

## New Year's Day, Monday, January 1

*I am sure that God who began the good work within you will keep right on helping you grow in his grace. . . . —Philippians 1:6 (TLB)*

This year, I am not going to get the least bit upset over the fact that I haven't thought of, planned out, or written down any New Year's resolutions. But I am going to get excited that I have 366 days (leap year) to become a better person. I can work, help, accomplish, experience, worship, create, write, exercise, visit, fix, entertain, share, ponder, read, counsel, dance, and dream of ways to be better and do better with as much gusto as I can muster.

Instead of making resolutions, I am going to look at last year's calendar and remember all the people I spent time with and prayed for, things I did, places I visited, social engagements I participated in, and work I accomplished. After my trip down memory lane, I'm going to thank God for giving me the health, energy, and means to do all that.

Then I'm going to turn back to today, happy that my calendar is clean and fresh and that opportunities are everywhere, especially when it comes to helping others. I'm going to start by offering my neighbor a ride to the grocery store. It's a grand day, today, the very first day of a new year.

Oh, I'm also going to eat some pickled herring because my ancestors said it would bestow blessings on my family at the start of a new year. Hmm. Good thing I like pickled herring.

*Heavenly Father, thank You for this New Year, a chance  
to start again to be the person You designed me to be.*

—Patricia Lorenz

*Digging Deeper: 2 Corinthians 8:10–12; Ephesians 1:4–5;  
Hebrews 3:12–14*

Tuesday, January 2

*Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.*

—Psalm 119:105 (NIV)

For over twenty years, I've asked God to give me a word to focus on for the upcoming year. Often people want to know how I chose the word, and the answer is, I don't. God does. I open my heart to Him and seek His guidance. Invariably a certain word will appear any number of times over the next few days. I stop, pray, ask for verification, and if I see that word again, then I know it's the one the Lord has given me. I then seek that word in Scripture and pay attention to how it is used and what God is saying to me through His Word.

As I prayed about my word for this year, the Lord steered me toward *trust*. As I look at retirement, I knew I was going to need to put my trust in the Lord as I step away from what is most familiar and comfortable in my daily routine.

This year it came to me that, since I'm adding a word to my life, perhaps it is time I start to eliminate one as well. It didn't take me long to discover what that word would be: *clutter*. This was God's first assignment to me as I retire. It's time to clean out my closets, my kitchen drawers, and pantry. And, yes, hard as it is to surrender a single skein, even my yarn room.

Perhaps there's a word in your life that needs to be eliminated. Words like *doubt* or *fear*. Words like *hurry* or *distrust*. All you need to do is ask, and He will answer.

*Father, help me to listen for Your words  
of wisdom, Your words of guidance.*

—Debbie Macomber

*Digging Deeper:* Proverbs 15:23, 25:11; Isaiah 55:11;  
Jeremiah 15:16; James 3:5–6

### Wednesday, January 3

*For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace. . . .* —Jeremiah 29:11 (KJV)

I sat down for morning devotion, my thoughts racing. Some of them were pleasing, some mundane—too many of them downright disturbed by what I *hadn't* done for the Lord.

Given His promises to forgive my trespasses, why was I lingering overlong about my shortcomings? *I should be rejoicing about God's endless kindness*, I thought—His lavishly given mercies. Yet like a child the day after Christmas, staring at a pile of gifts and still unsatisfied, I felt incomplete. My failure to “take hold of that [list of perfect accomplishments] for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Philippians 3:12, NIV) had upended my quiet time.

The one day I was listening to an audio meditation that suggested I ask God what *He* thought about me. I was moved toward Jeremiah's beloved passage, as quoted above: “I know the thoughts that I think toward you . . .” New hope bloomed. “In the final analysis,” I whispered to my heart, “these thoughts of inadequacy are from the ‘accuser,’ not from God.”

Too often we draw a grim picture of what Christ thinks of us. In reality, it's not about how we see ourselves; it's about what the forgiving Lord sees in us. The potential. The plans He has for us. The small but godly things we do but forget we've done. Only He knows what's in our hearts to do for Him and how to help us do it.

*Holy Spirit, thank You for showing me that my peace does not always rest upon my self-assessment but on how You see my heart.*

—Jacqueline F. Wheelock

*Digging Deeper:* Psalm 139:23–24; Revelation 12:10

Thursday, January 4

*Be still, and know that I am God. . . .* —Psalm 46:10 (KJV)

Winter sunsets dazzle me most evenings as I watch them from my back porch.

Compared with their red and yellow brilliance other months of the year, the winter range of colors leans toward softer hues like peach, rose, and French vanilla. More than likely a scientific explanation exists for the color differences, but I prefer to think the change is intentional. With shorter daylight hours and cooler temperatures, the soothing shades encourage me to slow down, relax, and enjoy quieter times. Sipping a cup of hot tea and reading a good book by the fire on a cold night come to mind.

Maybe God thought the same when He painted the winter sky with such pleasing and peaceful colors at sunset. Perhaps He created the mellow tones to make us pause and appreciate His artwork. Or possibly He knew from the beginning of time we would develop hundreds of ways to run ourselves ragged, as my grandmother used to say about folks never stopping to enjoy their blessings.

Whatever the reason, I'm grateful for God's calming touch as night approaches—reminding me of a parent tucking a blanket around a sleeping child, kissing their cheek, and whispering, "sweet dreams." How blessed I am to have a Heavenly Father who wraps me in His everlasting arms day and night so I can rest in Him.

