

Rooted in 2024

In a new year, it is customary to look forward and dream and plan for all the changes we want to see. But before we do that as individuals and as a Church community, I think it is so important to look back.

Before we dust off our new calendars, set new goals, and look to the future, we need to take time to look back, and to remember what God has done this past year. Because He has done great things in this church over the past year. This past year, we have learned so much in our community.

In 2023 we started the year with a series on prayer and fasting. This year, we encouraged the church to fast and to pray again. This habit is so crucial in teaching us how to depend on God, shake free of the pull of our flesh, and draw near to God. We studied the parables series—the mysterious reality of the kingdom and how to live in it! We studied Ephesians and had practical insights on how to live at work, at home, in our church community. Pastor Jake Spencer joined us, and we helped to support GC Knoxville in renovating their new building! Because of your generosity, they are moving onto their new campus. We had “Connect Sunday” where hundreds of new folks got plugged into women’s groups, men’s groups, life groups, and Connect classes.

We had our Disciplines of a Disciple series where we asked: What are the ways of Jesus? How do I grow in him? Many of you joined our core team! Pastor Don Finto shared with us an update on what happened since the attack in Israel and our role in supporting and praying for Israel. We ended with our series on joy. There is arguably nothing more critical for human flourishing than joy. Jesus uniquely stands as the One who not only exudes joy, but extends to all of humanity a transcendent joy that is not swayed by circumstances of life.

REMEMBER! What has the Lord redeemed? Restored? Healed? Changed?

Take a moment and remember what God has done in you, in your family, and in your church this past year.

Last week, we had a wonderful blessing service where the elders and pastors prayed blessings over our entire church body. I heard many stories of what God has done, what He has transformed, and healed. I heard so many courageous stories of loss, and pain, and difficulties that you have endured by the power and the might of the Holy Spirit. I heard confessions, repentance, and many stories of joy and triumph. Some of you truly thrived in 2023 and some of you have really struggled, but regardless, all of you have drawn closer to Jesus.

This is the time of the year that I always get inundated with all kinds of plans to transform my life. Ways to lose weight, to get organized, to be more successful. And many of these plans, if you applied them, would truly make a difference.

There is one plan that I want to submit to you. It is the most reliable, powerful, and secure foundation to build your life in in 2024. It is to ROOT your life in the ways of Jesus.

Jeremiah 17: 5-8, “Thus says the LORD: ‘...Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.’” (ESV)

How many of you want to be exactly the way that you are a year from now?
God is calling all of us to deeper levels of transformation in 2024.

Jesus is calling us this year to be deeply rooted in him and to produce fruit.

What is a bonsai? It’s a tree in a pot. The tree is limited in how it grows by the size of the pot and the content of the soil it is planted in. We are a lot like a bonsai tree. We need to be planted and rooted deep in good soil to grow and be healthy.

Colossians 2:6-7, “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” (ESV)

Jesus has shown us exactly how to be rooted in God through His life, His teaching, and the power of His resurrection. He is inviting us still to walk with Him, to learn from Him, and to be His students.

If you want to follow Jesus, be changed by Him, and live on mission with Him, you need to be a disciple of Jesus and make disciples of Jesus. This is the purpose of the Church. To be disciples and to make disciples. That’s the core aim of the Church.

I want to encourage you to rewatch the sermon series on the Disciplines of a Disciple (2023) and download the little black workbook that will help you evaluate where you need to grow this year. It’s a great tool to help you shape your year.

Be a Disciple.

If you want to be deeply ROOTED in Christ, you NEED to grow in...

Private Devotion – Growing in intimacy with Christ.

- I. Scripture
 - i. Follow along in our Bible reading plan
 - ii. Take one of our Wednesday night classes

- II. Observe the Sabbath
- III. Participate in Solitude/ Fasting
 - i. Prayer walks around the campus
 - ii. Start the day with quiet time
 - iii. Come on our marriage retreat

Biblical Community - Growing in relationship with others.

- I. Corporate Worship
- II. Fellowship/Hospitality
 - i. Connect into a life group, men's group, women's group!
- III. Confession
 - i. We all need to confess our struggles, addictions, and hang ups. Thrive starts Monday evening with special guest speaker Neil Anderson. Another way to confess is to come forward during prayer time each Sunday! When we come forward for prayer, we are confessing that we need God regardless of our struggles, failures or needs. God wants us to share those needs with him!

