
Well, I want to wish everybody a Happy New Year. Those of you at all of our physical locations and those of you joining us online at TPO, so glad that you could be with us.

It's hard to believe that we are in a brand-new year, 2021. I don't know about you, if anybody else feels this way, but it felt like last year simultaneously went excruciatingly slow and incredibly fast at the same time. Anybody feel that with me?

Man, I am super thankful to see 2020 in the rearview mirror. Glad to see it go. And yet, I know that we're kind of hard on 2020, but God still did some incredible things last year. I really do believe that. He was still in the middle of it. He was still at work.

In fact, just to try to put a bow on last year as we head into the new year, I want to celebrate a few things with you. Traders Point Online stood up on its feet and launched in a matter of a few weeks back in the spring. We had 279 baptisms last year. Yeah, man. This is really remarkable. Over 4,000 people got into groups.

Through your generosity we were able—back in the spring when the pandemic started and there was a shortage of masks, we purchased over 100,000 M95 type masks to be delivered to hospitals. We gave over \$200,000 and 21,000 essential items to ministry partners around the globe for pandemic relief. And over 500 vulnerable children and their families in Indiana were served. So I just want to thank you guys for being involved and engaged.

Today we are starting a new series of messages that I've been excited about for a while called *Atomic Habits*. And this is inspired by a book that I read about a year-and-a-half ago with the same title written by a guy named James Clear. Maybe some of you have read it. Maybe you've seen it or you're familiar with it. It's not necessarily a faith-based book, as far as I can tell, but many of the principles that he talks about are certainly found within God's word.

One of the things that I like to do at the beginning of every new year is to do a series on what I might call spiritual formation. And if you're not familiar with that term, basically what that means is some of the small, daily practices that you and I can implement into our lives to help form us more and more into the character of Jesus.

I think that one of the most misunderstood things about faith in general is that we think that it's got to be like this automatic, total change overnight, all at once. I want to be very clear. Your conversion can happen in an instant because it's not on you. It's on the finished work of Jesus on the cross. So as soon as you...

You don't have to have all of your questions answered. You don't have to know all of the answers. You don't have to have it all figured out. You don't have to have all of your sin taken care of. You profess your faith, you trust in who Jesus is and who he declares you now are, in

an instant. And then from that point forward you are being formed more and more into the likeness of Christ—spiritual formation.

I love what John the Baptist said. He said, “It’s more and more of Jesus and less and less of me, until it is Christ alone.” It’s this process of transformation from the day of our conversion. So that’s what the next four weeks are about, inspired by this book *Atomic Habits*.

Now to kick things off I’ve just got a question for all of us, those of you at our physical locations and those of you online, just a show of hands:

How many of you are hoping that this year is better than last year?

Show of hands. If your hand is not in the air, we are kicking you out. Your hand better be in the air, because this year needs to be better than last year. And I love that word *hope*. Hope is one of my favorite words. And I love how Romans 15 talks about hope. It says by the power of the Holy Spirit you and I can not only have it, but we can abound in hope. I love that.

But have you noticed that hope can be used in sort of a positive way, and then hope can be used in kind of a weak way? I’ve heard this a time or two just in the last couple of months. I’ll give you an example.

Maybe you’re having a conversation with someone, just about world events, or about the pandemic, or whatever and you just say something like, “You know what? I just can’t wait for the pandemic to end.” And he says, “I sure hope so. I sure hope it ends. Sure hope things get better.” And you’re kind of like, “I don’t really feel encouraged by that.” We’re using hope in kind of a weak way.

And whenever it comes to hoping that 2021 will be better than 2020, that’s a great place to start but it’s not a great place to stay. It’s actually got to go beyond that. We can’t just hope that we have a better year, we actually need to begin to do some things about it. We’ve got to make some small adjustments and some changes.

Maybe you’re familiar with Albert Einstein’s quote when he’s defining insanity. He says, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

You could actually say it this way though:

If you do what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you’ve always gotten.