*Lord, thank You for providing our weary souls refuge, rest,  
and renewal. May we wake up refreshed each morning,  
choose the blessed path You offer us, and walk it daily.*

—Jenny Lynn Keller

*Digging Deeper:* 2 Samuel 22:31–33; Psalm 23:1–3;  
Matthew 11:28–29

## Friday, January 5

*And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.*

—Luke 2:52 (NIV)

The January wind stung my face as I walked along the sidewalk. My dog, Old Sport, picked his way around frozen patches of ice.

“We’re almost home, boy,” I said.

I was eager to get out of the cold. But I was not looking forward to finishing my repetitive routine. Pack briefcase. Eat breakfast. Drive to office. Work until five.

Sport and I had recently spent Christmas with my family. I had enjoyed the change of pace—the freedom and flexibility to spend time how I wished. Sport had enjoyed the energy of the holiday season. But normal life had resumed. Sport and I passed a curbside Christmas tree. Its branches looked thin and brittle. Sport sniffed them.

“It’s just a tree now, Sport,” I said. “The magic is gone.”

Sport paused, still looking at the Christmas tree. He tilted his head. I wondered how Joseph felt when he and Mary returned home from the first Christmas in Bethlehem. Joseph had spoken with angels and seen prophecies fulfilled. And then—back to the carpenter’s bench. Revelation exchanged for repetition.

There must have been so many ordinary days between the first chapters of Luke. But didn’t those ordinary days hold their own importance? Those were the days when the Christ-child learned and stretched and grew into the man who would one day carry a cross.

Today might be an ordinary day. But it was also an opportunity to grow and draw closer to the Lord.

“Sport,” I said. “Time to go. I have important things to do.”

And together, we finished our route home.

*Jesus, help me to use each day to become more like You.*

—Logan Eliassen

*Digging Deeper: 1 Samuel 2:26; 2 Peter 3:18*

## Feast of the Epiphany, Saturday, January 6

*You, LORD, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light. With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall.* —Psalm 18:28–29 (NIV)

Our family room is lit by two fake Tiffany-style table lamps—cheap knockoffs we bought as temporary lighting until the kids were gone and we could afford new ones. (New lamps, I mean, not new kids.)

The kids are now gone; the lamps remain. One lamp had a nice bend in the shade. I balanced that out by knocking its mate to the floor while taking out the Christmas tree. Now they match.

I don't know why we keep the off-brand, off-kilter lamps—probably because they still work, albeit a bit mangled. As I age, my night vision worsens; without a simple light from a simple lamp, I would've stubbed my simple toes a countless number of times.

That's all the Magi had: a simple, faint light in the East. But they were following more than a star. They were following some gut-level faith that said, *Yes, this is where our journey takes us.* No doubt there were a few stubbed toes along the way, yet they persisted.

I would love to have that kind of resolute conviction: to believe that my journey was guided by a distant light. Truth is, my guiding light has taken several spills, most of them caused by me. I do my best—through my imperfect vision—to sidestep the shadows and follow the lit path before me. Despite many falls, I'm still here. To paraphrase the old country song attributed to Martha Ellis, I ain't broke, though I may be badly bent.

*Lord, in our darkness, keep our pathways lit.*

—Mark Collins

*Digging Deeper:* Exodus 10:23; Nehemiah 9:19

Sunday, January 7

**STAR WORDS: Surprise**

. . . and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. —Matthew 2:9–10 (NIV)

Until I learned about the spiritual practice of star words, Epiphany most reminded me of the year that Curate Herb processed down the church aisle dangling a glass star above his head. Close behind, a tall parishioner beamed a flashlight through the star to dramatic effect. Behind both shuffled three pint-sized magi in nativity play regalia. Curate Herb intoned: “Follow the star! Be people of the star!” A memorable service.

These days, I follow the star all year using my star word. Each Epiphany, a member of the clergy chooses words at random for parishioners who request them. The word guides meditation, prayer, and reflection, much like the star guided the magi. The star word also helps us to discern God’s presence in past events as well as in the coming year. Many denominations participate in this spiritual practice.

This year my word is *surprise*. Already I’m primed for the unexpected, whether joyful or not. I started by looking up the origins of my word in both dictionary and concordance and was *surprised* to learn that it’s often used in a context of battle, as in surprising the enemy. (I hope I am not to be surprised this way!) Already I’m focused on unpredictable places where I may discern God on my faith journey. Already I’m following His example. No flashlight needed.

*All-knowing Father, secure in Your love, no surprise  
can shake me—at least, not for long.*

—Gail Thorell Schilling

*Digging Deeper:* Luke 21:25; 1 Corinthians 15:41; 2 Peter 1:19

Monday, January 8

. . . *Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.* —Luke 15:9 (NIV)

When I see a penny on the ground, I pick it up and throw it into my purse. Some of the coins are shiny. Some of them, to use an old phrase, “have been through the wringer”—maybe like Tracey, who’s been on dialysis for years; like Robert, losing his way through an emotional maze; like Ted, who can’t beat his drug addiction. Last week, I tried to give correct change to my friendly gas station guy. But he pushed back the mangled pennies. “I don’t want these,” he said. “Customers won’t take them.”

“But—” I stifled my protest that they were legal tender, coins of the realm. I closed my palm around the nicked, dirty pennies and took them home.

