



## **From Surviving to Thriving – Part 1 In Prayer**

If you have a Bible, and I hope you or somebody around you does, let me invite you to open with me to two places—one in the very beginning of the Bible, Genesis 5, then the other in Matthew 6. We're going to be in both places during our time together today. I also want to invite you to pull out something to write on—either a device or a piece of paper, something you can take notes along the way. There's something I want to encourage you to write down at the end of our time together.

As you pull all of that out, I want to officially welcome the MBC family and extended family, for those of you who are joining us from beyond Metro DC, to a new year. 2020 is history, so today we have an opportunity to start fresh together in 2021. Today, you have an opportunity to start fresh in your life. This is why I want to kick off this new series that we're calling "From Surviving To Thriving" —taking us through the first month of this year.

For many of us, 2020 was all about survival. Obviously on a physical level, as many people in our church family have had COVID—some with serious complications—and some people in our families, including our church family, are no longer with us.

I think of 31-year-old Juan Carlos, a member from Montgomery County, who went to be with the Lord a couple weeks ago. Please be praying for his wife Rebecca and their three young kids. I think of other funerals in 2020 related to issues beyond COVID that we've walked through as a church family. It's a clear reminder to us that every breath we have is a gift of God's grace.

At the same time, I'm not just talking about survival on a physical level. Even for those who've had little if any physical challenges this last year, for many it felt like walking through these days was a struggle to survive—emotionally, relationally, financially and in many different ways. As we look back on 2020 and begin 2021, what if God is saying to us, "I did not create you merely to survive in this world"? What if God is saying to us, "I have made each of you to thrive"? At which point you might say, "Well, if God wanted us to thrive, He wouldn't let a pandemic happen. I wouldn't be struggling in these ways, under these circumstances, alone or at my work or in my home or in this world."

How can we thrive in 2021 when so many circumstances from 2020 are still the same? Most of us still are not gathered in the same room. Those of us who are, are still wearing masks. Kids are still at home all day in virtual school. The only difference is now it's cold and they don't get outside. We could keep

going on and on, because all the tensions of 2020 obviously didn't go away a couple nights ago when a ball dropped in New York City. They're still here.

But what if that's the point? What if our ability to thrive is not dependent on when a pandemic ends, when particular tensions subside, when schools open up again, when the economy recovers, when any number of these things happen in your life, your family, your work or in the world? Isn't that kind of thinking actually what causes us to merely survive? "If I could just get by until..." Until what? "Until this happens or that happens, until this is resolved or that is better."

That's the whole point of survival. It's built on the hope that you endure until your circumstances change. But what if there's a way to thrive no matter what your circumstances are? What if God has designed you to thrive regardless of what is happening in the world around you? Would you want that?

Well, the good news I have for you today is God wants that for you. God wants you, right where you're sitting, to thrive. The God of the universe, the God Who created the world and governs the world with all power over all things wants you to thrive. And He has made a way for you to thrive. That's what the next five weeks are going to be all about—moving from surviving to thriving.

In order to get there, all I ask at the start of this series is that you believe it's possible for you to thrive in 2021, believing specifically that God wants you to thrive in 2021 and that He has made a way for you to do it. Every single one of you. Every member of this church, every guest, every person listening right now. No matter who you are or what you've done. Regardless of whether this is your first time in church or listening in on church, your first time near anything church-related. Or maybe the first time in a long time near anything church-related.

I invite you today to believe that God wants you to thrive in your life. I want to show you how God has designed you to thrive, realizing that thriving does not happen automatically. I want to illustrate this with a picture that we're going to come back to at different points over the next five weeks.

I should start by saying that I used to not know a lot about growing fruit until I spent about 15 minutes at a couple nurseries this week, so I am essentially an agriculturalist at this point. I purchased two lemon trees. Now, let's just go ahead and state what every agriculturalist knows: this is not the season for lemon trees. It's not really the season for anything. It's also not the place for lemon trees. We're in northern Virginia, not southern California. But we're going to attempt to do something really simple with these two trees over the next five weeks.

