

A New Year, A New Step

What Will You Do?

Fairview Missionary Church | Angola, IN

Scripture: Assorted

Speaker: Joel Greenwood

December 31st, 2023

Well, here we are, the last Sunday of 2023. Actually, the last day of 2023. And it's hard to believe that another year has come and gone. And tomorrow is going to be the beginning of a new year, 2024. For some, as you look back at the year of 2023, it's a year of celebration. As you think back on your life and over the last 365 days, maybe you got married. Maybe you had a child or a grandchild.

Maybe you graduated from college or high school. Maybe in 2023, you started a new job and you love it, or you quit an old job, and it's the best thing you've ever done, 2023. Maybe you retired this year in 2023. Maybe you started dating somebody or even got engaged or you bought a new house. Maybe you had an amazing vacation in 2023, and you are enjoying it.

Maybe you celebrated a special anniversary in 2023, or maybe you made more money this year than you've ever made in your entire life, and it only looks like it's going to get better. For others, 2024 or 2023 is a year that will be associated with pain. Maybe you lost someone you loved, a spouse, a friend, a parent. Maybe in 2023, you had to file bankruptcy because your business failed.

Maybe this year you received bad news from the doctors about your health that's going to impact you for the rest of your life. Maybe in 2023, you got a divorce or you've been separated from your spouse. Maybe you've been sick, and it's just been a year of one health issue after another. Maybe in 2023, you even lost a friendship and you feel betrayed. For others, 2023 was just another year of unfulfilled dreams, desires that continue to be there.

The crazy thing is in a church this size, I know some of you, if for 2023, have had multiple things from the amazing category happen as well as multiple things from the not-so-amazing category happen, all in the same year. It's been a year of high highs and low lows, and you're just ready to move on into something different and maybe hoping to go down the middle of the road for a little bit. You know When we come to a new year, some people take this as a time to reflect.

Some people take this as an opportunity to set new goals for next year. Health goals, relationship goals, financial goals. Other people take this as a time for career goals. But today, I want to encourage you to set up spiritual goals. Why? Because it is a proven truth that in all of our relationships, there are rules that apply. You are either growing closer to someone or further away, but you never just stay the same.

This is true in all of our relationships, our marriage relationships, our friendships, our family, and it's also true of your relationship with God. One year from now, on December 31st, 2024, you will either be closer in your relationship with God or further from Him, but there is one thing that is true, you will not be the same. And where you end up, whether closer to God or further away, will be totally dependent on you because God will get as close to you as you will allow him.

He desires to have a great relationship with you. So my question for you today is, what is your goal for 2024? Do you want to grow closer to God or do you want to end up further away? And my desire is to give you some steps that can help you grow closer. And you need to know that growing closer in your relationship with God doesn't just happen by chance. Instead, it is an intentional decision that you make, intentional effort that you put in.

In fact, I have found to be true in my own life that if you don't make the intentional effort to grow, you will naturally and easily fade. Unfortunately, growing in your relationships takes work, but fading in your relationships just requires you to do nothing. So if you want to grow, you have to put in effort. If you want it to fade, your job is just to do nothing. And my goal is to help you grow.

So I don't want you to do nothing. I want you to do something. And that's what we're going to talk about today. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, as we come to the end of another calendar year, it is truly just another day. But it's a day that we can reflect. It's a day that we can look back on your blessings and also the challenges and difficulties.

It's a day that we can look forward to the next year, putting our faith and trust in you that you know everything that's going to happen to us. So God, it is our desire to grow closer to you. Help us to take those steps that are necessary. Give us the self-discipline to do what it takes to grow in our relationship with you. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

As we look through some passages of Scripture today, you'll notice in all of these verses of Scripture that there is an action step because growing in our faith requires action. It requires us to do something. So we start in James 4:8 where James tells us, "Come near to God and He will come near to you." In other words, God is just waiting for us to take that first step and to continue to edge ever closer to Him, and He will come closer to us.