This evening, from the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of the coins that have landed in a jar on my dresser. But this, I know, is not their final resting place. Feeling drawn toward a mundane activity, I dump out the cache and set aside fifty pennies to line up and roll into a paper tube. As I nudge and poke at the coins, I place hardly recognizable pennies alongside shiny new Lincoln heads. Fifty accounted for, safe and secure, I close the ends and set the roll aside, ready to hand in at the bank.

And now, as I pray for friends Tracey and Robert and Ted, I envision them as coins of an otherworldly realm—battered down, beaten up—but accepted at face value where it counts.

*Lord, just as I am, I turn to You for redemption.*

—Evelyn Bence

*Digging Deeper: 2 Samuel 9:1–13*

**Tuesday, January 9**

*As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.* —Proverbs 27:17 (NIV)

The gym held the mid-morning regulars. The ultrafit early birds had flown. The lunch-hour fits hadn't arrived. I'd found my place in the center, where middle-aged folks fight hard when numbers on the scale threatened to rise like our years.

"Morning," said my friend on the elliptical. He smiled and glanced at the clock. "You're right on time."

"Yep!" I said. "And you're doing great!"

I climbed on the stationary bike. "Morning, Joanie," I said to the woman next to me. We chatted as we pushed pedals. She shared a fitness setback, and I listened with empathy because I'd been there too.

I love this gathering of people. Most of us are recovering from surgeries and started at the gym after physical therapy. There's a commonality. A desire to encourage. An openness with struggles. A willingness to be a balm to others—and to allow others to be a balm to us. Transparency is key.

It was easy to draw a parallel between the physical and the spiritual. Recently, a young mama I mentor shared a sin struggle she'd been trying to conquer alone.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" I asked.

"I didn't want you to know."

My spirit saddened. Maybe the desire to guard her struggle was her own pride. But maybe it was mine. Had I been transparent in my own struggles? Had I allowed her to see them so that she could see God's faithfulness too? What a checkpoint. I want to be as genuine as my gym friends. For my experiences to be used for the benefit of others.

"Joanie, you can get back on track," I said.

She nodded.

Iron sharpens iron, and sharing is part of the sharpening.

*Lord, if my struggles can help others, let me be humble. Amen.*

—Shawnelle Eliassen

*Digging Deeper: James 5:16*

Wednesday, January 10

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

—1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 (NRSV)

Haven't we all scratched our heads at Paul's injunction to pray without ceasing? *How on earth am I going to do that?* I wonder. In the crux of a busy day, I figure I'm doing OK by reading a few Psalms at breakfast and carving out some meditative prayer time on the sofa. How do I squeeze in more?

One morning after a half hour on our lumpy couch, I felt wholly inadequate. Sure, I'd concentrated on a short Bible verse and mentioned the names of people who had needs that had to be addressed, but I was chagrined about how much time I had spent *not* praying, instead fretting about my own mundane concerns—a work meeting, emails to answer, bills that needed to be paid, an assignment I had taken on. They all seemed like distractions from my spiritual purpose.

*Wait a minute, I thought. Wasn't I unwittingly putting all that stuff in God's hands? The mind had wandered in prayer. Why wouldn't God be wandering with it?*

This is the key, I think, to an enriching spiritual life. Bringing God into stuff that we normally keep Him out of. Like writing those checks and typing that email and prepping for that meeting. God is with us all day long, even if we forget to acknowledge it.

I greet the morning by giving God the hours, the minutes, and all the worries that come with them. Later I might occasionally murmur “God!” quietly, but He's always here whether I address Him or not. Without ceasing.

*Today, Lord, I shall not forget Your presence,  
whether I express myself in words or not.*

—Rick Hamlin

*Digging Deeper:* Jeremiah 33:3; Romans 8:26; Philippians 4:6

**Thursday, January 11**

*Let your unfailing love surround us, LORD, for our hope is in you alone.*  
—Psalm 33:22 (NLT)

**W***hat gifts has the pandemic brought?* The question from a podcast offended me. Upheaval and unrest in America. A million deaths. Many more had been gravely ill or lost jobs. Healthcare workers were burned out. What could be the gift in any of that?

The long-lasting pandemic changed many things for me and my family too. Loved ones became sick and died. Shut-in relatives were sad and lonely. The gym I visited daily shut down for months. My high-school daughter was sent home for remote learning. The following year, her senior activities were curtailed. My husband, who had traveled weekly, started working from home.

Instead of going to in-person Bible study twice a week, my group met via Zoom. Our family now attended church online and worshipped from our living room couch. I ordered groceries that were loaded into the back of my SUV. No lunches with friends. I rarely saw those who didn't live in my household. *How could any of those things be gifts?*

I shrugged off the question, but it wouldn't let go of me. If God is sovereign, good, and loving all the time, which He is, then times of pain are no less blessings than times of prosperity. Gifts are wrapped in different packages, yet they still contain blessings.

*What gifts has the pandemic brought me?* The realization that despite my circumstances, whether good or bad, with God, I am always blessed.

*Lord, help me to see Your gifts in every burden I bear.*

—Stephanie Thompson

*Digging Deeper:* Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28; Philippians 4:11–13

Friday, January 12

*Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.* —2 Thessalonians 3:16 (NIV)

For years, my husband and I have been looking for a house. We love the home we bought over a decade ago, but that was before we had children and a dog, and our needs have changed.

Every few months, a house comes on the market that's a good fit. We go see it and work through the process of whether to put in an offer or not. Mostly, the answer is not.

One night, our neighbor texted us that they were selling and asked if we were interested in looking before they put it on the market. Of course we were!

