

All right. Hey, Valley Creek, welcome. Today, from wherever you're joining, let's welcome each other together. Happy New Year to you. Maybe your first time with us was at Christmas. Maybe you're with us every single weekend or somewhere in between, whatever the case, thanks for putting Jesus first as we start this year together. I'm declaring by faith over you and over all of us, 2024 is a year that God is going to crown with His goodness. He's going to be good to you. He's going to be good to your family. His goodness is going to pour over your decision-making, and your work, and whatever's in front of you. The goodness of God is for you this year in Jesus' name. All right. So, Pastor John was planning to be with you today. He has been fighting through flu all week long. And so, he was sad not to be here. In 17 years of being with him, he's never even taken a sick day. So, he's going to plan to try to get better and come back for next week to start a brand new series.

So, two quick things about that, one is if anybody has any idea what I should preach on today, if you could just raise your hand. No, I'm just kidding. I know exactly what I'm going to talk to you about. The second one is this, and this is for real. Our church is healthier than you think. I think that it is because Pastor John loves, serves, and honors Jesus more than you think he does. He is a great leader. He's a great teacher. He is funny. He's a great husband. He's a great dad. He's a great friend. Beyond all of that, he's a beloved son, and he knows it, and he lives it. I love my pastor. I'm thankful for Pastor John. All right. So, I am excited to take you, I'm excited to take you on an orientation of sorts. So, remember back to when you go to college, and you have to get an orientation for the semester, or if you're in an airport, and you go to a sign that says X marks the spot, "You are here," and then that tells you where you're going to go from there.

That's what we're going to do today. I'm going to take you on a journey on really how to have the very best possible life here at Valley Creek in 2024. This is how to make the most of everything that God is doing in and among us. So, I'm going to take you on different stops of that journey. But the first thing I just want to say out loud, God is on the move in our church in a profound way. We're seeing it. We're experiencing it. It's been a beautiful season. And we're hearing these little anecdotal stories on how he's moving in the lives of people. I'm going to start with one like this. Just this week, I got a story from a guy who was pretty new in his journey with Jesus. He texted me just two lines. And the lines he said were, "I'm 48 years old, and I just quoted Scripture to someone for the first time." Now, that comes a week and a half after his wife, in a booth, at lunch, over lunchtime, just said, "Jesus, I'm going to finally make you Lord. And I give up, and I surrender, and I want you to be Lord of my life."

That's a week and a half for that couple. And stories like that are happening all over the place because God is on the move because we are a movement of hope as a church. See, our vision is that we're a movement of hope for the city and beyond. That's who we are. We're a movement of hope. That is, we're not just meant to do the same thing year over year, over and over. We're meant to move with God and to carry His hope, not just His wishful thinking, His hope, the confident expectation of the goodness of God, through our lives and into the lives of

those around us. And so, hope moves, hope flows, hope cascades. It comes through us into the lives of those around us for the city, which includes the schools that we're a part of, the businesses we frequent, the neighborhoods that we're in, the context, and the relationships we have. The hope in us moves into those areas, and then it goes beyond. There is no end to where it goes. It just keeps on flowing.

So, we are a movement of hope. That's who we are. And we're experiencing that in so many ways, in so many places in life right now. But one of the very best places that we experienced that was this past weekend with RE, our three-day encounter with God. RE, two little words that put in front of any word can change anything. To redo, to reclaim, to redeem, to restore. God can re-anything. And over those three days, we said that our theme verse was that the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating or drinking, but it's of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. So, some of you, for the very first time, you learned that in Jesus, you are righteous. You have a right standing with God. You're good with God. And even better than that, God is good with you. Some of you are starting to hear that for the first time. It's just starting to take root. Keep going on that journey, that identity journey of understanding who you are in Jesus.

