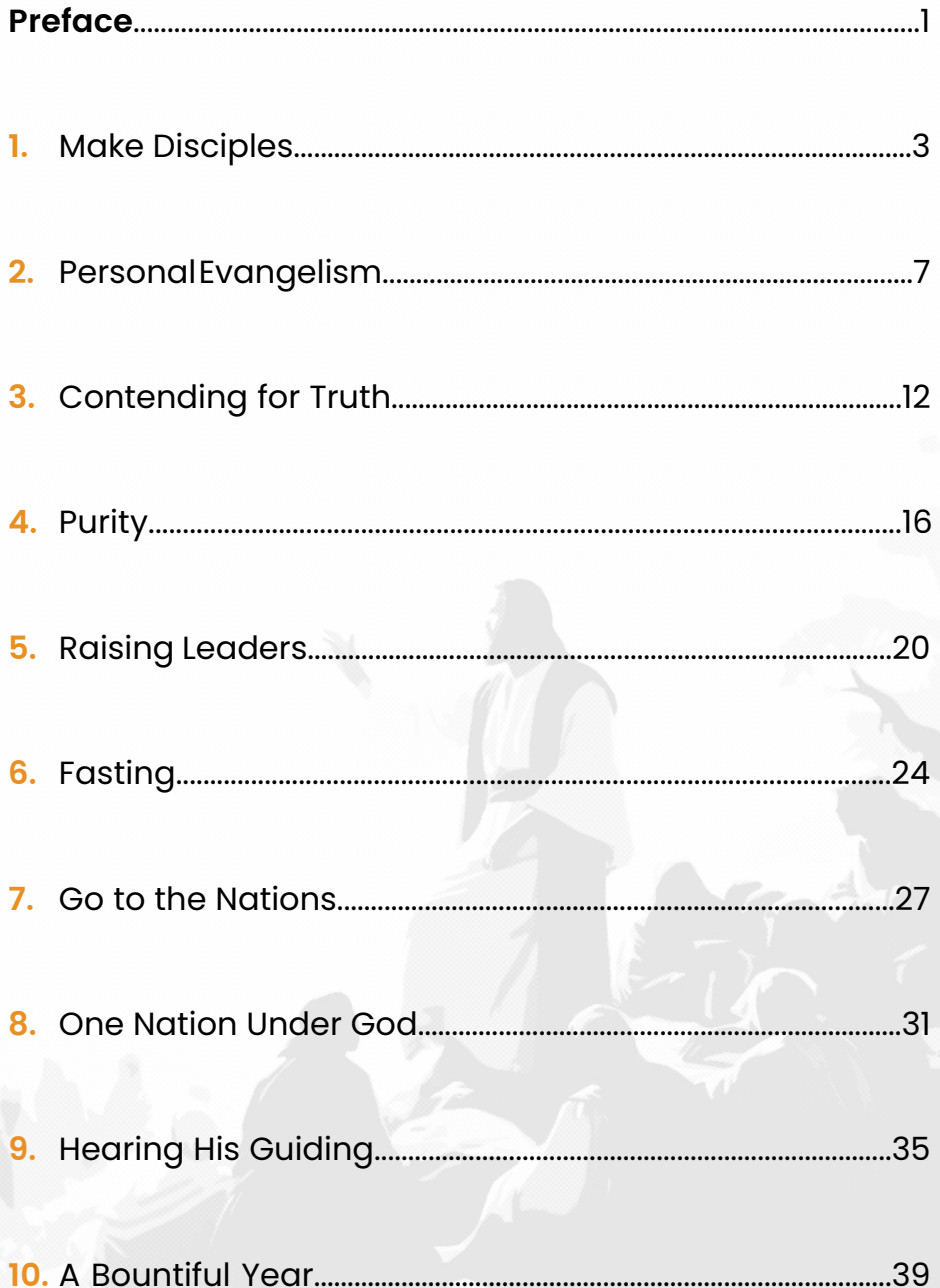


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Preface

As we commence this 10-day period of prayer and fasting, we do so with expectancy that we will see God work supernaturally in our lives, church, and nations. We believe that there will be foundations laid for the year ahead resulting in many salvations, healings, deliverances, provision and breakthrough.

In Matthew 6:16, Jesus said, “when you fast” not “if you fast”. In fact, he also said in Matthew 17:21, “This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.” Many can testify to experiencing breakthrough as we fast alongside prayer, disconnecting ourselves from the world, and reconnecting to God. Together they become a spiritual combination punch.

For 10 days we’re encouraging as many in the church who can, to participate in a special time of prayer and fasting. Daniel and his three young friends fasted on numerous occasions. They faced a culture and society that didn’t know their God, and they likewise desperately needed a breakthrough in their situation. They chose a special fast, only eating fruit and vegetables and at the end, God both honoured and set his favour upon them.

But there are other types of fast.

Social media – disconnect from the clamouring and often divisive voices on social media to spend time in prayer, worship, and the Scriptures.

Television – given that the average person in the UK watches four hours of television daily, just imagine the spiritual nutrition one could receive by fasting from TV and connecting with the Lord.

Daytime food fast – throughout the day you may choose to fast from food, devoting preparation and mealtimes to God, and breaking the fast each evening.

Total food fast – others may wish to fast from food altogether for the entire ten days and only have liquids.

If you have any health conditions or feel you may require medical advice regarding any type of food fast, please consult with your doctor in advance before commencing the fast.

A video version of the written daily devotions will also be available on the Living Hope YouTube channel from 7am daily and on demand thereafter. www.youtube.com/Ihtvchannel

In His Service,

Jonathan Stanfield.

