

CHANGE YOUR LIFE. CHANGE YOUR WORLD.

activated

Vol 18 • Issue 1



ON THE CUSP OF THE YEAR

An optimistic outlook

The Postman's Palace

Building a dream

Strawberries, Candles, and Resolutions

Seize the moment!



EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION THE MOUNTAINTOP

In his very last speech, given in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 3, 1968, the day before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King imagined God asking him what era he would like to live in. He goes on to survey all of human history, starting with Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery,

goes through Greece and Rome, the Renaissance and Reformation, the Emancipation Proclamation, and finally the very troubled times he lived in, when his country was full of hatred, injustice, and fear. Here is his reply:

“Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, ‘If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy.’

“Now that’s a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around. ... But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period. ... We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. ... I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!”¹

Martin Luther King believed that no matter what the circumstances were, or what difficulties, setbacks, pain, and anguish he experienced, God was in control. His optimism wasn’t based only on his belief that his cause was right and would prevail, but mainly on his belief that *God* was right and would prevail.

In our lives as well, whatever this new year will bring, we can depend on the same certainty. “Be brave and strong! ... The Lord your God will always be at your side, and he will never abandon you.”²

God bless you with a wonderful new year filled with His love and care!

Samuel Keating
Executive Editor

1. Quotes taken from <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>
2. Deuteronomy 31:6 CEV

For more information on *Activated* and other inspirational products, visit our website or contact one of our distributors below.

activated@activated.org

Activated Ministries

P.O. Box 462805
Escondido, CA 92046-2805, USA
Toll-free: 1-877-862-3228
Email: info@actmin.org
www.activatedministries.org

Activated Africa

Big Thought Publications
P.O. Box 2509, Faerie Glen
Pretoria 0043, South Africa
Tel: 078 331 2270
Email: sales@bigthought.co.za

Activated Nigeria

P.O. Box 9009, Aggrey Road P.O.
Port Harcourt, Nigeria
Cell: +234 (0) 7036963333
Email: activatednigeria@activated.org

Activated Philippines

Cell: (0922) 8125326
Email: activatedph@gmail.com

EDITOR Samuel Keating
DESIGN Gentian Suçi

© 2016 Activated. All Rights Reserved.

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. Other Bible quotations are from the following sources: Contemporary English Version (CEV). Copyright © 1995 by American Bible Society. Used by permission. New Living Translation (NLT). Copyright © 1978, 1996 by Tyndale House Publishers. Used by permission. New International Version (NIV). Copyright © 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission.



BUILDING ALIVE

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

AN ELDERLY CARPENTER WAS READY TO RETIRE, and he told his boss of his plans to leave and live a more leisurely life with his wife. He would miss the paycheck, but he needed to retire. They could get by.

The contractor was sorry to see such a good worker go, and he asked the carpenter to build just one more house as a personal favor.

The carpenter said yes, but it was easy to see that his heart wasn't in his work. He resorted to shoddy workmanship and used inferior materials. It was an unfortunate way to end a dedicated career.

When the carpenter finished his work, the employer came to inspect the house. He handed the front-door

key to the carpenter. "This is your house," he said. "My gift to you."

The carpenter was shocked! What a shame! If he had only known he was building his own house, he would have done it all so differently.

So it is with us. We build our lives, a day at a time, often putting less than our best into the building. Then with a shock we realize we have to live in the house we have built.

If we could do it over, we'd do it much differently. But we cannot go back.

You are the carpenter of your life. Each day you hammer a nail, place a board, or erect a wall. Your attitudes and the choices you make today build your "house" for tomorrow. Build wisely! ■



If you feel that you have made mistakes, taken wrong turns, even failed miserably at this or that, you're in good company. Many of God's heroes in the Bible did those same things, but they learned from their mistakes. And God came to them, sitting in the midst of failed dreams or disappointed hopes, and gave them a new reason to live. That's what He can do when we give up on our own plans and projects and decide to try His. He gives us goals to help us grow and move in the right direction, and then He helps us attain them. Give Him your heart and life, and let Him give you all the good things He has planned for you. The New Year is a great time to make a new start.

—Nana Williams



ON THE CUSP OF THE YEAR

BY PETER AMSTERDAM, ADAPTED

WHEN I COME TO THE END OF ONE YEAR AND AM ON THE CUSP OF THE NEXT, I'm generally optimistic about what's ahead. I like to rejoice in the victories of the past year, the progress made, the challenges overcome, and the joy experienced. I also try to set in the past those things which didn't come to fruition—failures, unreachd goals, unmet expectations—and start the new year with determination to do better, work smarter, progress more, and reach my goals.

