



UNHINDERED
DEVOTIONAL
GUIDE

A PASTORAL NOTE TO THE MECKLENBURG FAMILY

As we begin our “Unhindered” campaign, our prayer for you is that it would be a time of spiritual challenge, opportunity and renewal. Toward that end, we have developed this devotional guide to encourage your daily consideration of the themes that will be discussed this month during our Sunday services.

We regularly make disclaimers about the offerings we gather in our weekly services. The intent is not to minimize the significance of what we give to God, but to maximize our belief that giving flows out of life choices made in regard to God’s trustworthiness to lead our lives. This guide is sent to you with the same thought in mind. The giving element of our “Unhindered” campaign is not central to the daily lessons. Knowing God and trusting Him in every area of life is the theme of the Bible lessons.

As we grow to understand God’s game plan for life; work toward being faithful to His plan; make the appropriate sacrifices; and trust God for the results, every area of our lives (including our finances) will be touched. Use these daily studies to open your life to God, praying that, at the end of the 16 days, you’ll be open to any steps God might lead you to take.

The daily lessons are written to be a family exercise for those with school aged children. They can be easily adapted for individual, couples, or even small group use. Writing out your thoughts and answers to the daily questions and prayers will be an invaluable tool for personal reflection. We would recommend your using the devotional at the same time every day, whether that be breakfast, at the dinner table, or just before bed.

Please know that we, as a staff, are praying that this will be a rich season of thanksgiving and celebration for God’s great work on our behalf. Merry Christmas!

Day 1 - Unhindered People

UNHINDERED PEOPLE HAVE VISION

"Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained, but happy is he who keeps the law." Proverbs 29:18 (NIV)

One pastor translated this verse, "Where there is no game plan, folks run around like chickens with their heads cut off, but if you get in touch with God's game plan, it's a great thing!"

Having God's game plan involves getting to know God, living life without limiting God's activity, being free to do whatever God leads you to do and being faithful to follow through in obedience to His plan.

God has a game plan for every area of your life: your relationship with Him through Christ; your family; your work; your finances; and your role in the ministry of the church.

Discovering God's game plan or vision requires faithfulness to learn what He has revealed in the Bible; prayer for understanding, wisdom and diligence to follow through on what He says; listening to the wise counsel of godly people; and the willingness to make the necessary sacrifices to accomplish God's will.

Just for Today: What do you think God's game plan is for your life, your work, your resources? Are you taking steps to be in line with God in all the key areas of your life? Take a few minutes to talk about God's plan for your family. Are there any changes you can make, beginning today, to fulfill those plans? Come to an agreement with everyone involved as to what you are willing to do to be more faithful to God's design for you as a family. Pray together for understanding of and faithfulness to His plan.

Day 2 - Unhindered People

UNHINDERED PEOPLE CAN SEE FROM GOD'S VIEW POINT

"But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.'" 1 Samuel 16:7 (NIV)

Have you been to a parade or festival and seen a dad with a child sitting on his shoulders? The father does this because he wants the child to see all that is happening. In essence, he wants the child to have his perspective on the event...to see it the way he does. The child, left on the ground, can only see legs, backsides and confusion. It does the child no good for the dad to get down on his knees and identify with him. For the child to enjoy the event, he must have a new vantage point.

Much of our life is lived in the confusion of the masses, where our view is obstructed, our hearing impaired and our imaginations overwhelmed by things much bigger than ourselves. We need a new perspective...we need to see things the way God does.

Unhindered people are those who see what it is God wants to do in a given situation, rather than only what is currently happening. The more we get to know God, the more we can see that His plans are very different than ours because His heart is very different than ours.

Just for Today: Go back to your thoughts about God's plan for your life, family and resources. Try to break out of your world of fears, doubts, obligations and necessities to see it from God's vantage point. What differences might there be as he looks and dreams of all you could be and do for His kingdom? Talk together as a family about God's view and then pray for eyes to see things His way.

Day 3 - Unhindered People

UNHINDERED PEOPLE ARE AVAILABLE PEOPLE

"Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'" Isaiah 6:8 (NIV)

A few years ago an Air Force jet was shot down over Bosnia and the pilot survived for several days eating bugs and berries and finding creative ways to collect water...all the while hiding from enemy soldiers. Upon his rescue he was declared a national hero, but deferred to those who had rescued him saying, "I just did what I was trained to do."

