

Facing the Challenges of a New Year
The Challenge of Opportunity
Psalm 1:1-6

According to the report I received, a Carolyn was in Wal-Mart last Monday in order to do her New Year's shopping. As she laid her items on the counter to purchase, the clerk said, "Cash, check or charge?"

Carolyn began to fumble in her wallet and the clerk noticed that she had a remote control for a television set in her purse. "So, do you always carry your TV remote?" he asked.

"No," she replied, "but my husband Bryan refused to come shopping with me, and I figured this was the most evil thing I could do to him legally."

That will make you think, won't it? Well, it was a day or so after our Christmas vacation, and I had stopped to do some thinking. I had spent the waning hours of the evening trying to deal with all of the "stuff" that had cluttered in the house during the holiday. I was cramming the leftover stuff into the refrigerator; the kids were banging around playing with their new stuff. And all of us needed some Maalox because we were over stuffed! So when I settled into bed, it's not surprising that I lay there for a long time thinking about all of the "stuff" that I have been through in the past year, and some of that stuff made the holiday madness look like the sheer joy that it really was. Few will really understand all of it, and I don't plan on telling you any of it; but the fact of the matter is that it has been a year of real challenges for me. I have faced unique ministerial challenges. I have faced unexpected relational challenges. I have faced unmentioned physical challenges. I have faced unforeseen spiritual challenges. And as I turned the thoughts of those challenges into prayer for our church and for the coming year; I felt as though the Lord said to me: "Stacy, I've got good news and bad news! **The good news is that you have survived and even thrived on the challenges of the past year. The bad news is that this coming year will be filled with even more challenges.**"

Now, after I said - in the most respectful way - "Thanks a lot, Lord!" I began to think about it. And I realized that we need to spend some time talking about the challenges that we will face in this New Year. There are real challenges before us in the coming year. You may not realize it. You may not have thought about it. But you are going to face some serious challenges in 2012. So, I want us to spend some time talking about that. I want to begin by sharing with you some insights that Lord has shared with me about The Challenge of Opportunity that all of us will face in the coming year. One of the challenges that I know you and I will face in the coming year is the challenge of opportunity. I don't know about you, but that excites me. It excites me when I realize that we have all sorts of fresh opportunities before us in the coming year. But I also realize that it is a challenge. It's a challenge to seize those opportunities and not just let them slip by. I wanted to spend our time together this morning sharing with you what the bible says about the opportunities before us in the coming year.

We're going to do it by looking at a Psalm in the bible. The psalms are located right in the middle of your bible. They are called wisdom literature. For they contain the wisdom of the Christian faith that can strengthen us and guide us and bless us along our way. If you have your bibles, turn to the very first of those psalms; because that is the place to start if you want to know what the bible says about the opportunities that lie before you as a believer. Find **Psalm 1:1-6...Prayer**. Now, what I have felt the Lord saying to us as a congregation these days is this: We may not know much about the coming year, but we can know that it will hold the Challenge of Opportunities.

1) Specifically, this year you will have the opportunity for fresh experiences of the **joy** of God's **touch**.

I want you to look at vs. 2 for a moment. One translation puts it this way, "*They delight in doing everything the Lord wants.*" Notice those words "They delight." The word for delight means the experience of great joy. It describes exuberance, or excitement. I have found that when you and I live the life of faith, when you and I live the way the Lord wants, one of the things we can expect to experience is the joy of God's touch. Now contrast that with a startling fact I came across in a report on churches in America. According to the report, one half of all Christians in this country when surveyed said **that they DID NOT experience God's presence at any time in the past year**. One half of church going, bible reading, prayer praying Christians in this country indicated that they did not experience the touch of God's presence even once during the past 12 months. How can that be? If the bible promises us that we have the opportunity this year to experience the joy of God's touch, how can it be that one half of all Christians can go through the year and not experience that?

Well, let's get brutally honest with each other for a moment. If you've been a Christian for more than a few years, you know what it is like to have years when you were really alive spiritually; years when you grew spiritually; years when you really accelerated spiritually. Right? We understand each other? You also know what it is like to have years when you did not grow, when you did not accelerate spiritually. Instead, to be honest, you eroded spiritually. If you've been a Christian for more than a few years, you know what I'm talking about. You've had times when you were really close to God and you've had times when you weren't all that close to God. True? Now, being honest about the difference between those two types of years; I want you to hear what the Lord is saying to you today. You have the choice as to what type of year 2012 will be. You have the opportunity for this to be a year of spiritual acceleration rather than a year of spiritual erosion. However, the catch is that it begins with **the decision to pursue fresh experiences of God's presence**. The difference between a year of spiritual acceleration and a year of spiritual erosion is a matter of your personal decision.

