



portland
communities

THE EXPERIENCE WORKBOOK

VOLUME 1

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CONNECT WITH
GOD
THE CHURCH
YOUR PURPOSE

CONTENTS

| WEEK | TITLE | PAGE |
|------|------------------------------------|------|
| | WELCOME | 2 |
| | COMMUNITIES COVENANT | 3 |
| | INTRODUCTION | 4 |
| 1 | WHO IS GOD? | 7 |
| 2 | HOW DOES GOD SPEAK | 27 |
| 3 | WHERE IS GOD IN SUFFERING? | 45 |
| 4 | BATTLE READY | 63 |
| 5 | HOW DO I MAKE THE MOST OF MY LIFE? | 83 |
| 6 | TIME, TALENT AND TREASURES | 103 |
| 7 | HOW CAN I TELL OTHERS? | 121 |
| 8 | CELEBRATION | 139 |

WELCOME TO PORTLAND COMMUNITIES

Welcome to Portland Communities and the next chapter of your story. Our goal for this experience is for you to deepen your connection with God, His Church and your purpose through the discipleship community with whom you are about to grow.

Portland Communities are about more than another series of classes or church program's rather, they are about true transformation and life change. Through the next eight weeks, it is our hope that you root your life in rhythms of discipleship that draw you closer to God, inspire real questions and conversations and help you find yourself in God's great story.

Communities are both the discipleship intensive you are about to embark on, as well as any small group gathering through the Portland Christian Center family that meets regularly to spend time together, discuss scripture and do life together...serving Christ. In fact, at the end of the Communities experience, you and your group will be uniquely set up to continue growing and serving together as a small group. God's plan is for His Church to grow together in community, which is why Portland Communities is designed to equip you to do just that.

Over the course of the Communities experience, you will engage in the rhythms of learning to be Christ-like. In this guide, you will find daily devotionals designed to engage you in regular reading of scripture and prayer. Through God's power and His working through your group interactions, we pray you will experience spiritual freedom, practice giving and serving sacrificially, and sharing your testimony (your story) about how God has transformed your life.

When we finish this season of Communities, we will celebrate together what God has done and launch you and your group into a new season of exhilarating spiritual growth. Our hope is that you continue these rhythms as your spiritual journey continues beyond Communities. So, come with an open heart and mind, and see how God will surprise you!



COMMUNITIES COVENANT

It is our desire to promote a safe environment for sharing the most important things in life. We want to provide a place where people can reveal openly and confidently the broken areas of their lives without judgment or condemnation. We are not here to “fix” one another. We encourage openness, vulnerability and intimacy during discussion and prayer times. To ensure a safe haven for personal sharing, we ask that each Portland Communities participant enter into an agreement of confidentiality.

Additionally, to get the most out of this experience, our hope is that you make a commitment to attend all sessions and participate in the group discussions. If you cannot be there, group dynamics will be impacted. If you know you will miss more than two group meetings, we ask that you attend a different session of Portland Communities.

I agree to attend all group meetings and keep all things shared by my group members confidential at all times.

Signed

Date

INTRODUCTION

You are beginning, or perhaps continuing might be a better word, your journey of discipleship through this experience of Portland Communities. It is a lifelong journey, by the way, and it won't end until you stand in Christ's glorious presence, having been finally and fully made like him—the ultimate goal of discipleship. It is also a journey that is meant to be experienced with others. That is why you will be sharing this discipleship devotion with co-disciples in your Portland Community. Moreover, the adventure of discipleship is the most important journey you will make in life, simply because that is what your Lord has called you into as his follower.

So just what is it that disciples do in the journey? Two things, actually: They reflect and they replicate. That is pretty clear according to what Jesus said in Matthew 28:18-20, what we have come to call the Great Commission:

Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

What do disciples do, according to Jesus? First of all, authentic disciples become like their Master. They fully devote themselves to his life and they fully obey his teachings. They become like Jesus in thought, word and deed to the point where his very being is reflected in the essential quality of their being. The Master becomes the sum and substance of their lives. Only by the kind of transformation where the Master is fundamentally reflected from center to circumference in their lives can Christ's disciples in turn "go and make [other] disciples." Only then can they teach others to "observe all that [the Master] has commanded."

That is what it means to be truly Christian. Being truly Christian means being an authentic disciple. One cannot happen without the other—Christianity means discipleship; discipleship means Christianity. Being either is not just in name, it is in the reflection of the Master in the life of the disciple. Calling oneself a disciple is simply wishful thinking without doing the things of discipleship and being in essence the reflection of the Master. Call it what you will, anything less is nothing more than inauthentic discipleship, non-Christianity, a false religion. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ."

Second, authentic disciples replicate the life of the Master through their lives in the lives of others. In other words, they reproduce. Barren discipleship is non-discipleship. True disciples go with the message, bearing the life of the One they reflect, persuading others who don't follow Christ to follow and modeling Christ's life so winsomely that fellow disciples are inexorably drawn in to the passionate pursuit of full devotion to Jesus.

Disciples don't just win converts to Christianity, they make new disciples and better disciples. And those disciples in turn replicate the Master's life in others, who themselves replicate the Master's life in still others.

Reflecting and replicating—that is when discipleship comes full circle and is proven authentic.

So this begs the question: Are you a true disciple? The answer is easy: If you are reflecting Jesus in your life and replicating the life of the Master in others, you are in pretty good discipleship shape.

Now the fact that you are in this experience of Portland Communities tells me that you are quite interested in this journey to become a fully devoted disciple of Jesus. And that is music to my ears. That is why this devotional book has been produced: to give you yet one more tool to help you to grow in Christ and to give you opportunity to influence others in their spiritual growth as you share the discipleship journey together.

As you enjoy these daily devotionals with your co-disciples, you will discover that they have been arranged in essential rhythms of discipleship. Over the course of the next eight weeks, your devotional experience will follow these rhythmic patterns that will support your spiritual growth:

- Week 1: Discovering God—Who Is God?
- Week 2: Listening To God—How Does God Speak?
- Week 3: Trusting God—Where Is God In Suffering?
- Week 4: Standing Firm in God—Battle Ready
- Week 5: Reflecting God—How Do I Make The Most Of My Life?
- Week 6: Partnering With God—Time, Talent And Treasures
- Week 7: Sharing God—How Can I Tell Others?
- Week 8: Enjoying God—Celebration

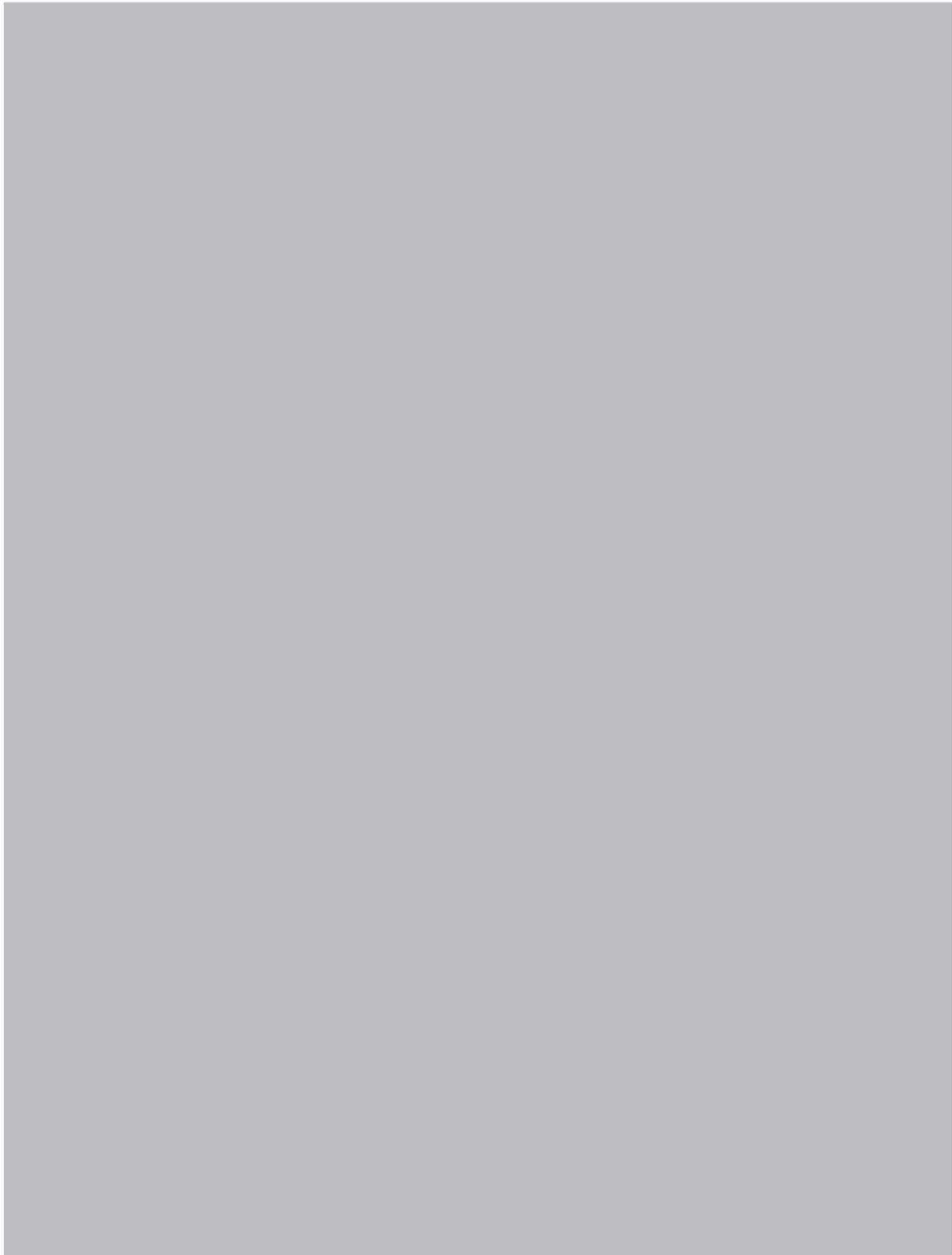
Since by your participation in this Portland Communities journey you are demonstrating serious-mindedness about being a true disciple of Jesus, let me suggest that you offer this prayer as you begin:

“Jesus, You said we cannot truly call you Lord unless we do the things You said we should do. With all of my heart, I want to be authentic when I call you Lord. Help me to give you my full devotion and complete obedience. Make me a true disciple, and use my unreserved devotion to inspire others in my Portland Community to themselves want to be like you. In your great name I pray. Amen!”

And now, let the adventure begin!

Your fellow disciple,







WEEK

1

WHO IS GOD?

DAY 1

FOR GOD SO LOVED ... YOU!

For the Bible Tells Me So

The Big Idea: If you are ever in doubt about God's unconditional, unstoppable love for you, just remember, there is a cross that stands as a continual reminder of how deeply loved you are. You see, on that cross, when Jesus stretched out His arms wide on the crossbeam, it was as if He were saying, "I love you this much!" Then He bowed His head, and died—for you. And the Bible tells us that there is nothing today or tomorrow or ever that can separate you from that love. Let the power of God's love absolutely, profoundly change your life today!

Read John 3:16

For God loved the world so much that He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16—it's the whole Bible in just one verse. The verse is so simple that any child can memorize it, yet it is so infinitely profound and irresistibly powerful that it can totally, radically transform your life. That's right, this verse is not just an amazing statement about God's universal love for all mankind, it is about God's personal love for you!

God so loved the world, but He didn't just look at it as one big mass of nameless faces. When He looked at the world and loved it, He was looking at you. Max Lucado, who wrote an entire book just on John 3:16, said, "If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If He had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning."

God has a crazy love for you! He really does. St. Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, one of the most influential figures in church history, said: "God loves each and every one of us as if there were only one of us." Think about that: If you were the only person left on this planet, God would have loved you so much that He still would have given Jesus to die for your sins. There would still be John 3:16 if you were the sole human ever created and had fallen from God's grace.

One of my favorite authors, Brennan Manning, told the story of an Irish priest on a walking tour of his rural parish, and he happened upon an old peasant man kneeling by the roadside, praying. The priest was impressed: "You must be very close to God."

The peasant looked up from his prayers, thought for a moment, and smiled, "Yes, He's very fond of me." This simple man had a profound sense that he was loved by God, and that was all that mattered! From that story, Manning developed a personal declaration: "I am the one Jesus loves."

That is in no way arrogant; it is actually quite Biblical. The Apostle John identified himself throughout his Gospel as “the one Jesus loved.” That came to be John’s primary identity in life. If you were to ask John, “Tell me about yourself,” he wouldn’t have said, ‘Well, I’m a disciple, an apostle, and the author of this incredible Gospel.’ Rather, John would have simply said, “I’m the one Jesus loves.”

Now if John could think of himself that way, so can you. John 3:16 gives you permission. Charles Spurgeon wrote,

“We have a share in the special love of Jesus. We see evidences of that love...in the precious blood that He so freely shed for us...Behold how He loves us!”

I hope you’ll practice remembering that on this day: “Behold how He loves us!”

Yes, you are the one Jesus loves!

So again, if you are still doubting that God could love you, just remember, the cross is a continual reminder that when Jesus stretched out His arms on that wooden crossbeam, it was as if He were saying, “I love you this much!” Then He bowed His head, and died. And there is nothing today that can separate you from that love. Let the power of God’s love absolutely, profoundly change your life today!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, when I wonder who You are, remind me of this eternal truth: You are love! And You love me, this I know because the Bible tells me so. I choose to believe it, I receive it, and I will live in the reality of that love today, tomorrow and every day for the rest of my life and all eternity. I am the one you love!

DAILY RESPONSE

- How do you feel about God’s love?**
- What new thoughts do you have about God?**

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DAY 2

GOD DID IT!

It All Begins With God

The Big Idea: All I need to know about anything and everything I learn in Genesis 1, which is simple yet profoundly this: God did it! In the opening line of the Bible, the first thing I discover about God is that He is the creator of all, and the second thing I learn is that He hovers over the chaos, bringing order, beauty and glory from it, and that is a great comfort to my soul, for that is His ongoing work in me—and you, too!

Read Genesis 1:1-2

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.

The first thing we learn about God in reading the Bible is that He is Creator. The second thing we learn is that He hovers over the chaos and brings order, beauty and glory from it.

Now the writer of Hebrews tells us that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8) In other words, Jesus, who is God, whom John tells us was the agent of creation (John 1:1-4) is still actively creating and ordering in the lives of His followers.

I am grateful that through Jesus, creating and ordering is still God’s activity in my life. He is still forming beauty and glory out of my unruly, empty, dark chaotic life. He is still hovering over me. In fact, Zephaniah 3:17 tells us,

“The Lord your God is with you,
the Mighty Warrior who saves.
He will take great delight in you;
in is love He will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing.”

And while it seems that I am a long way from being finished, I am at the present moment His workmanship: “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10)

Thank God for a Creator who finishes His work, for “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 1:6) What a comfort! As Thomas à Kempis said, “How great peace and quietness would he possess who should cut off all vain anxiety and place all his confidence in God.”

So back to Genesis 1: what do we learn from this opening chapter of the Bible? Simply this: God did it. He started it all from nothing, He is shepherding what He started, and He will bring it to the completion He desires—He will finish it in fine fashion. That includes His work in your life, too. Take a moment to offer your gratitude for the Author and Finisher of your faith.

SIMPLE PRAYER:

God—You are the Author and the Finisher of my faith, so today I place my full confidence in You. I offer You a heart full of thanks that You are constantly hovering over me, even rejoicing in me, the work of your hands. Bring to pass everything You have in mind for me.



DAILY RESPONSE

- What do you learn about God from the creation story?
- What does God’s creation of all things say about His creation of you?

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DAY 3

KNOWING THE GOD WHO WANTS TO BE KNOWN

When You Seek His Face It Delights His Heart

The Big Idea: To ask God that you might know Him is a request that pleases His heart! After all, that is the reason He created you; that is why you exist. God himself says in Hosea 6:6, “For I desire...the knowledge of God [from you] more than burnt offerings.” That should be your chief aim in life. To know God, who wants to be known, is truly the sweetest nectar of life.

Read Exodus 33:11

The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.

If I could choose an epitaph that described my life, it would be this: “The Lord would speak to Ray Noah face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.” But is that really possible for a human being?

It was for Moses! If anyone ever really knew God, if a human being ever experienced an extraordinarily intimate revelation of God, if a man ever truly had a close personal friendship with God, it was Moses.

But Moses didn't always have this kind of relationship with God. If you were to review Moses' life, you would be reminded that in his first forty years, Moses knew a lot about God. He was born to Hebrew parents, but raised in the lap of luxury in the Egyptian palace as one of Pharaoh's sons—he was a prince of Egypt. Moses knew about God through his heritage, but there is no indication of a walk with God characterized by love and obedience. In fact, it appears Moses was somewhat indifferent to God.

But then Moses tried to play God and killed an Egyptian, and he had to flee the palace to the backside of the Sinai Desert, where he lived as a fugitive for the next forty years until he met God at the burning bush. During these four decades, Moses unlearned everything he knew about God in the first forty years. It was a desert experience—literally and spiritually—where Moses knew nothing but the silence of God. God had enrolled Moses in the University of the Desert—the Graduate School of Sinai—where He trained Moses in the curricula of solitude, monotony and failure.

But then came the burning bush, which marked the beginning of the final forty years of Moses' life. In this period, he came to know and experience God the way we want to know and experience Him: In His power and glory. Moses, unlike any other man, experienced first hand every attribute of God a human being could possibly experience: God's omnipotence—that He

is all-powerful; His omniscience—that He is all-wise and knowing; His omnipresence—that He is everywhere at all times; His Divine nature—that is, His justice, righteousness, holiness, and incomparable greatness.

What more could a human being want? Yet that wasn't enough. Moses didn't just want to know about God, He wasn't satisfied with seeing the evidence of God's activity. He wanted more:

Exodus 33:13, 18

If You are pleased with me, teach me your ways so that I may know You and continue to find favor with You...Now show me Your glory.

You've got to admire Moses' boldness, audacity and greediness for God! Here is what he's really asking: "God, I want to know you...your character...your nature...what makes you tick. I want to enter into the deepest dimension of intimacy with the Almighty that's possible for one human being."

Amazingly, God obliged this big, audacious request—He revealed himself fully to Moses. (Exodus 33:14-23) Now this doesn't simply tell us something about Moses, it mostly reveals something vitally important about God: God wants us to know how much He wants to be known. J.I. Packer said, "The main business that you are here for is to know God."

God has made himself knowable. He is not some unapproachable deity way out there in a galaxy far, far away. He is the God who is there, the God who is near, the God who will reveal himself to those who long to know Him.

Deuteronomy 4:7

What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to Him.

God wants us to know that He's near and that He is knowable: "I will cause my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence." (Exodus 33:19) In other words, I will let you know me.

To ask to know Him is a request that pleases the heart of God! You see, that's what we were made for: To know God. That's what He desires from us. God Himself says in Hosea 6:6, "For I desire...the knowledge of God [from you] more than burnt offerings." That should be our chief aim in life—to know God—because that is truly the sweetest nectar of life. Jeremiah 9:23-24 says,

"This is what the LORD says: 'Let not the wise man gloat in his wisdom, or the mighty man in his might, or the rich man in his riches. Let them boast in this alone: that they truly know Me and understand that I am the LORD who is just and righteous, whose love is unfailing, and that I delight in these things. I, the LORD, have spoken!'"

Knowing God is the best thing in life. In fact, it is eternal life. Jesus said in John 17:3, “This is eternal life: That they may know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”

God has offered to let you know Him—really know Him. It’s the best offer You’ll ever get! I would take Him up on it if I were you.

SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, You want me to know You, and You have made yourself available for this very purpose. So today, I take You up on that offer. I want to know You more—deep within my soul I want to know as much of You as is possible for a human being this side of heaven. And as I know You more, I want to become more like You.



DAILY RESPONSE

- Have you ever wanted to know God in a personal way? In what ways do you want to know Him?
- How do you respond to the idea that God wants a relationship with you?

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DAY 4

FULL OF GRACE AND TRUTH

Now Go and Leave Your Life of Sin

The Big Idea: Jesus came to reveal who God is. Through His life, His teachings and His actions, we get a glimpse of the Heavenly Father. And one of the most amazing features is His grace. We see that, in particular, in His amazing display of grace and truth toward the woman caught in adultery. From that, we learn that God, through Jesus, accepts us as we are, but when He accepts us, we cannot remain as we are. He brings our sin to the surface, and when we acknowledge it by confession and repentance, He totally, graciously and forever forgives it. The adulteress went away forgiven, with a new, clean heart and a brand new chance at life. Only grace and truth can do that for sinners—including you and me.

Read John 1:14

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Not too long after my wife and I had moved into a home we had just purchased, our next door neighbor's live-in girlfriend asked me, "what do you do?" I told her that I was a pastor. So she said, "Oh, I'm looking for a church...one that doesn't get all weird and condemning about sin. What about yours?"

I said, "My church—hey, uh, uh, yeah, we accept everybody just the way they are—unless you're shacking up with someone!"

No—I didn't say that! But it was an awkward moment for me as I scrambled for a way to minimize the offense of the gospel to a person who was far from God and build a bridge that might lead us at some point into a spiritual conversation. The truth was, I didn't need to offer condemnation by my words, in the tone of my voice or with my body language. I didn't need to convince her of her sins; she was already dealing with that herself. Besides, it is not my job—it is the work of the Holy Spirit to do that (John 16:8). Nor would Jesus have done that. Remember, in this very same book, right after the most famous verse in the entire Bible, John 3:16, Jesus goes on to say,

John 3:17

For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.

