

InTouch



July 2010

*the call to
accountability*





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This photograph was taken on Martha's Vineyard—a place that was known in the 1800s for its Christian revivals and spiritual awakenings. As we celebrate the independence of our great nation, I cannot help but pray that God would again move powerfully throughout the country as He did so long ago on Martha's Vineyard. Please join me in asking the Father to show our fellow Americans that political liberty is not enough—they need the spiritual freedom that can come only through salvation in Jesus Christ.

—Charles F. Stanley

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DR. STANLEY PORTRAITS
BY DAVID SMITH.

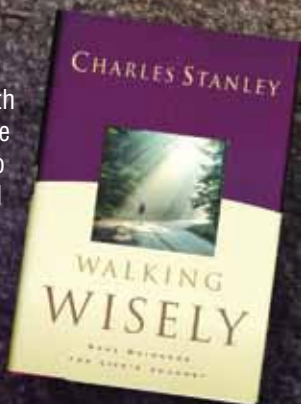


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surrender my heart to You and receive Jesus as my personal
Savior. I believe He took all my sins onto Himself when He
died on the cross, conquering death for my sake and giving
me access to You. Thank You for forgiving me and for send-
ing the Holy Spirit to transform my life. In Jesus' name I
pray. Amen.*

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THE MISSION OF
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*To lead people worldwide
into a growing relationship
with Jesus Christ
and to strengthen
the local church*

Bringing God Into Focus

We all experience seasons when the trials and difficulties of life stretch us too far. At such times, we feel physically exhausted and mentally drained, and our spiritual focus becomes unclear. Minds cluttered with constant demands are challenged when it comes to meditating on God's Word and His purpose for our lives.

Oswald Chambers writes, "We get disturbed because we have not been considering Christ. As one confers with Jesus Christ, the perplexity goes, because He has no perplexity, and our only concern is to abide in Him."

When anxiety builds and time runs out and our devotion to Christ begins to fade from view, it is time to return to the rock from which we were hewn (Isa. 51:1). If you can't remember the last time you felt connected to the Lord or had a fruitful quiet time, today is the day to revitalize your connection

“Intimacy with the Lord is where we find spiritual refreshment for our souls.”

with the most important person in your life—Jesus Christ. There are many ways to do this, but each one begins with a desire to know God in a personal way. Intimacy with Him is where we find spiritual refreshment for our souls.

Even those who have been walking with the Lord all their lives can allow their relationship with Him to become stale and dusty. However, we can take comfort in knowing that He has promised never to abandon us (Heb. 13:5). Therefore, when we turn to Him in prayer, He listens with love and understanding.

While times of spiritual dryness inevitably come, there is a way through. Hudson Taylor wrote, "My own position becomes continually more and more responsible, and my need greater of special grace to fill it. But I have continually to mourn that I follow at such a distance and learn so slowly to imitate my precious Master."

The Lord uses our dry times to draw us closer to Him. Taylor hungered for a deeper knowledge of God and discovered an intimate Savior who loved him unconditionally. The Father wants you to experience the same kind of spiritual growth. If you've neglected your relationship with God, make a point of seeking Him today, and He will refresh your soul.





the call to
ACCOUN



Our protection and motivation for godliness

BY CHARLES F. STANLEY

Accountability is not ordinarily a subject people like to discuss. We value our independence and the freedom to do whatever we want in our own way and time. After all, who of us would like others prying into our private lives and making us feel guilty?

But taking responsibility for our actions is the only way to preserve our freedom. A faulty understanding of liberty leads to the loss of rights and eventually results in slavery of one type or another.

That's what the apostle Paul was trying to warn believers about in Galatians 5: "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (v. 1). Christians have been released from the power of sin. Therefore, they can choose to obey the Spirit's promptings instead of being enslaved to the sinful patterns of their old nature. Tolerating sin in our lives is a misuse of our rights, as verse 13 cautions: "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."

Liberty in Christ is a great privilege. But it carries responsibility, since our actions, words, and attitudes have a profound effect—for either good or harm—on both ourselves and others. Accountability is a protection that accompanies this responsibility and motivates us to live a life worthy of our calling. It is a gift the Lord gave to guard us from the painful consequences of ungodly choices.

TABILITY

Ancient in origin

The principle of accountability has been in effect since the beginning. In the garden of Eden, God gave the first man and woman three simple instructions—to cultivate the garden, keep it, and avoid eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:15-17). After choosing to partake of the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve were afraid. They hid from the Lord (Gen. 3:10) to avoid having to explain their disobedience. Even when confronted by God, Adam tried to sidestep responsibility by blaming Eve, who in turn accused the serpent.

Mankind has been repeating this same pattern throughout history. We resist answering for our actions because we

“ . . . every believer would benefit from having a small group of friends who commit to an open and honest accountability relationship.”

don't want to face the humiliation of being wrong. Pride motivates us to try to hide our failure from others and from the Lord, while fear of unpleasant consequences leads us to cover up and blame others.

The first king of Israel, for example, attempted to absolve himself from the guilt of disobedience (1 Sam. 15). When the prophet Samuel confronted him about his failure to follow God's instructions, Saul lied, saying, “I have carried out the command of the LORD” (v. 13). When Samuel exposed the obvious inconsistency, Saul offered excuses. By refusing to repent and make himself accountable to God's prophet, he lost his throne and the kingdom (v. 26).

Designed for our protection

We oftentimes lose by refusing to heed people's warnings—and we *always* lose if we ignore God's. A friend of mine was an excellent pastor with a solid foundation in sound theology. However, someone convinced him that freedom in Christ meant being able to do almost anything he wanted. I warned him repeatedly that if he kept going on that downward course, he would slip and fall right out of the pastorate. But he would not listen and, as a result, lost his ministry.

Anyone who refuses accountability is walking on dangerous ground. The Devil works day and night to devour Christians by ruining their lives and testimonies. Temptations lurk everywhere, promising pleasure but ultimately leading to misery and regret. King David discovered this painful truth. He sinned with Bathsheba after withdrawing from his responsibilities and isolating himself from associates who might have helped him stay on track (2 Sam. 11). Even though he repented as a result of Nathan's rebuke, the consequences followed him for the remainder of his life (2 Sam. 12:1-14).

In order to avoid the Enemy's deceptions, we must seek out relationships in which we are answerable to one another. Doing so requires a commitment to take responsibility for our actions and a willingness to be open, honest, and vulnerable in sharing our lives with other believers. Since this includes admitting wrong and making the necessary corrections, humility is crucial.

Although Christian accountability at times involves confronting sin, its primary purpose is to encourage and strengthen one another in the Christian walk. Knowing that someone cares and takes the time to pray about our struggles can motivate us to persevere.

When my grandson went to college, he enrolled in the Army ROTC. But before he could be accepted into the program,

he had to pass a very strenuous physical test. I phoned to let him know that I would be praying for him during that challenge. Later on, after it was over, he called with an update: he reported that the very thought of me praying on his behalf had given him a burst of energy, which enabled him to do better than he expected. Just knowing that I loved him and was speaking his name to the Father inspired him to do his best.

We all need this kind of encouragement, which comes from people's loving involvement in our lives. In fact, every believer would benefit from having a small group of friends who commit to an open and honest accountability relationship. But carefully consider whom to include in your inner circle. Confidentiality is essential, so never choose a gossip, or you will find that your intimate secrets have been spread far and wide. And to avoid any temptation, men should meet with men, and women with women.

I have made myself accountable to a group of several friends and staff members. They have my permission to point out any action or attitude in me that is inconsistent with God's Word, and I reserve the right to do the same for them. They will also come and tell me if they discern anything that could put me in jeopardy. These men are like a hedge of protection around me, and I am so grateful for them.

Who answers to whom?

While the principle of accountability applies in every area of human society, it begins in the home. First, husbands and wives are responsible to each other. And second, children must be taught to answer to their parents and as well as to teachers and other authority figures in their lives—otherwise, they will become irresponsible adults.

My mother knew exactly how to keep me in line when I was growing up. Sometimes she would ask me directly, "Where have

you been?" But at other times she had this very quiet, loving way of getting straight to the truth—she would say, "Tell me what you want me to know." Mother really got to me with that line, because it motivated me to tell her the truth.

Next, consider the importance of accountability in the workplace. I wouldn't want to drive over a bridge whose builders were answerable to no one. Every business needs the safeguard afforded by trustworthy employees who show up on time, put in an honest day's work, and do their best even when no one is watching.

Government is also founded on the idea that we cannot simply do as we please, but must answer to authority. For example, laws must be obeyed, and like it or not, taxes must be paid. If the nation is a democracy, then citizens have the added privilege and duty of voting for legislators to represent them. In addition, God calls believers to live lives that will strengthen their country, not tear it down.

Ultimately, everyone is answerable to God. All mankind will face Him at the judgment (Rev. 20:11-15). As Christians, we are responsible to the Lord for how we are presently living, and one day we will also stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account of ourselves to the Lord (Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10).

The time to prepare for this encounter is right now. Believers have the privilege of daily accountability to the Lord. This is not a time of humiliation before a tyrannical God, but an opportunity to ask Him each morning what He would have us do. He is our loving heavenly Father, who has given us principles for living, which will result in peace, joy, and contentment. The Lord is up to something good in the lives of His children, and we need to check in with Him each day to make sure we are walking in His ways.

So every night before I go to bed, I review my day with Him. Just imagine Jesus sitting

on the edge of your bed as you evaluate the day's activities together. Present what you did, what you neglected to do, ways that you failed or succeeded, and then let Him affirm, encourage, or correct you. Learn to see your activities, attitudes, and words through His eyes, and take time to rejoice over even your smallest acts of obedience.

In Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus taught a parable about our present responsibility and future accountability to God. He described a master who entrusted his possessions to three of his slaves while he went on a long journey. Each one received an amount of money—one, two, or five talents—based upon his ability. When the master returned, he called his slaves to give an account of their dealings.

In the same way, when Jesus ascended to heaven, He left His servants on earth to do His kingdom work. Each one of us has been entrusted with His resources, and we will be called upon to give an account when He returns. Although the talents in this story were currency, we need to think much more broadly in our application. All that we have comes from God—money, time, abilities, possessions, work, and opportunities. When we stand before Christ, we will be held responsible for how we used what He has placed in our hands.

The master's commendations were based on his slaves' faithfulness with what had been given them, not on the amount of increase (vv. 20-23). In the same way, Christ will judge each person individually without comparison to anyone else. For believers, this judgment is not about their sins, but about their stewardship. Since Christ has borne the penalty for our transgressions, they are forgiven and forgotten. Our judgment will result, not in condemnation, but in rewards or loss of rewards (1 Cor. 3: 10-15).

In the parable, the slaves who proved faithful were rewarded with praise, joy,

and greater responsibilities. Each day offers opportunities to be good stewards of all that God has entrusted to us. Our goal should be to live in such a way that we can one day stand before Christ and hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful slave" (v. 21). ♦

Questions for Further Study

1. List some benefits of an open and honest accountability relationship (Eccl. 4:9-12).
2. Why is there a natural tendency to avoid such transparency (John 3:19-21)? What happens when we refuse to let the light shine into the dark places of our lives (Luke 11:34-36; Eph. 5:1-10)?
3. How can a mutually accountable relationship help believers (Gal. 6:1-2; Heb. 3:12-13; 10:23-25; James 5:16)?
4. Every believer will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. On what basis will He judge Christians (1 Cor. 3:10-15)? What works do the gold, silver, and precious stones represent (Luke 12:29-34; John 15:1-12; Gal. 5:22-23; 2 Tim. 4:5-8)?
5. What will Christ do in the judgment (1 Cor. 4:5)? Instead of seeing this event as a time for reprimands and embarrassment, think about how the last phrase of this verse and Matthew 25:19-21 present a more positive view. What does the Lord long to give you? Does knowing this motivate you to live a God-pleasing life?