Others of you heard the voice of God for the first time, and that voice spoke, "Peace, be still." Still others of you, you experienced the joy of the Lord that is your strength, and you got to worship with joy. We saw so much of that during RE. On the third night of RE, there were literally little kids running up to the platform. I'm talking like two-foot-fours running up to the platform and just going for it. And you might think, "Yeah, well, that's where the worship is there, and the lights and all the people." Okay, that was probably pretty exciting. You know what I think they were drawn to? The presence of God. They were drawn to literally being right in the center of where God was moving. There's a story about Joshua. When he was younger, he would sit right outside what was called the tent of meeting where the presence of God was. And he would just lay there, and stay the night there. He wouldn't want to leave it, and our next generation is exhibiting some of those same things. They don't want to leave the presence of God. They want to be where God is. They want to be around the atmosphere and in it.

I heard an amazing story about a 10-year-old who said to her mom for the first time, like, "I think God spoke to me. And so, would you buy me a journal so I can write down what He says?" Let's go. Her mom is like, "Well, it's midnight. You think Hobby Lobby is open?" That's awesome. The same 10-year-old that's like, I feel like I'm dragging to church sometimes, she's awakening to it. Our students were worshiping so hard, I had a few of them tell me, like, "My calves are sore because I've been bouncing so much over worship over these three days." But it wasn't just in the next-gen. We heard stories all over the place from RE. I got to see personally a moment when a woman came up for prayer. She was so moved by God that she could only spit out her first name. She couldn't even say her prayer request. And then, the person that was praying for her was like, "Okay, I'm going to pray for her now." So, she listened for a second. And she heard God say, "Freedom, freedom."

So, she started to declare freedom over her. The chains were breaking. Her emotions were showing. And the Lord was working in her in a profound way. You see, one of the things we know God spoke to us is that RE was a moment in which we were supposed to engage it with a childlike faith, faith like a child. Let the little children come unto me. And so, this is a word for you as we start 2024. Some of you have lived your life with years of childhood trauma. God wants to take childhood trauma and turn it into childlike wonder this year. And in Jesus' name, He will. So, we had an amazing experience. God moved in a profound way in RE. We're so excited to see where He's going to keep taking us through His Spirit this year. And just a second ago, you got to hear about Circles. The Circle semester is kicking off, which is so great. Circles are where church becomes less of a place I go to and more of a family that I'm a part of.

So, for some of you, the invitation is to be part of the family of God and what He's doing here. Jesus said that, "He looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers.'" Here's my spiritual family. The people that I'm on mission with. The people that are being transformed and following me. The people that are walking with me. This is my spiritual family. Sometimes people will ask us where we got the name circles from. And then, I'll just be like, "I have no idea." Because it comes from this idea that we sat together, that in the Bible, they would sit together. They would listen to Jesus. They would be transformed to become more like Him. And the same opportunity is on the table for us. That we can become more like the image and likeness of Jesus. And that we have a spiritual family that we can do that with. This is how the disciples did it. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer." That is, they would discuss the weekend message. They would talk about Scripture. They'd pray with each other. And they did that devoted to one another.

To be devoted, to continue to do something with really intense effort despite the difficulties. And Circles are an opportunity for us to say, "I'm devoted. I'm in for whatever God has for us." When Circles are like a family, when church is like a family, and when I have a level of devotion, it means that I'm in it to win it even if what you tell me, I don't really like. I heard a story actually from a guy who brought a possible job promotion to his Circle. And the gist of it was it would have moved him away from his whole community. It would have been really tough on the family and it would have taken a ton of time to say yes to the position. And so, by his own words, he said, "What I brought to them a Circle, brought it to my Circle, I knew it was my own pride that really wanted to do it." They basically understood what it would mean and what it would mean to me. And so, they were like, "We don't think you should." So, I listened to them. I didn't take the promotion.

And he says, after the fact, he believes that that saved his marriage. And those are the kinds of stories that come about when we start to engage, and do life together, and when we choose to stay devoted to one another. So, I really felt strongly that there are some of you that have already been in Circles before, and on a Circle roster, and engage that at different times and

seasons. What would it look like in 2024 to stay devoted, to just say like, "I'm in, I'm going to be with these people?" For others of you, if you've never been part of Circles before, come on, you're invited. You're invited to kick off the semester with us. You can learn about that at the pop-ups out in the atrium. We'd love to help you find a Circle for yourself. Okay. So, here's the next one I want to take on the next stop on the map. And that is Join the Movement. Join the Movement is for anybody who's not yet had a chance to raise a hand and say, "I want this to be my church. I want Valley Creek to be my church," like, "I'm in." See, there's a difference between a potted plant and a rooted tree.