I don’t even know if that is proper English, but it’s true. If you do what you’ve always done, regardless of how much you hope for different results, you will get what you’ve always received.

You might even write this down. This is so brilliant. Things aren’t going to change if you don’t change. There has to be some sort of an adjustment that we make in our lives.

You just can’t hope your way to a better financial situation. Like right now if you are in a whole bunch of credit card debt and you’re not saving very much for the future you can’t just say,

“Well, I hope things get better. I hope I can get to a better financial situation.” You can start there, but then you’ve got to begin to implement these small adjustments and changes to get you there.

When it comes to family relationships—maybe you’ve got a family relationship that is strained or distant or dysfunctional and you’re like, “Man, I sure hope it gets better.” You’ve actually got to make some changes and some adjustments.

When it comes to your faith—right now maybe your faith is a little wobbly, maybe right now it is somewhat non-existent, maybe it needs to be strengthened and you’re like, “Well, I sure hope by the end of 2021 my faith is stronger.” Well, you can start there, but you can’t stay there. You’ve got to begin to make some adjustments if you’re going to experience any sort of change. So we find ourselves in this position of wanting to change but we can’t.

I think that oftentimes that when it comes to the beginning of a new year, most of us are more open to change than ever. So if I could kind of illustrate this, we’ve got two side of what we might call a canyon. And there’s a space between where I am and where I want to be.

So here we are one side. We are like, “This is where I am and this is where I want to be,” when it comes to any category in your life. So: finances, relationships, faith, whatever.

What we end up doing is we end up making a New Year’s resolution of some kind. Or we set some lofty goal. We say, “This is where I want to be.” And then we end up taking this huge jump and we end up falling short. And we fall and we miss our mark, and we get discouraged by this, because we’re like, “Well, I bought the book, I attended the conference, I had the conversation, I did the thing, but I didn’t get to where I wanted to be.”

The reality is that if we’re going to see any sort of significant and lasting change it almost always, always, always... It does not boil down to this big decision that we make; it boils down to our habits at a small level.

So, let me define what a habit is. A habit can be defined as:

“a settled tendency or usual manner of behavior;”

it is, “an acquired mode of behavior that has become nearly or completely involuntary.”

In other words, it’s become so ingrained in your daily practices and processes that you don’t even necessarily see it anymore.

I think that one of the challenges when it comes to thinking about habits and incorporating habits into our lives is that many of us, the way we were trained to think about habits is that these are bad habits that we need to break away from. So we almost always thought about habits in the negative. We didn’t necessarily think about habits as positive.

When I was a kid, I had a number of bad habits that my parents or my teachers would try to break me of. They would say, “Aaron, that’s a bad habit. You need to stop it.”

And one of my worst habits that I had when I was a kid was biting my fingernails. Anybody else have that bad habit? Anybody else still have that bad habit? I would bite my fingernails and nothing that my mom did could break me of it. I remember one day she decided to spray lemon juice on my fingers to try to discourage me from biting my fingernails.

And I don't even know if I should share this with you. This is so gross. I ended up just choosing to chew on my toenails instead. I literally did that for a while. Super gross. Thank you for this place of love and acceptance and grace.

And so there are a number of bad habits—maybe you even think about them now, “Oh, that's a bad habit. I need to stop it.”

How many times do we think about habits in the positive? Like, what are some good habits that we need to begin incorporating into our lives? A habit isn't just an annoying or a distasteful behavior. A habit is a direction. A habit is a building block. A habit is one step closer to where you ultimately want to end up.

A guy named Sean Covey put it this way. He said, “Our habits either make us or break us. We become what we repeatedly do.”

We don't become what we decide to do. We don't become this big giant leap that we decided to make. We become what we repeatedly do on a regular basis.

So, here's the really sobering reality. Kind of like the bad news before we get to the good news. The sobering reality is that whatever it is that you are experiencing in your life right now—I just want you to kind of do a little evaluation here at the beginning of the year.