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Why We Die

» Mankind's Fall into Sin

GENESIS 3:1-24



In the Word of God, Genesis 2:17 records the first mention of death, and Revelation 21:8 contains the last. In between, we find the biblical record of man's fall into sin and death—and the Father's work to remedy the situation and reconcile mankind to Himself through the death of His Son.

The Lord takes no pleasure in death (Ezek. 18:32). But sin is contrary to His nature; because God is holy, He must separate Himself from anything less than absolute purity. Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden so that they couldn't eat of the tree of life and live forever in their sinning state. They were

required to face death, and so must all of mankind (Heb. 9:27).

“Through Christ's obedience, many will be made righteous and live.”

Death is separation:

► Natural death is separation of the spirit/soul from the body (Gen. 35:18).

- Spiritual death is separation from relationship with the Lord (John 5:24; 1 Cor. 2:14).
- Eternal death is everlasting punishment and separation from God (2 Thess. 1:6-10; Rev. 20:11-15).

God offers hope through the promised “seed” (Gen. 3:15):

- Christ “died for sins . . . the just for the unjust” (1 Pet. 3:18).
- Through Adam's sin, death entered the world; through Christ's obedience, many will be made righteous and live (Rom. 5:6-21).
- Upon death, believers go to be with the Lord (2 Cor. 4:16-5:8).
- Believers will be resurrected and given immortal bodies (1 Cor. 15:20-53).
- Christ is victorious over death (1 Cor. 15:54-58).

The Lord rules in life and death:

- God has ordained the number of our days (Job 14:5; Ps. 139:16).
- Having planned fruitful labor for each of us, God will leave us on earth until He says we are finished (Phil 1:12-26).
- Our job on earth is to discover and walk in the good works God has prepared for us (Eph. 2:10).
- Our goal is to be pleasing to God (2 Cor. 5:9-10).

Questions for Reflection

1. How can knowing the final outcome of Christ's victory over death defuse fear, produce peace, and even create a sense of anticipation?
2. What fruitful work has God planned for you during your lifetime? What changes must you make now, so you'll have no regrets in death?



in the
crowded mind



The buzzing train station shook our bodies free of any grogginess left over from the peaceful, sleepy ride into Paris. We stood with our backs to a wide pillar, holding out a tourist map, as hundreds of passengers poured from the gaping mouths of train cars. People and people—thronged of them going who-knows-where, spilling around us like salmon dodging a boulder midstream.

That's what a Paris metro stop looks like in the morning. But it's also a picture of my thought life at any given moment. Can you relate? I imagine that my mind is a train station, and I am standing on its cool, tiled floor. Instead of people, a torrent of thoughts bombards me. Some look familiar and pleasant. Others, just as recognizable, are strange and disturbing—they've haunted me for years. Some continue on their way, while others linger in distant shadows or stand close with stinking breath, like street salesmen hawking wares.

learning to pray without ceasing

BY CAMERON LAWRENCE

Where is Christ in all this? It's difficult to hear Him above the din of so many questions, memories, and emotions. I seek His face in the crowd but it eludes me. All these thoughts, voluntary and involuntary, make it difficult to do the one thing I need to do most—to pray, as the apostle Paul said, without ceasing.

About now you're probably hearing the small voice of doubt nattering in your brain. *Pray without ceasing?* it asks. *That's impossible—how boring, tiresome, unnecessary. I'd rather bang my head against the wall.* The voice will go on to suggest that Paul must have been exaggerating to make a point. *One can't be expected to pray all of the time, surely.* It might even say you're justified in scoffing at the idea. But don't believe a syllable.

The apostle gave us these words not only as exhortation, but as a pastoral command. "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus," he wrote to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5:16-18).

And to the Ephesians, "With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit" (Eph. 6:18). As people who hold to Scripture's teaching, we have to believe that Paul thought ceaseless prayer was both possible and necessary.

what is prayer?

In the fourth century, theologian and celebrated preacher John Chrysostom said, "Prayer is the light of the soul, giving us true knowledge of God." The kind of knowledge he spoke of was not the sort learned in books, but that borne of a true encounter with the living Christ.

Fundamentally, prayer is *communion with God*. Yes, we come to Him with our needs and wants, as Scripture encourages. Yes, prayer involves conversation with the Lord, speaking *and* listening. But neither our conversing nor our petitions are really what prayer is all about—they are the means, not the end. Rather, what we're after is an ever-deepening oneness with the Savior that each of these parts facilitates.

What we long for is God Himself.

“You should not think of prayer as being a matter of words,” Chrysostom said. “Anyone who receives from the Lord the gift of this type of prayer possesses a richness that is not to be taken from Him, a heavenly food filling up the soul.”

Our fellowship with the Lord transcends language. We don’t always need to speak in order to experience Him. And in one

explains that what we consider “the mind” today is not the same as what the Bible means by that word: “Confusingly enough, the authors of Scripture, and Jesus Himself, presume that thoughts arise instead in the *heart*. As Jesus said, ‘For out of the heart come evil thoughts’ (Mt. 15:19) . . . When you see the word ‘mind’ in Scripture, the

The mind needs healing, and only the presence of God can restore its proper function.

sense, we don’t always need to be listening, or straining to hear instructions, in our private devotions. Rather, believers should strive for watchfulness at all times—looking out for anything internal or external that steals our attention from His constant, healing, life-giving presence within us. Nothing stands in the way of our turning to Him but ourselves. And the biggest hindrance is our thought life.

the *assault* of the mind

Have you ever tried to quiet your thoughts to focus on God? Leave aside the idea of ceaseless prayer for a moment. If we honestly assess the state of our minds as we approach the Lord in prayer, every kind of thought, from good to wicked, bombards us. With our mouths, we speak. But another dialog incessantly eddies within, distracting us from truly engaging the Lord. It seems impossible to overcome.

Eastern Christian tradition has a name for this flood of thoughts that often overwhelm efforts to commune with God—the Greek *logismoi*, meaning many thoughts, or *logismos* for one. But they don’t stem from where you might assume.

Author Frederica Matthewes-Green, a proponent of historical Christian worship,



Greek word that lies behind it is usually *nous*, and it doesn’t equal our concept of ‘mind’ today.”

“The *nous*,” she says, “is primarily a little receiver,” like a “little radio” given by God to perceive His presence and hear His voice, but in its fallen state, it needs repairing. “[The *nous*] doesn’t perceive things clearly, due to the damage caused by the fog of sin that affects us all. Healing [it] involves getting rid of the erroneous thoughts and emotions that cloud our minds. We need to have a clear-eyed view of reality, if we want to encounter God. Reality is God’s home address.”

Our thoughts don’t often present an accurate picture of the world, our loved ones, neighbors, or circumstances. The mind needs healing, and only the presence of God can restore its proper function. But how do we overcome distractions and truly commune with Him?

learning to *pray*

There’s no formula for overcoming our mind’s difficulty at achieving a life of ceaseless prayer. But there’s a proven method, centuries old, to help us find the way, slowly

through perseverance—regardless of what we’re doing or who’s around.

For hundreds of years, Christians have quietly repeated fragments of Scripture or short prayers throughout the day to remain present to God. As the Russian Christian writer Anthony Bloom put it, “God is never absent . . . We complain that He does not make Himself present to us for the few minutes we reserve for Him, but what about the twenty-three-and-a-half hours during which God may be knocking at our door and we answer ‘I am busy, I am sorry’ or when we do not answer at all because we do not hear the knock . . . we are a great deal more absent than He ever is.” Having a simple refrain to call upon during the day helps us maintain connection to Christ and tunes the heart to hear him knocking at its door.

It also helps dislodge unwanted thoughts. Rather than engaging a *logismos* head on, we let it pass like a bird flying by a window, and then turn attention back to God through our prayerful refrain.

But what about the scripture that says, “When you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words” (Matt. 6:7 NKJV)? Not all repetition is “vain” or “meaningless,” as the NASB reads. A well-chosen verse or prayer is anything but. Reciting them with devotion and attention to God yields a habit of the heart that brings us closer to the Savior, and further into His likeness.

choosing a prayer

Prayer may not be solely a matter of words, as John Chrysostom said. But language helps our hearts arrive where they need to be. Here are a few of the most typically chosen passages:

The Lord’s Prayer: Memorize the prayer lesson Jesus gave His disciples, which Christians have recited ever since (Matthew 6:9-14). If you find it hard to

repeat through the day, let certain daily events serve as reminders to stop and commune with the Father.

The Publican’s Prayer: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” In Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the first man thanks God that he is not as sinful as others, while the second honestly assesses his sinfulness. Jesus said, “I tell you, [the tax collector] went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:9-14 NKJV).

Note two things about this prayer. Though the word “mercy” often evokes the idea of a pardon, here it refers to God’s “lovingkindness,” asking Him to pour His healing love upon us. Also, the word “sinner” shouldn’t make us feel bad. Rather, it is a statement of humility and neediness. As James 4:6 reminds us, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” You can also try an adapted version of the prayer, which is “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”

The Psalms: Praying spontaneously is a good practice, but many people find written prayers helpful when they don’t know what to say. Consider turning to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “the Bible’s prayerbook”—the Psalms—and using 51:10, 70:1, or 139:23.

keeping perspective

There’s no magic in this method. Practicing the discipline of ceaseless prayer doesn’t replace the time you set aside to meditate upon Scripture and to fellowship with God. It’s an extension of that devotion—a way to carry it as you do the dishes, mow the lawn, serve at church, or work your job. Be careful not to slip into vain repetition; God wants us to mean what we say. Learning to call out to Him in this way won’t detract from your daily responsibilities. You’ll only discover the Lord to be the constant companion He already is. 🙏

by **faith**

MIGHTY LIKE A JELLYFISH

A Conversation with Phil Vischer

BY TONYA STONEMAN



About 20 years ago, give or take, a young and vivacious Phil Vischer set out on a mission to change Saturday morning cartoons through a company he called Big Idea. A decade later, he'd built a multi-million dollar empire and watched it crumble to the ground. In this interview with *In Touch*, he talks about how he learned to separate God's call from his personal ambition.

IN TOUCH MAGAZINE: *Was it hard for you to let go of VeggieTales?*

PHIL VISCHER: Oh, horribly hard.

ITM: *I'm sure there's a big technical reason for it. But spiritually, why do you think God would allow this?*

PV: Because I had made the work I was doing for Him more important than my relationship with Him. I was rolling a rock (that He had never called me to carry) up a hill. And it was killing me. It was crushing me. I was really miserable. So I started to look back on it. I said, "Well, I thought You wanted me to do this. I thought You wanted me to be the next Walt Disney.

To change the world and single-handedly save American children from the evils of Hollywood." And I was working myself to death to try to do it because I was convinced that was God's purpose for me. That's why I existed. I

had to learn that, no, I exist to be in relationship with Him. And to have peace and joy. And love.

ITM: *As a guy who puts his identity in his work (which most men do), talk to the men out there. What is this like to just say, "Well, here's a multi-million dollar company I built, and it's not mine anymore"?*

PV: Yeah. It was brutal.