A potted plant is mobile, but it can be tipped over and broken. It has a difficult time in hard freezes and it can only grow as big as whatever that pot is. But a rooted tree can get way down deep. The roots can go way down deep in the soil, and it can grow, and it can flourish, and it could take on when bad weather comes at it. And I think the invitation for some of us as we start this year is to just say, "I'm going to get rooted here. I'm in. This is going to be my church. This is going to be my place." "The righteous will flourish like a palm tree. They'll grow like a Cedar of Lebanon planted in the House of the Lord. They will flourish in the courts of our God." You want to flourish in 2024? You want to grow? You want to be everything that God has called you to? You have to choose to be planted in the House of the Lord. Notice, it doesn't say they "attend" the House of the Lord. They just "go to" the House of the Lord. No, no. They're planted in the House of the Lord, deeply rooted with the people of God.

And so, you're invited to come to Join the Movement. For those of you who may have been here for a while and you just have never gotten to come, man, you're invited also because if you join us there, it will encourage you regarding our theology, where God is leading us, what God is doing and remind you of who we are. So, you're very much invited February 4th, right after services for about 70 minutes. You can come and do Join the Movement. You can register for all that online at valleycreek.org. Okay. Next stop on the journey is this. We want to invite you to connect with us. So, some of you are so new, you haven't actually had a chance to connect with us in a way where you can stay really informed of what God's doing. If you text VCC to 55888, that's the best way to get updated on everything that's happening inside of Valley Creek. So, we're a "follow the cloud" kind of church. That means that when God moves, we follow. When God speaks, we go to wherever He tells us to go, which means we want to keep you informed of everything that's happening. And so, you can make that text to 55888 to stay on our text chain and our link. That's for all the updated information, everything that's happening here.

But more than that, this time, I really want to encourage you. If you have social media and you don't follow us on social media, let me just encourage you to really consider doing that. Here's why. When I think about my feed, I need a whole lot more joy and kingdom on my social media feed. When I look at my feed, sometimes it's like bad – bad politics, dumb opinion. It's like they call it doom-scrolling. It is doom-scrolling for a reason. What if you traded some doom-scrolling for some kingdom-scrolling in 2024? What if you made a decision to say I want

to see things like that are the next-gen thriving and worship, and the Word of God spoken over my life? I think that's an invite for all of us to just say, "I want more of that." So, we invite you to connect with us online, connect with us in all of these ways, to be part of everything that God is doing here. But beyond all of these things that I've led you on so far, here's the thing. I'm probably the most excited to talk to you about today, which is the 2024 Reading Plan.

The 2024 Reading Plan. Okay. So, the 2024 Reading Plan, like it has been in so many years, is an invite for us to read chapters of the Bible all together. And this year, the invitation for Valley Creek church is to read the entire New Testament together. Okay. Now, if you hear me saying that you're thinking, "That sounds vaguely familiar." That is true. That's what we did last year. And we're going to do it again but with a little bit of a spin on it. I'll talk to you about that in a second. Here's why. The reason we want to do that again is because we believe that as we go through the whole New Testament together, there's going to be a depth, and a revelation, and God is going to speak to us, and He's going to reveal more things to us. He's going to show us more of Himself. The first time you read something, you're like, "Oh, I don't know if I read that before." The second time, a little bit further. Third time, a little bit further, and on, and on and on. And that's how the kingdom works.

And so, some of us are just getting started. Some of us are just like, "Man, I literally have never read that before. I'm not familiar with it. I hadn't heard that." Okay, great. How are we going to take it a little bit deeper? God's Word is living and active. It's sharper than any double-edged sword. That means it's always changing. It's always showing us, revealing to us more and more and more. If you heard me say that, the '24 Reading Plan is the New Testament. And if you're like, "Oh man, I don't want to have to do that again." I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt and say it's because you memorized the whole thing. But for everybody else, you're invited to jump in with us into the '24 Reading Plan. And God is going to reveal, and do, and show us new things. Even in my own Circle, I felt like I had guys that were just having major breakthrough as they engaged the Reading Plan. Probably about 75% of my Circle recommitted to reading it about halfway through the year, halfway through '23 in the summertime. And they really dug in, and they recommitted to encouraging one another.

