

DEVOTIONAL BOOKLET

A stylized map of the African continent is shown in a light green color against a dark green background. Overlaid on the map is a target graphic with concentric circles. Two location pins, one at the top and one at the bottom, are positioned over the target. The word "GOSPEL" is written in a bold, sans-serif font, with the "O" replaced by the top location pin. The word "GROWTH" is written in a similar font, with the "O" replaced by the bottom location pin. The text is in a light green color.

GOSPEL GROWTH

21 DAYS OF PRAYER 2023





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WEEK 1

Gospel Growth in Me



JANUARY 1-7





Week 1 Introduction

Happy New Year! And welcome to the *21 Days of Prayer & Fasting* for 2023.

Every day during this spiritual journey, we'll join together individually in prayer, seeking after the heart of God. To guide us on this journey, simply open your email or this booklet each day for the next 21 days as we:

- read a section of Scripture,
- consider a brief “devotional” thought,
- then pray through the provided prayer (but feel free to add your own prayers!).

We also provide space each day for you to journal a thought or write out your own prayer.

Over the course of the first three weeks of 2023, we'll be praying for Gospel Growth in three areas: in you personally, in us as a church family, and around the world. This week, we will focus on ourselves, asking for God to work in us, heal us, fill us, restore us, and more.

So grab your Bible, turn the page, and let's begin praying for Gospel Growth!



Sunday, Jan 1

TODAY'S READING:

Psalm 145

DEVOTIONAL: "GOSPEL GROWTH IN ME"

by Erin Bird

Many people mark New Year's Day by starting a New Year's Resolution. For the past six years, Riverwood has started off each New Year with *21 Days of Prayer*. It's like a short-term "resolution." But rather than help you lose weight or kick a bad habit, we want to help you grow spiritually. That's why this first week of our 21 Days will focus on Gospel Growth in you.

With that said, at Riverwood, we believe your greatest spiritual growth won't come by merely focusing on self improvement. Rather, your greatest growth and joy will come by focusing on God.

Notice how the writer of Psalm 145 (today's reading) isn't finding his joy and growth in himself, or life hacks, or self-help books. His sole focus is the Lord.

"I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless you and praise your name forever and ever." (Psalm 145:1-2)

As we begin these 21 Days, seeking to have our union with God through Christ be stronger than ever, let us begin at the proper place - by focusing on the goodness, awesomeness, and incomparableness of our God and King.



PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, you are amazing. There is no one like you. You are so good. You are so gracious. There is nothing that happens in this world that you are not aware of. When I sin, you show mercy. When I doubt, you are patient. Your love is endless. Your grace is consistent. You are faithful to me, even when I am faithless.

Thank you for letting me know you. Please help me to connect with You during these 21 days of prayer and fasting more than I ever have, seeing you more clearly than I ever thought I would.

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME:

Read Matthew 6:5-13



Monday, Jan 2

TODAY'S READING:

Isaiah 58

DEVOTIONAL: "GROWTH THROUGH FASTING"

by Erin Bird

Each year for Lent, Christians (particularly those of liturgical traditions) will give up something (meat, TV, chocolate, social media, etc.) for the 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. I remember decades ago one of my elementary school classmates gave up popcorn for Lent - which was no big deal as she had braces and wasn't allowed to eat popcorn anyway.

But her choice to "fast" from popcorn reveals how many of us approach fasting. We want to give up something to appear spiritual, hoping to get some benefit, yet we don't really want it to cost us anything.

On this second day of our *21 Days of Prayer*, let me strongly encourage you to fast from something for the entire spiritual journey that will truly cost you. It could be coffee, eating out, TV, social media, a meal each day, all food for one entire day each week, energy drinks... anything that feels like it would be impossible to live without even though you fully know you will survive just fine. (I'm looking at you, ice cream.)

(TIP: If you choose to fast from food for more than a day, here is a "Fasting Starter Kit" with helpful tips: https://bit.ly/Fasting_Kit)



As you fast, remember the goal isn't to earn more of God's favor or manipulate Him into giving whatever you ask of Him. The goal is to put yourself in a position where you are continually reminded that what you need more than pizza, or Netflix, or Instagram, or caffeine, is Jesus. As we long for "Gospel Growth in Me," may you willingly put yourself in a position to be regularly reminded of just how enough Jesus truly is.

PRAYER:

Gracious Father, as I fast from _____ for these 21 days, I ask that You give me strength to sustain my fast and joy through it all. Please replace my longing for the things of this world with a deeper desire for you, so I might see the gospel grow even more within me.

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME:

Read Matthew 6:16-34



Tuesday, Jan 3

TODAY'S READING:

Philippians 2:3-18

DEVOTIONAL: "GROWTH BY EMPTYING"

by Erin Bird

There is a semi-famous illustration of a glass jar filled with so much sand, it has no room for a group of rocks sitting next to the jar. But if you place the rocks in the jar first, then pour in the sand, everything fits. (This illustration is often used as a lesson on time management or priorities.)

I want to draw out an aspect from this illustration that is often overlooked. As I've already said, when the sand is in the jar first, not all the rocks fit. In order for the rocks to fit, the jar must first be emptied of the sand.

Your life is like that jar. It is filled with a busy schedule of work, school, hobbies, and more. Most of these things aren't wrong or bad, but they can keep us from things and activities of much greater value. One of the purposes of the 21 Days of Prayer is to help you get the "big rock" of God placed first in your life-jar. But in order for that to happen, you probably need to do some emptying.

Just as Jesus set aside His throne in heaven to come to earth for you (as you read in Philippians 2), you might need to set aside some things (some of which are good and some of which are not-so-good) in order to be better positioned for the Gospel Growth God wants to do in you. So let me ask you: What might you need to empty out of



your life for these 21 Days to prepare for the growth of the Gospel in your life?

So take some time to genuinely ask yourself:

- What captures too much of my self-interest?
- In addition to my fasting, what might I be able to give up for 21 Days to create more room for God? (A weekly appointment? An exercise class? A certain weekly TV show or podcast?)
- How can I lessen or get rid of my self-preservation?
- How do I rely on my self-assuredness more than on God and the gospel?