ITM: *Did you spend a day in bed crying?*

PV: A day? I actually spent about three months afterwards just reading the Bible and praying and saying, "Okay, God, how could You let that happen?" When I was most confused and disoriented, I got a call from Biola University, asking if I would do their spring commencement address. And I had to decline. I said, "I have no idea what I would say right now to 2,500 excited Christian kids who want to be like me."

ITM: *What would you say to them today?*

PV: Well, they asked if I would speak at their fall commencement instead—it was like five months away. I remember thinking, *Okay, God, You have five months to explain this to me.* And I agreed, still having no idea what I would say. It was during that four-month period that I just got on my knees and said, *Okay, God. You need to unwrap this for me and show me what I did wrong; show me how any of this makes any sense.* And He did. He just completely peeled it apart and showed me how I had confused my own ambition—which was based as much out of my insecurity as it was out of my giftedness—and things that I thought I needed when I was a kid, when I felt invisible. My dad walked out when I was nine, and I just felt like nobody could see me. Like I wasn't worth anything and I had to grow up and do something massively huge to be loved.

ITM: *Did you have a counselor help you unpack all of that?*

PV: No. It was a combination of a number of things. There was a lawsuit that finally sunk Big Idea Productions. Funny thing is, that was what broke it. That was what killed my dream. And 18 months later, it was overturned. But I got nothing back. It didn't change a thing.

Right before it went to trial, we had

“Whatever you’re dreaming about doing for God . . . kill it. Drop it. And when you’re ready to live your whole life without it, just resting in your relationship with God, then you’re ready to be used by Him.”

our one last big prayer meeting at Big Idea. The company had gone from about 200 people down to about 60. Only 13 people showed up because everyone was so depressed. It was such a horrid time. We were praying for God to save Big Idea. And there was one woman who was an amazing prayer warrior—just a pillar of all of our prayer meetings. But she didn't say a word the whole night. Then, after it was over, she waited until everyone was leaving and came to me and said, “I think God has something for me to tell you. I don't think this is about God and Big Idea. I think this is about God and Phil. And before it's over, I think you might have to say goodbye to all of us.” Then she just walked out.

That didn't fit in my worldview. My worldview was: There's nothing more important than the impact you can have for God. I grew up in this evangelical culture where the missionaries were right up there with angels. Guys like Bill Bright or Moody or R. G. Letourneau were the icons of my family heritage. They changed the world

for God. And that's what I wanted to do too. And I couldn't see what could be more important than the work I was doing.

There was a very key point after that—a sermon preached by a family friend. Then there was a study by Henry Blackaby that I went through, on Samuel as a model for God's leader. There were also like four or five different pieces that absolutely just turned my life upside down.

And I realized that I had created a worldview built entirely around what you can accomplish for God, with very little time or consideration for what it looks like to walk with God on a daily basis—which has much less to do with what you accomplish and much more to do with the fruit of the Spirit. And just helping those who you bump into everyday. Not necessarily living in these giant plans to change the world.

ITM: *Was that the speech you gave, then?*

PV: I gave a 20-minute talk at Biola that I thought would be nominated for worst commencement speech in history. Basically it was this: Whatever you're dreaming about doing for God, whatever you're longing for, whatever impact you hope to have, let it go. Kill it. Drop it. And when you're ready to live your whole life without it, just resting in your relationship with God, then you're ready to be used by Him.

I thought, *I'm gonna get pulled off the stage by the president of the university for demoralizing 100 excited kids*. But instead, they said it was the first standing ovation any of them could remember in the history of Biola commencement speeches. And then the head of the business school came up and said, “I'm going to make that talk required listening for every student at the university.”

When I tell this story, I usually end up speaking to people like me—guys in their 40s who have built something and seen it all fall apart. And no one in the church has ever addressed how that can happen.

ITM: *And that grieving process.*

PV: Yeah. 'Cause the books are always about how we do it big. You know, Big Success God's Way. And this was all about my Big Failure God's Way. I've probably spoken to 15,000 youth workers and children's pastors in the last year. I've been keynoting the youth workers' conferences and the Children's Pastors' Conferences. And I find it just amazing how tired we all are from trying to work so hard and trying to achieve so much. In reality, the story of my massive failure is a much happier story than the one about my big success.

ITM: *Are you happier now?*

PV: Oh, yes.

ITM: *Do you just have more time in your life?*

PV: No, it's not about time—it's about me not carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders. I don't know if it's a kind of "Messiah complex" that we're raised with or what it is, but there are so many evangelical kids that are being raised with this ambition to single-handedly change the world. To write that one hit Christian song, make that Christian movie, you know, or start that parachurch organization that will change everything, that will save the world. And we're so obsessed with our ambition that we're almost useless. I realized I was so wrapped up in my ambition that I didn't even have the energy to make eye contact with the girl at the grocery store who was bagging my groceries.

Okay, what's Christianity? Is it me and my big idea? Or is it that girl bagging my groceries? And I really had to rewrite how I viewed my role here on earth.

ITM: *So, then, what does the future hold?*

PV: Well, my new company is called Jellyfish Labs—very intentionally, because jellyfish can't choose their

own course. They can't locomote. They are carried by the current. And they have to trust the current will take them where they need to be and keep them alive.

I went off the track with Big Idea when I started making 20-year plans. I was like, "Okay, God, this is what I'm going to do for You in the next 20 years. Now, all You need to do is just bless it." When we do this, we don't have to listen anymore, because we've already figured out what we're going to do. God is in some sort of subservient role where He gets to sit in the back seat and hand out the credit card when we need resources.

But for a jellyfish to make a 20-year plan—it's humorous. It's lunatic. I had viewed myself as a big macho barracuda in the ocean of life. In reality, I was a jellyfish—basically a spineless bag of goo that has no form.

ITM: *(laughing) You're so humble I can't believe this.*

PV: In reality, if I've given Christ lordship of my life, and if I understand the concept of lordship, where I am in 20 years is really none of my business.

It's my business to say, "Okay, God, what have You called me to do today?"

And that may have more to do with how I treat the girl who's bagging my groceries than my big plans to change the world. 🙌



To find out more about Phil's new venture, visit www.jellyfishlabs.com.



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revelations from the

What every woman (and man) should know

BY SANDY FEIT

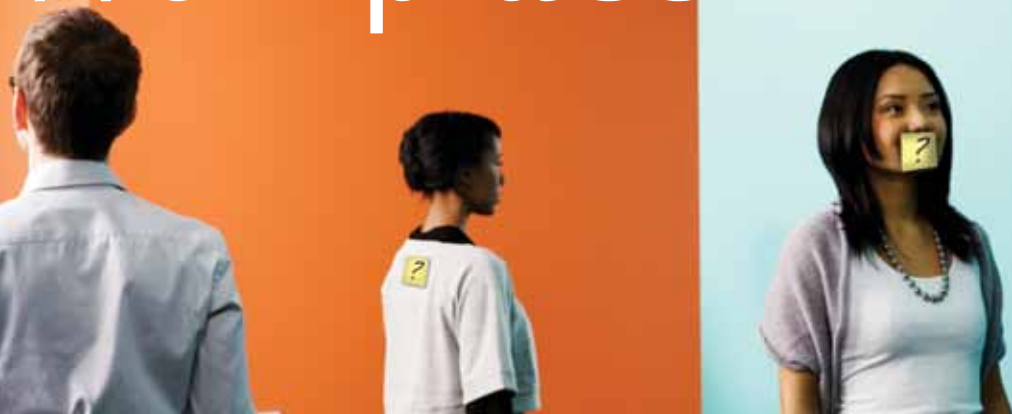
Several years ago, Shaunti Feldhahn wrote *For Women Only: What You Need to Know About the Inner Lives of Men* and its sequel *For Men Only*. These groundbreaking best sellers—based on two professional national surveys—provided startling and much needed insight into how differently the sexes are “wired.”

More recently, the author’s findings led her to investigate the impact of those differences on females in the male-dominated working world. Specifically, she wanted to understand ways women “sabotage” themselves simply because they don’t understand some relevant truths about how males think—and thus how they may be perceiving (or misperceiving) a woman’s words and actions.¹

A former Wall Street analyst, Shaunti expected relatively limited corporate relevance of the dissimilarities common to personal relationships. Instead, she found even greater application. Her new book—*The Male Factor: The Unwritten Rules, Misperceptions, and Secret Beliefs of Men in the Workplace*—points out that unless a woman is aware, there are many more ways for her to stumble into problems.

Part of that, of course, is a matter of numbers: a married woman has one husband, but she may work with a dozen or more men. In addition, males play by different rules in a marriage. When they regard matrimony as a long-term commitment, they’re more willing to “cut slack on the personal soft side”—and more tolerant of annoyances at home, figuring they have years to work on such issues. Even so, gender differences at the office have a definite upside: by knowing what is in the minds of male coworkers, a woman has many ways to improve how she’s perceived on the job.

Workplace



I pull up to Shaunti's door just as her six-year-old son's play date arrives. The boys immediately take off for adventures in the living room, leaving us at the kitchen table to discuss her findings on the unspoken assumptions of the workplace—assumptions that are simply not intuitive to the other sex. These include conflicting takes on issues like displays of emotion, and separation of work from personal life. Her research also revealed that unless a woman understands certain prevalent male vulnerabilities, she can easily wound a coworker without realizing it.

revelation 1 Emotions, Shaunti says, are perceived very differently by the two sexes. For instance, if a woman is excitable or upset at work, men automatically believe she's no longer thinking clearly. Science, however, indicates otherwise. "The female brain," Shaunti learned, "is actually wired to be able to handle a high degree of emotion and still think clearly. I had not realized that the male brain isn't wired that way. Men

have to shut down an emotion in order to think clearly, so they look at the woman whom they perceive as getting emotional and assume she is not thinking clearly either." In fact, 60 percent of the males surveyed doubted that they could trust a woman's judgment in such situations.²

[The boys appear, announcing that they're hungry. Shaunti suggests peanut butter, which is nixed (one of them had it for lunch). I use the hiatus to check my recording equipment, while she serves the kids cheese crackers and seamlessly returns to our conversation.]

She points out that many women find surprising "the vast array of things men saw as 'getting emotional'"—including the ability to make a quick decision. Shaunti recognizes herself in this: "With my personality, I was the first to raise my hand in a meeting when somebody said, 'Should we do A, B, or C?'" Decisiveness might seem like a plus in a business setting; yet men often regard speedy determinations as "jumping to a

conclusion.” Shaunti explains that often isn’t the case: “The way the female brain is wired, we can zip through the options really quickly and come out with ‘Not A, not B, but C will work.’ Yet a typical male response is, ‘Well, let’s not be hasty’—they think the decision couldn’t possibly have been based on logic in such a short period of time. So it had to have been based on emotion.”

She cites another personal example: “Pushing was a big one for me. When I had a strong opinion and the facts to back it up, I would not let it go. I didn’t understand why others weren’t getting what I was trying to say. So I’d keep pushing. I had no idea that was viewed as ‘She’s way beyond logic, and now she’s emotionally attached to this.’”

