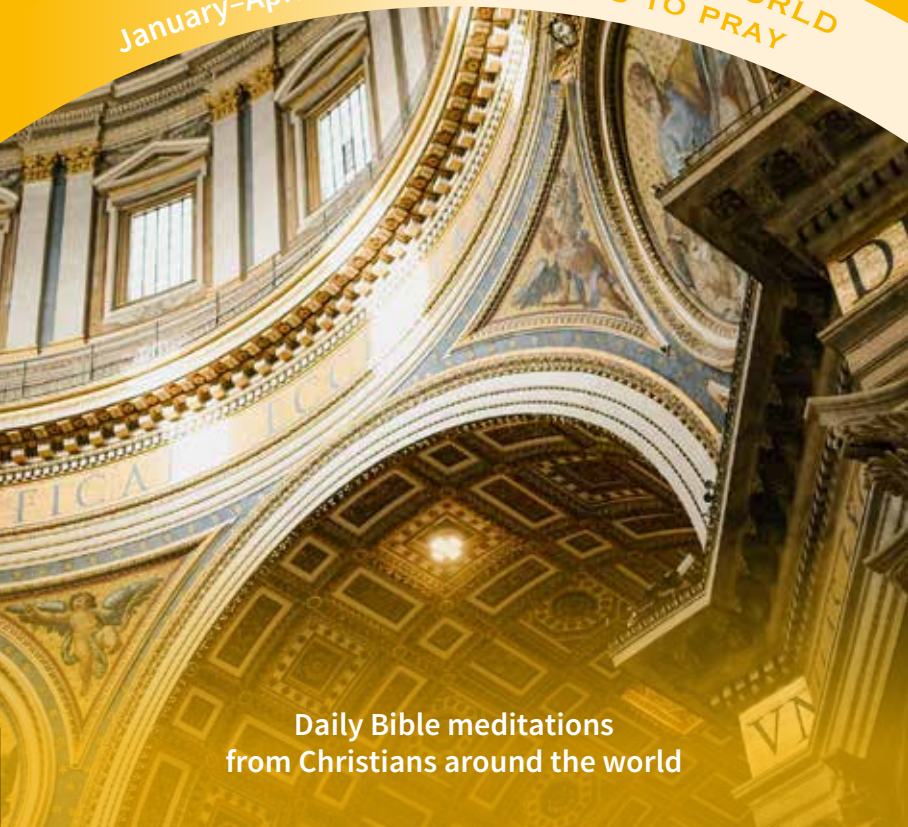


THE UPPER ROOM

January–April 2024

WHERE THE WORLD
MEETS TO PRAY



Daily Bible meditations
from Christians around the world

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THE UPPER ROOM

WHERE THE WORLD MEETS TO PRAY

Daniele Och

UK editor

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34 LANGUAGES

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ISBN 978 1 80039 261 8
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Originally published in the USA by The Upper Room® upperroom.org
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Cover photo by Julia Volk/pexels.com

Acknowledgements

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed by Gutenberg Press, Tarxien, Malta

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 seeks to relate their experience of God in a way that will help those who use *The Upper Room* every day.

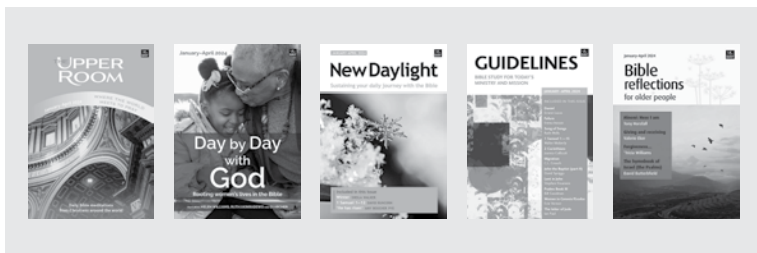
Here are some guidelines to help you make best use of *The Upper Room*:

- 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 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 Upper Room* 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.

Helping to pay it forward



As part of our Living Faith ministry, we're raising funds to give away copies of Bible reading notes and other resources to those who aren't able to access them any other way, working with food banks and chaplaincy services, in prisons, hospitals and care homes.

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Bridge builder

There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbour?

James 4:12 (NRSV)

Both Jewish and Christian scholars assert that James functioned as a righteous teacher and bridge builder between Jewish followers of his brother Jesus and those who adhered to the tenets of emerging rabbinic Judaism. James pointed to the heart of scripture when he wrote, 'If you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," you do well' (James 2:8). His words continue to offer guidance for bridge building today.

