

Advent Devotions by Tom Donnelly (Firmly Rooted Ministries – [www.firmlyrooted.org](http://www.firmlyrooted.org))

Dec. 1

***“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”*** Genesis 3:15, NIV84

This Advent devotional series is on Old Testament prophecies. It is amazing to consider that the Jesus we love and worship was promised from the very beginning. Over thousands of years of writings and several different authors, God predicts and promises Jesus to us. He did not want there to be any confusion about who He was when He came. Only by divine intervention could one person fulfill all the Messianic prophecies in Scripture. I hope the awe we feel on Christmas morning is deepened because we have a closer relationship with the heart of God who promised a Savior to us, and a deeper understanding of who Jesus is brought on by meditating on His Messianic prophecies over this Advent season.

Here in Genesis is where the promises begin. Man has fallen into sin. Adam and Eve are hiding from God and are living in a very different world from just moments ago. The love and peace that ruled their hearts and minds has been replaced with selfishness and fear. God comes to the garden to condemn Satan and to save His creation. He doesn't come to destroy Adam and Eve but to promise them that their brokenness would be healed by a redeemer He himself would send. God promises that the One to come would crush the Devil's head.

Because of their sin, Adam and Eve experienced death and separation from God. The Messiah would come to destroy death and to reunite humanity with its Creator. Adam and Eve had no clue how that would happen. They just believed it would. Thousands of years and many more Messianic prophecies would reveal the “how” God would work this salvation. We stand on the fulfilled side of these prophecies knowing that Jesus died on the cross and rose again so that we might have victory over death, a renewed relationship with God, and the promise of eternal life. But today, let's appreciate a God of love and promise, and the countless believers who trusted in what God was going to do, even when they weren't sure exactly what it was.

Peace!

Tom

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Dec. 2

***“I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*** (Genesis 12:3) ***“Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north, and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.”*** Genesis 28:14

The two verses above were spoken to two of the Old Testament patriarchs, the first verse to Abraham and the second to his grandson Jacob. Both verses assured both men that they would be richly blessed by God. As we study these verses and the lives of these men, we are most conscious of the way in which God fulfilled His promise to each man. He blessed both men with offspring and physical blessings that would cause them to grow from a family into a nation. Jacob would become the father of 12 sons, who would eventually become the 12 tribes of Israel.

The promise that we sometimes miss in these verses is the one about Jesus. When God works in this world He works on multiple layers. He not only works to bless the individual he initially makes the promise to, but also future generations. In these verses He adds an additional layer in which He promises that through these blessings He will bless all peoples (the whole world). God does this by bringing Jesus to the world through the lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For centuries the Lord not only was faithful to the nation of Israel, but He was also faithful to the entire world the day Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

It is hugely comforting to me to know that our God is so big and so powerful that He can rule peoples and nations by His will. He protected the line of Abraham all the way to Jesus for centuries. He protected them through famines, wars, and conquests. He ruled over the Roman world and forced them to have a census, which would force Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem to be counted. And all this He did to fulfill a prophecy we will talk about another time.

The Good News here is that even when we lose sight of the real purpose and will of God, He doesn't. He reminds His children throughout all ages that His great desire is to spiritually redeem and save us from our sins and to restore His creation once again. When was the last time you thought about the fact that the reason the nations on this planet continue to exist is God's will and the furtherance of His kingdom? The Earth continues to revolve because God says that the message of Jesus hasn't spread to everyone He intends it to be spread to. When that day comes (the last day) not a single president, king, or queen will be able to prevent it from ending.

All of history is ultimately defined by God's promise to bless all the people of the world in Jesus Christ.

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Dec. 3

***“The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between His feet, until He comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is His.”*** Genesis 49:10

What is so fun and amazing about this series of devotions on Messianic prophecies is that it is all from the Old Testament. As you go through this 25-day journey you are going to be amazed at how specifically Jesus is described and depicted thousands of years before His ministry would even begin. Men, smarter than I, have studied the probabilities of any human being fulfilling but a handful of prophecies from one man. Now imagine more than 50 prophecies written by more than 10 writers over thousands of years. The men who were led by the Spirit to make these prophecies didn't even know one another. Jesus fulfilling these prophecies is a mathematical improbability. But with God all things are possible.

In this verse from Genesis, the Messiah is prophesied as coming from the tribe of Judah, and He would be a king who would eventually rule all nations. Thousands of years later, Jesus was born as an offspring of the tribe of Judah. He was a direct descendant of King David. When asked by Pilate whether He was a king, He replied that He was. In the book of Revelation, Jesus is called the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. On the last day He will return as the Lord of the Nations and completely restore His heavenly kingdom.

But even now Jesus is the King. He is the King of the universe and the King of our hearts. You and I are members of His kingdom by virtue of His love and grace. As you give honor to your Lord and King this Christmas season be reminded that God saw fit to clearly foretell of His coming way back in Genesis.

Dec. 4

***"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him -- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD -- and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist."*** (Isaiah 11:1-5)

This is certainly more verses than I normally use for a devotion but it is important to see them all together to see how specific they are about Jesus' ministry. The reference to a shoot coming from the stump of Jesse (King David's father) is a declaration that the Messiah would be a king from the line of David. The shoot (Jesus) comes from a lineage that had been lost and replaced since the destruction of Jerusalem in 722 BC. There hadn't been a king in Israel in quite some time. When Jesus was born, the Romans ruled the land. Jesus sprouted out of a dried stump as Israel's King. The Spirit of God would rest on Him. We know that at His baptism the Spirit descended upon Him like a dove. We know that He read the scroll of Isaiah 61 ("The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me...") in the synagogue and declared it fulfilled in their hearing. We know that He was able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the hearts of those who came into His presence. We know that His heart went out to the poor and needy. He was ridiculed for hanging out with the tax collectors and sinners. His response was that only the sick know that they need a physician. He struck the world with His Word of Truth and the world hasn't been the same since.

