. He believed that no matter how far down the ladder of decency one had descended, given the right opportunity, that wasted life could be salvaged. He thought anyone could change for the better if just given the chance. In that spirit, my father negotiated a work-release contract with the Jackson State Penitentiary that brought a prison parolee to work on our farm.

My father's responsibility in all this was to provide room and board, transportation to his weekly visit with his probation officer, and a wage. But, I know that he quietly wished for more for this man than just another farm hand. The man's name was Chet. I do not recall what led to Chet's conviction. He was well groomed and polite enough, but he was the biggest whiner I have ever met!

Chet never let up. He complained incessantly about everything. He was about as miserable as a man could be. He wanted a car, a home, an expensive suit, a gold watch, and a bankroll. He wanted to visit his old watering holes. Chet had a bad case of the "wants." He wanted it all and he wanted it now. Chet's constant whining grew weary. His tenure as a farm worker was short and unpleasant for both Chet and all of us. Though I do not know the exact circumstances of his dismissal, one day when I came home from school, Chet didn't live there anymore.

Chet showed me that there are prisons with bars and prisons without bars. He had done his time, but he was still incarcerated in the prison of "want." Perhaps his personal prison was as confining and constraining as the walled "palace" he had left behind in Jackson. I never knew what happened to Chet. My guess is that the prison of "want" was harder time than the cold gray walls of Cooper Street.



Prayer: This Day I will give thanks for the freedom that only Christ can bring. For in Christ I am paroled from the prison of "want."

Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

—Romans 10:17

A number of studies have shown that hearing is the last sense that leaves a dying person. That is important because there may be a time when we still have something important to say to a loved one who is near death. When a loved one is close to crossing over into the new life God has prepared for him or her, they do not go in total silence. It brings a good measure of comfort to us in the knowing that what we say can still be heard. It gives us the opportunity to attend to our unfinished business. What we have kept in our hearts for perhaps decades can still be said with the certain knowing that it will be heard.

Based on this knowledge, a study was designed to determine if surgical patients had this same capacity of unconscious hearing. It seems they do. Anesthetized surgical patients who heard doctors, nurses, and other operating room staff talking in a positive or cheerful manner during surgery had shorter recovery times. Moreover, these patients had fewer post-operative problems. Patients who heard angry debates, hostility, or negative talk have significantly more post-operative problems.

Given the facts that anesthetized people respond to positive talk, it changes everything for a preacher. Even if hearers doze off, the Good News must be kept affirming, uplifting, and pointing toward new wholeness!



Prayer: This Day I will listen to God's voice in my life. Today, I will deliberately take the cotton out of my ears and put it in my mouth.

“Peace be with you!”

—The words of Jesus as recorded
in John 20:21

Ever say to yourself, “Who am I to make a difference? I am just one person.”

One person can make a huge difference.

In 1985, a pastor from Pennsylvania, the Reverend Mooney, took a group of Christians to the Soviet Union. The group toured the countryside, visited several museums and the remains of a number of unused cathedrals. Their tour was closely scrutinized by Soviet authorities and was no more than a token view of communist life. But, it was a goodwill gesture in a time when American and Soviet relations were in a sorry state of disrepair.

As the group was about to leave Russia, an elderly, wrinkled-faced woman reached out to the Reverend Mooney and pressed three rubles into his hand. In her broken English she said one word: “peace.” Pastor Mooney took the three rubbles home with him and spent some thoughtful time mulling over what a few pennies could do to bring about world peace. In the face of hundreds of billions of dollars in expenditures for arms, the three rubles looked pretty puny.

Pastor Mooney decided to purchase a votive candle with the Russian woman’s pennies. He would call the votive candle a “Peace Candle.” His church’s missions committee added to the “Peace Candle” fund and made it an outreach of this Pennsylvania church by sharing these candles with other churches. The idea spread. Today there are thousands of churches across America where the direct descendants of the Russian woman’s pennies still flicker with the hope for peace. The “Peace Candle” continues to illumine the darkness of global war. It sheds its warming glow on countless worshipers who pray for peace.

You are just one. But, in the spirit of that one word that came from the lips of a forever-unknown woman, ten thousand “Peace Candles” still light the way.