Think about every category of your life. Your relationships, your career, your finances, your faith, your thought life—whatever it is, your health. Whatever it is that you are currently experiencing in every one of those areas is the direct result of your daily decisions and habits.

Now, there are some things that are outside of our control. You can't control everything. But what you can do is you can control your daily decisions and habits. And I'll tell you. When you begin to do that, it will give you more stable footing in the midst of all of the uncertainty that is swirling around us. In a world of rapid change and in a world that is outside of our control, one of the things that you do control is your daily decisions and habits.

So, here's the really good news. If you can change your habits, then you can literally change your life. If you can change your habits, you can literally change your life. Not all at once, but little by little.

See, that's the problem with New Year's resolutions. And I think that most of know this, which is the reason why we've mostly given up on them. It's because, statistically, about 80 percent of New Year's resolutions we abandon by Valentine's Day. Why? Well, because we establish these really, really lofty goals, and they are good goals...

Like, “You know what? I want to lose 25 pounds.” “I want to pay off my \$10,000 in credit card debt.” “I want to read my Bible and pray for two hours a day.”

They are really good, lofty goals. But they are way too big. And we end up getting discouraged without an incremental and an attainable plan to get there. And those are key words—an incremental and attainable plan to actually get there.

So, having a hope that 2021 will be better than 20 is a great place to start. But if there is anything that last year taught us it's that there are so many things that are simply outside of our control.

But we do have a say in our daily habits and decisions, which is why I am so excited about this series. I just want to encourage you, whether in person or online, to lock in with us for the next four weeks as we walk through this together.

As I said just a few minutes ago, a lot of principles that are found in the book *Atomic Habits* can be very easily found in Scripture, beginning with Jesus. We see that Jesus was a man of daily habits.

In fact, let me just give you a couple of examples. Luke, chapter 5, verse 16, referring to him, says:

Jesus, *“continued his habit of retiring to deserted places and praying.”*

We see him doing this on a regular basis. Jesus would be with the crowds teaching and then he would retreat, and he would go out by himself and it was actually those retreats that would enable him to give himself away and do what he did with the crowds. Jesus had developed that habit.

Another example is found in Luke, chapter 4:

“When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath...”

So Jesus did this on a regular basis. That's always stood out to me. If anybody had a pass on church attendance, you'd think it would be Jesus, “Yeah, I think I've got it covered. I think I've got all of the answers. I've got this all taken care of.” But Jesus found it necessary to go on a regular basis to the synagogue. Why do you think that is?

Well, I think that the author of Hebrews gives us a clue to this in Hebrews, chapter 10. It says: *“And let us consider how to stir up one another.”* I love that visual. It's kind of like, things have sort of settled to the bottom, and every now and then we need to be stirred up once again, to what? Well, *“to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”*

I think that this is such a critical passage, especially for the time period in which we are in. Let us not neglect some of these habits—one of them being that as imperfect Christ followers we gather together to stir one another up toward love and good works. And you can develop the habit of that in two ways.

One of my concerns through all of last year and through this pandemic, through the duration of it, is just wondering what kind of habits we are developing right now that might stick with us on the other side.

Now, one of the things that is sort of mind blowing is that if you look on paper, we actually have more people—even though less people are physically showing up to our campuses, we actually have more people engaging in our worship services on the weekend due to technology in the midst of the pandemic.

And yet, I've had a number of conversations and messages from some people who I know who love Jesus and are committed to our church who haven't engaged in a service in months. And they'll just say, "I'm really wrestling with depression." Or, "I've gotten out of the habit." Or, "I just forgot what day it was. I've been working from home. Kids are e-learning from home. And I've just missed it."

So, one of my concerns is, and this is the question all of us have to ask ourselves—listen. The pandemic will eventually come to and end but right now you are being shaped by your habits in the midst of the pandemic. The question is, are they habits that you want to keep when the pandemic is over?

Right now you are being shaped into someone, so you can't control some of these outside things, but you can control the habits that you cultivate in your life. Habits can be good or bad, they can be helpful or unhelpful, they can be destructive or constructive, but either way, they are cumulative in their effect and they are stronger than your will.