The house had the bedrooms and baths we needed, plus lots of other features we hadn't dared to wish for. Then, we heard from another friend who had visited the house. And another. We were shocked to find out that the house already had six offers on it.

Brian and I prayed, visited the house again, submitted our best offer, and, in the end, did not get it. Why? Hadn't God basically walked this house right into our hands? We knew while the house might have seemed great, we couldn't force a new house for ourselves if it wasn't in God's plan right now.

Walking away from the situation, I can truly say that we felt peace. Now, when a house comes on the market, I don't stress that I'll make a bad decision; I trust that God will open the front door to our new house wide open when the timing is right.

*Thank You, Lord, for the peace You give me,  
even amid disappointment and closed doors.*

—Ashley Kappel

*Digging Deeper: Philippians 4:6; 1 Peter 5:7*

**Saturday, January 13**

*For I know the plans I have for you.* —Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

**W**ait, what was I doing with my hand up? Our rural community ambulance service posted a call for volunteer drivers. Years ago, my husband had been a first responder. He decided to sign up. Since he offered to buy dinner on the way, I went with him to the meeting. And found myself volunteering.

I left the meeting with mixed feelings. Even with my experience doctoring cattle on the ranch, I felt inadequate for the calling. I'd never remotely considered helping people in life-or-death situations on a regular basis. Could I mentally deal with human illness and trauma? Was I up for this? Was it God's will for me?

I went deep into prayer. If I volunteered like this, I would be dispatched to assist someone on the worst day of their life, when they were most vulnerable and in pain. Odds are, in this small community, I would know the patient.

But as I went to more meetings, other personnel's experiences resonated with mine. "I had zero medical experience when I started," Pam, an EMT, said. "I had no idea when I went to my first training that I would love it so much that I would still be doing it thirty years later."

Looking around the room, I saw mostly volunteers. Dairymen, hay growers, ranchers, retirees. Nobody was in it for the money. Everyone was there to help their community. And the need was great.

*Lord, I hear the call. Please give me the strength to help others.*

—Erika Bentsen

*Digging Deeper:* Isaiah 41:10; Romans 8:31

Sunday, January 14

*Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed.*  
—Ecclesiastes 4:9 (NLT)

Squeezing a thirty-two-inch-wide couch through a twenty-seven-inch-wide front door was not mathematically possible, so my husband, Kevin, and I maneuvered the lanky piece of old furniture through the double doors off the back deck of our cabin in northern Arizona.

To the top of twelve steps. Covered in snow.

Our dog, Mollie, danced around us as we hefted the unwieldy mass—a hide-a-bed that I swear weighed seven thousand pounds.

“A bit more to the right,” I cautioned Kevin, who, at the front end, had the added burden of walking backwards. “No, to the left.” Inch by inch, we lugged the couch down the steps and around the cabin, taking breaks when our muscles screamed for mercy.

After we finally hefted the old couch into the back of our truck, we eyed the new couch sitting in the driveway with reluctance.

“On the count of three, let’s lift together,” Kevin instructed as I got in position.

As we retraced the path we had just finished, I couldn’t help but think of the different burdens we had shouldered in our forty years of marriage. Several miscarriages. A breast cancer diagnosis. Pressures in Kevin’s job as a pastor and a mayor. The loss of our parents.

That night as I nestled into the new couch in front of a glowing fire in the fireplace, I sent up a prayer of thanks that I had someone to help lift the weight and share the load.

*Jesus, in marriages and friendships, You provide people  
to share the heavy lifting. Thank You.*

—Lynne Hartke

*Digging Deeper: Psalm 68:19; Ecclesiastes 4:10*

## Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Monday, January 15

*. . . do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.* —Deuteronomy 4:9 (NIV)

This January, snowy weather shut down my community's annual MLK Day march, allowing me a day to rest and reflect on the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. My reflections led me to a treasure my late mother had left behind—a 2014 church newsletter in which she shared a first-person account of the 1963 March on Washington led by Dr. King.

As I read my mother's words, I felt her excitement, even six decades later. She spoke of "rumors of expected trouble, low participation, and possible groups of 'bandits' intent on harming marchers." Yet she and my father "were not to be discouraged."

Her account of the march is glorious: "The day dawned hot and humid—not a cloud in the sky." Three buses that transported fellow church members from our hometown Baltimore to Washington, DC, "were filled with excited marchers in great spirit and voices as we sang freedom songs on the way."

When the group reached the Washington Monument, "the thousands, many more than predicted, who made their way from all over the country, marched, sang, cooled our feet in the Reflecting Pool, greeted strangers, shared experiences, met and listened to civil rights leaders and celebrities."

Though I was born years after this historic day, my mother's essay serves as a front-row seat to one of the most epic events in history and lives on as a legacy for me and my children.

*Lord, thank You for the stories and admonishments  
of my ancestors; may they point me to You.*

—Carla Hendricks

*Digging Deeper: Deuteronomy 11:19–21; Esther 9:28*

Tuesday, January 16

*When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other.* —Ecclesiastes 7:14 (NIV)

I was chatting with a friend the other day about the last few difficult years and the toll they have taken.

“I wish we had a time machine,” she said. “So things could go back to the way they were.”

There are days when I wish that too, but time moves in one direction and one direction only. The one force that exists outside the bounds of time is God. He connects the past to the present to the future because He exists everywhere.