Prayer: This Day I will not allow my oneness to be silent. Today, my voice, my prayers, and my caring will add to God’s light.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

—The words of Jesus as recorded
in Mathew 6:13

What does it mean to ask God not to lead us into temptation? It is one of the most often asked questions by vicinage councils and ordination credential committees. It is the most feared question any seminarian can face. It has sent chills up the spines of candidates who seek the blessing of ordination. It is one of those tough sayings that the Bible presents. It is one we would prefer to avoid. But, avoidance and fear will not make it go away. What do we mean when we say, “God, please do not lead me into temptation?”

Does it imply that God is in the business of tempting us? Does it mean that God wants to test our resolve? Does it mean that God and Satan have formed a curious partnership that toys with our ability to stand tough in the face of temptation? Surely not! God does not tempt. And it is lousy theology to even think that a loving God would find pleasure in dipping us into harm’s way just to see if we have the stuff to say, “No!” God does not behave like that.

“Lead us not into temptation” means do not allow us to be so led. It means keep us safe. It means as life tests us, give us the resolve, the wherewithal, and the determination to avoid sin. It means that we readily acknowledge our vulnerability to temptation and God’s ability to keep us out of harm’s way. It is saying, “In my powerlessness, may your power keep me safe.”

God does not tempt. In the words of James it says: When tempted, no one should say, “*God is tempting me.*” *For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone . . . (James 1:13)*

Believing that God tempts and leads us to sin is like believing that sun causes darkness.



Prayer: This Day I will pray out of my sense of vulnerability. Today, I will make no excuses or pretend I have found a better way.

“There are only two things I want to know: Does God speak, and what does He say?”

—An unidentified Puritan author

We Congregationalists take great pride in our Pilgrim heritage. We delight in the fact that our forebears breathed life into both a democratic form of government and freedom of religion. The other side of our family tree, the Puritans, we prefer not to mention. Theirs was a staunch morality that deplored anything that resembled having fun. The Puritans brought us one of history’s sorriest chapters—the Salem Witch Trials. It is no wonder that we like to omit Puritanism from our pedigree. Yet, occasionally a bit of Puritan wisdom pokes through the easily forgettable past and speaks to the richness of our heritage.

The Puritan forbearer asked, “Does God speak?” The answer is a resounding, “Yes!”

“What does He say?” is not as simple to discern. What does God have to say? There are some broad and obvious generalities. For example, to the fearful, God says, “Be brave.” To the weak, God says, “Let me give you a hand.” To the confused, God might say, “Let me help you decide.” To the downtrodden, God says, “You matter to me.” To the grieving, God says, “I care.” To the hurried, God says, “Whoa, Big Fella! Slow down!”

God has much to say when He speaks to our inner spirit. It is there that God comforts, encourages, reveals possibilities, and gives each of us an intuitive knowing of His will. To know what God has to say demands a bit of silence in the presence of God. Asking God to do this and that is a common prayer. But to be still in the presence of God seems to go against our impatient spirits. Speaking to God is the easy part. Listening to God takes a bit of effort.



Prayer: This Day God will hear my stillness and the longing of my soul to hear His voice. His speaking is a given; my listening will take some effort.

*It may be called the Master Passion,
the hunger for self-approval.*

—Mark Twain

We hear a lot about the destructive nature of our competitiveness. It is hard to deny that overt competitiveness can be destructive. We have all watched someone turn what ought to be a leisurely sport into a matter of life and death consequences. A friendly game of cards, pool, golf, or bowling becomes the Super Bowl of human worth. There are those who must have the deer with the biggest rack of horns and the largest fish hanging on the wall. It matters little if the sport is collecting baseball cards or Beanie Babies; the urge to have the most and the best drives the collector. For these overtly competitive souls, it is as if the axis of the world turns on winning.

Some have cried that competitiveness ought be incised from our spirits. They have suggested that we nurture our children with the desire to win through Little League statistics, dance recitals, and awarding scouting badges. They push to have Little League games without scoreboards. In their myopic naiveté, these reformers believe that we can remove competitiveness from the human spirit.