Standing on the threshold of the new year, I'm excited about what's ahead. At the same time, I have a feeling of foreboding. The optimism I feel regarding potential and opportunities causes me to look forward to what God has in store. At the same time, caution about developments in

1. Philippians 4:8 NLT

the world lingers in the background. I'm trying to reconcile these clashing opposites of optimism and pessimism about the new year.

Each of us can take action toward pursuing the opportunities that will be available to us as individuals in the new year. After all, the results will be based at least partly on the goals we set, our choices, the effort we put in, our prayers, and seeking God's will. World events, on the other hand, aren't something we personally have control over. Our human tendency is to fear, and in that fear, to become more concerned about ourselves and our own community or nation. This can result in a rise of nationalism, intolerance, and hatred, which are in direct opposition to the teachings of Jesus.

How to reconcile these two outlooks to find a balanced perspective? In pondering this issue, I made

some personal commitments going into the new year.

Regarding pessimism due to the state of the world:

To not succumb to fear. It's important to face the troubles of this world with faith in God. While there are atrocities, injustices, and many sad and terrible situations throughout the world, as Christians we are meant to put our trust in God and have His peace in our hearts, no matter what situations we and others face.

To not let the sad state of the world, and regularly hearing about it via the media, cause me to focus *primarily* on the negative. There is much evil in our world, but there is much good as well, and I'm committing to remind myself of the good, to fix my thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. "Think

about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.”¹

To focus on what Jesus taught—to love our neighbors in general. While those who commit wrong deserve retribution and justice, our attitude toward them should not be one of revenge and hatred.

To pray for those in power. For their wisdom in dealing with volatile situations, and for them to be motivated by truth and justice over national or personal pride.

Optimistically, there is of course much to praise God for in this past year, and also much to look forward to in the new year.

Each of us can look ahead to our personal future with optimism, knowing that the God of the universe loves us individually and is personally involved in our lives. As we pray about the upcoming year and seek Him for guidance and help,

He can guide us in our decisions and direct us toward paths that will help us achieve goals that are in alignment with His will.

I find it worthwhile to seek Him at this time of the year about what goals He may want me to work toward, be they spiritual or practical. It’s uplifting and faith-building to know that my goals coincide with His overall plan for my life.

Some areas of personal growth that I plan to focus on in the year ahead include:

Giving more attention to spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is important to me, and I know that it takes intentionality to grow spiritually.

Investing in my friendships. Friends are an important part of life, but it’s so easy to take them for granted. I plan to put more time and effort into strengthening these relationships.

Minimizing stress. I’m praying about and seeking ways to avoid stress, rather than merely working through it when in a stressful situation.

Doing what I can to bring those around me closer to God. There are some wonderful people in my life who unfortunately have strong prejudices against Jesus. I’m praying for the wisdom, patience, and love to help them come to know Him.

I also pray that as you enter this new year, you will do so with a sense of purpose and direction. That you will take time to receive God’s guidance for the coming year, and that as you work toward your goals, you will find joy and satisfaction.

PETER AMSTERDAM AND HIS WIFE, MARIA FONTAINE, ARE DIRECTORS OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL, A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF FAITH. ■



THE BUS RIDE

BY MAG RAYNE

ONE TYPICAL RAINY SPRING EVENING IN RIJEKA, I was sitting on bus number 18 going home after a long day—at least, I *thought* it was bus 18. There were about 30 other passengers on the bus, equally tired and impatient to get home.

As we reached a crossroads, instead of turning right as usual, the bus took a left. *Did I get on the wrong bus?* I was about to ask when other passengers started shouting to the bus driver, “Where are you going?” So at least I *was* on the right bus after all.

However, now the bus driver was getting panicky. The bus was over 30 meters long, making course corrections tricky, and the fact that he was being screamed at wasn’t helping matters. I knew of situations like this where the passengers screamed, yelled, and even threatened to beat up the driver.

Fortunately that’s not what happened this evening. The complainers went quiet when a few other passengers called out in encouraging

tones, “Don’t worry about it, we all make mistakes. There’s a roundabout ahead where we can turn around.” Sure enough, two minutes later the bus was back on its way in the right direction.