I think as we move through time, we move closer to God. Time is our path to Him, our spiritual trajectory. I don't know how many times I've wished I could go back and fix the mistakes I've made or relive the difficult times in my life with more wisdom and faith. And maybe those times were difficult precisely because I lacked sufficient faith. Yet those were also the times when I learned and grew. My faith was made stronger even when I doubted it, even when I resisted. And I have resisted God's will as often as I have accepted it.

I felt bad for my friend, so I said, “We do have a time machine. We're in it right now; we just can't go backwards, only forward. There's no reverse gear!”

That got a smile out of her, and we both felt a little better about these past few years, realizing that the temporal breeze was in our hair.

*Lord, You are with us always, past, present, and future.*

*I pray my faith grows as I move closer to You.*

—Edward Grinnan

*Digging Deeper:* Psalm 37:18–19; Ecclesiastes 3:1–11; Mark 10:29–31

## Wednesday, January 17

*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power . . . —Ephesians 3:20 (NIV)*

Bumping down our long driveway in my Subaru, I glanced ruefully up at the sky. For weeks, it'd been a gray-white monotone that blended almost seamlessly with the frozen white of the world beneath it. *And with the low ebb of my spirits*, I thought with a frown. Sometimes it felt hard to be bright when the world around me wasn't. I'd been so excited that today's forecast had called for sunshine. But it looked like a few measly breaks in the clouds were all I was going to get. I sighed. It didn't feel like enough.

But then, I rounded the driveway's next bend . . . and brought the car to a sliding stop. The clouds had shifted overhead. Sunlight—abundant, angled, and golden—poured across the snowy landscape in front of me, painting everything it touched with deep shades of amber, pink, and orange. Birch and aspen trees, adorned in lacy cloaks of delicate hoarfrost, seemed to glow from within like blazing copper torches. And ice crystals, suspended in the air, glittered like diamond dust, causing the very air to sparkle.

I stared, mouth agape. Tears pricked my eyelids. Just seconds ago, I'd been ruing the clouds, sure I was missing out on something I needed. But, as I gazed at the light-filled masterpiece in front of me now—more brilliant than anything I could've ever known to hope or pray for—I knew. I needn't worry or grasp. God had my needs covered. And then some.

*Thank You, God, for Your light. For Your limitless imagination.  
And for this priceless glimpse of Your glory.*

—Erin Janoso

*Digging Deeper: Job 37:22; Matthew 6:28–31; Luke 12:22–31*

Thursday, January 18

. . . *“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”* —Mark 9:24 (NIV)

I stood in line in a local department store with my cart full of items, inching slowly through the maze of shelves meant for last-minute purchases.

In the past, I had always ignored the chaotic display of random things—copper mugs, bags of pasta shaped like trains, and fuzzy socks. Yet this time, something caught my attention. It was a long, white, wooden block with gray typewriter font proclaiming “The Best Is Yet to Come.”

I scoffed at those words. *The best is well behind me*, I thought.

I couldn't imagine anything in the future that I would ever identify as the best. The best was when I lived in France and traveled through Europe for a year. The best was when my kids were younger and raced toward me yelling “Mami” every time I walked through the door. The best was when I visited my parents in Florida to relax by the pool, not like my recent visit when I realized my father's dementia is getting worse.

Despite all of my skepticism and negativity, I picked up this ridiculous block and added it to my cart. I took it home and put it against my window where I could see it each day. I displayed it, not because I believed those words, but simply in hope that one day I would.

*Lord, help us to hold on when we cannot see beyond our circumstances.*

*Remind us that our hope and future is in Your loving hands.*

—Karen Valentin

*Digging Deeper: Isaiah 40:31; Hebrews 11:1*

**Friday, January 19**

*Many designs are in a man's mind, but it's the LORD's plan that is accomplished.* —Proverbs 19:21 (JPS)

**H**ow old would you be if you didn't know how old you are?" asked my friend Janet.

The question took me by surprise. I had never before thought about age that way. I was much more accustomed to "How old do you feel?" A "feeling" way of looking at the issue made me think about the years we spend losing things we used to do: I used to be able to do a cartwheel but no longer; I used to lift a fifty-pound package as if it weighed nothing; I used to be able to hike in the Grand Canyon. Sometimes I even wondered why God had made us with "declining years"—years in which to resent the limitations of aging.

But Janet's question drew me away from what I couldn't do physically into thinking about how I had grown spiritually. It had taken me a very long time to learn I could accept help and to recognize that I was blessed with caring friends. That was a gift I might never have received back in the days when being independent was a matter of pride. I had learned to accept help graciously, and now I could accept what I had lost, too, because there were huge compensations in recognizing what God had decided was best for me.

Janet was waiting patiently for an answer.

"Well," I said, "not a teenager by any means or in my twenties. Maybe about fifty, when I'd stopped thinking about myself and started thinking more about why God put me here."

*You always know better than I do, God, and I have to relearn that every single day. Thank You for Your patience.*

—Rhoda Blecker

*Digging Deeper: Ecclesiastes 3:1; Jeremiah 12:16*

Saturday, January 20

... for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. —Luke 18:16 (NASB)

She comes to me with her big, questioning brown eyes . . .  
“Pop Pop?”

My apologies to all other grandparents out there, but this little girl standing in front of me is the cutest, bravest, most curious creature on earth.

She holds up a little stuffed dragon and smiles. At least, it looks like a dragon to me. To her, it's a baby dinosaur. I know what to do. I take the toy, do my best Mister Rogers, and start in with Baby Dinosaur voice.