But let's keep in mind, as C.S. Lewis pointed out, that Jesus didn't come to tell the world that everything was quite alright! Obviously, the world needed a savior—that's why Jesus came.

People need a savior because sin holds people captive. To keep the bad news about sin and the good news about a Savior from them would be the most hateful thing we could ever do.

So, how do we bridge that gap between a loving God and the repulsiveness of the sinner's sin? Grace and truth, that is how. That is what Jesus perfectly modeled. Take, for instance, His interaction with the adulterous woman in John 8. Picture the scene: This sinful woman is standing in the center of a circle, surrounded by self-righteous religious leaders who want her stoned. Imagine her humiliation, caught in the very act of adultery—a private act now a very public sin. Nothing can hide her shame—and make no mistake, sexual sin is shameful, degrading to the people involved, destructive to innocent families it affects and odious to God.

This woman is standing before Jesus, exposed, humiliated, hot tears dripping to the sand. She has been used by men all of her life, and now she will pay for it with her life. She sees the stones; she knows her guilt. Now, all eyes are on Jesus—what will He do?

After some time, Jesus speaks and says to those who want her executed, “Ok, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!” And with that bombshell, one-by-one, from oldest to youngest, they walked away, leaving only Jesus and this sinful woman face-to-face. What now? Would Jesus give her a good moral tongue lashing? No, He just gently asks, “Where are your accusers? Has no one judged you guilty?”

She replied, “No one, sir.”

At that, Jesus offered these grace-truth words that would utterly right this sinner's upside-down life: “Then I don't either. Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Behind this amazing display of grace and truth, as Walter Trobisch said, what we find is that Jesus “accepts us as we are but when He accepts us, we cannot remain as we are.” Jesus brings our sin to the surface, and when we acknowledge it by confession and repentance, totally, graciously and forever forgives it. The adulteress went away forgiven, with a new, clean heart and a brand new chance at life. Only grace and truth can do that for sinners.

Perhaps that is why prostitutes, publicans and other sinners responded to Jesus so readily. At some level, they recognized their sin. That was why forgiveness was so appealing to them... and still is! C.S. Lewis observed, “Prostitutes are in no danger of finding their present life so satisfactory that they cannot turn to God; the proud, the avaricious, the self-righteous, are in that danger.”

What does the world need more than anything right now? What does your sinful next door neighbor so desperately need? The same thing you need: A whole lot of truth and a big dose of grace!

Take some time today to memorize and meditate on these two very important verses from John 1:

John 1:12

Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God.

John 1:14

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, You are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. You heal those broken by sin and impart righteousness to those deserving of condemnation. You free the undeserving from their sin and set them on a new path to eternal glory; that includes me, for which I will be eternally grateful. Now I pray, O God, may I act toward others as You have acted toward me through Jesus: full of grace and truth.



DAILY RESPONSE

- How does it feel to know God accepts you for who you are?
- As a follower of Christ, do you think you can remain who you are or will there be some change as you know Him more?

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DAY 5

MY ENEMY, MY FRIEND

Thank God That He Has Reconciled You To Himself

The Big Idea: I want to suggest a new way of looking at your scars. Use them as an ever-present reminder of Christ's triumph over your failed and sinful past. Every time you look at that scar or you feel remorse or you cry over what has been or what might have been, remember that God has brought victory out of sin through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Read Colossians 1:21-22

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

My arch-enemy in the second grade was a kid named Delmer. He was the biggest, meanest, scariest guy in our class...a real bully. And I had the brains to get into a fight with him one day at recess. No damage was done, really, we were only eight years old.

After school that day, Delmer and two of his no-good lackeys, Stephen and Jay, confronted me as I walked home. Words were exchanged, and we went our separate ways. Then I made the critical error of picking up and heaving rock, along with some choice words, at Delmer and his buddies as they were walking away. That caused a barrage of rocks to come back my way. One of those rocks, about the size of a baseball, caught me right on the chin. It caused a great deal of pain and discomfort, along with a fair amount of blood. I ran home, bloodied and bawling, and told my mom the whole story (from my point of view of course). My mom then took me right back to school and into the headmaster's office where I again gave my account of the story. The next day at school, Delmer and his buddies were summarily marched into the office, and the "board of education" was swiftly and forcefully applied to their "seat of knowledge," if you know what I mean.

That encounter way back in the second grade left me with a scar that is still visible to me today. I see it every time I look into the mirror. It is a constant reminder of the fact that I offended someone, that I didn't handle a conflict very well, and that this failure led to severe pain in my life.

Each of us has scars—unpleasant reminders of painful times. But the worst scar in our lives, whether visible or not, is the scar that sin has left. Sin always leaves scars. Sometimes those scars are physical, sometimes they're emotional, but always they're spiritual—ugly scars that remind us of our past failures.

I want to suggest a new way of looking at your scars. Use them as an ever-present reminder of Christ's triumph over your failed and sinful past. Every time you look at that scar or you feel remorse or you cry over what has been or what might have been, remember that God has brought victory out of sin through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. That is what Paul is reminding us of here in Colossians 1:20-23 as he explains what we call the doctrine of reconciliation:

...And God, through Jesus, reconciled all things to Himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight and without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope of the gospel.

In my opening story, I told you about Delmer and his partners in crime, Stephen and Jay. Jay received the principle's paddle along with Delmer for hitting me with the rock. Actually, Jay was the guy who threw the rock that did the damage. But somehow, for some reason, Jay and I were reconciled through that encounter. And Jay and I were not just reconciled, we became the closest friends throughout our growing up years. We were inseparable all the way through childhood. We who were once enemies now stood as friends.

That's a picture of reconciliation. That's what happened when Jesus died for you. He has the scars to prove it. And so do you. His scars were for your sins. Your scars are a reminder that He became a sin offering for you.

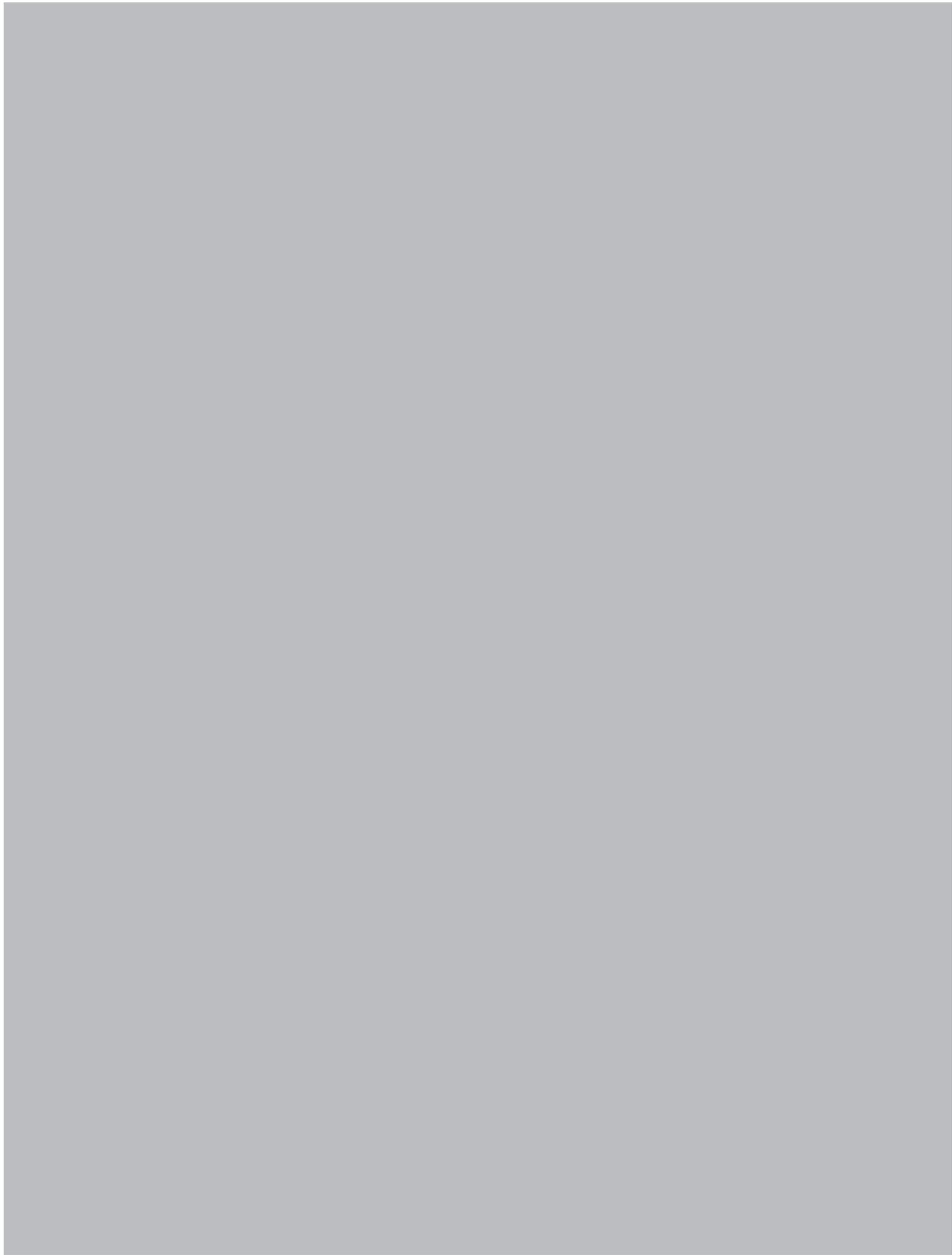
The next time you look at your scar, or see it in your mind's eye, don't die again for that which Christ has already died! As Warren Wiersbe says, "Most Christians are being crucified on a cross between two thieves: Yesterday's regret and tomorrow's worries." Don't let that happen to you. Rather than remembering the pain and disappointment of your sin, think of the reconciliation that Christ's death produced between God and you.

You were once an enemy—now you are God's friend!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, thank you for bearing my sin in Your body on the tree. I sometimes fall back into feelings of guilt for things I have done, but today, I choose to look at those things as a reminder that I have been reconciled to God and have been brought near to Him. All that is due to You, and I gratefully praise You for that.

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WEEK

2

HOW DOES GOD SPEAK?

DAY 1

THE KIND OF PRAYER GOD LIKES—HONEST, SIMPLE, INTIMATE

When You Pray, Keep It Real

The Big Idea: Prayer was meant to be intimate. Too often, we make it intimidating. Jesus is calling us out of the legalistic, joyless, intimidation of misunderstood and malpracticed prayer to an authentic, intimate, simple day-by-day, moment-by-moment practice of the presence of God. That is the kind of prayer that pleases God more than anything. “When you pray” like that, the Father opens up all of heaven to you!

Read Matthew 6:5

“When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get.”

In Jesus’ day, prayer had been hijacked. The culprits were the religious leaders and the Pharisees—Jesus called them “hypocrites”. They had turned the simple and wonderful practice of talking to God into a ritualized, formalized, mechanized and stylized event. As a result, something meant to connect people with God had turned into an intimidating, joyless experience since few people were eloquent enough to pull off the impressive public prayers demanded by the spiritual elite.

This misuse and abuse of prayer disgusted Jesus, the Master of prayer. So in a teaching moment that was both scathing, yet soothing at the same time, He set the record straight as to what the kind of prayer looked like that truly pleased God.

First of all, Jesus taught that God-pleasing prayer is authentic. Jesus said in verse 5, “When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them.” The hypocrites—the Pharisees and religious leaders—were pretentious. Their motive for praying was to impress the crowds, but they were anything but real. God wasn’t, and isn’t, impressed by the style or the content of our prayers. He’s moved by our honesty—even if it is not too articulate and especially when it is heartfelt. Jesus is saying that God wants His children to just “get real” before Him.

Secondly, Jesus taught that God-pleasing prayer is intimate. Verse 6 says, “when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private.” The use of the name “Father” isn’t a mistake. Jesus is painting an altogether different picture of what God intended prayer to be rather than what man had turned it into. Jesus is referring to a childlike quality and posture that prayer is to take before the Father. That’s because God-pleasing prayer is really a parent-child exchange. It is simply being with a Father who longs to be close to His kids.

Finally, Jesus taught that God-pleasing prayer is simple. He said in verse 7, “don’t babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again.” I can’t help but think if Jesus were here today to teach us about prayer, He would instruct us in the KISS method: Keep it simple, sweetheart!

Jesus is calling us out of the legalistic, joyless, intimidation of misunderstood and malpracticed prayer to an authentic, intimate, simple day-by-day, moment-by-moment practice of the presence of God. That is the kind of prayer that pleases God more than anything. “When you pray” like that, the Father opens up all of heaven to you!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I love You. I worship You. I need You. I am Yours. That’s all!



DAILY RESPONSE

- What do you think of the statement, “Prayer was meant to be intimate. All too often, we make it intimidating”?
- How did today’s reading affect the way you pray?
- Why should we use the name “Father” when we pray to God?

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DAY 2

YOUR DIVINE PRAYER TEAM

You Can't Lose When Prayer Works That Way

The Big Idea: No matter how confident—or not—you are with your prayers, offer them up to God anyway. After all, according to the Bible, you've got quite a prayer team praying with you: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What great news: even at this very moment, the Holy Trinity is actively engaged on your behalf, and They won't stop until They see that the Father's perfect plan is fully worked out in your life, both in time and for all eternity.

Read Luke 22:31-32

Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift each of you like wheat. But I have pleaded in prayer for you, Simon, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to Me again, strengthen your brothers.

There is a lot of prayer going up for you! I hope that comforts you, because whether you realize it or not, you've got quite a prayer team. Think about this: When you pray, it's not just you praying. Romans 8:26-27 says,

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

That is tremendous news! Paul says the Holy Spirit is actively engaged, at this moment, interceding within you and through you, lifting your life, taking your case, speaking your name before the throne of the Heavenly Father and praying the Father's perfect will for your life. As the great theologian C.H. Dodd so appropriately noted, "Prayer is the divine in us appealing to the Divine above us."

Even when you don't know what to pray for, or how to pray, or stumble through prayer, or even shortsightedly pray things that would be to your harm, the Holy Spirit comes alongside you to translate your prayer into the world's greatest prayer, "Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit." Through the Spirit, "our prayers," as C.S. Lewis said, "are really His prayers; He speaks to Himself through us." As frustrated and inept as you might be, when you pray, you unleash a divine dialogue between Father and Spirit. When you pray, Father and Spirit are strategizing how to turn the circumstances of your life, both good and bad, into that which will produce the greatest good in you. That's why there's no such thing, for a child of God, as ineffective prayer.

Now, as amazing as that is, there's more. Not only are Father and Spirit in a constant conversation about you, the Son is in on the discussion as well. Romans 8:34 says, "Christ Jesus, who died—

more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” Compare that to Hebrews 7:24-25, “...because Jesus lives forever, He has a permanent priesthood. Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them.”

Jesus’ job description as resurrected Lord is to be your personal intercessor. We saw that with Peter in Luke 22, but it didn’t stop with Peter. Now Jesus stands night and day before Father representing your case, too. He intends not just to help you get through whatever you are going through, His mission is to save you completely! As Henry Blackaby writes, “When Jesus intercedes for us, the Father always hears Him; the Father always responds immediately to bring to pass what the Son has requested. He is our advocate with the Father.”

Now, try to take all of this in! What it means is that Father, Son and Spirit are actively engaged on your behalf at this very moment, and They won’t stop until They see that the Father’s perfect plan is fully worked out in you, both in time and for all eternity.

And when you join, then that’s quite a prayer team you’ve got, isn’t it?

No matter how confident—or not—you are with your prayers, offer them up to God. After all, you’ve got quite a prayer team praying with you!

A SIMPLE PRAYER TO BE MORE LIKE JESUS:

God, thank you for sending the Holy Spirit to live within me as my prayer partner. Thank you for sending Jesus to be my personal intercessor, bringing my needs before You night and day. Thank you for making me the object of the prayer team of the Holy Trinity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I am forever grateful!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I love You. I worship You. I need You. I am Yours. That’s all!



DAILY RESPONSE

- Why can we offer up prayers to God with confidence?
- What did you learn today about how God helps us to pray?
- Do you think of the Holy Spirit differently after what you read today?

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DAY 3

ALTAR OF REMEMBRANCE

Don't Forget To Remember God

The Big Idea: We don't build altars much anymore, and rightly so. Under the new covenant, established through the blood of Jesus, the altar of God is now our heart. Yet there are significant events in our spiritual journey, breakthroughs into the blessings of God so important that we would label them "defining moments", that require an altar. At times, building a memorial at which we can stop to give praise to God and to remember is covenant, is an appropriate thing—perhaps even a needful act of faith. There are times along the way that establishing a memorial of remembrance will serve to remind us of the greatness and faithfulness of God as we journey forward to the next challenge.

Read Genesis 46:1-4

So Israel set out with all that was his, and when he reached Beersheba, he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. And God spoke to Israel in a vision at night and said, "Jacob! Jacob!" "Here I am," He replied. "I am God, the God of your father," He said. "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph's own hand will close your eyes."

Good news had flooded Jacob's old, weary soul, worn thin by years of dashed hopes and dead dreams, like a flowing stream in the parched desert. Joseph, the son he favored, was alive after all these years of thinking he had been killed by a wild animal. And the news of Joseph's incredible journey from the pit to the palace had revived the old patriarch's heart:

Read Genesis 45:27-28

When his sons told Jacob that Joseph was alive in Egypt, and everything he had said to them, and when he saw the carts Joseph had sent to carry him back to Egypt, then Jacob's spirit revived. And Israel said, "I'm convinced! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die."

As Jacob began the journey from Canaan to Egypt to see his son and to relocate his clan in the riches of Goshen during the time of famine, one of the first things he did was to build an altar and offer sacrifices to the Sovereign God who had revived his dreams by remembering the covenant the Almighty had sworn to his grandfather Abraham, his father Isaac, and to him. As he sacrificed, the Lord spoke, calling him by name and recounting the promises of the covenant that He would fulfill as the clan of Israel lived in the land of Egypt.

We don't build altars much anymore, and rightly so. Under the new covenant, established through the blood of Jesus, the altar of God is now our heart. Yet there are significant events in

our spiritual journey, breakthroughs into the blessings of God so important that we would label them “defining moments,” that require an altar. At times, building a memorial at which we can stop to give praise to God and to remember His covenant is an appropriate thing—perhaps even a needful act of faith. There are times along the way that establishing a memorial of remembrance will serve to remind us of the greatness and faithfulness of God as we journey forward to the next challenge.

These physical symbols that we choose to jog our memory are powerful. Every time we look at that sacred symbol, or touch it and consider what it represents, we call to mind the reality of God’s glorious presence and His unmerited intervention on our behalf.

God often used symbols in the Old Testament. Frequently in the book of Revelation, symbols are provided to help us grasp the glories of the eternal world where God dwells, physical representations of His invisible and uncontainable presence. These symbols provide a way for God’s people to worshipfully enter into God’s presence without being completely consumed or totally overwhelmed by God’s holiness. In other words, spiritual symbols allow finite people to momentarily grasp the infinite.

Have you ever noticed how small children at an ocean beach will run away from the crashing waves in absolute terror? Why? They are overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude and brutal force of something incomprehensible. But later, they will dig a hole in the sand and fill it with a bucket of that very same seawater that made up the monstrous wave. Then they will scoop a handful of that water and let it drip through their fingers back into the hole.

What are they doing? They are partaking in the magnificence of the ocean without being overwhelmed by it.

That’s the benefit of a symbol. It allows finite beings to comprehend the infinite—if but for a moment. An altar of remembrance allows you to call to mind the incomprehensible greatness of Almighty God and His covenant faithfulness in the past without being completely undone by it. I am not suggesting that you go crazy with this, that you turn your prayer closet into a holy shrine full of religious artifacts and icons—that can obviously get way out of hand. But, sometimes we just need a little help with remembering that since God is covenantally faithful, that what He has done in the past for us, like He did for the saints of old, He will do for us today, and we can count on Him to do again and again in the future.

God is faithful. He will fulfill His promises. Always. Do what you need to do to remind yourself of that. Perhaps an altar of remembrance would be the appropriate thing for you to erect.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, today I remember all that You have done for me. You have saved me. You have given me purpose in this life and in the one to come. You have created me for Your pleasure. You have

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DAY 4

WHAT HAPPENS TO YOUR PRAYERS

Your Prayers Matter

The Big Idea: Prayer is practicing the presence of God. It is entering His very throne room in the great court of heaven. It is exercising faith in the One who rewards those who believe that He exists and diligently seek Him. It is placing your needs, concerns and hopes into the hands of a loving Father who delights in your dependence and is pleased to provide for your needs according to His gracious will. That is why all of our prayers matter to God. They rise up to heaven and are offered as precious and pleasing incense before His very throne.

Read Revelation 5:8

And when He took the scroll, the four living beings fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp, and they held gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of God's people.

It is not uncommon for us to feel as if prayer is an exercise in futility; that either our prayers are unheard, or if they are heard, that they don't really matter. We don't always feel this way, or else we would never pray. But, sometimes, we do sense that the heavens are brass and our prayers simply disappear like a puff of smoke into the atmosphere.

According to this verse, however, all of our prayers matter to God. They rise up to heaven and are offered as precious and pleasing incense before His very throne.

Now, God will not answer every prayer according to our desires—thankfully. I share this observation with Jean Ingelow: "I have lived to thank God that all my prayers have not been answered." As Mother Teresa rightfully observed, "More tears are shed over answered prayers than unanswered ones." Yes, thankfully not all of our prayers are answered in the way we want, but each prayer is an act of worship offered in faith that blesses the very heart of God.