And here's what I kept seeing among my guys. "When your words came, I ate them, and they were my joy and my heart's delight for I bear your name, Lord, God Almighty." When I took in your Word, I had joy and they were my heart's delight. Here's what I was seeing. The guys that were really engaged in the Reading Plan, they were living with a different level of joy. The guys that were really engaged in my Circle and the Reading Plan were having these situations in their life that otherwise would have been dreadful were becoming delightful. It's not even the situation was changing. It's that they were seeing it differently. They were engaging it differently. They were experiencing it differently, but the thing I'm probably most excited about is they started to bear the name of Jesus. What do I mean by that? The banner of the identity of who Jesus says they were was like starting to be a banner over their life. No longer were they the ashamed one, they were the one that was seen as worthy.

No longer were they the guys that are like, "I messed up everything and I'm too far in my future to be able to make up for it," no. In Jesus' name, you have a new name and you're bearing that. And they're learning that, they're learning what it was. Instead of just being like, I don't know, the dude that's just barely getting by and doing everything to try to just make it through the work day, the work week, they were the beloved sons and whom the father was well pleased. And so, I was probably most excited that I saw my guys bear the name of Jesus because His Word was coming to them. And so, that's really an invite for us is to engage the Word at a completely different level. For you guys last year, I think some of you were in it to win it. You totally did the Reading Plan. Some of you did some of the Reading Plan. And then, honestly, a lot of people are just like, "I missed it. I didn't do it at all." Here's what I want to say about that. God is the God of second, third, and 40th chances.

And so, even this year is another chance to say like, "I'm in, I want His words to give me joy, to be the delight of my heart, to help me bear the name of the Lord and what He wants to speak over my identity." This fall, the men of Valley Creek got invited to become part of Men's Nights. And in the Men's Nights, there was an opportunity to memorize Psalm Chapter 1. And Psalm Chapter 1 was the first thing Pastor John encouraged the guys like, first month, memorize Psalm Chapter 1. And then, when they came back one month after that, he asked the men to go ahead and stand up if they'd memorized it. And then, we cheered for them and we cheered on their memorization. But then something interesting happened. The next month after that he said, "Okay, are there any guys that missed it the first time, but then you went back and you memorized Psalm Chapter 1?" That is you missed it at first, but then you came back and you grabbed a hold of it. Probably about two handfuls of guys stood up and you would have thought that a thousand guys stood up.

The way they got cheered for was literally like a giant celebration. Why? Because obedience is always celebrated in the kingdom. And because even if you missed it before, there's a chance to jump in right now and to be part of what God wants to do and what he wants to speak into our church family. When you came in, go ahead and grab this card that you grabbed when you walked in today. I want you to take a look at that for just a second. And just a few things about the Reading Plan. One is that it's going to start right around a week from now, right around January 22. We want to give you a week because we want to give you a week to prepare, and plan, and really choose in your heart to say like, "I'm in. Of all the resolutions I could decide this year, this is the one that really, really, really matters." And so, it'll start about a week from now. On this side of the Reading Plan card, right on the front side, you can see here something that's a little bit different than it was last year. Here's the big difference.