Now, a two-year-old mind is a fickle thing. You would think she'd be quickly distracted and our game would last only a minute or two. You would be wrong. This can literally go on for hours. In my granddaughter's mind, everything else fades away. It's just Baby Dino and the endless adventures this promises.

Jesus invites us to come to God like little children. Innocent, with the unwavering faith that our Heavenly Father has us in His arms. I know this precept. I've been around the block enough times to have the house numbers memorized. I've seen His miraculous hand in my life over and over again. You would think our conversation would last hours before distraction set in.

You would think, but you would be wrong.

I've found a Pop Pop's mind is a fickle thing.

But there are times, every once in a while, when I manage to keep my soul still in His presence. And when I do, the world fades. It's just me, my Beautiful Friend, and the great adventure that will never end.

*I look forward to the day, Lord, when distraction is not even an option. Just Your love forever and ever. Amen.*

—Buck Storm

*Digging Deeper: Matthew 18:1–14; 1 John 3:1*

## Sunday, January 21

*Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them.* —Matthew 6:1 (NIV)

As part of my church's hospitality team, I sometimes prepare and deliver comfort food meals to families experiencing medical convalescence or bereavement. Since I once cooked daily for my family of six, I easily plan and prepare entire dinners. Working around dietary restrictions or extra-large portions just adds to the creative challenge.

Perhaps the most satisfying part is chatting with the recipients, especially those who live alone: the new widow, the person in pain, the homebound. I like to think that my presence offers comfort along with the soup. And I confess I crave a little praise now and then. Or used to . . .

When I learned that a young father of six had died suddenly and the grieving family of seven included teen boys, I put on my apron and turned on the stove. Spaghetti and sauce, bread, salad, fruit, and pies. According to team protocol, I called the mother ahead of time. "I won't be home, but the boys will let you in."

But the boys didn't hear the doorbell. I left three totes of food on the porch. The next month, I prepared baked beans and ham, shredded coleslaw, extra rolls, and cake. I phoned Mom, who warned about icy steps. Again, no one received me. Again, I left food on the porch.

Praise? I've lost my taste for it. God knows I helped—and that's enough.

*Lord, let me serve You without wondering who's watching.*

—Gail Thorell Schilling

*Digging Deeper:* Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 5:10;

Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9

Monday, January 22

*Don't speak evil against each other, dear brothers and sisters.*

—James 4:11 (NLT)

Our family Bible study one evening focused on the fourth chapter of James. My husband called attention to the eleventh verse, then challenged us to make more of an effort to build people up. “When we find fault with someone,” Dwight said, “how can we instead say something positive?”

Our son, two daughters, and I sat silently, unable to think of an answer. Finally, our son piped up. “I guess when you want to say something like, ‘He’s an idiot,’ you could add, ‘but that’s what makes him special in his own way!’” We all laughed, but it gave me an idea.

“I’m going to try that this week,” I announced. “Whenever I catch myself saying something unkind, I’m going to add that phrase to the end to call attention to my negativity.”

I had no idea what a humbling challenge I’d taken on. I’d never before realized how casually critical I could be.

While driving past our local college campus, I commented, “These girls’ shorts are way too short.” Then I added, “But that’s what makes them special in their own way.” The kids were in the car with me, and they laughed. Later on, we saw a personalized license plate. “What a dumb thing to put on your car,” I said, quickly adding, “but that’s what makes him special in his own way.”

Before the week was out, my son’s joke had become tiresome. “Mom,” one of my daughters groaned, “it’s not funny anymore.”

How ashamed I felt that I’d made the words lose their punch through overuse.

I’m going to work on showing more grace—a truly wonderful and special way to be!

*Lord, help me to be kind.*

—Ginger Rue

*Digging Deeper: Matthew 5:22, 12:36*

**Tuesday, January 23**

*There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.* —Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NIV)

I had waited twenty years to start pursuing publication. College, marriage, a career, and the birth of my daughters prevented me from taking the time. But I was finally staying home to raise my girls, so it seemed like the perfect opportunity to start writing again. I was several months into my first manuscript when I discovered we were pregnant with twins! My husband, daughters, and I were overjoyed to welcome two babies into our family.

But the day I heard the word “twins” was also the night I cried myself to sleep. Not because I was sad for this incredible blessing, but because I knew God was asking me to put my writing dreams on hold a little longer. How long? I didn’t know. What I did know was that God had placed a calling on my life to worship Him through my words.

As I lay there in tears, I felt an overwhelming sense of peace. God whispered a promise to my heart that if I would honor Him in this season of life, He would honor my dream.

I never imagined that God would call me to pick up my pen again when my twin boys were not quite two years old. That was ten years ago, and in that time, I’ve had over twenty-five books published.

I learned an important lesson in that season of life. When we work on God’s divine timetable and honor His plans, we step into the center of His perfect will.

*Lord, when I get frustrated and impatient with delays, help me to remember that my times are in Your hands.*

—Gabrielle Meyer

*Digging Deeper:* Psalm 31:14; James 4:13–15; 2 Peter 3:8

Wednesday, January 24

**CELEBRATE!! Word of the Year**

*These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you,  
and that your joy may be full. —John 15:11 (RSV)*

Many people mark the New Year, not with a resolution, but with a word intended to shape the days ahead. I'm doing that this year, and my word is *celebrate!!* with two exclamation points. *Celebrate!!* got woven into my spiritual life when I read Richard J. Foster's classic book, *Celebration of Discipline*. I was intrigued by the title that combined those two unlikely words.