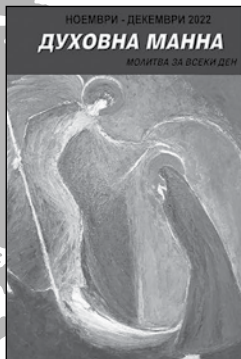
In his writings, James taught that Jesus' followers are distinguished by their non-judgemental posture towards others. He instructed, 'Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for human anger does not produce God's righteousness' (James 1:19–20). James also taught that when we draw near to God, God will draw near to us (James 4:8) and empower us to show mercy instead of judgement and to listen with compassion before offering advice.

In a world that constantly tempts us to embrace division, anger and fear, what would our new year look like if we chose to live according to the humble example of James, our ancient brother in Christ? What arguments might end? What truths might we find? What aspects of our most authentic selves might joyfully emerge?

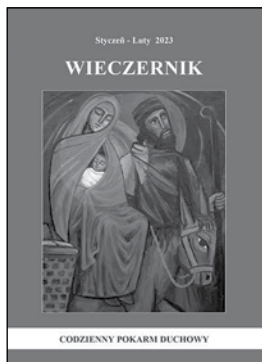
Kimberly Orr

World editor and publisher

Where the world meets to pray



Bulgarian edition



Polish edition

Writers featured in this issue of *The Upper Room*:

- Hadassah Treu (Bulgaria) • Madeline Kalu (Germany)
- Jolanta Burzyska (Poland)

Gifts to the international editions of *The Upper Room* help the world meet to pray. upperroom.org/gift

The editor writes...

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:16 (NRSV)

If I were to compile a list of favourite verses and passages from the Bible, Hebrews 4:16 would be among them, largely thanks to a sermon that I once heard on it many years ago. One of the many riches of this verse is the injunction to ‘approach the throne... with boldness’. As I first learned in that sermon, the word translated ‘boldness’ is *parrhesia*, which can be literally translated as ‘speak everything’. To the ancient Greeks, *parrhesia* referred to the right of a citizen to freely speak at the public assembly without fear of recrimination.

To exercise your right to say what you like among your fellow citizens is one thing; to do so before a throne – that is, before a ruler who has the power of life and death over you – is quite another. If there were ever a time when you would want to choose your words carefully, that would be it.

And yet when it comes to not just *a* throne, but *the* throne – the throne of God – the writer to the Hebrews urges us to feel free to ‘speak everything’, to express whatever is on our hearts and minds. When before God’s throne, we do not have to choose our words carefully for fear of recrimination if we cause offence. This is because God’s throne is ‘the throne of grace’, which we can approach because, as the preceding verses explain, ‘we have a great high priest... Jesus, the Son of God’ (v. 14).

In each issue of *The Upper Room*, the meditations cover a wide range of experience and emotion. While it is true that most, if not all, of the following meditations express praise, thanks and trust in the Lord, many of them do so in the midst of, or after a time of, anxiety, pain, anguish or perplexity.

So as you use this issue as part of your devotional time, hear God’s invitation to you to draw near to the throne of grace and ‘speak everything’ – joy or sadness, delight or anger, thanksgiving or confusion, or even just some random trivia. And in doing so, may you receive mercy and find grace.

Daniele Och, UK editor

Speak a new beginning

Read John 1:1-9

God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light.

Genesis 1:3 (NRSV)

I felt extremely grateful at the New Year's Eve service in 2021. It indeed felt like a new beginning, a new hope against the odds of the past year. Yet after the service, I was in tears as I thought of all the things I didn't have. I wanted so much for the new year, but I didn't know how or where to start. I felt hopeless.

That night, I decided to pray again. I didn't ask for anything. Instead, inspired by 1 Thessalonians 5:18, I gave thanks for all that I had, and I felt blessed by everything on my list. After this prayer of gratitude, I had Genesis 1:3 in my heart and a new understanding of the verse. In Genesis 1:1-2 it was the beginning, and it looked hopeless. In that bleak situation, God spoke light. With that light came hope, and God kept speaking, forming sky, seas and land. What God wanted for the future, day after day, God spoke into being. Until it was all good, God spoke.

As believers, when faced with a hopeless situation, the first thing we can do is invite the light into that situation. We can speak: 'Thank you, Jesus.' He is the light of the world (see John 8:12). With Christ's light comes hope. My resolution this year is to speak light through all my days.