Make Disciples.

If you want to be deeply **ROOTED** in Christ, you **NEED** to grow in...

Missional Living - Making a Spiritual Impact in your community.

- I. Service
- II. Curiosity
 - i. Soul Care ministry
- III. Testimony
 - i. Sharing your story with others is so important! Learn how to share your testimony in our Disciple class that meets on Sunday mornings.

Kingdom Stewardship - Faithfully investing what God has entrusted to you.

- I. Submission-
 - i. One day at a time, day by day, decision by decision
- II. Simplicity
 - i. Less is more! As Christians, we need to filter our schedules and our stuff! Donate to local thrift stores!
- III. Generosity
 - i. Did you know that Grace Chapel offers free training on financial stewardship? We have classes, and we have even paid for you to be able to take courses online!

There are so many opportunities to get rooted in 2024!

About 10 years ago, a missionary was telling me this story, and I'll never forget it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RD7hIkIgeY8&list=PLHjAPO24vfkDGELOUwutt9KWTxMWBvOSL&index=2>

John 15:1-12, “I am the true vine, and My Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in Me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in Me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in Me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to My Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love. If you keep My commands, you will remain in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commands and remain in His love. I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” (NIV)

When I talk about all these opportunities to grow at Grace Chapel this year, I don’t want you to hear me saying you should just add one more thing to your crazy busy life. I am not. These are just means. They are not the point. Jesus is the point. My guess is you can’t just do one more thing. You CAN allow the life of Jesus to flow in you and HE can help you do one thing! Abide in Him!

Jesus is saying, *you're not the source of life, I am. And if you'll just connect to me, then I will produce fruit.* So how do we do that? How do we connect to the vine? How do we abide in Jesus? How do we connect to him? Probably the easiest way is to spend a little bit of time in silence. Many people don’t want to because we are so busy and there is always something going on. But turning off the car radio or sitting on your back porch for just five or 10 minutes in silence, will be amazing because God will meet you there, and fruit will be produced just by ceasing from striving for one minute. Stop, be still, and He will speak in that.

Another way is to get into scripture and read and pay attention to what God is saying. The point isn’t how you study your Bible exactly and how you pinpoint all of the little things that you will learn. The point is that you are abiding in Christ and He will produce fruit.

Another issue is people try to pull their life from other people. They are trying to get their sustaining life, power, or purpose from others, maybe even from their marriage. Although there are a lot of great things in marriage that can sustain you and meet your needs in life, your

spouse is not intended to be the vine that you sustain your life from. In fact, if you take two branches and you put them together, they are going to suck the life out of each other. They will both go empty. And so, in the same way, we need to connect to Jesus.

We do not need to find our life and our meaning from our mentors, our friends, our successes, or our spouses. Ultimately, our life is found by abiding in Jesus. Another thing to think about is pruning. Because if we are following Jesus, we will be pruned. That is not a sign that we are doing something wrong. It's just a reality that if you do not prune a branch, then you will not produce more fruit. There are people that look good on the outside, but they're like big bushy green vineyards that have never been pruned. They have all these branches growing with bright green leaves, but there is no fruit.

Sometimes, when things are taken from us, stripped back, or don't go exactly the way we wanted, we think we are less fulfilled and question why God is doing this to us. God is actually trimming things back so that you can produce more fruit. Some of the things that are taken away in our lives is for the best. Although they were good things, they were sucking the life out of us, and we didn't know it. And so, when something is taken away, or trimmed back, or disappears, sometimes, that is a huge blessing and we don't even realize it for quite a while. There's a season that goes by where we don't like being pruned. But ultimately, it produces more fruit.

So, consider spending more time with Jesus. You'll be surprised that by trying harder, you're not going to produce as much fruit as by sitting still and being with Him. Because what you are doing with Jesus is the most important thing that you are up to right now. And He is the gardener. If we abide in Him, then we will produce fruit, and we can trust him even with the things that He takes away.

Questions for 2024

- How are you going to grow deeper roots this year? How can you produce good fruit?
- What small daily practices can you begin that will draw you closer to God?
- What small weekly practices can you start that would deepen your relationships?
- What small shifts in your life would help you to live on mission with God in every sphere of life?
- What small adjustments can you make to steward what God has given you for his kingdom?