A fireman enters a burning home, crawls to an upstairs bedroom and pulls an infant from the smoke-filled room. The parents of the child describe his heroic efforts to the news media, proclaiming their profound gratitude. The rescuer's response is to say, "I just did what any good fireman would do. From my first days at the academy I've trained for this day. When the moment came, reflexes took over."

The more we get to know God and grow in our ability to look at the world and our circumstances from His perspective, the more we find ourselves challenged to become difference makers in that world. The Bible and those who teach it become our trainers to help us prepare for the moment that we might be called on to fulfill our unique role in God's great plan for the world.

Just for Today: Is there any place you sense God wants you to "step to the plate" and do something for Him? What fears, obligations, or obstacles hinder you from fulfilling God's opportunity for service? Talk these things over, as a family, and begin to develop a strategy to be free to serve. Pray for a willingness to be faithful.

Day 4 - Unhindered People

UNHINDERED PEOPLE ARE PEOPLE OF ACTION

“Then I said to them, ‘You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem...’ They replied, ‘Let us start rebuilding.’ So they began this good work.”
Nehemiah 2:17, 18b (NIV)

A pastor knew that 70% of the folks in the local high school did not attend church. He talked with other pastors and concerned community leaders, but little changed. Something needed to be done.

After much consideration and prayer, he decided to make a difference. He hired a young seminary student as his youth director. The student was enthused and arrived for his first day of work thinking of how he would care for the young people of that church. He was surprised, however, when the pastor took him to the high school and said, “We have a nice program going on for the young people in our church. This school is your youth group. I want you to create a ministry for kids who won’t come to our church.”

“So the began this good work.” Vision is not vision unless it produces action and change. One can get to know God and see things from His point of view. One can know His game plan and be available for His use. Nonetheless, until action happens, the vision is just an idea.

Just for Today: You are part of a community of people committed to God’s game plan for reaching lost people for Christ and helping them become fully devoted followers. The game plan is good because it comes from God. It will not be effective unless God’s people put it into action. Pray and plan for what step(s) you’ll take in the next month to be active in God’s plan.

Day 5 - Unhindered Faithfulness

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IS OUR BASIS FOR FAITH

"Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." Lamentations 3:21-23 (NIV)

Our real hope for the future is based on the faithfulness of God. His faithfulness to us is based on his "great love." Other translations for the Hebrew word used here include *loving kindness, steadfast love, mercy and kindness*. The intent of the word is "faithful love given on the basis of covenant or promise."

God is utterly reliable, no matter what our circumstances might communicate. He is reliable because He has promised that He will not leave us to fend for ourselves. All the decisions we make for the present and the future can be made with the certainty that God will be faithful.

Because God's faithfulness is based on His love for us, we can know there is nothing we can do to diminish His love; there is nothing we can do to make Him love us more; and, God would have to deny His character if He failed to love because He is love. (1 John 4:8) For God to be unfaithful to us would be a denial of His deity.

Just for Today: Take some time as a family to be thankful for all the ways God has been faithful to you. Make a list of ways He has cared for you, provided for you and given you direction. Next, consider the future of your family, your work, your community and the church. Pray about those things which will require that God be faithful (i.e., your health, finances, etc.), giving thanks, in advance, that God is completely reliable and faithful.

Day 6 - Unhindered Faithfulness

GOD'S STRENGTH IS OUR RESOURCE FOR FAITHFULNESS

“Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” Isaiah 40:30-31 (NIV)

The pages of the newspaper herald bad news every day: War in Iraq, economic crisis, murder in the streets of Charlotte, debt and dishonesty in Washington. At times, the world seems hopeless and our ability to make any difference is non-existent. That is, of course, if our basis for truth is the news media.

The good news for those who follow Christ is that there is hope and we can make a difference! The world is changed for the good of God one person and one step at a time.

Isaiah reminds us that all of us grow tired and are inclined to stumble in the process of being God's representatives in a hurting world. The prophet also tells us of an unlimited source of strength: placing our hope, or trust, in God. By trusting God to use us as He sees fit, we receive the new perspective of seeing things from above...from God's perspective, rather than in the middle of a world full of bad news. By doing so, we can be available for God's use, with His strength, to be an agent for change. Our call, in Christ, is to do the one thing we can do rather than dwelling on the many things we cannot do.