Lead Elder

Day 1 - Make Disciples

Welcome to 2024 and the first of ten days prayer and fasting devotions.

I borrowed a book from a friend, which contained nearly 2,300 famous last words from people over the centuries. Some could be described as funny - even if unintentionally. General Sedgewick was an American civil war commander, killed at the battle of Spotsylvania 1864. Foolishly looking over the barricades at enemy lines he said, "They couldn't hit an elephant at that dist...". An enemy sniper had picked him off. Other people's last words could be described as pointless. Oscar Wilde, the eccentric dramatist, who died at the turn of the century apparently said, "Either this wallpaper goes, or I do." Pointless and strange last words.

Too many other last words are really quite hopeless and sad. A young soldier was among one of those who said, "I die unprepared." On the other hand, Jonathan Edwards, the famous preacher, was totally different; his last words were "Trust in God and you need not fear."

What about Jesus? I believe if we focus on His final words after His resurrection, we'll understand the heart and priorities of Jesus. In each of the four Gospels and in the book of Acts, Luke's history of the church part 2, we'll find some of His very last words, known as 'The Great Commission': Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 23:47-48; John 20:21; Acts 1:8. Each author records a variation of the Great Commission. Matthew's perhaps is the most comprehensive.

¹⁸ 'And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" Matthew 28:19–20 ESV.

'Make disciples' is the key phrase that resonated with our elders as we sought the Lord about our focus for the year. Some of you, of a certain age, will have grown up singing worship songs of the now deceased Christian singer and song writer, Keith Green. I remember being impacted by his song based on the great commission, 'Jesus Commands us to Go!' Interestingly, if you study the original biblical language, Keith got it a little wrong. The imperative or command isn't to go, but rather to 'make disciples'. Think of the emphasis this way. 'As you go throughout life, MAKE DISCIPLES'.

What's a disciple? A disciple is a follower, a learner, or an apprentice. Sadly, the church has often reduced faith in Jesus to a decision in time, rather than a lifetime of discipleship. As someone once said, "God loves us just the way we are, but he refuses to leave us that way. He wants to make us just like Jesus."

I'm so grateful to the leaders and peers in my life who discipled me, particularly when I was a teenager. I remember Ricky, brother of David, our youth pastor, who would meet with me weekly, one-to-one, when we'd pray and study the Bible. He would lovingly but firmly lead me through times when I was drifting. Scriptures I memorised then with him

are still sharp and effective in my spiritual battles today. Other leaders gathered groups of us young lads together to pray, study, share the gospel on the streets, have fun and provide accountability in what were vulnerable seasons of life.

At the start of the new year, we often think about our physical health and weight, but what about our spiritual health. What is your plan to grow and mature as a disciple? In the Word? In the Spirit? In ministry? In fellowship? In generosity? In devotion? Similarly, who can you disciple? Who would really value a regular meet up, perhaps over a lunch break, not to chat about the things of this world, but how the Kingdom of Heaven is breaking through into your life, and into others?

Over these next days, we'll explore further how to become disciples who will turn the world upside down. Without planes, trains and automobiles, the first disciples impacted the nations of the world. They had a heart for nations. By the 5th century even the Isle of Man, on the far western part of Europe, was reached by those who were carrying the Good News. They weren't merely hearers of the word, but doers. Their obedience to the commands of Jesus made them counter-cultural.

And this was no dead religion. Jesus was with them, to the very end of the age, by his Spirit wherever they went. Signs and wonders followed them as they valued the presence, power, and person of the Holy Spirit.

On Day One, take a few minutes to come before the Lord. It's a new year. Why would 2024 look any different than 2023?

Ask the Holy Spirit to show you one change you can make, even from today, that will see you grow both deeper and wider in your influence as a disciple of Jesus.

Day 2 - Personal Evangelism

“Given everything you’ve heard, is there any reason why you wouldn’t want to accept Jesus Christ as both Lord & Saviour right now?” It took a few moments, and then the answer came, “No, there is no reason not to.”

Over the past few months, I have been sharing the good news of Jesus Christ as mankind’s only hope for salvation, with my new friend. It’s been an exhilarating journey as we grappled together with what Jesus did for humanity; how he did it and why he did it. I shared testimony after testimony of lives transformed, including my own, and the miracle of being born-again. Discussing the practical outworking and implications of what Paul wrote to the Corinthian church when he said,

‘If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.’ 2 Cor 5:17 ESV.

We talked about the wonder of Jesus becoming a substitute for all people, unable to free themselves from the presence, power, and penalty of sin. And how He came to carry in his own body the consequences of God’s anger against our sin when He died on a cross in our place and on our behalf. “He willingly lay down His perfect life, for you, and for me,” I said on more than one occasion! In my own words, I explained the truth of John 3:16-17 ESV:

‘For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'

We talked about purpose, identity, future and inheritance in this life and this world and beyond them. How all of that had been corrupted by an enemy who hates everyone, everywhere, who is made in the image of God. In Jesus, you have a calling and a magnificent destiny into eternity, beyond anything you can dare to think or imagine! You were created to be an image-bearer of the one who made everything, everywhere, from nothing by the power of His Word! And Jesus, only Jesus, can restore you to the glorious God who made you. Jesus himself said:

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6 ESV.

We grappled together with faith, Christianity and more whenever opportunity presented itself - at a community meal, in a local pub over lunch, or during a mid-morning break in a coffee house. I counted such precious moments as a high privilege remembering that:

'All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.' 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 ESV.

Yes, indeed, every child of God is called to be a minister of reconciliation, taking every opportunity captive to point, guide

and lead others to the open arms of the loving, good and gracious heavenly Father.