It's a matter of your personal decision to pursue fresh experiences of God's touch. God has no desire for you to live off of stale grace. God has no desire for you to have to live off of your spiritual memories. Instead, God has every desire for you to live off of fresh grace. God has every desire that you live off of fresh experiences of his touch upon your life. The question is how do we experience that fresh touch? Well, here's the principle, so get it down and then live it out this year: **God always feeds the hungry; and God always respects the preoccupied.** The bible says, "*Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.*" (Jas 4:8) Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*" (Mt 5:6) Do you get it? If you are hungry for God; if you pursue Him this year; YOU WILL experience His fresh touch in a wonderful way. But if you spend this year preoccupied with other things; be it job, or school, or your problems or your health, or your fears, or your frustrations, or your disappointments, or your successes; or your pleasures, or your new toys or your friends, or whatever. If you spend this year preoccupied with other things, God will respect that preoccupation. He will not force himself on you. But if you draw near to him, he will draw near to you. If you pursue Him, you will discover fresh experiences of the joy of His touch. That's one of the challenges of opportunity that you will face this year. One of the opportunities that you have before you this year is the opportunity for fresh experiences of God's touch. But you're going to have to choose how much you really want it. That's why it is a challenge that is before you in the new year and not a guarantee. God always feeds the hungry; and God always respects the preoccupied.

2) Another opportunity that lies before us is for a fresh experience of the **strength** of God's **standard**.

This year you and I have the opportunity not only to discover the touch of God; but also to discover more and more of God's ways that will give you more and more strength for your days. You have the opportunity this year to discover more and more of God's ways. If you accept that challenge, you will discover more and more strength for your days. It's the opportunity to experience the strength of God's standard, of God's ways. Now look at the rest of verse 2 in Ps. 1 and let me show that to you, "*But they delight in doing everything the Lord wants; day and night they think about his law.*" (Ps 1:2) See that phrase, they think about his law? It means to study God's word, to learn about God's standards and apply them to our lives. Why is it so important that we discover more and more of God's standards, more and more of God's ways this year? So we can keep moving spiritually this year, that's why. I want you see here in this Psalm the danger of disregarding God's standards; the danger of failing to discover more and more of God's ways for our days.

Notice how this Psalm begins: *Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.* (Ps 1:1) I want you to underline the words: walk, stand, and sit. Do you see the progression described in a person's life who disregard's God's standards?

a) It starts with **walking** by sin. Sin is the opposite of God's standard. It is when we do what we want to do instead of what God wants us to do. Of course, if we never bother to discover more and more of those standards of God, it is much more likely that we will allow ourselves to walk by more and more sin, because we don't realize that it is sin. The Christian who walks by sin is the Christian who flirts with sin. They are not camping out in sin, but they are checking it out. They want to see what all of the excitement is about. Again, they are not camped out in sin, but they are certainly walking by it and checking it out.

b) But that can lead to **standing** around sin. Do you see that there? They start slowing down and standing around long enough to get to know the sin and the people who commit it. They start hanging out with the wrong crowd. They start choosing friends from among the wrong people. They start putting themselves in situations where sin is taking place all around them.

c) Walking by sin can lead to standing around sin; and standing around sin usually leads to **sitting** in sin. Somewhere along the way they moved from walking by and standing around to actually joining in the sin. Can you see how easy it is to slip slowly away from God and his standards?

The Bible gives us an illustration of this principle in the life of a man named Lot. Do you remember him? He was the nephew of Abraham, that hero of faith in the Old Testament, the first half of the bible. Abraham and Lot had journeyed into the Promised Land together. And God had blessed them because they had pursued him and learned more and more of God's ways. And that blessing had included the increase of their flocks and herds and so forth.