According to Foster, discipline means doing what needs to be done when it needs to be done, and celebration is about recognizing God's goodness and pausing long enough to thank Him. The discipline turns the "thank You" into a habit that strengthens our faith.

As I stand on the edge of this New Year, looking at my new 2024 calendar, I'm reminded of blessing the blank pages of my new calendar years ago. I'd recently been diagnosed with cancer and faced a future of unknowns. My pastor stopped by to see how I was doing as I was adding the dates of my first rounds of chemotherapy. I confessed my fears about the outcomes of doctor appointments and treatments.

"You have to pray for the possibilities," he said, and then led me through a prayer, blessing those blank pages, trusting God's presence and protection, and ending by praying that I could focus on the possibilities.

I'm celebrating that memory today as I bless the blank pages of my 2024 calendar, especially praying for the possibilities.

*Father, I am excited to discover the possibilities  
You have for me in this New Year.  
—Carol Kuykendall*

*Digging Deeper: 2 Samuel 6:14; Psalm 16:11*

## Thursday, January 25

*Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*

—Psalm 42:11 (NIV)

It was dark and the road was blanketed with snow as I walked home from visiting my mom next door. The plow hadn't come through, and my path of footprints from the way there were hardly visible. I shivered, remembering another big storm was expected later in the week. Winter, it seemed, had no end.

As the snow fell, I thought about dinner and everything I had to do before the day's end. I was the only one out on this frigid night, and the loneliness of the season took hold in my heart.

I tugged my scarf up under my chin and noticed a familiar scent that seemed so odd for a winter's night that I almost didn't recognize it. The smell of hot dogs and hamburgers wafted by me. I took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of summer, most likely from a neighbor's back porch barbecue.

I looked up at the beam of light from a streetlamp in the distance. The falling snow made a hazy rainbow around the lamp, and I found myself walking lighter, excited to see the beauty of this night God had made, taking in every sense of the wintery moment.

*Lord, thank You for unexpected gifts that lift my spirit away  
from cold thoughts to You, my Savior.*

—Sabra Ciancanelli

*Digging Deeper: Psalm 31:24; Romans 15:13*

Friday, January 26

*You shall have no other gods before me.* —Exodus 20:3 (NIV)

I woke up excited about getting a new car today—a rare event for our family. The whole car-buying process is fun for me. Our family enjoys spending time deciding the type of car, color, and options that best fit our needs. Once ordered, I look forward to the day the car arrives. Then we drive the car for a long time—usually ten years.

The excitement reminded me of an experience soon after getting our last new car. Pat and I drove the car to Texas to see our son. On the trip down, before even getting out of our home state of Ohio, a truck's wheel kicked up a rock, cracking the windshield. The evening we arrived, we went out to dinner. As Pat and Johnny walked toward the restaurant, I stopped to examine a noticeable dent in the driver-side door. Johnny came back to see why I had stopped. Totally frustrated, I fretted and fumed about both the windshield crack and dent so soon on a new car.

“Hey Dad, it’s only a car! Are you really going to let a small crack and even smaller dent spoil our evening?” His point stung, but he was right; his comment helped get my priorities—and our evening—back on track.

I don’t believe God has a problem with us having new things. But He certainly does care about our attitude toward anything, new or old, and their priority in our lives.

*Dear Jesus, help keep my excitement about this new car in check,  
and when the first dent comes, help me not let it ruin my day  
with You or anyone else. After all, it is just a car!*

—John Dilworth

*Digging Deeper:* Deuteronomy 28:14; Jonah 2:8

**Saturday, January 27**

*The LORD will guide you always. . . . You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.* —Isaiah 58:11 (NIV)

Writing has almost always been part of my life. My favorite school assignments were essays, sports reporting, and term papers. I wrote for Christian and farm magazines as a young mother, and I've been writing for *Daily Guideposts* (*Walking in Grace*) since 1979. But a couple of years ago, I wondered if it was time to quit. Did I still have anything relevant or encouraging to say? I prayed for guidance, but God seemed silent.

Then I got an email from my nephew Chris. He'd just finished reading my biographical sketch in the 2022 edition. The verse I'd quoted was Psalm 145:18, "The Lord is near to all who call upon him, to all who call upon him in truth." Then, when he opened his Bible, he was amazed to find the passage he'd bookmarked earlier was also Psalm 145:18! "Out of 1,189 chapters in the Bible and 730 days into my lumbering stroll from Genesis to Revelation," he wrote, "I arrived at Psalm 145 the exact same day I read your bio. I can only speculate about divine supervision or coincidence. But I am certain that God is working through your pen, experiences, and even the verse you chose."

Message received. The time will come when I put away my pen and computer. But for now, I'll keep on writing.

*Thank You, Lord, for the amazing way you answered  
my prayer. Guide my thoughts and pen, that my words may  
bless others as their words have blessed me.*

—Penney Schwab

*Digging Deeper:* Psalm 25:4–5; Proverbs 16:1–3; 1 John 2:12–14

Sunday, January 28

. . . *the Lord shall give thee rest from thy sorrow, and from thy fear. . . .*

—Isaiah 14:3 (KJV)

Quarantined.” A scary word, one you might imagine posted across a door in ancient times. Yet, here we were, quarantined, in the throes of a world pandemic. Our three younger children were home from school, and Harrison, our college student, had been assigned to remote learning.

Our investment office was now “work at home” status, and the stock market had crashed almost 35 percent in five weeks. It was a harrowing time. Stores were closed, meetings canceled, groceries were delivered to front doors.