Back to the present...

“So, if you don’t see any reason **not** to accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour and all that that entails, do you want to do so right now?” This time, with less hesitation: “Yes!” “Ok, let’s go for a walk.” We grab our coats and head out of the door into the fresh Isle of Man winter weather.

“I would like to lead you in a prayer, but before we do so, I must reiterate, that being born again is an exchange. A glorious exchange at that, but an exchange none the less. Your broken, sin-tainted, guilty life laid down for His perfect, righteous, sinless, and holy life. It is by no means a fair exchange, but one God, in his unmeasurable love, is offering us anyway. Doing so means to hand the reins over to Jesus and follow wherever He may lead you.” Wherever possible I always try to make this point as Paul made it clear:

‘I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.’
Galatians 2:20 ESV.

“Yes, I want that,” says my friend.

The feelings of excitement, relief, joy and love that flood my soul as we pray are overwhelming. I cannot help but remember Luke 15:7 that says:

'In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!'

By the grace of God, I have never yet been involved in salvation and not experienced this deep sense of personal fulfilment and joy! And this day is no different. As my friend and I walk back to our cars, I thank God for His mercy, His patience, His kindness, and His generosity in allowing me to participate in the magnificence of seeing a lost and condemned soul restored to life – and life to the full!

Working with the Holy Spirit to share our faith simply, effectively and biblically, the way that Jesus did, is one of the great adventures of walking with God. And the more you do it, the more you get to share in His joy! Paul says:

'Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.' 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 ESV.

You and I are ambassadors for Christ! Sharing our faith is not an event, but a way of life. It's our great commission. Our direction and directive from Christ Jesus before He ascended to heaven. We are to reach the world with the gospel as we go! So, look for opportunity today. Ask the Lord to use you personally to lead another to faith in, and obedience to Jesus. Remind the Lord regularly of what Jesus said to His disciples:

"The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few;³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out

labourers into his harvest.” Matthew 9:37–38 ESV.

And finally, take courage and be inspired by this assurance found in the book of Daniel 12:3

‘Those who are wise will shine as bright as the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness will shine like the stars forever.’

So let’s get out there and share His Good News!

Day 3 - Contending for Truth

From the very earliest chapters of the bible to the closing statement in Revelation 22:21, God has emphasised that His heart's desire is to enjoy relationship with His people. Throughout the scriptures, a beautiful story unfolds that reveals the lengths the Father is willing to go to in order to rescue us from sin, so that we can enjoy a reconciled relationship with Him.

From cover to cover the bible reminds us that even when we were living for our own selfish desires, bound up in our sinful habits, God demonstrated His love for us in this: *'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'* Romans 5:8 NIV.

Jesus has a special love for us and His church. He contends for her through intercession and sacrifice. Paul reminds us that:

'Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word. He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault.' Ephesians 5:25-27 NLT.

What a beautiful picture of unity and oneness. Of course, the journey towards perfection will be one marked by skirmishes and battles with the forces of darkness. The enemy Satan labours tirelessly to derail the Father's plan to purify the church. This clash of kingdoms will intensify as we near the day of Jesus' return and certain characteristics will be evident in mankind as the day approaches. Paul warned Timothy that:

'In the last days, people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people. 2 Tim 3:1-5 NIV.

The moral landslide of the last days is easy to see. The Church in many areas is beginning to stumble as pressure is applied in sensitive areas. We are surely living in days when contending for truth should be an essential element of the Church's ministry. But where should we focus our efforts? What are the common shifting sands that need to be underpinned and strengthened in these times?

Our first challenge is:

1. Biblical Illiteracy

Pleasure has become the pursuit of the Western world. Our fast food, on-demand culture has slowly but surely eroded our devotion muscle. We are so accustomed to information being dropped into our laps with little effort, as a slick 30-second media clip delivers the latest garment from the emperor's new fashion line.

Yet the word of God tells us that *'it is God's privilege to conceal things and a man's privilege to discover what God has hidden!'* Prov 25:2 NLT. Revelation and truth are revealed as a person searches the word of God and devotes him/herself

to understanding what God has designed in His creation. Whether it is marriage, sexuality, gender, the sanctity and preservation of life, God has a view on all of these matters. An illiterate church, though, will simply follow the source of most easily attained and digestible information. Untrained, the church will pursue what is most comfortable.

In a recent Barna survey of Western European and American churches a startling 82% of people surveyed believed that: 'God helps those who help themselves' was a verse from the Bible 12% of those surveyed believed that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife! It is no good just paying lip-service to the word of God; we must open it, read it, learn it and meditate on it or we will remain blissfully ignorant of the treasures God has buried in scripture for us to discover. Not reading the bible for ONE WEEK, makes ONE WEAK!! We must commit to the word daily!

2. Consumerism

Never have we enjoyed so much choice! Take tea for instance! Tea used to be tea, Tetley, PG Tips, that was it!! Now it is lemon, green, raspberry, bubble or whatever suits your fancy. Church similarly has become a marketplace of choice. If I don't like this doctrine, I'll go to the church down the road. Somebody left one of our congregations last year because there was a more comfortable church up the road, where it isn't necessary to serve.

Yet Paul reminded the Ephesian church that *'as each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.'*

Ephesians 4:16 NLT. As we contend for truth in 2024, we must realise that in order for the body to become fully healthy, every person must be activated in doing their own special work. This is how we break the ugly consumer mindset that causes us to see Church as a tuck shop that I choose my favourite sweets from. We must learn to give to bless, not take to benefit. We must become contributors, not consumers.