The good news is you can never get too close to God. I have never had a conversation with anybody in my office or on the street or anywhere that said, "Pastor, you know what? I just got too close to God. I need to take a few steps back." God's just too close to me right now. I can't take it. No, you can never go too close to God. There's always another step, and he is waiting for you to do that. And so we are to come near to God.

The author of Hebrews chapter 10, starting in verse 19, says, "Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened up for us through the curtain, that is his body. And since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings." Here, the author of Hebrews is referring to the temple.

The temple that is there in Jerusalem. He's speaking to mostly Israelite people, and he's saying, "Listen, do you understand what has happened through Jesus?" You and I now have the ability to draw near to God. He's making reference to the veil that was torn that separated the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place. And there in the Most Holy Place was the presence of God. And all of us required some high priest that would be the intermediary between us and God.

They would go into that most holy place once a year to offer a sacrifice for our sins. But we know as we read the gospels that when Jesus was crucified on the cross, that that veil was torn in two, signifying that you and I can have a personal and intimate relationship with God if we simply will draw near. And we come to Him through the presence of Jesus. In Matthew chapter 7, starting in verse 7, Jesus says, "Ask and it will be given to you.

Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives the one who seeks finds. And to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." Jesus is reaffirming to us that God is not withholding Himself from us, but neither will God force Himself upon us. Notice the action steps. Ask, knock, seek. That is an action that we take.

One of the interesting truths that you'll recognize as you read through Scripture is that God never forces himself on somebody else. He never tries to possess anybody without their okay. While the opposite cannot be the opposite is true of the enemy of our soul and Satan. As you read through Scripture, you read about demons and evil that look to possess other people and take over their will. But God promises never to do that.

Have you ever noticed that distinction? God stands by patiently waiting to be invited in, waiting, saying, "I will come as close as you will allow me to come. And every step that you take towards me, God says, "I will match." The enemy does not do that. The enemy tries to take over our will, take over our desires. Revelation chapter 3: 20, "Here I am. I stand at the door and knock.

If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person and they with me." This is that perfect balance that God has. If we don't knock, he will. It's like we're standing on one side of the door and he's standing on the other. And he's saying, "Listen, if you knock, I'll open the door. I'll come in." On the same side of the coin, he's

saying, "But if you don't knock, I will start knocking. Please open the door and let me in." This perfect balance between not pushing himself on us but still pursuing us, allowing us to make the choice.

Genesis chapter 1 verse 26, "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image and in our likeness so that they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' We read in Genesis that God didn't create you and me because He needed us. God created us because He wants to have a relationship with us.

He wanted to share His creation with us. The next statement that I am about to make, if you were not raised in the church, might be a shocking statement, but you and I were created for His glory. A lot of people ask the question, "Why are we here? What is the purpose of mankind? How did we get here? Why do we exist?"

You and I exist for the sole purpose of His glory and His praise." This is also why so many people feel so empty and incomplete when they do anything else because they're not fulfilling what they were created to do. And so there's an emptiness that is there. So how do you grow closer to God? How do you take your next step toward him? It's not like you can call him up and ask him to go golfing with you, or can you?

It's not like you can book a flight so that you can go on a family vacation and invite God to come along, or can you? It's not like you can call him up on the phone and talk to him about your day or can you. You see, if you want to grow closer to God one year from now, what should you do? Give him a phone call, invite him to go golfing, take him on vacation? You see, you already know what I'm going to tell you in the next few moments.

You know what I'm going to say. So I'm going to work through these things fast, and then I want to give you some practical steps to give you a better chance of sticking with it because you already know what I'm going to share with you. These are the ways that you can grow closer to God. And again, they will not be shocking. Number one, receive Jesus. If you want to grow closer in your relationship with God, obviously, you have to receive Jesus. John 14:6, Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me." Your first step towards God is receiving Jesus, inviting him in, opening the door so that he can come into your heart and into your life. The second step, the second thing that you can do to grow in your relationship with God is read the Bible. I told you these were really shocking, aren't they? You could probably make this list. Read the Bible. Hebrews 4:12 tells us, "For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Our Bible is alive. It changes us. It draws us closer to Him. The next thing you can do starts with a P, ends with Ray. Pray. All right? Pray. Again, not surprising. If you struggle with memorization, this next verse is your verse, all right? 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, verse 17, "Pray continually." You got it.