This year, we're going to read the chapter altogether, but then we're going to pick a verse and we're going to choose to meditate on that for about five minutes or however long you choose to meditate on it. Here's why. Some of us need to read more Scripture this year, and some of us need to read less Scripture more. So, some of us need to eat up the words of God, like take

it in. And some of us need to read less total Scripture, but really go deeper on it to meditate on it, to think deeply on it, to consider it over and over and over. There's something about meditation that helps it go deeper in my heart and I start to receive it at a different level. Just look what it says in Psalm Chapter 1. "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the council of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers, but his delight is on the law of the Lord. And on that law, he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers." Okay. Whatever he does prospers. Whatever he puts his hand to. Whatever is in front of them, whatever life brings to them, they prosper. Why? Because we choose to meditate, think deeply on what God has spoken. We meditate and let the Scriptures work in us. We don't work on the Scriptures. The Scriptures work on us. And when we meditate, when we take them in, and we consider them over and over and over, God wants to do something deep inside of us. And so, I'm believing by faith, you're going to prosper in 2024 because you're going to choose to live in the ways of God and meditate on what He speaks and what He says. So, meditate, what could that look like? Let's say that I was looking at a verse and I'm like, "What does that even mean? How would I meditate on it?" Let's try it for a second. Let's say I was looking at Matthew Chapter 6 and in Matthew Chapter 6, I chose this verse to be the one I was going to meditate on, okay?

"Do not worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will worry about itself." Do not worry about tomorrow. Do not worry. What's worry? Okay. Anxiousness in my mind, when my thoughts start to take over when I think it's like my head is spinning a little bit. I'm not supposed to worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow. Does that mean I'm supposed to worry about today? I'm supposed to worry about some other day. Don't worry about tomorrow. Okay. Why? Well, Jesus, I know that You're with me right now, and I know that Your presence is present with me, and You want to meet me right here right now with whatever's going on in my life. So, I don't have to worry about tomorrow because You're going to take care of tomorrow. It's in Your hands. You're going to take care of me. So, I'm going to choose not to worry.

And even if I meditated, and I just literally said it over and over and over, and I thought deeply about the fact that I don't have to worry in Jesus' name because Jesus takes care of me, something would happen inside my heart, and that meditation would take root and I would experience this flourishing, this prospering, this changing inside of me because the Word of God was digging way down deep on the inside. So, that would be Matthew Chapter 6. Let's try another one real quick. Let's say I was reading Ephesians 2 and it says, "For it is by grace you've been saved through faith. It's not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." It's by grace that you've been saved through faith. Okay. Grace. So, grace, like graciousness, like when somebody is graceful when they're kind to me. So, it's God's kindness that really is my salvation, but it's not from me. It's from Him. He's the one that did it. He gave it to me. So, grace through faith. Faith is when I can't see it. I can't see it. I can't understand it, but I still believe it.

So, grace through faith. It's not of myself, but all of it is a gift of God. Thank You, God, for Your gift. Thank You for Your gift of grace in my life. So, thank You, God, for Your gift of grace in my life. Will You help me have more faith? Will You help me live my life by faith? And I don't want to just do it on my own. I want to do it through You. It's not of myself, it's through You, Jesus. What You've done inside of me. How You're moving inside of me. And suddenly, it goes and it goes, and it goes, and it goes, and you feel this. Thinking deeply on one verse, how it starts to transform you. It starts to change you. It starts to move every part of your heart forward. So, we're going to read the chapter. We're going to pick a verse. We're going to meditate on it. And I'm believing by faith that God is going to transform every single one of us in the name of Jesus.

As I was thinking about this, I really felt strongly to tell you that I feel like that engaging the Scripture is similar to how we experience salvation. Here's what I mean. When you're saved, you have to do that on your own. Nobody can do that for you. You have to make that choice to say like, "Jesus is Lord. I'm going to follow Him." And nobody can make that choice for you. And nobody can force it upon you. But you work out your salvation with fear and trembling among the people of God. You experience more and more of your salvation as you engage the people of God. The same is true for Scripture. I have to read it, engage it with my own eyes, with my own mind, whenever I choose to read it, but if I do it with the people of God, there is a depth. There's a growth. There's a life in that because we're all doing it together. So, what's awesome about the Reading Plan is I'm not just trying to just figure out what to, we're all doing this together. And we're all hearing the same words at the same time. And God is moving inside of us. And it becomes this profound move of the word of God through our church family.