Just for Today: Where can you make a difference for God in your world? Consider the future of our church and talk together about your part in fulfilling God's plan for giving Christ to those who need Him. Pray together that you would be faithful to do your part in God's work.

Day 7 - Unhindered Faithfulness

FAITHFULNESS STARTS WITH SMALL THINGS

"The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'" Matthew 25:22-23 (NIV)

By the time a teenager is allowed to go off on his own in the family automobile, he has gone through a long process of being tested for reliability. A big-wheel is a starting point in learning to not run into things. A bicycle comes with the understanding that it will be cared for and maintained. Riding the bike to a friend's home is allowed on the basis of returning at an appointed time. Driver's education teaches the rules of the road and the responsibility of taking the wheel. Only after these (and other) tests are passed is the teen entrusted with the car.

Likewise, we grow in our faith and faithfulness by doing little things first. We trust God to help us in a presentation before we ask Him to lead us to a new job. We are faithful to training classes before we are entrusted with leading a Bible study. We learn to give a tenth of our earnings to the Lord by being faithful to smaller amounts.

With God, the process of learning to be faithful is as important as the final product of faithfulness because we never reach the destination without taking the small steps along the way.

Just for Today: Gather the family and have each person share a lesson learned in faithfulness. Where have you succeeded in being faithful...to the family, to your school, job or friends...to God? Share these and then pray about your next challenges in faithfulness.

Day 8 - Unhindered Faithfulness

FAITHFULNESS IS EVIDENCE OF GOD'S WORK IN US

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law." Galatians 5:22-23 (NIV)

In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard suggests that if we want to perform like a great athlete or musician, such as [Tiger Woods or Bono], it is best to study his practice and training habits and then work to duplicate them. Most of us, however, watch the performance in front of the crowds and dream of duplicating that.

Many of us would be unable to identify an apple or peach tree by looking at their bark or leaves. If, however, we saw the tree full of fruit, we would identify it immediately. There is nothing physical that identifies a person as a Christian. The evidence of being a follower of Christ is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. When these characteristics are becoming more obvious in our lives, it is an indication that God is at work.

In our efforts to grow in Christ-likeness, Galatians 5 gives a list of things that will demonstrate that we are making progress. To do so takes practice, training and discipline. Only Jesus demonstrated these fruit perfectly, but we can become more faithful, for instance, by working on the practices that have helped others in the faith.

Just for Today: Take an inventory of the evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in your life. Use this as a tool to encourage the members of the family. Tell each other how you've seen them be more loving, joyful, faithful, etc. Next, think through a step for training you can take to become more Christ-like...in particular in the area of faithfulness. Pray together for God's growth in your life.

Day 9 - Unhindered Sacrifice

GOD MADE THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life." John 3:16 (TM)

During World War II two planes were shot down and the pilots taken captive. One of the pilots was seriously injured in the escape from his damaged plane while the other was unhurt. In the prison camp the men were given little food and no medical attention. The healthy pilot took it upon himself to care for his injured friend.

Over time, the wounded pilot began to regain his health. The other man's health, however, deteriorated to the point of death. As the injured man recovered, the first pilot withered and died.

The now healthy pilot was determined to survive. Not until he discovered that his rations had been cut in half did he know the truth about his dead friend: He had given all of his rations to restore the injured man to health. He sacrificed his life for his injured friend.

God, in the person of Jesus, made the ultimate sacrifice for a sick and dying world. He took our death upon himself and offered his life to us instead. At Christmas we celebrate the coming of the Perfect Sacrifice by giving thanks for God's indescribable gift.

Just for Today: Have you ever given up something that was of great value to you? Have you ever had someone make a sacrifice for you? Take the time, as a family, to tell your stories of sacrifice. Close your time of sharing with prayer, offering thanks for the sacrifices made on your behalf and seeking courage to be sacrificial when needed.

Day 10 - Unhindered Sacrifice

GOD CONTINUES TO GIVE ON OUR BEHALF

“So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn’t hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn’t gladly and freely do for us?” Romans 8:31-32 (TM)

Some years ago there was a popular song that advised, “You’ve got to know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em, know when to walk away, and know when to run.” In business terms, one has to know when to cut their losses.