To remove our drive to win is neither possible nor desirable. What really needs to change is how our passion to be remembered is lived out. If we are remembered only for the most home runs, the biggest collection of jam jars, or the most Beanie Babies on the shelf, we have lived a sorry life. However, we will be long remembered if we are able to come to a delicate balance of living with passion. Ours must be a checked passion that does not control us or the quality of our relationships. Be competitive, but do not let your passion to win be all that defines you.

Remember this: our competitiveness is a good thing; our unchecked passion to be recognized is toxic.



Prayer: This day I will be all I can be. I will live with passion, but one that is channeled not for recognition, trophies, or wealth, but rather a passion to use my God-giftedness in ways that are pleasing to God, to others, and to myself.

January 14

*It's them that take advantage that get advantage
in the world.*

—George Eliot

Sarah was born with a muscle missing in her foot. She had to wear a special brace all the time.

One day Sarah came home from school to tell her father that she had competed in an indoor track meet. Because of her leg support, the father was a bit puzzled. In fact, his mind was racing to think of some kind words to soothe his daughter's disappointment. Before he could get a word out, she said, "Daddy, I won two races!"

He could not believe what his daughter was saying. And then she said, "I had an advantage."

Inwardly the father sighed. Now he knew what had happened. The race officials must have given her a head start or some other advantage.

But again Sarah spoke before he could say anything. She said, "Daddy, I didn't get a head start. My advantage was I had to try harder!"



Prayer: This Day I will try harder. Today, I will understand that my head start is measured in heart, not in feet, dollars, or seconds.

*I keep six honest serving men (They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When and How
and Where and Who.*

—Rudyard Kipling

I am not sure if “Whyness” is a word. It is not to be confused with highness, nor is it a root of whinny or whiny. Whyness sounds like a word, and it seems to have the ability to stand on its own terms. If the governing body that validates and certifies words does not already recognize “whyness” as a useable word, I think it ought to be nominated as a new word.

The “Why?” question is central to being human. We are born as whyness seekers. Anyone who has lived through the first half dozen years of parenthood understands whyness. A child’s inquisitive mind is a perpetual whyness machine. Sometimes that constant barrage of “Whys” wears on a parent’s patience to the point of saying, “Don’t ask why again!” A child whose whyness is squelched tragically begins to believe that it is somehow wrong to ask, “Why?” Added to the childhood taboo of asking why, we soon discover that many of life’s important questions defy a clear answer. It is easier to avoid seeking the whyness of an idea. Still another whyness barrier is that by asking “Why?” we appear to be uninformed, or, worse yet, look a bit foolish.

Whyness is the fearless look at the reasons that underpin a belief or an idea. I suspect that we misidentify or confuse the whyness that drives an idea more often than we would like to believe.

So, why is it so important to be able to ask the “Why” question? Plato said, “The life that is unexamined is not worth living.” Asking “Why?” is the ultimate examination. It is good that God is confident and big enough to allow our whyness to shine. Who would want to put faith into a puny God who squashed our deepest yearnings with, “Don’t ask, ‘Why?’”

Praise God for “Whyness.”



Prayer: This Day I will fearlessly seek my soul’s deepest yearnings. Today, I will put aside anxiety, fear of ridicule, and all other petty barriers.

January 16

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.

—Acts 2:17

Dreams are important. They are vital to living fully. A life void of the ability to dream dreams cannot live up to its potential. I am not speaking about the dreams we have when we are asleep. They, too, are vital to our emotional and physical wellness. The dreams I am speaking of are the visions and hopes that dwell in our minds and souls—the ones that make us possibility thinkers.

A life void of dreams is one of monotony. It is one that can never imagine that which is beyond the seen. It is a life that settles for the empirical, the mundane, and the lowest measure of hope. Dream puny and live little. Dream big and your life is only limited by your imagination.

Not every dream has to be achieved to make it worthwhile. A dream that plays only in the theater of your mind has its value. Dreams come in all sizes and shapes. Some are silly. Some are impractical. Some would make us look a bit foolish if we shared them with others. Some will never be. But, just because a dream may never become reality, it does not invalidate a dream's worth.