How many times in life do we make a wrong turn on the way to reaching our goals? We wouldn’t get very far if each time we made a mistake we started yelling, protesting, and complaining, or blaming and judging somebody for the difficult place we find ourselves in. Neither would lamenting get us moving any sooner.

On the other hand, once we recognize we’re off track, we can encourage ourselves (or those around us when they make a mistake) that not all is lost—like those good-natured people on the bus that evening. Then we can turn around and get going back in the right direction.

MAG RAYNE RUNS A VOLUNTEER ASSOCIATION IN CROATIA. ■

TURN AGAIN

In the Bible, the word *repent* comes from the Greek *metanoeo* (New Testament), meaning *to turn around*, or the Hebrew word *shuwb* (Old Testament), meaning *to return or come back*. If you find yourself on the wrong path, when you turn around and start heading back in the right direction, you are literally repenting. When Jesus said, “Repent, and believe in the gospel,”¹ He wanted people to not only have faith, but also to change what they were doing or how they were living—belief plus action.—*Chris Hunt*

Who errs and mends, to God himself commends.—*Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616)*

1. Mark 1:15

CLIMBING THE NEW YEAR

BY CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER

EVEN THE BEST CLIMBERS NEED GUIDES WHEN THEY CLIMB UNFAMILIAR MOUNTAINS. In fact, only a foolhardy novice would try to go without one—a novice like me.

Years ago, I was on vacation in Switzerland, and on the last day, a friend and I decided to climb a nearby mountain. It was late afternoon by the time we got started, and we hadn't gone far before we passed a rugged shepherd on his way down with his sheep, after a day of grazing them further up the mountain. "Darkness comes early and suddenly in the mountains," he warned. "Wait until tomorrow and hire a guide." But tomorrow would be too late. By the next afternoon, we'd be on a train home, so we trekked on.

As sure as night follows day, we were soon in near total darkness. Because it was overcast, there wasn't even any moonlight or starlight. We could barely make out the rocky trail right at our feet, let alone see ahead. One misstep and we would go tumbling down the mountain. We would have to spend the night on the mountain.

We had one sleeping bag with us, so we took turns sleeping in it.

Then it started to rain—pour, actually. Now we were not only cold but also drenched, and so was our sleeping bag. We managed to take refuge under an outcropping of rock, and after what seemed like an eternity, dawn broke, the rain stopped, and we were able to make our descent.

On our way down, we passed the same shepherd we had talked to the previous afternoon. He shook his head in silence and gave us a look that was a mix of amusement and relief. Had it gotten much colder that night, we could have died of exposure.