It reached the point, where they couldn't camp out in the same place anymore because there were just too many of them. So Lot and Abraham went out and looked over the land. It was all spread out before them like a brand new year. And Abraham said, "Your pick, Lot. You choose where you want to live and then I'll take my family and herds and go elsewhere." Gen. 13 tells us the story:

1) It tells us that the first thing Lot did was to look out over the land and choose the Valley of the Jordan. (Ge. 13:11) Now, that sounds innocent enough, until you know that right smack dab in the middle of the Jordan Valley was this city called Sodom. And it was named Sodom because of the very practice from which we get the word sodomy. It was a blatantly sinful place, but Lot chose that valley. He chose a place where he would walk by the sin every day.

2) And the very next thing you know, Lot has pitched his tents next to Sodom. (Ge. 13:12-13) He wasn't just walking by sin any more. He was standing around it. He pitched his tents next door to that sin. He hung out with the people, and he made them his very best friends.

3) Until the very next mention we have of Lot in Scripture we find out that he has moved right on it to Sodom. (Ge. 19:1) He was sitting in the sin. He had moved from walking by sin, to standing around sin, to living in sin.

And that same danger lies before each and every one of us this year. That's why I believe God is urging us to seize the opportunity this year to learn more and more of His ways so that we will gain more and more strength for our days. Take advantage of all of the opportunities before you this year to learn more and more about God's standards. Start attending a S.S. class if you aren't right now. Get into one of the bible studies that we have. Join in on a small group. Every one of us, regardless of our spiritual or physical age, should be taking advantage this year of the opportunity for fresh experiences of the strength of God's standards.

3) There is one more opportunity that lies before us as a challenge this year that we need to see as well. We have the opportunity for fresh experiences of the **fruit** of God's **work**.

One of the characteristics of a believer who is spiritually accelerating rather than spiritually eroding is fruit, spiritual fruit that will bless God and bless God's people. Notice Ps. 1 again - vs. 3, *"They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season without fail. Their leaves never wither, and in all they do, they prosper."* (Ps 1:3) The bible makes it clear over and over that God's desire for your life is for you to bear fruit. For you to produce in your life spiritual fruit that will further the ministry of God's church. You have the opportunity this year to produce that kind of spiritual fruit for God. You can be a fruit producer this year, or just a fruit consumer. The choice really is yours. But please know this: **The spiritually accelerating life - the life of the Christian who accepts the challenge of opportunity this year - will bear fruit.** Christians are supposed to bear fruit. Do you want to know if you are a fruit producer or just a fruit consumer in God's kingdom? Do you want to know if the fruit in your life is the fruit of a spiritually accelerating Christian? Do you want to know if it is real? This psalm gives us four characteristics of the fruit that pleases God.

1) The first is: **Integrity**. Notice vs. 3 again: *They are like trees planted along the riverbank.* (Ps 1:3) It matters "where" you put down your roots. The fruit of the life that pleases God is founded in the right places. There is an integrity. You know what integrity is. God wants to see that integrity in your fruit this year.

2) Then there is: **Consistency**. If you want to know if the fruit in a believer's life is genuine spiritual fruit, then look for consistency. It says there, *"They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season without fail."* (Ps 1:3) It says that they bear fruit each season without fail. This isn't a part time fruit producer. This isn't the Christian who pitches in once in a while. This isn't the person who helps in a ministry at the church when it is convenient. This is a believer who produces fruit in season and out of season. They are consistent. You can count on them. Tell me, can people count on you? That's the challenge before you this year.

3) The third characteristic of genuine spiritual fruit is: **Stability**. Listen to the bible again, *"They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season without fail. Their leaves never wither."* (Ps 1:3) Their lives never wither. They stick with it through the ups and downs. They are willing to serve God in his church in the good times and in the bad. They aren't your fair weather Christians. They stick with it - in the good days and in the bad; in the lean times and in the plentiful times; when things are going their way and when things aren't going their way...They are stable. Will God see that in your life this year?

4) The fourth characteristic of the spiritual fruit that you will find in those who are spiritually accelerating is: **Abundancy**. It says that *"In all they do, they prosper."* (Ps 1:3) This is the picture of fruit that just overflows. You know what when you see it, it's going to have fruit. God wants us to be people who overflow with fruit. God wants us to be people whose lives just bless and bless those around us.

Someone sent me an email the other day that talked about Charles Schultz, the creator of Snoopy and the Peanuts comic strip. In case you didn't know it, Charles Schultz was a very committed Christian.

Anyway, according to the story, Schultz once spoke about people who make a real impact in life. He asked the people who were listening to him to take a little quiz. Let me give it to you and see how well you do.