Yet, there is nothing wrong in hoping for the answer to your prayer. God's Word is clear in that our Father desires to give us those things we ask for in prayer. So, don't quit expecting your answer. But pray with this added dimension: the greatest answer to prayer is the act of prayer itself.

You see, prayer is practicing the presence of God. It is entering His very throne room in the great court of heaven. It is exercising faith in the One who rewards those who believe that He exists and diligently seek Him. It is placing your needs, concerns and hopes into the hands of a loving Father who delights in your dependence and is pleased to provide for your needs according to His gracious will.

Hopefully, the answer you are expecting will be in line with His will to act. But, if not, your act of prayer does far more in the unseen realm than you will ever realize this side of eternity. So keep praying!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

Father, I lift my prayer to You today simply as an act of worship. May I, and this prayer, please and glorify You. You know my heart, You know my needs, You know Your will for my life. Fulfill Your perfect plan for me—whether it comes in the form of some great and miraculous intervention, or simply through the intimacy of Your silent presence.

DAILY RESPONSE

- Knowing that God hears and remembers all of our prayers, how does that change the way you pray?**
- How does knowing that God does not answer all of our prayers the way we want affect the way you pray?**
- How are you challenged to pray more today?**

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DAY 5

WHY GOD ANSWERS YOUR PRAYER

He Wants To Make You Living Proof Of His Love

The Big Idea: Why does God desire to answer our prayers? Not for our petty purposes—although He graciously takes those into account—but for His redemptive purposes God supplies our needs and fulfills our desires. He blesses us with abundance, graces us with favor, covers and cares for us, supplies us with success so that people will look at us and be attracted to Him. Through His blessings upon us, He receives glory, honor and praise. As we were created to do, we bring glory to Him being a real-life example of answered prayer.

Read 1 Kings 8:59-60

And may these words of mine, which I have prayed before the Lord, be near to the Lord our God day and night, that He may uphold the cause of His servant and the cause of His people Israel according to each day's need, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God and that there is no other.

In 1 Kings 8, Solomon prays one of the most moving prayers you will ever encounter. It is long, but worth reading—and if your heart is tender toward God, you will be moved, for Solomon is really praying what you and I often pray. He asks for forgiveness—repeatedly and in advance; he prays for protection; he requests provision; he invites God's abiding presence; he appeals for success.

We pray those prayers, too; God is faithful to answer our supplications—even when it doesn't seem like He is or it feels like His answer is way too slow in coming. God forgives repeatedly, He protects and provides daily, He is with us always even when we can't see or feel Him, and at the end of the day, He grants us the kind of success that is eternally celebrated in the heavenly realm.

So why does God do that? Why does He answer the prayers of little ol' insignificant us? Is it because we are just so lovable? Perhaps—He really does love us with a crazy love, you know. Is it because we are so deserving? Not a chance! Is it to make us more comfortable? Perhaps, but probably not, since He is much more concerned with our character than our comfort. Is it to relieve our pain and soothe our hurt? It could be—He really is moved with compassion by our plight. God answers prayers for a variety of reasons some of which we will never grasp. God has His reasons, and for those of us who call out to Him, whatever His reasons, we are eternally grateful that He is a God who not only hears, but answers, prayers. How blessed we are to be the people of God!

Yet, there remains a reason God answers our prayers that we don't often think about. If we could ever get our brain around this, I think we would probably present our prayers and petitions in

a lot better frame of mind and with a great deal more trust than we are prone to do. What is the reason God answers?

1 Kings 8:60

So that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God and that there is no other.

There you have it. Not for our petty purposes—although God graciously takes those into account—but for His redemptive purposes God supplies our needs and fulfills our desires. He blesses us with abundance, graces us with favor, covers and cares for us, supplies us with success so that people will look at us and be attracted to Him. Through His blessings upon us, He receives glory, honor and praise. As we were created to do, we bring glory to Him being a real, live example of answered prayer.

John 15:7-8

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

Understanding the purpose of answered prayer in that light ought to make praying a whole lot different—and better—experience for us, wouldn't you say? Get addicted to God's glory—even in your praying—and you will likely see a significant uptick in your prayers being answered.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I offer You my requests in prayer, but I do so for Your ultimate glory. So take what I lift to You, and purify my motives, desires and plans so that by Your answering them I will become living proof of Your love. For Your glory alone, I pray.



DAILY RESPONSE

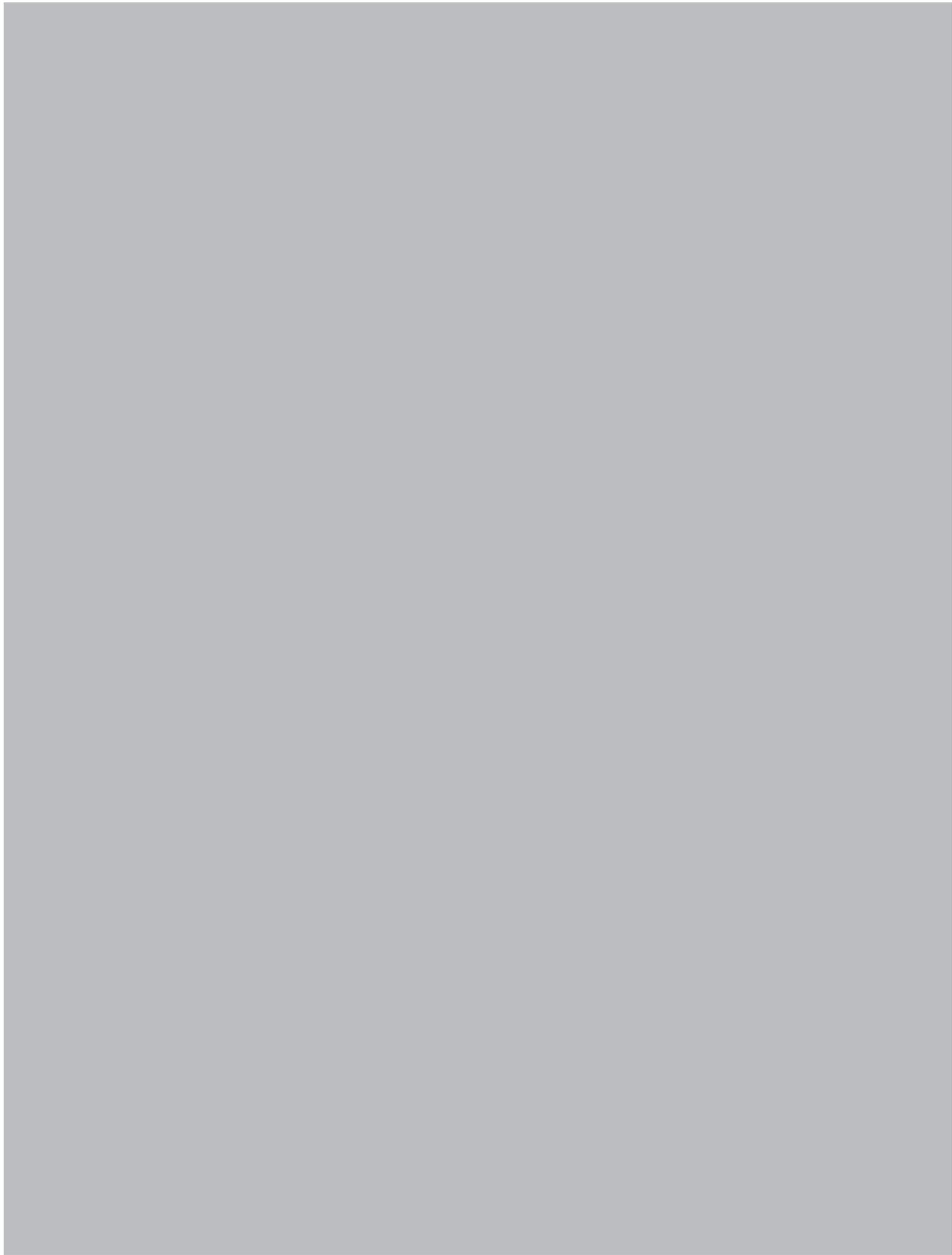
- Can you point to a prayer that God has answered in your life?
- Why do you think God listens to and answers your prayers?
- How does answering our prayers bring Him glory?

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WEEK

3

WHERE IS GOD IN SUFFERING?

DAY 1

TEARS IN A BOTTLE

Spilled Tears Are God's Reminder That He Cares

The Big Idea: What is it that is making you cry today? A heart broken by a fractured relationship? A dashed hope or the death of a dream? A failed family? A personal sin? The consequences of a past mistake that continues to haunt you? What is it that is making you feel such deep sadness? Entrust those tears to God. And let the very next tears that fill your eyes and spill down your cheeks be a reminder that your tears never really just dry up and fade into a painful memory, they go right into the bottle of the One who truly cares!

Read Psalm 56:8

You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.

Aren't tears a mysterious part of what it means to be human? It is strange that we have the capacity to cry—to expel water from our eyes when we are sad. It seems to serve no real purpose—although science can explain the physiological “why” and mental health experts can explain the psychological “why.” That still leaves the question of “why” tears—why were we created with that capacity?

Perhaps this psalm provides a clue. Maybe they are to remind us that God cares about the things that make us sad enough to shed tears. So much does He bear our sorrow that He collects our tears in a bottle, as the New Living Translation says, or as other versions put it, “He records them in His ledger.” In other words, God takes note—implying that He is not only aware of our sadness, but He will not forget it.

What is it that is making you cry today? A heart broken by a fractured relationship? A dashed hope or the death of a dream? A failed family? A personal sin? The consequences of a past mistake that continues to haunt you? What is it that you feel such deep sadness over?

It is likely that no one truly knows the depth of what you are feeling right now. Maybe no one will ever see those tears that have rolled down your cheek—and the intense hurt that caused them. Even if they do see your tears, how sad it is that long before your pain is healed, people will forget and move on.

But, there is One who sees...and One who cares...and One who never forgets...and One who will never move on! He wants you to know that, my friend. And that One, your Heavenly Father, simply asks you to take comfort in His compassion for you:

Psalm 103:13

The Lord is like a father to His children, tender and compassionate to those who fear Him.

That compassionate, loving Heavenly Father likewise asks you to place your trust in Him. In fact, so strongly does He desire your trust, that He extends the invitation twice in Psalm 56 just to make sure you really know His heart for you:

Psalm 56:10-11

In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid. What can man do to me?

I hope you will do that. Entrust those tears to God and let the very next tears that fill your eyes and spill down your cheeks be a reminder that your tears never really just dry up and fade into a painful memory, they go right into the bottle of the One who truly cares!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I give You my broken heart, my shattered dreams, my disappointments and my failures. I give You every spilled tear. Now I pray, take all the broken pieces and make them beautiful.



DAILY RESPONSE

- How do you feel knowing God is not only aware of your sadness, but He won't forget about it?
- What do the words of Psalm 103:13 assure you of?
- Knowing God is with you through suffering, how do you think you will act toward God when you are going through tough times?

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DAY 2

A REASON FOR SUFFERING

God Is Still The Healer

The Big Idea: Why is there suffering in the world? Sometimes it is from our personal sin, but sometimes it is simply from the fact that we live in a world that is broken by sin. But at the end of the day, Christians can entrust their suffering to the God who will redeem it for our good and His glory. When we entrust it to God through prayer, it may very well be that He will promptly reveal His power and glory in a mighty deliverance of the suffering. He is still the healer, the restorer and the deliverer.

Read John 9:2-3

“Rabbi,” His disciples asked Him, “why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents’ sins?” Jesus answered, “It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins. This happened so the power of God could be seen in Him.”

Where does suffering originate? When someone gets sick, contracts a disease, or is born with a disability, is that the result of personal sin—either theirs or their parents? Has the devil inflicted the suffering upon them? Did God cause it? When we, or the people we love, are forced to endure suffering, we get pretty passionate about finding answers to those questions.

What Jesus said was that not all sickness and suffering is the result of a specific sin. However, in a general sense, because we live in a world broken by sin, bad stuff that was not a part of God’s original plan for human beings now happens. And to be sure, the Bible does teach that I can bring some physical suffering on myself. If I do not follow God’s principles, my body will experience the consequence. If I do not eat right, sleep enough and exercise regularly—which is sin, since my body is a temple of the Holy Spirit—then I should not be surprised when my body reacts with an infirmity. If I do not listen when God’s Word says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but pray about everything”(Philippians 4:6) and I worry a lot—which is a sin—if I get an ulcer, then I am to blame. If resentment builds in my spirit—which is a sin, since I am not to allow bitterness to take root and defile me—then the doctors say that what is eating me will not only eat away at my mental health, but it will also take bite out of my physical health.

When it comes to suffering and sickness, I need to pay attention to the sin-factor in my life. When sin is at the root, then James says that confession and prayer are the appropriate responses to my suffering:

James 5:13-16

Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the

church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven. Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed...

However, not all suffering is the result of sin. Jesus blew that idea out of the water in John 9 when He talked about the man born blind and clears up the notion that the blindness was the result of neither his nor his parents' sin. Sometimes God permits suffering in your life simply because He wants to heal you and let it be a testimony to the world. John 11:4 tells the story of Lazarus, who was sick and near death. In that case, Jesus said, "The purpose of his illness is not death, but for the glory of God."

Know that God doesn't heal every sickness; if He did, none of us would ever die and go to heaven. But for sickness that is within the Lord's will to heal, James 5:14 says that we are to do a couple of things: One, we are to take the initiative and summon the spiritual leaders of the church; and, two, we are to have those elders anoint us with oil and pray.

This prayer for healing is to be done "in the name of the Lord." The "name" represents Christ's authority, which is the basis for all healing. When we offer prayer for healing under these conditions and in that manner, James says, "such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well." (James 5:15, NLT)

God is the healer, not the person praying. Let's never forget that! In this age of flamboyant faith healers, sometimes you get the idea that it is their ability and spirituality that gets the job done. It is not; God alone deserves the credit.

That brings us back to what Jesus said about suffering and sickness: sometimes it is not the result of sin. It is simply so that God's power and glory can be revealed in the restoration!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, You prompted Your prophet Jeremiah to declare of You, "I will restore You to health and heal your wounds." (Jeremiah 30:17) Today, I take Your declaration as a personal promise for my life and for my loved ones. Heal us, O God!



DAILY RESPONSE

- According to scripture, what is the cause for anything bad?
- When sin is at the root, what is the appropriate response to suffering?
- When suffering is not the result of sin, what are we to look to God for? What might He be getting ready to reveal?

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DAY 3

SOME THINGS ONLY SUFFERING PRODUCES

The Path Of The Cross Is The Way To The Crown

The Big Idea: Is there any reason why you can't allow your difficulties to be used as opportunities to show forth the glory of God? People are watching you, after all. Just as the other prisoners were listening to Paul and Silas sing hymns to God in spite of the beating they had just received, people are watching how you go through your challenges as well. And the truth is, you have no greater opportunity to make an impact on others than by allowing your suffering to be redemptive.

Read Acts 16:25

But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

Francis Frangipane writes, "God made [Joseph] fruitful in the very things that afflicted him. In the land of your affliction, in your battle, is the place where God will make you fruitful. Consider, even now, the area of greatest affliction in your life. In that area, God will make you fruitful in such a way that your heart will be fully satisfied, and God's heart fully glorified. God has not promised to keep us from valleys and sufferings, but to make us fruitful in them."

Bible teacher and author Warren Wiersbe wrote about his recovery from a serious automobile accident. In the hospital, he began receiving letters of encouragement from a man he'd never met, and his own recovery was greatly aided by this man's inspiration.

Later, when he met the man, he was shocked to find a blind, severely diabetic, amputee who lived with and cared for his elderly mother. The man shared Christ in his spare time as a motivational speaker! He turned his disadvantages to his advantage, and his courage, determination and joy greatly inspired others to do the same!

I'll bet you've got some disadvantages of your own. Perhaps not as dramatic as this man's physical challenges, or as dramatic as Paul's imprisonment in the city of Philippi. Or maybe they are.

Here is my question for you: Is there any reason why you can't allow your difficulties to be used as opportunities to show forth the glory of God? People are watching you, after all. Just as the other prisoners were listening to Paul and Silas sing hymns to God in spite of the beating they had just received, people are watching how you go through your challenges as well. The truth is, you have no greater opportunity to make an impact on others than by allowing your suffering to be redemptive.

If you are interested in redeeming your sufferings, as weird as that may sound, here is how you can do that:

Begin by identifying the negatives in your life right now. Write them down on a piece of paper—things like physical limitations, financial challenges, a hard marriage, singleness, hostile work environment.

Next, thank God for each one of them. Famed Scottish theologian and hymn-writer George Matheson once prayed,

“My God, I have never thanked Thee for my thorns. I have thanked Thee a thousand times for my roses, but not once for my thorns. I have been looking forward to a world where I shall get compensation for my cross: but I have never thought of my cross as itself a present glory. Teach me the glory of my cross: teach me the value of my thorn. Show me that I have climbed to Thee by the path of pain. Show me that my tears have made my rainbow.”

By the way, Matheson went totally blind when he was 20. If a young man who lost his sight in the prime of his life can thank God for it, you can practice gratitude for the stuff you are going through.

Finally, determine to take advantage of your disadvantages to talk about Jesus this week. Here’s the thing: whatever negative circumstances you are facing, this may be your greatest opportunity to glorify God. 1 Peter 4:13 challenges us to “be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing His glory when it is revealed to all the world.”

My prayer is that, whatever your challenges, the people who are watching you will be pointed to God’s glory through the grace and trust with which you suffer.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, help me to see each and every difficulty as an open door to bring glory and praise to You.

DAILY RESPONSE

- **Are there any good things in your life that have been produced out of hardship?**
- **Is there any reason why you can’t allow your difficulties to be used as opportunities to show forth the glory of God?**

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DAY 4

SANCTIFIED SUFFERING

Pray For The Persecuted Church

The Big Idea: Most likely, you and I have never suffered for our faith—really suffered. We suffer when the doughnuts don't show up for church, or the sermon goes too long, but for the most part, we don't really pay a heavy price for our faith. Other believers do, however. Even as you are reading this devotional, Christians are being persecuted in other parts of the world simply for believing in Jesus Christ as their Savior and for sharing the Good News. Right now would be a good time to say a prayer for them.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15

You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved.

Most likely, you and I have never suffered for our faith—really suffered. We suffer when the doughnuts don't show up for church, or the sermon goes too long, but for the most part, we don't really pay a heavy price for our faith.

Other believers do, however. Even as you are reading this devotional, Christians are being persecuted in other parts of the world simply for believing in Jesus Christ as their Savior and for sharing the Good News. I was recently in Ethiopia, and spoke with a young man whose uncle had been recently martyred for his faith. Here is how it happened:

A preacher named Tesfy (not his real name—he is still under scrutiny and even in the remote villages of Ethiopia, social media posts can still be read and the information used against the believers) brought the Gospel to this young man's village, a community dominated by Islam. A Muslim man named Bekele (the young man's uncle), Bekele's wife and 8 children, along with several of his extended family, all joyfully received Jesus Christ as their personal savior.

The Muslim leaders of the village were angered by Bekele's conversion. They came to his house the following week to demand that Bekele renounce his faith in Jesus and return to the mosque by week's end. To make their point, they beat Bekele, but this new convert remained strong in his infant faith. The transformation in his life was so profound that even though he was just days old in the Lord, he began to witness to these Muslim persecutors. He told them that they, too, needed to receive Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.

Ignoring the Muslim leaders' demands, Bekele didn't return to the mosque, as demanded, so the following evening, several men armed with clubs and knives came to his house. After beating

his wife, they turned their anger on Bekele, but he remained strong. They were so enraged at his refusal to recant his faith in Jesus that they slit his throat. Bekele, less than a week old in the Christian faith, and having received very little instruction in the way of Christ, remained true to Jesus. On that day, Bekele bled to death, the first Christian martyr in this newly evangelized area.

This led to a wave of persecution in the region. Homes were burned and harvests destroyed, leaving believers with no means of support. Many churches were torched and both pastors and parishioners were beaten.

Yet, in the face of such severe trial, the new converts in this area have tenaciously clung to their faith. In fact, Bekele's nephew now pastors the church in that village, and it is growing. Some of the very people who have persecuted the Christians are now Christians themselves. Throughout this region, revival has broken out. Truly, the blood of this martyr has become the seed of the church.

This story reminds us that just because the suffering Paul speaks of is rare in our country, it is certainly not rare for our Christian brothers and sisters around the world. In fact, I would venture to say that when you consider the panorama of church history, the believer who doesn't suffer for Christ is the exception rather than the rule. As Paul taught in I Thessalonians 3:4, "we warned you troubles would come." In Philippians 1:29, Paul said, "It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for Him."

Since the beginning of the church, Christians have suffered. They have been rejected, beaten, imprisoned, and killed. That's what they do best. Within three hundred years of the birth of the church, beginning with only a ragtag band of twelve disciples, Christ's church overtook the once hostile Roman Empire, converting it to Christianity. How did they do it? Not by fielding an army or gaining political power or suing for their rights. All they did was to suffer and die. That's what Christians seem to do best. That's what makes them—that's what makes us—so powerful. Tertullian, a brilliant Christian apologist, said in the third century, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

Of course, that doesn't negate the reality of the pain and devastation suffering brings. So could I encourage you to take a moment to pray for the persecuted church today. Perhaps you might even pray for Bekele's nephew who is now pastoring this church full of new converts.

While you are at it, say thanks to God for the country you live in where freedom of religion is still possible. And, if you are called upon to suffer today—suffer in a way that brings glory to Jesus.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I pray for all the believers around the world who are undergoing persecution, hardship and suffering. Strengthen them for the battle, encourage them in spirit, give them boldness to speak for Christ, and use their hardship as the seeds of revival in their community. Lord, hold them close to Your heart.