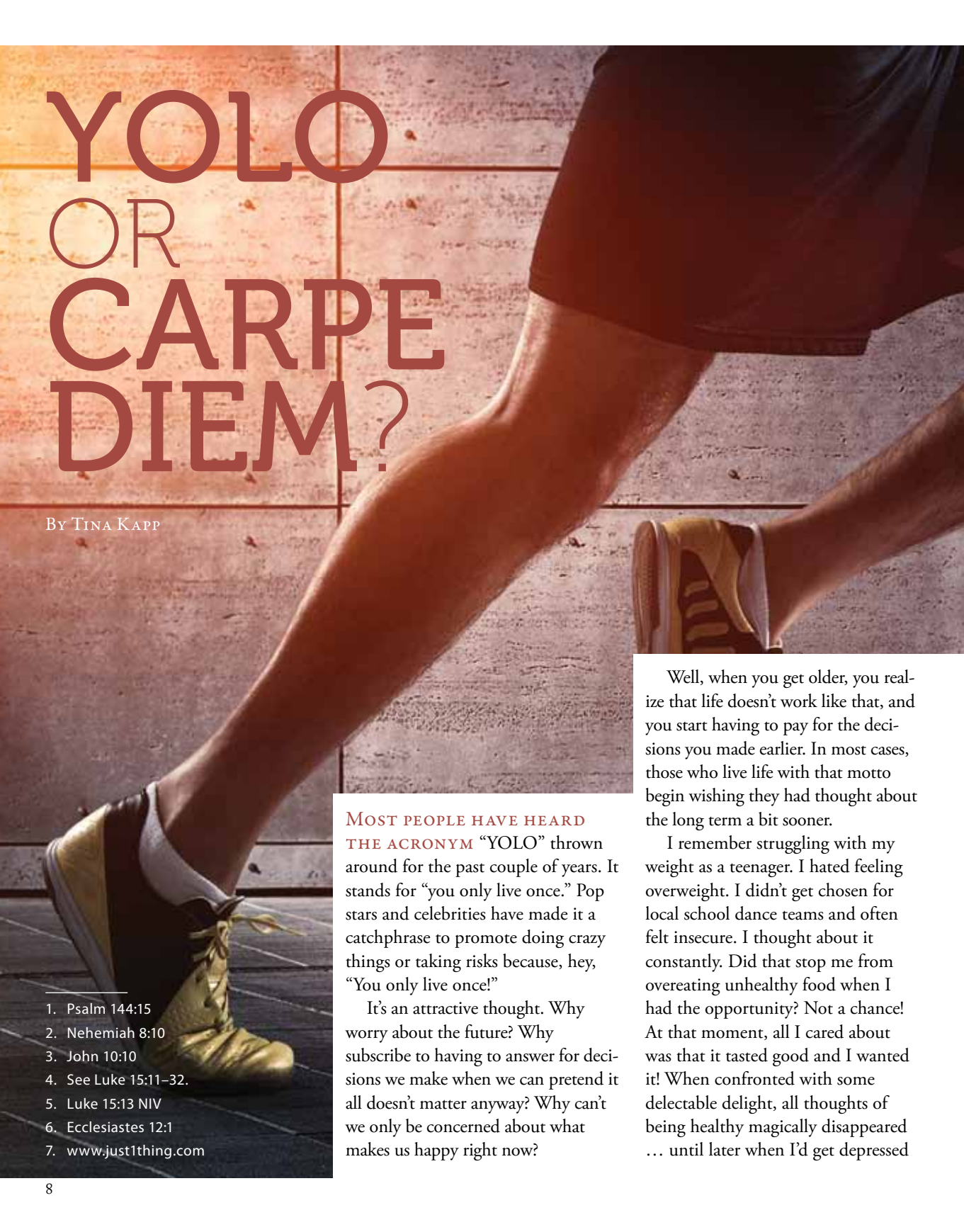
Taking on the challenges of the new year is like climbing a mountain: Although it's a lot of hard work and potentially dangerous, it holds special rewards for those who rise to the challenge and don't quit till they reach the summit.

But sometimes we become too self-confident and feel that we can go it alone. If we're smart, we'll realize that we need the help of a mountain guide, and of course there's no better guide than Jesus, the "Chief Shepherd" of our souls.¹ He knows where the green pastures are, as well as where the dangers lie. If we stay close to Him, He will help us reach our goals for the coming year.

CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER IS A SCRIPTWRITER AND MIME ARTIST² IN GERMANY. ■

1. See 1 Peter 5:4.

2. <http://elixirmime.com>



YOLO OR CARPE DIEM?

BY TINA KAPP

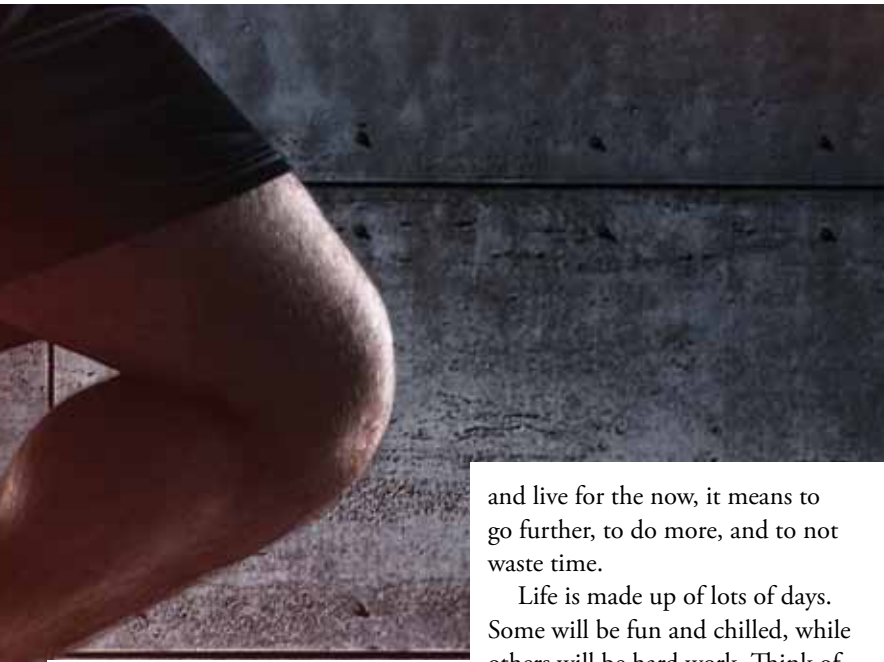
MOST PEOPLE HAVE HEARD THE ACRONYM “YOLO” thrown around for the past couple of years. It stands for “you only live once.” Pop stars and celebrities have made it a catchphrase to promote doing crazy things or taking risks because, hey, “You only live once!”