That's a whole verse you just memorized. "Pray continually." Paul tells us we should be in a constant state of prayer. That is how we can grow in our relationship with him. It's like we are on a phone call with him that never gets shut off. The next thing we can do is worship and praise. Spend time worshiping him, praising him. Psalm chapter 98, the psalmist says, "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Burst into jubilant song with music.

Make music to the Lord with the harp, and with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn, shout for the joy before the Lord, the king. You know, you may come to church on a Sunday morning and wonder, think to yourself, "How did church end up looking like this?" I mean, who made the decision that we sing three or four songs and then some guy gets up and he opens some book and he begins to read out of it? It's because these are the commands that we are given.

We are to shout and to sing with musical instruments, offering our praise to God. This is one of the ways that we grow closer to Him, making sure that we appreciate Him and we lift Him up and we exalt Him. All of these things that we do. The church service wasn't just made up by somebody as to, "Well, I guess this is what we're supposed to do." We are commanded to do these things. The next thing you can do is get involved. Again, not surprising. Get involved in the church. Attend worship services.

Get in a life group. Join a Bible study. Come to a Sunday school class. Serve. You see, the ways to grow closer to God and to take your next step haven't changed in the last 2,000 years. They've stayed the same. But yet we struggle with them.

And I know that. I know that the issue is not the knowledge of what to do, but it's actually doing it. It's just like and I hate using this analogy all the time, but this is the perfect time of the year to do it. It's like trying to lose weight.

Every single one of us knows I need to eat less, exercise more, drink water, get good rest. But yet, we all struggle with it, myself included. It's not the knowledge of knowing what to do. That's hard. It's actually doing it. So I want to give you some practical things, again, that you can do. Instead of just saying, "You know what? I want to read my Bible more." That's great, but we need to be more specific. So the first thing that I told you that you need to do is to receive Jesus.

This is an obvious first step of inviting Jesus into your heart and into your life. And if you need help with this, please come see me or someone else after the service. The apostle Paul says that if you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. So it's a confession with our mouth that Jesus is our Lord, which means I know I'm a sinner in need of a Savior. I need to repent of my sins, and it's believing in my heart that God raised him from the dead.

That is the first step that you take in your relationship towards God. The second step of reading the Bible. Let me give you some practical things. I know I did this a couple of weeks ago, but it's so important. I'm going to do it again. Maybe you need to set an alarm on your phone. We all have alarms now with us all the time. Our phones are with us. You can just set an alarm. Pick a specific time every day. And when that alarm goes off, even make it a special alarm.

Some special music that plays or song that plays that every time you hear that, you know, "Oh, I'm supposed to be reading my Bible." And maybe it's for five minutes or 10 minutes, just set a time. Maybe you want to invite someone to do it with you, to read Scripture with you, and you don't even need to be physically together. You can just choose a friend and say, "You know what? Let's do this. Let's go through the Bible in a year together. You can hold each other accountable. There's just something about doing it together that makes it more probable that you're going to keep with it. It's that accountability.

The same is true of exercise. You know It's a lot easier to turn down that piece of cake or piece of pie when somebody is doing it with you. It's easier to endure working out and exercise when someone's doing it with you. We have the phrase misery loves company. Hopefully, that's not true of reading Scripture together. I talked to you about stacking habits. This is just true of human beings in general. We're more likely to do something if we attach it to something we already do.

I shared with you the idea of you know you get up, you brush your teeth, and you know right after I brush my teeth, I'm going to read the Bible for 10 minutes. Then I'm going to take my shower. When you stack those habits on top of each other, it's more likely you're going to do it. And so try to attach these habits with something else you already do. Pick a specific place and time to do it. Other things that will help you celebrate along the way. If you're doing it with somebody else, plan it, you know a month out.