The tree on my right, your left, we will water and put in sunlight. God has designed, intended and created this tree to thrive with a few simple things happening to it. Let's watch what happens according to God's design for a living organism to thrive.



Then, for the tree on my left, your right, we're going to neglect those things. We're not going to water it. It's going to see no sunlight. We're going to think of creative ways to neglect it, then watch what happens. If it does not thrive, we're just going to tape some lemons on and pretend like it is okay. In the process, hopefully we'll be seeing that if we neglect it that it not only won't survive, but will wither and die.

So this is the picture. It's not an especially creative illustration—it's obviously very basic—yet it's straight from God's Word. Remember Psalm 1:1-3:

*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.*

That's the picture. God is saying, "I want you to thrive." Now, we're not going to talk much today about exactly what God just said in the very end of Psalm 1:2—"...on his law he meditates day and night"—about how meditating on and reading through God's Word enables us to thrive. But I do want to at least mention that because we have started a Bible reading plan together. If you haven't started yet, it's only January 3<sup>rd</sup>, so you're not too late. I would actually say throughout this year, you're never too late. You don't have to stress out about not being totally caught up.

But I do want to invite you today to read through the Bible this year together with us. Go to [mcleanbible.org/biblereadingplan](http://mcleanbible.org/biblereadingplan) and download on a device or print out a Bible reading plan that is basically two chapters a day—one in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament. So we're starting right now in Genesis and Matthew. As we walk through this plan, we will actually read through the Bible together over the next two years. Actually, we'll read through the Old Testament once, and the New Testament and Psalms twice.

Have you ever read the whole Bible? I think there are many Christians who would say, "I don't think I have." I really want to encourage you to change that. As a Christian, this is the book you have banked your life on. It would be wise to read it.

Even if you're not a Christian, I would encourage you to think about it as the best-selling book in the history of the world. Isn't it at least worth figuring out why and knowing what it says?

So I invite you to read the Bible with us. We'll talk more next week about how to get out of Bible reading all God has designed in order to help us thrive. But today, I want to talk about thriving in God based on two passages that are actually in our Bible reading this week: Genesis 5 and Matthew 6. I should mention also that Sundays during this month are going to be a little different. Our usual practice is to walk verse by verse through particular books in the Bible. Last week we finished a journey through 1 Peter. That book was so good and exactly what we needed.

Many of you may not remember that we were walking through 1 Corinthians when everything was shut down last year. We thought it would be wise to go in a different direction in God's Word in light of all

that was going on around us with the pandemic. Our plan, after these five weeks in January, is to pick up where we left off in 1 Corinthians 6. We're going to talk about some really significant issues in our culture, like gender and sexuality. So more on that later.

So for this month, as we're talking about going from surviving to thriving, we're going to be in different places in God's Word. Genesis 5 is a really heavy chapter in the Bible, but it contains one of the most beautiful verses in the entire Bible. The chapter actually begins by going back to the beginning of the Bible, the creation of man and woman. You have basically a summary of the start of human life in the world.

Then listen to what it says in verse five: "*Thus all the days that Adam lived were 930 years...*" That's a pretty long time. Another day we can talk about why he lived so many years and how others after him lived for a gradually decreasing number of years. But we'll just say at this point, this puts a new perspective on approaching your 50s, 60s, 70s or 80s. You'd just be getting started.

I was doing some deadlifts yesterday and to be totally honest here, my body is not 20 years old anymore. Right before I came out on the platform, you would have thought I was praying on my knees. I was actually stretching out my back because I'm having a hard time standing right now. So if that's what 40 feels like, what does 930 feel like?

