

THE UPPER ROOM[®]



WHERE THE WORLD MEETS TO PRAY

January–April 2019



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Susan Hibbins

UK Editor

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How to use *The Upper Room*

The Upper Room is ideal in helping us spend a quiet time with God each day. Each daily entry is based on a passage of scripture, and is followed by a meditation and prayer. Each person who contributes a meditation to the magazine seeks to relate their experience of God in a way that will help those who use *The Upper Room* every day.

Here are some guidelines to help you make best use of *The Upper Room*:

- 1 Read the passage of scripture. It is a good idea to read it more than once, in order to have a fuller understanding of what it is about and what you can learn from it.
- 2 Read the meditation. How does it relate to your own experience? Can you identify with what the writer has outlined from their own experience or understanding?
- 3 Pray the written prayer. Think about how you can use it to relate to people you know, or situations that need your prayers today.
- 4 Think about the contributor who has written the meditation. Some users of the *The Upper Room* include this person in their prayers for the day.
- 5 Meditate on the 'Thought for the day' and the 'Prayer focus', perhaps using them again as the focus for prayer or direction for action.

Why is it important to have a daily quiet time? Many people will agree that it is the best way of keeping in touch every day with the God who sustains us, and who sends us out to do his will and show his love to the people we encounter each day. Meeting with God in this way reassures us of his presence with us, helps us to discern his will for us and makes us part of his worldwide family of Christian people through our prayers.

I hope that you will be encouraged as you use the magazine regularly as part of your daily devotions, and that God will richly bless you as you read his word and seek to learn more about him.

Susan Hibbins
UK Editor

CAN YOU HELP?

Here at BRF, we're always looking for ways to promote the practice of daily Bible reading, and we would like to ask for your help in spreading the word about this valuable resource.

Can I ask you to spread the word about the usefulness of *The Upper Room* in aiding daily meditation and prayer? This could be among your friends and contacts, or at any events in which you might be involved, such as church or a Bible study group, or a conference, special service, retreat or workshop.

We would really value your help, and we'll happily send you some sample copies if you can use them. Just let me know how many you would like and I'll arrange for them to be sent to you. If you wish you can email me at **susan.hibbins@brf.org.uk**.

If you're active on social media, we can supply cover graphics for use on Twitter, Facebook and so on, and we can also supply information packs to churches and groups if you pass on any requests to me.

Thank you in advance for helping us to publicise our Bible reading notes.

Susan Hibbins
UK Editor, The Upper Room

Living resolutions

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

Acts 2:42-43 (NIV)

As a new year begins, I hear conversations about resolutions and goals. We make lists on social media of books we plan to read, places we want to travel to and habits we hope to break or take up. Sometimes I wonder if we get too caught up in listing and talking about our hopes and goals. After all, talking about the fresh start offered by our New Year's resolutions is the easy part. Living those resolutions can be much more challenging.

In this issue of *The Upper Room*, many of our writers share stories about the challenge and importance of actions that reflect Christ's grace, love and mercy to the world – serving others without recognition or attending to the small details of daily life. In Acts 2, the early Christian community broke bread together, spent time in fellowship with one another, gave to those in need and praised God. These actions led others to explore the way of Christ and forged the community that became the church.

In my experience, the faithful actions and attitudes of others have helped me to see Christ in the world, inspiring me to live in more Christlike ways. I think of friends and family who have prayed for and supported me in times of grief and joy. I think of mentors who have listened deeply and given me the gift of their presence when I needed guidance.

As you read, reflect and pray, I hope you will consider these questions. Where do you see Christ at work in your life and in your community? How will you live a life that honours Christ this year? I hope that for all of us, 2019 will be a year filled with the joy of serving Christ through serving others.

Lindsay L. Gray

Editorial Director, The Upper Room

Where the world meets to pray



The Editor writes...

In Mark's gospel, we read the short account of Jesus calling his first disciples (Mark 1:16–20). Jesus walks beside the Sea of Galilee, where he sees fishermen Simon and Andrew casting a net into the lake, and he invites them to follow him. A little further on, Jesus sees James and John preparing their nets aboard their boat, and asks the same of them. In each case, the two sets of brothers leave their nets and follow Jesus. James and John also leave their father Zebedee behind in the boat with the other men who work for them.

I wonder what sort of day that was. Was the lakeside noisy, crowded with busy people? Did the sunshine sparkle on the water, so that Jesus had to shade his eyes to see the men clearly? It is interesting to note that all four men leave everything behind 'at once' and 'without delay', presumably with no second thoughts. Had they seen Jesus before this day? Perhaps the four men had listened to Jesus' preaching (see v. 14) and had already warmed to him, so much so that when Jesus invited them to follow him and work with him, they did not hesitate.