3. Aversion to Devotion

Historically, the church was the centre of its community. Its members, as we read in Acts 2:42, *'devoted themselves (self-disciplined devotion) to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer.'* We live in a FOMO (fear of missing out) culture, where our tendency is to keep our options open rather than to devote ourselves to something that may demand some degree of self-sacrifice. Of course, the glory of our faith, is to give ourselves wholeheartedly to the one who gave Himself for us.

This year could be the most fulfilling year of our lives to date, but in order to gain, we must give, in order to find our lives, we must be prepared to give them fully to the purposes of Jesus and His church.

Day 4 - Purity

As a Scotsman, I love and appreciate the winter. It is my favourite season of the year. I grew up in a land that is famed for its beauty, severe weather, cool temperatures, and its whisky! What I love most about my native home is the way light changes in different seasons. Summertime in Scotland is characterised by its exceptionally long days; in mid-summer, it is possible to go for a walk at any time in the night and one would be able to see clearly because it never quite becomes dark.

Winter is the season of seasons. Unlike many people, I love waking up in darkness and waiting for the sun to rise. In Scotland, on the 21st of December each year, the sun rises at 8:45am and it sets at 3:30pm. That makes for a very short day. There is a benefit, however - sleep is so much easier when light is absent. There is nothing more irritating than the intrusion of light in the wee small hours of the morning, bringing with it a restlessness that leads to tiredness. Darkness is good for sleep!

Spiritually speaking, darkness is increasing in many Western nations. Our minds are constantly bombarded by philosophies and ideologies that question age-old truths which, for many centuries, were never considered worthy of debate. Long-accepted societal building blocks, such as the definition of gender, sexuality, marriage, and partnership are reinterpreted on an almost daily basis. We are encouraged to choose our identity rather than to accept what is written into the fabric of our genetic makeup.

The sustainability of life itself is an issue currently under the microscope of governmental review. Should we have the right to determine when life ends or is that not something that belongs to the governance of heaven, rather than earth?

The problem with advancing darkness is that it induces sleep. As it advances across Western Europe, even the Church itself appears to be falling asleep under the rhythm of this repeating satanic lullaby. Darkness has a habit of invading subtly. It feels comforting, but it numbs the sharp edge of our moral sword.

Jesus Himself warned: *“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!”* Matt 6:22-23 ESV.

If the eye is a lamp, then careful consideration must be given to what we shine into our bodies. God’s word is crucial as we anchor ourselves in what is upright, pure, and holy. Without it, we have no true north, no plumb line against which we can measure the declining standards of our surrounding culture. We must turn to His word and practice His ways in order that His grace will fill us and enable us to live a life that pleases Him and honours His great name.

One particular area of personal devotion that is tested so stringently in these days is our purity. Consider the instruction to the church of Thessalonica which states that:

‘God’s will is for you to be holy, so stay away from all sexual sin.

⁴ Then each of you will control his own body and live in holiness and honour— ⁵ not in lustful passion like the pagans who do not know God and his ways. ⁶ Never harm or cheat a fellow believer in this matter by violating his wife, for the Lord avenges all such sins, as we have solemnly warned you before. ⁷ God has called us to live holy lives, not impure lives. ⁸ Therefore, anyone who refuses to live by these rules is not disobeying human teaching but is rejecting God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you'

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 NLT.

When we allow ourselves to engage with sin that is either sexual by nature, or simply that feeds our lustful passions, the bible warns us that we are not disobeying the teachings of man, but are rejecting God Himself. That is a very weighty offence. We must be on our guard. Darkness seems at times to be a comfort, but we are called to be people of light; holy people, set apart for good and righteous works. We are called to live in partnership with God who has given us His Spirit to empower us to overcome our temptations and everything in life that can entangle us and trip us up.

God has not made us personally responsible for producing holy character in ourselves. That would not be possible. We could of course temporarily create an appearance of holiness, but unless there is an inner transformation that causes Christ-like character in our core being, our human attempts to appear holy will be nothing more than sellotaping apples to an orange tree and claiming, "Look, I produce apples!"

Life flows from within. Holiness is produced by the inner presence of the Holy Spirit transforming our desires, our

passions and adjusting our appetites for sin and righteousness. Praise God for His promise, *'Holy you will be because I am holy'* (1 Peter 1:16) This year, let us live by the plumb line of God's word. Let us uphold His ways and desires for our lives. Let us be people of light who are awake, and vigilant. Let us be reminded of Paul's words to the Thessalonians:

'You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. 6 So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober.' 1 Thessalonians 5:5-6 NIV

Day 5 - Raising Leaders

I heard of a young pastor asked by an apostle to take over and lead a big church. It was a daunting task. First the apostle told him that some of the senior elders needed to be stepped down. They did not have the right character and had allowed some seriously dangerous false teaching to come into the church. The young pastor was told to command the false teachers to "STOP"! I think I would be pretty intimidated, but he tackled the task with courage. Then, devastating news arrived. The apostle told the young pastor that he was dying. The pastor must now turn his attention to how the church will continue to thrive after the apostle dies and the young pastor is called elsewhere. How can a church remain healthy and thrive? Well, here are the exact words the young pastor received from his condemned mentor:

'You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. ² And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others. ³ Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. ⁴ No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer. ⁵ Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor's crown except by competing according to the rules. ⁶ The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. ⁷ Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.' 2 Timothy 2:1-7 NIV.