PRAYER:

Father, this process of emptying myself is hard, because I either have a blind spot and don't see the "sand" of my life, or I like my "sand-filled" life too much. So I ask you to empower me through Your Spirit to say "no" to the right things, so I can say "yes" to what you want to do in me. Help me to surrender all of me to you so I might echo the words of John the Baptist in John 3:30, "[Jesus] must increase... I must decrease."

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME:

Sit in silence for 5-10 minutes



Wednesday, Jan 4

TODAY'S READING:

Psalm 51

DEVOTIONAL: "GROWTH THROUGH CONFESSION"

by Erin Bird

Yesterday, we took time to "empty" ourselves of our selfishness – self-interest, self-preservation, self-assuredness – through the act of surrendering. Today, we want to take this thought a step further.

If you follow Jesus, ALL of your sins (past, present, & future) have been forgiven through the willing sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. However, this doesn't mean you should think shallowly of the moments you sin, whether in action, word, or thought. After all, the Apostle Paul told the Jesus-followers in Rome:

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?"

(Romans 6:1-2, ESV)

So even though your sin is already forgiven, it is wise for you to confess your sin, acknowledging your desire to not "live in it."

If you keep a tree sapling in a cold dark room, you won't see growth. You might see mold grow! But not the tree itself. You have to bring the tree out of the cold and dark, and put it in the warm light where it can begin to grow into the tree it is meant to be.

If you are going to see "Gospel Growth in Me," you have to concede that you are a saint who still struggles with sin. The good news is



that, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

So bring your sin into the light through the act of confession. Let it be exposed before your loving Heavenly Father, so that He can begin and continue to grow you into the image of His Son.

PRAYER:

O Gracious Heavenly Father, I confess my sin to you right now. You already know what it is, but I want to let you know that I also know what my sins are.

So, Father I confess to you...

(Spend some time confessing your sins, including sins of action, inaction, attitude, and thought.)

Father, thank you for your love, grace, and forgiveness. Help me to live life out of an identity as a forgiven saint rather than an identity of a needy, selfish sinner. Help me to believe and know I don't have to sin because my sin was paid by Jesus through the cross, and you offer me a life that is so much better than one I could find through my sin.

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME:

If God lays it on your heart, confess your sin to a trusted follower of Jesus.



Thursday, Jan 5

TODAY'S READING:

Ephesians 5:1-21

DEVOTIONAL: "GROWTH THROUGH FILLING"

by Erin Bird

Two days ago, we looked at our need to "empty" ourselves of self: self-focus, self-protection, self-assurance, etc. Part of the process of emptying includes the spiritual discipline of confession, which you hopefully engaged in yesterday. (If not, go back and do yesterday's devotional.)

While it is wise to engage in the spiritual practice of confession regularly, it isn't helpful to continually remain there. To get stuck in constant confession is to deny the transforming power of the gospel and the ability of God's Holy Spirit to work in your life. Just as an acorn doesn't solely grow roots, you shouldn't solely seek to be emptied.

Rather than live in a constant state of emptying, we need to be emptied in order to move into today's topic: filling.

In today's reading, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Jesus-followers in Ephesus to empty themselves of all different types of selfish sins (5:1-18a) so that they might "be filled by the Spirit" (5:18b). This idea of being "filled" isn't just a common theme in Ephesians (see 1:23, 3:19, & 4:10), nor just in Paul's writing (see Romans 15:13, Philippians 1:9-11, & Colossians 1:9), but a theme throughout all of Scripture.



God's goal isn't to empty you and leave you vacant. Rather, your emptiness should create a vacuum for His righteousness. He wants to fill you with His Spirit and all His fullness (Ephesians 3:19), because if you are filled with His Holy Spirit, you will "love like Jesus loved and live like Jesus lived," seeing the gospel grow within you.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, please fill me to overflowing with your Holy Spirit, so that your wisdom, power, grace, and character might pour out of me on to those around me.

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME:

Learn more about being "filled" with the Holy Spirit:

<https://youtu.be/oNNZO9i1Gjc>

(Apologies to those of you who are fasting from YouTube!)



Friday, Jan 6

TODAY'S READING:

Ephesians 3:4-19

DEVOTIONAL: "GROWTH THROUGH EXPERIENCE"

by Erin Bird

Years ago, I was teaching one of my children the piano. On this one particular day, we were reviewing the names of the keys, and the associated note indicated on paper. I would press a note on the keyboard, or point at a notation on the sheet music, and ask my child, "What note is this?"

This particular child (who I will allow to remain nameless) rolled their eyes one time and said, "Dad, I know what it is."

"Great!" I replied. "So what is it?"

I then sensed the brain of my child spinning rapidly as they tried to remember, and after about a 3-5 second delay, my kid would blurt out the correct answer. After watching this, I had to let my piano student know that while they got the answer, they didn't truly know the notes. If they had "known" it, there would have been no hesitation.

Many self-identified Christians think they "know" God, but they have never truly experienced the Gospel. They have a mental understanding because they've been to church a few times on Easter, but the Gospel hasn't penetrated their hearts. In a couple days, you are going to think through the importance of growing in knowledge of the Gospel. But so much of that growth won't come through just



packing your brain with more theological knowledge. The growth will come through experiencing God and His Gospel.

This is why God wrote through the Apostle Paul that He desires you “to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:19). Just as a husband is to “know” his wife, God wants you to “know” Him and His grace-filled love. Like being at a restaurant, God doesn’t want you to just see the food or smell it; he wants you to enjoy it. Being “filled” (as we considered yesterday) isn’t just a mental exercise; it is a practical understanding of living the gospel naturally.

While you might have moments of “experiencing” God’s presence, this type of growth doesn’t always happen in a one-time event. Personal spiritual growth comes day by day. But don’t fall for the type of Christianity that is only mental. Ask God to help the gospel be something you experience and enjoy.