It’s an attractive thought. Why worry about the future? Why subscribe to having to answer for decisions we make when we can pretend it all doesn’t matter anyway? Why can’t we only be concerned about what makes us happy right now?

Well, when you get older, you realize that life doesn’t work like that, and you start having to pay for the decisions you made earlier. In most cases, those who live life with that motto begin wishing they had thought about the long term a bit sooner.

I remember struggling with my weight as a teenager. I hated feeling overweight. I didn’t get chosen for local school dance teams and often felt insecure. I thought about it constantly. Did that stop me from overeating unhealthy food when I had the opportunity? Not a chance! At that moment, all I cared about was that it tasted good and I wanted it! When confronted with some delectable delight, all thoughts of being healthy magically disappeared ... until later when I’d get depressed

1. Psalm 144:15
2. Nehemiah 8:10
3. John 10:10
4. See Luke 15:11–32.
5. Luke 15:13 NIV
6. Ecclesiastes 12:1
7. www.just1thing.com



that I couldn't lose weight. That was me living strictly in the moment with no thought for the long term.

Now that doesn't mean that we shouldn't enjoy life. God doesn't want us to be miserable. "Happy are the people who are in such a state;" the Bible says, "Happy are the people whose God is the Lord!"¹ "Do not sorrow," it tells us, "for the joy of the Lord is your strength."² Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."³ Jesus wants us to experience God's love and the many blessings that He gives us every day.

Since we only have one life, what do we want to do with it? What do we want to be remembered for? What would be a life that we can look back at and be proud of? The well-known saying "Carpe Diem" (Latin for "seize the day") has a positive feel to it. It's the same rationale that you only live once, but rather than taking it as a reason to do crazy things, ignore consequences,

and live for the now, it means to go further, to do more, and to not waste time.

Life is made up of lots of days. Some will be fun and chilled, while others will be hard work. Think of Olympic gold medalists. The day that they compete and win will go down in history, and I bet it will remain as one of the best days of their lives. But to get there, it takes years of training, hard work, and focus. Think of your favorite musician playing to a massive audience. Again, they only got there through countless days of faithful practice, rehearsals, and playing for anyone who would listen until they got their big break.

All our favorite Bible characters experienced something similar. Think of Noah building the ark or Joseph saving Egypt from starvation. The good days didn't come from them sitting around only doing what they felt like and enjoying the YOLO days. It took hard work and planning so that when the time came, their single life would save many more and leave its mark on the world.

The prodigal son believed you only live once.⁴ He didn't want to wait for his inheritance. He wanted

to party and have fun now. He pestered his father for his share of his inheritance and then immediately "set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living."⁵ I'm sure he had a fabulous time ... until the money ran out, and with it, all his so-called "friends." They left him in rags, begging for food, when he had nothing left.

Ecclesiastes warns us, "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'"⁶

All of the choices we make have consequences—from little things like eating vegetables, to studying and working hard toward a goal, to living a godly life. Understanding that now can help you make wise decisions and have something wonderful to show for it at the end of your days.

Don't let life pass you by. Make the most of it so that you can look back and be encouraged by what you've accomplished.