You've probably guessed that our young pastor is Timothy and the apostle is Paul. As Paul wrote to Timothy from his prison cell on death row, it was clear a generation of church leaders was

coming to an end. James had died in Jerusalem, Peter was also dead, as well as many martyrs Paul must have known, and now, Paul faced his own death. So, he commissioned Timothy to imitate what he had learnt and to raise up a new generation of leaders. This recognised Paul's own priority of raising leaders **'in every church'** Acts 14:23). The phrase *'be strong'* in v.1 is literally *'be empowered'*. Timothy was given the essential task of raising leaders, not in his own strength but with the *'help of the Holy Spirit'*; a lesson we could benefit from understanding. Raising trustworthy, reliable leaders for the church isn't just a good idea, it's an anointed task from heaven.

From chapter 1 of Paul's letter to Timothy, we know that these leaders are required to define biblical doctrine, bring loving discipline, and direct the mission and ministry of the church. All this is to be done by those displaying godly character. Timothy had removed elders and purged false teaching from the church in Ephesus but there was no time to sit back. Now he needed to raise leaders to raise more leaders. The question was how?

Paul gives him three illustrations in 2 Timothy 2:4-6; a soldier (v.4), an athlete (v.5) and a farmer (v.6)

1. Raising leaders requires the focus of a soldier; 'No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer.' There are many distractions for church leaders (emails, messages, admin, petty disputes and problems; what Paul calls 'foolish controversies') but raising leaders always needs to be a main item on the agenda of a healthy church. No 'one man' ministries with a 'Messiah complex'. 10 years ago Living Hope had no deacons.

There are now approaching 50. With the help of the Holy Spirit, what gets attention gets done. Raising leaders must be in focus.

2. Raising leaders requires the humility and sacrifice of an athlete; ‘Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor’s crown except by competing according to the rules.’ One guaranteed barrier to raising leaders is leaders who deep down are more concerned about protecting their position and ministry than releasing others more gifted than themselves. We become like those Russian dolls, each leader that follows is a bit smaller and less impactful. At the recent School of Leadership, I asked a visitor for their reflections. Their response was that they couldn’t believe the leader was letting others lead most sessions and do the lion’s share of the teaching. That’s a sign of a culture of humility and sacrifice where leaders are being raised.

3. Raising leaders requires the simple hard work of the hardworking farmer. Crops don’t grow by accident. A farmer prepares the ground, plants good seed and watches the weather to harvest at just the right moment. Good leaders prepare the next generation, test them with responsibility, shape their character and watch for the right moment to raise them up. Healthy leaders don’t grow, they’re made. Ask any leader and they’ll tell you those who shaped them for service. That takes work.

‘And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.’(v2)

We learn from this young leader that he must have the focus of a soldier, the sacrifice of an athlete and the hard work of a farmer. Why? Because any healthy church is raising leaders who raise leaders who raise leaders. As the late missionary, Wesley Duewel, wrote in his book 'Ablaze for God'; 'It takes more than a busy church, a friendly church or even an evangelical church to impact a community for Christ. It must be a church ablaze, led by leaders who are ablaze for God.'

Day 6 - Fasting

I don't know if you are like me but I really struggle with fasting. I can remember the time when I savagely feasted on a chicken burger in front of my Swedish friend, breaking my two-day fast early and without her knowing I was abstaining. She was concerned about whether those in the UK were generally famished! But there have been times in my life when I have pressed through. Last year, I fasted for three days and saw a supernatural healing in my knee with symptoms that have not returned to this day.

It's clear that Jesus expected his followers to fast by his response to the Pharisees:

*"But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they **will** fast in those days."*

Mark 2:20 KJV.

But more than that, there is something incredibly powerful about fasting and we miss out in the supernatural and in spiritual warfare when we don't engage. Jesus said that certain spiritual forces would only come out if they were banished through prayer **and fasting**. In Daniel 10, we read that he fasted for three weeks and on the very first day the archangel Michael was sent to Daniel, but was held back by the prevailing spiritual forces at that time:

*'Then he said to me, "Do not fear, Daniel, for **from the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard; and I have come***

because of your words. But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; and behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left alone there with the kings of Persia.”

I've known that certain things have only materialised in my life when I've humbled myself, got on my knees and begun praying. Queen Esther knew this too well also; the feast of Purim, that is still celebrated to this day, marked the occasion when the Jews were spared genocide due to the nation getting on its knees with prayer and fasting, at her command. We know that Jesus has disarmed all principalities and powers (Col 2:15) and yet we are told that *'we do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers'* (Ephesians 6:12). Praying and fasting is a way to do that very thing.

Are you ready to do business in the heavens? Are you ready to stand in the gap for our nation, our church, our family in Christ, our lost sheep? What's holding you back?

Fasting can also be an incredible agent in getting your relationship with the Lord right. Paul talked about this in Galatians 5:16: *'I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.'* Saying no to food allows you to say yes to God and draw closer to Him in your weakness.

Finally, we see in the New Testament that before an important decision, the disciples fasted and sought the Lord's will over their lives:

'While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit

said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Acts 13:2 ESV.

Whether you are doing a full fast, (Matt 4:2) a partial fast, (Dan 10:3) or a single-item fast (1 Cor 6:12-13), can I please encourage you to do battle in the heavens, pull out the heavy artillery, commit to a plan and fast to take ground in Jesus' name! Try taking one step further than you have in the past, set a realistic goal and stick to it. Because like my knee, we walk into victory through our obedience. There are souls out there that need saving. Let's go and rescue them, by doing warfare in the heavens, through Jesus!