PRAYER:

Father, I want to truly know you. I want to experience your love, so it might then flow through me. I want to truly understand your forgiveness so I might be quicker to forgive others. Help me to not just have an awareness of the power of the gospel, but to truly experience it. Please use these 21 Days as part of this process to know you intimately and truly.

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:



Saturday, Jan 7

TODAY'S READING:

Romans 12:9-21, Colossians 4:5-6

DEVOTIONAL: "GROWTH THROUGH SHARING"

by Erin Bird

Ever since my sabbatical in 2020, I've been using the *Libby* app (<https://libbyapp.com>) to listen to books. Every once in a while, I come across a book that is absolutely fantastic. Take a guess what one of my initial thoughts is after enjoying the book? I want to find someone to share it with! I want to tell others who like books about this great story so they can enjoy it as much as I did.

You do this too. After enjoying a great restaurant, or an excellent film, or an awe-inspiring national park, or even just a funny video, you most likely want to share it with someone.

After spending the first 11 chapters of his letter to the church in Rome talking about the Gospel, Paul shifts in chapter 12 to the implications of the Gospel. In verses 9-21 (which was part of today's reading), he describes what a Jesus-follower should look like. One thing that sticks out to me is how Jesus-followers are expected to be generous in all things:

- with their emotions (verses 10 & 15)
- with their resources (verse 13 & 20)
- with grace (verse 16 & 18)
- with their very lives!



In other words, just like my reaction to a good book, the reaction of a Christ-follower to the good news of Jesus should be one of sharing. But it isn't just sharing the gospel with words. It is sharing the gospel with your life (which, by the way, will include words!).

So how might you need to share the gospel today, this next week, and this whole year? Is there someone with whom you need to rejoice or weep? Is there someone to whom you need to show honor? Is there someone in need to whom you need to contribute some of your resources? Is there someone with whom you need to tell about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection?

PRAYER:

Generous God, make me more like you! Help me to share all you have given me through Christ with those around me. Let my family sing your praises because of the life you live through me. Let my co-workers desire a relationship with you because of your work within me. Let my neighbors be thankful you put me in their neighborhood. Empower me through Your Spirit to live out Romans 12 naturally because of the growth of the Gospel within me.

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME:

Choose 1 person in your life who doesn't know Christ. Write his or her name on each day in this booklet for the remainder of the 21 Days as a reminder to pray for him/her each day.





WEEK 2

Gospel Growth in Us



JANUARY 8–14



Week 2 Introduction

Welcome to Week 2 of our *21 Days of Prayer*.

This week, our theme is *Gospel Growth in Us*. The “Us” is the Riverwood family. It is a really good thing when each of us as individuals are growing in the Gospel. But it is an even greater thing when we are seeing the Gospel grow us as a church family.

That is why this week’s devotionals have all been written by members of Riverwood’s Elder Team, Sunday Team, and the Riverwood family as a whole. May you enjoy growing with one another as part of the Riverwood family as we are guided by our fantastic team of leaders and Riverwood Partners.

By the way, if you are fasting, hold strong! If you “slipped up” on your fast this past week - this is a new week, so begin again. As we saw on Day 2, fasting is simply engaging in an activity that reminds us of what is more valuable. So either continue or begin to put yourself in a place where you are regularly reminded of the importance, value, and priority of God and His gospel.



Sunday, Jan 8

TODAY'S READING:

Romans 3:23-26, 1 Corinthians 15:1-10, Titus 3:3-7

DEVOTIONAL: "GROWING IN KNOWLEDGE"

by Jake Epley, Worship Gathering Director

"What is the gospel?" A good friend asked me this question when I was a teenager. "Well, it's the message of Jesus of Nazareth," I replied confidently. "Okay," he said, "so what is that?" I froze. "Huh... that's a GREAT question," I thought to myself.

It's really important for us to know what the gospel is. The word *gospel* literally means "good news." The word occurs over 90 times in the New Testament. However, to understand why it's good news, we have to know what the bad news is. Paul defined it in Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

To sin means "to miss the mark, to wander from and violate God's law." According to Paul, we've all failed to obey and uphold God's law. Even if we've done a better job than most, we've done an imperfect job at that. We've missed the mark, disobeyed God, and fallen short of His glory. So despite any "goodness," our sin incurred the debt of death and separated us from God.

However, the good news relates directly to God working to redeem those of us from sin who would believe in His Son, Jesus Christ who lived perfectly without sin. As Paul said in the very next verse in Romans 3 (verse 24): "...and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."



Jesus died on the cross in our place to pay our penalty, purchasing our redemption by taking upon Himself our unrighteousness, and placing upon us His righteousness as a free gift of grace. He was buried, yet rose from the dead 3 days later, declaring us righteous in the sight of God the Father. Now, THAT is good news!

But I have even better news: the gospel doesn't work *only* to save, but also to sanctify us: to make us more into the image of Jesus. For the rest of our lives, as we grow in relationship with God, we should grow in our knowledge of the gospel as He continues to transform our lives, perpetually renewing our minds (Romans 12:2) to recall His goodness and good work in us and through us.

PRAYER:

Father, I thank You for saving me. Would You remind me of what You have done for Your glory and my good every day? Would You remind me You have pursued me from the very start? I know You have and will always remain faithful to me - would You help me remember that truth despite my circumstances? Help me and all of the Riverwood family to dive deeper in our relationship with You. Amen.

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME, ANSWER THE FOLLOWING:

- What are some practical ways you can know God more on a daily basis? (Bible reading, praying, listening to worship music, connecting with other Jesus-followers, etc.)
- Are there any rhythms in your life that draw your focus away from God? Identify and list a few distractions, then make a plan to read from Scripture or say a prayer in those moments.



Monday, Jan 9

TODAY'S READING:

Isaiah 6:1-8, Philippians 2:5-18

DEVOTIONAL: "GROWING IN AWE"

by Sam Shaffer, Riverwood Partner

Recently, I was reminded of Matthew 11:27:

"All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him."

