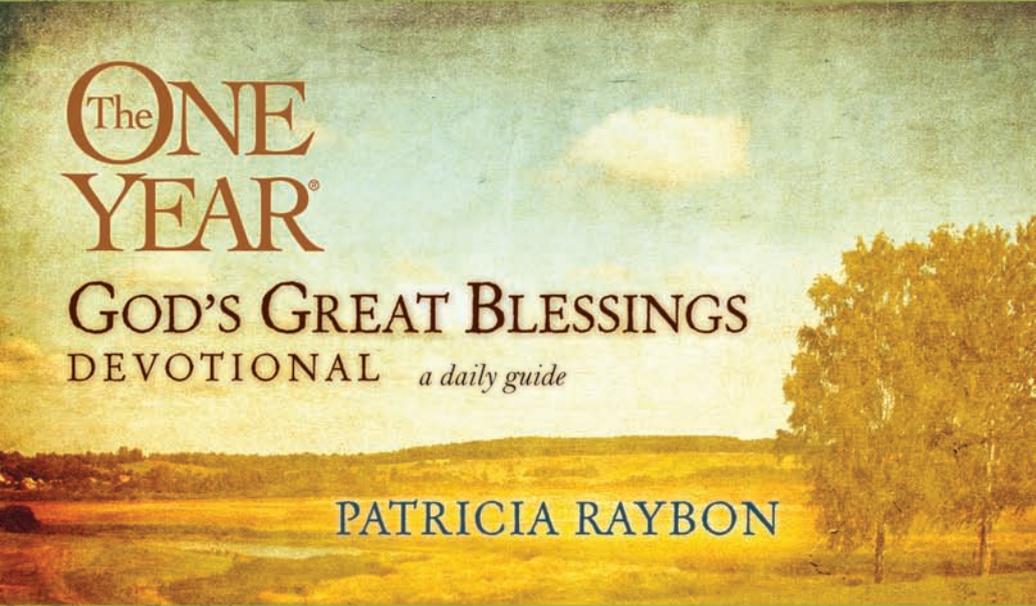




The ONE
YEAR®



GOD'S GREAT BLESSINGS
DEVOTIONAL *a daily guide*

PATRICIA RAYBON





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The One Year God's Great Blessings Devotional

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INTRODUCTION

I DIDN'T KNOW I WAS BLESSED. Never even imagined it. Never dared to guess it. Not all the time, anyway. Instead, like most of us, I lived in a warm house, cooked in a decent kitchen, slept every night on a clean bed. Yet I complained about life. Not enough of this. Not enough of that.

Then one evening, while sharing a dinner with friends, I looked at their photos from a trip to Ghana and saw what I was missing. A smart three-year-old child—taking a soapy bath in a bucket outdoors in a nice rain—looked in the camera's eye and grinned, laughing about it all. On her face? A confident look of blessed joy.

Her humble village had only one deep well. “Children walked for miles every day to bring back their family's water,” my friend said.

So when the skies suddenly opened and poured down rain, “everybody grabbed buckets and bowls, catching the water.” Then on cue the little girl's mother handed her soap and a towel, “and the child tore off her clothes, scrambled into a bucket, and before you knew it, she was soapy from head to toe.” And laughing about it all.

The child had a job to do in a big storm, but she obeyed and worked through the inconvenience, the downpour—not to mention the lack of plumbing—and she found joy. Showered with blessings.

That's what I was seeking when I started this devotional: to be showered with God's best blessings—but not as the world thinks, in material ways. I longed to be showered with God's highest, simplest, and greatest blessings, then get refreshed on the journey—even in a storm.

A simple but brave request? In fact, the path I was looking for was sitting on my shelf, waiting for me to launch ahead. It was *The One Year Bible*—a Christmas gift from the year before, still unwrapped, still bound in its cellophane wrapper. Then finally, worn out on what theologian A. W. Tozer called “the frivolous character of much that passes for Christianity among us,” I sat down to open my new Bible.

My plan? I would launch a deliberate, purposeful journey through the

fresh wind of God's Word, turning to the sweet truth of God's great and quiet blessings.

But God wasn't so quiet.

Instead, God wrote in loud words. With exclamation points.

Use common sense!

I sat back and squinted. Started reading some more.

Be content!

I nodded slowly, knowing I'd heard such timely advice before—heard it in sermons and Sunday school lessons, in church groups and Bible studies, on back porch swings and front porch stoops, in planes, trains, and automobiles, not to mention on countless long and winding walks.

But for some reason on this trip through the Bible, I was seeing and hearing such urgings in a different way.