If you think your most quiet dream is silly, then consider this: My dream is to drive the Zamboni Machine at an NHL hockey game. I want to resurface the ice between periods while the teams are in the locker rooms. I want to hear the roar of the Zamboni. I want 12,000 fans to sit and watch me deftly maneuver the massive Zamboni into the arena's corners and lay down a new surface of ice. There, I have said it—I want to drive the Zamboni Machine!

Dreams do not have to be achievable, realistic, or even practical. Dreams have great worth simply because they validate our imaginative selves. Who knows? Maybe a few of them will actually happen.



Prayer: This Day I will dream big, for I know that my dreams are the stuff of reality.

*The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man
knows himself to be a fool.*

—William Shakespeare

Consider these curious and humorous inconsistencies:
Only in America:

- . . . can a pizza get to your house faster than an ambulance.
- . . . are there handicap-parking places in front of skating rinks.
- . . . do drugstores make the sick walk all the way to the back of the store to get their prescriptions while healthy people can buy cigarettes at the front of the store.
- . . . do people order double cheeseburgers, large fries, and a diet coke.
- . . . do banks have both doors open and chain the pens to the counters.
- . . . do we have cars worth thousands of dollars in the driveway and put useless junk in the garage.
- . . . do we use answering machines to screen calls and then have call waiting so we won't miss a call from someone we didn't want to talk to in the first place.
- . . . do we buy hot dogs in packages of ten and buns in packages of eight.
- . . . do we use politics to describe the process so well: "Poli" in Latin means "many," and "tics" means "bloodsucking parasites."
- . . . do they have drive up ATMs with Braille lettering.
- . . . do we spend millions to subsidize tobacco farmers and hundreds of millions to educate our citizens about the harm of smoking.



Prayer: This Day I will take a brave look at my inconsistencies. Some may be humorous. Some may need my attention.

January 18

Be still and know that I am God.

—Psalm 46:10

When I was a child it often occurred to me that God certainly had a lot to do. For example, if God heard every prayer, how did he keep them all straight? Suppose a man in Ceylon prayed for his water buffalo to live forever. And, at exactly the same time, a mother in Buffalo prayed for her children to have enough hamburger for a meatloaf. Did God ever get mixed up? Or what about the farmers who prayed for rain and the city dwellers who just as fervently prayed for a sunny weekend? Curious how young minds worry about such things.

Of course my dilemma as a child was the same one we encounter all of our days—attempting to comprehend the infinite with a finite mind. Just growing up does not put an end to this dilemma. We still want to understand the scope of and the mind of God.

Indeed, such pondering is not limited to children. The story is told of Galileo's astrological investigations receiving much criticism. Some felt that his concepts of the vastness of the universe left no place for humans. If indeed the universe was as big as Galileo suggested, then how could God keep track of each tiny detail?

Galileo's answer was simplicity itself. He pointed to a bunch of grapes and said, "The sun will ripen one small bunch of grapes as though it had nothing else to do."

We all need that same assurance of a personal God in this vast world. Aren't you glad God is God and all we have to do is live in that assurance?



Prayer: This Day I will stand in awe of the vastness of God, knowing fully well that I will never fully comprehend. And knowing just as fully that God can be God quite nicely without my comprehension.

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

—The words of Jesus as recorded
in Matthew 28:20b

Jesus was walking down the road one day and came upon a man who was crying. The Lord said, “My friend, what’s wrong?”

The man replied, “I’m blind. Can you help me?”

Jesus healed the man and went on his way. As he continued his journey, he came upon another man who was sitting beside the road weeping. “Good friend, what is wrong?”

The man answered, “I’m lame and cannot walk. Can you help me?” Jesus healed the man and he, too, went down the road.

Presently, the Lord came upon a third man who was sobbing. “Good friend, what is wrong?” the Lord asked.

The man said, “I’m a minister.”

And Jesus sat down and wept with him.

We are not all pastors, but we are all ministers. We are the hands and the arms of the living Christ. We are the servants and the doers of Christ. We are ministers because we move among the needy, bring hope, and labor for peace and justice. In short, we are the body of Christ that lives and has its being in the world.

That sounds like a tall order. Surely it is more than any one of us can bear. Take heart. In Jesus’ own words he said, “I will be with you always.” Christ knows the scope of the job we have as ministers. Therefore, he walks with us, heals us, gives us new vision, and encourages us. Perhaps he even weeps with us from time to time, for he surely knows the magnitude of the job.