Fear of the unknown was everywhere. We all suffered with those who were sick and mourned the dying. No one knew what was going to happen. Yet all around us, families began to settle in, reacquaint, and adapt to enforced isolation.

We were fortunate to have access to a rural farm, and Corinne and I decided to retreat to its safety. I had the equipment necessary to keep in touch with my clients’ needs. Soon, we found ourselves taking long walks together, first because there was little else to do, and then because we had begun to love the beauty of God’s creation, which we had so often failed to notice in the past.

It was on such an afternoon that my children Mary Katherine, Ella Grace, and David found a perfect spot for sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree. The sun fell across the woods behind them, making them beautiful.

“Daddy,” Mary Katherine asked, “what’s going to happen with the virus?”

I didn’t have an answer to her question, so I responded with the only truth I knew: “I’m not sure, honey, but God is always with us.”

*Father, even in the midst of fear and uncertainty,  
You come. Stay close, Father, stay close.*

—Brock Kidd

*Digging Deeper: Matthew 6:24; 2 Timothy 1:7*

## Monday, January 29

*Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.*

—Colossians 4:2 (NIV)

Recently, I had an email from a former student. She'd sold her first short story to a children's magazine and wanted to thank me for the help I'd given her when she'd taken my writing course years ago. I was delighted for Gillian. More than that, I was touched that she'd reached out to say thank you. Very few students do.

I suppose it shouldn't surprise me. When Jesus healed ten lepers on his way to Jerusalem, only one of them returned to thank Him. One in ten. That's sad, isn't it? But thanklessness seems prevalent. Perhaps that's why magazines publish articles—usually in November—on the importance of having an attitude of gratitude. I've taken meals and disposable diapers to new mothers, delivered homemade cookies or flowers to shut-ins, and performed other acts of kindness without ever getting an email, text, or phone call to say thanks. I didn't do these things to be thanked. I did them because the Lord would have me do so—to be salt and light in the world.

Why are we prone to take so much for granted? When my teenagers succumbed to grumbling or whining, I'd counter by asking them to share three things they were grateful for that day. Perhaps the attitude of gratitude is like a muscle that needs exercise to grow strong. I don't know. What I do know is that life is too short not to take time to thank the Lord for our blessings and to say thank you to those around us.

*Dear Lord, I thank You for showering me with  
so many blessings that I can't count them all.*

—Shirley Raye Redmond

*Digging Deeper:* 1 Chronicles 16:34; 1 Thessalonians 5:18

Tuesday, January 30

*But he said to her, "Daughter, it is your faith that has healed you. Go home in peace, and be free from your trouble." —Mark 5:34 (PHILLIPS)*

One day I visited a patient. "Debra" soon confided, "My husband died a few months ago. I'm so lonely. I don't have anything to live for." As I listened, I prayed silently to receive the words the Lord would have me speak to this suffering woman.

Thankfully, the words came ever so gently. I told her, "I once had a brain tumor. I didn't think I could keep living feeling so bad. But then the Lord spoke to my heart."

"Yes?" she inquired.

"When you feel bad, you can't focus on anything else. So, when you pray, the first thing that often happens is you feel peace. Peace helps you to see life beyond the pain and helps you see that the Lord is always with you even in the worst of circumstances. That's what happened to me."

Debra touched my hand. "Tell me more."

I leaned in. "You took care of your husband in his last years as he lived with dementia. Even when he didn't recognize you anymore, you never left him alone. Your love for him was greater than his terrible illness."

She became teary. "How could I do anything else? Our vows . . . in sickness and in health. I loved him." She then looked out the window for a very long time. "Before you visited, I felt so alone, but now I feel hope. Thank you."

After I left Debra, I felt a renewed gratitude for how the Lord had carried me through my own illness. What I had once asked the Lord to spare me from experiencing was now my greatest blessing.

*May Your understanding give us the peace we all seek. Amen.*

—Adam Ruiz

*Digging Deeper: John 14:27; Romans 5:1–2, 10:14–15*

**Wednesday, January 31**

*God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.*

—1 John 4:16 (NIV)

As a little girl, I enjoyed watching PBS shows when I returned home from school. I would burst through the door, throw my backpack down, grab a snack and some apple juice, and plant myself in front of “the tube.”

One of my favorite shows was *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. I loved watching him return home, remove his suit jacket, and don a comfy cable-knit cardigan. I enjoyed his interviews with unique guests. Most of all, I loved his calm voice, a voice that exuded warmth and encouragement to children like me, seated in his virtual audience.

Recently, I attended a conference for people from various organizations serving vulnerable children. To my surprise and joy, a lady representing the Fred Rogers Center in Pennsylvania led a session that quickly became my favorite. The presenter spoke in the same calming tone of Mister Rogers, while sharing the ways his center continues his work in the world.

She closed with a clip of Fred Rogers, filmed decades ago, that transported me back to the little girl who found inspiration and joy in that kind face and gentle voice. The clip ended with this simple statement: “I like you just the way you are.”

Those simple words—an embodiment of the truth of God’s love that we don’t hear often enough—filled my heart. Not only did I feel encouraged to live in authenticity and acceptance, but it also reminded me that every child in my life is yearning for this same affirmation. Every child needs to know that with all their struggles and imperfections, I like them just the way they are.

*Dear Lord, help me to live in the truth that You love me just the way I am, and help me to gift others with kindness and acceptance.*

—Carla Hendricks

*Digging Deeper: Psalm 17:7–8; 1 John 4:7–12*