Prayer: *Dear God, help us to be grateful in all situations. Show us how to speak light and goodness into our lives and the lives of those around us. Amen.*

Thought for the day: With the light of Christ comes great hope.

P. E. Uloh (Edo, Nigeria)

Standing tall

Read Romans 5:1–5

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

James 1:2–3 (NIV)

When we moved to our current home, we learned that the redbud tree is very common here. They are often oddly shaped with gnarled trunks. Many have broken branches from storm damage. But in the spring, they are the first trees to bud; when their flowers open, they bring vibrant colour to the dull, winter landscape.

One autumn, my husband transplanted a redbud sapling into our yard. Within a few months, a storm had broken its tallest branch. However, the young tree made it through the winter, and its remaining branch bloomed in the spring. It continues to grow tall to this day. God made the redbud tree to withstand all sorts of adversity, and it continues to be resilient.

I want to be like those beautiful trees. When I am faced with hardship, I want to trust in God my creator. God has much good planned for us and can turn our struggles into blessings if we persevere. When hard times attack me, I want to be strong enough to say, ‘You are helpless against me because God made me and I can overcome anything through God’s power.’ With this faith I can stand tall like the steadfast redbud trees.

Prayer: *Father God, thank you for models of resilience and strength in nature. Empower us to persevere through our struggles. Amen.*

Thought for the day: I can rely on God for resilience and strength.

Janet Kratochvil (Indiana, USA)

Sense of purpose

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12–23

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 (NRSV)

I didn't intend to retire, but I lost my job at 64. Then we moved because my husband changed jobs. Shortly after our relocation, I was able to take two extended trips to be with a family member in crisis and later to welcome my new grandson. These would not have been possible had I started a new job. But I missed the sense of purpose and the structure that my profession had provided, and I wasn't sure how to fill my days. I realised that I could keep mourning what I had lost or choose to actively nurture a new sense of purpose for my life.

We choose each day how to live out our discipleship. I do not believe there are days when nothing important happens. Paul reminds us in 1 Thessalonians of God's will for our lives: we are to rejoice always, pray constantly and give thanks in all circumstances. But such simple directives are impossible to follow when we focus on what is wrong rather than on what is right.

I now choose to begin and end my day in prayerful reflection, paying attention to the goodness of God that surrounds me. I review the day with gratitude – even the parts that were difficult – and deliberately name the joys. When I choose to rejoice, pray and give thanks, I can see beyond my circumstances, and my heart is oriented towards God's purpose.

Prayer: *O God, we pray that our words and actions will reflect gratitude for your presence and provision on this day. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

Thought for the day: My faith in God gives my life purpose.

Linda Coggin (British Columbia, Canada)

The power of love

Read Titus 3:4–8

How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

Psalm 36:7 (NIV)

When our family relocated to the desert southwest, about the only relief from the relentless heat of the summer months was a trip to the public swimming pool. My parents enrolled my brothers and me in swimming lessons. I can still recall the fear during some of those first lessons, especially when we were taken into the deep end of the pool. But our instructors were kind, and we trusted them to keep us safe.

Many years later, my wife and I had three small children of our own, and we needed to teach them to swim so that they could be safe in and near the water. My wife, being a certified water safety instructor, taught them. I recall some thrashing, splashing and even some crying, but our children knew their teacher was always there to support them and keep them safe from danger, and she would not let them go. Eventually my children swam very well, competed on swim teams and were rewarded with ribbons and trophies.

Now, in my later years, I sometimes reflect on how those swim lessons are similar to my relationship with God who is my teacher and is worthy of all my trust. Yet there are times when I thrash about and feel consumed by fear. But then I remember that God is love and will not let me go.

Prayer: *Dear God, thank you for your everlasting love that surpasses our understanding. Help us to remain devoted to you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

Thought for the day: God will never let me go.

Doug Wingert (Arizona, USA)

Intent on giving

Read Philippians 2:1–11

Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.

Philippians 2:3–4 (NRSV)

After a snowstorm and dramatic drop in temperature, a thick layer of ice and snow covered the ground. Although it was blisteringly cold, my husband, Solomon, went out to clear the sidewalk in front of our house. It was hard work, but he slowly began to carve a path.