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DAY 5

WHAT JESUS CAN TEACH YOU

Learn How To Do Life From The Master Of Life

The Big Idea: No matter what you are facing today, God's therapy is the cure for what ails you. Do you simply need to marinate in God's compassionate love for you? Do you need to honor the Creator's rhythm of renewal? Or do you need to find someone worse off than you and do something for them? Whatever God shows you to do, just do it, and you will be blessed—and you'll feel a lot better, too.

Read Mark 6:34

Jesus saw the huge crowd as He stepped from the boat, and He had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So He began teaching them many things.

Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, had just been beheaded, and most likely, Jesus was grieving John's loss when He suggested to His disciples, "Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile." (Mark 6:31) Of course, both Jesus and His disciples were in an incredibly busy season of ministry and the needs of the crowds were emotionally draining, but add the sorrow of this personal loss to an already demanding situation and you have the perfect storm of spiritual and emotional exhaustion.

Yet, when the needy crowds found Jesus in His place of retreat, He responded in a way most of us would find impossible under such an exhausted state: He had compassion on them. He saw their need. He saw their vulnerability—they were like shepherd-less sheep, unprotected, unfed, unguided. So, He tapped into a source of inner reserve of grace and "began teaching them many things." (Mark 6:34, NLT) Then He performed one of the outstanding miracles of the Bible by feeding "five thousand men and their families" from five loaves of bread and two fish. (Mark 6:41-44, NLT) And, as if He needed to do anything else to prove His deity, Jesus topped it all off by walking on the water. (Mark 6:47-52, NLT)

So what are we to make of all this, other than Jesus was not only a great guy, but without a doubt, God come in the flesh? Let me offer three things for you to consider:

First, Jesus' compassion for people reveals the heart of God for you. If Jesus could set aside His own emotional grief and physical tiredness to minister to hurting, hungry and helpless people, you can be certain that nothing will get in the way of Him coming to your aid, too.

Second, Jesus' willingness to find a place of retreat to refresh the tired spirits of both Himself and His disciples is a reminder that you, too, ought to honor the rhythm of renewal the Creator has hardwired into your DNA. If even the Son of God got tired, if even the Creator of the Universe

rested from His work on the seventh day, perhaps you're not so important and indispensable to interrupt your busyness to renew yourself once in a while. Rest is an act of worship that honors your Designer.

Third, Jesus' willingness to interrupt His grief and take a time out from His time out to minister to hurting people shows that the best therapy for what ails you is to find someone worse off than you and serve them. God never calls you to deny your pain or ignore your woundedness, but at some point, serving others is God's prescription for our own recovery.

Mark 6:34 ends by saying, "Jesus began teaching them many things." He can teach you a few things, too!

when asked what a person should do if he felt a "nervous breakdown" coming on? Lock up your house, go across the railroad tracks, find someone in need, and do something for them."- Karl Menninger

No matter what you are facing today, God's therapy is the cure for what ails you. So, which of these three things that Jesus teaches you do you most need to lean into today? Do you simply need to marinate in God's compassionate love for you? Do you need to honor the Creator's rhythm of renewal? Or do you need to find someone worse off than you and do something for them? Whatever God shows you to do, just do it!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

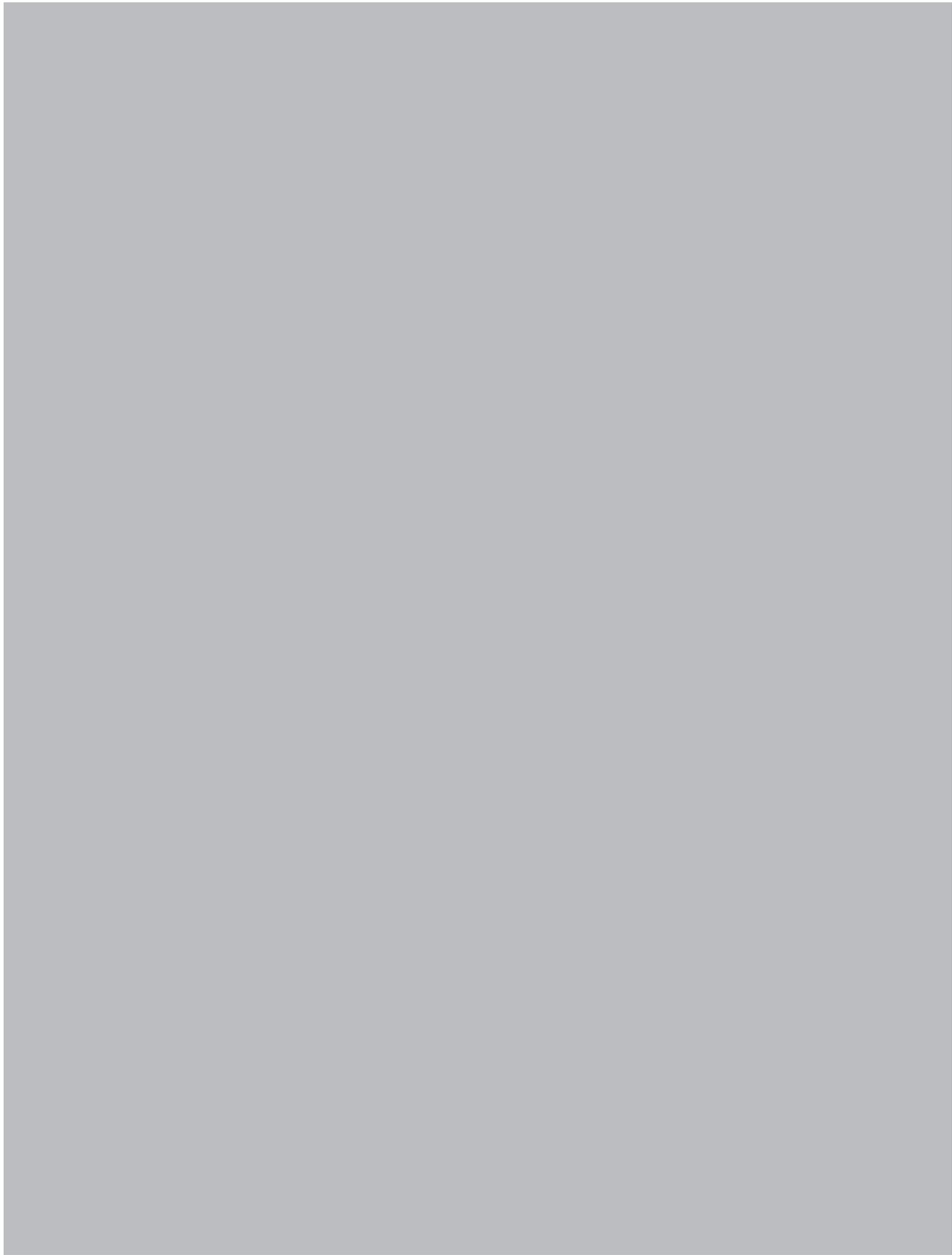
God, teach me to think, do and be just like Jesus. Help me to live as Jesus would if He were in my place—even when I am suffering.

 **DAILY RESPONSE**

- No matter our suffering, we have a compassionate Savior who loves us and wants to help us. How does that thought encourage you today?**
- What do we learn about the refreshing power of serving others even when we are worn out through today's reading?**

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WEEK

4

BATTLE READY

DAY 1

BATTLE READY

Why God Doesn't Remove Enemies of the Soul

The Big Idea: Why doesn't God completely vaporize your every spiritual enemy? He is testing you and He is teaching you. He allows you to be in strenuous situations to test and temper your faith, and then in those moments, He forces you to learn the art of spiritual warfare. The argument could be made that you wouldn't really need the testing and teaching if you were sinlessly perfect, but you are not. So, God does you a favor by getting you battle ready through testing and teaching.

Read Judges 3:1-2,4

These are the nations the Lord left to test all those Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan (he did this only to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites who had no had previous battle experience)...These enemy nations were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the Lord's commands, which he had given their ancestors through Moses.

Do you ever wish God would just annihilate sin in your life? Wouldn't it be nice if He removed everything that troubles your soul? How wonderful it would be if the Christian's voyage from salvation to eternity was nothing but smooth sailing!

Yes, that would be nice. But God doesn't work that way. He could have given Abraham and Sarah, whom He called the parents of many nations, an heir long before they were in their nineties and well past the years of bearing a son. He didn't have to leave Joseph languishing in a prison cell for fifteen years training him in how to be a faithful leader in small matters and under great duress when a weekend stay would have sufficed. The Lord didn't have to teach Moses how to shepherd Israel over a forty-year illustrious career by first burying him in ignominy and isolation during a forty year stint as a goat herder on the backside of the Sinai desert. God didn't have to take the Israelites on a forty-year meandering journey through that same desert when two years would have gotten them from Egypt to Canaan and more than sufficed to mold them into a nation.

The thing is, God takes His time in preparing His people. He does it apart from our sense of time because God is God. And God knows more than we do. And God can do what He wants. And God knows that it takes us a long time to learn. So He uses His sharpest edge tool, discomfort, to test us and to train us for glorious purposes.

After Joshua died and the Israelites settled into Canaan, there were more than a few enemy nations still left in the land. Moses had commanded that Israel wipe them out because they would ultimately lead God's people astray by enticing them to tolerate, then accept, then actually

worship their gods. Israel had failed to remove those nations, and sure enough, Israel began to intermarry with some of them and live alongside others as if it was no big deal. But, it was a big deal indeed, because what Moses predicted was exactly what happened: Israel began to embrace the unspeakable pagan practices of these Canaanite nations. So, God punished them.

Punishment came in the form of subjugation—the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Hivites and Jebusites defeated Israel and put onerous demands and taxation upon them. Finally, in desperation, Israel cried out to God, who in turn raised up judges to deliver His people. This is the story of Judges: judge after judge was raised up to lead Israel into repentance, unite and inspire them, then lead them into battle and throw off the oppressive yoke of their masters. This vicious cycle of subjugation, desperation, repentance and deliverance took place over a period of 400 years.

There was something else going on during that time. God was testing the loyalty of His people by leaving these pagan nations that Israel had failed to remove; He wanted to show them how easily and quickly they would surrender to the enticement of false gods. Which they did! And He not only tested them, but He had to teach them how to battle their way back to holiness and freedom by throwing off the yoke of their oppressors. They had to suffer the consequences of the pain that always comes after enjoying the pleasures of sin for a season; they had to relearn power of holiness; and they had to learn the literal fighting skills that it would take to decimate those enemy nations.

Why doesn't God completely vaporize your every spiritual enemy? Same reasons! He is testing you and He is teaching you. He allows you to be in strenuous situations to test and temper your faith, and then in those moments, He forces you to learn the art of spiritual warfare. The argument could be made that you wouldn't really need the testing and teaching if you were sinlessly perfect, but you are not. So, God does you a favor by testing you and teaching you.

Until you are sinlessly perfect—which means you will have died and are firmly in heaven—then praise God that in the meantime He is getting you battle ready!

Are you enduring hardship and spiritual harassment? Step back and think about how God might be allowing this as a test to temper your faith. Then look for ways that you can cooperate with God as He gets you prepared for the battle ahead.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, make me battle-ready. Keep me aware of the spiritual conflict going on around me. Help me to keep Your armor on at all times. Make me a warrior for Your kingdom.

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DAY 2

THERE IS NO SWITZERLAND IN SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Take A Stand As A Kingdom Ambassador

The Big Idea: The realm of spiritual warfare where the Christian resides is no theological Switzerland. Moral issues demand that we take a stand as Kingdom ambassadors. We cannot keep our distance from this conflict; we cannot stay neutral in it. We must engage, even when the odds seem overwhelming. To step forward in faith into the fray is to be on the right side of history—and time will prove it.

Read Judges 5:15-18, 24-25

The princes of Issachar were with Deborah; yes, Issachar was with Barak, sent under his command into the valley. In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart. Why did you stay among the sheep pens to hear the whistling for the flocks? In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart. Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan. And Dan, why did he linger by the ships? Asher remained on the coast and stayed in his coves. The people of Zebulun risked their very lives; so did Naphtali on the terraced fields...Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, most blessed of tent-dwelling women...

When they write a song about you, it is either going to be a really good thing or a really bad thing. Whichever the case, it will be remembered for a long time. And if you think you are not going to get a song, think again—everybody gets a faith-song.

In Judges 5, the prophetess Deborah wrote a song on the occasion of the Israelites' victory, led by General Barak, over the Canaanites and their leader, General Sisera. The very memorable and brutal battle took place in Judges 4, and ended with the gruesome death of Sisera, which Deborah memorializes in this song—a song she not only composed, but sang for all to hear.

The tune, however, was not just a celebration; it was a bit of a diatribe, too. Not only did she celebrate the brave hearts of several of Israel's tribes: Issachar, Ephraim, Benjamin and Zebulun, along with a courageous lady named Jael, but she also castigates the indecision of other tribes: Reuben, Dan and Asher. These latter tribes apparently sat out the conflict because it didn't really concern them directly.

Reuben was conflicted about joining the fight, apparently not so sure there would be a good outcome, given how badly Israel was outmanned and outgunned: "In Reuben there was much searching of heart." (Judges 5:15-16). The others, the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin and Zebulun, were either sitting in the safety of being far from the conflict or too busy with their own thing to jump into the fray.

Despite their lack of participation, Israel conquered the Canaanites. It was an amazing victory for Israel when General Barak put the larger, better equipped army led by General Sisera to flight, no thanks to these aforementioned peaceniks. When the time came for courage, for the reasons mentioned above, they stayed home, but in so doing, earned the ire of this steely prophetess, Deborah. She interpreted their reluctance as disloyalty to the nation, which was tantamount to a lack of faith, disobedience and disloyalty to God. Deborah called them out quite publicly for seeing themselves as separate entities rather than as a part of the nation as a whole, a problem Moses had previously warned about, and a problem that actually became reality in future chapters throughout Judges.

What does this story have to do with you? Simply this: there is always a conflict in the believer's life—whether you want it or not; whether you want to acknowledge it or not. At times, the conflict is in the unseen realm, while at other times it spills over into the real world in your personal, family, social, professional and church life. In the battle that rages, there is always a right and wrong side, a side that represents good and one that represents evil. Wherever conflict invades your world, there are always three positions you can take—one right, two wrong.

The two wrong sides are similar to what we see immortalized in Deborah's song. One side, represented by Reuben, is to stay neutral in the fray when the choice is clear. The Reuben mentality is conflicted, not sure what to do, worried about the cost, wanting to play it safe, but not feeling so good about sitting it out. But safe it is not—it is wrong, for in the fight of faith, there is no spiritual Switzerland. Moral issues demand that we take a stand.

The second wrong side takes a definite stance to sit it out. They are too busy, too far removed (they don't have a dog in this fight, or so they think), and to jump in would take too much effort with little reward. But in the fight of faith, where the choice is clear, staying off the field will only get you into history books, and for the wrong reason. Spiritual infamy is not what you want when you were needed in the conquest.

There is only one right side—to step forward in faith and fight for right. When sin threatens, encroaches or seeks to enslave, even when it seems the odds are against you or against those who need your help, Deborah's eternal call is to jump into the fray. Her words to Barak are the Word of the Lord to you: "This is the day the Lord has given your enemy into your hands—for the Lord is marching ahead of you." (Judges 4:14)

Where is the battle of faith calling you to take a stand today? If there is an identifiable conflict, jump into the fray. God is already there and you are not only guaranteed a win, but also a song to commemorate your conquest.

Where is the fight of faith in your world right now? Is there an issue of sin in your personal world, rebellious behavior in your family or among your friends, an uprising in your church or a moral issue in your place of work? Discern whether this is a case of sticking your nose where it doesn't belong, or getting on the right side of history by declaring that you are on God's side. Get on the right side—they will sing about you someday.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, on this day, I will take a stand against evil wherever I see it. I will not remain neutral. I will suit up in the armor of God, and led by Your Spirit, I will fight for Your cause.



DAILY RESPONSE

- How does it make you feel to know there are no sidelines for the Christian?
- Why can't we stay neutral in the spiritual fray?
- How are we supposed to engage in battle in the spiritual fight?

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DAY 3

LIVING AN OVERCOMING CHRISTIANITY

Take A Stand As A Kingdom Ambassador

The Big Idea: An overcoming Christianity truly isn't rocket science, is it? It is actually quite simple: Trust in God + Passionate Supplication = Answered Prayer. And Answered Prayers = The Victorious Christian Life. It is that simple. Not easy, but simple. If we walk daily, hand-in-hand in a relationship of simple trust with the Lord, and boldly, expectantly pour out our needs and desires to Him, He will answer our prayers, and at the end of the day, we will have lived an overcoming Christianity.

Read 1 Chronicles 5:20

They cried out to God during the battle, and He answered their prayer because they trusted in Him.

As I read this short, simple, to-the-point verse, here is the first thing that hits my mind: Overcoming Christianity truly isn't rocket science, is it? It is actually quite simple:

Trust in God + Passionate Supplication = Answered Prayer

Answered Prayers = The Victorious Christian Life

It is that simple. Not easy, but simple. It is not easy because we often allow other things to wreak havoc on that divinely ordered relational formula. We allow fleshly, selfish desires to corrupt our trust and tempt us to desire selfish things; we allow fear to stunt our prayer; busyness and self-sufficiency to shelve our prayer life; we allow the world to push in and push the things of God to the margins; we give the devil a foothold in our lives by flirting with immorality. And the list goes on.

That being said, the biblical formula is still simple: if we walk daily, hand-in-hand in a relationship of simple trust with the Lord, and boldly, expectantly pour out our needs and desires to Him, He will answer our prayers.

When we so order our lives to do the will of God, we have every human right—in fact, we have an invitation from God himself—to come before Him in bold, expectant prayer, and His promise is to answer us when we call on Him. When you string a bunch of those experiences together, you have the makings of an inspiring witness of a life surrendered to and used by God. And that is the victorious Christian life.

That is the kind of life God blesses. In fact, those are the kinds of people God looks for. 2 Chronicles 16:9 says, "For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to Him."

That is what explains the testimony of the Israelite warriors we read about in 1 Chronicles 5:18-20. We don't know much about their lives individually; we don't have details of the battle they were in; we don't know anything about their enemy; we just know about their trust in God. In the midst of their life and death efforts, they cried out to God. And He heard them:

There were 44,760 capable warriors in the armies of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh. They were all skilled in combat and armed with shields, swords, and bows. They waged war against the Hagrites, the Jeturites, the Naphishites, and the Nodabites. They cried out to God during the battle, and He answered their prayer because they trusted in Him. So the Hagrites and all their allies were defeated.

They were in a fight—a life and death struggle. They did their part, but they needed God to do His part. So they cried out to the Lord in battle, and as He had promised His people, He heard them. He heard their prayer and they achieved a victory significant enough to make it into the pages of eternal history.

That is the kind of life I want to live—a life of ruthless trust, passionate supplication, answered prayer and victorious Christian living. My guess is you do, too. Follow the relational formula and you will have that life indeed.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I need Your help in the battle I am facing. I am going forth in Your name to do Your work in order to extend Your kingdom. Enable me to do mighty exploits this day as I fight for You. Work in me and on my behalf to bring about a great victory that will result in high praise to Your name. I ask for none of the glory for myself. I ask only for a day that can be chalked up in the win column for Your kingdom. So I boldly ask that You would answer this prayer. I offer it in faith in the name of the ultimate victor, Jesus Christ. Amen.

DAILY RESPONSE

- How important is it to trust God when we pray?**
- What does it take on our part to live a life that God wants to bless?**
- How does this reading influence how you will pray?**

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DAY 4

NEVER ALONE

Not Even In The Minority

The Big Idea: There is no area of weakness and struggle in your life where sin is guaranteed a victory. No sin is too big, too powerful, too overwhelming. It might be tough, but there is always a way to win! Furthermore, God stands at the ready to offer His help to give you that victory—even over the toughest temptation!

Read 2 Kings 6:16-17

“Don’t be afraid,” Elisha told his servant. “For there are more on our side than on theirs.” Then Elisha prayed, “O Lord, open his eyes and let him see!” The Lord opened the young man’s eyes, and when he looked up, he saw that the hillside around Elisha was filled with horses and chariots of fire.

I love this story! What a great reminder for Elisha’s servant, and for you and me: There is more on our side than on theirs! You see, when you have the Lord in your life, you are never alone—you are not even in the minority. You plus God always equals a majority!

Like Elisha’s servant, you would be amazed if your eyes could be opened to the spiritual realm all around you. What you would see is that the Lord of hosts is fighting your battles for you. While your enemy might be legion, they stand no chance against the armies of the Lord of Hosts. No matter what it looks like in the invisible realm, that is not the critical realm where victories are won or lost. That realm is the unseen world of spiritual warfare. The good news is that in the unseen realm, you are on the winning team. Let me say it again: you are on the winning team, so you have nothing to fear!

What are you battling today? Are people opposing you? Are you on the losing end of an addiction? Are you facing an impossible situation in your family or your marriage? Are your finances going south? Is your job on the line? Are you expecting a bad report from your doctor? May the Lord open your eyes to the divine truth that there are more on your side than on the other. The Lord has put all of heaven’s resources at your disposal; His ministering spirits will fight on your behalf, for the battle is the Lord’s!

Facing overwhelming odds and certain defeat at the hands of the advancing Nazi war machine, on June 18, 1940, Winston Churchill stood before Parliament and rallied his countrymen in a speech in which he uttered these now famous words: “Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties and so bear ourselves that [a thousand years from now] men will say, ‘this was their finest hour.’”