How can we read a text like this and be familiar with the Gospel accounts and not be completely in awe of how powerful and amazing our God is? Jesus' ministry was exactly like Isaiah described that of the Messiah to be. But even more amazing is that God would send such a Messiah to us. We are selfish, sinful people who do not deserve His grace and providence but get it anyway because He is always true to Himself. His Spirit-empowered Word has breathed new life into our souls. He has given us the gift of His righteousness.

As I sit back and think about these Messianic prophecies I think about a divine plan or an intricate design. God put it all together and weaved it into history just like He wanted it to happen. How about your life? Are you certain there is a plan and a design? Are you living confidently that the Lord has this all figured out? Or are you worried and stressed out about what might be next? Stop and think about the prophecies. If God can pull this kind of fulfillment off, He can certainly provide purpose and direction to our daily lives.

Dec. 5

***“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over His kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.”*** Isaiah 9:6-7

This is one of the most quoted Messianic prophecies in all of Scripture. You will find it this year on a lot of Christmas cards. Most would recognize the words, “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Let’s break these descriptions down a bit.

“Wonderful Counselor” -- Jesus was a Wonderful Counselor to those He taught and revealed His divine truths to. He taught the multitude in parables. He sat on hillsides and in boats along the seashore teaching like one who had authority. The true wonder of His teaching and counseling is that He continues it for us today. He continues to reach to you and me with that same truthful authority through the Scriptures and through the fellowship of believers.

“Mighty God” -- The beginning of this prophecy clearly tells us that the Messiah would be a male child born into this world; but it also says that He would be called "Mighty God." The Messiah is unique and never to be repeated. There would only be need for one. He would be both God (God’s Son) and man (Mary’s son). Why both? Only Jesus (both God and man) could live and die in our place and pay the eternal price for our sins.

“Everlasting Father” -- Although not the Father, but the Son of the Father, He was the perfect expression of His Father’s love. If you want to know how much God loves you, you have to look at Jesus. He is the embodiment of the Father’s love. In His own words He had come to do His Father’s will. Jesus fulfilled that love and will by dying on the cross and bearing our sins. “For God (the Father) so loved the whole that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him would not perish, but have everlasting life.”

“Prince of Peace” -- This is my favorite description of Jesus. The prophecy says there will be no end to the reign of His peace. I can tell you that this is absolutely true. Ever since I have known Jesus (since the age of 17), He has been my source of peace. He has been that peace in good times and in bad. I know that He will be that peace for me for the rest of my life. I know that He is not just the source of that peace for me, but for millions and millions of others as well.

It is my prayer today that we see in Jesus the true depth of this prophecy.

Dec. 6

**“The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.’”** Jeremiah 23:5 NIV

This is an incredible Messianic prophecy. Jeremiah is writing thousands of years after Moses. He is writing to a nation (Judah) that is being punished. They have been attacked and are being taken captive into a foreign land. They have lost their king and their land. What a strange time for God to talk about a coming King. The people are experiencing some really tough times. I am certain they are not in the mood to hear hopeful words about the coming of a future King. They lost their faith in God and are angry with Him. If they feel anything, it is abandonment, not redemption. How difficult these words of promise must have been to hear and understand.

Have you ever been in that place in your life when even the hopeful promises of God are hard to hear? Things are so bad and so difficult that it is impossible to think hopeful thoughts. You can read them. You can hear them. They just seem to be SO impractical and not for you. If you have been in this place, then you can relate to the people Jeremiah is speaking to. But listen one more time and understand that God doesn't see things the way we do. We find ourselves in a dark place and think that everything has changed. It is just not true. Things may have changed for you, but not for God. God does not change, nor do His words and promises.

God knows and understands the place you are in. He will lovingly see you through it the same way He did the people of Judah. God doesn't have dark experiences like we do. Everything is light to Him. There isn't a moment that He isn't working out His plan and will. To Judah, and to us, He provides a promise of Hope that the day is coming when this dark period will end and He will restore everything. To Judah, He assures them that this dark time of punishment will end and He will not only bring them back to their land, but He will provide them a righteous King who will reign forever. In 1 Peter 5:10, Peter says, "And after you have suffered for a little while the God of grace who called you into His eternal glories in Christ Jesus will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you."

Like the people of Judah, the words might fall on deaf ears today. But the day is coming when you are going to need to hear these words of promise and hold them as certain and true. Be certain today that there is never a day that God doesn't see His divine design for your life. Even in our dark times He speaks to our hearts words of truth, promise and hope.

**Comment [LDM1]:** perhaps "God doesn't dwell in dark places." Or "God radiates light even in dark places." -- he's gone there, he took our sin on the cross, he descended into hell, and he resides in us now and we live in a world of darkness, he seeks us out when we're in dark places... there could well be some distinction here I'm missing, but maybe clarify for readers (and me!)? Im

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Dec. 7

***“A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’”*** Isaiah 40:3-5

I picked this verse for today over a week ago without knowing that it was one of the readings in church for yesterday. Or that I would do the Children's Message on this verse yesterday morning. Just a coincidence? I don't think so!

A long time ago it was common for a city like Jerusalem to prepare (get ready) for a visiting king or dignitary. They would do it by sending out thousands of workers into the desert to smooth the path for the coming king. They would knock down hills and fill in holes until the path into the city was completely flat. This is the way they showed the visiting dignitary that he was important.

Between November and December we spend hours and hours preparing for Thanksgiving and Christmas. We clean. We decorate. We clean. We cook. We clean. We shop. How many hours will you spend this month just preparing for Christmas? Given all that commitment and preparation, how many hours will you spend preparing for Christmas *spiritually*?