Prayer: This Day I will recognize the awesome task that is mine as a minister of Christ. I will not be timid or fearful, for I know I am not alone on this journey.

“Is it ‘When all Else Fails, Pray’ or is it
‘Pray Before all Else Fails?’”

—Unknown

Plague. Epidemic. Pandemic. Frightening words aren’t they? Consider anthrax. It is a disease that spreads rapidly, causes much harm, and leaves death in its wake. The very mention of anthrax sends a shudder through us. The idea of an epidemic is truly frightening.

The wandering band of Israelites was faced with a different sort of plague. It, too, was an epidemic, though slightly different kind of plague. This plague did not cause high fever, skin rash, flu-like symptoms, or shortness of breath. Yet this epidemic caused suffering, great harm, and much destruction. The Israelites were suffering from a bad case of complaining. Their symptoms were whining, moaning, and complaining. They had fallen victims to the plague of complaining.

“Why have you brought us out here?” “I’m thirsty!” “My feet hurt.” “The sand is hot.” “My sandals are too tight.” “My goats and sheep are thirsty.” “Where is God in all my misery?” “We had it better when we were slaves in Egypt.” Whine, whine, whine, and moan. They complained incessantly. They were plagued with relentless complaint.

They were a miserable lot. The hot sun beat down on them. They were thirsty, their feet hurt, and their livestock must have also been miserable. This had been a tough journey. The desert heat, the lack of water, and the arduous trudge had taken its toll. The people were weary. But, the plague of complaining, whining, and moaning was not helpful to their situation.

Incessant complaining and the whining and moaning that goes with it may be the most crippling and deadly of all diseases.

Here is the good news: The cure is simple—just listen to yourself.



Prayer: This Day I will listen to the lament that others are obliged to hear from my mouth. Justifiable or not, my complaining usually has an audience of one. I will begin the healing within through my grateful conversation with God.

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

—The words of Jesus as recorded
in Luke 14:35

Pete Gould was an elderly neighbor of mine when I was a child. Old Pete had a little Fordson tractor that was the cutest little tractor you have ever seen. Pete’s Fordson was badly undersized for the 80-acre farm Pete owned and operated. Pete nearly ran the wheels off this little tractor to get his work done. It had seen so much use that the sheet metal had worn around the screws from the constant vibration of the little engine that constantly ran at full throttle. The result was that the sheet metal hood began to rattle around the loose screws. Listening to that rattling hood all day long was about as unnerving as the Chinese water torture.

Pete fixed the situation and silenced the constant rattle with a piece of felt that he jammed under the tractor’s hood. Pete called that piece of felt his A.R.D. It was a fancy term for Anti Rattling Device. By stuffing the A.R.D. under the tractor’s hood, the annoying sound was stilled. Pete’s A.R.D. worked. The tractor hood did not rattle, but the problem was just silenced. The incessant racket was only stilled, and the real problem was not solved. There are people for whom an A.R.D. would be helpful. If we could just stuff a piece of felt in the din of their racket, all would be well.

But, sometimes complaining is more than just an annoyance. A real problem exists, and just ignoring it or covering it up is not a healthy solution. Sometimes another’s concerns need more attention than Old Pete’s A.R.D. We need to be good listeners.



Prayer: This Day I will avoid complaining for this complainant’s sake. I will also make a sincere effort to listen to the lament of others.

January 22

A good name is better than fine perfume . . .

—Ecclesiastes 7:1

Fred Craddock is a prolific writer, a preaching professor, and one of America's best preachers. Dr. Craddock has a keen insight that sees truth in the simplest of life's happenings. He tells the story of the importance of one's name.

When Dr. Craddock was a child, he and his four siblings attended church every Sunday with their mother. The minister would say, "How are you, Miz Craddock?" And to the five youngsters who followed along like little ducks in a row behind their mother he would say, "How are you, sonny? How are you, honey? How are you sonny? How are you honey? How are you, honey?"

Another minister came to serve that church, and on the fifth or sixth Sunday he said, "Fred, how are you doing?" Craddock says he was the best minister who ever served that church, because there is a big difference between "sonny" and "Fred."