God the Father and God the Son (and Holy Spirit) are infinite uncreated beings. Each is so unknowable, only They Themselves truly know each other... unless the Son "wills to reveal" the Father.

To reveal the Father, Jesus chose to set aside His rights as an infinite uncreated being by coming in weakness as a baby to earth. He then "emptied Himself... to the point of death... on a cross" (Philippians 2:7). Think about that: the God King, present at the foundation of the earth, reached across the uncrossable raging river of our sin, to pull us to Him because of His unfathomable love. Amazing!

However, if you asked some people why they worship God, they might say, "Because He is good," or "Because He died for my sins." While those things are true and good, adoration of God should not be simply because of the things He *does* for us. Rather, we worship God because Jesus is the source of everything! (Colossians 1:15-20) Unlike other religions which claim to know the path to god, Jesus claims *He* is the path (John 14:6), the one whom...



“God highly exalted... and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11).

We worship God not only because He forgives sin, is good, and keeps His promises, but more importantly because He is God - the only one who may be completely unknowable, but is infinitely good.

So take a moment to just be in awe that an unknowable God has made Himself knowable through Jesus.

PRAYER:

As you prepare to pray, look through these descriptions of God/Jesus. Then select one (or many!) that fills your heart with awe and let that word guide your prayer.

- | | | |
|----------------------|-----------------|----------|
| • Shepherd | • Redeemer | • Savior |
| • Everlasting Father | • Lamb of God | • Friend |
| • Great High Priest | • Lion of Judah | • King |

“Jesus, I thank you that you are my _____. I realize this descriptor means you are _____. Help me to daily live in awe of this truth, so I might find joy and wonder in life because of who You are.”

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:



Tuesday, Jan 10

TODAY'S READING:

Psalm 16

DEVOTIONAL: "GROWING IN JOY"

by Bridget Pavelec, Kids Creek Director

Joy is the smile we have inside, no matter what is happening around us.

People often use the words *happiness* and *joy* synonymously, but there is actually a big difference. The word *happy* comes from the same word as *happen*. We feel happy if something good is happening to us at that moment. But this means happiness is only temporary.

Joy, however, is different. Joy does not depend on what is happening to us – it stays deep down in your heart no matter what! That's what verse 11 of Psalm 16 is pointing out: God is to be our source of joy. Since His Word is our truth, it is the first place we should turn to learn more about joy.

God is so good and everything He does is amazing! When we spend time with Him, we get to know Him more. We are filled with joy because of who God is and how He cares for us.

If we are Jesus-followers, we have something the rest of the world does not: the hope of eternal life with God. After we die, we know we will live forever with God. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes and there will be no more sorrow. This means the hard times



we experience on earth will not last forever. Knowing this truth allows us to have joy even in the midst of sadness and sorrow.

While I want you to experience true joy in your life, I hope we will also see joy grow in us as a Riverwood family. Because when we find our joy in Jesus, we will overflow and can spread that joy to others! What can you do to spread joy to someone this week?

PRAYER:

Father, God, Thank you for the gift of joy. Help us as a church to continue to abide in You and Your Word. We know You are close to us in our times of gladness and suffering, for the joy we have within us through the Holy Spirit is our strength. We love you. Amen.

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME:

Is there someone in the Riverwood family that seems to exude with genuine joy? Find a way to let them know how much their contagious joy means to you!



Wednesday, Jan 11

TODAY'S READING:

1 Corinthians 13

DEVOTIONAL: "GROWING IN LOVE"

by Ed Pavelec, Elder

In our modern world, it seems like the definition of words is fluid. This is why it is important to draw meaning from Scripture. Today's topic is "Growing in Love." Rather than let our culture define this concept for us, I want to let today's reading of 1 Corinthians 13 guide us.

As you read today's reading, how did you see love defined? Hopefully it stuck out to you that God has given us quite a list to work with (patient, kind, not boastful, etc.). But our goal today isn't to just define love, but to figure out: what is it then to Grow in Love?

Take a moment to look at the list of what Love does positively and what Love prohibits negatively. Notice it does not seem to be a list of ways to feel, but a list of ways to act! These spiritual actions have a direction. These ways to love have a purpose. Like the physical body our Lord has given you needs training to be in shape, your ability to love needs to be an action you practice in order to grow.

Let's take then the target of these action steps, first regarding our brothers and sisters in Christ, then to the world broadly, moving outward from small to big. When we see those in need around us, we put love into action when we meet them, feed them, and serve them, as we might/would do unto Christ Himself (Matthew 25:40).



It is in the practice of “bearing one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2) that our sense of Love is refined, directed, sharpened, and grown. First Corinthians 13 starts with some really impressive spiritual gifts, but brings a contrast to our attention. If all of this great ministry, this wonderful service, these impressive gifts we do are performed in a loveless, self-serving way, our action is nothing. It is of no use to ourselves, and of no use to our Lord.

Look to honor God, in Love, through the truth of what Scripture reveals about how to Love. It is through these actions that we will grow in love.

PRAYER:

Father, help me know what good works you have laid before me, and help me do them with love. Please guide me and shape my way so that Love, the supreme ethic, would be what governs me, defines me, and comes through me. Amen

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME, ASK YOURSELF:

- Into what routine action could you incorporate a loving attitude?
- Who has God put in your life to whom you can show love that perhaps you have not previously actively loved?
- How might you meet the needs around you with loving action?



Thursday, Jan 12

TODAY'S READING:

Philippians 1:27-2:24

DEVOTIONAL: "GROWING IN CARING"

by Minette Ericson, Administrative Assistant

In today's passage, Paul is writing to the church in the ancient city of Philippi to encourage them to continue the advancement/growth of the gospel. One of the ways he tells them to do this is to live in a "manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27). He goes on to lay out what that looks like in chapter 2. Paul urges us to "look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (2:4) as Timothy was known for doing (2:19-21).