- 1. Name the five wealthiest people in the world. (Can anybody here name all five?)*
- 2. Name the last five Heisman trophy winners.*
- 3. Name the last five winners of the Miss America pageant.*
- 4. Name ten people who have won the Nobel or Pulitzer Prize.*
- 5. Name the last half dozen Academy Award winners for best actor and actress.*
- 6. Name the last decade's worth of World Series winners.*

So, how did you do? The point is, none of us remember the headliners of yesterday. These are no second-rate achievers. They are the best in their fields, but the applause dies. The awards tarnish and the achievements are forgotten.

But then Schulz said: Here's another quiz. See how you do on this one:

- 1. List a few teachers who aided your journey through school.*
- 2. Name three friends who have helped you through a difficult time.*
- 3. Name five people who have taught you something worthwhile.*
- 4. Think of a few people who have made you feel appreciated and special.*
- 5. Think of five people you enjoy spending time with.*

Now, that's easier isn't it? The people who made a difference in your life are the people who bore fruit that blessed you. The only question is whether or not you want to be one of those people for somebody else? *As I understand it, the nurse took the arm of the young man and escorted him to the bedside of an elderly man. "Your son is here," she whispered to the patient. She had to repeat the words several times before the patient's eyes opened.*

He was heavily sedated because of the pain of his heart attack and he dimly saw the young man standing outside the oxygen tent. He reached out his hand and the young man tightly wrapped his fingers around it, squeezing a message of encouragement.

The nurse brought a chair next to the bedside. All through the night the young man sat holding the old man's hand and offering gentle words of hope. The dying man said nothing as he held tightly to his son.

As dawn approached, the patient died. The young man placed on the bed the lifeless hand he had been holding. Then he went to notify the nurse.

While the nurse did what was necessary, the young man waited. When she had finished her task, the nurse began to offer words of sympathy to the young man. But he interrupted her. "Who was that man?" he asked.

The startled nurse replied, "I thought he was your father."

"No, he was not my father," he answered. "I never saw him before in my life." "Then why didn't you say something when I took you to him?" asked the nurse.

He replied, "I also knew he needed his son, and his son just wasn't here. When I realized he was too sick to tell whether or not I was his son, I knew how much he needed me."

You have that opportunity this year. Just look around you. There people in this church whose lives you can touch. Just get involved in God's kingdom work around here. Start bearing fruit. Just look around you. There are people outside of this church whose lives you can touch. Just get involved in God's kingdom work around here. Start bearing fruit. So tell me, or better yet tell God; **what will you choose in 2012?**

Facing the challenges of a new year
The Challenge of Opportunity
Psalm 1:1-6

The challenges before us in the coming year:

- 1) The Challenge of Opposition.
- 2) The Challenge of Opportunity.

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. 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, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps 1:1-6)

The Opportunities Before You This Year:

#1: The Joy of God's Touch.
They delight in doing everything the Lord wants. (Ps 1:2)

They delight in doing everything the Lord wants. (Ps 1:2)

One half of all Christians in America said they did not experience God's presence at any time in the past year. (Barna, Habits of Highly Successful Churches)

Key Principle: God always feeds the hungry; and God always respects the preoccupied.
Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. (Jas 4:8)
"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. (Mt 5:6)

#2: The Strength of God's Standard.
But they delight in doing everything the Lord wants; day and night they think about his law. (Ps 1:2)

But they delight in doing everything the Lord wants; day and night they think about his law. (Ps 1:2)

The Danger of Disregarding This Challenge:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. (Ps 1:1)

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. (Ps 1:1)

- 1) Walking by sin.
Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. (Ps 1:1)
- 2) Standing around sin.

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. (Ps 1:1)

3) Sitting in sin.

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. (Ps 1:1)

#3: The Fruit of God's Work.

They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season without fail. Their leaves never wither, and in all they do, they prosper. (Ps 1:3)

Four Characteristics of Genuine Spiritual Fruit:

1) Integrity.

They are like trees planted along the riverbank. (Ps 1:3)

2) Consistency.

They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season without fail. (Ps 1:3)

3) Stability.

They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season without fail. Their leaves never wither. (Ps 1:3)

4) Abundancy.

They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season without fail. Their leaves never wither, and in all they do, they prosper. (Ps 1:3)

What Will You Choose in 2012?