To manage the perception of coworkers, one can use an “edit function” around emotions the way most people can with their words—when you’re becoming upset, Shaunti suggests that you “project a façade of calm.” Preparing mental scripts for responses to potential scenarios can also avert drama in the office.

revelation 2 *[I am momentarily distracted by a sociable feline who has decided to make it a threesome at the kitchen table. “We have very affectionate cats,” Shaunti laughs, removing Storm.]*

The movie *You’ve Got Mail* becomes the example to explain a second unforeseen finding: Joe Fox has just discovered that the competitor he forced out of business happens to be the anonymous woman he’s falling for online. His apology starts with the justification that “it wasn’t personal.” Kathleen’s response speaks for many women in the workplace: “What is that supposed to mean? . . . All that means is that it wasn’t personal to you. But it was personal to me . . . What is so wrong with being personal anyway?”

The exchange illustrates the sharp difference in how the two sexes view

personal feelings: many men believe that one shouldn’t even *have* the same feelings at work as at home. The male distinction between “Work World” and “Personal World” was an enormous surprise for Shaunti, even knowing as much about men as she did from her prior research. She has since learned that the male brain is equipped to “compartmentalize”—in order to open one “window,” it must first close another. A businessman described the

. . . the structure of the female brain predisposes women to think about many things simultaneously, as strikingly portrayed by the Proverbs 31 woman.

extreme “either or” nature of the dichotomy this way: “When I’m sitting here in the office, I almost have to go into another world to tell you my daughters’ names.”

In contrast, the structure of the female brain predisposes women to think about and handle many things simultaneously, as strikingly portrayed by the Proverbs 31 woman. But this ability can be foreign to men and puzzling or even uncomfortable when they encounter it at work. So a woman may view questions about a coworker’s family or weekend plans as “relationship building,” whereas a man might label such blurring of the personal and business worlds as unprofessional. Someone who allows these realms to

intersect may be seen as less secure, more emotional, . . . naïve, [and] not a team player.”²³ If you pick up on negative signals, this may be an area to make adjustments.

[Shaunti's son reappears, distressed because his friend called him a “Phootie” for not sharing (I now know that's a Star Wars creature, thanks to Google™). Asking me to forgive the interruption, the author/mom turns to the boys and, like a Solomon, listens, reasons, solves, and

For Shaunti, this unintentional faux pas took the form of innocent “why” questions: “I look back and think, *Oh my gosh—I did that every day!* I’d raise my hand in a meeting and say, ‘Bob, why are you choosing that?’ or ‘Why did you do that?’ I had no idea he would view that as challenging him in front of the group.” She does, however, urge women to be honest with themselves about their motive in raising such questions. If a man’s decision strikes them as illogical



teaches, all in under a minute's time.]

revelation 3 Without missing a beat, Shaunti lists one more eye-opener: the way men’s insecurity translates into the workplace. “Though they often present a confident exterior,” she explains, “underneath, there is frequently self-doubt. And no matter how I asked the question, 75 percent of men said that they wanted to tackle a challenge, but they’re terrified somebody will find out they have no idea what they’re doing. This fear of being found out—of being inadequate—is the most painful feeling for a man. And you can hit that nerve without any clue that’s what you’re doing.”

or poorly thought out, women may genuinely wonder, *What was he thinking?!* In those cases, she says, “You have to force yourself to assume the best—to think, *I may not understand it, but he is a competent professional, and I’m sure there is a reason here.*” She recommends posing the concern differently, like “Help me understand your reason for that” or “Walk me through your process here.” Doing so shows that you trust there’s a reason, and he’ll hear the difference.

Christian applications

Shaunti began to wonder if these discoveries had additional application for people of faith, since believers “are to be salt and light, whether in full-time ministry, volunteering

at church, or in the corporate marketplace.” In keeping with the Titus 2 directive for older females to train the younger, she has added Christian businesswomen’s observations and advice in an Expanded Edition of *The Male Factor*. Their wisdom took the form of “seven key ‘aha’ realizations and biblical reminders”—in other words, more revelations—that improve one’s own effectiveness while ministering to others and bringing honor to God.

For example, the fact that God created men and women differently is not a new idea to believers. However, we still need help understanding the opposite sex, and one practical suggestion is to “ask the Creator of men how to handle them!” This idea comes from a high-powered consultant, who explains how Shaunti’s earlier book, *For Women Only*, opened her eyes to men’s need for respect: “I saw how I could apply it at home, but it solved even more confusion at work.” Like the author, she came to realize that simply rephrasing a question could win cooperation among men. But even more importantly, she discovered, “Every day if I asked Him, God gave me wisdom about what worked with that particular team.”⁴

Other insights are also helpful—for instance, a male boss might be more patient in a Christian setting than in a “cutthroat Fortune 500 environment.” Patience is simply more expected in a ministry context, and the Christian boss “hopefully has the Holy Spirit in him urging patience.” But even though things may play out differently in secular and religious environments, Shaunti found that men’s *internal* thoughts and feelings were “very much the same.”

One last revelation . . .

Packing up my recorder, I ask about plans for a *Female Factor*. The author agrees it’s a possibility, but for now, her schedule is filling up with requests to lead business and

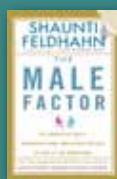
ministry seminars on her findings. Then, just before I leave, I ask what “turning left instead of right” means (it’s from the book’s acknowledgments) and am treated to the story of how she met her husband.

Driving home, I turn my phone back on and notice a voice mail waiting. Now it’s my turn for an “aha!” as I discover that our interview about *The Male Factor* inadvertently turned into an illustration of it:

“Hey, Sandy. It’s Shaunti. You just left, and I realized I forgot an example that I was going to mention. On the issue of how much men want to segregate out stuff that intrudes from the personal world, and how to navigate that: If you had been a male interviewer, I would *never* have suggested to my publicist that you come to my house. That would have been in nobody’s best interest. Since the interview was when my children were home from school and I was going to be interrupted by entirely personal-related things, that would have been much more uncomfortable for a man. It’s not that men don’t like family, but it’s uncomfortable for them to have to jump back and forth between “personal” and “work.” And those kinds of interruptions—the multi-tasking that we handle effortlessly—would be more difficult for a male interviewer. Also, it would risk me being seen as less professional, whereas I didn’t have that same concern with you. So there you go. Hope that helps.”¹

¹*The Male Factor*, p. 3

²⁻⁴*Ibid*, p. 107; pp. 54-55; pp. 294-296



Men and women speak different languages—even in the workplace. Learn how to “translate” with Shaunti Feldhahn’s new book.

The Male Factor

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Financial Fitness

» Basic Principles for Getting Into Shape

BY WAYNE JONES, CFP®



In the summer, people often focus on getting into shape. This usually involves the basics of proper diet and exercise. Likewise, there are some basic biblical principles for getting into shape financially. Foundational to these is that God is the owner of all (Psalm 24:1), and we are stewards—or managers—over everything He entrusts to us. With that in mind, let’s review a few principles.

Give cheerfully and regularly (Mal. 3:10-11; Prov. 3:9-10; 1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 9:7). In Old Testament times, the Israelites gave the first tenth—or “tithe”—of their income to the Lord’s work. The tithe is a good guideline for believers today as well: it is the practice of returning to God a mere portion

“God is the owner of all, and we are the stewards over everything He entrusts to us.”

of what He has provided to us. Giving regularly and cheerfully honors God and acknowledges Him as the source of all we possess. When we obey the Lord with our finances, He blesses us and proves His faithfulness.

Spend less than you earn (Prov. 13:11; 21:20). Our culture encourages overspending. But habitually spending all income can lead to financial trouble, so priorities must be right. After the tithe, we should use income to take care of our needs and commitments.

Then, it’s wise to save a portion for anticipated needs and future goals. Remaining income can be used to meet the needs of others and to provide for some of our desires. Now, don’t confuse desires with needs, because that gets expensive. Desires shouldn’t control expenditures; they’re the last priority. Being content with what we have and foregoing today’s desires for future benefits (1 Tim. 6:6-8; Heb. 13:5) helps us spend less than we earn.

Minimize or avoid the use of debt (Prov. 22:7; Ps. 37:21). Excessive debt has caused much financial turmoil in our nation over the past few years. Owing money increases stress, reduces financial flexibility, and limits our ability to reach other important goals. Whatever we borrow, we should repay.

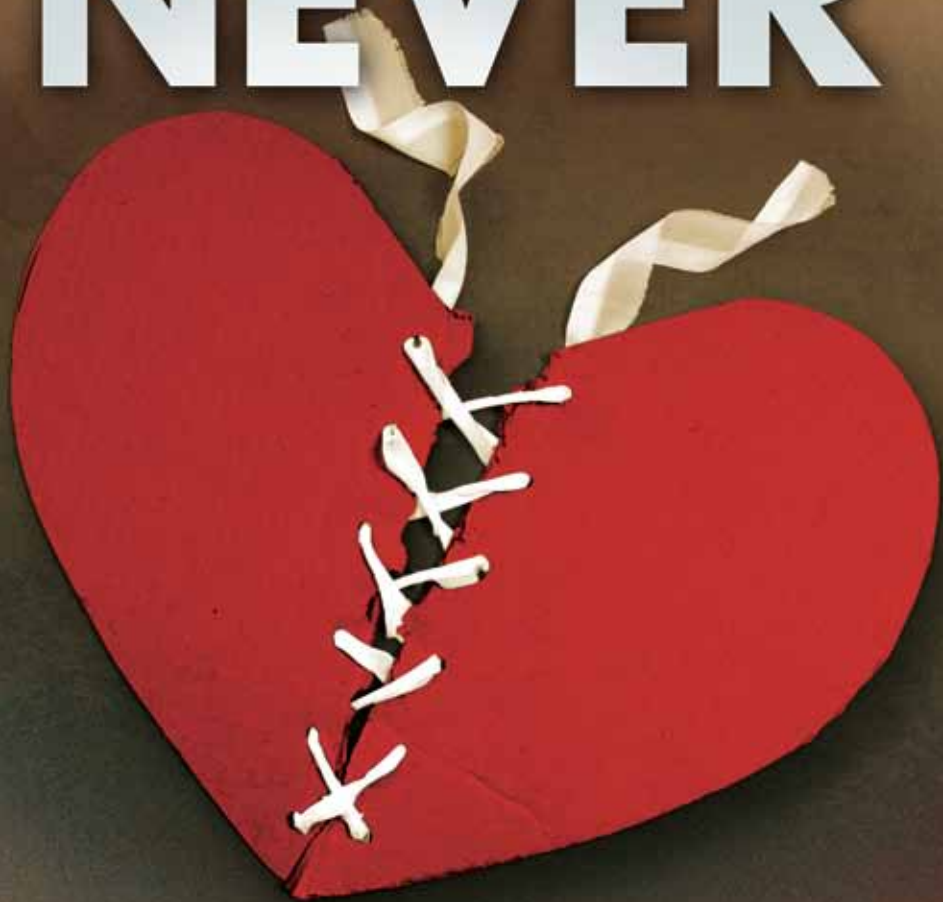
Good stewardship includes following Scripture’s financial principles and generously supporting God’s work. He rewards faithful stewards (Prov. 11:25).

This article is not intended to provide specific legal, tax, or financial advice. You should seek the advice of qualified professionals in planning for your family’s future.



familyroom

NEVER SAY NEVER



HEALING IN THE AFTERMATH OF INFIDELITY

BY GARY AND MONA SHRIVER

GARY'S STORY

Walking down the hallway that night was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. I knew this could be the end of everything I cared about—my family, friends, business, church—all of it. But I had to deal with it now.

I sat on the edge of the bed next to my wife, who had been reading. She looked up. "How was your meeting?"

I couldn't help it—I began crying—again. I'd just spent the last two hours in our pastor's office, confessing a secret I'd harbored for the last few years.