For me, the most important detail in these short verses is that Jesus calls the disciples exactly where they are: at work, performing tasks that were part of their daily lives. He did not wait for them to attend the synagogue to see if they were worthy people to join him; he was not interested in their past; he did not look for character references from other people.

How about us? Do we think we need special qualifications before we can be Jesus' disciples: many years' attendance at church, for example, and reading our Bible each day? Jesus might be glad that we do these things, but I think he is more interested in us now, just as we are, with all our strengths and weaknesses. When we have listened to his voice and heard his call, all he wants from us is a positive 'Yes'. Jesus knew the disciples' potential. They were slow to learn, sometimes quarrelsome and prone to letting him down, but Jesus knew what they would become. And he knows the same about us.

The disciples left their nets and former lives behind that day for the biggest adventure of their lives. In this new year, are we ready to do the same?

Susan Hibbins
UK Editor

The Bible readings are selected with great care, and we urge you to include the suggested reading in your devotional time.

New Year's resolution

Read Psalm 67:1-7

Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him.

Psalm 62:1 (NIV)

It was New Year's Eve and, while everyone else was busy preparing for the evening's events, I spent some time thinking about what my New Year's resolution would be. Then it occurred to me that my family could probably suggest some good resolutions. After all, they know me better than anyone.

Later I carefully considered all their suggestions and decided on just being me. They had probably suggested this because I often worry about everyone else so much that I get lost in their problems, which leaves me no time to just be me. That night as I was getting ready for bed, I was thinking about what I could do to make this resolution work. Then it hit me: I didn't have to plan! All I needed was my salvation, my family and my God.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, be with us all year long. Help us to focus on you in all that we do, and help us to trust that you are right by our side every day. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen*

Thought for the day: How do I want the Lord to help me be me in the coming year?

Bristol E. DeSpain (Missouri)

'Where is the new?'

Read 2 Corinthians 5:16–21

Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable... think about these things.

Philippians 4:8 (NRSV)

It was 31 December, and three-year-old Julu was excited and happy, playing and singing repeatedly, 'Tomorrow is the New Year. Everything will be new tomorrow!' After supper, with much expectation, Julu went off to sleep.

Early the next morning Julu got up, ran outside, and then came back to the sitting room. In a loud disappointed voice, he asked, 'Where is the new? Nothing is new outside; there is nothing new inside. Where is the New Year?'

Then I wondered if sometimes I can't see the newness in my life. Suddenly Bible verses about newness came to mind. From 2 Corinthians 5:17, I remembered, 'If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come' (NIV). I asked myself, 'Am I in Christ today? What are the signs that I am a new creation?' Philippians 4:8 gives a clue. Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable and praiseworthy is what I am to think constantly about. A second clue comes from Galatians 5:22–23. If I am a new creation, the fruit of the Spirit – 'love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' – will be evident in my life. Thank God for the chance to become a new creation in Christ!

Prayer: *Dear God, give us wisdom to guide us in our life's journey, and lead us to life eternal. In Jesus' name. Amen*

Thought for the day: How am I leading a Christ-centred life?

Sriparna Mahanty (Odisha, India)

God's tree climbers

Read Luke 19:1–10

[Jesus] said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.'

Luke 19:5 (NRSV)

Zacchaeus was a wealthy tax collector, who also happened to be short in stature. His wealth could buy him access to many things, but a front-row seat to see Jesus wasn't one of them. Instead, Zacchaeus had to resort to climbing a tree in order to catch a glimpse of Jesus.

To me, even the thought of clambering up a tree is more than a little scary. Yet Zacchaeus was willing to risk perhaps a futile climb and personal embarrassment for the chance to see Jesus.

Jesus asks us to come to him with the innocence of a child (see Matthew 18:3). No wonder that when he saw Zacchaeus in a tree, he immediately offered to pay him a visit. As a result, Zacchaeus' life was changed: he gave to the poor, made restitution to those he had cheated and, most importantly, received salvation.

Jesus came to seek and save the lost – and whether we are up a tree or lost in the woods, I take comfort in the fact that Jesus longs to rescue us. Whenever I feel unsure or embarrassed about the next step God is calling me to take, I remember Zacchaeus. If he was willing to take a risk just to see Jesus, how much more should I be willing to risk following the Master?

Prayer: *Father God, grant us the courage and humility to seek your Son, even when it seems risky to do so. In Jesus' name. Amen*

Thought for the day: It's risky to walk with Jesus, but the rewards are eternal.