What is in a name? Everything.



Prayer: This Day I will do whatever it takes to keep my name healthy and in good repair. I will honor others with the same respect.

We have learned that we must live as men, and not as ostriches, nor as dogs in the manger. We have learned to be citizens of the world, members of the human community.

—Franklin D. Roosevelt

We have seen a great rise in individualism. This spirit of individuality comes at the expense of our sense of community. It is hard for any culture to embrace both individuality and community. Perhaps our individuality shows its sorriest and most absurd side in frivolous lawsuits. It seems that gone is any sense of personal responsibility, because we have individual rights. The solution is to sue someone because we have been wronged.

Jim Shea, who is a columnist for the *Hartford Courant*, offers his imaginary and wildly absurd list of pending lawsuits. Among others, he is considering suing the following:

- His barber for his gray hair.
- Maxwell House for making him nervous.
- The trouser industry for not making 31-inch inseams.
- The potato-chip industry because he can't eat just one.
- His former teachers because he is not smarter.
- John Madden for doing hardware commercials that made him buy the hammer that hit his thumb.
- All the girls who dumped him.
- Movie theaters for the size of their sodas.
- The Boston Red Sox for pain and suffering.

Personal responsibility ought be enhanced by individualism. However, the more we celebrate self, the more wronged we feel by life. Go figure!



Prayer: This Day will be one of personal responsibility. The greatest responsibility I will have today is to be a responsible and contributing member of my greater community.

January 24

*You see things and say, "Why?" But I dream things
that never were; and I say, "Why not?"*

—George Bernard Shaw

Wendy Booker and Clay Roscoe both live with the disease, Multiple Sclerosis (MS). Wendy and Clay may be as determined as any two people you will ever meet. They joined a group called "Climb for the Cause" and attempted to climb one of North America's highest peaks, Mt. Denali. The summit of Mt. Denali is 20,320 feet. Wendy and Clay did not reach the summit. High winds turn the two MS mountaineers back at 17,200 feet.

What is remarkable about this is not that they came within nearly 1,000 yards of the summit. What is remarkable is that they even attempted such a feat. It would have been reasonable for them to just say, "I can't do that!" Who would have ever suggested that they were somehow wimps for not trying? After all, everyone knows that MS is a debilitating muscular disease. Sitting on the sidelines would have been both expected and reasonable. Wendy and Clay are not about to settle for the reasonable or the expected.

The Wendy Bookers and the Clay Roscoes of the world help stretch our imagination. They have turned the "Why mes?" of life into "Why not?" They have shown us guts, determination, and imagination that go beyond the ordinary.

Both Wendy and Clay plan to try Mt. Denali on for size another time. It matters little if they ever reach the summit, because they have already conquered the highest peak of all by just trying.



Prayer: This Day I will put a lid on my whining. Today, I will allow my determination and my imagination to run wild.

*Do not let your hearts be troubled.
Trust in God, and also in me.*

—The words of Jesus as recorded
in John 14:1

Each year at Christmas time, it is the tradition of the ministerial association to jointly rent a large billboard on the outskirts of town. A dozen or so churches share the cost in bringing the Christmas message to our community. It is our way of offering the community a Christmas greeting from the Christian perspective.

One recent year the billboard featured a picture of the holy family accompanied by the familiar words: *Jesus is the reason for the season.* It was an appropriate message and a good reminder for a materialistic world to remember that our Savior's birth is the reason for Christmas joy.

Apparently the billboard company did not get the space rented immediately after Christmas. The New Year lagged into mid-January, and I noticed that the holy family was still greeting the community. Then one day in late January, the sign changed. It now featured a popular sports utility vehicle with the slogan: "*A little security in an insecure world.*"

Tragically, they had pasted over the world's only real security with populism and materialism. The message to buy a new sports utility vehicle and to have a little security proclaimed that Christmas was over and it was now business as usual.



Prayer: This Day I will hold on to the world's only real security. For the hope of Christmas is not about a season. It is total security in an insecure world.