"You're scaring me," said Mona, worried.

She put her arms around me to try to comfort me, but then I finally whispered my dreaded confession: "I've betrayed you. I've been unfaithful."

I knew our lives had just changed forever, but had no idea what would happen next. I felt my wife stiffen and pull away. She crumpled before my eyes, and I thought she might pass out from shock.

How did this happen? We had a good marriage and three sons we deeply loved. But the busyness of life had pulled at us, and we'd gradually grown apart. Then a friendship with a co-worker had gotten out of control. One innocent touch insidiously led to more. An affair began, and a day became a week, then a month, then three years.

All I knew was that I couldn't go on this way. I had to get right with God and, if possible, with my wife. Inside, I was dying. I knew I'd just ripped the heart from the woman I loved, who had stood by me for 20 years. I didn't know if—or how—we would ever survive.

MONA'S STORY

One look at Gary's face, and I saw that something tragic had happened. As he confessed his betrayal, everything turned surreal. It was as if I was watching strangers sitting on our bed from a distance.

What I did know was that life would never be the same. I would never be the same. Fear and pain engulfed me. Breathing took effort. A tragedy had happened—to me.

I asked if Gary wanted a divorce. He wanted to see if we could heal, if I was willing. Heal? I wasn't sure I'd survive.

I was totally blindsided. He'd been having an affair with my best Christian friend for the past few years, and I'd never even suspected; I'd trusted them both implicitly. I had no idea our marriage was even vulnerable. Gary couldn't lie for beans; I always thought I'd know if he did. My friends thought he was wonderful—he did dishes and laundry; he changed diapers. We were friends; we could talk about anything. Sure, we'd had our moments in two decades of marriage, but nothing insurmountable. Had I been that bad a wife?

I felt the stirring of rage. I was nauseous. Was I a complete idiot to have been so in the dark? I spent the rest of that night weeping, heartache penetrating every inch of my being. I felt more alone than I'd ever been.

That night, my life took on a new timetable: before the affair, during the affair, and after the affair. Everything was distorted now through the lens of revealed betrayal. While Gary's burden had just begun to lift, mine was just starting to bear down its crushing weight on me.

GARY

When we got married, we knew our marriage would work. We were best friends who loved and respected each other.

Five years later, Mona completed nursing school, I'd started my own business, and we had our first child. A few years later we both became Christians. Now we had another tie to hold us firmly together.

By our 20th anniversary, we both were working diligently and active in church. But



Recovery is hard work

on top of our packed schedules, parenting three boys was proving far more challenging than we'd imagined, and we rarely had time or energy left for us. We kept telling ourselves that "our time" would come later—when we actually had time. In reality, we'd become caught up in a life that was pushing us along separate paths.

Those first few weeks after my confession were a blur. We later learned that this is typical, as the revelation of infidelity is much like a sudden death. Previously a model of confidence and competence, Mona could barely crawl out of bed. Her energy hardly lasted beyond her shift at the hospital.

Yet, aside from my guilt and the pain of seeing my wife suffer, I was experiencing freedom for the first time in ages. I immediately quit working with my affair partner and cut off all contact. No longer living a lie, I could once again spend time with God and enjoy His presence. I did whatever I could to allow Mona time alone to think and grieve. But my greatest challenge was exhausting: I knew I had to answer her continuous questions as honestly as I could. Unlike me, Mona knew nothing about what had really happened during the past years. She needed to be able to fill in the blank spaces like a puzzle, and I needed to patiently offer those pieces—repeatedly, if necessary—until she could better understand her life. Angry words weren't uncommon, since the truth wasn't pleasant.

MONA

Few in the church would have faulted me for leaving Gary (Matt. 19:9), but I knew that wouldn't make the pain disappear;

I'd have to go through the grieving and healing process with or without him.

That night of revelation 17 years ago was beyond painful. But it also marked the beginning of our recovery. Not because either of us believed we could heal, but because we felt we had nothing more to lose. All we knew was that we wanted to follow God in this, no matter where that led.

So we began seeing a Christian counselor who believed our marriage could heal. But we were terrified that maybe it couldn't. What we really needed was to talk with another couple who'd gone through the devastation of adultery and actually found healing. We wanted to see real people who could honestly tell us that the pain of working through this deep rift was worth it. But our counselor couldn't find anyone who fit the bill. So we took one step at a time on an uphill path we weren't even sure was there.

We talked a lot about the affair and our marriage, and soon realized that, while linked, they were two separate issues. The infidelity had been Gary's unilateral choice. But we were both responsible for our marriage and needed to understand why the affair happened. We also needed to relearn how to share our hearts and listen—we realized we'd never been completely honest with each other and had issues incompatible with a healthy marriage. Of course, these weren't excuses for adultery; Gary could have chosen to bring up these problems honestly rather than seek comfort elsewhere. But now God had our attention. This was our opportunity to address issues we'd allowed to linger.

But ten months into our recovery, we hit

that requires two willing hearts.

a major wall. Gary's response to a question totally undid me, and I was ready to quit. I felt the "recovery" process was killing me, bit by bit. In an emergency session, our counselor helped us clarify and talk through the issue. Somehow, hearing this unbiased voice above the emotional chaos let us see the actual problem clearly and deal with it. We left his office with renewed hope—though the struggle wasn't over, I knew we could keep moving forward through God's strength.

GARY

Eventually, in persevering day after day, we began to see the progress we'd made. Healing finally felt possible.

Two years later, our counselor called us. "Remember you once asked if I knew of a couple you could meet with?" Was he now, after all this time, trying to connect us with people whose help we so greatly needed years ago? He continued, "Are you and Mona ready to be that couple for someone else?"

Now, that had never crossed our minds. Stepping into this role would mean admitting to others all of our past pain. Would our worst memories and emotions recur? In talking and praying about the idea, we remembered how needy we'd been. So we said yes.

Our first meeting with this hurting couple set the course for a ministry we'd have never dreamed of when we started down this road. After we all saw the huge impact of peer support on their recovery, we actually founded Hope & Healing Ministries together with them. Twelve years later, we still see God at work in

powerful ways as we sit across the table from couples right where we once were, wondering if there's any hope.

The night Gary confessed, neither of us expected restoration. We doubted the pain would ever go away. But now we know adultery, as destructive as it is, doesn't automatically mean a death sentence for a marriage. Navigating the aftermath was the hardest thing we've ever done, yet today we enjoy a strong, satisfying marriage based on love, respect, intimacy, and trust. And we've seen healing become reality time and again with other hurting couples.

Recovery is hard work that requires two willing hearts. If you choose to stay together and do the work, your marriage can heal—it's certainly worth the cost. Even before both hearts become willing, you can always start the journey towards healing for yourself. The same Savior who enables sinners to stand pure before a holy God can restore what is in shambles to something beautiful and fulfilling. 🙏



Do you have friends going through the trauma of marital infidelity? Visit www.intouch.org/magazine for advice from Gary and Mona Shriver about the best way to help.



For those who have experienced the devastation of unfaithfulness, the Shriver's practical advice can point the way to restoration.

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ONE WISH

WHY KING SOLOMON DIDN'T ALWAYS USE THE BRAIN GOD GAVE HIM

BY LINDA CANUP

If you could have anything you wanted, what would it be?

You know how the cautionary tale goes. A genie, liberated from its bottle by some gentle rubbing, appears, at the service of its new master. He fulfills three wishes, which in time ruin that person's life. Because the moral, as everyone knows, is, you just might get what you wish for—and that could be a terrible thing.

But when Solomon considered this question (1 Kings 3:5), the young king gave an answer that pleased God and wasn't

at all likely to ruin his life: "I want wisdom," he said.

In his new responsibility as king, Solomon wanted to make good decisions and judge righteously. However, he hadn't acquired the experiences and life lessons necessary to handle the tough dilemmas he'd be responsible for solving. So he requested understanding and a discerning mind.

The Lord granted his wish—and threw in a bonus gift of wealth and honor just because he didn't ask for the same ol' standbys. God also said that if Solomon

played by His rules, He would give the king a long life.

Solomon was set. With a world of wisdom and a lifetime ahead of him, he went to work bestowing his insights upon the masses. He became known far and wide for his great discernment and judicious decisions, with people coming from miles around to glean from his enlightened mind (1 Kings 4:34).

But to have wisdom doesn't mean you always act wisely. Solomon had a weakness for marrying foreign women who worshipped foreign gods. So the Lord visited Solomon and warned him again: "[If you] turn away from following Me and do not keep My commandments . . . and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel . . . so [it] will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples" (1 Kings 9:6-7).

The wise man would turn his own kingdom into a word for the wise.

Solomon was getting carried away with the secular culture—God never intended for His people to be polygamists. Add to that the multitude of gods the women worshipped, and God knew odds were (oh, about 700 wives to 1) that they would lead him astray. The king was playing with fire, which is a sure way to get burned.

And while this was Solomon's second warning, it was not the first for the nation of Israel. The Lord warned the Jews that multiple wives would turn their hearts away from Him (Deut. 17:17). And when the people clamored for a king, God promised they'd get everything that came with a king's lifestyle—and would pay the price for it (1 Sam. 8:18).

But at this point, Solomon continued to honor the Lord with his wisdom. His fame spread all the way to the Queen of Sheba—she heard Israel's God had blessed the king with uncommon understanding and wanted to experience it herself. So she

came to him with many questions, and he answered every one perfectly. Impressive.

Yet all the wealth and intelligence in the world isn't as valuable as a heart for God—and Solomon's still belonged to his pagan wives. "Solomon held fast to these in love," records one scribe, "and his wives turned his heart away" (1 Kings 11:2-3). The king indulged in their pagan religions and joined them in making sacrifices to their gods. Eventually, his heart wasn't true to God anymore, and he began ignoring the first commandment.

With this broken rule came the promised destruction. Solomon's kingdom was ruined after his death. The nation was split between Jeroboam, who acquired Israel, and the king's son Rehoboam, who managed to keep Judah—the only remainder of King David's legacy.

And all that was left of Solomon's legacy was his wisdom.

Wisdom is a wonderful thing. Jesus' brother James encourages us to pray for it (James 1:5). But wisdom alone is not enough. Without a heart for God, we may know the right things to do, but won't have the will to do them. We will see the misguided path of the lost without the desire to redirect them to the Savior. As Paul explained to the Corinthians, "[If I] know all mysteries and all knowledge . . . but do not have love, I am nothing." (1 Cor. 13:2).

When Solomon broke the first commandment, he also disobeyed the greatest one—to love God with all his heart, soul, and mind (Matt. 22:37; Deut. 6:5).

So here ends our cautionary tale, with a man who was ruined, not by his wish, but by his own apathy and indulgent nature; a man with all the answers, but without the resolve to apply them to his own life; an observer of follies and fools who was blind to the cracks in his own character.

So, what's your wish? I hope you use it wisely. 💎

A young boy with a shaved head, wearing a light blue polo shirt and plaid shorts, is saluting with his right hand. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. To his left, a portion of the American flag is visible. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with green foliage.

thursday

*He's Got the Whole
World in His Hands*

READ | DANIEL 2:20-22

How many of us have listened to the global or national news and wondered, *What in the world is going on?* Without a firm foundation of biblical truth, we can easily be overcome with fear and despair. Despite the upheaval in political and financial realms, Christians can find peace in the knowledge that our God is sovereign over every nation and ruler on earth.