Phillip Catterton (Kansas, US)

Comfort after loss

Read Jeremiah 31:12–14

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Matthew 5:4 (NIV)

I always assumed that I would have children. A year after my husband and I married, we were ecstatic to learn that we were expecting our first child. But two weeks later, we lost the child to an early miscarriage, and we were left reeling in grief. It was incredible how attached we had already grown in just 13 short days to that tiny life growing inside me. Gleefully, we'd shared our news with many friends and family members, unable to hold back our excitement. Now, we had to mourn the child we would never get the chance to know.

I cried many tears over that lost baby, and over every dream we lost along with it – the dream of holding our baby, of hearing his or her first word, of seeing our child grow and develop a unique personality. Having no idea whether a healthy pregnancy would be part of our future was distressing and frightening. Would we ever become parents?

Even in our grief and suffering, however, we were blessed. Our church community, family and friends surrounded us with love and compassion, listening to us and comforting us as we grieved. Through our shared grief, my husband and I came to understand and trust one another and God more deeply. In Christ, we found strength to move forward. Eventually, we were able to have two healthy children; but God's presence during that time of grief assured us that no matter what had happened, he would still have been good.

Prayer: *Dear God, thank you for comforting us when we mourn. Remind us that mourning is a blessing, for it draws us closer to you. Amen*

Thought for the day: Mourning leads me to seek God's comfort.

Kate Underwood (Kentucky, US)

Good-news carriers

Read Romans 10:12–18

How can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'

Romans 10:14–15 (NIV)

When I was young, I had a paper round. Every morning, like clockwork, my trusty black-and-white bicycle and I could be found on the streets of my route. I kept going through all kinds of weather so that my customers could read in detail about the events happening around the world. I felt privileged that so many trusted me to provide this benefit to their lives, and I took the responsibility seriously.

The apostles were called to spread much greater news of their time, the news of Jesus – his life and message. Travelling the countryside, they spread the good news of God's love and spoke of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which meant that the people's sins could be forgiven. And what a message! Jesus was sent to earth for all men and women of all races, whether rich or poor, powerful or not so powerful. Jesus is Lord, the Son of God.

The apostles faced many obstacles beyond extremes of weather. Rejection, prison and even death stood in the path of these carriers of the gospel, yet they persevered. We too can follow the apostles' example and find opportunities each day to spread the good news.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, may we always be ready to share your word when we have the opportunity. Amen*

Thought for the day: Every day, I will look for opportunities to share the gospel.

Michael J.M. Hotchkiss (Texas, US)

God of restoration

Read Philippians 4:10–13

The Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.

Job 42:10 (NRSV)

In January 1995, our family went through a very difficult time. While we were away on holiday, an early morning knock at the door brought the news that our car had been vandalised and our house burned almost entirely to the ground. What we had in our suitcases and what we were wearing were now all that we owned.

Throughout this crisis, God's helping hand was immediate. We were able to stay in the church manse which was vacant at the time. It was a comfortable accommodation and was offered free of charge for six months. Then a Christian friend organised a fundraiser for us, which we accepted with gratitude. Another friend gave us a Bible, which I still cherish. While we lost many precious items, our lives were safe – and we experienced love that we will never forget.

We now live on two and a half acres of land in the country; God's blessings have continued daily and we have learned that no loss is too big for him to restore.

Prayer: *We thank you, God, for always watching over us – especially in our struggles. Amen*

Thought for the day: I am assured of God's love, even in the most difficult circumstances.

Margaret Young (New South Wales, Australia)

'See, I am doing a new thing!'

Read Isaiah 43:18–21

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.

Isaiah 43:18 (NIV)

Each New Year is another chance to achieve what we have not yet achieved. This year I want to be a hard-working student and athlete. However, I sometimes worry that my past failures will affect my future. In 2 Corinthians 5, we read that God does not count our failures and sins against us as long as we are living in Christ. Being afraid that we cannot accomplish our dreams because of our past affects our successes in the future.

Scripture tells us not to worry; we are a new creation. Relying on God's word, I try to keep on track with my studies through continual review and listening closely to my teachers' directions. In the same way, I keep up with my running through practice and mental discipline.

I cannot realise these goals, however, apart from my focus on God. Doing what God wants is our main focus; our love for him motivates us to work hard to achieve our goals. Our purpose in everything we do is to glorify God. As we move into the future, we can rely on him no matter what happens in any New Year.

Prayer: *God of new beginnings, be with us during this New Year. Help us not to dwell on our past failures, but instead to enjoy new days in your presence. Amen*

Thought for the day: I will not let the past take my focus away from God's purpose for me.