TINA KAPP IS A DANCER, PRESENTER, AND FREELANCE WRITER IN SOUTH AFRICA. SHE RUNS AN ENTERTAINMENT COMPANY THAT HELPS RAISE FUNDS FOR CHARITY AND MISSIONARY PROJECTS. THIS ARTICLE WAS ADAPTED FROM A PODCAST ON JUST 1 THING,⁷ A CHRISTIAN CHARACTER-BUILDING WEBSITE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE. ■

WHEN LESS IS MORE

BY JESSIE RICHARDS

IT'S A CLICHÉD RÉSUMÉ LINE, but I'm a goal-oriented person. For as long as I can remember, I've set goals, and in particular New Year's goals, and then worked to achieve them. A lot of New Year's resolutions fail because they're just things people say while caught up in a moment of passion (or guilt), only to soon forget or ignore. That isn't the case for me. However, I *have* learned that I tend to be overly ambitious. I reach some goals, but still end up discouraged, or sometimes reach goals that were semi-important but not the most important ones. It isn't because I

don't keep my goals in mind and work toward them consistently, but because I fail to plan realistically, factoring in my own limitations or building in enough time for "just living life."

I recently reviewed my past eight years' worth of resolutions, which have usually been a combination of work accomplishments, fitness achievements, places I wanted to go, and things I wanted to learn or become more proficient at.

YEAR ONE

I set ten goals and only fully fulfilled two of them. Then there were several that I worked toward and got pretty close—for example, I planned to run 1,000 kilometers during the year, and I ran 850.

Something interesting I noticed when reviewing my goals at the end of the year was that I had told a lot of people about the two I fulfilled, which of course then spurred me to follow through.

Something else that stood out was that there were at least two items on my list where I realized later that *I don't really want to do that anymore*, or wondered, *How did that get on the list?* Whims, not goals.

YEAR TWO

In an attempt to learn from the previous year, I told myself I would "only set one or two goals per category." But I somehow ended up with six categories and eight goals. And those were all personal, so a few months into the year, I added seven work goals. So my total of 15 goals was even more than the year before.

I made a very specific rule for my goals this time, though, which was: If it's not specific and measurable, it can't go on the list. That must have helped, because I hit 11 of the 15.

YEAR THREE

In another attempt to improve my methods, I decided to focus on one big overarching goal. There were, of course, sub-goals under that (16 of them); but they were all connected and organized in a step-by-step style, and it mostly worked. Well, I hit nine. But the progress was valid and I was happy with it.

YEAR FOUR

I set six goals. Hit five. I did a few things differently from previous years:

I took time every quarter to review my goals and progress.

I kept an ongoing list of all my accomplishments, both work and personal.

I made a “stop doing” list—this was a revelation! I read it somewhere and it made so much sense. In order to give myself more time for the things I wanted to do, I realized I had to free up time from somewhere, and I’m happy to say I was successful in discontinuing the three things I decided to stop doing.

YEAR FIVE

The realities of life made my goals fairly easy that year—there were two biggies that weren’t optional—get a

new job and get a new apartment—and I achieved them.

Then, of course, I had to go and set myself some optional ones. There were six. I hit three.

YEAR SIX

I changed the name of my list, from “New Year’s goals” to “What I want this year.” (I also spelled out “the means” of how to get them, whenever possible.)

I wanted nine things. I got six of them.

YEAR SEVEN

Again I went with the “what I want” list. I kept to two primary goals; but to fulfill them would take seven of what I called “support system” goals. Three of the seven went well, and they were the ones most important to me. But I didn’t fully realize either of the top two. I bit off more than I could chew, even with two—they were too big.

YEAR EIGHT—THE PRESENT

A quick recap shows me clearly that as much as I try to be realistic, I always overreach. If I set 10 goals, I’ll perhaps meet seven. If I set six, I’ll

probably meet three. If I set three, I’ll meet one or two.

So this year I’m going with what I think is a brilliant plan: Just. One. Goal. There will be no way around it—it will be reached. With only one objective in sight, I am certain to focus, be intentional, and achieve it.

I still have my “bucket list,” which I regularly add to, and there’s no limit on entries for that (currently over 40!). They don’t have an expiry date of the end of the year, though—and anyway, desiring and dreaming are free. Achieving goals, on the other hand, takes clarity, focus, time, effort, and a healthy dose of realism.

JESSIE RICHARDS HAD A ROLE IN THE PRODUCTION OF *ACTIVATED* FROM 2001 TO 2012, AND HAS WRITTEN A NUMBER OF ARTICLES AS AN *ACTIVATED* STAFF WRITER. SHE HAS ALSO WRITTEN AND EDITED MATERIAL FOR OTHER CHRISTIAN PUBLICATIONS AND WEBSITES. ■



THE POSTMAN'S PALACE

BY JOYCE SUTTIN

[Photo: Palais Idéal]

IT WAS A SIMPLE, mundane life, the life of Ferdinand Cheval. He was born in 1836 in a village southeast of Lyon, France, where he attended school for only six years until he was orphaned as a young teenager.