I even found myself shaking my head when I read: Don't talk too much! Or as Proverbs 10:19 puts it: "Don't talk too much, for it fosters sin. Be sensible and turn off the flow!"

Exclamation point.

God seemed, indeed, to be personally teaching His own rules for blessings—timeless, smart, life-giving principles of both promise and joy. But I was hearing them with an unusual urgency, and seeing them in a new way.

Thus, I discovered this simple but winsome promise: "Godliness leads to happiness." That's Proverbs 10:28, or my paraphrase of it. So I pondered its simple beauty awhile—long enough to stumble onto yet another provocative promise: "Good-hearted people . . . produce a huge harvest" (Luke 8:15).

This was getting interesting. I started making notes:

"Gentleness makes us great" (see Psalm 18:35).

"God answers prayers when we trust Him" (see 1 Chronicles 5:20).

But of course, I almost said. Then I realized something deeper was percolating. So I wrote down a question: What am I learning? That's when I really started this book about blessings—by asking myself that question. Already, I had one answer: Use common sense! And more than that: Be content!

Not too long after, I added another: Get wisdom!

Then came: Travel light!

Then next: Know Jesus!

Then: Be righteous!

Also: Choose joy!

Good rules for living, to be sure. But I noticed something more. Something surprising. Something wonderful and great, in fact.

NO ORDINARY BLESSINGS

With each command to seek His high road and follow it, God promised a simple but powerful blessing. Not just an ordinary blessing. Instead, to those who followed His virtuous path, God promised His most grandiose, extravagant, crazy, highest, greatest blessings.

Be generous to the poor? “Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I” (Isaiah 58:8-9, NIV).

I read the words again. Slowly. Could this be right? It had to be because in page after page of my new Bible, I found yet more such virtues that God promised His people He would greatly bless.

Some promises seem liting and bright, such as:

Delight in the Sabbath: “Then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob” (Isaiah 58:14, NIV).

Other promises seemed grounded as much in faith, but straightforward and clear.

Be kind, Solomon declared, “and your soul will be nourished” (see Proverbs 11:17).

Or even better, Jesus promised: Believe in me “and you will never die” (see John 11:26).

I was intrigued by these conditional but extravagant connections.

Then one day I saw it. The great irony—that for all the ways we Christians struggle to accomplish our goals, fight our demons, slay our dragons, climb our mountains, and satisfy our longings, God offers all that we desire, plus His blessings, if we choose simply to live right by Him, both in good times and storms.

And, no—this isn’t a “works over grace” point of view. Grace assures our eternal salvation, to be sure. But to work in virtue assures us an abundance of unimaginable blessings—right now.

Whether it’s raining hard or not.

I thought intently about this.

Instead of struggling to be “good Christians”—trying to get to heaven—we experience a preview of heaven by modeling God’s character now. By following His ways. By living out His virtues. By receiving His greatest and highest blessings, but also by enjoying the blessed journey.

In fact, as Psalm 107:29-30 promises: “He calmed the storm to a whisper and stilled the waves. What a blessing was that stillness.”

Or as Zechariah 10:1 urges us: “Ask the LORD for rain in the spring, for he makes the storm clouds. And he will send showers of rain.” Why? “So every field becomes a lush pasture.”

Each one of us, indeed, can become a flowering blessing for God’s Kingdom when we determine to walk in His virtuous and blessed path.

The apostle Paul writes of this mystery in his letter to the church at Corinth: “We speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began” (1 Corinthians 2:7, NIV). Not even rulers understand it, Paul adds. “However, as it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’” (1 Corinthians 2:8-9, NIV).

I could hear the ancient prayer warriors declaring the same truth. Spiritual abundance, Andrew Murray declared, “will depend on my life.” Or as he put it: “If I do what God says, God will do what I say.”

Even better, He’ll do more.

Why so much blessing for a life of virtue?

I could find only one answer. The blessings bespeak love. Only a God who loves us without limit could bless with such magnificence. Thus, His blessings are glorious. Yet, at the same time, they evoke the essence of His godliness.

LIST OF BLESSINGS

But what, in fact, are God’s blessed virtues for life?

As I worked through my *One Year Bible*, I first logged a modest list of ten. But I kept reading. Soon my list grew to twenty virtues. I gave my notes a working title—The Virtues God Blesses. I photocopied the list. Sent it to family and friends. Printed out a list for myself. Thumbtacked it to the wall behind my computer screen.

