

# ***Spiritual Practices for Thriving Life***

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★Write down one new insight you received today...

★Thinking...

- In what dimensions of life are you accepting a permanent or recurring winter?
- How might life be better if you were able to produce fruit in that dimension?
- What form would obedience to His Authority take that leads to spiritual paradise in that dimension of life?

★Applying...

- Tell a confidant about this winter season and what transformative obedience requires.
- Commit to the lifestyle changes needed to obey and eagerly expect fruit.
- Look for signs of warmth and growth, regularly sharing what you see with your confidant as you anticipate the harvest.

★Praying...

- Father, do not hide your face from me in this area of life. I commit to following Jesus into spiritual paradise, seeking your light and peace. Please help me submit to your will by...



## **Winter Hopes For Spring**

**Isaiah 9:6-7** – For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

### **I) Winter's Retreat...**

All creation seems to retreat in winter. Birds flee to warmer climates. Insects burrow deep into the earth. Bears hibernate. Vegetation hides within itself. We seek refuge indoors, waiting for longer days of warm sunlight only a few pages of the calendar away. Each of us has wandered from permanently pleasant tropical warmth to the spiritual poles of deep winter. We endure for the promised hope of Spring to come – the return of daylight.

♦**The unprepared:** There are people who know nothing of winter. Never leaving tropical warmth, ice and snow are legends of foreign lands. Not us. Living in Flagstaff, we know the permanence of ice in the shadows. Days abruptly closed by darkness in the midafternoon. Those in northern Canada, Alaska, the Nordics would say we know nothing of near total darkness. Why would people live there? Perhaps for the same reason God's people find Him "hiding his face from the house of Jacob (Isa 8:17)." Not understanding life is harsher, harder, brutal in the polar wilds, "this people has refused the waters of Shiloah

that flow gently (v6).” Arrogantly we each assume we can make the life we want, misunderstanding that God orders all creation. As a result, “many among them shall stumble; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken (v15).” Having wandered into captivity and taken far from God’s presence we are “thrust into thick darkness (v22).”

♦**A winter of discontent:** The retreat of creation brings another harsh reality – food is scarce. Moderns know little about seasonal availability, accustomed to imported produce at grocery stores. Our recent times reminded us what it can be like to see empty shelves. Prior generations and rural communities experience something else. The wise store up provisions, canning, smoking, curing, and freezing. The foolish...it will be a long winter. The spiritually wise “wait for the Lord (v17),” to turn from His anger and show His face, storing up hope in God’s love for the winter. The foolish abandon Him, consulting “the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and mutter...the dead on behalf of the living (v19).” These continue wandering in the winter wasteland and “will have no dawn (v20),” will be “greatly distressed and hungry, when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods (v21).” Hopeless, fruitless, empty, and cold.

## II) The Sun Also Rises...

Do you remember your first hard winter? It might have felt endless. Experienced people assure us it will be over soon, longer days are just around the corner. That first winter, such expectations feel foolish. Removed from God’s warm presence, it seems there is no hope for peace, joy, unconditional love for one another. We weary in the “thick darkness” constantly guarded against unseen enemies while suffering hunger for a satisfying way of life. God’s Word assures us every Winter eventually yields to Spring.

♦**No time to waste:** No hope of Spring, some idle away the Winter in misery. Others busy themselves in preparation for the next season. Maintaining tools, preparing the soil, tending animals, cleaning the barn. That the growing season has passed does not mean there is nothing to do – the next growing season is coming! God assures those who wait on Him that “in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations (9:1).” In these harsh conditions we are to prepare ourselves for the return of His light. What does this look like? *Distance makes the heart grow fonder.* Rather than despair over what has passed, we are to “rejoice before [God] as with joy at the harvest (v3).” What He once did for us

He will do again. We are to open our eyes to what He has done and look closely for signs of His return. Let us eagerly anticipate.

♦**Are we there yet?** The eager hold early vigil for green shoots as Spring approaches. They mark extensions of daylight, degrees of warmth, receding snow levels on the mountains. Having seen a few Springs arrive, we know the signs. Those expectant for God’s return note the ease of burdens and decreasing presence of oppressive feelings. They prayerfully imagine “the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken (v4).” The darkness retreats and soon “the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire (v5).” We believe we will emerge into pleasant days of purpose, prosperity, and peace. Surely, God will again show us His love.

## III) A New Thing...

Indeed, He surely will. Sadly, the seasonal cycle carries on. Spring blossoms into Summer, which ultimately fades into Autumn, freezing again into Winter. Our history suggests our prosperous spirits will soon give way again to misery. Only this time God declares “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it (43:19)?”

♦**A wise leader:** Most of us live a settled way. We reside in Flagstaff, delighting in Spring and Summer, enduring Autumn and Winter. Some have adopted a migratory lifestyle, pursuing a sort of eternal warm season. God offers something better – a spiritual paradise. A renewed Garden. It comes not through clicking of ruby slippers nor a finger’s snap. Instead, “a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (v6).” There is One promised who will lead us into this legendary Garden in which “there are many dwelling places (John 14:2).”

♦**Tropical paradise:** Everlasting spiritual Spring yields endless crops. Not boring produce, but ones that excite “The zeal of the Lord of hosts (Isa 9:7).” The Garden of our heart when nurtured with “a spring of water gushing up to eternal life (John 4:14),” will bring up “endless peace...with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore (Isa 9:7).” It is no coincidence Christmas comes in Winter for most. It is in the depth of night we most long for the light of Summer, the dawning of a new day, a new season, a new life.