If you're like me, you care about others, but the part of verse 4 that trips you up is the "look" part. We all have responsibilities that need to be fulfilled: to our families, our friends, our jobs, our to-do lists, our own spiritual growth, etc. These are important things to take care of. But perhaps we can lift our heads enough to look around us as we go about our days to see for whom we can show a little extra care: to "be genuinely concerned for the [spiritual] welfare [of those around us]" (2:20).

So let me ask: how can you seek to "look to the interests" of those around you this week and this year? Perhaps you could invite someone to coffee, to watch the game, or to simply hang out. Maybe you need to take it even further by becoming a mentor, or discipling someone, or volunteering at a senior citizen center or school.



I encourage you today (or at least this week) to find a way to put yourself in a position where you have to “look up” so you can see the needs of others.

PRAYER:

God, thank you giving me Jesus, not only as a sacrifice for my sin, but also as an example of giving of oneself to others. Please give me eyes to see others as You see them. Help me make space in my life (in my schedule as well as in my heart) for others and their needs, both spiritual and physical.

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME:

Send someone a text right now inviting them to get together for lunch or coffee.



Friday, Jan 13

TODAY'S READING:

1 Peter 4:1-11, Ephesians 2:1-10

DEVOTIONAL: "GROWING THROUGH SERVING"

by Matt Townsley, Elder

My extended family enjoys playing a card game called *Up and Down the River*. If you're not familiar with it, every player is required to "bid" the number of tricks he or she will obtain during the next hand. But get this: no one gets a pass! While playing a recent round, I had the highest score going into the final three hands. The next hand I was dealt did not make for an easy bid. I wanted to pass! But I placed my bid, and play began.

Sadly, I did not make my bid. Nor on any of the next three hands causing me to lose the game. To this day, I have still not won a game of *Up and Down the River* against my family! But every time I play, the requirement stands: bid each hand – no one gets a pass!

When it comes to serving, you may think "I'm not ready" or believe "others can do it better than I." Don't get me wrong – God is not calling us to serve without regard to our abilities. Instead, in 1 Peter 4:10, it says that each has received a gift, and that we are to use these gifts as good stewards of God's varied grace. This means no one gets a pass! Every believer has been gifted by God and we are called to use these gifts for His glory.

While how we serve at Riverwood or in our community may be negotiable and dependent upon our spiritual gifts, when we serve is



non-negotiable. Like in *Up and Down the River*, when it comes to serving, no one gets a pass!

“But, Matt, I don’t feel equipped to teach in Kids Creek or lead a Growth Group right now.” As we look ahead to 2023, I encourage you to consider serving (or continue serving!) in *some way*. Here are three ideas to get you started:

- Are you able to shake hands and say hello with a smile? Consider being a door greeter on Sunday mornings!
- Do you prefer to serve behind the scenes? Consider serving on the Clean Team during the week or Tech Team on Sunday mornings.
- Do you enjoy meeting the physical needs of those in our community? Join us as we serve the community on the second Tuesday of every month at the Waverly Food Pantry.

Remember, when it comes to serving, no one gets a pass! If you feel God calling you to use your giftings in a new or expanded capacity, email riverwood@weareriverwood.org

PRAYER:

Dear God, I thank you for the eternal gift you have given us through Jesus. I also thank you for the spiritual gifts you have given to me to use here on earth. Help me grow in serving! Help me discern how I can best use these spiritual gifts to serve you for your glory at Riverwood, in my family, and in my community. Amen

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:



Saturday, Jan 14

TODAY'S READING:

Romans 15:1-21

DEVOTIONAL: "GROWING BY WELCOMING"

by Luke Anderson, Elder

When I was fresh out of college, starting my career, I began looking for a church to get plugged into. I visited *lots* of churches. Many were friendly, but I was looking for something more. I was 800 miles from family and 100 miles from anyone I knew. I was on my own.

One Sunday morning, I was running late and hurriedly entered the doors of one of the last churches on my list. I tried to sneak in the back to not bother anyone. A gentleman greeted me and said he was glad I made it. He then showed me where I could sit and said he would talk to me after the service.

Sure enough, the same man found me afterwards and invited me over for Sunday dinner with his family. (Being young and poor, I wasn't about to refuse a free meal!) But they not only welcomed me into their home; they welcomed me into their family. I knew at that moment what I was looking for: a family away from home. And by God's grace, David became a mentor and a lifelong friend.

God loves a welcoming heart. In the Gospels, we see Jesus welcome children (Mark 10), tax collectors (Luke 19), prostitutes (John 4), and even the castaways of society (Luke 17). Jesus met everyone as they were; not after they cleaned themselves up, but *as they were*.



That's why Paul tells us in Romans 15:7, "Therefore, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

We have been blessed with a wonderful church family at Riverwood. However, we can become comfortable with the friendships we have already built. This might lead to inadvertently ignoring new faces that show up on Sundays. You may not oppose new people coming, but we might lack motivation to truly welcome them.

Sadly, this complacency can also spread outside the church. When blessed with strong relationships, we can become reluctant to include others into our lives. It is important we continue to welcome those around us. I know it can be hard, but a welcoming face is rarely rejected. My family has moved many times, and I remember how much I appreciated being welcomed when entering a new place.

So tomorrow, greet someone you don't know. And here's a tip: as you extend your hand in greeting, give them your name to get theirs. And if you are bad with names, repeat their name back along with "Nice to meet you." You never know who God will put in your life. It just may be a lonely young college grad trying to figure out his life, and all he needs is a home cooked meal to set him on the right path.

PRAYER:

Father, You have welcomed me into your family. Help me welcome others into my life and the Riverwood family. Empower me to overcome any hesitations that linger within, so I may be more like Jesus.

I also pray this for the whole Riverwood family. Make us a church that welcomes people as they are and invites them to follow You.







WEEK 3

Gospel Growth Around Us



JANUARY 15–21



Week 3 Introduction

Welcome to Week 3 of our *21 Days of Prayer & Fasting*

For this last week of our spiritual journey, we will shift our perspective from asking God to grow the gospel in us individually as well as a church family, to longing to see *Gospel Growth Around Us*. Our hope and prayer will continue to be that God will begin (or continue) to use you to grow the gospel through your words and actions at work, at school, on your teams, to your extended family, and more.