Over time, during my reading, that list grew to thirty virtues. Then forty. At about forty-five, a little light flashed in my mind—my seeker’s mind, that

is. What if I devoted a year to focused study of the virtues God blesses—then wrote about them? A fifty-two-week devotional on the virtues God blesses.

At a meeting with my publishing team, I “pitched” my idea. They liked it. Then I went home.

And I froze.

I don’t have formal theological training under my belt. Certainly, I don’t have a flawless, unblemished life to my credit. I wasn’t sure other people would even be drawn to the study of blessings.

I was surprised to learn that the Jewish word for “blessing”—*berakhah* or *brakha*—meaning a short prayer of thanksgiving—isn’t so much about getting favored by God, but about blessing God with praise. Thus, like David, I longed through this book to declare, “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me” (Psalm 103:1, NASB).

I dared even to imagine how our broken, weary world would be transformed and the cause of Christ advanced—and our own lives made new—if the longing of every Christian was to be showered with blessings, but also to live a life that blesses God and others, while we journey through the storm.

But what about me? Could I follow through with this one-year project? Would I be transformed? Would I finish the trip, blessing God by the effort? I found my answer in my new Bible: “And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father” (Colossians 3:17). Or in the words of a great and beautiful psalm:

Commit everything you do to the LORD.

Trust him, and he will help you.

He will make your innocence radiate like the dawn,

and the justice of your cause will shine like the noonday sun.

(Psalm 37:5-6)

A shining book on smart virtues that God blesses seemed a worthy project, to be sure. A devotional format would allow deep and daily study of this blessed kind of life. In fact, for all the memoirs and essays and reflections I have written or read, the biggest day-to-day difference in my life has sprung from getting up every morning to pray and read from devotionals—everything from Oswald Chambers’s classic, *My Utmost for His Highest*, to contemporary writer Chris Tiegreen’s One Year devotionals with Walk Thru the Bible.

I was blessed, indeed, with this advice from Chris Tiegreen on the writing of daily devotionals: Don't just ask the why of what God tells us, he said. "Sometimes it's most helpful to ask why not."

Or in the case of God's blessings: how?

That's what I offer in this book. It is a one-year devotional study of biblical virtues and blessings, offering the ways and means that God blesses us. It's based on the premise that the secret to every desire of a Christian life—and to every desire of God to bless us—can be found by pursuing His high and blessed path of virtue.

Written from a personal point of view, this devotional explores one virtue per week, one point per day. As I explained to this book's editor: "I covered fifty-two virtues that bless God when we obey Him and bless us because we tried."

But what's the best way to use this devotional?

Take it one day at a time. One week at a time.

Be content—you don't have to digest the entire book whole in one sitting. Instead, go slow, letting God inspire each day's intimate searching and seeking.

Then at the end of each week, take some time to answer the study questions, allowing them to pull you deeper and further into God's blessed path for your life.

What will you and I discover?

I don't hold every answer. But I hear David in Psalm 108: "My heart is confident in you, O God; no wonder I can sing your praises with all my heart!" (v. 1). Still, like David, will we get lost on this journey? Or frustrated? Tired? Afraid?

Or will we stand under God's downpour and enjoy His mighty rain? Already greatly blessed. If so, we will rest in the one who promises to bless our efforts with His presence—and His power—leading us on His journey to a mighty end.

LISTENING

His Promise

Blessed is the man who listens to me.

Proverbs 8:34, NIV

My Prayer

Bless me with the power to listen,
O Mighty God.
Then convince me that it's okay
sometimes to stay quiet.

Listening: To Him

Listen, my child. . . .

Proverbs 1:8-9

It's dark, cold, and early. But I'm excited. On this morning, the most important thing I have to do is hear from God. And not just a little bit. I want to hear without limits. Isn't that what we're all saying today? That we want to be blessed by God this year? So we can bless God without limits?

So I sit, like you, Bible in hand—the first chapter of Proverbs staring up at this new year—looking for some life-changing secret on how to make such blessings happen.

Instead, Proverbs offers a gracious and quiet word: *Listen*.

It's not a suggestion. It's a plea. Spoken tenderly. Even kindly. "Listen, my child. . . ." The writer, King Solomon, seems to know most of us *don't* listen well. We wake up talking, our voices rattling around in our heads, hollering first and hearing second.

But Solomon says *stop*.

Step off the loud, rusty, ragged treadmills of our lives. This fresh year, he says, turn from our noise—all the emotional chatter raging in our minds or spewing from other people. And turn it off.