Though the future of a nation appears to be in the hands of its rulers and lawmakers, an omnipotent hand is orchestrating a good and glorious plan: the Lord is the one who “removes kings and establishes kings” (v. 20). Ultimately, every governmental leader is put into office, not by voters, political campaigns, or personal abilities, but by the hand of God.

Nothing that the Lord does is carried out in isolation. He’s working all things according to His divine plan. We tend to think that a ruler has to be righteous for God to use Him, but Proverbs 21:1 tells us that the Lord can direct the heart of any national leader wherever He wishes. In fact, He describes two pagan kings—Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus—as “My servant” (Jer. 25:9) and “My shepherd” (Isa. 44:28). Unbeknownst to them, God guided their paths to fulfill His purposes for Israel.

*early
light*

Christians have a vital responsibility in addition to the duties expected of all citizens: God instructs believers to pray for their nation and leaders.

EARLY LIGHT

When the news threatens to dislodge your peace or cause despair, remember who holds the nations in His hand. God’s plans for this world are moving along according to His divine purposes, and no unrighteous ruler can thwart Him. Just keep singing, “He’s got the whole world in His hands.”

THE BIBLE IN

One Year

PSALMS 100-104

READ | 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-8

After observing the godless condition of our nations, we readily recognize the need for change. But God's solution for our predicament is surprising. Paul instructs Timothy to establish some priorities in the church, and top on the list is prayer "for kings and all who are in authority" (v. 2). The reason for our petitions is so that we can live tranquil and godly lives and thereby have unhindered opportunities to tell others about the Savior (v. 2-4).

Paul would never have given this command to Timothy if he didn't believe that the church's prayers made a difference in achieving God's purposes for their nation. Our problem is not with the Lord's promise or power, but with our lack of faith. By focusing on the enormity of the problems or the power of those in office, we lose sight of our sovereign God who waits for us to ask for His intervention.

Political policies and legislation are not ultimately determined in conference rooms and governmental chambers, but in prayer closets. The voices that shape the direction of a nation are not necessarily those that ring out in legislative halls, but those that approach the throne room of God with bold faith (Heb. 4:16). As the church believes and prays, the Lord will respond.

EARLY LIGHT

Knowing that God can change a country, you may be wondering why He has waited so long. Maybe He is asking you a similar question: "Why have you waited so long to pray?" Every authority on earth can be touched by the power of prayer if we are willing to ask and believe God.

READ | PSALM 72

Because government is instituted by God as His minister for good (Rom. 13:4), it functions best when leaders honor and obey Him. Throughout Israel's history, God commended those kings who obeyed His laws and worshiped Him alone. The course of the entire nation was influenced by each king's beliefs and behavior. Since this principle is still applicable today, righteous leaders have a tremendous potential to affect their nations for good. The Lord will guide and support those who fear Him and seek His wisdom and direction for their decisions.

As important as rulers are in determining a nation's future, its citizens also play a vital role, especially in democracies where leaders arise from within the populace. An unrighteous constituency rarely elects a godly leader. Yet Christians who share their faith and raise children in God's ways can have a tremendous impact on their nation's values and, thereby, on its choice of rulers.

When both leaders and citizens value the Word of God, laws will be enacted which line up with biblical principles and commands. Every instruction in Scripture is given for our protection and benefit. By aligning our laws with God's, justice will triumph as the helpless are protected, the guilty are punished, and the innocent are vindicated.

EARLY LIGHT

When comparing this ideal to your reality, you might feel discouraged. But no matter what the condition of a nation, you can make a difference in your circle of influence by living righteously in an evil culture and reaching out to share the good news of Christ with a world that has lost its way.

READ | ISAIAH 59

The principle of sowing and reaping applies not only to individuals but also to nations. A country that ignores or rejects God and His Word will suffer the consequences of that choice. Though Israel had once honored the Lord, it went astray during the days of the prophet Isaiah and suffered the dire results of turning from the heavenly Father.

When a nation begins ignoring biblical commands and principles, truth becomes relative as false philosophies and “liberated thinking” take root. Leaders tend to consider themselves advanced and intellectual, but in reality, if they are separated from God, their thinking is foolish and their understanding darkened (Eph. 4:17-18).

A society always behaves according to its belief system, so the inevitable result of skewed thinking is sin. Once sin becomes acceptable in the eyes of the people, sensuality and self-gratification dominate as restraint is lifted. The baser nature of man emerges in the form of immorality, greed, and violence. Injustice reaches its peak when laws permit the killing of the most helpless and innocent of all its citizens—unborn children. Even if the majority of citizens disapprove of the injustice and immorality, unless they act, that nation will continue its downward spiral into depravity.

EARLY LIGHT

Our ultimate hope, of course, is in our coming King who will reign on earth with righteousness and justice. But the church must still awaken to its responsibility to be salt and light in a depraved world. Each generation is called to be alert and active during its appointed time on this earth.

READ | 2 TIMOTHY 2:11-13

All of us experience times when circumstances feel unbearable, prayers appear to go unanswered, and God seems distant. When that happens, we may wonder if He is the same as we once believed Him to be.

During such periods of helplessness, faith falters for some people yet grows stronger for others. What is it that can cause such opposite responses to suffering?

The key is simply one’s understanding of and trust in God’s *faithfulness*. This term means that the Lord never changes—He always does what is right, remains true to His promises, and is 100 percent reliable. In other words, we can trust our almighty God, regardless of our situation or attitude.

Our understanding of God relates to this concept. Do we trust Him enough to obey, even when obedience seems foolish? Are we so confident He hears and answers prayer that we consistently bring requests before His throne, even when we don’t see an immediate response? Are we daily sacrificing our selfish desires and patterns of living because we believe His promise of eternity, joy, and peace? An answer of “no” may indicate a deficient understanding of God’s character. That’s why reading the Bible is so important—through Scripture’s countless illustrations of our Father’s attributes, we learn who He is and increasingly trust Him.

EARLY LIGHT

Thankfully, the Lord’s faithfulness does not depend upon our circumstances, our feelings, or even our own faithfulness. He is true to His Word and true to Himself. How would your life look different if you had complete confidence that God was trustworthy and unchanging?

READ | DEUTERONOMY 7:8-10

God is the only One who never disappoints. From the beginning of time, His Word has remained true. Every prophecy is a promise that has been or will be fulfilled.

Perhaps the greatest of these foretellings were the ones that spoke of Messiah, and throughout the ages, God's people longed for His coming. Many prophets spoke about the Anointed One (2 Sam. 7:12-16; Isa. 7:14; 9:6; Dan. 9:25 NIV; Micah 5:2;). Although there was no further prophecy on the subject during the four centuries leading up to Christ's birth, when the time was right, Jesus came to reconcile mankind to the Father.

Surely, people must have questioned whether the Savior would ever come. After all, 400 years is a long time to wait without any word. But, as history proves, God never falls short on His promises. He is trustworthy, even when His timetable differs from what we hoped.

Knowing this, we can read Scripture's assurances with expectation. For instance, if we believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior and choose to follow Him, the Bible promises our salvation. We can rest assured that we are forgiven and redeemed. What's more, nothing can separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:38-39), and we can trust that He will provide everything we need to accomplish His purpose in our lives.

EARLY LIGHT

These are but three foundational promises; the Word contains many more. Consider God's faithfulness throughout Bible times and in your own life, and realize that He will be steadfast in the future as well. By living obediently, you can have full confidence that He will do all He has promised.

READ | PHILIPPIANS 4:19

God promised to supply all your needs, and yet sometimes fulfillment is slow in coming. What could be the problem? Perhaps you are. When our Father fails to meet our expectations, we generally look outside ourselves for the reasons. But while the Lord's love is unconditional, many of His promises are not.

For example, Philippians 4:19 is a "family promise"—it can be claimed only by those who rightly call the sovereign of the universe "my Father." His unlimited resources are not available to men and women who reject salvation through Jesus Christ. Moreover, when we look at the whole framework of Scripture, we see that the Lord makes our obedience a condition for His fulfilling needs (Ps. 81:10-12). He will not condone sin by blessing us while we rebel against Him.

Think of yourself as part of an army at war, which is what you are, in a spiritual sense. A top military priority is to keep the supply line open—victory is impossible if the soldiers are weaponless, cold, and starving. Our willful disobedience allows Satan to cut our supply line from the Lord. Restoring that connection is a matter of repentance. Those who walk in God's way are protected, provided for, and satisfied (Ps. 81:13-16).

EARLY LIGHT

Taking a promise out of its biblical context is dangerous. And expecting God to keep a conditional pledge when we aren't meeting its requirements is even more unwise. The Lord keeps His word but rightfully expects us to do our part. Thankfully, His yoke is light—to love, honor, and obey Him.

READ | PSALM 19:7-11

Yesterday we noted that believers must consider the whole counsel of God to understand His promises. For example, the Lord's commitment to supply our needs isn't an isolated pledge without connection to other parts of Scripture.

Trust God to provide. James opens his letter with a strong warning that those who doubt the Lord can expect nothing from Him (1:6-7). God's trustworthiness is clear in Scripture and in believers' lives, but our wavering confidence undermines His work.

Wait upon His timing (1 Sam. 13:9-13). King Saul took over the prophet Samuel's duty and made a pre-battle sacrifice to God. Like so many people who manipulate circumstances and timing, Saul was dissatisfied with the results. He won the war but lost not only God's favor but also his kingdom. No one gets what he really wants by supplying his own need.

Accept responsibility (Prov. 19:15, 20:4). God does not open a door to opportunity while we're lying on the couch. We have to be on the lookout. If we need a job, we should be out making applications. If we want to know the Father's direction for a hard situation, we need to be seeking Him regularly through prayer and His Word. The Lord goes before us to soften hearts, but we must do our share.

EARLY LIGHT

God knows our needs, and He has committed Himself to meeting every one. But He does not make promises in a vacuum. We have a responsibility to trust Him, be patient, and do our part. Then we leave it to the Lord to move heaven and earth to give us what we require.

READ | JOHN 1:29-34

When John the Baptist saw Jesus approaching, he declared Christ to be the Lamb of God (John 1: 29).

This concept was actually familiar to the Israelites, since their law required blood offerings as atonement for sin (Lev. 17:11). Jesus became our sacrificial lamb, paying "once for all" the sin debt owed by mankind. (1 Pet. 3:18). His death secured forgiveness and eternal life for everyone who trusts Him as Savior. With regard to salvation, nothing else is required or acceptable to God.

Jesus was the one who set things right between the Father and man. He died to bring us . . .

Redemption. This was a word that was used to describe a marketplace transaction—one that buys back something of value. All humanity was in bondage to sin and unable to pay the penalty (Rom. 6:23). As our sacrificial lamb, Jesus willingly died in our place and, with His blood, redeemed us for His Father (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Forgiveness. As God's adopted children, we have been saved by the blood of Christ (Matt. 26:28) and permanently pardoned for our transgressions. The penalty for our actions has been fully paid. So at the moment of salvation, our guilt for the sins we committed—past, present, and future—is wiped away.

EARLY LIGHT

Meditate on what the Savior did at Calvary (Eph. 1:7) As the sacrificial Lamb, Jesus exchanged His life for ours and gave it up to pay what we owed. His death redeemed us, secured our forgiveness, and gave us a permanent place in God's family. *Thank You, Jesus, for bringing redemption!*



READ | ROMANS 3:21-26

Knowing what we believe is a key to strong, life-sustaining faith. Yesterday we saw two of the blessings that are ours through the blood of the Savior. Today we will look at two more.