When John the Baptist began his ministry he went out into the desert to prepare the way for the Lord. He did not go out and knock down dirt hills and fill in earthen holes. He preached to anyone who would listen a message of repentance and spiritual renewal. He knocked down hills of spiritual ignorance and filled in holes of guilt and shame. He laid the foundation for the coming of the Messiah. Look how specifically Isaiah describes John the Baptist.

"And the glory of the Lord will be revealed." John the Baptist -- what a strange way to reveal God's glory! A camel-hair-clothed, locust-eating man preaching in the desert that the Kingdom of God was at hand. The Kingdom of God has been at hand from that day and is still at hand today.

May we all be willing to add to our physical preparation some time to spiritually prepare. The Messianic Kingdom is a spiritual Kingdom and it requires spiritual preparation.

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Dec. 8

***“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.***” Malachi 3:1

Here we have another prophecy about John the Baptist, the prophet who preceded Jesus' ministry and "prepared the way" for His coming. Yesterday we talked about how important it is for us to spend some time preparing spiritually for our Christmas celebration and the coming of Jesus.

Why is it so important to prepare? Unlike many important events in life of which we know the time and date, that was not the case with the beginning of Jesus' ministry nor will it be the case with His second coming. God's people need to be ready at all times because they cannot be certain when it is going to happen. We are called to expect and anticipate it as though it could be today. As Isaiah says, "Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will appear in His temple." Jesus says of His second coming that He will come "like a thief in the night."

Let's not be caught by surprise! Let's be found ready and waiting for our Lord. Let's prepare for His coming whether it be the celebration of His birth or His second coming. Let's be found ready!

Dec. 9

***“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”*** Isaiah 7:14

The context of this prophecy is really important. Isaiah is sent to King Ahaz to tell him that he need not worry about the enemy that was approaching. The Lord, through Isaiah, even offers Ahaz the opportunity to ask for a sign that would be his assurance, but Ahaz refuses. Then comes our verse for the day. The Lord tells Ahaz that He will supply the sign Himself.

"The virgin will be with child ..." WOW! Some kind of sign, Lord. In previous devotions we discussed the mathematical probability of all these Messianic prophecies coming true in one man. I say, what is the mathematical probability that this one prophecy would come true? How is a virgin going to have a child? It is impossible!!!! But all things are possible with God. Just stop for a minute and wrap your mind around this thought. God would so certainly work through and control historical events that He would cause the virgin Mary to give birth.

"... and will give birth to a son ..." God even specifies that the miraculous child born from the virgin will be a boy. He will be the second Adam. Where the first Adam failed the second will not. This Son will be called, "Immanuel" (God with us). Wait a minute. Did you catch that? The miraculous Son born from the virgin Mary would be God Himself. What a sign! In this verse God is saying to all of us, I am coming to save you.

Now remember the context of this verse. Ahaz was worried about the approaching enemy and God wanted to assure Him that He had everything under control. The deeper meaning of this verse is that God knows we have an enemy, too. His desire to protect us from that enemy was to become man Himself, be born of a virgin, and be Immanuel (God with us).

Whatever you are going through today, be assured that God knows and that He is with you (Immanuel).

Dec. 10

***“Marshal your troops, O city of troops, for a siege is laid against us. They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod. But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”*** Micah 5:1-2

Up to this point our study into the Messianic prophecies has revealed that the Messiah would be the answer to Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden. We see Him promised to and through the lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We see that He specifically would come from the tribe of Jacob and through the family line of King David. We have learned that He would come as a son to a virgin woman and would be no ordinary man. He would be Immanuel (God with us).

Today's scripture gets very specific. It tells us that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. The marvel in the prophecy is found in God's providence. You see, Joseph and Mary did not live in Bethlehem. There would be no reason for Joseph to travel with his 9-months-pregnant wife. God stepped into time and space and caused history to move according to His will. He moved Caesar Augustus to request a census of His kingdom at just the right time. Caesar stipulated that the only way the census could be taken properly was to have everyone go back to their town of heritage and be counted. God used the most powerful earthly kingdom of the day to act according to His will.

Do you and I understand that God continues to work in our world in the same way? His providence doesn't turn on and off. It is always on. He is moving in and among the current kingdoms and governments in our world today to act according to His will. Once we step back for a moment and marvel at what God does to get His will done in a harsh and sinful world, can we take the next step and believe that He could do the same in our daily lives? Do you believe that God has a plan for your life and is working it out as you read this devotion? Do you believe that He can even work through your sinful acts and bad decisions and make good come from them?

This morning I pray that the Lord opens wide our eyes of faith and we find ourselves in awe of His powerful providence over ALL things.

Dec. 11

***“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.”*** Isaiah 61:1

I love this prophecy! This is the Messianic prophecy that Jesus reads in the synagogue at the beginning of His ministry. After reading this prophecy, He says, “...and this is now fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus Himself claims that this prophecy was about Him and that it was fulfilled upon reading it that day in the synagogue. Does it get any clearer than this? Jesus claimed to be the Messiah. He not only claimed to be the Messiah. He went on from there to fulfill the rest of this prophecy during His 3-year ministry on this earth.

What did that 3-year ministry consist of? It consisted of a Spirit-filled man preaching and teaching to the masses about the Kingdom of God. While He did so He healed broken hearts and set the spiritually captive free. Throughout His ministry He touched many who were in need. Just read any of the Gospels to be reminded of the countless beggars, blind men, lepers, lame, deaf, dead, demon-possessed, crippled, etc., who were set free by the healing touch of Jesus.

And you are quietly asking in the back of your mind whether Jesus somehow still does these things today? And I say, Yes! He did not just do these marvelous acts during the 3 years of His ministry. He continues to fulfill His priestly office as He works these same freeing works through, and to, us today. Do you have a spiritual or physical need? Reach out to Jesus. He can and will meet your need. How? He will most likely do it through a fellow Christian He has placed in your life. He performs miracles every day through believers who are willing to be His instruments. Trust me when I say that every aspect of this prophecy is still occurring today.