Day 7 - Go to the Nations

I spent the first eighteen years of my life in England in a small town on the sunny south coast. Sunshine, seaside, fish and chips and family. It was excellent. I was fortunate to be able to travel on holiday as a child, and we had many wonderful weeks away as a family. We made some brilliant memories. We would usually head for the Cornish coast, two hours down the road, and occasionally venture a little into northern England or over the border into Wales. I remember one amazing trip as a nine-year-old to Disney World Florida, but for the majority of my childhood, the culture I knew was that of the nation I dwelled in - England. Despite their proximity, I never made it to Scotland, Northern Ireland, Ireland or the Isle of Man in my childhood, and lived contentedly in my little town on the south coast, with beautiful beaches, coastal scenery and countryside. I certainly had no dream to travel and expected England to be my home for the rest of my life.

This changed significantly when I was eighteen and doing a gap year as a church intern on the Isle of Man. A visiting prophet brought a word from God for me; "You are going to travel around the world." This simple sentence had such a significant impact on my whole life. Suddenly the call of God to take the good news of Jesus to the nations and see the church flourish across the globe began to resonate in my heart. I realised that there is so much potential for the kingdom beyond where we call home. A desire and belief that God was calling me to go to the nations was birthed!

Acting in faith on what was prophesied over me, I took my

long-expired passport down to the passports office and applied immediately for a new passport. If God was calling me to the nations, I would need to be ready to go immediately, so in faith I acquired a new passport. My jaw hit the floor when literally two days after the arrival of my passport, I was invited to join a missions team trip to South Africa and three months later I was having an amazing life-changing time in the nations!

'Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations.'
Matthew 28:19 NIV.

These were some of Jesus' final words on earth and ones which would have baffled His disciples. They were not wealthy, travelled men; many were local tradesmen with minimal mileage across their whole life. Following Jesus through the nation of Israel and surrounding territories would already have been a huge change for some, who wouldn't have travelled that far in their lives. I can really imagine Jesus' disciples grappling with the meaning of 'go and make disciples of all nations', just as we do today ourselves.

Following Jesus had already proved to be a totally unexpected outcome for them. Now the disciples of Jesus were discovering the calling upon them as apostles; to be part of establishing the church and to go and take the good news of Jesus to the nations. It was vital, as the early church began, for men and women to travel to every nation with the news of Jesus. You feel that the miracles witnessed, lives transformed, discipleship received and simply seeing Jesus resurrected, would have spurred the twelve to go immediately after this teaching but somehow things got stuck in Jerusalem. Even after Pentecost, with a growing church,

it took the persecution of the Christians, following the stoning of Stephen in Acts 6 -8 to begin the spread of the gospel beyond Jerusalem and for the people of God to go to the nations.

I can relate to the disciples from my own life. I read and hear the word “go” but frankly I feel that’s for someone else or for those in leadership. I can’t see how I would ever travel to the nations, and simply get stuck with a vision of life within a ten-mile radius. I really believe that for many, over the ten days of prayer, the Lord is wanting to call us to go into the nations and share the good news of Jesus with others. And I want to encourage you, do you have a passport ready for you to travel?

“Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.” Psalm 2:8 NIV.

As we pray and fast, I really believe that God is going to create a quickening and a hunger in many of our hearts to believe that this is a year to go to the nations. As a church we have a calling as an apostolic house to go, show, teach and reveal the ways of the kingdom to other believers and to break new ground open, seeing the lost saved! This isn’t just a privilege reserved for those in leadership but, as Psalm 2 encourages us, it is an opportunity for all of us.

Ask God in your prayers this week:

1. To put a nation on your heart to start praying for
2. To enlarge your heart’s desire to go to the nations
3. That opportunities to go to the nations will come in 2024 and the years ahead.

4. To make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.

When I think of the word inheritance, it reminds me of the legal process of will-writing, where people are stated as beneficiaries and receivers of possessions when someone passes away. In our situation, we should have the same confidence that when we ask God, he will make the nations our inheritance. Something we can claim as a possession in faith. Where are you being called to go? In 2024, where are you going to walk into your inheritance in the nations?

In the same way that the first followers of Jesus and sharers of the gospel arrived in the Isle of Man in coracles (small, lightweight, circular boats) in 447 AD to share the gospel with the locals, I am praying something will spark in your heart today not to disqualify yourself from travelling to the nations, but to believe you to have a calling beyond your local home to go to the nations! To go and make disciples and see the kingdom of God move mightily!

Ask today and believe for opportunities to go and receive a great inheritance in the nations in 2024.

Day 8 – One Nation Under God

In my hometown of Londonderry, my family are famous for defending the nation of ULSTER. It's an exciting story and one I think has a point for today's devotional - or maybe I just like telling the family history. In the late 1600s the city became a battle ground between the protestant inhabitants loyal to King William, and the attacking forces of James II who was the deposed Catholic king of England

James decided to take the throne by raising an army and attacking through Ireland. He set his sights on the largest English Garrison at Londonderry. His armies arrived at the city and it seemed as if it would easily fall, as many didn't want to fight. However, there was a group of young men who were apprentice boys, and they decided that they would close the gates of the city in the face of the enemy soldiers. This started a siege which lasted for 105 days but eventually was relieved by William of Orange forces, and King James was defeated. Two of these mighty apprentice boys, Robert and Daniel Sherrard were relatives of my father. Robert was my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather.

The sad thing is that when William's forces arrived, it was said that they had a Bible in one hand and a sword in the other and this division in Ulster still remains today. In the churches that I grew up in, the flags of Protestant nationalism were on display each Sunday, which made it really hard for non-Protestants to feel comfortable and welcome in this environment. It felt as if to be a Christian meant you had to become a Protestant and give up your national values, music and culture. Very few Catholics

ever entered such churches. The flags and emblems were a blockage to the kingdom of God advancing.