Remember, as William Shakespeare said, “Doubt is a thief that often makes us fear to tread where we might have won.” So whatever you are up against, take courage! Face your challenge in the strength of the Lord, knowing that He is on your side. Perhaps in retrospect, people will say of you that this was your finest hour!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, open my eyes today, like Elisha’s servant. May I see, even if it is just a glimpse, into the supernatural realm. May I see that all of my battles belong to You and that You have assigned Your ministering spirits to fight on my behalf. May I face every enemy with renewed and unshakeable confidence in You. Lord, grant me victory in all of my battles and may You be glorified in them. Amen.



DAILY RESPONSE

- How does knowing that you are not alone in battle encourage you?
- When you face opposition, are people the ones really behind it or is it someone else?
- Where in your life do you need to pray, “God open my eyes to see even a glimpse into the spiritual world?”

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DAY 5

DEMOLISHING STRONGHOLDS

Not Even In The Minority

The Big Idea: If you are going to experience a spiritual breakthrough with your stronghold, then you must employ the spiritual weapons that God has put at your disposal. Those weapons are not carnal. In other words, sheer force of will, rational argumentation, personal discipline, financial resources alone cannot secure your victory. Rather, the weapons you must use are spiritual in nature, but they are powerful. They pack a divine punch that will destroy the demonic strongholds that are behind those challenging relationships and difficult circumstances that you are facing. What are they? Prayer, God's Word, the name of Jesus and the righteousness of Christ that you wear as a breastplate.

Read 2 Corinthians 10:4

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.

Are you up against a stronghold? Perhaps it is a troublesome spouse or a rebellious child or an overbearing boss. Maybe it's a crippling disease or a shaky economy or an uncooperative job market. Whatever your stronghold is, in reality, there is an **unseen spiritual enemy behind it** masking as a real human being or a challenging circumstance.

If you are going to experience a spiritual breakthrough of your stronghold, then Paul says you will need to employ the spiritual weapons that God has put at your disposal. Those weapons are not carnal. In other words, sheer force of will, rational argumentation, personal discipline and financial resources alone cannot secure your victory. Rather, the weapons you must use are spiritual in nature, but they are powerful. They pack a divine punch that will destroy the demonic strongholds that are behind those challenging relationships and difficult circumstances that you are facing.

What are those weapons? First and foremost is the weapon of prayer. It is through prayer that we access the power of God to overcome all the attacks of the enemy. Samuel Chadwick preached, "The one concern of the devil is to keep Christians from praying. he fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, and prayerless religion. he laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray." Why does Satan do everything in his power to keep us from prayer? Because prayer works!

R.A. Torrey wrote, "The reason why many fail in battle is because they wait until the hour of battle. The reason why others succeed is because they have gained their victory on their knees long before the battle came. Anticipate your battles; fight them on your knees before temptation comes, and you will always have victory."

The second weapon is the Word of God. Divine truth will expose Satan's chief strategy, which is deception. Satan is the "father of lies," and he is effective only as we remain in the dark as to who we really are, what we really have and what we can really do in Jesus Christ. The Word of God is the sword of the Spirit.

The third weapon is the authority of the name of Jesus. All the demons of hell tremble at that name. It is at the name of Jesus that everything must bow in submission. It is in the name of Jesus that we have authority to pray. It is in the name of Jesus that doors must open, demons must flee, and answers must come. We must learn to live and pray in Jesus' name, otherwise we will live well below our capacity for Divine provision, blessing, freedom and favor.

The fourth weapon is the righteousness of Christ that we wear as a breastplate. It is Christ's righteousness, imputed to us at salvation, which makes us not only holy before God, it likewise empowers us to live a life of integrity and purity in our daily journey. Christ's righteousness, worked out in our own daily righteousness, keeps us from being vulnerable to an enemy looking to exploit any chink in our armor.

We were made to win! God has given us every weapon that we need to live the victorious Christian life. These are our weapons of mass destruction. Now we've just got to make sure we use them.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, in You I am completely victorious. You are my shield and my strength. Through You, I will overcome. You have provided every weapon to destroy the enemy's efforts to destroy me. By Your Spirit, through Your Word, in the name of Jesus, and by His blood that makes me righteous, I am more than a conqueror. Thank you for guaranteeing and securing my victory.

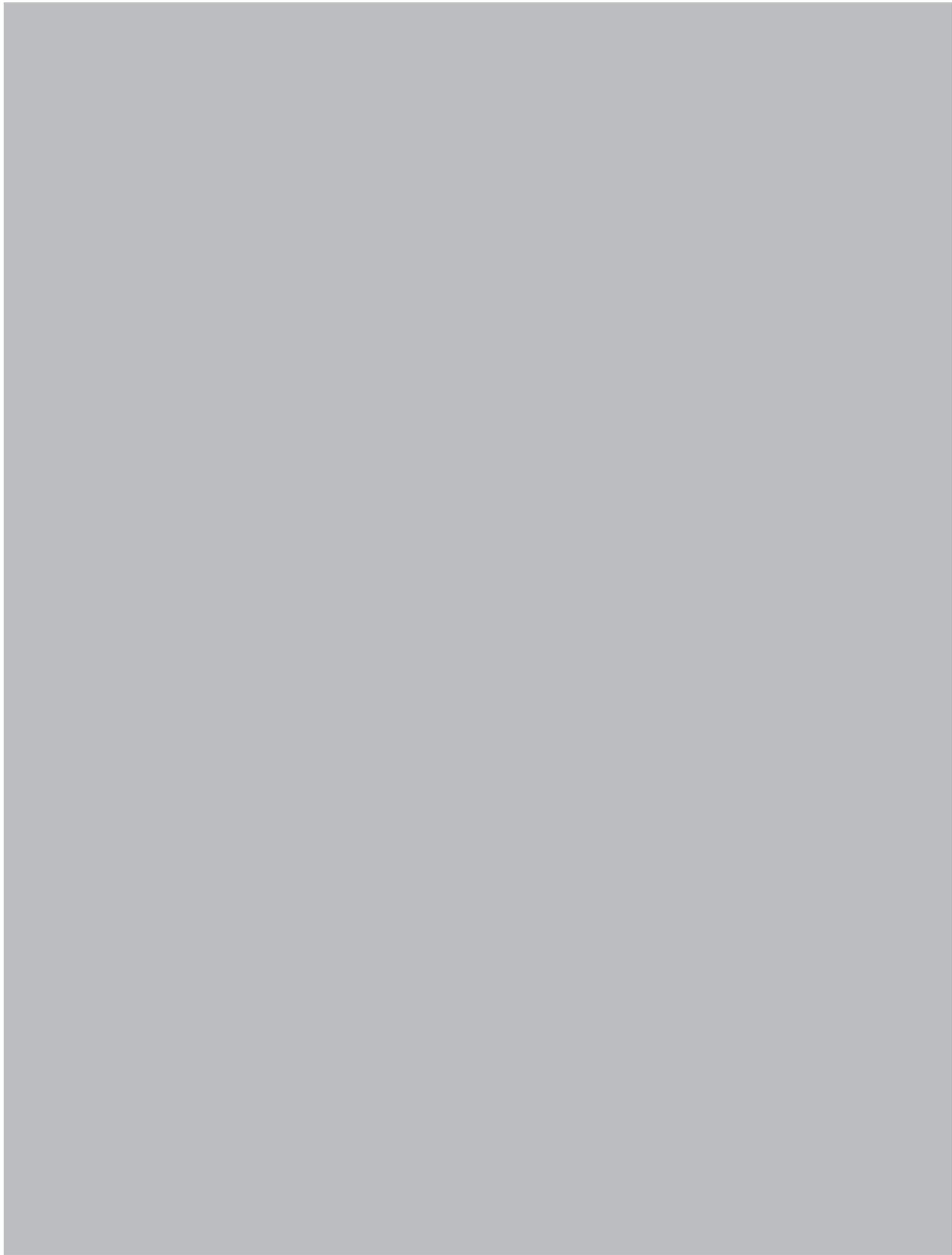


DAILY RESPONSE

- ⦿ **We all have hurts, habits and hang ups in life. Where in your life is there a stronghold you need to rely on God to demolish?**
- ⦿ **What are the weapons we have at our disposal for demolishing strongholds?**
- ⦿ **How can you and your Portland Community support each other in this spiritual freedom?**

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WEEK

5

HOW DO I MAKE THE MOST OF MY LIFE?

DAY 1

THE BEST MISSION STATEMENT

I Must Decrease So Jesus Can Increase

The Big Idea: All Christians and Christian organizations are called to introduce and represent Jesus. And to successfully execute that mission—however that mission statement might be personalized uniquely to you and me—John’s caveat must control ours as well: in all that we do, in the success that we experience, in the direction we take and in the dreams we pursue, we must decrease so that Jesus can increase.

Read John 3:30

He must increase, but I must decrease.

Over the last two or three decades, it has become clear, at least in the western world, that a person cannot be successful, live a truly satisfying life and experience significance as a human being without a well-written, eye-catching personal mission statement. Likewise, no corporation can increase its bottom line and influence its market without a corporate mission statement. Next to oxygen and nourishment, a mission statement is essential to life.

Of course, I am speaking facetiously. To be sure, strategically developing and clearly stating your personal or corporate mission is a good thing. I have one. Jesus had one: “the Son of man came to serve, not be served, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) The Apostle Paul had one... “I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.” (Acts 20:24) You would do well to have one, too.

But what would happen if the qualifier to every mission statement of every Christian and every faith-based organization was the same as John the Baptist’s? Oh my! We would change the world—that’s what would happen!

John the Baptist’s mission statement can be found in John 1:7, “John came as a witness to testify concerning that light (Jesus Christ), so that through Him all might believe.” Throughout his ministry, John faithfully, fearlessly and passionately executed against that calling until he himself was executed, literally, for doing his job. (Mark 6:14-29) And, while in reality, John’s time in fulfilling his mission was brief, it was undeniably powerful.

It is very likely that John could have avoided, what from a human perspective, looked like the failure of his business. Most likely, he could have gone on to a lucrative career as a speaker, or the leader of a religious movement. But had he done that, from an eternal perspective, he would have failed at his mission.

No, John’s mission to testify to the Light (that is, Jesus and His messianic mission) was controlled by this caveat: that no matter how famous and prosperous his clients were willing to make his ministry, John knew that he had to decrease so Jesus could increase. After all, his mission was simply to introduce and represent Jesus. Jesus was the real deal; John only knew of Jesus. It was Jesus, not John, who had the bona fides to speak of the Kingdom of Heaven since He had been there and was actually from there. And if that was the case, the more successful John did his job of introducing Jesus, the less of John people needed to see.

Of course, you and I are likely not called to John the Baptist’s path. He was unique in the initial public offering of Jesus. Yet, in another sense, all Christians and Christian organizations are called to introduce and represent Jesus. To successfully execute against that mission—however that mission statement might be personalized uniquely to you and me—John’s caveat must control ours as well: in all that we do, in the success that we experience, in the direction we take and in the dreams we pursue, we must decrease so that Jesus can increase.

From a human point of view, that might seem silly, but from heaven’s perspective, that is the path by which you and I can change the world—for Christ’s sake. Yes, that is the best mission statement!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I want Your Son to shine through me. Help me to decrease so that He can increase through my life. May the summation of my life be Soli Deo Gloria—for the glory of God alone.



DAILY RESPONSE

- If you had to make a mission statement for your life, what would it be?**
- How are you, as a Christian, called to introduce and represent Jesus?**

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DAY 2

LET JESUS SHOW THROUGH YOU

The Cost of Discipleship Is Nothing Less Than All of You

The Big Idea: Jesus doesn't want star-struck fans, He wants fully devoted disciples. That is why, to paraphrase Dietrich Bonhoeffer, even though your salvation is free, discipleship will cost you everything, even your life.

Read John 6:53-56

So Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you cannot have eternal life within you. But anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise that person at the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in Him."

The crowds had been pretty impressed with Jesus—and why not? He had healed their sick, He had fed their multitudes—5,000 of them were treated to a full meal when He miraculously multiplied a couple of sardines and five loaves of bread—and He had even walked on their water—literally traipsing across the Sea of Galilee. So you can see why they wanted to hang around Jesus. Who wouldn't?

But, Jesus didn't want star-struck fans, He wanted fully devoted disciples. So, in essence, He said, "Whatever your reason for following me up 'til now, let me take you to a deeper, more satisfying experience, and you can only do that by taking my life fully into your own." Oh, He didn't say it quite that innocuously; He got pretty graphic and told them they had to eat His flesh and drink His blood if they wanted to be His disciples. And when the adoring crowds heard Jesus lay down the demands of discipleship in that way, they were shocked—and turned off. The New English Bible translates John 6:60 this way: "This is more that we can stomach! Why listen to such words?"

Why were they so upset? Was it because they found Jesus' word so revolting? Was it because they didn't understand what He was saying? No, it was because they knew all too well what he was asking of them. He was calling them to accept Him as God's Son, the true bread of life, the only one who could truly satisfy their spiritual hunger and quench their thirst for God, both now and for all eternity. Jesus was calling them to radically commit their lives totally to Him, promising that if they did, then, and only then, would their deepest longings and innermost needs be fully met in Him.

Jesus' call to radical discipleship, using those provocative terms, would not have been unfamiliar to them. When a leader in that era called for unreserved commitment, He would demand that His followers "eat His flesh and drink His blood." So the reason the crowd was upset and

abandoned Jesus at hearing this was because they knew exactly what Jesus was asking: nothing less than total commitment and full surrender.

Interestingly, Jesus used two different words in two different Greek tenses for “eating His flesh.” In John 6:53, the word “eat” meant to eat once and for all—a specific act at a moment in time that produced continuing effects into the future. He was speaking of the act of salvation—a specific moment in time when you give your life over to Christ and are born again. Salvation occurs at a moment in time, but it produces effects that continue throughout life and clear into eternity. The second word for “eat” in John 6:54 referred to a continuous act of daily and voraciously taking life-giving, soul-satisfying nourishment into one’s life. Jesus was referring not to salvation, but to the daily walk of discipleship.

In both cases, to “eat and drink of Him” means to so thoroughly absorb Jesus that every fiber of who you are and every aspect of how you live is fundamentally and profoundly affected. When He is invited and allowed to so fully and completely take over your life that way, something wonderful will happen: Jesus begins to show through.

That reminds me of the story of a little girl who turned to her mother on their way home from church and said, “Mommy, the pastor’s sermon confused me.” The mother said, “Why was that?” The girl replied, “Well, he said that God is bigger than we are. Is that true?” The mother replied, “Yes, honey!” Then the little girl said, “And he also said that God lives in us. Is that true, mommy?” The mother again said, “Yes, that’s true, too.” Upon hearing that, the girl said, “Well, mommy, if God is bigger than us and He lives in us, wouldn’t He show through?”

That is what happens when you take Jesus so thoroughly and fundamentally into your life—both at salvation and in your daily walk as His disciple. He begins to show through, and that is a good thing! If He is not showing through, it is likely that you are lacking in good spiritual nutrition, and, in the words of your Lord, you need to go back and “eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man.”

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I want to absorb Your Son’s life so fully into mine that He shows through me. So on this day, I offer myself to You; fully take me over.



DAILY RESPONSE

- What do you think about the quote, “Even though your salvation is free, discipleship will cost you everything, even your life?”**
- Have you ever found it difficult to accept all of Jesus, who He claims to be, the Son of God, and follow Him 100%?**
- What of your “everything” do you need to surrender to Jesus?**

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DAY 3

PICTURING WHAT GOD WANTS YOU TO POSSESS

Who Will Be In Charge—God Or Me

The Big Idea: Godship! That is the battle in the human soul. Who will be in charge—God or me? If my flesh wins out, I will seek the comfort of doing things my way; I will work to get fame for myself. I will get neither. If I go with God, I will sacrifice the comfort of my way for the adventure of His way—and He promises me the blessing of influence and success along the journey.

Read Genesis 13:14-17

After Lot had gone, the Lord said to Abram, “Look as far as you can see in every direction—north and south, east and west. I am giving all this land, as far as you can see, to you and your descendants as a permanent possession. And I will give you so many descendants that, like the dust of the earth, they cannot be counted! Go and walk through the land in every direction, for I am giving it to you.”

Godship! That is the battle in the human soul. Who will be in charge—God or me? If my flesh wins out, I will seek the comfort of doing things my way; I will work to get fame for myself. I will get neither. If I go with God, I will sacrifice the comfort of my way for the adventure of His way—and He promises me the blessing of influence and success along the journey.

God has placed in the heart of every believer a dream and the desire for what He intends their life to look like—like Abraham, it is a land of promise: territory, influence, blessing that is theirs by Divine decree. That promised land is way bigger than what any believer is experiencing in the present; it’s way more than they need or even deserve.

Yet, God is a God of abundance and His Son came to give life more abundantly, or life to the full, to those who believe!

Unfortunately, some of us have allowed God’s promise—the dreams and desires He has placed in our hearts—to be buried so deeply for so long that we have forgotten what our land of promise even looks like. God’s command to Abraham to look at the land, and even to walk the length and breadth of it before He possessed it, is a great reminder to us that it is time to dig up what has been buried and envision it once again! As Abraham’s children (Galatians 3:29), God desires for us to experience His abundant blessing. If we are not, we are not living where God has called us to live.

Of course, there may be a good reason why we are not currently living in God’s abundance. It could be that we are in a season of pruning, or tilling and sowing before the harvest. In that

case, patience is called for. Or it might be that we are in a season of sin, and we are reaping the consequences of what we have sown. In that case, repentance is in order.

Sooner or later, God wants us to come into our land of promise. An important first step is to call to mind the vision implanted in your heart for Divine abundance. Visible success for you will originate with the invisible realm of your soul. (See Psalm 37:3-4, John 15:7-8) Hebrews 11:1 reminds us, “faith is the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen.” Hebrews 11:3 goes on to say that what is seen never begins with what is visible. Like Abraham, God places within you a heart full of treasure and talent, feelings and desires—in short, potential realities; it could be that treasure has been buried for too long.

Dig it up today and visualize the future God has for you. One of the greatest acts of faith would be to dare to look ahead and imagine what you want to be, have and do! There is nothing wrong with that.

That’s faith! God has placed it there; He has promised you land—a life of blessing. You’ve got to see it by faith before you can begin taking the steps toward it.

Do you have a dream that God has placed in your heart? Thank God, if it is there, He intends to fulfill it! Now cooperate with God and let vision become your victory!

You will often notice, if you really look, that Christians who seem to live in God’s uncommon abundance, have the habit of viewing the end from the beginning—they get real clear about the future they believe God has for them. Perhaps you should do that, too. Envision what God has for you—then begin to marshal the spiritual resources to possess your promise through prayer, repentance, holy living and steps of faith.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I want Your vision for my life to be fulfilled. Remove all impure motives and external obstacles that stand in the way of me being the me You’ve designed me to be.



DAILY RESPONSE

- **As you examine your life, do you find that you do more things your way or God’s way?**
- **What do you think God intends your life to look like?**
- **Is there a “promised land” for you that you have forgotten or neglected? How can you pray for God’s revelation of what He wants for you today?**

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DAY 4

LET GO OF THE PAST

Set Sail For New Horizons

The Big Idea: We ought to learn from the past, both our mistakes and successes, but our focus needs to be on the future. As Christ followers, we are always standing at the edge of new opportunities that God has set before us, and the thing that will keep us from possessing our Promised Land is not menaces in front of us but memories of what is behind us, both good and bad. We've got to let go of the past and grab hold the future!

Read Joshua 1:1-2

After the death of Moses the Lord's servant, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant. He said, "Moses my servant is dead. Therefore, the time has come for you to lead these people, the Israelites, across the Jordan River into the land I am giving them."

Sarah Ban Breathnach offers sage advice for living in victory each and every day of our lives: "You've got to make a conscious choice every day to shed the old—whatever 'the old' means for you." As Lyndon Johnson once said, "Yesterday is not ours to recover, but tomorrow is ours to win or lose."

Think for a minute about the very first thing God said to Joshua after the death of Moses: "Moses is dead!" Obviously! Do you think Joshua didn't know that? Joshua knew pretty much everything about Moses; he had been Moses' right hand man for most of the forty years the Israelites had wandered through the desert. In passing the leadership baton, Moses had just laid hands on Joshua and commissioned him to lead the people into the Promised Land in Moses' place. Joshua was well aware that God had just taken Moses up the mountain to take his breath away for the final time. Obviously, Joshua knew Moses was dead.

There is something more going on here than meets the eye. God isn't revealing new information to Joshua. Rather, he is telling him that He is going to do a new work in a new way with a new person. In other words, Joshua needs to bury the past and get on with the future—starting now. In other words, "shed the old." As someone has wisely pointed out, you cannot set sail for new horizons in your life if you are still tethered to the shore. (William Faulkner) You've got to let go of the past!

That means a couple of things: one, don't lean on past successes, and two, don't limit yourself by past failures. Don't get stuck in the past—either good or bad! Moses represented both: unequalled successes in bringing Israel out of Egypt and unmitigated failure to get Israel into the Promised Land. I suspect that Joshua could have thought, "If Moses, the greatest leader of all time, couldn't get the job done, what makes anyone think I can be successful?" God says, "Hey

Joshua, Moses is dead. Let it go. Don't get caught up in the past; catch a new vision for what is ahead—I'm going to do a new thing in a new way through you."

The apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 3: "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ... Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (3:7,13-14) Shed the past; let it go. Catch a vision for the future and move resolutely toward it.

That is a good word for you and me. We ought to learn from the past, both mistakes and successes, but our focus needs to be on the future. We are standing at the edge of new opportunities that God has set before us, our Promise Land, and the thing that will keep us from attaining them are not menaces in front of us but our memories of the past, both good and bad.