By trusting in Christ as Savior, we are . . .

Justified. *Justification* is the process by which God declares us “not guilty.”

Romans 3:23 condemns all mankind as sinners who are under a sentence of death and facing a dreadful eternity apart from the Lord and His blessings. But everything changes for the person who accepts Christ's shed blood as payment for his sins—through Jesus, our heavenly Father declares the sinner not guilty, provides him with Christ's righteousness, and adopts the new believer into His family (Gal. 3:26). Jesus' sacrifice satisfied our sin-debt, and His death was counted by God as our own (Rom. 5:9).

Reconciled. Before salvation, we were separated from the Lord and spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1). We had no way to span the gap between Him and us. Christ sent His Holy Spirit to convict us of our guilt (John 16:8), make us aware that we need a Savior, and bring us to saving faith. Jesus, the Lamb of God, removed the barrier of sin that separated us from God. Christ reconciled us to God “having made peace through the blood of His cross” (Col. 1:20).

EARLY LIGHT

As believers, we should understand what occurred when we received Jesus as Savior (Acts 16:31). Through His sacrifice, we are redeemed, forgiven, justified, and reconciled to God. That is, Christ's blood has brought us from death to life—and has let us enter into an eternal relationship with the Father.



READ | LUKE 18:18-23

Three of the four gospels contain an account of the young man who asked Jesus a very important question: “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 18). A ruler with great wealth, he considered himself a moral man because he had kept God's commandments.

However, he was operating under the false assumption that good works bring salvation. He seemed to be asking Jesus what else he had to do to secure his place in heaven—besides all the good things he'd already accomplished.

This is what I refer to as the “great deception”—the false belief that eternal life can be earned through our own efforts. If we give credence to this lie, then we do not understand the problem of our sin and how it separates us from God. Scripture tells us that we have inherited a sinful nature from the first man (Rom. 5:12). Ever since that time, humanity has been in rebellion against the Lord and under His judgment. There is nothing we can do to pay for our sin.

If this were the end of the story, we would be a people without hope for today or the future. But the good news is that the heavenly Father recognized our plight and mercifully provided the way to heaven (John 14:6).

EARLY LIGHT

When God made us in His image, He created us to live forever. So, though our earthly body will perish, our spirit will never die. The question about eternal life is important, as we'll spend eternity either with God in heaven or in an insufferable state, separated permanently from Him (Matt. 25:34, 41).

READ | JOHN 3:16-18

Each of us faces the same dilemma. We have a sin debt that we owe to God but no way to pay for it. None of our solutions—living a moral life, being religious, or doing more good deeds—can take care of our problem.

God Himself has provided the solution—one that both satisfies His justice and grants us mercy. He sent His Son to pay the penalty we owed. Jesus was qualified to be our substitute because He never sinned (2 Cor. 5:21). He willingly took our place on the cross and experienced the full measure of the Lord's wrath against our sinfulness. In dying for us, Christ secured our salvation by paying the debt for all our past, present, and future sins. When we trust in Jesus and surrender our life to Him, He becomes our personal Savior and Lord.

The great tragedy is that many have heard the gospel and rejected it. Some are like the rich ruler who placed his trust in material possessions and turned his back on the truth. Others have refused to even listen. Another group is convinced they are heaven-bound, based on erroneous confidence in their own good deeds. Only those who have entered into a relationship with Jesus through faith in Him will be welcomed into heaven.

EARLY LIGHT

If you're wondering, *How can I have eternal life?* there is only one answer: through faith in Jesus Christ (John 14:6). We have an Enemy who actively seeks to blind people to the truth (2 Cor. 4:4). Pray that many who are separated from the Lord will trust in the Savior and gain everlasting life.

READ | GENESIS 12

Faith is the foundation of our Christian lives. Hebrews 11:1 gives us the biblical definition of this term: "faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (NIV).

True belief is more than something we express verbally; it is a pathway you and I follow. Throughout life, our heavenly Father takes us on a journey, allowing us to experience a real relationship with Him as we encounter each circumstance.

Today's passage illustrates that God has a purpose for everything we encounter. The Lord promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars visible in the sky. (Gen. 15:5). Then He directed His servant to obey several commands, such as moving from home. Abraham was not told the details of this plan.

We now know that he was the father of the Jewish nation, and his lineage included Jesus Christ, the Savior of mankind. Though the patriarch did not obey perfectly, he did step forward in faith, trusting in God's ultimate purpose.

We, too, can know with certainty that the Lord is weaving together a beautiful plan. He isn't obligated to explain His reasoning or reveal every detail. Instead, God shows us the next step (Ps. 119:105), and our job is to obey, even when it doesn't make sense.

EARLY LIGHT

If you want to know what God is doing in your life, obey Him. Often, you won't understand the intricacies of the plan, but you can trust the goodness of His heart. Rest assured that all He does is purposeful and for your benefit. So step forward in faith, and you will see His faithfulness.

READ | ROMANS 1:4-6

The pathway of faith has divine purpose, and we're to obey, no matter what. But even when God's direction is perplexing, we can count on the fact that He is good.

Walking obediently with Christ doesn't guarantee an easy life, which is obvious when we consider the apostle Paul. He encountered all kinds of hardships, including shipwreck, persecution, and beatings (2 Cor. 11:23-27). Keep in mind, though, that nothing can touch a believer without God's loving permission. He uses difficulty to strengthen and correct believers—and eventually to achieve His ultimate plan. Also remember that the Lord protects His followers in their suffering, just as He kept Paul safe in situations that seemed impossible.

Adversity can tempt us to ignore the Holy Spirit's guidance. But we will ultimately regret such a decision, as God doesn't spare us from the consequences of our sin. However, He never lets go of His children, whom He will continue to protect and guide throughout life.

Walking in obedience and trust is the only avenue to true peace. As Paul sat in an uncomfortable Roman prison where his life was in danger, he encouraged believers not to worry but to pray with gratitude. Doing so leads to experiencing peace beyond what we can comprehend (Phil. 4:6).

EARLY LIGHT

The only wise way to live is to trust in almighty God and follow wherever He leads. That is the road to contentment, fulfillment, protection, and peace. Are you journeying on the pathway of faith? Or is something holding you back from all God intended for your life?

READ | 1 TIMOTHY 1:18-19

The conscience is God's early warning system for alerting us to potential danger. It monitors our emotions, thought life, and conduct.

The way our conscience works is similar to a radar system, which notifies us of possible trouble, usually without specifically identifying the problem. The principles and standards that we hold to determine the sensitivity of our conscience. For example, if we believe lying is wrong, then an alarm will sound when we start to shade the truth. But if we think that lies are justifiable, it will be silent.

When programmed with the truth of God's Word, the conscience has great value for a Christian. It detects deviations from the Lord's standards and sends out a warning. The Holy Spirit uses that signal to get our attention. Then, He will reveal what the problem is, give us understanding about it, and show us the right choices to make. He will guide us to relevant Scripture verses that can shed light on our situation and point out the implications of a wrong choice.

Failure to heed our inner alarm can bring serious consequences. Adam and Eve knew what God expected (Gen. 2:15-17). However, when tempted, they ignored their conscience and sinned against Him.

EARLY LIGHT

When your conscience sounds the alarm, do you stop and take notice or continue on the same course? Repeatedly ignoring your internal compass can decrease its effectiveness at keeping you out of trouble. Ask God to help you program your inner alarm with His truth and sharpen your ability to hear it.

READ | 2 CORINTHIANS 1:12

The conscience looks at thoughts and actions to determine if they are in line with one's principles and standards. It is important to keep our internal alarm system well maintained so it will be trustworthy.

For our moral compass to sound at the right time and for the right reason, we must:

- **Accept Scripture as our standard for behavior.** Second Timothy 3:16 says, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness." If we choose to adopt our culture's values, which are often at odds with the Lord's, our conscience will be unreliable. Instead, we want our radar to alert us to the possibility of going off course.

- **Align our thinking with the Lord's.**

Romans 12:2 says to renew our minds. It is necessary and ongoing work to combat what this unbelieving world accepts as true and right. Our alarm system should help us identify ungodly ideas.

- **Apply God's Word to daily living.**

When our habits reflect godly values, our conscience will become more sensitive to what is right and wrong.

In addition, it is essential that we rely on the Holy Spirit for understanding. Our conscience by itself is of some value, but it becomes indispensable when accompanied by the Spirit's guidance (John 16:13).

EARLY LIGHT

The Scriptures teach us how to live—in our thought life, conduct, and emotions (Gal. 5:16-23). As we make our standards align more closely with the Lord's, our conscience will become increasingly trustworthy because it is based on what is important to our heavenly Father.

READ | MATTHEW 5:43-48

Abuse is rampant in our world. It seems new stories are constantly emerging of one person inflicting harm upon others. Sadly, few victims know where to seek respite and restoration. You likely know someone who needs to hear that God is a hiding place for the mistreated. Perhaps that someone is you.

The heavenly Father is faithful to comfort His children and heal their wounds. When His strength undergirds us, we can respond rightly to abuse and the abuser.

1. **Ask, "Lord, what would You have me do?"** There's no standard answer, since so many kinds and degrees of abuse exist. God knows when the right response is to leave home, seek counseling, stay and pray for the abuser, or follow some other course of action. The Lord will never tell you to do anything that violates His Word.

2. **Pray for the abuser.** Specifically, ask the Lord to show you what motivates the person to injure others. I wish I had prayed this way earlier for my own stepfather, who physically abused my mother and also hit me. My healing process accelerated when I finally learned that he had endured cruel treatment from his father. A harsh past did not excuse his actions, but I was able to feel compassion for him, thanks to God's love at work in me.

EARLY LIGHT

God's tender grace heals the wounds of abuse. Only He can replace resentment with compassion, erase the pain from bitter memories, and give the abused a renewed sense of their worth as His treasured children. From our hiding place in His love, we can thrive even in a harsh environment.

READ | EPHESIANS 4:30-32

When I tell abuse victims that full healing requires forgiving their abuser, many will argue. Their message is generally the same: “You don’t understand the hurt I’ve endured.” They’re right. But I do know that a bitter spirit penetrates every part of our life like a cancer. Anger and resentment are symptoms that cannot be pushed away and ignored. They spill out, harming relationships and leading to risky decisions.

Withholding mercy feels as if we are punishing someone who inflicted harm. But people cannot take revenge on one another without destroying themselves. That’s why the Lord calls us to follow His example of extending grace to all (Eph. 4:32). No one can justify holding back forgiveness when God has given His so generously. An abuser does not deserve pardon, but neither are we worthy of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.

The cross was a torture device. Death was slow and excruciating, but at least the physical pain was temporary. Jesus’ worst torment began when, because He’d taken our sin upon Himself, He was rejected by God and severed from perfect love and companionship. I may not know your pain, but I assure you that Jesus does. He’ll help you overcome hurt, anger, and bitterness if you simply give up your unforgiving spirit.

EARLY LIGHT

Forgiveness is a choice—an act of service to the Lord and a witness to the person who inflicted our pain. No matter how terrible the acts committed against us were, God demands that we show mercy. For our good and His glory, He wants us to give up the “right” to punish an abuser.

READ | 2 CORINTHIANS 12:9-10

If someone we care about hurts, our first instinct is to remove the pain. We want to offer money, advice, or a way out of a mess. However, if God is not ready to have the problem patched up, then the believer who repairs it gets himself into a fix. The Lord will discipline a Christian who obstructs His work in another person’s life.