This morning I want nothing more than for you to close your eyes and picture Jesus reading this text, and then looking straight into your eyes and saying that today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. See Him close the scroll and then reach out to touch you so that He might set the captive free.

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Dec. 12

***“The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts. All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him.”***  
Psalm 72:10-11

One of my favorite events in the Bible is how the wise men traveled for miles to visit the newly born King of the Jews. If they saw the divinely placed star on the day Jesus was born, it took them 2 years to travel to Jerusalem. We know that because they didn't visit Jesus at the manger but in a house. I am amazed that they traveled so long to pay homage to a King that no one in Israel even knew was born. I wonder whether their pursuit was purely because of the astrological event or maybe because remnants of a Messianic prophecy made its way all the way to the Far East where they lived. Regardless, they came.

Step back for a moment and look at all that this event tells us about God's providence. God, once again, worked in time and space to bring wise men from the Far East to honor and worship Jesus. He did so to fulfill a Messianic prophecy that He caused the Psalmist to write more than a thousand years earlier. Do we have an amazing God or what?

This prophecy also tells us that Jesus would be no ordinary king. It tells us that all the kings of the Earth would honor and serve Him. Paul says in Philippians 2:10 that “at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth.” In Revelation He is called the “King of kings and the Lord of lords.”

Finally, and more practically, my question for myself and you today is, are we willing to travel the distance to see all that Jesus came to fulfill? It was worth it for the wise men, and I pray that it is for us, as well.

Dec. 13

***“This is what the LORD says: ‘A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more.’”*** Jeremiah 31:15

This is the most heart-breaking Messianic prophecy in all of Scripture. This verse is proof positive of Satan's desire to “kill, steal and destroy.” What is the background of the verse? Remember that the Wise Men went to Jerusalem (assuming that the young child would be in the capital city) and when they arrived they could no longer see the star. I believe this was a result of the spiritual darkness of Jerusalem. They went to the palace and talked to Herod about the child and the star. Herod was taken by surprise. He hadn't heard about this from anyone in Jerusalem, and he would know because he was the king of the region.

Herod called the religious leaders in and asked them where the prophecies said the Messiah was to be born. They told Herod that He was to be born in Bethlehem of Judah. Herod directed the Wise Men to go to Bethlehem and to report back to him after they found the Christ child. The Wise Men left Jerusalem and on their way to Bethlehem the star reappeared and they followed it all the way to the town. After they honored and worshiped the Christ child, the Lord warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod because he meant to harm the child. The Lord also warned Joseph and Mary to leave the town and to go to Egypt for safety.

When Herod realized that the Wise Men had left and did not come back to report what they found about the prophetic King, he ordered that all the boys in Bethlehem age 2 years and younger be slain. I believe that at this moment he was being manipulated by Satan himself. What a terrible event, soldiers heading into the peaceful town and killing all those children! Herod's motive might be to wipe out his competition, but Satan's motive is to attempt to prevent the act of salvation that would “crush his head.”

This prophecy and its historic fulfillment remind us once again how deadly sin is and why we need a Savior. It also reminds us that we have an enemy that seeks to destroy us. Last, it reminds us that “He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world.” Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah and He did crush Satan's head.

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Dec. 14

***“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”*** Hosea 11:1

Most Biblical scholars see this as a Messianic prophecy fulfilled by Joseph and Mary as they heed the warning of the Lord and flee from Herod's wrath and go to Egypt. It is pretty amazing to think that our Savior spent time in a foreign country before His ministry in Israel began. It is also quite remarkable that, in a way, He relives Israel's history. The first nation of Israel (Abraham's offspring) would be called out of Egypt into the promised land. The final nation of Israel (those of us with the faith of Abraham) also finds its beginnings in Egypt. God always finds his children (like the Prodigal Son) in a foreign land needing redemption and hope. So, it is out of the nation of Egypt that God called His Son.

The first Israel was called out of the bondage of slavery into a land flowing with milk and honey. The New Israel will be called out of the bondage of sin into the glories of a Spirit-led life and the assurance of an eternal home in paradise. The layers of meaning in the text go way beyond the physical protection of Jesus as a young boy. God is fulfilling His prophecies and His promises. Jesus said that true sons of Abraham were not those who have the *bloodline* of Abraham but those who have the *faith* of Abraham.

As the children of Israel faithfully followed Moses as he led them out of Egypt to the promised land, may we, in the same way, follow Jesus into our new life and ultimately into Heaven itself.

Dec. 15

***“Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.”*** Isaiah 35:5-6

Here is one of those Messianic prophecies that take us beyond descriptions of where, how, and when He would be born. Today we look directly at His ministry itself. The question on the mind of the curious might be, “once the Messiah comes, what will His ministry or reign be about? How could His work be described or summarized?” How about the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised.

The Messiah was never meant to be an earthly king who would exert power over the subjects of His kingdom or the other kingdoms of the world. Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve. What we see in Jesus' ministry is the Creator putting His creation back together. Sin did a number on God's creation. Throughout His ministry, Jesus revealed to us through what He did that His purpose was to restore His creation. The sick and the broken came to him for healing and repair. The same is true for us today. It is not Jesus' desire that we wallow in the despair of our brokenness. He isn't looking for a way to drive us deeper into guilt and shame. It is His desire to permanently lift us up from the mire and through His grace and forgiveness to set us free from what ails us.

This is not only what Jesus' ministry is about. This is what the Cross is all about. Jesus bears our sin, shame, and brokenness on the cross. He removes it from us and takes it upon Himself. When He says, “It is finished!” we can be certain that we too have been healed. Today, may we ponder and meditate on the compassionate ministry of Jesus. May we see this work not only for others, but for ourselves. He came to heal you and to set you free.