Last year, some of you took huge steps in reading Scripture. There were dads inside of our church that you led your family for the first time. And you're like, wow, I saw the benefits of really us having those moments together. Here's what I want to say to you. In 2024, create spiritual moments with your family. In 2024, create spiritual moments. Have these moments where you're super intentional to read the Word of God together, to pray together, to take the time, because the world is not going to create it for you. You have an opportunity to create spiritual moments, you guys, as a family. Dads, you can especially lead the charge in your home. Moms, if you're the one that is leading the charge in your home, just understand, we're for you and we're praying for you. And we're declaring wisdom over you in everything that you do. But I think it's really important for us to create spiritual moments in 2024. Meaningful moments together is the invitation from the Lord.

All right. Here's the last verse I want to share with you as we get ready for what God wants to do in the Reading Plan. This one has been really, really deep in my heart over the last few months. And this is the verse that's basically Jesus talking about His bride, the church, and what it's like to be the church. Here's what Jesus does. He "makes us holy, cleansing us by the washing with water through the Word. To present her to himself as a radiant church without

stain, or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless." Here's what I think God is going to do. Through His Word this year, He's going to make us a radiant church. He's going to purify. He's going to move in us. He's going to transform us through His Word. So, if you believe in Jesus, are you part of the church, yes or no? Okay.

So, then this promise is for you. What does God want to do through His Word in 2024? How does He want to transform your life and your home through His Word? Just think about that for a second. How does God want to move in your anxiety and your anxious thoughts? How? Through His Word. How does God want to give you wisdom for decision-making so that you make decisions that are heaven decisions, kingdom decisions? He wants to do that through His Word. How does God want to help you walk through the next season of life, even if you face difficulties? Through His Word. How does God want to awaken you in parenting, where you start to make great parenting, Jesus-focused parenting decisions? You know how He's going to do that? Through His Word. You know how God is going to give us the joy of the Lord that's going to be part of the atmosphere of our church in 2024? That's going to happen because it's going to happen through His Word. You're seeing a pattern here?

You know how God is going to awaken your hearts and your dreams that you feel like you've been let go of years ago? He's going to bring you back to life. He's going to give you hopes and dreams that are just churning inside of you and awakening you to everything that Jesus has for you. You know how He's going to do that? Say it with me. Through His Word. And by doing all of that, He's going to create a radiant church. A people that are beautiful without stain, wrinkle, blemish that don't look like the world, that look like the kingdom of heaven. People and families and our campuses, they're going to look like these outposts of the kingdom of heaven. He's going to do all of that through His Word this year. And so, I'm super excited about everything that's in front of us in 2024. It will be a year that's going to be filled with the Word, and the Spirit, and the people of God. And so, I've tried to take you on a little bit of a journey in what's in front of us.

X marks the spot. You are here. Jesus is here. We're going there because Jesus is going there. So, go ahead and stand up with me wherever you're at. Stand up with me. And I want to pray a commissioning prayer over all of our campuses, all of our people, as we begin this year. We have so much to look forward to and God is going to be so good to us because He has always been good to us. So, maybe even as a sign of faith, you can open up your hands to just receive this as I declare this over the church. I want to actually repeat the words out of Scripture from Isaiah 55. It says this. "My word goes out from my mouth. It will not return empty." Valley Creek, God is going to speak to us His words of life and they will not return empty. God's Word is going to accomplish what He desires among us in 2024. God's Word is going to achieve the purposes for which He sent it. He's going to speak to us in deep ways, and the purposes that He has for our church and for your life will come to pass in Jesus' name.

"You will go out in joy and you'll be led forth in peace." Valley Creek Church, you're going to go out in the joy of the Lord that is your strength, and you're going to be led forth in a peace that passes understanding. Why? Because God is going before us because the journey that we're on this year is going to be a journey that is a journey of faith, hope, and love. The journey we're going to take is a journey that's going to say His Word is leading, is guiding, is purifying, and is cleansing us to turn us into a radiant church and a radiant people who are so filled with the life of Jesus that others are going to take notice, that hope is going to rise and that all of these things that you or others around you have felt like you haven't had any clue how to face it, or what to do, or how to get through it. The Word of God is going to be revealed to you. Jesus is going to go before you and you're going to be led forth in joy and peace in Jesus' name. Thank you, God, for what you're going to do in 2024. We receive it by faith. Amen.