But as we move deeper into 2023, we want to see God working through Riverwood in such a way that we are seeing entire communities, people groups, and more come to understand the life-changing gospel locally and globally.

So with this in mind, let us pray together, asking for God to do what only what He can do through us and our Gospel partners this year.



Sunday, Jan 15

TODAY'S READING:

2 Timothy 2

DEVOTIONAL: "GROWTH THROUGH MULTIPLICATION"

by Erin Bird

Three years, one month, and five days after we said, "I do," LeAnn and I welcomed our first child into our family. It was no longer just the two of us.

While we didn't mind this intrusion, imagine if LeAnn and I were so focused on our marital relationship we ignored our baby's cries, left her home alone while we went on dates, and neglected feeding her while we readily made dinner for ourselves. Not only would we deserve your scorn, we would deserve to be arrested!

In order for new parents to be successful, they have to take their eyes off themselves somewhat to attend to the needs of their child.

Likewise, passages like Philippians 2:3-4, Romans 12:9-18, and Ephesians 4:32 make it quite clear God desires for His followers to take their eyes off of themselves to attend to the needs of others. After all, that is exactly what Jesus did!

During the first two weeks of these *21 Days of Prayer*, we've been praying for personal and corporate Gospel Growth. But I hope you've noticed that this Gospel Growth should naturally lead us to be others-focused. That's what Paul is getting at in 2 Timothy 2:2, "*What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.*"



Paul's heart wasn't for himself. He wanted this life-changing Gospel to not just pass to Timothy, but for Timothy to be "others-focused" and pass it on to others who would be "others-focused" by passing it on to others (who should be others-focused, etc, etc.).

For you to live the life God has for you, He wants you to share your faith (as we saw on Day 7). And if we are going to be the church God calls us to be, we are going to have to take the Gospel to others while welcoming others into our church family (which we saw yesterday).

That's why this week we'll be praying for God to guide us as a church in how to "multiply" ourselves and be others-focused. But let's start with the personal. Just as Paul "multiplied" himself, how can you "multiply" yourself?

- Who can you invite to serve in ministry with you?
- With whom do you need to start a 1-on-1 discipling relationship?
- Who can you invite to a Worship Gathering or Growth Group?
- Who do you need to share the gospel with?

PRAYER:

Almighty God, I confess I am far too often focused on myself and not on the people you have put around me. Would you continue to grow your gospel in me so I might be more and more like Jesus, knowing how to care for myself while being used by you to love, care, serve, and welcome others. Give me insight into who you want me to invest in as you continue to invest in me.



Monday, Jan 16

TODAY'S READING:

Acts 2

DEVOTIONAL: "GROWTH THROUGH CHURCH PLANTING"

by Erin Bird

In Colossians 1:6, we hear the Apostle Paul talk to the Jesus-followers in Corinth about the gospel, "which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing."

During these 21 Days of Prayer, you spent Week 1 praying for this Gospel "which has come to you," to grow and bear fruit in you personally. Then last week, we prayed together about how this Gospel could grow and increase in us as a church, longing to see it "bear fruit" among us corporately.

But just as the Gospel came to the Corinthians as well as to us, part of God's call is for His Church to help the gospel "come" to other people as well.

One of the most effective ways over the past century for local and global Gospel Growth is through the planting of churches. Sadly, we are falling way behind in America in seeing the Gospel spread. In 2019, 3000 churches started, yet 4500 closed. That led to, for the first time in America, religious attendance falling below 50% (this includes all types of churches, as well as synagogues & mosques).

This is why Jesus' words, uttered as he was sending 72 disciples to go town to town sharing the gospel, were not only relevant for His day, but still ring true over two-thousand years later:



“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” (Luke 10:2)

Would you join together in praying for:

- God to bring in the harvest
- For laborers to say “yes” to helping spiritually disconnected people find and follow Jesus
- For us to hear God’s direction in how to be part of the solution in seeing Gospel Growth Around Us

PRAYER:

Loving Heavenly Father, it is clear your heart is for people all over the globe. So many of them do not know about your love. Help me know how I can be part of helping your life-changing gospel reach these people, so they might not only be “harvested,” but become future laborers to invite others to find and follow you as well.

I pray also for wisdom for the Elder Team as they prayerfully consider Riverwood’s role in church planting. I pray for unity for us as a church, as well as emotional and spiritual protection, as we seek to see Gospel Growth Around Us.

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:



Tuesday, Jan 17

TODAY'S READING:

Psalm 24

DEVOTIONAL: "GOSPEL GROWTH IN IOWA"

by Erin Bird

My friend, John Fuller, pastor of Prairie Lakes Church, is somewhat famous for saying, "I want to make it as difficult as possible to go to hell from Iowa."

If that's the first time you've heard that statement, it might sound a bit weird, and even a bit bold. But for most Americans, Iowa is just a flyover state. But for us, it's home. So if anyone is going to help people find life in Christ, it's left to us.

But this is not an insurmountable task. And today's Scripture reading helps us see that.

Psalm 24 informs us that everything and everyone belongs to God. John 3:16 reminds us that, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

This is why Jesus tells all of His disciples to "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) in "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Do you see God's heart for His creation? He loves you and the people around you. In fact, His love for the people of Iowa is far greater than yours or mine ever could be.



We've been praying about reaching our "Jerusalem" (our immediate area) by multiplying ourselves (Day 15). Tomorrow we will pray for our "Samaria," (those further away and unlike us). Then Thursday and Friday, we will pray for our missionaries who are helping us reach "the ends of the earth."

But, today let's pray for God to use us to reach our "Judea," the region around us where people are similar to us. And for us, that is Iowa.

PRAYER:

God, many people complain about the cold, the uninteresting landscape, the lack of a metropolis, and the dearth of professional sports or major attractions in Iowa. Yet, I know you deeply love each and every person in this state.