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Dec. 16

***“He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.”*** Isaiah 40:11

Now this is the Jesus I need today! It is very strengthening to study about God's divine providence and His ability to control world events for the sake of His kingdom. It is assuring to know that Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords. But today, I need a Good Shepherd. I need a savior who remembers that deep down inside I am a lamb. I want to know that Jesus understands that it is so easy for me to be wounded in this life. I need to know that He understands how scary this world can be at times. I want Him to gather me into His arms and hold me close to His heart.

Do you remember when Jesus was blessing the babies and children and the disciples tried to prevent them from coming to Jesus? Even as an adult, I always place myself in the story as wanting to be one of the children. I want to have that closeness with Jesus. I long to sit on the hillside and hear Him teach. I long for His healing touch. I need His gentle voice of forgiveness. I want to be close to Him.

As I read the text above I am comforted that the Messiah (Jesus) would come as a Good Shepherd -- a Shepherd who understands the needs of His lambs and sheep, a Shepherd who is already reaching down to pick us up when we need it most. This morning, give yourself permission to be a lamb. Let Jesus pick you up and hold you close to His heart.

Dec. 17

***“Rejoice O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*** Zechariah 9:9

This is obviously the Messianic prophecy fulfilled by Jesus on Palm Sunday. What a remarkable event. He tells a couple of His disciples to go into town and bring back a certain man's donkey and colt. Jesus says to the disciples, “If he asks why you are taking the animals tell him the (their) Lord has need of them and he will let you go.” Once again God's providence is evident. He touches time and space and wills the fulfillment of this prophecy.

More important, this prophecy reveals the type of king Jesus came to be. He came humbly on a colt of a donkey and not on a great white steed. He came not wanting worldly attention and honor but something much more important. He “comes to you, righteous and having salvation.” Jesus rides into Jerusalem for the same reason He was born in a manger -- so that He might die on the cross for our sins and bring salvation to us. Jesus lived on this earth for 33 years and His purpose never changed. Whether we see him teaching, healing, admonishing, or dying, He was doing it as our righteous Savior.

Two thousand years later He has the same purpose. It is His extreme desire that you know Him as your righteous Savior. He wants you to intimately know of His love and grace for you. He wants you to rejoice and shout because, knowing who He is and why He came, you can't help it.

Dec. 18

***“And the LORD said to me, ‘Throw it to the potter’ -- the handsome price at which they priced me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD to the potter.”*** Zechariah 11:13

Every aspect of Jesus' ministry is beautiful to us because it ends up being for our salvation. Even this prophecy, which predicts the betrayal payment that Judas would get for turning Jesus over to the religious leaders, is one step toward our redemption. But have you ever thought about it from Jesus' perspective? What pain it must have caused Jesus to have one of His disciples turn on Him and betray Him. I can hear Jesus saying to Himself, “Why, Judas, why? What did I ever do to you to get this in return?”

If you're older than 20 and are alive and breathing, you can probably relate to Jesus' betrayal. Human relationships are not easy! It is amazing how deeply sin can wedge its way in and break down the heart of a friendship. I am certain we all have experienced betrayal like this. It is flat-out painful! You are left with more questions than you have answers. You're left asking how and why did this happen?

As I write this devotion I cannot assume that we were all on the Jesus side of the betrayals in our lives. The truth is that some of us have been Judas; at times we have been the betrayer. This morning I want to assure you that no matter what side of the betrayal you find yourself, you have a Savior in Jesus. He understands your pain and bore that pain and the sin that caused it on the cross. The Gospel heals and restores broken hearts and broken relationships.

Finally, if you're at all like me, you have to admit that often times the one you betray is Jesus Himself. Like Judas, we allow our sinful desires to well up in us and we betray the very One we committed our life to. Look up and see Jesus reaching out to you and calling your name. See Him loving, forgiving, and restoring you just as He did Peter after his denials. Jesus loves you! Let go of the guilt and shame and let the Gospel restore your relationship.

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Dec. 19

***“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!” declares the LORD Almighty. “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones.”*** Zechariah 13:7

This is certainly not a deeply theological or philosophical Messianic prophecy. I chose to use this prophecy not because of its depth but because of its precision. This prophecy finds its fulfillment in the garden of Gethsemane. It predicts that the Shepherd (Jesus) would be under attack and that His sheep (the disciples) would be scattered. The amazing thing to me is that when we read the four Gospels, that is exactly what we find. The disciples flee the scene while Jesus is arrested by the temple guard.

I find strength and comfort in believing in a God who cares about the small details. He cares to make sure that every aspect of His promises and prophecies are fulfilled. There are times when I feel pretty small, times when I feel overwhelmed by the volume of issues and concerns in my life. At those times I am thankful to know that God doesn't lose me. His attention to the small things keeps Him faithful to me. I guess what I am trying to say is that there are really no small details to God. He sees them -- us -- as important details. How humbling!

If this devotion finds you a bit overwhelmed by the circumstances of this life, if you feel that you are lost in the volume of “stuff” you are wrestling with, then know that God knows and understands what you are dealing with. He is working to fulfill His promises for your life and will not rest until the smallest of details is worked out.

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Dec. 20

***“All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: ‘He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.’”*** Psalm 22:7-8

You might be surprised that as we get closer to Christmas the devotions are more like Good Friday. We are looking for choirs of angels singing as we are getting betrayal, mocking, suffering, and death. I can't apologize because this IS what it's all about. It is all about Good Friday. Jesus came to die for us. He came to experience all the pain and suffering that sin causes so we wouldn't have to.

In these two verses we are given the prediction of the religious leaders mocking Jesus as they stand at the foot of the cross. They are looking up at Jesus. They are hearing Him speak. But they are not believing a word of it. They begin to mock and hurl insults at him. How painful it must have been to be mocked by the very people for whom He was suffering and dying. Have you ever been completely misunderstood? Have the motives of your words and deeds been twisted to a point that their true meaning has gotten lost? Look at Jesus and remain true to yourself. Follow Jesus' examples as He sees and hears their misinterpretation but just continues to do what is right. There is really no other option.