As we're still doing this, we're going to go out and we're going to celebrate. We're going to have dinner together. We're going to do something fun. Don't beat yourself up if you miss a day. So often, I talk to people that set a goal and they say, "Man, I'm going to read the Bible every day." And then they miss one day and they go, "Oh, I ruined my goal. I might as well stop." Don't beat yourself up. Make your goal to read more and to make more days than you miss. You as a plan. We have so many things available to us now for this.

You all have phones or devices. YouVersion is a great app. You can go on there and search for plans. The great thing about UVersion is if you have friends, you can join with friends, and you don't even have to be together, and you can go through devotions together, and you can check it off, and it held you accountable. We have this thing called RightNow Media, which is basically like a Christian Netflix. It's a subscription service that the church pays for every single one of you, meaning you can log in.

And there are thousands of Bible studies that are free for you to download. There's children's videos and things you can watch, fun old Christian videos, veggie tales, things like that. This is all free. If you have not signed up for this, you can go to the guest reception center, and we have little business cards that have a QR code. You just scan it, and you sign up, and it's free. You can go through these with anybody, anytime. You can even watch the videos together from different locations.

There are so many resources available for you to be in the Word of God together. And one last thing, let me just give you another piece of advice. If you're going to start reading through the Bible, can I encourage that you start in Matthew

or in John, finish the New Testament, and then go to the Old Testament? If you just say, "Nope, I'm going to start in the Old Testament. Can I just give you an encouragement?" Genesis and Exodus are great. I love them. But when you get to Leviticus and Numbers, could you just skip those for me? Go to Deuteronomy and keep going, and then come back to it.

I'm not saying it's bad, but I just know way too many people that stop in Leviticus and Numbers when they try to go through the whole Bible in the way that you have it. So just skip those two books. Go back to them. They're good. But if you start in the New Testament, I think that would be even better. So be in the Word of God. It is one of the best ways that you can take your next step towards Him. We talked about praying. Can I just encourage you? Begin small. Begin small. If this is one of the things you struggle with, just before meals, say a small prayer with your family.

Before you go on a trip and you're traveling, just say a small prayer with your family as you're in the vehicle right before bed. Pray with your spouse. Pray with your kids. Say a prayer before you fall asleep. It's okay to fall asleep praying. It's okay. Start small. Just do something small. Maybe as you drive to work, just turn off the radio and say a prayer if you have a short drive to work. If you have a long drive to work, just do it until a certain exit. Don't end the conversation.

Keep it in an open line. You don't need to say amen. It can be an ongoing conversation. Paul said, "Pray continually. One sentence prayers are okay. Maybe I can encourage you to schedule a walk in the park or some type of exercise. And while you are doing that, pray. Schedule time on your calendar. Put sticky notes around where you are so you will see them. Put them in your car, in the mirror, in the bathroom as you're getting ready. Put them in your office.

Celebrate along the way. Attach prayer to things you're already doing. One of the things that I did this year that was awesome is when I was making gifts in my wood shop for family members, I was praying for those family members while I was making that gift. So every gift I would pray until I was done with that. Now, did I get distracted? Of course I did. I didn't do it the whole time. But again, celebrate along the way. Don't beat yourself up. Let's talk about worship and praise.

Of course, one of the great ways to do this is to find worship music you like. Put it on your phone. Play it. Play it in your car. Attend a worship service like this and sing along. Don't just stand there and observe. This is not a concert. This is worship. It's totally different. You are to be involved praising. Those upfront are leading in worship. Play music while you work. Play an instrument or learn an instrument.

I talked to so many people that are like, "Oh, I would love to learn this, and I would love to learn that." And they say, "But I could just never do it." Listen, I am the most non-musical person you will ever meet. I learned to play guitar because I couldn't stand hearing myself sing, all right? And I had other people tell me they couldn't stand hearing me sing. So I learned to play the guitar as my way of worshiping. Learn to play an instrument. You can. It's not as hard as you think it is. Pick something up. Ask somebody to teach you. Find a way to praise God.