Interestingly, the church here on the Isle of Man is made up of many nations, British, African, European, Asian, and even the Manx! So how do we become 'One Nation Under God' without losing our national identity? Well, in Christ, our new nation is the Kingdom of God, not a physical nation but an area of kingdom rule, an area where God reigns. More specifically, the kingdom of God is a spiritual rule over the hearts and lives of those who willingly submit to God's authority.

How do we become part of the kingdom?

'Jesus answered him, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* John 3:3 ESV.

It is important to see that it is about a spiritual rebirth not about our physical birth:

- Being born into a religious family doesn't make you a Christian. God doesn't have any grandchildren just children!
- being born in a 'Christian' country doesn't makes you a Christian.
- Going to church doesn't make you a Christian. The song writer Keith Green said that "going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to McDonalds makes you a hamburger!"
- YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN!

But before you start burning your passports and national costumes, know that nations do matter to God. In fact, even in Heaven nations are recognised and worship God in their own tongue!

⁹ 'After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.' Revelation 7:9 ESV.

But on flip side, when I first came to the island, the church I attended was known as the Irish Church because so many of us attended. It could be at times cliquy and hard for new people to feel welcome. They didn't talk like us or have the same 'banter' (sense of humour) as us. God really challenged me in this from Jeremiah 29:4-5 ESV:

⁴ 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce."

I now live on the Isle of Man and my home church family is here with Living Hope. I have planted not just my physical roots but also my spiritual roots. Here is where I am, and where I see my nation under God.

Just one last thought that hit me about this idea of one nation, and it was how our national culture can actually impact how we worship and serve God. Our apostolic leader in Four12, Andrew Selley, on a recent trip to Zambia led

a conference for Africa Leaders and he reported; 'It was an incredible time of undoing many of the traditions brought in by man and teaching Kingdom culture as it stands in the Bible, which led to deep repentance in some of the leaders who had aligned with cultural syncretism. God purified and broke control and bondage off the leaders, and we trust that the same happens in their churches.'

That is where Kingdom culture supersedes our nations values and beliefs. One pastor, **Michael Tembo**, who influences and leads 26 local churches in Mkushi, Zambia said this:

"I've seen that, most of the time, I've been mixing up church and culture, and it is not working well. This training time taught us that we must be Kingdom people with a Kingdom culture and values for us to break through. I also chatted with Ryan and Andrew – humble men of God who want to connect with people. And so, when they speak against titles, I now understand. I'm so provoked and I am going back to Mkushi a different person, to try to do the work more seriously than ever before."

Today, to be a Nation under God, seeking God's Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, we must listen to the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:33:

³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Day 9 - Hearing His Guiding

Once upon a time, I lived in a house called Cathedral View right in the centre of Peel. One morning, just before my usual 6am alarm went off, I woke up fully alert and immediately felt the guiding of God. "Get up, get dressed and head out into Peel for a quiet time." The battle of the duvet commenced; leaving my warm bed to the mild summer morning wasn't appealing! The longer I lay there, the stronger the guiding grew. Finally, after accepting I had to go, I was at the front door, hearing his guiding to walk left, right into the centre of town. Within 30 seconds of leaving my home I was met by a lad I knew just home from Douglas and looking for his lost friends. What followed was a great hour or finding his friends, sharing the gospel, talking about the miraculous power of Jesus and returning home all before 7:00am. The timing of us meeting was almost like a fairy-tale world where the make believe happens, but I believe this is the reality of following the guiding of a supernatural God! As we hear and respond, anything can happen! What can't an all-powerful creator of the world do as we follow his guiding?

Another time, in that same home, my now wife was praying for one of my housemates for healing of his eyes. She sensed the Lord's guiding that, as Jesus did, we needed to spit in the mud and roll it up and place it on his eyes. What followed was a partial healing of his eyes, where the opticians changed his lenses immediately due to improvement in his eyesight! If you read through the Gospels and the book of Acts, you realise suddenly what happens when people hear and follow his guiding; the miraculous! We should have great confidence in

John 10:27 ESV *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me”* and trust daily that we will hear his guiding.

Often, the breakthrough we long for doesn't come in the format we might expect, and then hearing his guiding is so key to living victoriously. I think of Joshua 6, when Joshua stood gazing upon the mighty walled city of Jericho, with its king and mighty men of valour poised to fight against the Israelite army. A battle needed winning and the impossible needed to be overcome! What would Joshua have wondered when God said, “March around the city once for six days, with seven trumpeters continuously blowing before the Ark, keeping all your men quiet. Then on the seventh day, walk around the city seven times before shouting for the Lord!” How did Joshua convince his men this was of the Lord's guiding? But as those walls cracked and crumbled, every ounce of doubt and concern disappeared as a great victory resulted from the power of the Lord's guiding. Today, what battles might you be facing and where might the Lord be guiding you to victory?

When hearing the Lord's guiding, I try to ensure it lines up with one of the three W's:

- **Word** – Is what I am hearing in line with scripture? This is the God-given framework for life and all we do should fit and be measured against this.
- **Witness** – Do I have a God-given peace about what I think I am hearing? So often we can turn our emotions into ‘what God wants’, so it's key to check that I am feeling the peace of God in this area. Often, asking another believer or your leaders in whom you trust is a great second sounding board.

- **Wonder** – Do I need to apply faith to what God is guiding me into? Is this something I am doing in my own strength or do I need God to break in at this moment? Often the most incredible breakthroughs come through stepping out in way you wouldn't naturally do.