One complaint often heard in the offices of marriage counselors is, “I do all the giving. When do I finally get something in return?” The question being asked is, “When do I cut my losses?”

Isn’t it good news to know that God doesn’t look at our relationship with Him as a business proposition? He never checks the balance sheet to see who has given the most or to be certain that what He’s pouring out is equal to what He gets in return. Instead, we are told that because He has already given the greatest gift He can, there’s no reason to hold anything back from us.

The appropriate response, according to the Bible, is to understand that if God is on our side, there is really no way we can lose. God sacrifices on our behalf and that sets us free to make sacrifices in return. We can’t lose because He will always outgive us!

Just for Today: Are there any places in your life where you feel like you give more than you get? Talk together about these feelings and pray for wisdom as to appropriate levels of sacrifice in your life.

Day 11 - Unhindered Sacrifice

REAL SACRIFICE BEGINS IN THE HEART

"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." Psalm 51:16-17 (NIV)

The Old Testament is full of obligatory sacrifices and burnt offerings that were to be given to God as acts of worship. Doves, sheep, bulls, grain and incense were all offered to God. Sacrifices were given in worship, thanksgiving and as payment for sin. Life itself was viewed as a gift from God. Rebellion against Him deserved death, but a live animal was substituted as a means of confession of sin and thanksgiving for forgiveness.

Those who gave the sacrifices to God were to take from the first and the best of all they had. God was not to be honored by leftovers, but by the best of all one possessed.

As significant as sacrifice was to Israel, of greater importance was the condition of the heart of the one who made the offering. Did the giver understand that all they had was a gift from God? Was the offering made in humility and thanksgiving? Was there joy in accepting God's gracious forgiveness for sin and rebellion?

Today, God's followers often make offerings of money to God. We do not buy God's favor with our gifts. Instead, as did the Israelites, we acknowledge God's worthiness of our best; our need for His love and provision; and our thankfulness for all He has done for us.

Just for Today: How do you and your family make sacrifices for God? Is there more you could do to express your thanks to and admit your dependence on the Lord? Talk together about your answers and then pray for hearts that are willing to sacrifice even more for God.

Day 12 - Unhindered Sacrifice

REAL SACRIFICE IS COSTLY

“Araunah said to David, ‘Let my lord the king take whatever pleases him and offer it up. Here are oxen for the burnt offering, and here are the threshing sledges and ox yokes for the wood...’”

“But the king replied to Araunah, ‘No I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.’” 2Samuel 24:22, 24 (NIV)

Sacrificial giving was once defined as “giving until it hurts.” The point was not the pain in giving, but instead, the importance of moving out of our comfort zones. Giving that is sacrificial is not just giving from our excess. It is giving from our resources for day-to-day living.

In Mark 12:41-44 we are told of the gift giving of a poor widow. Others had come to the Jewish Temple and placed large sums in the offering bins. The widow came and gave two small coins, yet was declared to have given a more significant gift. The wealthy, he said, had given out of that which was above and beyond their daily requirements. She, however, had given all that she had for living.

In our giving, we are to remember the generosity of the Father in giving His Son. We are to remember His grace in providing for our rebellion. We are to remember His provision of our day-to-day needs. Sacrificial giving is never an issue of what we give, but of what we keep back for ourselves.

Just for Today: Take the time to be thankful for God’s gift of His Son; for forgiveness; for the essentials of life; for life beyond the grave for those who know Christ. While in this attitude of thanksgiving, think together about what it would mean for you and your family to give, sacrificially, to the Lord this Christmas.

Day 13 - Unhindered Trust

GOD ALONE IS OUR BASIS FOR TRUST

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Romans 15:13 (NIV)

A teenager "hopes" to be invited to the prom. The college senior "hopes" to get into graduate school. The sales rep "hopes" to land a big contract. The harried executive "hopes" to be able to get away with the family for a vacation. Each of these "hopes" can be based on some level of evidence, planning or hard work. None are anchored in totally reliable truth and fact and thus, may not be a basis for trust.

Biblical hope is never to be understood as some manner of a "wish" list or nebulous dreams for the future. Hope is always to be anchored in the absolute reliability of God and His promises. Our hope and trust for the future is built around what God has stated to be true. If God is trustworthy, then we have no basis for hope.