Seriously, what I want us to look at today is these next three words: "*...and he died.*" He died. When you know the story of what happened before this, you would know this was not supposed to happen. God created man and woman, Adam and Eve, to live with Him forever, to never die. Death didn't enter the world until sin entered the world, not until Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve decided they knew better than God what was best for their lives and they disobeyed Him. God had told them, "If you eat from this tree, you will die. But I don't want you to die. I want you to live and enjoy Me and one another and life in this world forever. Just trust Me." But they decided to turn from Him instead. They believed God was not trustworthy.

So now in Genesis 5:5, Adam dies. Then look at the refrain, over and over again, as you go through this chapter:

- Verse 8, "*Thus all the days of Seth were 912 years, and he died.*"
- Verse 11, "*Thus all the days of Enosh were 905 years, and he died.*"
- Verse 14, "*Thus all the days of Kenan were 910 years, and he died.*"
- Verse 17, "*...and he died.*"
- Verse 20, "*...and he died.*"
- Verse 27, "*...and he died.*"
- All the way to verse 31, "*Thus all the days of Lamech were 777 years, and he died.*"

This is a heavy chapter, but right in the middle of all these people who died, one person sticks out because we don't see this phrase regarding him. Genesis 5:24 says, "*Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.*" So instead of just saying Enoch did this or that, then died, the Bible says, "*Enoch*

*walked with God...*” These three words summarize my prayer for your life, and for my life for that matter. I pray this for every one of you. I pray this continually for members of MBC, those who are listening and for our guests. I pray this for all the people I’m closest to. I pray that you would walk with God. The original language here indicates intimacy with God, closeness with God, a deep relationship with God.

Could it be that this is the key to thriving in a way that nothing in this world can take away from you? Just to think of this even being possible for you and me, as people who have sinned against God. If we could just jump ahead in this story—for those who are new to church or need to be reminded of the whole point here—this is why Jesus came. This is what we just celebrated at Christmas.

All of us, just like Adam and Eve, have sinned against God. You and I have all turned from God’s ways to our own ways and have not believed God is trustworthy. As a result of our sin, we are separated from God and we all deserve to die and experience God’s eternal judgment for our sin. But God loves us so much that He came to us in the person of Jesus, Who never sinned. Then, even though He had no sin to die for, Jesus chose to die on a cross for the sins of anyone who would trust in Him. Then He rose from the dead in victory over sin, so that all who trust in Him—no matter who you are, no matter what you’ve done—can be reconciled with God and experience deep relationship with God. Do you realize what this means? You can walk with God. You can experience deep relationship, closeness and intimacy with God.

We’re talking about God! Our Bible reading plan this week started with Genesis 1, the creation of the world. As I was reading it, I was so overwhelmed. Let this soak in. We’re talking about the God Who spoke and light came out of darkness. We’re talking about the God Who said a word and the earth was formed. The God Who separated the waters from the heavens. The God Who formed the land to meet the water. He’s the God Who caused the land to bear fruit and vegetation. He’s the God who caused water to pour forth throughout the land.

We’re talking about the God Who created the sun, the God Who created the moon, the God Who created and sustains every single star in the sky. He’s the God Who created every fish in the water and every bird in the air. He’s the God Who created birds to carry fish through the air. He’s the God Who created every tiny insect, every roaring animal. He’s the God Who beautifully made and breathed life into over 7.5 billion people who are on the planet right now.

The God Who makes all of this a reality has designed you for closeness with Himself. Are you getting this? As a child, as a teenager, you were made to walk with God. College student, young adult, you were made to walk with God. No matter who you are, no matter how young or old you are, you were made to walk with God. And Jesus came to make that possible for you so don’t settle for anything less in your life than intimacy, closeness and walking with God. You were made for this. This is the key to thriving in this world. It makes sense—you walk with God, the One Who created you, loves you and designed you for life.