Robert Ganzert (North Carolina, US)

The promise of forgiveness

Read Matthew 6:9–15

If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

Matthew 6:14 (NIV)

Years ago I found myself sitting on the front steps of my house, listening while the person sitting beside me was breaking my heart. In tears and anger, I pushed the hurt deep down inside and thought, ‘I’ll get back at him one day.’ I wish I had said, ‘I forgive you.’ It took me a long time to learn that holding on to anger and refusing to forgive someone doesn’t take the pain away. It only makes it linger.

Scripture reminds us that in order to be forgiven, we must forgive. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t want or need forgiveness from time to time. Yet sometimes we hold on to bitterness and lose the very thing that could set us free – the act of forgiving.

Choosing to forgive doesn’t mean that the other person gets off without any consequences. It means that we give up our right to take matters into our own hands and instead trust God to do what only he can do. If we ask with a repentant heart, God is willing to forgive. As children of God, we can choose to be just as willing to forgive others.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, help us to forgive those who have wronged us, just as you forgive us. Amen*

Thought for the day: In gratitude for God’s forgiveness, I will forgive others.

Christine Baker (Louisiana, US)

Look around

Read Jeremiah 2:4–8

The Lord says: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that made them wander so far? They pursued what was worthless and became worthless.

Jeremiah 2:5 (CEB)

I have a double pushchair for my twin daughters. Its rigid canopy normally stays over their heads like an umbrella, but it can be pulled down so that it covers their faces. The last time we took them to the zoo, for some reason known only to four-year-olds, they were determined to keep the canopy pulled down across their eyes for the entire visit. I would pull up the canopy and proclaim with great enthusiasm, ‘Look at the size of those giraffes!’ But then, four little hands would immediately reach up and pull the canopy back down. Amazing sights were all around them, but they missed everything. It was a frustrating three hours.

But who am I to complain? How many times has God said, ‘Look at the comfort of my promises,’ but I refuse to look by not studying the Bible? God says, ‘Talk to me; I have so much to give you,’ but I day-dream instead. God tells me, ‘You can do things that will not only bless you now but will store up treasures in heaven,’ but I go and waste my time doing other things. How many times have I reached up and pulled the blinkers back down over my eyes?

God has surrounded us with many assurances and blessings. If we will only reach out in faith and grab hold of them, then we will be able to proclaim, ‘Look at the size of those blessings!’

Prayer: *Dear Lord, may our eyes always be open to your abundant blessings. Amen*

Thought for the day: Every day, I will look around to see God’s great blessings.

Bob LaForge (New Jersey, US)

Restore with love

Read Colossians 3:12–14

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Ephesians 4:2 (NIV)

I recently read an article about a tribe in northern Natal in South Africa. According to tribal custom, when someone does something wrong or detrimental to others, the members of the tribe take the offender to the centre of the village and surround him or her. Over two days, the tribe members tell the offender the good things he or she has accomplished. The purpose of the ritual is to restore the person and to affirm that he or she is essentially a good person.

I think that too often our tendency is to treat others unkindly, especially when they have made a mistake. We make sure to remind them continuously of their errors. Even in raising our children, we tend to emphasise the negative rather than the positive.

However, the Bible teaches love. In Matthew 22:39, Jesus says, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Galatians 6:1 reminds us, 'If someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently.' Let us treat others the way we want to be treated. In doing so, we'll follow the example of Jesus, who loves us, even though we do not merit it.

Prayer: *Loving God, we confess that we are not perfect. Forgive us and teach us to follow your example of mercy. Amen*

Thought for the day: Surrounding people with love can bring healing and restore the community.

Narda Vargas (Dominican Republic)

The aroma of Christ

Read 2 Corinthians 2:14–17

Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him.

2 Corinthians 2:14 (NRSV)

Walking on our northern Utah hiking paths gives me a great appreciation of God's majesty. My eyes delight in the beauty of snow-covered Wasatch peaks and the sunlight sparkling on the Great Salt Lake. My senses awoken to the lowing of the cows and the chatter of the magpies. As the brisk breeze sweeps over my face, my soul cannot help but praise the Maker of it all.

As beautiful as these surroundings are, along my favourite path the odour of skunk – rank, strong and often lasting for days – is common. As I passed through a 'skunky patch' recently, I wondered about the fragrance that I leave behind in my daily interactions with others. Paul reminded us that we are 'the aroma of Christ' and through us God spreads this fragrance everywhere.

As my nose winced at the smell of the skunk, I had to wonder about times when my 'fragrance' has been more of a stench – times when I might have hung on to anger and bitterness or wallowed in self-centredness. Have I caused others to turn up their noses at Christianity because of my spiritual stink? That is not the witness I desire! But as I spend time seeking God's presence in the Bible and in prayer, his power purifies me. The fragrance I share with the world then becomes the aroma of Christ's love, grace and truth.