Listening is serious business, to be sure. Listening to God's Word, implanted by God's Spirit in our hearts, "has the power to save your souls," says James 1:19-21. Why? "My sheep listen to my voice," Jesus answers. "I know them, and they follow me." When we listen, "I give them eternal life," Jesus promises, "and they will never perish. No one can snatch them away from me" (John 10:27-28). When we listen to God, He knows us. As we silence ourselves, our prayers don't perish. God may hear us better, plus, He grants us eternal life. I'm ready to try that this year. Quiet my heart. *And* my mouth. Then look what I'll discover: God is speaking. 🌿

A good listener is not only popular everywhere,
but after a while he knows something.

WILLIAM MIZNER

Listening: To His Call

Joyful are those who listen to me.

Proverbs 8:34

Get up.

That's the best way to listen to God.

Listening, as it turns out, is an action word. *Draw near to Him*. That's what the Hebrew word for listen—*shama*—fully means. Draw near and look. Then, attuned, we hear God's call: "Come closer, and listen to this . . . I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is good for you and leads you along the paths you should follow" (Isaiah 48:16-17).

Moses did that. After a plush life in Pharaoh's palace, he got up to defend the helpless—starting a personal journey that led him back to God. But first, he rescued a Hebrew slave. Then he saved seven women from cruel shepherds, watering their thirsty sheep. Then he said yes to marrying one of the women, honoring her grateful father.

Finally, on a humble hillside, tending his father-in-law's flock and far from worldly and inner distractions, he got up to draw near, looking at God's handiwork—a burning bush. At that moment, then, he heard God speak. "Moses! Moses!"

Was it a loud voice? Will you and I hear God—actually calling us by name?

I hear questions like this at a women's prayer retreat.

"I'm a concrete person," one woman says. "What does it mean to listen to God? How can I hear Him?" For answers, we look at Moses. Then we see: Listening to God is getting up with intent. It's going humbly to new places. It's doing plain, hard work—leaving behind the world to go back to church, Bible study, prayer meeting, to all the places His voice is shared. Then we stop trying so hard to hear His call. Instead, we work and walk by His Spirit, in His joy. *Then* He speaks. 

Part of doing something is listening.

MADELEINE L'ENGLE

Listening: For His Spirit

All the people listened closely.

Nehemiah 8:3

Curious business, this godly listening. As I try it, I hear all manner of mysteries. Great advice. Honest truth. Deep desires. So I'm hearing less gossip. Less complaining. Less doubt, fear, worry, and false teaching. I see, in fact, why our enemy overwhelms our ears with noise.

If we listen to ungodly things, we miss one of God's greatest blessings: hearing God's Spirit. So I quiet myself to better hear my Bible, feeling that listening seems too pretty a virtue to unlock God's mighty, delivering, trustworthy, Spirit-filled power. Then I see:

Those who refuse to listen to God prefer to go their own way—to trust in themselves. To be their own god. So God asks something simple—*just listen to Me*—knowing that those who listen truly want to know what His Spirit says.

Yet how do we hear Him?

By listening closely. That's what Jesus taught. *Draw near*, Christ says. Why? He doesn't shout. To hear Him, we sit close, see Him better, and then we learn. "The closer you listen, the more understanding you will be given—and you will receive even more" (Mark 4:24).

Theologian Richard Foster, in his book *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, describes this close approach to listening to God. "I wait quietly," he says. Tuning his heart to God's voice, he waits as "people and situations spontaneously rise" to his awareness. Letting the Spirit guide his prayer, he then remains quiet for a while, "inviting the Spirit to pray through [him] 'with sighs too deep for words.'" Throughout the day, he jots down brief prayer notes in a small journal.

Dare we do the same? Listen closely enough to hear the Spirit-filled thunder of God's clear voice? Even take notes? I dare you to try it today. Then, in your quiet, God speaks. 

If the key is prayer, the door is Jesus Christ.

RICHARD FOSTER

Listening: To Each Other

Listen, my child, to what your father teaches you.

Proverbs 1:8

In Dale Carnegie's classic self-improvement book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, the author describes the concentrated listening style of famed psychiatrist Sigmund Freud. Quoting a man who had met Freud, Carnegie writes: "There was none of that piercing 'soul penetrating gaze' business. His eyes were mild and genial. His voice was low and kind. His gestures were few. But the attention he gave me, his appreciation of what I said, even when I said it badly, was extraordinary."

Or as he concluded: "You've no idea what it meant to be listened to like that."

King Solomon, traditionally credited as the author of Proverbs, seems to say precisely what it means: Good listeners are gracious. Mild and genial. Confident but kind. None of that soul-piercing gaze business. So they listen with love. With patience. With interest. With appreciation. Without judgment. The result? God crowns their listening with His grace (v. 9).