Throughout his life he worked as a farmer, a baker, and finally a postman. In 1869, he requested and obtained a route known as the *Tournée de Tersanne*, delivering and picking up mail in the villages around Hauterives. He remained there until retirement, walking the 33 km (20 mile) route daily over 10,000 times.

One day, at the age of 43, he stumbled over a uniquely shaped stone. In his words: "I was walking very fast when my foot caught on something that sent me stumbling a few meters away. I wanted to know the cause. In a dream I had built a palace, a castle

or caves, I cannot express it well... I told no one about it for fear of being ridiculed and I felt ridiculous myself. Then fifteen years later, when I had almost forgotten my dream, when I wasn't thinking of it at all, my foot reminded me of it. My foot tripped on a stone that almost made me fall. I wanted to know what it was... It was a stone of such a strange shape that I put it in my pocket to admire it at my ease. The next day, I went back to the same place. I found more stones, even more beautiful, I gathered them together on the spot and was overcome with delight."¹

From then on, each day while walking his route, Ferdinand set aside stones, which he collected on his way home, and with them, he began to construct his palace, which he called *Palais idéal*. Night after night, stone by stone, he worked to construct the marvelous building, complete with arches, turrets, and ornate columns.

In 1896, Ferdinand retired and was able to devote himself entirely to his passion. In 1912, after 33 years of labor, and at the age of 77, he completed the palace. But Ferdinand wasn't done. He began work on an elaborate mausoleum, which took him another eight years and was completed when he was 86.

If you feel your life is mundane as you slowly trek the long miles through your days, remember the postman's vision of a *Palais idéal* and the simple painstaking labor of building a dream pebble by pebble, stone by stone. You never know what amazing results might come from tripping over an odd stone along your way. If you use those stumbling blocks as stepping stones, you just might create something amazing.

JOYCE SUTTIN IS A RETIRED TEACHER AND WRITER AND LIVES IN SAN ANTONIO, USA. ■

1. Wikipedia page: "Ferdinand Cheval," accessed June 16, 2016

FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL



BY KEITH PHILLIPS

NEW YEAR'S DAY IS SORT OF LIKE THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL.

It's as though God gives us each a spotless new notebook, sharp new pencils, new textbooks full of new lessons, and a fresh start. Whether or not that comes as a happy thought to you probably depends on how well you did in the last grade, last year. If you excelled, you're probably ready to greet the new year with high hopes and bring-it-on enthusiasm. If you just barely squeaked by, you probably feel something between jitters and trepidation.

Either way, this coming year can be your best yet because Jesus wants to be your personal tutor. He's pretty smart, and if you're smart you'll take Him up on His offer. Who could better help you through the school of life? After all, He designed the course, wrote the textbook, and put together the tests, so of course He understands the material inside and out and has all the answers. What's more, He loves you dearly and

wants to see you succeed even more than you do.

As you learn to take your questions and problems to Him and let Him explain how He sees them, you'll find that things will click like never before. He will help you solve even the toughest problems, and teach you to capitalize on your mistakes by turning them into learning opportunities. He's patient, loving, and wise—and did I mention He knows better than anyone how to make learning fun?

Why struggle on your own for a passing grade when Jesus can help you make the honor roll? And when the final exam comes around, Jesus will help you ace that too, and you'll be so proud when you hear Him say, "Well done!"

KEITH PHILLIPS WAS *ACTIVATED'S* EDITOR-IN-CHIEF FOR 14 YEARS FROM 1999 TO 2013. HE AND HIS WIFE CARYN NOW WORK WITH THE HOMELESS IN THE U.S.A. ■

Start the year off right by asking Jesus to come in and walk the year's path with you. Simply pray:

Jesus, I accept Your offer to spend eternity with You. Please come into my life and help me navigate whatever may come our way.

I don't know what the future holds, but I know that God holds tomorrow, so it is exciting. Even when I have hard things happen, He loves me so big, so much. I come through it and I grow from it, because He has got me.

—Barbara Mandrell (b. 1948)



BY SASKIA SMITH

Strawberries, Candles, and Resolutions

IT WAS A BRIGHT SUNNY DAY IN SOUTH AFRICA, and the old year was coming to a close. Thoughts had turned from Christmas celebrations to New Year's resolutions.