What is it from your past that you need to let go of? Perhaps you are resting on your laurels from some past accomplishment, and you are thinking, "that's good enough for today!" Maybe you are relying on a spiritual experience from years ago, but honestly, you have never moved on from it into a deeper dimension with God. Don't make the mistake of assuming a good start ensures finishing well. On the other hand, maybe you are entangled from the guilt, fear and condemnation of sin. Maybe a failure last year, a mistake that you made years ago, keeps you in bondage emotionally, relationally or spiritually.

Hebrews 12 talks about the weights and sins that so easily beset us in our life's race. So, identify whatever it is that is holding you back from running a great race, good or bad, and declare over it, "Moses is dead!" In Joshua 1:11, Joshua says these words to the Israelites that I would encourage you to personalize, and say to over your past before you take another step: "I will cross my Jordan right here to go in and take possession of the land the Lord my God is giving me for my own."

Read Joshua 1:9

Let go of your past. Remember, you cannot set sail for new horizons if you are still tethered to the shore of yesterday. Today, God is going to do a new thing in a new way with a new person—you. So be strong and courageous, for your God will be with you each step of the way.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, today I declare over my past, "Moses is dead!" I refuse to be tethered to the shores of yesterday; I will set sail for the new horizons of faith to which You are calling me. With Your help, I will possess what You have promised.

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DAY 5

THE ONE THING YOU WILL NEVER REGRET

Trust God and Trust God Big

The Big Idea: Whenever you step forward in faith, God will do the rest: rivers will part, dry land will appear, walls will fall, enemies will flee, the sun will stand still, and the Land of Promise will become your Land of Possession. You will never regret putting your trust in the Lord.

Read Joshua 5:1

When all the Amorite kings ...and all the Canaanite kings...heard how the Lord had dried up the Jordan River so the people of Israel could cross, they lost heart and were paralyzed with fear because of them.

Contrast this to the story in Numbers 13-14 when the twelve spies returned from surveying Canaan. Ten of them brought a negative report, and it was the people of Israel who lost heart and were paralyzed with fear:

Numbers 13:31-14:4, MSG

But the ten spies said, "We can't attack those people; they're way stronger than we are." They spread scary rumors among the People of Israel. They said, "We scouted out the land from one end to the other—it's a land that swallows people whole. Everybody we saw was huge. Why, we even saw the Nephilim giants (the Anak giants come from the Nephilim). Alongside them we felt like grasshoppers. And they looked down on us as if we were grasshoppers." The whole community was in an uproar, wailing all night long. All the People of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The entire community was in on it: "Why didn't we die in Egypt? Or in this wilderness? Why has God brought us to this country to kill us? Our wives and children are about to become plunder. Why don't we just head back to Egypt? And right now!" Soon they were all saying it to one another: "Let's pick a new leader; let's head back to Egypt."

What a lost opportunity—if only they had remained faithful to God and confident in His call, the same story that the Israelites experienced in Joshua 5 would have been theirs. That same race of giants, the Nephilim, that made the Israelites feel like grasshoppers were now the ones who were feeling small:

Joshua 5:1, MSG

"...Their hearts sank; the courage drained out of them just thinking about the People of Israel."

Joshua 5 could have occurred forty years earlier and the people Moses led out of Egypt would have entered their Promised Land. Instead, they forfeited the promises of God for death in the wilderness because of fear and disobedience. Untold numbers of people died over four decades with the most disheartening words in the library of human language on their lips: if only. What might have been had they just trusted the God who had led them?

Fortunately, the next generation learned a very difficult lesson at their parents' expense. They witnessed the unbelief of their fathers and mothers, and the harsh consequences of shrinking back in fear and they determined that while there might be other sins, that particular one would not be theirs. They stepped forward in faith, and behold, God did the rest: rivers parted, dry land appeared, walls fell, enemies fled, the sun stood still, and the Land of Promise became the Land of Possession.

No one has ever regretted trusting God. Obedience to the call of the Lord has never left a person disappointed. No one who has followed God has ever been abandoned by God. No one who stepped out to put God's promises to the test has ever died with "what might have been if I had just NOT trusted God so much" on their lips. As the prophet said in Jeremiah 17:7-8;

"But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord,
 whose confidence is in Him.
 They will be like a tree planted by the water
 that sends out its roots by the stream.
 It does not fear when heat comes;
 its leaves are always green.
 It has no worries in a year of drought
 and never fails to bear fruit."

Trust God completely and you will live a full life of no regrets!

Trust God! Whatever is before you today, walk into it with confidence. If you are obeying God, He is not only with you, He is before you.

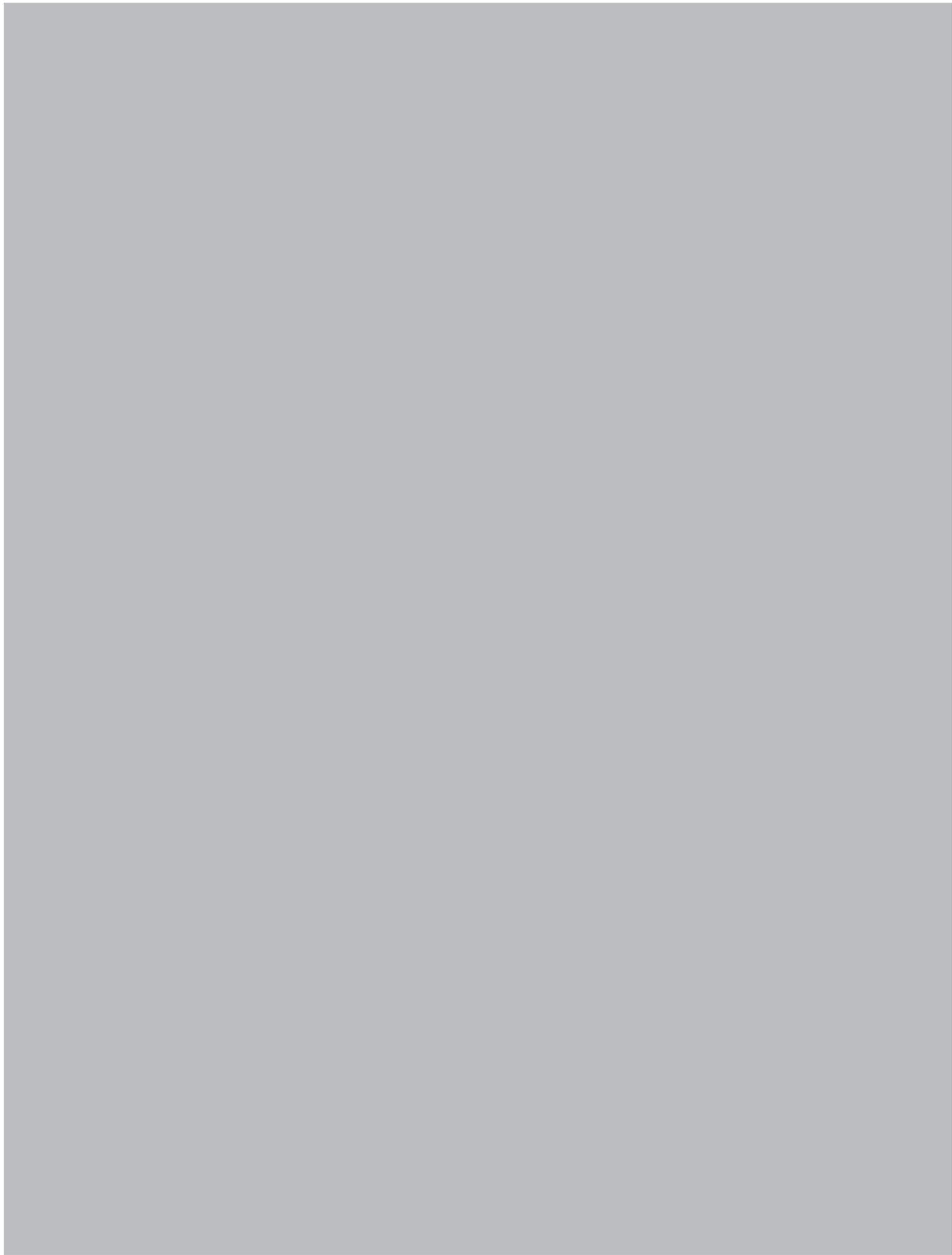
A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I put my trust in You. Whatever I will face today, I will choose faith over fear and obedience over inaction. Empower me, guide me and go before me, and when I lay my head down to sleep as the day ends, may I rest with no regrets.

DAILY RESPONSE

 **What are the differences in destinies for the Israelites in the two scripture accounts mentioned here?**

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WEEK

6

TIME, TALENT AND TREASURES

DAY 1

TIME FLIES

Time Is A Gift—That’s Why It’s Called The Present

The Big Idea: Truly, time flies. As the poet said, “Tis one life will soon be past. Only what’s done for Christ will last.” Henry David Thoreau wrote, “As if you could kill time without injuring eternity.” The clock of your life is ticking, so use every second wisely. Time is a gift from God, that’s why it’s called the present.

Read Psalm 90:10-12

Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away. If only we knew the power of your anger! Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due. Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

True story: Kermit the frog was once heard saying, “Time’s fun when you’re having flies.” Kermit got his idiom a bit garbled, but that is quite understandable when Miss Piggy is stalking you!

Kermit was on to something! The truth is, time does fly—whether you are having fun or not. Moses was reflecting on how relatively brief life was when he said in Psalm 90:10,

*The length of our days is seventy years—
or eighty, if we have the strength;
yet their span is but trouble and sorrow,
for they quickly pass, and we fly away.*

How true that is! Are you as amazed as I am with the speed of time? What once seemed interminable when I was a kid—school, chores, the preacher’s sermon, winter, life—now seems to rush by like a speeding locomotive. I blinked and suddenly this fifteen-year-old kid panting to get his driver’s permit is now over fifty and panting just walking up the stairs. Watching my wife-to-be walk down the aisle has turned into the new adventure of empty nesting—overnight! Staring in amazement at the mystery of life as our daughters were born seems like only yesterday. Now they are contemplating their own careers, places to live; and the kind of impact they want to have in this world.

Time flies!

You could certainly add your own experience to the narrative. Those of you who are older can definitely add an urgent witness to the speed of life even more than I can at this stage of life: Suddenly, the grandkids are getting married; great grandchildren are arriving; the body is not working quite like it used to even though the mind still thinks of yourself as a youngster, full of

vim and vigor; you are facing life without your soulmate—and something you never dreamed possible is now a gritty reality.

Time flies!

Yes, time flies, and I need to add a twist. As the poet said, “‘Tis one life will soon be past. Only what’s done for Christ will last.” Henry David Thoreau wrote, “As if you could kill time without injuring eternity.”

That is the truth, my friend. Time flies, so use it wisely. Make the most of it. Time is a gift from God, that’s why it’s called the present.

Perhaps it would be a good idea to follow Moses’ lead and pray that prayer today—and every day: “Lord, teach me to number my days soberly, so that I might live each of them wisely.”

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I want to live every moment of this day wisely, making the most of every opportunity to please You. May the summation of what I do today be Soli Deo Gloria—for the glory of God alone.



DAILY RESPONSE

- How have you perceived the passage of time in your own life?
- As you reflect, what are the most important things you have given your time to in life?
- How do you feel about the statement, “‘Tis one life will soon be past. Only what’s done for Christ will last.”

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DAY 2

WAITING TIME IS NOT WASTED TIME

Order Your Life By The “Joseph Way”

The Big Idea: While you may be languishing away in your prison of undesirable circumstances, God is above it all and He clearly sees the road ahead of you. Embrace that time between the frustrating and the fruitful, your period of waiting, not as a waste of time, not as prison time, but as God time.

Read Genesis 40:23

Pharaoh’s chief cup-bearer, however, forgot all about Joseph, never giving him another thought.

Twenty years in prison. Two decades. 7,300 days of mistreatment (see Psalm 105:18) for doing nothing wrong whatsoever. One-third of the years typically allotted to a man, the prime years of his life, wasted in a dank, fetid Egyptian prison. But were those years really wasted? Bible commentator Warren Wiersbe notes,

More than one servant of God has regretted rushing ahead of God’s schedule and trying to get to the throne too soon. Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to say, “It’s tragic when a person succeeds before he is ready for it.” It’s through faith and patience that we inherit the promises (Hebrews 6:12; see 10:36), and the best way to learn patience is through tribulation (Romans 5:3-4). “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” (James 1:2-4) God often removes our crutches so we’ll learn to walk by faith and trust Him alone.

God took away Joseph’s crutches and replaced them with the characteristic he would later need to run the greatest empire in the world of that time, Egypt, through what he learned during those twenty-years in jail: he endured injustice—what truly great rulers must know to fairly govern their subjects; he developed discernment—he learned how to properly interpret dreams; he grew in trust—what the Lord’s servants must have to be greatly used in carrying out His eternal plans. The two decades of waiting on God were not wasted.

As you read the prison portion of Joseph’s story, you can’t help but be impressed with this young man’s deep and abiding trust in the goodness and sovereignty of God. Joseph believed in the core of his being that God was in control, and that God was fundamentally good, and those beliefs became settled law for Joseph. Neither his current circumstances nor his emotions at the moment would trump the fact that his life was in God’s hands. When Joseph’s ticket out

of prison, the cupbearer, forgot about him and Joseph languished for another two years in a squalid Egyptian jail, Joseph trusted.

I would like to think that's how I would react to the disappointing and hurtful things that will get thrown at me in life. I'm guessing you would like to think that about yourself, too. The "Joseph way" is certainly a heroic way to do life—and one that must be so pleasing to the Father who takes such delight in our trust.

But to live life like Joseph, you have to understand that there are two views of the road ahead. The first view is the human perspective. That is where you simply and only see what is right in front of you—which means that sometimes all you see are bumps, barriers and big, old hairy difficulties. Obviously, it is quite normal to look at the world from such a point of view; you are human, after all. But, if that is the only view you have, you will be prone to discouragement, enslaved to the emotional ups and downs that come from being slapped around by life and look at the unwanted circumstances that envelop you as a waste of time.

What you really need to have in order to live the "Joseph way" is an eternal perspective. That is the other view, and it is a grand one! The "Joseph way" of viewing life comes only by way of fundamental trust in the care and competence of your Heavenly Father. It understands that while you may be languishing away in your prison of unexpected and undesirable circumstances, God is above it all and He clearly sees the road ahead of you. Furthermore, it embraces the time between the undesirable and the fruitful, the period of waiting, not as a waste of time, not as prison time, but as God time.

If you can't learn to enfold your human perspective into that kind divine perspective of ruthless trust in the God who is in control of all things and works all things to His glory and your good, get ready for a frustrating stay in Pharaoh's prison. If you can order your life by the "Joseph way," everything that comes your way—especially the bad stuff—becomes fodder for the God who takes what was meant as harm and turns it to good. (Genesis 50:20)

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, from the bottom of my heart, as sincerely as I know how, I give You thanks for every moment You have kept me in the "waiting room." While I don't have the big picture, You know the plans You have for me—and You will accomplish them. So, I choose to trust that You will bring about good from everything that I experience. God, You are good—all the time!



DAILY RESPONSE



What are some of the things that you have had to wait a long time for that had a big payoff?

DAY 3

TAKE A RISK

Kingdom Opportunity—Kingdom Potential

The Big Idea: Just like the servants in the Parable of the Talents, you, too, have been given kingdom potential and kingdom opportunity. You have been given them according to your ability—not anyone else’s. You won’t be judged against either another’s potential or their actual production. Your only benchmark is your own faithfulness. As Charles Robinson pointed out, “The reward of being ‘faithful over a few things’ is just the same as being ‘faithful over many things’; for the emphasis falls upon the same word; it is the ‘faithful’ who will enter ‘into the joy of their Lord.’” It matters not if you have five, three or one talent potential. What matters is what you do with what you have been given.

Read Matthew 24:14-15, 18

Again, the Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. He called together His servants and entrusted his money to them while he was gone. He gave five bags of silver to one, two bags of silver to another, and one bag of silver to the last—dividing it in proportion to their abilities. He then left on his trip. ... But the servant who received the one bag of silver dug a hole in the ground and hid the master’s money.

You probably know this Parable of the Talents well. The servants were given talents (a sum of money) each according to their ability, with the expectation that they would use these resources to produce something of benefit for the master.

The first two did—and were rewarded handsomely; the third didn’t—and was rebuked harshly. In fact, the talent was taken from the latter and given to the first servant, since he had proven to the master that he could increase exponentially whatever was placed within his care.

Now I have no way to prove this theologically, but I have a strong suspicion about this third servant. I don’t think the master would have excoriated him if effort had at least preceded his failure. I think it was because he didn’t try that the master’s anger was unleashed upon him. He played it safe. He feared failing, so he didn’t risk anything. This one-talent servant simply took what he had been given, protected it, and turned it back over to the master in the same condition in which he had received, it the master blew a gasket!

This gracious but just master had entrusted something special to the servant and the servant did nothing to expand it. Here is a crucial part of this story: the master had given his servant the talent according to his ability (verse 15). In other words, the master knew, even though it was small, there was production potential in this servant, but the servant wasted it! He let a golden opportunity slip by, and paid a heavy price for effortlessness. He didn’t damage the talent; he

didn't lose it; he preserved it—thinking he was doing the master a favor. However, the master found that kind of fear-based, lazy-hearted stewardship odious and offensive.

You, too, have been given a talent—probably more: talents in the literal sense of the word, and talents in the sense of kingdom potential and kingdom opportunities. You have been given them according to your ability—not anyone else's. You won't be judged against either another's potential or their actual production. Your only benchmark is your own faithfulness. As Charles Robinson pointed out,"

"The reward of being 'faithful over a few things' is just the same as being 'faithful over many things'; for the emphasis falls upon the same word; it is the 'faithful' who will enter 'into the joy of their Lord.'"

It matters not if you have five, three or one talent potential. What matters is what you do with what you have been given. You have been given your talents with the expectation that you will leverage your abilities to increase those talents and enlarge the kingdom for the real Master's sake.

The whole point of this story is this: don't waste your opportunities. Don't let the possibility of failure paralyze you into inaction. If you do, the regret at the end of your faith journey won't be that you tried and failed. It will be that you didn't try.

Risk a little. Even if you fall flat on your face, the fact that your heart was pure and your motive was to increase your Master's kingdom will bring you to the joyful place of hearing him say to you on that glorious day,

Matthew 25:23

Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, all that I have is on loan from You—talents, resources, skills, gifts and opportunities. Today, grant me the courage to increase them for Your glory. May I know how great a good it is simply to please You which is all the reward I truly need and desire.

 **DAILY RESPONSE**

- What kinds of risks do you as a Christian need to take to do Christ's work?**
- Have you ever taken a financial risk (a faith promise) at God's leading?**
- How can you step out in faith in your generosity this week?**

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DAY 4

POSSESSED

The Issue Is What Possesses You, Not What You Possess

The Big Idea: When Jesus spoke of how hard it is for the rich to enter heaven, He wasn't making a statement about the inherent evils of money. Wealth itself isn't the problem. It's our attitude toward money; our over-dependence on it! This is really a very simple thing Jesus is saying: through your own efforts, whatever those efforts might be, you cannot be truly satisfied or eternally saved. That was the original question that led to Jesus response: "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus says that the wealthy can't be saved through money any more than someone can one be saved by skills, talents, intellect, good looks—or even by living a good life! Jesus' real concern is this: what possesses you—not what you possess. If God's grace possesses you, you're good for all eternity.

Read Matthew 19:16, 21-24

Someone came to Jesus with this question: "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" ...Jesus told him, "If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." But when the young man heard this, he went away sad, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus said to His disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is very hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. I'll say it again—it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!"

Twice in his conversation with this rich, young man, Jesus said how hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God—as hard, in fact, as it would be for a camel to slip through the eye of a needle!

Now that is a little intimidating, and bothersome, too, in light of this stubborn conviction we seem to have that money will make us happy! It bothered the disciples, too, so we're in good company. They were so shaken they asked, "Then who in the world can be saved?" (Matthew 19:25) They were unnerved because popular Jewish thought had it that wealth and prosperity were a sign of God's blessing.

Here's the deal: wealth itself isn't the problem. It's our attitude toward money; our over-dependence on it! This is really a very simple thing Jesus is saying: through your own efforts, whatever those efforts might be, you cannot be truly satisfied or eternally saved. That was the original question that led to Jesus response: "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus says that the wealthy can't be saved through money any more than someone can be saved by skills, talents, intellect, good looks—or even by living a good life!

Wealth is not the overriding issue here. As you can see, it would be just as dangerous for an underprivileged person to think that his poverty gave him spiritual piety and eternal favor. In truth, anything can lead us from the path of righteousness: not only wealth, but drink, food, television, leisure, entertainment or any number of things available to us in this world. In 2 Timothy 4:10, Paul writes, “Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world.” What caused this close friend and ministry companion, Demas, to leave Paul and walk away from Christ? He loved the world; the particulars aren’t divulged.

Whatever it was, the simple fact is that a camel cannot go through the eye of a needle, and someone who loves the world more than God, whether rich or poor, forfeits the approval of God. 1 John 2:15-17 says,

“Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world. And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever.”

Again, the point is that we do not achieve salvation through our own efforts, nor can we gain lasting security and satisfaction by worldly means; those are from God alone. So the real issue Jesus is addressing—back then and right now—is about priorities, not possessions. He isn’t teaching that wealth is wrong... it’s not money that’s evil...it’s the love of money that’s at the root of all kinds of evil. (1 Timothy 6:10)

Jesus’ real concern is this: what possesses you—not what you possess.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I want You to possess all of me. Deliver me from the deceitfulness of wealth, or any other thing that I have substituted for You to bring me earthly happiness and eternal security. Bring me to that place where I am ready to let it all go in complete obedience and full devotion to You in whatever way You should ask.