This leads us right to Matthew 6, also in our Bible reading this week, where Jesus says these words in verses five and six:

*And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Did you hear what Jesus just said? Jesus is talking about religious people here—people who pray and participate in religious activities. He’s saying, “They are not walking with God. They’re just going through religious motion.” Don’t miss this. It is entirely possible, and unfortunately all too common, for people to pray or go through religious motion and not actually walk with God. Do you think that’s possible for you? For me? Absolutely, it is. It’s possible for any one of us, including me, to live a life of monotonous religious motion. All kinds of professing Christians do this. All kinds of professing Christian leaders do this. This is a danger for each of us.

There’s a lot going on here with these hypocrites, including their desire for praise from others. I think in an even more basic way, the problem is they are more focused on praying than they are focused on God. They’re just saying words; they’re not walking with God. Jesus says, “This is not what you were created for. You were created for so much more than this. So get in a room alone with God, shut the door, just you and Him, and pray to your Father.”

As a side note, this is a powerful picture of intimacy in and of itself. I think of my youngest son being upset about something this last week, crawling into my lap and saying, “I love you, Daddy.” I was just holding him, cherishing every second. This is the picture God gives for our relationship with Him. I’ll take that every day with God, which is the point.

When you realize that prayer is experiencing intimacy, closeness and deep relationship with God, then you don’t have to pray anymore, you don’t have to convince yourself to set aside time for this—you want to pray. And that time with God your Father leads to what? Reward. Jesus says, “Reward.” I’m emphasizing that word because I think so many Christians are missing out on it.

Even prayer for you is something you survive through instead of thriving in. Prayer is like words before a meal, or a couple phrases or thoughts in the morning or before you go to bed. But God has designed you to experience intimacy with Him through prayer. You’re not designed to survive in prayer; you’re designed to thrive through prayer. You are designed by God for reward in relationship with Him and that reward is possible for you every day this week, every day this month.

This is why Jesus says what He does next in verses seven and eight: *“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”*

Now what Jesus said right there can be really confusing—even demotivating when it comes to prayer, right? Jesus said, “Don’t heap up empty phrases and many words, thinking that’s what matters. For God your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.” If you’re really listening to this, you’re thinking at this point, “Wait a minute. If God already knows what I need, then what’s the point of praying?” The more you contemplate it, this makes sense because God is omniscient. He knows everything. God’s not up in heaven with a notepad, writing down your requests, thinking, “Thank you for informing Me of that. I was totally unaware.”

So you’re might be thinking, “Well then, what’s the point of prayer?” As soon as you ask that question, you are on the verge of an incredible breakthrough in prayer, because you are realizing that the primary purpose of prayer is not to get something, but to know Someone. The heart of prayer is what happens when you’re in the room alone—just you and God the Father in heaven. Then you realize you were made for intimacy with Him. The primary purpose of prayer is not to get something, but to know Someone, to love Someone, to enjoy Someone. You wonder, “What does that mean for how I pray?” And Jesus tells us how in the next verses:

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

The Lord’s Prayer—there’s so much we could talk about here. I just led a conference for 13,000 college students and young adults this last week, walking through five sermons on these words. I’ll just summarize all of that with an acrostic we encourage one another to use when it comes to experiencing intimacy with God through prayer. For those of you who have been around MBC for the last few years, this will be a reminder. For those who are new, this may be the first time you’ve been thinking about prayer this way. Regardless, I would encourage you to write it down.

**P: Praising God.** When you think about prayer as experiencing intimacy with God, start with praising God. Worship God for Who He is. Jesus starts, “*Our Father in heaven...*” So prayer starts with fixing your eyes, heart, attention and affection on God. How has God designed you to thrive in prayer? Go in a room, close the door—just you and God—and start here. Start by praising Him. Say, “God, You are \_\_\_\_\_,” and fill in the blank. “You’re holy. You’re loving. You’re just. You’re merciful. You’re kind.”

Then move from that and just speak of how He’s shown these things in your life. Start thanking Him. “Thank You for my breath. Thank You for my heart beating right now. Thank You for...” Just start listing all the different things you have to thank God for. Pour out gratitude before Him. And in the process, express your desire to know Him more. “God, You are love; I want to know Your love more. You are all-powerful; I want to know Your power in even greater ways. You are all-wise; I want to know Your wisdom in even greater ways.”