The farmhouse door clanged behind me as I went into the kitchen. My mother followed my gaze to a heaping bowl of strawberries on the table. "Yvonna brought those over," she said. "A gift from her family."

I found the generosity of our neighbors almost awkward. Our volunteer center occupied the largest and nicest house in the neighborhood. Yvonna was a teenager who lived two houses down. Like most families in the village, hers had tended the strawberry fields behind their house for months. Every harvest, our neighbors came to our door with their arms full of strawberries.

Yvonna had been asking for Bible studies for some time, but we had

been genuinely busy and kept putting it off. I sighed and resolved to get Yvonna started on those classes soon.

My family always celebrated New Year's Eve together, and friends would come for a candlelight get-together. Each person, down to the youngest, would light a small candle from a large central one that symbolized Jesus. Then they would share the things they were most thankful for about the last year, and also their hopes and prayers for the new year.

That night I forgave someone present for a wrong that had made my life emotionally difficult for the past few weeks. It felt so good to get it off my chest that I wished I had done it earlier. Other people talked about wanting to do more for the local community. We all agreed. The start of a new year was the perfect time to get more involved.

New Year's Day dawned bright and full of promise. But Yvonna was not there to see it. She had been killed in an auto accident shortly after midnight.

Everyone was deeply affected by the loss of our friend. In the months that followed we found ways to comfort Yvonna's family, and the community was brought closer together. Many young people came to us with questions about life, death, and God, which we were happy to answer. Yvonna believed in Jesus, and I'm certain that from her vantage point in heaven, she saw the positive effects of her passing. For my part, each New Year's Day since, as the fireworks dissolve in the early morning sky, I have thought about Yvonna and renewed my resolution to not wait for the "perfect" time to do the things that really matter. ■

PAST *and* FUTURE

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

BY ABI MAY



THE NEW YEAR IS A GREAT TIME TO TAKE STOCK OF THE PAST YEAR AND SET GOALS FOR THE NEXT. Here's a spiritual exercise to that end. (You will need one large candle and one small one.)

Begin by lighting the large candle, which represents Jesus, the light of the world. Read and think about these verses from the Bible:

"I [Jesus] am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."¹

"You will light my lamp; the Lord my God will enlighten my darkness."²

Use the big candle to light the small candle, representing you.

Take a few minutes to reflect on the past year. Take into consideration

1. John 8:12
2. Psalm 18:28

these three areas of your life: your work or studies, your home life and relationships with family and friends, and your personal life, which includes your physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

What in the past year, in each of those areas, are you most thankful for? You might have many things in each area. Thank God for them. You may want to jot them down for future reference.

Then take a few more minutes to reflect on the coming year. In terms of those three areas of your life, what are your prayers or aspirations for the coming year? Write those things down, either as a personal prayer or in point form, so you will have them to refer to as the year progresses and be reminded to thank God as He answers your prayers (and for next New Year's exercise).

With a few simple modifications, this exercise can also be done with family or friends:

Light the large candle, read the Bible verses aloud, and briefly discuss them.

Take a few minutes for everyone to think about and write down the things they are most thankful for from the past year, then a few more minutes for everyone to formulate their prayer for the coming year. (Or with advance notice, everyone can prepare their list ahead of time and take as much time for reflection as they like.)

Then, as you go around your circle, each person lights their small candle and reads or explains to the others what they are most thankful for in the past year and what their prayer is for the new one.

ABI MAY IS A FREELANCE WRITER, EDUCATOR, AND HEALTHCARE ADVOCATE IN GREAT BRITAIN. ■



FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

HAPPY NEW YOU!

In this coming year, I can help you become more like you want to be. In fact, I can do better than that! I can help you become more like I want you to be.

Yes, it will take some effort on your part; it will take a daily yielding to My Spirit. For Me to live and move in you and work through you in greater measure, there must be yielding. Ask Me to help you change, and be willing to work at overcoming any habits that are holding you back from becoming all you could be. Make some resolutions, with My guidance, and then review them daily and put them into practice until they become second nature to you. You may not be able to do all of these things every day, especially not at first, but with practice, as you apply yourself and learn to avail yourself of My help, I will help you override your old habits and nature.

Don't expect to be totally changed overnight, for this is not the way I work. Be patient, be consistent, and I will help you bring about the changes you desire. If you will do your part, I will bring you along step by step, because I love you.