Let me say that again in case you started daydreaming or the dog just ran through the living room. Habits are cumulative in their effect and they are more powerful than your will. In other words, this [making a New Year's resolution leap to where you want to be] is a will. I'm going to will myself across the canyon. And you fall into it because you didn't get there.

But habits are step by step by step and on those days when you just don't feel like it or you're not seeing results, you're still continuing on in that same direction.

So, I want to kind of wrap up the rest of our time by just camping out on this question right here:

Why do most of us not see change, even when we're committed to it?

Why is it that oftentimes we don't see the kind of change that we would like in our lives, even though we're genuine about the goal that we set? We are sincere about the desire for us to accomplish something, but then we end up giving up on it. And almost always it comes down the space between the two canyons.

So when it comes to the word *atomic* what comes to your mind? Well, for me it's like explosion, right? The atomic bomb. Something big takes place. But the atomic bomb doesn't happen without an atom, these small things. The word atomic defined actually means this:

incremental, extremely minute, tiny

It's this idea of small adjustments. That's the key. The small, daily practices that get us to where we want to be. I want you to think like building blocks. They are incremental and they are cumulative in their effect. So why do we not see change when we are committed to it?

Three reasons. Here's the first one:

We have a tendency to overestimate the big moments and we underestimate the power of small, daily improvements.

That's where we have to start and that's where we've got to stay. Just think about it, even if you could just make a one percent change or a one percent improvement every single day, if you run the math out on that, by the end of the year you'll be 37 times better.

And the reason why is this thing called compound interest. And compound interest, for those of you financial wizards, can work against you—this is why it's so hard to get out of credit card debt, because of compound interest. And it can work for you in your 401K. You add little by little by little by little and it just continues to compound.

And listen, that same thing is true in relationships. So if you think, "You know what? That relationship is really dysfunctional, and it's broken down. I don't know why it isn't fixed, because we had one conversation, we went to counseling one time, we went on a great vacation and nothing seemed to work." Well, that's just one thing but you've got to implement small, daily habits to get there.

The same is true with your finances. You're like, "You know what? We're in a mess so we'll wait 'til we win the Lottery." Or, "We'll wait 'til we get the inheritance." Or, "We'll wait 'til we sell the business." When all financial books will tell you that the most effective and healthy way to build wealth is little by little.

I love how Eugene Peterson puts this in one of his books that he wrote a long time ago. I love the title: *Long Obedience in the Same Direction*." So you might write this down: Small disciplines made on a consistent basis is how big change happens.

It's the small disciplines that are made on a consistent basis that make big change happen. That's true in every area of life.

Here's the second reason why we often don't experience change, even though we are committed to it:

We give up too quickly because we actually don't receive results fast enough.

That's true for me. That's probably the biggest one for me. I'm impatient and if I don't see results as fast as I would like then I end up giving up.

I remember when I was in the 8th or 9th grade, I really wanted to dunk a basketball and there are a number of factors working against that, that you can tell just by looking at me. That ain't going to happen.

But I saw an advertisement for some shoes. Maybe some of you recall these. Anybody have the strength shoe growing up? I saw this on TV, and I was like, "Man, I've got to have that. It's a shoe with a platform on the front so that it forces you to walk on your toes.

So I did all of the workouts. I ran in these things. I worked out in the strength shoes every single day for a week. And I got done at the end of the week and I was like, "Alright. Let's see the results of my work." And I took off the strength shoes and I put on my regular basketball shoes and I barely could touch the net. And I was so discouraged, "These things don't work." I gave up too soon.

There have been a number of studies on why change is so hard. And, visually, if we were to look at it like this: there is a point that represents results, and an arrow represents the time to get to the results...

What we want—like me and the strength shoe, I wanted to see results right away, as fast as possible. This is also true when it comes to getting out of debt. This is true when it comes to relationships, your career, just fill in the category. So we want to see, especially here in the western world, we want to see results, but we want to see results fast, like hockey stick up and to the right.