God's reliability has been demonstrated over the centuries. Noah placed his hope for dry ground on the trustworthiness of the God who told him to build the ark. Joshua based Israel's hope for the Promised Land on the promises God had made to Abraham, Moses and others. We build our hope for the future of our community on the evidence of God's faithfulness to lead us to this point. We have solid evidence that God is trustworthy.

Just for Today: Have you experienced a situation that seemed hopeless? Why was the event or circumstance beyond hope? As you consider your current circumstances, what hope can you have for the future based simply on the reliability of God? Share your thoughts and then pray, with thanksgiving for God's reliability, for your future.

Day 14 - Unhindered Trust

TRUSTING GOD INVOLVES TESTING

“Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations...Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead...Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.” Romans 4:18a, 19a, 20-21 (NIV)

Abraham was challenged to believe promises God had made to him. God said he would have a son and be the father of a great nation. As an old man whose wife was beyond her child-bearing years, he was tested as to God’s ability to do what seemed impossible.

Once given the son, he was tested again. The child that meant more to him than life itself was to be given back to God as a sacrifice. When questioned by others, his response was, “God will provide.” God’s faithfulness in regard to the first promise helped Abraham believe He would act in the second. Nonetheless, we can assume he had many questions as he acted in faith.

Faith does not mean that we have no doubts. It means, instead, that we do not let our questions keep us from obedience. We trust that God knows best. Faithfulness means risking that God won’t come through simply because He has promised that He will.

Just for Today: Are there places where you have allowed questions or doubts about the future to keep you from doing all you sense God would have you do? Talk about your concerns and then pray for and decide on the first step of obedience you and your family should make in faith that God will provide.

Day 15 - Unhindered Trust

THOSE WHO TRUST SEE GOD'S GREATEST WORKS

"The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the [lion's] den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God." Daniel 6:23 (NIV)

Daniel was a Hebrew captive enlisted to serve the king of Babylon. His exceptional abilities had so distinguished Daniel that the king intended to make him ruler over his whole kingdom.

Daniel's rivals, jealous of his success, sought to discredit him before the king. Their only basis for attack was the faithfulness Daniel exhibited toward God. Babylonians worshipped a multitude of things, but had no use for the God of the Jews.

The penalty for Daniel's faithfulness was a one way trip into a den of hungry lions. Compromising his beliefs would save his life, but he continued his daily prayers and worship. He believed it was God's business to protect him from his enemies. Because he trusted God, he participated in one of God's greatest works.

Trusting God might not lead you to a lion's den. Nonetheless, being a person of faith always involves the choice to compromise or to be true to God. To see God at work in our lives requires that we take risks based on His promises for our protection and provision.

Just for Today: Have there been events in your life that were a "lion's den" (a place of testing) for you? Did God provide for you and was there evidence that God was with you? Take the time to be thankful for God's help and then pray together for willingness to trust God for the challenges you face today.

Day 16 - Unhindered Trust

TRUST IS PROVEN THROUGH ACTION

“By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.” Hebrews 11:8 (NIV)

A man built a ropes course in the mountains of North Carolina to challenge high school students to overcome their fears. A series of wires, board bridges and cargo nets would lead them from tree-to-tree 40 feet above the ground. The final stage in the course was a rope swing that required an initial drop of 30-plus feet.

The swing was tested repeatedly for safety. When the builder was convinced the swing was trustworthy there was one last test: He would be the first to try it. Later he said, “I built that swing right and it was safe. Nonetheless, I sat on the platform for 30 minutes before I could get myself to slide off and prove that it worked.” His faith in the swing was not faith until he slid off and tested the rope.

There is a tunnel that runs through a mountain in Asheville, NC. Legend has it that the engineer who designed the tunnel never drove through it. He wasn't completely convinced of its reliability.

We can say we trust God and believe Him to be faithful to His promises. We have not, however, exhibited faith until there is action.

Just for Today: In the last 16 days you have considered God's plan for your family, work, church and finances. God's desire is not just that we would know more, but that we would act on what we know. Pray together for courage, discipline and thanksgiving in regard to the choices and decisions you have made for your future.

NOTES

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