And so because you have chosen to put me in this state at this time, I ask that you will use me and all of Riverwood to invite the spiritually disconnected of Iowa to find and follow you. May we love them like You do. And give us wisdom as to whom we should partner with in this task because it is too big for us. Thankfully, it is not too big for You.

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME:

Read Romans 9, asking God to give you the same heart for Iowa that Paul had for his fellow Jews.



Wednesday, Jan 18

TODAY'S READING:

Matthew 5:1-16

DEVOTIONAL: "GOSPEL GROWTH IN 'SAMARIA'"

by Erin Bird

Back in the days of Duos (a coffee/ice cream shop located in the now Century 21 building), I was at the counter getting ready to order my usual hot tea when I heard a voice behind me say, "I'll buy the tea of a church planter."

That's how I met Patrick Ray.

Patrick was in Waverly visiting his brother, KWAY broadcaster, Matt Ray. But while Matt was in broadcasting, Patrick had felt called to church planting since his childhood years. At the time I met Patrick, he was single and helping with a network of house churches in the Twin Cities. But within a couple years, he not only got married, but shifted to doing a church planting residency at a different church, with the dream to plant a church in North Minneapolis.

Many of you know Riverwood has been supporting Patrick and Shelby for the past 5 years. When Patrick shared with our Elder Team about their efforts, our response was unanimous - we wanted to be a part, even though Patrick's neighborhood was vastly different than ours.

North, the neighborhood the Rays live in, is extremely diverse racially and linguistically. It is also a neighborhood plagued with violence. (To understand how violent: https://bit.ly/CNN_North22)



You could say North is about as different as you could possibly find from our tiny section of Iowa while remaining in the U.S.

Here is how we view Patrick and Shelby's efforts: The North neighborhood is in our "Samaria." In the days of Jesus, Samaria was a region north of Jerusalem filled with a biracial population (half-Jew, half-Gentile) worshipping with a modified version of Judaism. Most "good" Jews avoided the area. But the people there clearly mattered to Jesus. Not only did Christ travel through the region (see John 4:1-42), he specifically told his followers to go there (Acts 1:8). It didn't matter the people were racially and religiously different. They mattered to God, so they should matter to Jesus' followers.

And so the people of North matter to us because they matter to God.

PRAYER:

- *For Patrick and Shelby's physical, emotional, and spiritual safety*
- *For Patrick as he leads Northside Neighborhood Church*
- *For residents of North to find and follow Jesus*
- *For peace to come to the neighborhood through the gospel and ministry of Northside*

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME:

Send Patrick and Shelby an email letting them know you prayed for them today. Patrick's email is patrickray1993@gmail.com.



Thursday, Jan 19

TODAY'S READING:

Isaiah 42

DEVOTIONAL: "GOSPEL GROWTH IN TOGO"

by Erin Bird

Several years ago, I received an email from a pastor friend who mentioned a gal from his church headed to the mission field. He not only vouched for her, but asked if I would meet with her to consider having our one-year-old church plant become a financial partner.

While I was very impressed by this young woman, unfortunately, we couldn't get it in our budget that year (Riverwood was still 75% supported by outside donors). But 7 years later, our Missions Decisions Team decided to begin financially and prayerfully supporting that same gal.

Her name: Azlyn McCarthy. And her place of ministry: Togo.

But what led the Missions Decisions Team to say "yes" to financially supporting Azlyn wasn't her cool first name, nor her fascinating location. It was the uniqueness of her ministry. As we considered "ends of the earth" Gospel Growth, we were looking for ministries that were going to places and people others weren't going to. Azlyn's ministry was one of the most unique we encountered. She is helping spearhead a gospel-centered church planting movement among the 40,000 deaf people of Togo as part of the 6 Degree Initiative (6degreeinitiative.org).



Azlyn's ministry focus would explain why her favorite passage in Scripture is Proverbs 31:8-9.

*“Open your mouth for the mute,
for the rights of all who are destitute.
Open your mouth, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy.”*

So let's join together to pray for Azlyn...

PRAYER:

Father, right now we pray for:

- *Azlyn's physical, emotional, and spiritual safety*
- *Azlyn's coworker, Mawussé, as he leads their efforts*
- *For unity among the 6 ° Initiative team, especially as they transition to a new key leader*
- *For people within the deaf community to find and follow Jesus*

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME:

Send Azlyn an email letting her know you prayed for her today. Azlyn's email is azlynm@converge.org.



Friday, Jan 20

TODAY'S READING:

Isaiah 61

DEVOTIONAL: "GOSPEL GROWTH IN CAMBODIA"

by Erin Bird

A few weeks ago, I wrote a blog/email Advent series called *The Grandmas of Jesus*. My goal was to point out that the four women mentioned in Jesus' genealogy (yes, I know, "Momma" Mary is also mentioned) were strategically included to remind us these were the type of people for whom Jesus came.

Many of us in the Riverwood family enjoy a semi-comfortable middle class existence. Which means we most easily make friends with people in a similar socioeconomic situation. So it is easy to sometimes forget that God's heart is for the overlooked, the vulnerable, the brokenhearted, the abused, the forgotten, the hungry, the imprisoned, and the poor. (Today's reading should make that abundantly clear!)

Because God's heart is for these people, the ministry of Josh & Hillary Smith in Cambodia really stood out to our Missions Decisions Team last year as we contemplated who to begin supporting as part of our desire to see Gospel Growth to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Josh & Hillary are truly bringing the gospel to the poor. They are seeking to meet spiritual, emotional, and physical needs as they are able. They are actively sharing their faith by word and deed. They are regularly discipling those who put their faith in



Jesus. And they are planting churches by gathering these new Jesus-followers together.

But just as we prayed earlier this week, “the harvest is great, but the laborers are few.” (Luke 10:2) This is so true in Cambodia! Cambodia is 98% Buddhist, many having never heard about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. So would you join together right now in prayer for the Smiths?