Prayer: *Dear Jesus, thank you for transforming us – equipping us to carry your fragrance of life and love to the world. Amen*

Thought for the day: Every day I will seek to spread the fragrance of Christ.

Andrea Nelson (Utah, US)

Answering our cries

Read Matthew 7:7–11

The Lord's eyes watch the righteous, his ears listen to their cries for help.

Psalm 34:15 (CEB)

During the week, my wife cares for two of our grandsons. At two years old, the younger one, Colton, still struggles with his vocabulary so that even when he can find a word to use, he also cries out. He especially loves his toy trains and cries if he can't find them. Whatever the cry, we respond because we love him.

In that respect, God is no different. He watches over us and answers our cries for help. He can hear my cries along with millions of others at the same time. Some days, Colton is needier than usual and wears out his grandmother. But God is more powerful than my wife. Our cries for help never wear him out.

Some of my cries may be insignificant, but God doesn't restrict our access to times of utter crisis or emergency. We are invited to come to him at any time, as a little child would, and that's what I do. As the parent, God listens to our small concerns and complex issues alike. His answers to my cries are always in my best interest, whether I think so or not. Like any good parent, he loves to give good gifts to us.

Prayer: *Dear Father, thank you for hearing and answering our cries for help. Amen*

Thought for the day: Whatever my need, God hears my cries.

Martin Wiles (South Carolina, US)

Welcoming all

Read James 2:1–9

[The Lord declares,] ‘I will show my love to the one I called “Not my loved one”. I will say to those called “Not my people”, “You are my people”; and they will say, “You are my God.”’

Hosea 2:23 (NIV)

At each Sunday service, a man at my church sits in the last pew and greets everyone who enters. It doesn't matter who wanders into the church: stranger, newcomer or homeless person. If he doesn't know the visitor, he introduces himself and asks for his or her name. At the sharing of the peace, he walks down to where that new person sits and shakes his or her hand.

I love this man's spirit. It is the spirit of Jesus, for Jesus stands ready to welcome each and every one of us regardless of our circumstances. Our Lord calls us by name and takes our hand. Jesus loved and welcomed all to his teachings and promise of life eternal. I pray that I may always follow this example – not only on Sunday but on each day of the week.

Prayer: *Gracious God, thank you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ, to show us the way to live. Help us always to follow his example and show kindness to everyone. Amen*

Thought for the day: God loves me and knows me by name.

Monica A. Andermann (New York, US)

In the same boat

Read Matthew 8:23–27

[Jesus] replied, ‘You of little faith, why are you so afraid?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.

Matthew 8:26 (NIV)

I had just finished my primary school education and by God’s grace I passed my exams and was the best pupil in my area. Everyone was happy for me, and I remember that my friends kept telling me that God was good to me; but I was troubled. My mind was not at peace and sleep eluded me. I was worried that, although I had passed and could now attend a prestigious school to continue my education, my family could not afford to send me. My faith assured me that God, who had been with me this far, would see me through, but my family was in financial crisis.

I thought of the time when Jesus and his disciples were crossing over to the other side of the lake. Even though the disciples knew that Jesus was in the boat with them, they were still troubled. We do the same. Jesus is in the boat with us, but when trouble comes we forget that we can depend on someone greater than the trouble we are going through. In fact, Jesus was asleep because he knew there was no reason to panic. When they woke him, Jesus said, ‘You of little faith, why are you so afraid?’ Then he rebuked the wind and it was calm.

I eventually received a scholarship that took me through my four years at school. When we remember that Jesus is in the boat with us, we can trust him to calm the storms.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, help us to remember who you are and that you are with us, even in times of trouble. Amen*

Thought for the day: Today, I will remember that Jesus is in the boat with me.

Mary Nyokabi Penparadise (Kiambu, Kenya)



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UPPER ROOM is a unique publication which has a worldwide readership of some three million. Each daily meditation includes a Bible reading, reflection and prayer. Questions for small group study are also included for each week.

All the meditations are written by readers of *The Upper Room*, who seek to share the insights of their faith with others.

'I love the varied stories and choice of Bible passages. I look forward to my quiet time with God each day, using these notes. They also guide and widen my prayer horizon. Thank you.'

'I feel so enriched... reading people's personal experiences born from lives of faith, not simply doctrine or cold dogma.'

This edition of *The Upper Room* is published by The Bible Reading Fellowship, which works to see lives and communities transformed through its creative programmes and resources for individuals, churches and schools.

The Upper Room is also available in giant print for the visually impaired. For more information, see page 156.



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