Maybe you're sitting there praying. Maybe you get on your knees which is a biblical thing to do that I would encourage to the extent you are physically able to do so—to make that a posture in your prayer on a somewhat regular basis, kneeling before God in prayer. Maybe you stand and lift up your hands. Maybe you sit in silence, just pondering the greatness of God.

Maybe you sing. Maybe you turn on a worship song and just sing. The beauty is you're in a room alone with God—only He hears you. If you turn it up loud enough, you can't even hear yourself. It's beautiful. You can actually think you sound like the people who are singing. Just worship God. Don't rush through this time. This is intimacy with God, so start here. Praise. Worship God for Who He is.

**R: Repent.** Confess your sin to God. Acknowledge your need for Jesus. This is part of how Jesus teaches us to pray. In verse 12 He says, "*Forgive us our debts...*"—our sins. "God, I need Your grace." So just pause when you come before God and ask, "God, what in my life right now is not most honoring to You?" Just ask Him; He will show you. Examine your heart and confess your sin—things you are doing, things you are not doing. Oftentimes I'll write out a prayer of confession. You might be tempted to say, "Well, that's depressing, just dwelling on my sin and the specific ways I've disobeyed God." But it is not depressing when you realize that God your Father delights in forgiving you through what Jesus did on the cross for you, restoring you to intimacy with Him. Repentance leads to restoration of this deep relationship.

If one of my kids has done something directly disobedient to me, we're not able to experience closeness until they come to me and say, "I'm sorry, Dad." This picture with God is so great because our sins have been paid for and repentance leads to deeper relationship with God. So absolutely we want to repent, turning from our sins in prayer.

**A: Ask.** This is petition for specific needs in your life and in others' lives. So yes, prayer does involve asking for things. It's summarized in Jesus' prayer: "*Give us this day our daily bread...*" Obviously God knows what we need, but God has designed prayer to be the means by which we receive what we need and others receive what they need as we pray for them.

What Jesus teaches us to pray here in Matthew 6, verses nine and following, is filled with things to ask God for in prayer. "O God, hallowed be Your name. I'm asking for Your name to be honored in my life. God, glorify Your name in my life. Glorify Your name in this person's life. Glorify Your name in the church. Just like Your will is done in heaven, God, may Your will be done in my life. May Your will be done in this situation. Help me do this or that according to Your will. Help this person to walk in obedience to Your will."

"Give us this day our daily bread. God, I need this today. God, this person needs this from You today. This person needs that. I need that." We're to pray for ourselves, pray for people around us, pray for others. This is where I would encourage you to think along the lines of both spontaneous and planned



asking. Spontaneous—just pause. What comes to your mind to pray for in your life, in others' lives, right now? Certain things start coming to your mind, so just pray accordingly.

Then planned asking is where I would encourage you to have a prayer list to go through. For example, my list is focused Monday through Friday. I have specific things I pray for in my own life on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, plus different things for Heather and my kids on these days. I pray specific things for our church on specific days. There's so much I want to pray for. I don't think I can cover it all in one day, so I just split it up into five days.

There are things I pray for our country on certain days, for the world on certain days, for different people in my life beyond just family and those who are closest to me on certain days. Just kind of plan it out; be intentional. I want to be intentional to intercede for you. Isn't one of the most loving things you can do is to be intentional about praying for others, even as you're praying for all kinds of things in your own life? So ask, petition, in spontaneous ways and in planned ways.