On the other hand, if you have been to the foot of the cross at other times and mocked its depth and meaning, I invite you to come again. Look with eyes of faith to the Savior of the World. Even His mocking and suffering was predicted in prophecies written centuries before He would come into the world. The truth of the matter is that everyone has to come to the cross. On the last day, what you believe about the events of Good Friday and Easter morning is the only thing that matters.

This Christmas, please pray for spiritual sight that is broad and deep enough to see that the message of Christmas is also the message of the cross and the empty tomb.

Dec. 21

***“I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.”*** Isaiah 50:6

Here we have another Messianic prophecy that predicts the abuse Jesus experienced at the hands of the religious leaders and Roman soldiers. Did I say religious leaders? I did! How could men who were so close to the Word of God miss who Jesus was? How could they not see that He was the very Word they claimed to believe in? How could they not see that He fulfilled all the Messianic prophecies we have been studying since the first of December. How could they inflict such pain on someone under the guise of religion? It is my contention that their religion was more about them than about God. They created a Judaism that virtually removed God (as He truly is) from their belief system. Hence, they were left with a belief system that was all about them. When Jesus challenged that system, He naturally faced their judgment and wrath.

The inherent danger in all religions, including Christianity, is that we make it about us. I call this making Christianity in our own image. Like the Jews of Jesus' day, we could very easily create a Christianity that is less and less about Jesus and more and more about what we think and do. This happens when we water down and weaken the Word of God. When we feel it is necessary to explain what the Bible is really saying because our reason will not allow us to accept it at face value, we begin to create Christianity in our image.

It is time to let go of our self-righteous and self-centered religious principles and receive Jesus as He is. We need to look at a beaten and abused Jesus and see how far He was willing to go to win us back to Himself. See how much God loves you! Join me today in looking at our Christian faith. Let's strip it of anything that is about us. Let's make it about the One who saved us. Let's believe in Him. Let's love Him. Let's worship Him.

Dec. 22

***“And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.”*** Zechariah 12:10

The second half of this Messianic prophecy once again reminds us of the suffering Jesus experienced on Good Friday. The references to looking on the One they have pierced, mourning and grieving, continue the tone of the costly price Jesus paid to redeem us from our sins.

But rather than talk about Good Friday today, I am more intrigued by the first half of the verse. God states that He “will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication.” I am reminded once again how awesome our God is. In the midst of describing the suffering of Jesus, He provides a spirit of grace and supplication so we can rightfully understand His workings in our lives. Drink in deeply of the spirit of grace that God is providing. Know for certain that He is motivated and works based on the unconditional love He has for us. He wants us to be immersed in His grace. Only when we understand His grace can we understand what Christmas is all about. Close your eyes and look into the manger one more time and see God's love for you there.

But God doesn't stop with His grace. He also provides a spirit of supplication. He desires to be in an intimate relationship with us. He wants to communicate with us. He provides us a spirit of supplication that moves us to pray. Prayer is for those who walk by faith and not by sight. We pray because we desire to see and understand what the Lord's will is for our lives. In prayer we come to our Creator asking for eyes to see things in this created world like He sees them.

In the next few days before Christmas, I encourage you to receive His spirit of grace and supplication. May His grace and your prayers be the source of encouragement they are intended to be.

Dec. 23

***“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?”*** Psalm 22:1

With this Messianic prophecy we are back to Good Friday. This is one of the seven phrases spoken by Jesus during the crucifixion. This is the first phrase spoken during the fatal hours (from the sixth to the ninth hours) while darkness covered the whole Earth. I need you to stop whatever it is you are trying to do while you read this and seriously go through this with me. It is the middle of the day and darkness takes over. Jesus had said on a couple of occasions that this was “the hour of darkness.” This is the time that the prince of this world would have his way with Jesus. This is when Jesus begins to bear our sins and drink the cup of wrath from the hands of His own Father. Do you know that this is the only time in recorded history (and probably ever) that Jesus doesn't refer to His Father as Father. He says, “My God, my God...”

What Jesus experiences in the darkness of those three hours is suffering beyond description. It so far exceeds the suffering of the beatings, scourging, and crucifixion that they should not be compared. He bears Hell itself. He takes all humanity's sins and their consequences. As Paul says, “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21). This thought alone deserves a moment of silent reflection. Do you see all your sins leaving you and going to Jesus? This act of Jesus is far from being “far from saving us.” It IS God saving us. Do you feel the burden of guilt and shame lifted from your shoulders? You should! It is what happened on the day of your redemption. Why is He doing all this? Because He loves you and wants to buy you back.

Read the verse again. Do your thoughts take you there today? Do you feel you can relate to that cry? Do you feel like someone took the words right out of your mouth? Do you feel forsaken? Do you feel like no one is listening to your cry for mercy? If so, I am here to tell you that I have been there, too, and it is a lie of the devil. Jesus spoke these words on the cross so we would NEVER have to. God will always be our Father and He will always hear our cries because of the separation that Jesus experienced on the cross. Ponder that for just a second. Jesus experienced all that pain and sorrow so we would NEVER have to. NEVER!!! I am not trying to lessen the reality of your current trials. I am only trying to put them in proper perspective.

Read the prophecy one more time, and while you read it, remember that this phrase belongs to Jesus. Only Jesus.

Dec. 24

***“But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so He did not open his mouth.”*** Isaiah 53:5-7

Alright, I know that I have been pretty heavy on the Good Friday message, and this text rings of much of the same. I understand that this runs contrary to the warm and fuzzy feeling we wish to have at Christmas time. Let me suggest that this awkwardness is healthy. It shouldn't be an either/or, but a both/and. We should feel warm and fuzzy about a God who loves us so much that He would send His own Son into the world to save and redeem us, His lost and wandering sheep. We should be grateful that He would pay such a price. We should sense the richness of His love and grace as “the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” He was pierced and crushed so we wouldn't be. That is how much God loves us!