DAILY RESPONSE

- What kind of dependency do we as a culture have on money? How about you?**
- Would you say your financial drive is to gain wealth or to use wealth for God’s kingdom?**
- According to today’s reading, what would you say “possesses” you?**

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DAY 5

BEWARE THE GOD OF MONEY

You, Wealth, God and Eternity

The Big Idea: Jesus talked more about money than about heaven or hell. The focus of many of His parables was that very subject. So was the subject of a good number of His teachings. That's because Jesus fully understood the death-grip money could have on the human soul. Greed, materialism, selfishness, competition, worry, just to name a few, and worst of all, the love of money, always crowd out our love for God along with the joy and hope we have in Him.

Read Luke 16:11

And if you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven?

It has been said that Jesus talked more about money than about heaven or hell. Many of His parables centered around that very subject, as did His other teachings. That's because Jesus fully understood the death-grip money could have on the human soul.

Whether or not there was (or is) a literal god of money, I don't know. Some have supposed that is what Jesus referenced when He spoke of "Mammon". But for sure, the love of money leads to all sorts of problems in this world, and in our lives: Greed, materialism, selfishness, worry, just to name a few. Worst of all, the love of money always crowds out the love of God. That is why Jesus said in Luke 16:13 (NLT), "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

In other words, we are to love God and use money—not vice versa.

As critical as what Jesus said about God and money is, there is yet another facet to this teaching that you as a Christ-follower need to understand: How you use money now will have a direct bearing on the Kingdom authority God wants to release to you in this life, and in His eternal Kingdom. That is what Jesus meant in Luke 16:11 when He said, "if you can't be trusted with wealth in this world, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven?"

How you are handling your wealth—your money, home, cars and possessions—is not just isolated to the physical world of the present. It is, in reality, a test-run that will determine the extent to which God will entrust to you authority in realms much more important—the spiritual realm of the Kingdom Life now and the eternal realm of the ageless world to come.

Ask yourself this question today: who has me? Money or God? Am I loving God and using money? Or in reality—and just take a look at your checkbook register or your Quicken summary if you are unsure what reality is—are you bowing at the altar of Mammon?

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, help me to use my money, to the very last cent, in a way that is pleasing to You. When I stand before You some day, may You say of me that I loved You and used money to store up wealth in the eternal kingdom.



DAILY RESPONSE

- What do you think of the statement, “We are to love God and use money – not vice versa?”
- How do you think your generosity has an impact in the spiritual world?
- How do you think your generosity has an impact on you?

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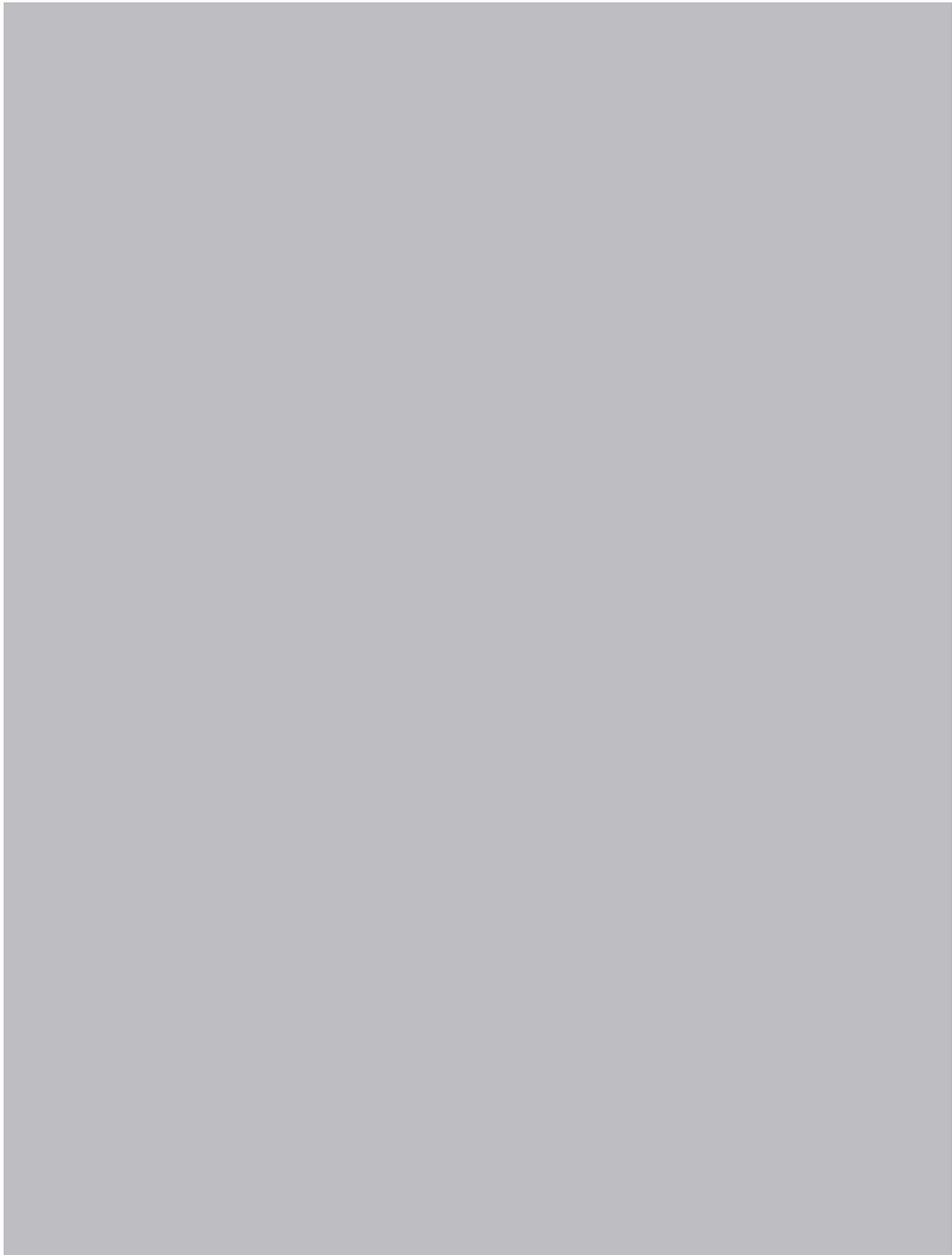
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WEEK

7

HOW CAN I TELL OTHERS?

DAY 1

THE ANDREW FACTOR

Invite People Into Your Spiritual World, Then Let God Do The Rest

The Big Idea: The disciple Andrew's claim to fame was just bringing people to meet Jesus, then letting Jesus do the rest. That's the Andrew Factor. It's simply inviting friends into your spiritual environment—your church, your small group, your ministry team—then letting God do His work in their lives. That continues to be one of the most powerful ways to share your faith with others.

Read John 1:40-42

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of these men who heard what John said and then followed Jesus. Andrew went to find his brother, Simon, and told him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means "Christ"). Then Andrew brought Simon to meet Jesus.

Andrew is arguably the most inspiring figure in the New Testament because of his simple, non-threatening, doable example of how to reach lost people. Andrew didn't have any special skills or advanced evangelism training, he just simply brought people to meet Jesus, and then let Jesus do the rest.

Even though Andrew was the first disciple Jesus enlisted, and even though he was the first to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, he never achieved the fame that his brother Peter did. Jesus never included Andrew in his inner circle like Peter. Andrew wasn't there at the transfiguration, like Peter. Andrew wasn't there when Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, like Peter. Andrew never preached like Peter, never wrote a letter that got included in the New Testament, like Peter, and was never recognized as a key leader in the early church, like James.

Peter's name appears close to 200 times in the New Testament, 96 times in the four gospels—only Jesus is mentioned more often. We find Andrew in only 11 different places, 10 of them in the Gospels—mostly in a list of the disciples; five as "Peter's brother." Only three times do these passages tell us any details about Andrew—and even that is minimal. Someone once asked a conductor what the most difficult instrument to play in the orchestra was. He said, "second fiddle." That was Andrew!

Yet, beneath everybody's radar, Andrew was being used in the most powerful way of all—to bring people to Christ. Andrew not only brought Peter to Jesus, but in John 6:8, we find it was Andrew who brought the boy with the loaves and fish to Jesus, and then one of the outstanding miracles of the Bible took place: the feeding of the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish. On account of Andrew, we have a story preserved that has helped millions to understand that Jesus is the true and only Bread of Life. Then in John 12:21, some Greeks came to Philip and said, "we want to see Jesus." Philip took them to Andrew, and what did Andrew do? He hooked them up with Jesus.

Andrew became both the first home missionary—when he led Peter to Christ, and the first foreign missionary—when he led those Gentiles to Jesus.

In Andrew, you don't find any special skills or an incredibly charismatic personality, or an extremely articulate speaker. You just find a guy who was faithful, available and useful. He just kept bringing everybody who got near him to Jesus.

Tradition tells us that Andrew just kept on introducing people to Jesus for the rest of his life. He was finally put to death at a ripe old age in Greece. His death came after he befriended Maximilla, the wife of the Roman proconsul Aegeas, and led her to faith in Christ. Aegeas became so enraged over this that he ordered Andrew to offer sacrifices to a heathen god. When Andrew refused, he was severely beaten, tied to a cross, and crucified. That cross, shaped like an X, is today called St. Andrew's cross. It is said that he lingered for two whole days before dying, but the whole painful time, he preached the Gospel to everyone who came by. Andrew never stopped introducing people to Jesus, even to his last breath.

Every time Andrew is mentioned, he's bringing someone to Jesus—then Jesus does the rest, and lives get transformed. His single talent seems to have been leveraging his relationships to introduce seekers to Christ. He doesn't lay the "Four Spiritual Laws" on people; he doesn't whip out a "Roman Road" tract on them. He just says, "Hey, come with me, I've got someone I want you to meet."

That's the Andrew Factor, which, if you haven't picked up on it by now, is simply inviting your friends into your spiritual environment—your church, your small group, your ministry team—and letting God do the rest.

Employ the Andrew Factor this week: try bringing someone to church with you on Sunday.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, continually remind me to invite the people I'm around into my spiritual environment, then trust You to do Your work of wooing and redeeming their lives.



DAILY RESPONSE

- **Can you remember who brought you to Christ? Recall how this happened and take some time to thank God for sending someone to lead you.**
- **How can you bring others to Christ simply through your relational interactions with them?**

DAY 2

THE SCARY “E” WORD

Put The “Go” In Your Gospel

The Big Idea: The assignment is still the same today as it was when Jesus commissioned the first disciples. And it is just as clear: “Go!” We have been called to go into the world and give them what we have been given: the Good News of forgiveness of sins and eternal life by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Read Luke 10:3

Now go, and remember that I am sending you out as lambs among wolves.

The assignment is still the same today as it was when Jesus commissioned the first disciples. It is just as clear: “Go!” We have been called to go into the world and give them what we have been given: The Good News of forgiveness of sins and eternal life by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

If we don’t go and give, no one else will. We are God’s “Plan A” for proclaiming his message to people, and there is no “Plan B.” There is a name for the plan, by the way. It is not in the Bible, but it has come to be known as “evangelism”.

Unfortunately, the “E” word has become quite intimidating, even scary to most Christians. But, since there is no “Plan B”, you and I need to reexamine our fear and reluctance so we can get busy doing what disciples do: going and giving the Good News to people who are lost.

As big and scary as the word “evangelism” may sound to you, it simply comes from a compound Greek word: “eu”, which means “good”, as in euphoria, and “aggelos”, which means angel, as in Los Angeles. “Euaggelos” is literally, a “good angel” or a “good messenger”. A messenger with good news—there is nothing big or scary about that. In fact, that is quite appealing.

You and I have been given the job of translating God’s message of reconciliation through the example of our lives in such a way that it comes alive and connects with people. Evangelism, then, is simply embodying the Good News by loving proactively, living purely, acting graciously, working joyfully, serving creatively and even suffering redemptively. When we have lived in such a way—by being living proof of a loving God before a lost world—then proclaiming the Good News is simply the natural next step.

It has been said, “preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary use words.” To be clear, it is always necessary to use our words. That is why Jesus said we are to go “preach” it. (Mark 16:15) So go be the good messenger today; be the good news. Robert E. Coleman said, “This is the new evangelism we need. It is not better methods, but better men and women who know

their Redeemer from personal experience...who see His vision and feel His passion for the world...who want only for Christ to produce His life in and through them according to His own good pleasure.”

Yes, be the living proof of the Good News, and when the opportunity presents itself, share it boldly!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I have often pulled back from sharing Your Good News. Please forgive me, and fill me with a new passion and a holy boldness to tell people the best news they will ever hear.



DAILY RESPONSE

- How important is it that we respond to the command to “Go” as God’s plan A for the world?
- Does the thought of evangelism intimidate you in any way? Why do you think that is?
- How can you plan and pray to share the gospel boldly this week?

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DAY 3

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

I Was Blind, But Now I See!

The Big Idea: Never underestimate the simple power of a personal testimony. When you speak for Christ as a satisfied customer, as one whose life has been changed forever, as one who was once spiritually blinded by sin but now can see by God's grace, there is no defense. Who can argue against that? Your testimony may not be as dramatic as the healing of the man who had been born blind, but it is just as persuasive as his. You, too, are a satisfied customer, and a satisfied customer makes the most compelling witness of all.

Read John 9:25

I don't know whether he is a sinner," the man replied. "But I know this: I was blind, and now I can see!

The Pharisees didn't like the fact that Jesus had used the Sabbath to heal a man who had been born blind. The truth is, they didn't like Jesus at all, and they were looking for Him to slip up so they could do away with Him once and for all. It wasn't the first time He had "violated" their Sabbath policies by doing God's work, but perhaps this latest "Sabbath miracle" was their chance.

They found the man Jesus had healed and began to question him: Had he really been born blind? Was this a hoax? Was he secretly a disciple of Jesus? Would a true man of God really heal on the Sabbath?

These weren't just the innocent questions of a curious group. This was an interrogation. The tone of the Pharisees was intimidating and threatening, and the implication was that it wouldn't go well for this healed man and his family if he didn't repudiate both the miracle and the miracle worker.

Then, in a flash of unrehearsed inspiration and simple brilliance, the man parries their attack and thrusts the most persuasive of all daggers into their opposition against Jesus: the testimony of a satisfied customer. All this man knew was that he was once blind, but now he could see. Case closed; end of story. The Pharisees were defenseless. What response could they give against such overwhelming evidence?

That is the simple power of a personal testimony. When you speak for Christ as a satisfied customer, as one whose life has been changed forever, as one who was once spiritually blinded by sin but now can see by God's grace, there is no defense. Who can argue against that? Your testimony may not be as dramatic as the healing of the man who had been born blind, but it is just as powerfully persuasive as his. You, too, are a satisfied customer, and a satisfied customer makes the most compelling witness of all.

Alexander MacLaren wrote, “We must have the glory sink into us before it can be reflected from us. In deep inward beholding we must have Christ in our hearts, that He may shine forth from our lives.” Reflect back on what Jesus has done for you. Let it sink in. Then take a few moments today to write your story out—one or two pages will be enough. Simply describe what your life was like before Christ, how you came to know Him, and the joys and benefits of what it means to now be His follower.

I guarantee, God will give you an opportunity before too long to share your story with someone who needs to know Jesus.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, without You I am totally lost. Would You give me a picture of that? Help me to remember, so that I never forget. Let the glory of Your salvation sink in, so that it can reflect out. Cause my life to be the powerful testimony of a satisfied customer.

 **DAILY RESPONSE**

- Stop to think about your personal testimony (the story of how you came to know Jesus). Have you shared it with anyone recently?
- How do you think you can work your testimony into regular conversation so it is not weird or abrupt for conversation?
- Take some time today and this week to write down your testimony and come prepared to talk about it this week in Communities.

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DAY 4

HOW'S BUSINESS?

Until Further Notice, Here's Your Assignment

The Big Idea: You and I are here on planet Earth to carry out business for the King. He has given us Kingdom resources—influence, money, creativity, and vision. He has privileged us with opportunities to leverage every fiber of what we are and every last ounce of all that we have in a way that will produce now the stuff of eternity: fame for the King, souls for His Kingdom, and a foretaste of the abundant life (even if it is imperfectly and temporally expressed). That is our business—nothing more than that; nothing less will do. This begs the question: how's business?

Read Luke 19:13

Invest this for me while I am gone.

This is the simplest explanation of what Christians are supposed to be doing between their salvation and their entry into the eternal kingdom, either by death or by virtue of Christ's return: investing!

The old King James Version says it like this: "Occupy till I come." The New King James Version translates it: "Do business till I come." Invest, occupy, do business—I like all of those. That is what Christians are supposed to be doing with their time, energy and treasures—investing and producing an eternal profit in the business of the Kingdom. There is nothing more important—and more pleasurable—than that.

The problem is, we Christians tend to forget that we are not here on planet Earth for our own benefit. Along the way, we lose sight of the fact that the perfectly good oxygen we are taking in is not simply for our own pleasure. The time and space we are occupying is not merely for our own temporal purposes—that would be a cosmic waste!

No, you and I are here on assignment for the King. He has given us Kingdom resources—influence, money, creativity, and vision. He has privileged us with opportunities to leverage every fiber of what we are and every last ounce of all that we have in a way that will produce now the stuff of eternity: fame for the King, souls for His Kingdom, and a foretaste of the abundant life (even if it is imperfectly and temporally expressed).

That is our business—nothing more than that; nothing less will do.

This begs the question: How's business?

For too many Christians, their Kingdom business is in a recession. Not because the economy is bad, but because they have lost sight of the core purpose of their business and the irresistibil-

ity of their product. Rather, they have retreated to a preserve-what-we-have mode and are not expanding into a market of unlimited potential. In an era long ago, the reformer Martin Luther soberly described it this way,

“The idea that the service to God should have only to do with a church altar, singing, reading, sacrifice, and the like is without doubt but the worst trick of the devil. How could the devil have led us more effectively astray than by the narrow conception that service to God takes place only in a church and by the works done therein. The whole world could abound with the services to the Lord; services - not only in churches but also in the homes, kitchen, workshop, field.”

The world is still our market, and we’ve got an unstoppable, irresistible business with unlimited potential to change the world. And the time has never been better to expand it.

So again, here is the question: how’s business?

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, thank you for calling me into Your Kingdom business. Today, give me a fresh baptism of passion and power to advance it in a way that will delight Your heart.



DAILY RESPONSE

- As you read today’s devotional, personally answer the question, “How’s business?”
- If we are on assignment from the King, how should we be spending our time on earth as disciples of Christ?

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DAY 5

HOW WE KILL OUR CHRISTIAN WITNESS

Remember, You Are The Good News

The Big Idea: The word “evangelism” is from a compound Greek word, “eu,” meaning “good” (euphoria) and “aggelos” meaning “messenger” (angel). So “euaggelos” is simply “a good messenger.” Our task is just translating the Good News by our selfless, sacrificial lives in a way that reconnects lost people with a loving God. Bottom line: Jesus didn’t condemn; He just fiercely, stubbornly, unconditionally loved. We should go and do likewise.

Read John 3:17-18

God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it. There is no eternal doom awaiting those who trust Him to save them. But those who don’t trust Him have already been tried and condemned for not believing in the only Son of God.

Unfortunately for too many Christians, John 3:17 gets lost in the shadows of the verse that immediately precedes it—John 3:16. Who doesn’t love that verse? It is the heart of God—His sacrificial love for a sinful world, the Bible summed up in one short verse—it’s the simplest yet most powerful collection of words the world has ever known. The truth that Jesus declares in John 3:16 is the only hope for the world.

But Jesus’ followers often miss what follows: He didn’t come to force His gracious offer of eternal life down the throats of those who resisted. His plan wasn’t to set up a spiritual police state to enforce adherence to His sacrificial love. He wasn’t even going to publicly condemn those who foolishly, perhaps even violently, rejected the divine plan to eternal life.

Why do so many believers have an insatiable need to condemn the unbelieving world? If condemnation were what sinners needed, Jesus would have done that. Rather, Jesus understood that their very resistance of His grace and rejection of His atonement was all the condemnation that was needed. The unbelieving world already stood condemned. Why condemn what was already condemned?

Contrary to Jesus’ approach, condemnation seems too often to be our leading evangelistic strategy. When believers, churches and spiritual leaders take to their social media outlets to decry the current crisis of morality in America, or lash out on the airwaves about the obvious failures of our out-of-control government, or write in their blogs about the evils of gay marriage or the horror of late term abortion or the ills of our increasingly secular culture, we are well on our way to destroying whatever Christian witness we might have once been able to exert. Does that mean I am in favor of those things, or believe that we should never speak out about sin or injustice in the world? Not at all!

It's just sadly interesting to me that we tend to pass too quickly over the greatest truth in the Bible, John 3:16, and go right for the jugular vein by condemning what already stands condemned when Jesus himself, the one we represent, didn't even do that. Christian pollster George Barna summarized recently some research on the church's perception in the world by stating, "the Christian community is not known for love." If Jesus was known for loving the world so much that He gave His life to redeem it, why should that be any less true of His followers? Barna concludes that this perception renders ineffective most of our evangelistic efforts. Our condemning voice overshadows our loving heart.

What should be our response to all of these ills in the world that need to be set aright? Are we to just idly stand by, do nothing and say nothing? No—we would be derelict in our discipleship to take that approach.