Love can blind us to the fact that God has a plan for pain. For example, He may bring a person to a position of utter desperation so that she will give up her self-sufficiency. Only when His strength is manifested in her weakness does she finally know what it means to rely upon God. We do not want to hinder such an essential lesson!

Our heavenly Father’s ways often do not make sense to humans. We wonder how pain could be the means of bringing about spiritual victory. Yet His greatest triumph—overcoming sin and death—was achieved through Jesus Christ’s sacrifice, which involved physical and emotional anguish. And the example in the paragraph above helps us understand why God uses hardship to mature believers: Hurt and despair often strip away the “props” we depend on and expose our need for a Savior. Man’s weakness is a showcase for God’s strength.

EARLY LIGHT

It is only natural that we want to rescue hurting loved ones. However, we may not be the tool God wishes to use for that purpose. The wise course of action is to ask God if He wants us to get involved. Then, we must be sensitive to His will and ready to stand aside so that His plan can move forward.

READ | 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-7

When I am praying about a situation, I call upon the Lord, using one of His names that identifies my need. So in periods of difficulty or pain, I ask for my Comforter to come (Is. 40:1, 51:12, 66:13). I trust that He will encourage my heart, relieve my burdens, and help me through trials.

However, many people cannot see God as a comforter. They misinterpret names like “Judge” to mean a tough disciplinarian or “King” to mean a distant and distracted deity. They imagine He is either waiting to rain down punishment or too busy to notice our puny life. Someone with such a wrong concept won’t even notice the Lord’s offers of consolation as they walk through valleys. Instead, that person is likely to struggle with unbelief, frustration, and perhaps bitterness toward God.

Jesus Christ was the representation of God the Father on earth—and the symbol of all His names. He always responded to hurt and distressed people with soothing words and kind actions. He did not judge the Samaritan woman for her serial marriages. Instead, Jesus offered her new life (John 4:14). He gave relief to the bleeding woman (Luke 8:48) and solace to Jairus’ grieving family (Luke 8:52). And the Lord is as ready to comfort and strengthen believers today as He was back then.

EARLY LIGHT

Human beings heap shame and blame upon themselves and each other, but the Lord doesn’t operate that way. He is the God of comfort, a trait that shows up in another of His names: Shepherd. The Shepherd uplifts His followers, even through the valley of the shadow of death (Ps. 23:4).

READ | COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

Webster defines *gift* as “something given to show friendship, affection, support.” Using this definition, it seems logical to give gifts only to those we love, not to those who hurt or abuse us. Yet Scripture clearly commands us to offer one of the greatest possible gifts—forgiveness—to those who mistreat us.

To forgive means “to give up all claims to punish or exact a penalty for an offense.” No strings or conditions can be attached, or else it ceases to be a pardon. Ephesians 2:8-9 expands on this concept by contrasting the gift of salvation with works. Neither salvation nor forgiveness can be earned; both must be freely given. Just as God granted us forgiveness, which we did not deserve and could not earn, so we are to release every offender from any form of penalty.

Unforgiveness is emotional bondage that consumes minds with memories of offenses, distorts emotions with revenge, and fills hearts with churning unrest. Its tentacles reach deep into the soul, affecting both spiritual and physical health. But the one who chooses to put on love and offer forgiveness is ready to receive the peace of Christ. Let God’s Word help you release hurt and anger into His caring hands—then watch as vengeful thoughts are transformed into praise and gratitude to the Lord.

EARLY LIGHT

Thankfully, the gift of pardon is not something we have to manufacture in ourselves. This present is wrapped in the love of God and tied with the red ribbon of Christ’s sacrifice. It is freely given to us by the Savior, and our job is simply to pass it on to others.

READ | EPHESIANS 4:30-32

Ephesians 4:22-24 describes two different “bents” that are found within every believer: the patterns of the corrupted old self—also known as “the flesh”—and the righteousness of a new nature in Christ. The characteristics of these opposing inclinations are vividly portrayed by today’s verses. The quality of forgiveness, or the lack of it, will largely determine which tendency predominates in our lives.

The inevitable result of an unforgiving spirit is anger, bitterness, and malice. By refusing to forgive, we allow the old sinful nature to dominate and produce its poisonous fruit. Every area of our life is affected when we refuse to extend to others the pardon which Christ so generously extended to us—in essence, we are treating those around us as we would never want the Lord to treat us. His mercy toward us has no limit.

Although the pain and injustice of an offense can break our heart or damage our sense of self-worth, a refusal to forgive denies God the opportunity to redeem the hurt. We want Him to change the offender and make him sorry for what he has done, but the Lord wants to transform us. A forgiving spirit frees us to live in our new Christ-like nature and enables us to see others through eyes of grace and mercy.

EARLY LIGHT

Look again at verses 31 and 32. Which one’s characteristics describe you? As believers, we all long to exhibit the qualities of our new nature, but the Lord can produce them only if we are willing to exchange offenses and grudges for tender hearts that forgive. Something has to change—let it be you.

READ | PSALM 103:1-5

Over the years I have heard Christians say, “I think I have committed the unpardonable sin.” Their body language showed the tremendous burden of guilt they carried. Perhaps this describes you or another believer close to you.

Based on the authority of Scripture, I can tell you without reservation that God loves you, and He’s forgiven everyone who has trusted Christ as Savior. The Bible says:

- Jesus’ blood paid our sin debt in full, and He obtained our full pardon (Matt. 26:28). Every sin—without exception—is covered (Col. 2:13-14).
- Forgiveness is given to everyone who believes in Jesus (Acts 10:43) and remains available to all believers (1 John 1:9).
- Our pardon for sin is based on the riches of our Father’s grace, which always exceeds the offense (Eph. 1:7; Rom. 5:20).
- God doesn’t count past, present, or future transgressions against us (2 Cor. 5:19).

To reconcile us to Himself, God sent His Son to die in our place. He accepted Christ’s sacrifice as payment-in-full for our transgressions. Forgiveness is solely on the basis of our relationship with Jesus, not on our behavior. Because of our faith in Christ’s completed work on the cross, we can be assured that we have received and will continue to receive His divine mercy.

EARLY LIGHT

Scripture reassures us that there’s no sin beyond the scope of God’s pardon. This isn’t a license to sin (Rom. 6:1-2). Rather, it should produce in us a passion for holiness. If you are struggling to accept God’s forgiveness, read over these verses, and be thankful for such a great gift.

READ | MATTHEW 12:22-32

In Matthew 12, Jesus talked about the unpardonable sin. Christians sometimes misconstrue His comments and end up fearful that they could commit an unforgivable offense. The context of today's passage helps us understand why that is not the case.

Christ used the power of the Holy Spirit to heal a demon-possessed man who was deaf and mute. Amazed onlookers began to suspect He was the promised Messiah (v. 22), so religious leaders tried to quell the crowd's growing excitement: they claimed the Lord was Satan's fellow worker, who had used the Devil's power to accomplish this miracle. Christ refuted their statement and in verse 32 said, "Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him."

Jesus' comments addressed a very specific situation unique to His time. Though the Pharisees had themselves seen the Lord heal many people through the Spirit, they attributed the miraculous work to Satan. Jesus declared that this sin—claiming that God's Holy Spirit was the unclean spirit of the Devil—was unforgivable.

The sin was blasphemy, done deliberately and without repentance, by knowledgeable religious people, despite irrefutable evidence to the contrary. This situation—*personally witnessing* Jesus' miracles and blaspheming the Spirit—cannot be repeated today.

EARLY LIGHT

Numerous New Testament verses assure us that no iniquity committed today is beyond the scope of divine forgiveness. The unpardonable sin Jesus referred to was something that could take place only when He lived on earth. So if guilt threatens to overwhelm you, read Romans 8:1 with gratitude.

READ | PSALM 31:19-24

I've often heard folks proclaim, "God is good!" when all is going well, but then doubt His benevolence when the blessings they envisioned don't materialize. Because God alone is good, only He can accurately determine what is best for each person. His kindness is expressed in more ways than simply provision of wealth, health, and relationships. Some of His gifts are experiences we would never choose, but the Lord knows we need them in order to grow in faith, obedience, and perseverance. Consider the following expressions of God's goodness toward us:

- **Loving discipline.** Since God's love is unfailing, He corrects us when we refuse to follow Him and instead go our own way. The process is painful, but the result is "the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Heb. 12:11).
- **Wise Limitations.** Satan offers a world of opportunities and possessions that seem to promise happiness but ultimately draw us away from God. With great wisdom, the Lord lovingly withholds those things that prove detrimental to our spiritual life.
- **Useful suffering.** God knows which refining experiences we need in order to become fruitful and useful in His Kingdom. What appears to us as a valley of weeping is God's valley of preparation for godliness and service.

EARLY LIGHT

It can be tempting to interpret God's character on the basis of our circumstances. If evidence compels us to doubt His goodness, we must remember that while His gifts come in a variety of wrappings, they are always beneficial. As Psalm 34:8 says, "O taste and see that the LORD is good."

READ | PSALM 25:4-15

Although the Lord showers His goodness on all men, the ability to perceive and enjoy it is limited by a refusal to reverence Him as God. To experience the fullness of His kindness, we must honor Him by choosing His pathway of submission and obedience. The Lord will never withhold good from those who walk uprightly with Him.

In love and wisdom, the Father has specifically designed a pathway for each of His children. Because no two people are alike, each path will look different. What may be best for one person may not be good for another. Comparison of God's ways in different lives will lead only to discouragement and misjudgment. We have neither the wisdom nor the eternal perspective to understand why the Lord leads some people down paths of pain and hardship, but we can know that He is always good.

Every step on God's pathway represents a deliberate choice to follow Him. By looking around instead of fixing our eyes on Jesus, we may start thinking that we are missing out on some really good experiences or possessions. If we leave the Lord's course to follow a path that looks better, we will forfeit His good blessings and discover, as Adam and Eve did, that any other way leads to loss.

EARLY LIGHT

Take time periodically to ask yourself, *Am I on the path the Lord has chosen for me, or have I taken a detour to follow another direction that looks good?* To build our own course and ignore the goodness and abundance of His pathway is foolishness. God alone knows the way we should take.

READ | JOHN 4:1-42

This story of the Lord's encounter with a Samaritan woman is a wonderful example of His loving response to hurting individuals. Jesus is always reaching out in love, even when we do not recognize His extended hand.

Although this meeting may have appeared accidental, it was really a providential appointment with the Messiah. As the woman reached the well, Jesus initiated conversation by asking for a drink of water. His direct approach surprised her and opened the door for a dialogue that would change her life forever.

Throughout the exchange, Jesus' goal was to help the woman recognize her greatest need so He could supply her with the only gift that would meet that need: salvation and the forgiveness of her sins. She had spent her life trying to find love and acceptance in all the wrong places. Christ offered her the living water of the Holy Spirit—the only thing that would quench her spiritual and emotional thirst.

Like the Samaritan woman, we can at times be so intent on getting our immediate needs met that we fail to see God's hand reaching out to us in love, offering what will truly satisfy. Only Christ can fill our empty souls for eternity and provide for our essential emotional needs now.

EARLY LIGHT

This world is filled with wells that promise to provide love, acceptance, and self-worth but never fully satisfy. When your soul is empty and the well runs dry, look for Jesus. He has a divine appointment scheduled with you, and He will quench your thirst with His Spirit—if you let Him.



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