But now let's go back to more of a Christmas theme. Take a look at the peaceful setting of the first Christmas. See Mary, Joseph, Jesus, shepherds, angels and sense the peace of that wonderful day. Stop for a minute, this Christmas Eve, and live in the peace of that very first Christmas. Know deep in your heart that this is the way it is supposed to be and what it is all about. God wants you to have the peace that was once in the stable restored into your heart and life. It is OK to want the warm and fuzzy feeling. God wants you to have it, too. Just never forget the price He had to pay to get it back for you.

At some point today, read the Christmas story in Luke 2 and then close your eyes and prayerfully ponder the peace of that special day. Ponder the peace that the Lord desires you to have this very day, and then go and have a blessed and peaceful Christmas.

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Dec. 25

***“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”*** Matthew 12:40

Merry Christmas!!! I pray that this Advent journey through the Messianic prophecies has been a blessing to you. This morning we have one of the most amazing Messianic prophecies. It is amazing for several reasons. First, it comes from the New Testament and not the Old Testament. Second, it comes from Jesus' own mouth. And third, it predicts and declares His resurrection from the dead. Since this prophecy comes from Jesus, Himself, we should give it special attention and hear it clearly.

On this Christmas morning I want you to think of nothing but the fact that God is faithful to His promises and brings them all to pass. I want you to read the text above and note Jesus' confidence about His resurrection. There is no “I hope” or “maybe” with God, only certainties! And here are those certainties for you today. God loves you with a passion and intensity that is unmatched. He loves you no matter what you say or do. His love is not a feeling or an emotion to Him. It is His very essence. His love drove Him to send His Son into the world to save and redeem you through His death on the cross. He proclaims the certainty of the words “It is FINISHED!” by rising from the dead. Jesus laid down His life and picked it up again, just as He said He would.

This morning, on this Christmas Day, we are victorious saints of God because of His redeeming work. Our victory is as certain as His resurrection. On the eve of the first Christmas, angels proclaimed “good news of great joy” to shepherds out in the fields. This morning I pray that the message of the angels is not just a message but a certain reality in your heart and soul. Live in the great joy of all that this Christ child brings. Like Mary, ponder these wonderful things in your heart. And like the shepherds, return to your life praising God and sharing the good news with everyone you can.

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Dec. 26

***“When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”*** Matthew 2:10 NASB

This verse is describing the reaction of the Wise Men as they left Jerusalem and once again saw the star they had been following for 2 years but had lost sight of when they entered into Jerusalem. How disappointed they must have been when they entered the capital city and lost sight of the star they had been following for so long. They felt led by God to come and honor the very special king born in Israel. But now what were they going to do?

Can you relate to their disappointment? Have you ever thought you understood the plan only to find it turned upside down? Then, like the Wise Men, you can understand that sick-in-the-stomach confused feeling. I have been there several times myself.

But what do we learn from this story? God is ALWAYS faithful. The Wise Men's disappointment turns into “exceeding great joy.” When these guys see the star again their excitement returns and intensifies. They get the opportunity to join in the heavenly joy proclaimed by the angels at Jesus' birth (“I bring you good news of great joy”). You can understand their excitement. You experienced it during the last two days as you celebrated Christmas. It doesn't matter how old you are -- the joy of Christmas is contagious.

We have reason to have “exceeding great joy” because God has been faithful to us and will continue to be throughout our lifetimes. We are going to work hard at not letting the world, Satan, or our own sinful natures rob us of the joy that Jesus came to bring. We will strive daily to respond like the shepherds did that very first Christmas as they returned “glorifying and praising God for all that they had seen and heard.”

May this "exceeding great joy" be yours today ... and every day!!!!

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Dec. 27

***“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”*** Philippians 4:4

So yesterday's devotion focused on the “exceeding great joy” we can and should experience over the message of Christmas. The angels proclaimed it and shepherds and wise men felt it. We, too, are to live in and feel that same joy. Easily said, but not easily done. We live in a dark, dismal world and it is hard to see light and feel joy, let alone “exceeding great joy.”

Is there a secret? The only secret I find in Scripture is perspective. That's right! Perspective. In Proverbs, Solomon says, “As a man thinks within himself, so he is.” In the text above, Paul tells us to rejoice ALWAYS. And where is he when he writes this verse but in jail. He has been thrown into prison for proclaiming the Gospel. He is suffering for doing the right thing. Yet he finds the ability (perspective) to rejoice and praise God.

So, what are you going through today? Are you suffering through a physical illness? Are you struggling to make a relationship work? Have you lost your job? Do you feel that God has abandoned you while you were doing good things? Have you lost the joy that once filled your heart? Close your eyes of sight and ascend above your trials and tribulations. See that the God of the universe and of your heart is still in control. Know for certain that He can make these troubled times work out to His will and glory. Know for certain that He will restore joy and peace to your life. Know for certain, though your life goes through changes, He NEVER changes. He loves you!

Today, let the joy of the Lord be your strength!

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Dec. 28

***“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”*** John 15:11

As I promised we are focusing on joy. It is my desire to understand more fully what the shepherds and the wise men felt when they saw the fulfillment of the promises they pursued. I don't write these devotions with a claim that I fully understand or live it out. I write these devotions so that I might strive side-by-side with you in our own pursuit of joy. In this verse Jesus is promising us His joy. This is His promise to us, one we must pursue. He wants His joy to be in us so that we might be complete. Again, this is easier to say than to do. So where do we start?