But here's how change normally happens. You make a commitment to something and you're probably going to see a little bit of a dip, a little bit of a lag before you eventually begin to see exponential results. It takes some time to get there.

Now, here's what knocks us off track. It's the space between the hockey stick up and to the right and the slow growth that eventually takes off. And you might call it the valley of despair. This is where New Year's resolutions go to die. And Valentine's Day is like right in the middle of the valley.

I would say that in the midst of this pandemic we are probably almost three-fourths of the way through. And many of you are feeling it. Here in Indiana the weather is really gloomy. We came through the holidays. When is this thing going to turn a corner?

And it's in the valley of despair where most of us give up on many of our commitments. This is where most of us give up. But if we could just hang on, eventually we'll turn a corner and we'll see exponential results.

If you decided, "I'm going to get in shape this year. And you buy the gym membership. And you go and you're pumping weights and you're trying to change your diet and you go home at the end of the week and you're like, "I actually gained two pounds. This doesn't work." But if you could do that for six months? Eventually you turn a corner to see exponential results. And this is true in every area of life.

Think about how many people in Scripture could have easily given up in the valley of despair. You can just trace this narrative all through Scripture: Moses, Daniel, David, Ruth—God had promised them these things. He said, “This is where you are going and then every single one of them went through this valley of despair, where they could have easily given up. But God was at work behind the scenes.

Galatians, chapter 6, verse 9 illustrates this really well. It says:

“So let’s not get tired,” don’t get tired, *“of doing what is good.”* Don’t get tired of doing the things you know you need to do, *“At just the,”* say it with me out loud, even those of you online, *“right time,”* at the right time, *“we will reap a harvest of blessing if we,”* what? *“if we don’t give up.”*

And maybe right now there is somebody who needs to hear that. You need that encouragement right now. I know you’re tired. Don’t give up. I know right now it seems like we’re never going to turn a corner on this thing. We will. Don’t give up. It seems like you’ve tried everything you can to make that relationship better. Don’t give up. It seems like you’ve tried to get out of debt and it just seems like the unexpected bills come in and you’ve lost the income. Listen. Don’t give up.

You’re trying to get closer to God. A year ago at this time you were like, “I’m set to go. I’m going to grow closer to God.” Then with the events of this year—it felt like they just hurled you away from him. Listen. Don’t give up. You continue to do what you know you should.

God gives us this promise. You will reap a harvest if you don’t give up. You’ve got to just continue to push through. Results are always a lagging measure of your habits. You get what you repeat.

Here’s the third reason why change is oftentimes so difficult:

We almost always get wrapped up in what to do rather than: who am I?

So, oftentimes when it comes to resolutions and goals and things that we want to achieve we immediately go, “What have I got to do to get it? And let me try to jump to that, to do it.” But then it doesn’t necessarily stick because it’s not being informed out of your identity.

So if I could just give you one more picture, I might talk about two circles, one inside of the other. “What” to do is the outside circle, and “how” to do it is the inside.

So when we think about goals and resolutions, we think, “Okay, what do I have to do to get there?” And that’s where we start. But then the next layer inside that is, “Well, how am I going to do it?” That would be like the systems we create to actually get there. And then inside the second circle is a third circle which would simply be: who. This is a question of identity.

And most often what we do is we stay way out in the outside circle with the “do” stuff. And it’s really hard to white knuckle goals, without actually having it come out of your identity. The key

to lasting change is to declare, “Who do I want to be?” And who do I want to be informs how I’m going to do it and that will inform the “do”.

Can I say that, by the way, this is what has short—circuited many people’s faith. Perhaps you grew up in a church environment that focused almost entirely on the “do”. Stop doing that. Start doing this. There is another word for that, a fancier word for that, it’s called moralism.