We would, however, be far more effective in reaching and redeeming the world if we would do what Jesus did. The best evangelism remains that by our love—for the Lord, for each other, and for the lost—that an unbelieving world will be attracted to our Savior. Like Jesus, when we demonstrate selfless, stubborn, sacrificial love, we will have the undeniable effect that Jesus had: the world will be both repulsed yet attracted by God's irresistible love in us.

That is the strange thing about God's love: while every human being fundamentally craves it, because of sin, many foolishly, sadly reject. Those who do stand condemned already. Yet, the fact remains, whether our witness is embraced or repulsed, we have an undeniable impact in forgoing condemnation and letting love speak for itself. The Apostle Peter said,

1 Peter 2:9 & 12, 3:15-16

You've been chosen...to declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His light...[So] live such good lives among unbelievers that even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us...Always be ready [to share your faith], but do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

I watch too many believers who are anything but that as they engage in politics, cultural issues or theological debates. It seems that some Christians are more passionate about their point of view than pointing people to Jesus. We would win more debates, elections, and souls too, if we'd learn to offer our opinions with more love and less condemnation.

The word "evangelism" is from a compound Greek word, "eu," meaning "good" (euphoria) and "aggelos" meaning "messenger" (angel). So "euaggelos" is simply "a good messenger." Our task is just translating the Good News by our selfless, sacrificial lives in a way that reconnects lost people with a loving God.

Bottom line: Jesus didn't condemn; He just fiercely, stubbornly, unconditionally loved. We should go and do likewise.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, when You sent Your Son into the world, You didn't send Him to condemn it. He just fiercely, stubbornly, unconditionally and sacrificially loved it. Please help me to go and do likewise.



DAILY RESPONSE

- How does condemnation hurt our witness instead of help it?
- In what ways can you show the world the love of Christ through your love?

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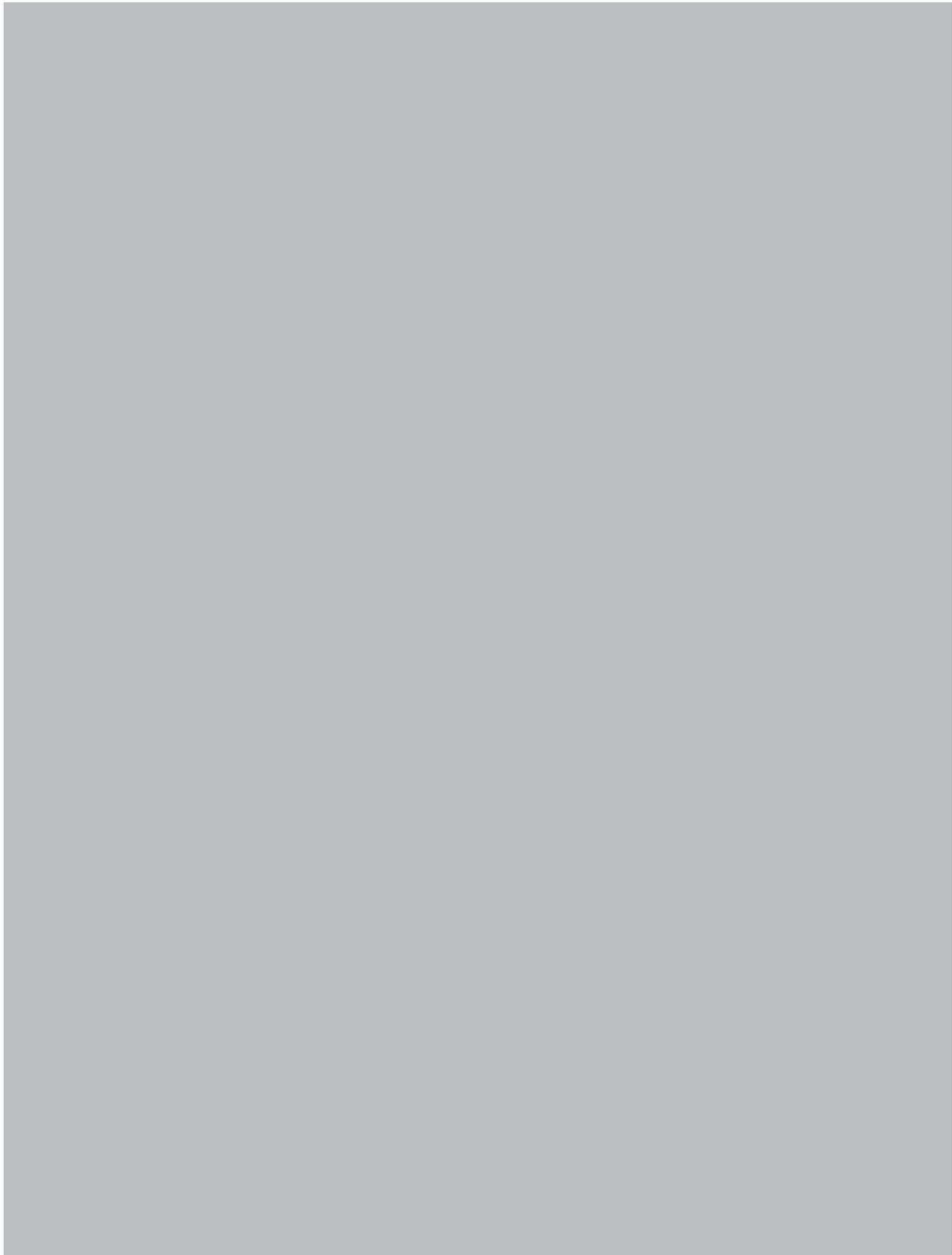
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WEEK

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CELEBRATION

DAY 1

I DON'T FEEL LIKE GOING TO CHURCH TODAY

Big Deal—Do It Anyway

The Big Idea: Biblically speaking, going to church is a decree, not an option for when we feel like it. As Eugene Peterson says, “Feelings are important in many areas, but completely unreliable in matters of faith.” The surest way to “feel like it” is by doing the very thing you don’t feel like doing—in this case, going to church to give thanks. When we get up and get going to church to give thanks, by faith and in obedience, the result will be that we will develop the best feelings of all: feelings for God!

Read Psalm 122:1

When they said, “Let’s go to the house of God,” my heart leaped for joy.

The psalmist was talking about going to church, and unlike an increasing number of “Christians” in America, he was excited. Among other things, he was looking forward to gathering with God’s people to “give thanks to the name of God,” according to Psalm 122:5 (MSG). That’s just one of the things, albeit a very important thing, that believers are meant to do.

That is a decree, by the way, not an option for when we feel like it. As Eugene Peterson says, “Feelings are important in many areas, but completely unreliable in matters of faith.” The surest way to “feel like it” is by doing the very thing you don’t feel like doing—in this case, going to church to give thanks. When we get up and get going to church to give thanks, by faith and in obedience, the result will be that we will develop the best feelings of all: feelings for God!

I am told that the average church-goer in the United States now attends their place of worship just a tick under two times per month. Somehow I don’t think that would cut it with the psalmist, who centered His life around the house of God, and I know it doesn’t cut it with God.

God loves it when His family stops by for dinner, and he has so ordered it that we should do that on a regular basis. (Hebrews 10:24-25) One could argue that nowhere does the Bible say that has to be every Sunday, but I would counter that with, first of all, the practice of the church from the beginning, which was gathering for praise, thanks, instruction and encouragement, minimally, every week on the first day. And, second of all, those who make that argument have missed the point: gladness in going to God’s house. If you are finding reasons not to go, and justifying those reasons, it is highly likely that your reservoir of gladness is empty.

If that is the case, I would suggest you go to God and ask Him to fill your tank. He is pretty good about doing that. If you just don’t feel like going to God, or to church, grab your feelings, if you

have to and drag them with you. When you do, at some point you will make one of the great discoveries in life, a discovery that great people of faith have known for some time: You can act your way into feeling much more quickly than you can feel your way into acting.

By the way, I would suggest that to honor the priority God places on the fellowship of believers and our gathering for celebration that you put a permanent appointment on your weekly calendar: “going to church.” keep that appointment for the rest of your life.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, thank you for my spiritual family. It is Your gift to me. May I love my church like I love You. Today, I pray that You would prosper and protect it, and cause it to have a huge Kingdom impact in my city. And I also ask that You would make me a blessing to my brothers and sisters who make up my church.

DAILY RESPONSE

- How do you respond to the call to go to church when you are not feeling like it?**
- Do you find yourself glad when you are going to the house of the Lord?**
- If you feel God prompting you to grow in this area of faith, what actions can you take to respond?**

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DAY 2

PRAISE YOUR WAY THROUGH PAIN

That's The Power Of Praise

The Big Idea: Like Hannah, you and I must learn to worship until worship becomes our first and best response to not only the delightful, but to the devastating things in life.

Read 1 Samuel 1:10-11

Hannah was in deep anguish, crying bitterly as she prayed to the Lord. And she made this vow: "O Lord of Heaven's Armies, if you will look upon my sorrow and answer my prayer and give me a son, then I will give him back to you. He will be yours for his entire lifetime, and as a sign that he has been dedicated to the Lord, his hair will never be cut. As she was praying to the Lord, Eli watched her. Seeing her lips moving but hearing no sound, he thought she had been drinking. "Must you come here drunk?" he demanded. "Throw away your wine." She replied, "Oh no, sir!" "I haven't been drinking wine or anything stronger. But I am very discouraged, and I was pouring out my heart to the Lord. Don't think I am a wicked woman! For I have been praying out of great anguish and sorrow."

Nobody really understands the pain of desiring children but not being able to have any like the barren. Hannah was a childless woman in a culture where children meant everything—a woman's worth and desirability to her husband, her bragging rights at family gatherings, the admiration of the other women at the market, her husband's ammunition for one-upping the other guys hanging out at the city gates, as well as a whole host of other cultural notches on the belt that came with having kids. And there was one other benefit to having children that had an even more significant meaning to married couples in Israel: eternal life. You see, through posterity, the family DNA, the family name, the family's unending future would be carried forth in perpetuity.

So in light of all that, Hannah's grief over having no children is more than most of us could ever begin to understand—unless, of course, you have suffered the disappointment of barrenness yourself. Even her husband, Elkanah, didn't get it:

1 Samuel 1:8, NLT

"Why are you crying, Hannah?" Elkanah would ask. "Why aren't you eating? Why be downhearted just because you have no children? You have me—isn't that better than having ten sons?"

Either he was a complete dolt and didn't get it, or he was a complete dolt who also happened to be an insensitive brute. But Elkanah wasn't alone in this matter: even Hannah's pastor didn't

fare too well in the “Mr. Sensitive” category. He accused her of being drunk as she silently poured out her heart to the Lord:

1 Samuel 1:13-14, NLT

Seeing her lips moving but hearing no sound, Eli thought she had been drinking. ‘Must you come here drunk?’ he demanded. ‘Throw away your wine!’

Hannah was alone in her grief, and even worse, she had no hopes that things would be any different in the future, destined to a life of barrenness. So what is a misunderstood, hopeless, devastated, childless woman to do? Well, here’s what Hannah did: she worshiped.

You will notice in the story that Hannah went before the Lord year after year—she didn’t give up. She poured out her heart, time and time again—trusting that God would one day hear her. She faithfully presented herself in sacrificial worship before the Lord not only with her husband, but also with his other wife and her mean-spirited rival, Peninnah (1 Samuel 1:7)—she pressed into God. As difficult as her situation was, Hannah worshiped the One who had her life, including all its details, big and small, in his good hands. And finally, in timing understood only by God, he granted her request and she bore Samuel, who grew up to be the greatest of Israel’s prophets.

Hannah worshiped! That’s what you and I must learn to do, too, until worship becomes our first and best response to not only the delightful, but to the devastating things in life. If you are a childless woman whose pain and disappointment is understood only by God—worship Him. He is your only hope and the One who knows His plans for your life—plans that are always good, even when you don’t particularly like them. If you are suffering other kinds of barrenness—in your relationships, your finances, your career, your ministry, or even your walk with the One you are worshiping—offer Him your worship. He knows your way, and He knows His plans for you. (Jeremiah 29:11)

As tough as it may be to offer your worship to the Lord when things aren’t going your way, it’s the best and only thing that will set your heart right. Brennan Manning writes in his great little book, *Ruthless Trust*,

“To be grateful for an unanswered prayer, to give thanks in a state of interior desolation, to trust in the love of God in the face of the marvels, cruel circumstances, obscenities, and commonplaces of life is to whisper a doxology in darkness.”

As Corban Addison said, “Life is a broken thing. It’s what we do with the pieces that defines us.” So, today, whether you are in a delightful place, or wrestling with disappointment—even if you are in a place of devastation—offer God your heart in worship. The saints of old would tell you that is the very best therapy.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, You are good all the time. Even in my pain, I choose to praise You, for I know that You are working all things for Your glory and my good. Thank you, in advance, for a pleasing outcome.

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DAY 3

LOOKING BACK

God Has Led Us All The Way

The Big Idea: On a personal level, as I review the ups and downs of my seasons in life, I have to agree with God’s self-testimony: “I have given you success. I have had your back—day and night. I have given you everything you needed.” Yes, in looking back over my life, I can honestly say, “God has been good.”

Read Deuteronomy 2:7

For the Lord your God has blessed you in everything you have done. He has watched your every step through this great wilderness. During these forty years, the Lord your God has been with you, and you have lacked nothing.

In Deuteronomy 2, Moses is recounting the wilderness journey of the Israelites over the forty years between exiting Egypt and possessing the Promised Land. Mostly in this chapter, he gives a blow by blow account of their battles with enemy nations who opposed their travel—nations who paid dearly for their opposition to God’s plan. In the middle of his account, Moses makes this amazing statement of how God has tenderly cared for Israel at each step of the way. Actually, Moses is directly quoting the Lord himself. In the statement, we see God’s own assessment of how He has carried his people all these years:

“I have given you success.
I have had your back—day and night.
I have given you everything you needed.”

Now of course, as Christians, you and I know that to be theologically true of God. He cares for us; He carries us. We sing about it every time we gather for worship. We remind one another that very truth to encourage us through the rough spots of life. Intellectually, we affirm in our minds that the Lord will provide—He is Jehovah Jireh, after all, the God who supplies all of our needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

Yet, if we are to be honest about it, there are seasons where we question God’s care. There are spells where we don’t feel too successful, and we wonder if God even notices. We go through a deep disappointment or a painful failure or a tremendous loss, and we can’t see any evidence whatsoever that the Lord had our backs. We pray for an answer—a provision, a healing, a breakthrough—and get a big fat nothing burger instead of everything we needed.

Most of us would never say that out loud—a few brave, unfiltered souls would, but you and I are too “holy” to say anything like that—but we are thinking that very thing to ourselves. Maybe, in our prayers, we let it slip, “God, where were you?” While disappointment with God is not

something we like to dwell on and certainly don't broadcast, it is a part of the journey for most, if not all believers. Yet, God still says the same thing to us as He did to the Israelites: I have given you success, I have protected you, I have provided everything you needed.

Think about those statements from the view of the Israelites on their journey. They spent forty years meandering through a desert, with no end in sight, instead of making their beds in the land God had promised them. They were thirsty to the point of death on several occasions. They were sick and tired of eating the same thing day after day for forty years. They had to fight for their lives against enemy nations bent on destroying them—with bigger and better equipped armies than Israel's. My guess is there were plenty of people on plenty of occasions who felt deeply disappointed with God's care and provision.

Those emotions are based on just a relatively short slice of history—both the Israelites and ours. We see things in brief moments of time and make assessments about God. If we are in a season of success and wellbeing, we overflow with joy and thanks to God. But if the season is filled with disappointment and loss, we wonder where God is. The point is, they are just that: seasons. Seasons have a beginning and an ending. While we only see what is right in front of us, God is over it all, watching out for us, allowing, according to His impeccable wisdom, what will develop our character and our faithfulness through experiences of joy as well as sorrow, and always leading us to where He desires to take us.

On a personal level, as I review the ups and downs of my seasons, I have to admit to the self-testimony the Lord gives:

I have given you success.

I have had your back—day and night.

I have given you everything you needed.

In looking back over all the seasons of my life, I can honestly say, "God has been good." That indisputable fact leads me to declare trust in His goodness in any current season, whether pleasant or rough.

Yes, God has been good. I bet you can say that, too!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, You have been so good to me. You have led me all the way. You have been faithful to all of Your promises. You have withheld no good thing from me. I love You, Lord, for who You are and all that You have done.

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DAY 4

LOOKING AHEAD

A Limitless Pursuit Of The Manifest Knowledge

The Big Idea: When you walk with God, the best is always yet to come. Keep trusting God and get ready to have your mind blown.

Read John 21:25

Jesus also did many other things. If they were all written down, I suppose the whole world could not contain the books that would be written.

The Apostle John ends His gospel account of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus with this remarkable commentary: “What I’ve written here about Jesus, well you don’t know the half of it! In fact, since I’ve been with him night and day for three and a half years, I’ve gotta tell you, this is just the tip of the iceberg!”

Wow! As you read through the four Gospels, it is hard to imagine that much more could be added to what Jesus did and said. I suppose the Holy Spirit limited the inspired thoughts and pens of these men in order to present to us only what our finite minds could absorb.

Even then, we have trouble getting our brains around Jesus, don’t we? I mean, how do you top the incarnation, the immaculate conception, and His miraculous birth at Bethlehem? Then there is His sinless life—what do you do after that? What more can be added to the Sermon on the Mount? Can anyone illustrate Christianity better than Jesus did with His parables? What about His miracles—how could you improve upon the feeding of the 5,000, walking on the Sea of Galilee, calming the raging storm, the deliverance of the Gadarene demoniac, the healing of the blind man, or the raising of Lazarus? Is there any “wow factor” left after the crucifixion—and the empty tomb?

Even though we would love to know more, mercifully, we have been given Jesus in bite-sized chunks. And, just with that, we will spend a lifetime in wonder, awe and gratitude for the life, love, death and resurrection of this marvelous Savior and Lord. Even if all we ever had of Jesus was John 3:16, you and I would have enough to keep us undone with love for all eternity—and then some.

What do you do for an encore with Jesus? Only one thing remains, which John alluded to back in John 14:3,

“When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am.”

It is probably a good thing that we didn't get any more details than that, because there is only so much the redeemed mind can absorb this side of heaven! Once we get to eternity—oh my goodness! We will spend unending days in limitless pursuit of the manifest knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Son of God.

Lord, come and get us soon! We want more!

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, send Your Son to take me to my permanent home—and do it soon.



DAILY RESPONSE

- “When you walk with God, the best is always yet to come.” Do you believe this? Why or why not?
- Is there a “best” in your life that you are hoping for? Are you praying and praising for it?
- In what areas of your life can you ask God for more this week?

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DAY 5

PTL—NOW & FOREVER

If You're Breathing, You Know What To Do

The Big Idea: No matter what things may look like, no matter what man may say, no matter what the devil may throw at you, no matter what you may feel, God is still God, He is always victorious, His will shall be done on earth, His purposes for you shall be fulfilled, and He is therefore always worthy of your praise.

■ **Read Psalm 150:6**

Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.

Our God is worthy of praise! At all times, in each place, and through every means, the highest and best use of the breath of life is that it would offer praise to the great and glorious One, the Creator and Sustainer of all. Praise the Lord!

That is not only the message of this final psalm, but it is really the underlying call to all 150 of them. From the beginning to the end of this amazing songbook for the human race, the psalmists have taken us by the hand and walked us through the whole gamut of life's circumstances. They have masterfully drawn us into the cornucopia of emotions that attend those human experiences, and they have reminded us that through all of our ups and downs, victories and defeats, good times and bad times, joys and sorrows, the one thing that remains constant is God's worthiness to be worshipped.

No matter what, God is ceaseless in His power and surpassingly great: "Praise Him for His mighty works; praise His unequalled greatness!" (Psalm 150:2)

No matter what, God is loving and faithful: "The Lord leads with unfailing love and faithfulness all who keep His covenant and obey His demands." (Psalm 25:10)

No matter what, God is good and kind: "Taste and see that the Lord is good. Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in Him!" (Psalm 34:8)

No matter what, God is just and fair: "The Lord gives righteousness and justice to all who are treated unfairly." (Psalm 103:6)

No matter what, God is with you and for you: "The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need." (Psalm 23:1)

No matter what, if you are God's and God is yours, you are going to be just fine: "Take delight in the Lord, and He will give you your heart's desires." (Psalm 37:4)

John Newton, author of *Amazing Grace*, wrote, “The Lord himself is our Keeper. Nothing befalls us but what is adjusted by His wisdom and love. He will, in one way or another, sweeten every bitter cup, and ere long He will wipe away all tears from our eyes.” (Psalm 30:11) That is why under every circumstance and with every breath, we can praise the Lord.

No matter what things may look like, no matter what man may say, no matter what the devil may throw at you, no matter what you may feel, God is still God. He is always victorious, His will shall be done on earth, His purposes for you shall be fulfilled, and He is therefore always worthy of your praise. Why don't you just go ahead and give God now what He will ultimately receive from all creation—praise!

Let everything that has breath—that means you—let everything that has breath, praise the Lord! Yes, praise the Lord!

Before the week is up, read Psalm 150, and praise the Lord in the ways the psalmist suggests. Now you probably won't have all the musical instruments available that he mentions, but improvise. You'll have fun and God will be pleased.

A SIMPLE PRAYER:

God, I praise You. You alone are worthy to receive my worship. You are loving and kind, just and true, patient and forgiving, and glorious in Your unmatched splendor. With everything I have, I lift my worship to You.



DAILY RESPONSE

- **How has today's reading changed your attitude about praising God?**
- **Take some time today to just praise Him. Maybe five minutes or maybe 50...set aside some time and vocalize your love for God today.**

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