So gracious listeners learn things. We also hear what we desperately need to know.

"Listen to whatever Sarah tells you," God urges Abraham, "because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned" (Genesis 21:12, NIV). Or when Jacob blesses his sons, first he urges them, "Assemble and listen, sons of Jacob; listen to your father Israel" (Genesis 49:2, NIV). And Moses "listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said" (Exodus 18:24, NIV).

Of course, the model for listening is God Himself. He "listened to Leah, and she became pregnant" (Genesis 30:17, NIV). He listened to Rachel "and opened her womb" (Genesis 30:22, NIV).

I study these stories and the truth becomes clear. If we learn how to listen like God, we hear what matters. 🌿

You can make more friends in two months by becoming more interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get people interested in you.

DALE CARNEGIE

Listening: With Honor

Listen, my child, to what your father teaches you. Don't neglect your mother's teaching. What you learn from them will . . . clothe you with honor.

Proverbs 1:8-9

As a young bride, I worked hard to learn the first secret of staying married—how to listen. To pay attention. To hear feelings, not just words. Then not to judge—or rush to talk. To let the Holy Spirit empower me to hear. A faith walk, yes. Listening is like that.

Then in today's Scripture, God raises the stakes—pleading with us to listen, not just to anybody, but to parents. But the teenager in us reels. Listen to *parents*? Nothing will be harder. Even if parents are wise. Or loving. Or perfect. Or even downright bad. Or even downright dangerous.

Yet God says we should listen—not because all parents teach us how to live—but in the case of ungodly parents, because they teach us how *not* to live. It's the position of respect that God seems to care most about in this exchange. That is, we listen to parents—not because they're perfect parents, but because they are our parents, period. Then as we listen, we release God's ability to clothe us with His honor.

Thinking on this, I turn to the Ten Commandments, pondering that provocative promise: "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12, NIV).

But surely this isn't just about living a long life. It's about living long in whatever territory God has set aside for you to serve Him.

If you're not living well in the land God has set aside for you, this Scripture provides the antidote. Listen to your parents. Still can't? Cry to the Holy Spirit to empower you. The blessing? You learn to listen to others. To spouses and to children. To coworkers and to neighbors. To friends. Even to enemies.

In our listening, we learn. But also we gain—a blessed garb of empowered honor. 🌿

The first duty of love is to listen.

PAUL TILLICH

Listening: To Life

Listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life.

Deuteronomy 30:20, NIV

Helen Keller couldn't hear. She couldn't see. But early on, the renowned civic servant found a priceless way around those problems. She found a friend who listened. According to Keller's autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, her first little friend—after Keller became deaf and blind following illness at age nineteen months—was the young daughter of the Keller family's cook.

We spent a great deal of time in the kitchen, kneading dough balls, helping make ice-cream, grinding coffee, quarreling over the cake-bowl, and feeding the hens and turkeys that swarmed about the kitchen steps. . . . I could not tell Martha Washington when I wanted to go egg-hunting, but I would double my hands and put them on the ground, which meant something round in the grass, and Martha always understood.

At least one psychiatrist has said this early friendship—through which Helen Keller perfected some sixty communication signs—was crucial for Keller's later improvements, most notably with her beloved teacher, Anne Sullivan. But what does this story teach us?

We learn, first, that listening takes two—that, indeed, the arithmetic of the gospel is two by two. "Two are better than one" (Ecclesiastes 4:9, NIV). Or as Jesus put it: "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). As important, however, we learn that when we work hard to listen well, we don't just gain friends. We gain life.

Helen Keller, in describing her "long night"—that "silent, aimless, day-less life" of her early years—said learning to listen and communicate was like being "restored to my human heritage." Yes, listening to God births life. "Give ear . . . hear me, that your soul may live" (Isaiah 55:3, NIV). That's theological truth. Here's practical truth: listening heals, mends, repairs. So listen to a hurting soul today. God will bless you both with His life. 🌿

Unless we form the habit of going to the Bible in bright moments as well as in trouble, we cannot fully respond to its consolations.

HELEN KELLER

Going Deeper

Blessed . . . are those who hear the word of God and obey it.

Luke 11:28, NIV

Are you a good listener? If not, why not?

If you could make one change this year to listen better to God, what would it be? Explain.

What about listening to other people? What special insight has God taught you this week about listening when others are talking?

If you'd like, write a prayer that reflects your needs regarding the virtue of listening.



Perhaps the best gift we can offer a hurting world
is deep, holy listening.

JOHNNY R. SEARS