Praise, Repent, Ask—this all leads to

**Y: Yield.** Surrender your life to following Jesus wherever and however He leads you. Verse 13 in the Lord's Prayer says, "*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*" "God, please lead my life. Guide my life. Direct my life." In other words, "God, help me walk with You in every moment." This is where in my time alone with God in the morning, I try to pray through as best I know every detail of my day. I pray through things I know are on the schedule, things I don't know are coming, people I know I'm going to be around, people I don't know I'm going to be around. I pray, "God, help me walk with You, in step with Your Spirit, in everything I do today." Pray specifically for opportunities and boldness to share the gospel. I find that concentrated time in prayer in the morning then fills continual time in prayer all day long—just walking with God.

One of the people who's had the biggest effects on my prayer life is a brother named Robert Anderson. I remember when I first started spending time with him, praying was a continual conversation with God for Robert. We'd be walking somewhere and all of a sudden he would just start saying, "And Father, we pray for this. Father, we pray for that." We'd interact with somebody, then walk away and he'd say, "Father, I pray for that person." It was just continual prayer, like he was walking with God. I thought, "I want that to be my life."

You know what happens when we pray like this? We start to thrive in intimacy with God. You can do this. God has designed you for this. God has designed you to walk with Him in a way that nothing in this world can take away from you.

Which leads right into the next thing Jesus says in Matthew 6:16-18:

*And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Just to make sure we're all on the same page, fasting is the process of periodically putting aside at least food as a physical expression of a spiritual reality. Fasting is saying, "More important than anything else in this world, including the most basic daily need for food, is my relationship and my intimacy with God. I need and want closeness with God more than I need and want breakfast, lunch or dinner."

Fasting is setting aside a meal or meals, not to eat; a day or days, not to eat. Instead of eating, we spend extra time in prayer and in God's Word. In the process, we're saying, "What's most important in my life is not physical nourishment. What's most basic in my life is not physical nourishment. What's most important, what's most basic is thriving in spiritual nourishment."

Now, I know some of you are familiar with fasting and you fast regularly. Others of you—maybe even professing Christians—may have never fasted or hardly ever fasted. But did you notice Jesus' words here. He said when you fast, not if. That's important. Jesus didn't say, "If you pray..." He said, "When you pray..." And He didn't say, "If you fast..." He said, "When you fast..."

Fasting this is one of the essential things God has designed for you to thrive in Him. It's like water or sunlight for a tree. God has designed fasting for your intimacy with Him. So here's another acrostic that we use to help us fast:

**F: Focus on God.** Jesus warns us in what we just read not to do this so that others will think we're spiritual. Jesus says, "That's hypocritical. Don't do it for applause from others." This doesn't mean no one else can ever know you're fasting. After all, there are times in the Bible when people fasted together—and of course, they knew they were fasting together. The point is you don't do this by focusing on others and what they're going to think about you, or even on yourself. The whole point of fasting is to focus on intimacy with God because God has designed fasting to actually be feasting on this reward that's found through time with Him and in His Word.

**A: Abstain** from food. Now, you might think, "Well, does it have to be food? Can't you fast from your phone or technology or something else?" Obviously, I don't know everyone's physical condition. If it is not possible for you to fast physically from food, then obviously you would look for something else instead of food to fast from. I think there's a reason why we see throughout Scripture that fasting is setting aside food, because food is uniquely a God-given addiction in our lives. Right? We are wired by God to want food, from the time we get up in the morning until the time we go to bed at night, in a way that's different from phones, technology, TV or whatever it might be. So yes, while it could be helpful to spend extended periods of time away from some of these other things, fasting essentially is saying, "One of the most basic needs I have, if not the most basic need beyond air and water, is food as nourishment. I'm going to set that aside." If you're physically unable to set aside a meal or meals, then think through, "What is the closest parallel to that when it comes to fasting?" So instead of eating, you substitute the time when you would be eating with prayer and meditation on God's Word.