The next thing we talk about, getting involved. Get involved. Get involved in the body of believers. For some, that's the best step they ever take in growing closer to God. Maybe you start a life group. We talk about these life groups all the time. And I know there's some that want to join a life group, but maybe there isn't room because they're all full, which is awesome. And maybe you need to start one. Maybe you already have a group of friends that aren't in a life group. Just add something spiritual to your time together. Use right now media and get on a schedule.

Now you're a life group. Sign up to serve somewhere in the church. Write down a goal of how many Sundays you want to attend church. Doesn't need to be just this church. Maybe you say on vacation, we want to attend church this year. Maybe you start a class. Maybe God's put something on your heart and you say, "Pastor, I want to lead a class on a Sunday morning. I want to teach a class on Wednesday night." It doesn't need to be forever long. You can say, "I think I got about six weeks of material of something I'd like to teach that God's put on my heart. Let's talk about it." Maybe you're in junior high or senior high.

You can attend FCA at your school, fellowship of Christian athletes. There's amazing programs going on. Different ways that you can get plugged in and get connected. But my goal is that you would make 2024 a year of growth. Don't assume that it will just happen because you want it to. You need to take practical steps that lead toward your goal. Pray for self-discipline. I know it's hard. I get it. I'm just like you. Pray that God would give you self-discipline.

Pray that God would bring somebody into your life that will encourage you along the way. And let me just tell you, again, from personal experience, take that first step. And then the second step will be a little easier. And the third step

will be even easier than that. Life is truly about one step, one day, one decision at a time, and you will look up a year from now and realize that you are way further down your spiritual journey than you ever imagined.

So I want to give you an opportunity today to take that first step. That first step may be making your desire public. Now, I don't recommend that you look at all of these things that I've listed and say, "Okay, I'm going to do all of those pastor. I want to do every single one because I know from experience it's just going to be overwhelming and it's not going to happen." I truly believe that God will lay it on your heart. If you'll say, "God, of all of these things, what is my next step? What do I need to do?"

Do I need to be praying more, reading the Bible more? Do I need to get plugged in, get connected? Do I need to receive you for the first time? I believe that the Spirit will speak to you this morning. And he'll say, "This is what your next step is. If you want to do it, I encourage you to do it," God is saying. And maybe it's making that step public. So here's what I'm going to ask you to do. For some of you, we always have people up here that are praying on both sides. The altar is always open. For some, you may just want to come up to the altar and just say a quick prayer.

God, my desire for 2024 is that I will spend more time praying with you and talking with you. That's it. And you go back to your seat. For some of you, you might want to verbalize it. And so you'll just go up to one of the people on the side and say, "Hey, I just want you to know my goal is to read more Scripture this year. I plan on starting in Matthew and working my way through." This initial step is a step of accountability. And let me just tell you something.

If you are afraid to come up front in a church service on Sunday morning in a room filled with other believers and tell someone that you want to pray more or read through the book of John, that it is very possible that you will struggle greatly when the enemy attacks you while you go through your week. If you can't do it in a room where people are encouraging and loving, the enemy will probably knock you down. Don't be concerned about what others think or what they might say. It's between you and God.

We simply want to be an encouragement to you. You don't have to come up front. I'm not making anybody do anything. You can make a commitment from the seat you're in and you can tell somebody close to you that can hold you accountable better than we ever could. But I want you to grow closer to God this year. I would love next year as we wrap up the year to have a service like this and to have people share, "You know what? I have grown closer to God because every day I just took a small step. I'm not superhuman. I didn't do anything great.

But every day I just did something little. And man, do I feel closer to God and I love it? Wouldn't it be great to hear the testimonies of God's faithfulness? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do come before you. And as we look back over the last year, we all see something different. For some, it was a blessing. For some, it was a difficult season. But we all have the hope of looking forward.

We have the hope that comes through Jesus Christ, that you want to have a relationship with us, that you long to spend time with us. May we take those small steps, make those small decisions, listen to your spirit speaking to us now in order to grow closer to you. May you receive the praise. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.