And it’s the reason why so many of you tapped out when it came to God. You thought church was all about making you feel really, really bad about yourself and all the things that you know you should do, but you know you’ll never live up to them. So eventually you either learned to fake it or you just walked away from it. And you said, “I don’t even know that I believe in God.” Or, “That’s good for you but it’s not good for me.” You just stopped going to church altogether.

Instead you need to camp out on your identity, because this is the gospel message, God fundamentally wants to change your identity.

So God says, “Listen to me. There isn’t anything that you can do to make me love you more. There isn’t anything you can do to make me love you less. You are loved and I’ve given my Son, Jesus, to you to make you into a new creation. The old is gone. The new has come.”

So there isn’t this incremental step to be loved by God. There isn’t this incremental step to your salvation, like, “If I can just try to learn about the Bible and do enough really good things, then maybe, eventually, I’ll get saved.” No, you can be saved in an instant. Why? Because Jesus has already done the heavy lifting for you. It’s his finished work on the cross, not your ongoing work.

So you can be saved in an instant. And then this new identity in Christ informs everything else. And you begin to grow, and you are transformed, slowly, into a new creation in Christ.

Your identity drives your behaviors. And without that, trying to establish a lofty goal is like trying to nail Jell-O to a tree. Have you ever tried to do that? Of course you haven’t. That’s crazy. But if you ever did try to do it, it wouldn’t work. It just won’t stick. You’ve got to say, “Who am I? Who has God declared that I am?” And then all of your daily habits and decisions get informed out of that.”

James Clear actually talks about that in *Atomic Habits*. He says that this is one of the reasons why it’s so difficult for those who are trying to quit smoking. If they don’t start with identity, if they just start with behavior, and stay there then their willpower will only take them so far.

So somebody offers them a cigarette and they say, “No, I’m trying to stop.” They can only say that so many times before they give in. But if somebody offers to give one to them and they say, “No, I’m not a smoker,” that’s an identity thing.

And the same thing is true in every area of our lives. Romans, chapter 12 speaks to this. It says:

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world...”

The Greek word there for conform is this word *syschematizo*, which basically just means to: shape one's behavior by a pattern

What English word does that sound like? System. It's these systems that we create to get us there. So Romans 12 says:

"Do not conform to the pattern of this world..."

...but set some New Year's resolutions to change your life. No, it doesn't say that. It says:

"Do not conform...but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

That's a process. That's the small, daily habits that point you in the direction of where you want to be. See, your mind defines the:

beliefs/values that lead you to act in certain ways.

And then the passage finishes to say:

"Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

So, when you know who you are, that informs what you know you need to begin to do. Here's the application today. I just want to make this as simple as possible.

I want you to think about the day of your funeral, alright? And I want you to not just think about what that's going to look like or who is going to be there, I want you to give some thought to what are they going to say about you on the day of your funeral?

And I'm not talking about from up front, because usually people say all of the really, really nice things from up front whether they mean it or not. I want you to imagine passing through the fellowship hall afterward or in the hallways when people are having private, one on one, conversations talking about you. What are they going to say?

And now is the time to begin making decisions to live your life in such a way so that on the day of your funeral people will say things about you that you really do desire, the mark that you really do want to make on this world.

So here's some very simple application steps. Today, while it's fresh, just get away for 10 or 15 minutes and write down:

Who you want to become?

And you might draw up categories of your life. Maybe when it comes to your relationships or your career or your faith or whatever, who do you ultimately want to be? Then the next step is:

Start some small, daily habits that reinforce who you want to become.

So how are you going to incrementally get there? And then the third one is so important:

Don't get discouraged if you mess up or don't get immediate results. Because atomic habits are cumulative in their effect and they have power as you stick with them as Galatians says: Don't give up.

Several years ago I used this illustration that some of you may recall. And I don't think it's a bad thing to reuse illustrations because it's good to be reminded. And then there are a number of you who haven't ever heard this.

I gave this illustration of the Chinese bamboo tree. And the Chinese bamboo tree starts off like any other tree. It's a seed in the ground. But once that seed gets planted, nothing happens for a really, really long time. Almost to the point that you don't think anything is going to happen. So the seed goes into the ground and several months go by, nothing.