January 26

*Not what we give, but what we share—
For the gift without the giver is bare;
Who gives himself with his alms feeds three—
Himself, his hungering neighbor, and me.*

—James Russell Lowell

Many years ago in a California desert, there stood a rundown hut. Nearby was a well. In this parched land, this was the only source of drinking water for miles around. Attached to the pump handle was a tin baking powder can with a message inside, written in pencil on a sheet of brown wrapping paper.

The message read:

This pump is in good repair. I just put new leathers and washers in it that should last another five years or so. But, the leathers dry out, and to get the bloom'n thing to work, you have to prime the pump with water. Under the white rock I buried a bottle of water so that it was out of the sun. There is enough water to prime the pump if you don't drink any of it first. Pour some in and then pump as fast as you can. The well has never run dry. Have faith.

When you get all the water you want, be sure to fill the bottle up and put it under the white rock for the next person who needs water.

Signed: Desert Pete

P.S.

Don't go drinking the water first! Prime the pump and you will get all you can hold. And the next time you pray, remember that God is like the pump. He has to be primed. I have given my last dime away a dozen times to prime the pump of my prayers, and I have never failed to get an answer. You got to get your heart fixed to give before you can get.



Prayer: This Day I will take the time to get my heart fixed to give. For it is when I share with another that I am doubly blessed.

*Winter lies too long in country towns; hangs on until it is
stale and shabby, old and sullen.*

—Willa Cather

Winter! Had enough by now? Somehow those idyllic Christmas cards with the lovely old Currier and Ives prints showing a horse and sleigh slipping over a frozen farm scene is not what you see outside your kitchen window. What you see is slush. You see snow piled up in ugly, frozen piles that look like off-white haystacks. You feel the biting cold. Oh, just to be able to go after the mail once more in stocking feet.

Every one of us has a winter story. We Northerners are winter warriors. You have a bare-feet-on-cold-linoleum story. You have a tongue on a frosty flagpole story. You have a pre-central heating story, a frozen pipes tale, or a saga of a snowbound week. You have leaky boots, itchy woolen underwear, no mittens, lost cap, car won't start stories. We are winter warriors with the badges of courage that attest to our campaigns of suffering. We wear those badges proudly. The retelling of long suffering is a privilege that goes with many winters. Every one of us has a story that begins with: "Let me tell you about the winter of . . ."

Here is a winter story of a different sort. Don Adams was a Maine potato farmer. He drove a school bus to supplement his income. Don said he had known many sleepless nights thinking about the children who got on the bus every morning without mittens. Mittens and children seldom stay together for an entire winter. After retiring from farming and driving a bus, he had his wife teach him how to knit. Don spent his days knitting children's mittens.

Don lived to be well over ninety years old. Every Christmas, Don would bring a half dozen grocery sacks of woolen mittens to a local church to be given to children. Don Adams knitted thousands of pairs of woolen mittens. His mittens were of every size and every imaginable color. Don quit moaning about winter's harshness. And in doing so, he helped ease a few suffering tales that begin with: "Let me tell you about the winter of . . ."



Prayer: This Day I will leave the whining behind. Knowing that spring will come, and that my moaning will not hasten it, I will be silent and delighted to be alive on this winter day.

January 28

Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

*He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!!"
Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.*

*He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid?
Do you still have no faith?"*

—The words of Jesus as recorded
in Mark 4:38–40

Fred Craddock tells the story of a man who moved into a small cottage that was equipped with a wood stove and a few simple furnishings. As the sharp edge of winter crept across the landscape, the cottage grew cold and inhospitable. The man was miserable.

He went out and pulled a couple of boards off the back of the cottage to kindle a fire in the wood stove. The fire was warm, but the house seemed as cold as before. More boards came off for a larger fire to warm the now even colder house, which, in turn, required an even larger fire to warm it against the winter blast. More boards, a bigger fire, and a colder house became the routine. The more boards he tore loose, the bigger the fire it fueled, the colder the house grew, and the more miserable the man became.

In a few days the man cursed the weather, cursed the cottage, cursed the stove, and moved away.

Some of life's ill-planned solutions only fuel the fire of discontent. We need more than our own sorry devices in times of challenge. We need faith to fuel the fires of life.



Prayer: This Day I will carefully consider how God and I can meet life's challenges. For I know that left to my own devices, I can only make matters worse.