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, we lift up Josh and Hillary to you, asking you to

- *protect them spiritually, emotionally, and physically*
- *give them faithful partners in evangelism and discipleship*
- *provide for them financially and relationally*
- *help their three children stay healthy and come to know you*
- *give Riverwood wisdom in how to deepen our support*

NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME:

Send Josh and Hillary an email letting them know you prayed for them today. Their email is joshandhillarysmith@gmail.com.



Saturday, Jan 21

TODAY'S READING:

Matthew 6:5-13, Luke 18:1-8

DEVOTIONAL: "CONTINUAL GOSPEL GROWTH"

by Erin Bird

Congrats! You made it! Thank you SO much for going on this spiritual journey with us.

However, even though the *21 Days* have come to an end, I hope your times of prayer and in the Word will not end. I hope you've developed or deepened a pattern of spending time each day with your God who knows you, loves you, is for you, and wants to work through you.

So don't stop praying for Gospel Growth in you, in Riverwood, and around us locally and globally. Keep pursuing the heart of God. Keep seeking to know more of the gospel so you might grow through the gospel. Ask God to fill you with wonder and awe because of His character revealed in the gospel. Stay connected with fellow Jesus-followers who will encourage you to keep growing. (Get in a Growth Group if you aren't in one.)

But don't end these *21 Days* with "that was nice," and then head into your own schedule. Make time with God a priority here in 2023. This could be one of the most significant years of your life as well as for Riverwood. So keep seeking Gospel Growth!



PRAYER:

Almighty Father, thank you for giving me the opportunity to pursue you through prayer and fasting these past 21 days. However, even though this spiritual journey has now come to an end, please continue to grow me. Help me continue to talk with you so I may more closely walk with you.

I love you Lord! Thank you so much for Jesus, for spiritual life in Him, for my Riverwood family, for Your heart for people, and for giving me access to you through the cross and resurrection of Christ.

And it's in Your name I pray, Amen!

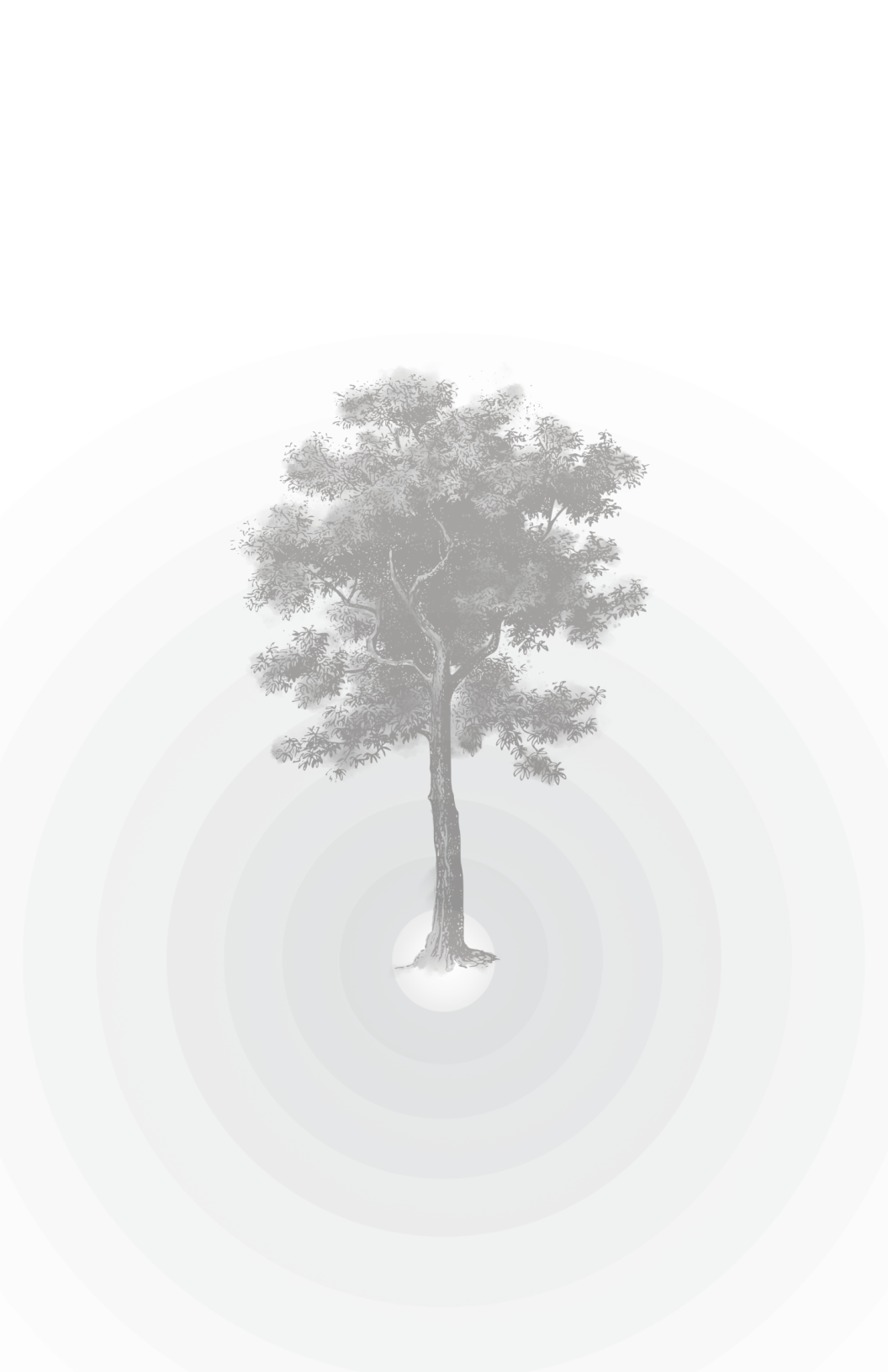
NOTES OR YOUR OWN PRAYERS:

IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME:

Find a Bible reading plan to begin tomorrow or Monday. You can find some at <https://weareriverwood.org/resources/freebies/> or in the YouVersion Bible app.









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