A year goes by, and there is still no movement in the soil. Two years go by, and you'd think something is massively wrong. Three years go by and you're like, "I think the seed died. I don't think anything is going to happen." Four years go by, you stop thinking about it. But then at five years the soil begins to stir, and the Chinese bamboo tree breaks through the soil.

When I first read about that, I thought about what it would have been like for the very first Chinese bamboo tree farmer? The very first one, right? Like the guy who figured this out. What would it have been like if you had read about these Chinese bamboo seeds and everything and he was like, "O man, nobody else is in the market with this."

So he quits his job, and he decides to go all in to start the Chinese bamboo tree business. And he talks his spouse into it. She reluctantly gets on board. They sink every penny that they have into this and he goes out into a field and plants all of these Chinese bamboo tree seeds. And then he just waits.

Several months go by and there's nothing. And she's asking about it. And he's like, "I'm sure that any day now we'll see some results." A year goes by and she's like, "Can I come down and see our investment?" He's making excuses as to why she can't. Year two goes by and she's wondering, "Did you forget where you planted them, kind of like you forgot our anniversary? Do you just not know where they are?"

Year three goes by. She gets angry. Year four goes by, the anger turns into outright cynicism. So he comes home at night. She greets him at the door. She says, "Hey, honey. How was your day being an imaginary Chinese bamboo tree farmer? I'm just here all day running imaginary errands. I'm preparing an imaginary dinner. Maybe we'll have some imaginary intimacy later tonight." I don't know. It's just like the worst, right? He's just totally in the doghouse and he feels like an utter failure.

And then at year five the soil begins to stir. And if you know anything about the Chinese bamboo tree, at year five the seed finally springs up out of the dirt and in six weeks the Chinese bamboo tree grows 90 feet. And I would imagine that he went home that day and he was like, "How do you like me now?" A little swagger in his step. "I knew what I was doing all along."

Right now there are a number of you who are in year two, three, or four and you're ready to throw in the towel and give up. And maybe that's your marriage. Maybe that's your friendships, a relationship of some kind. Maybe that's your faith. Maybe that's your health. Maybe it's your mental and emotional health. You're just tired and it's totally understandable.

Given the kind of year we've been through, the season we are continuing in, we are collectively right in midst of the valley of despair. But what God's word promises and what history shows us is that eventually we'll turn a corner to see fruit, to see a harvest, to see something spring up out of the soil of this pandemic.

God is at work and you need to know that you are not alone. You can't control so many things that are going on in this world. But what you do have a say in is the small, daily habits and disciplines that inform not only who you want to be, but who Jesus died for you to be. So, right now, today, there is an invitation that is open for you to find your identity in him.

That's what the gospel message is. It isn't all of these things that you need to do and not do. It's who Jesus declares you now are because of the sacrifice he made.

I just want to give you that opportunity to respond to that. If you would like to talk to anybody about what your next steps are in that, you can just text Jesus to 87221. Somebody from our team would love to follow up with you.

Join us next week as we continue on this journey of talking about the power of atomic habits in our lives. Let me pray for you.

Father, we come to you today and we thank you that 2020 came to a close. We're grateful for another new year.

God, right now many of us are tired. We're exhausted. We're out of steam. We're sort of at this bottom of this valley of despair. So we ask that your Holy Spirit would come right now to encourage us, to strengthen us, to fill us up whenever we just feel sort of emotionally and spiritually empty.

God, I pray that this series would be transformational in our individual lives, our families, and in our church. That as we are navigating continually through this extended season of discouragement that we would not fail to see the opportunity that is right in front of us. That you are at work. You are digging our wells deep. You are establishing deep, deep roots so that we might yield some significant fruit in every area of our lives.

So, God, help us by the power of your Spirit to develop habits during this season that will endure beyond the season. And we thank you for your grace that covers us as we make our way through it. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.