And usually, from the moment I start hearing his guiding, the three F's come into action:

- **Fear** – Did I actually just hear the Lords guiding? Surely I can't do/say that? That's awkward/not what I expected/impossible. This grappling is good for us, as for many it is the crossover point between responding in our own strength and stepping out in obedience to the Lord guiding.
- **Faith** – What the Lord guides us to requires us to step out beyond our comfort zone and trust in his provision, his wisdom and his direction, which our flesh naturally swings from. It's so key that we ask for faith to trust what the Lord guides us to, and apply it.
- **Favour** – Once you take action and step out to where the Lord's guiding has led you, often the floodgates of heaven open, things shift before your eyes, and amazing miracles, connections and opportunities open up, leaving you awestruck at the guiding of God.

As we head into the end of fasting, what has the Lord been saying and guiding you into? Is there something you need to do? Someone you need to connect with? Or a guidance which you need to share with a leader/friend who will help you consider what to do next with what God has been saying through the fast? As we look ahead into the year, I am in faith that as you

have heard his guiding these past few days, and as you follow his new directions, there will be some incredible breakthrough stories to share! Let's be sheep who hear His voice, recognise it distinctly and follow all that is asked of us.

So today, what is He guiding you to say or do? Stop, reflect, pray and ask God "what are you guiding me to?"

Day 10 - A Bountiful Year

Today we conclude our ten days of prayer and fasting, but it's only the start of a brand-new year with countless possibilities in the Lord before us.

'You crown the year with a bountiful harvest; even the hard pathways overflow with abundance'. Psalm 65:11 NLT.

What an amazing promise even on dark winter days!

Dr. Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ told the story of a famous oil field called Yates Pool. During the depression, this field was a sheep ranch, owned by a man named Yates. Mr. Yates wasn't able to make enough on his ranching operation to pay the principal and interest on the mortgage, so he was in danger of losing his ranch. With little money for clothes or food, his family, like many others, had to live on government subsidy. Day after day, as he grazed his sheep over those rolling West Texas hills, he was no doubt greatly troubled about how he would pay his bills. Then a seismographic crew from an oil company came into the area and told him there might be oil on his land. They asked permission to drill a wildcat well, and he signed a lease contract.

At 1,115 feet they struck a huge oil reserve. The first well came in at 80,000 barrels a day. Many subsequent wells were more than twice as large. In fact, 30 years after the discovery, a government test of one of the wells showed it still had the potential flow of 125,000 barrels of oil a day. And Mr. Yates owned it all! The day he purchased the land, he had received the oil

and mineral rights. Yet, he'd been living on hand-outs; a multimillionaire living in poverty. The problem? He didn't know the oil was there, even though he owned it.

If we want to walk in the bountiful harvest of Psalm 65, and see a rich flow of the oil of the Holy Spirit in every part of our lives, the secret is to make Jesus' priorities our priorities. Most of us haven't yet grasped the depths of what the Lord has in store for us! The promise to those who 'make disciples', to those who frame their daily lives around the great commission, is *"I will be with you always"*. I sense that many Christians interpret this promise of the manifest presence of Jesus among us as unconditional. But we won't actually need Him in this way unless we are 'Great Commission' people. It's a conditional promise.

Almost 18 years ago the Lord spoke to me through a verse in a way that has never left me:

'Then Jesus said to them, "Don't be afraid! Go tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there."' Matthew 28:10 NLT.

What is so special about Galilee? If you have been at a carol service, you'll most likely have heard the following reading:

'In the land of Zebulun and of Naphtali, beside the sea, beyond the Jordan River, in Galilee where so many Gentiles live, 16 the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. And for those who lived in the land where death casts its shadow, a light has shined.' Matthew 4:15-16 NLT

Where would the disciples encounter the risen Jesus? Not where they would have expected. Wouldn't Jesus once again be at the Temple and holy sites? No, it would be in the most spiritually dark region that the light of Jesus would be found shining; in Galilee. The same is true today - if we want to encounter Jesus in the power of the Spirit, 'make disciples' where it is spiritually dark.

Dare to live differently in 2024! Don't allow past failures or disappointments to hamstring you! Anyone who has accomplished anything significant on this earth has had their share of failures. Walt Disney was told he couldn't draw. Henry Ford went bankrupt before the Model T. Edison took over 1,000 attempts before inventing the light bulb. Ninety-nine percent of all failure involves quitting too soon!

Be inspired by this paraphrased excerpt from John Wesley's journal:

'May 5th AM: preached in St. Ann's; was asked not to come back.
PM: preached at St. John's; Deacons said, "Get out and stay out."

May 12th AM: preached at St. Jude's; can't go back there.
PM: preached at St. George's; kicked out again.

May 19th AM: preached at St. Andrew's; Elders called special meeting and said not to return.
PM: preached on the street and was run off.

May 26th AM: preached in a field; got chased by a bull that was set loose.

June 2nd AM: preached at the edge of town; police moved me.
PM: preached in a pasture and 10,000 people came!

We've had a powerful ten days disconnecting from the world by fasting, and connecting to Jesus in prayer. Don't make it a ten-day wonder! Develop a daily and weekly rhythm to keep firmly rooted and abiding in Jesus:

- **First thing every morning get into the Scriptures.** You might find it helpful to use a reading plan. The Bible App (YouVersion) has many, including the One Year Bible reading plan. After you've heard from the Lord in the Scriptures, worship and pray.
- **Fast one a day a week.** Many in the Living Hope family fast on a Wednesday and then break the fast with their community group with a meal in the evening.
- **Devote yourself to the corporate prayer life of your church.** The Living Hope family meet before work early on Friday morning, and every Sunday before the services. Stay planted in God's House, and be devoted to the fellowship.

'...the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits.' Daniel 11:32 NKJV.

Let's partner with the Lord for the most amazing year we've ever seen, as we see the Kingdom of God break through into our lives, communities, and nations!

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