Let's say you're fasting from breakfast. So instead of eating breakfast, you **spend extra time in God's Word and prayer.** Similarly at lunch; similarly at dinner. Then also continually throughout the day, because if you fast during the day, or particularly over multiple days, there are going to be points when you're thinking, "I'm really hungry." You start to have those cravings for food, so let that drive you to prayer. Say, "God, I really would love a sandwich right now, but more important than a sandwich is my intimacy with You. I hunger for You more than I hunger for a sandwich." This creates a continual intimacy with God, all day long or during whatever time you're fasting. So you want to make sure you give yourself enough time fasting so those cravings actually happen. It's not just, "Oh, I forgot lunch, so we'll call that a fast." That kind of misses the point. So substitute the time with prayer and meditation on God's Word.

**T: Taste** and see that God is good. This is a direct quote from Psalm 34:8-10:

*Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! Oh, fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack! The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.*

You will begin to thrive spiritually in all new ways when you realize that with God alone, you lack no good thing.

Here's the deal. We have these two lemon trees over here and I want to start the process today of feeding one and neglecting the other. So I'm just going to take some water and pour it all around the tree. Now in this picture, I want us to see what we are saying on this first day of this series. What is the water that God has designed to pour into your life in order for you to thrive? Today we've just seen, straight from His Word that He has designed you to experience intimacy with Him through prayer and fasting.

At the very beginning of this month, I want to invite us to look at this as a month of prayer and fasting. We're going to do this together specifically on Friday, January 15<sup>th</sup>. We're going to gather together in this room from all our locations as we are able to in person. Or you can gather on line. That day we're going to fast together, as many as possible who are physically able to set aside food that day.

That night we're going to come together and pray. We're going to seek God together from 7:00 to 10:00. It's something we started doing last year, but then postponed as a result of COVID. I want us to start it up again. So that's January 15<sup>th</sup>.

Then throughout the month, I want to encourage you to write some things down:

1. Identify one step forward that you can take in your life regarding prayer this month, starting today. We're all at different points in our relationship with God, but we can all take one step forward, one step deeper. So what's one step forward you can take in your life regarding prayer?

2. Similarly, what is one step forward you can take in your life regarding fasting? How might God be leading you to fast this week, this month—maybe a meal or two or three, maybe a day, maybe more than one day? It might be different for each of us, but what's one step forward you can take regarding fasting?

I want to give you a couple minutes to write down what comes to your mind, just between you and God. If you don't have anything to write down, seriously consider what's one step forward you can take in your life regarding prayer and fasting. Take a couple minutes to do that, then I want to pray for us.



As you are reflecting and writing, the last thing I want to encourage and challenge you to do is to share whatever came to mind, whatever you wrote down, with someone else—someone else in your family, someone else in your group, someone else who is a follower of Jesus. This will provide encouragement to them and will create accountability in a helpful way for you. You'll have somebody praying for you to take this step forward. And in the process this will build community. This is what the church does. We thrive together in Jesus. So share that with somebody else and see what God does in the process.

Pray with me.

O God, the last thing I want to do right now before You is use some rote words just to close out a sermon, without seriously contemplating Who You are, leading us to pray right now in intimacy with You. God, we praise You for Your love for us. We are so glad You sent Your Son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins, so that we can be restored to a relationship with You.

So God, I want to intercede right now for every single person listening, that they would walk with You. I pray Genesis 5:24 over them. May it be said, for each of their names, that they walk with God. For young kids to experience walking with You. For the oldest man or woman listening to this, that they would walk with You in deeper ways, experiencing deeper intimacy than they've ever experienced before.

I pray for people who have been walking with You for decades, that these days and this year would be a year of thriving like they've never experienced before, regardless of circumstances. God, we praise You for making thriving in relationship with You possible, regardless of a pandemic. So help us to experience this, we pray.

We pray particularly this month that You would be honored and glorified in us as a church seeking You through prayer and fasting. Not just going through monotonous religious motions, but truly experiencing You, walking with You. God, we pray that all of this would lead to our good, for others' good and ultimately Your glory. We love You God and praise You for the privilege of prayer and fasting. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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All Scriptures are quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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