*When living out Christ's call to love one another,
we always need to ask ourselves the question:
whose needs are being met here?*

—The Reverend Robert T. Carlson

Have you overheard someone who was leaving a service of worship say, “Well, I sure didn’t get anything out of that!”?

Who is the consumer of worship? Is it you? Or, is worship intended for God? It is a fair question: who is the intended recipient of worship? Is the focus of worship on spiritual growth, fostering a sense of affirmation, and bringing a new sense of wholeness to the individual? Or, do we gather to lift our praises to God? Which is it? Whose needs are being met?

The answer may surprise you. It is both!

In some ways, corporate worship is like loving another. The more you care for that person, the more affection you get in return. It is a giving-to-get kind of arrangement. So, when one says, “I didn’t get anything out of that!” it may be just another way of saying, “I didn’t bring much to God today.”

It happens to every one of us sometime. We think that worship is especially designed just for us. The hymns are our favorites. The Scripture reading is exactly what we need to hear. And the message of the Good News is speaking directly to us. One man said he could always tell when the preacher was saying something he needed to hear, because his wife would poke him in the ribs. He said, “Today the preacher was really on target. My wife poked me four times!”

Whose needs are being met in your worship time? The good news within the Good News is that God already knows our needs and is anxious to meet those needs. For it is in worship that God hears, the heart of God is moved, and God responds. The consumer is both God and God’s own!



Prayer: This Day will bring a renewed sense of both who I am and whose I am. Today, I will carefully consider whose needs are being met.

January 30

*“I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes
are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.*

—The words of Jesus as recorded
in Matthew 21:31

A friend of mine suggests that if Jesus were to use a modern consulting firm to help him start his ministry, it might look like this:

We have carefully screened the twelve resumes you submitted to us. All twelve candidates have now taken our battery of tests and have been personally interviewed by our team of psychologists and vocation aptitude consultants. It is our opinion that most of your nominees are unsatisfactory. They do not have the team concept and they are lacking in educational background. We would recommend you continue your search for proven persons of experience. To summarize our assessment please review the following:

Simon Peter is emotional, unstable, and given to fits of temper.

Andrew has absolutely no quality of leadership.

The two brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, place personal interests above company loyalty.

Thomas demonstrates a questioning attitude that would tend to undermine morale.

We believe it is our duty to tell you that Matthew has been black-listed with the Greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau.

James and Thaddeus definitely have radical leanings.

Judas Iscariot does show potential in fiscal matters and has demonstrated a keen business mind. We highly recommend him.

What if Jesus had chosen the twelve disciples based on modern methods of leadership selection? Most of them would have failed miserably before they had a chance to participate. God chooses people not for who they are, but for what they can become. As my friend pointed out in this improbable piece, the Good News is based on the fact that God chooses imperfect and unremarkable people to build the kingdom of God. Aren't you grateful for that?



Prayer: This Day I will not hide my imperfection, for I know that my brokenness does not exclude me from God's love.

*For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but
whoever loses his life for me will find it.*

—The words of Jesus as recorded
in Matthew 16:25

So how is your New Year's resolution going? Is it still intact? If it is, you are among a tiny fraction of resolution makers. Most New Year's resolutions fail in the first week. Only a few—perhaps five percent—make it until the end of the month. But, here is the good news: if you have stuck it out this long, there is a good chance you will succeed for the rest of the year. The tough part is behind you!

There is another layer of good news in resolution keeping. Suppose you have not been successful. What is keeping you from trying again? If you fail again, there is nothing stopping you from trying a third time. And if that does not work, then keep starting over and over and eventually you will succeed. It does not matter how many times you have tried to do or to stop doing whatever it is you have resolved. After all, who is keeping track of the number of times you start over again? The point is that you have a desire to change.

There is a huge help in resolution keeping. It is called surrender. "Surrender?" you ask.

Yes, surrender. It is exactly what Jesus was talking about when he said, "You find your life by giving it away." It is the notion of victory through defeat, success through failure, and having through giving. Leave how it works up to the psychologists. Just bask in victory regardless of how it happens!



Prayer: This Day I will gladly accept surrender if it means winning. For changing what I do not want to be is a victory at any price.