I think the key is in the verses that precede the promise. Earlier in John 15 Jesus tells us that He is the Vine and that we are the branches. He tells us that we need to remain in Him. He tells us that if we remain in Him we will produce fruit. We know that one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit is joy. We need to work at being connected to Jesus. We need to be in His Word. We need to talk with Him in prayer. We need to actively and continuously connect ourselves to Jesus. As we do that we will be connected to His joy. More important, we will be connected to His love, which produces that joy. Could it be that simple?

In verse 9 Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love.” As we work on our connection with the Vine we must remember that it is His love we need to focus on. Let's drink deeply of the richness of His grace and bask in the bright rays of His love. Let's set the world aside (continuously) so that we might focus on what really matters.

Join me in focusing on Jesus' love and let's let His joy fill us and make us complete.

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Dec. 29

***“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, JOY, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.” Galatians 5:22***

There is that word again. Joy. Do you think it is important to God that we experience joy? I am getting the message loud and clear. Not only does Jesus promise it to us as we remain in Him like branches grafted to the Vine, but the Holy Spirit provides it as a fruit of His presence in our life. Put plainly, God wants us to have joy in our lives. There are certainly times of suffering that make it difficult to have joy. But in general, God wants us to experience joy.

If we don't have joy in our lives, and we are not experiencing a specific trial or suffering, then we should be concerned about our spiritual condition. We might be too tightly tied to this world and its circumstances. We have learned from other devotions that when we are too tightly tied to this world and are walking by sight, our vision is limited. When our vision is limited we tend to get stressed and worried, which robs us of our joy.

We need to walk by faith! We need to look at our circumstances through the eyes of faith. When we do, we quickly realize that we are still loved and provided for by God. We realize that the Spirit of God still dwells in us and desires for us to live in the benefits of His fruit of joy. It is freeing to let go of the worries of this world and hold on to joy. Let's try it today. Every time the worries of this world creep up to steal away your joy, give those worries to God and keep the joy He intends for you to have.

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Dec. 30

***Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”*** Nehemiah 8:10

The Israelites were going through some very tough times. They were captive in a foreign land and a generation grew up away from the Promised Land. They have recently returned to the land of their forefathers, but life is not easy. They've been trying to rebuild the city and the temple under great threats and intimidation. The fact is, nothing is going well for them. They are glad to be back in the Promised Land, but it is not like the land their fathers described. In the midst of their hardship Nehemiah stops and declares a day of celebration. He tells everyone it is time to rejoice in the things they know for sure -- that God is faithfully restoring them to the land of their fathers. He is providing for their needs during these troubled times. He is protecting them from the enemies that threaten them. It is a “let's correct our perspective” day of celebration.

I think that most of us can relate to their trials and hardship. Most of us have had a rough year or two recently. We might be ending this year beaten, battered, and maybe even a little bitter. Let this New Year be a time for correcting perspectives. Let it be a day to truly celebrate the things we know for sure. Let's set aside the miseries of this time and celebrate the truths of God's gracious protection and providence.

Nehemiah says, “Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” Join me in setting aside reasons to grieve and focusing on the awesome grace of God. Let's let His joy become our strength. Who of us could use a little more strength today? Join me in heeding Nehemiah's advice.

Dec. 31

*“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. **But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.**”* Philippians 3:12-14

Today is the last day of the year. Many of us are looking forward to the end of this year. For a lot of reasons this has been a hard year for a lot of people. Today is a day commonly reserved for resolutions for the new year. It is a time for serious reflection of where our life has been and is, and where we want it to be. Deep down inside we know that our lives are not all doomed to fate. We know that our attitudes and actions have an effect on what direction our life goes. Is there any advice in Scripture on how to go through this process? Read the verse above one more time.

Paul is describing the process he goes through. I believe it is a process we should go through daily, but New Year's Eve is a great day to start. The first thing Paul admits is that he hasn't already obtained perfection. We need to understand that God is alright with our flaws. He doesn't condone our sinfulness. He knows what effect sin has on our lives and that is why He sent His Son into the world to redeem us. It is OK that you are not where you thought you would be at this point in time. None of us is. But here is the most important part! Paul says, “**But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind...**” Brothers and Sisters this is a key thought. Paul is saying that there can be no significant improvement in his life until he forgets what is behind. What he is saying is that he must forgive and forget what lies behind before he can move forward.

If there is one thing we must do today, it is to go through the process of true repentance. We need to lay our wrongs before the cross of Jesus and find that there they are forgiven and forgotten. God punished Jesus for our sins and today He remembers them no more. If God has forgiven and forgotten our sins, why do we continue to carry them around? All they do is drag us down and make us feel like nothing can change in our lives. Right now, let's stop for a minute and reflect on the last year. Let's give up any ugliness that still hides there and place it on the cross. Now, let's walk away in the freedom of that forgiveness. Feel the load being removed from your shoulders?!?! Stop! Do not look back again! Never look back again! God has forgotten our sins and it is time for us to forget them too. Have you truly “forgotten what is behind”? If so, then continue with Paul's instruction.

Paul says that now that he has forgotten what lies behind he “strains toward what is ahead.” He presses on! The imagery here is of a runner straining for the finish line. As we look to the coming year, Paul tells us not to be dragged along through time but to strain toward goals and plans that we have made. Here is where successful resolutions are made. Now that we have let go of the dead weight of the past we can move forward toward the things we want for the new year. If it is not already on our resolution list, we need to add that we will strive to be more Firmly Rooted in God's Word this new year. Paul places first on his list his spiritual resolutions and I think we should too. It will be tough to get our physical resolutions going right if our

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spiritual ones are not in place. Let's agree to put spiritual things first. Jesus says, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matt. 6:33 KJV)

Please read the Philippians verses one more time. May they be the guiding words to your resolution process today and into the new year.

Personally, I want to thank you for your support of Firmly Rooted Ministries. You have all inspired me to be all that Christ wants me to be. Join me as we forget what is behind and to strain forward in the new year.

May God richly bless your New Year!