Solomon had leaned back on his shovel to take a brief break when a man passed by. He was dressed inadequately for the weather and looked gaunt, but he offered to help Solomon shovel the snow and did so with gusto. As the man shovelled snow, he and my husband struck up a conversation. Upon hearing that the man was homeless, Solomon's heart was grieved. He knew that during the harsh winter, many people were in dire need of shelter and provision, yet this stranger had approached Solomon with a heart intent on giving. Working together, they cleared the sidewalk. In return for his kindness, Solomon gave the man a gift before bidding him farewell.

Afterward, Solomon ruminated on the lesson God had shown him – that help can come in unexpected ways and we should be open to receiving it. We each have God-given gifts that we can use to lift each other up and provide hope.

Prayer: *Merciful Father, help us to receive the gifts and assistance of others. Show us how to use our gifts to provide hope and help to those around us. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

Thought for the day: Each of us has gifts that can benefit others.

Madeline Kalu (North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany)

One day at a time

Read Psalm 55:1–8, 16–19

Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.

Psalm 55:22 (NRSV)

When I lost my job, my family lost our only source of income. Anxiety and worry overcame me, and I felt the weight of the world on me. The only thought in my mind was, *What now?*

I had always read my Bible daily, and as I read the many passages about worry, I remembered what I had always known but had temporarily forgotten: when we trust God, life will not break us. All troubles are temporary, but God's loving care lasts forever. Knowing this and living according to this truth made all the difference. Instead of worry driving us apart, our family grew closer, and we learned how to adapt and overcome. A better and calmer outlook on life made it easier to endure hardship, make new friends and build a new life from the wreckage of the old.

Eventually I did get another job and got back on my feet. And while I would not like to go through the experience again, I learned a valuable lesson that I might not have in any other way. Worrying about what might be down the road can only hurt us, but trust in the Lord always heals us – one step and one day at a time.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, thank you for assuring us that we never have to be consumed by worry because you will meet our deepest needs. Amen.*

Thought for the day: Life may bend me, but God's sustaining love will uphold me.

Mark A. Carter (Oregon, USA)

God provides

Read 1 Kings 17:7–16

My God will meet your every need out of his riches in the glory that is found in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:19 (CEB)

When a great drought hit, the water pump in our house broke. My parents didn't have the money to buy a new one. We prayed constantly for rain, but the rain didn't come.

We cannot live without water. But thankfully some neighbours who had sophisticated water pumps with sufficient water supply offered to help. They allowed my family to take as much water as we needed. So every day my parents and I carried buckets to the neighbours' houses to fetch water until the dry season was over.

This experience was a reminder to me that God doesn't always answer prayers the way we want or expect. It didn't rain immediately after we prayed. But God answered our prayers according to our needs by bringing us kind-hearted neighbours to provide water for us to use every day.

Prayer: *God our provider, help us to trust that you will answer our prayers even if the answer is not what we expect. We give thanks for the help you offer us and pray as Jesus taught us: 'Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen' (Matthew 6:9–13, KJV).*

Thought for the day: God provides for my needs.

Juita Kartini (Jakarta, Indonesia)

Blessings within burdens

Read John 11:32–44

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.

Romans 8:28 (NIV)

At age 22, our son, John, who had Duchenne muscular dystrophy, had surgery to insert feeding tubes. Loss of muscles, including those that control swallowing, created a condition that contributed to frequent pneumonia. John had also lost weight.

Two months after the surgery, with Thanksgiving approaching, I felt despondent because John could no longer join in family meals with us. The scripture reading at church about Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead took on new meaning, however. Instead of lamenting that John couldn't eat, I thanked God that he was alive. How wonderful that God gave people the knowledge and skill to put all nutrients needed to sustain human life in a can!

John could not enjoy family meals as he once had, but he could laugh, talk, play games, defend his views, give advice, tell jokes and watch his favourite football team. Although the ingenuity underlying tube-feeding that restored his life differed markedly from Christ's miraculous raising of Lazarus, it allowed John to be with us for eleven more years and live to see his younger sisters become adults.

Prayer: *Dear God, thank you for helping us see how you can use even heavy burdens to restore life. Help us live one day at a time, trusting you to provide for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

Thought for the day: Hidden blessings can be found in heavy burdens.

Margaret Foegen Karsten (Wisconsin, USA)



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‘I very much appreciate reading the contributions from so many different places, and indeed so many different cultures.’

‘I feel so enriched... reading people’s personal experiences born from lives of faith.’

‘Like is an understatement – I am in love with *The Upper Room* daily devotional!’

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