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I found this old boat when I visited Point Reyes, California, to photograph lighthouses. Something about it caught my eye, and I stopped to look closer. I could tell that the vessel had been a beauty in her day, but neglect had left plenty of scars and rust on her bow and deckhouse. To me, this boat is a perfect picture of what happens to people when they fall away from the One who cares for them. (See page 5.)

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IN TOUCH MINISTRIES OF CANADA, Box 4900, Markham, Ontario L3R 6G9
NEW ZEALAND OFFICE, Box 33-1260 Takapuna, Auckland 1332 0-800-446868

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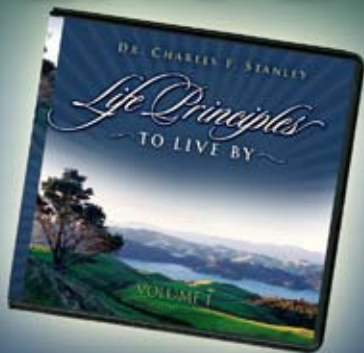
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CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

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VICE PRESIDENT
OF GLOBAL COMMUNICATION

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and to strengthen
the local church*

A Lesson From an Old Boat

» Staying on Course and
in God's Will



I recently went to Point Reyes, California, to photograph lighthouses. When I got there, a fog settled in and I couldn't see anything, so I figured God had something better for me. As I was walking away, I saw an old abandoned boat lying in the sand (the one pictured on the cover).

My first thought was that the boat had probably been very expensive—either a fishing boat or a recreational vessel. She had given a lot of people pleasure over the years. But somewhere along the way, the boat's owner took her out of the channel and forgot about her, or something like that. Somebody made a mistake. Somebody wasn't watching what he was doing; something happened that left her neglected. I could tell it had been a good while since she had been properly cared for, because she was dirty and unkempt. There were signs of distress and wear all over her.

**A lot of Christians
have drifted from
God's will and don't
even realize it.”**

I thought of all the people who drive by this boat every day and pay no attention whatsoever. They don't realize that she's a perfect picture of what becomes of people who fall away from the will of God. A beautiful

and productive life—happy, peaceful, and full of joy—can turn around in no time at all. When a follower of God gets out of the channel and drifts off course, he runs against rocks or becomes stuck somewhere far from home. As the hours and days go by, as the months and years pass, he becomes scarred and worn like the boat, barely recognizable to those who love him.

None of us want to end up looking like that. In fact, the next time you look in the mirror, think about that old boat. Do you know what ages people most? Not years, but sin. Disobedience, neglect, indulgence, and lack of discipline. I've met 90-year-olds with more energy and charisma than 60-year-old people I know. A lot of Christians have drifted from God's will and don't even realize they're in deep trouble. The Lord desires our success and wants us to live happy and fulfilled lives. But we won't unless we chart our course with His.

GOD

wants you to

SUC



How do you measure your true worth?

BY CHARLES F. STANLEY

CEED

We live in a world where everyone seems preoccupied with success. Television, the Internet, radio, and magazines give us a global bird's-eye view of the world's winners—and losers. And we're fascinated by it, aren't we?

But what does it mean to succeed in life? Furthermore, given how the world reacts to successful people, and considering the negative ways that many people strive for personal achievement, is success even a godly pursuit?

Let me answer that question right from the start: Yes. As followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are not only allowed to strive for success; we're *called to do so*. God is overwhelmingly interested in our victories, but as sinful men and women, we often get confused about this issue. Therefore, we must begin by understanding a true and godly definition of success.

What is success?

The world most often defines the term as simply one's ability to achieve personal goals. For example, a football coach may consider himself to be a success if he wins every game. Or a college student may appear successful if she makes straight A's. So it can be difficult to establish a definition that we can all agree on, because the measurement often depends on our individual goals.

Instead, we must ask the question, What is it that would make *God* see me as a success? You see, the world's perspective fluctuates, but the Lord's view is constant: *to Him, my greatest achievement is a continuing desire to be the person He has called me to be and to reach the goals He has helped me to set.*

Allow that statement to sink in for a moment. Read it again, this time out loud. Everything else I will say about success hangs on this one crucial point, so make sure you grasp it.

There are two critical elements in the statement. First, our success depends on *being* who God wants us to be. Second, it depends on *doing* what He calls us to do. In both areas,

God is the focus. Our goal is to fully realize what He has set forth for us. Therefore, *our* victories ultimately belong to *Him*, and He deserves all the praise.

You cannot be successful if you leave the Lord out of your life. Now, by the world's standard, you may appear to "have it all," but what is the eternal value of fame and fortune? Certainly, there is nothing inherently wrong with these things, but we must overcome the notion that "FAME + FORTUNE = SUCCESS." Money and celebrity cannot bring lasting peace, joy, love, contentment, and eternal security, which are available only through the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Does this mean that Christians can take their wealth with them when they leave this world? No, of course not. However, here's the powerful truth: We do not need to take our treasure with us, because we have already sent it ahead. In seeking a life motivated by godly goals, we are already amassing a great treasure in heaven (Matt. 6:20-21). Therefore, our true worth will be measured by our *eternal* reward, not our *earthly* wealth.

You may ask, "Well, then, should we avoid material wealth?" No, not at all. However, we have to be crystal clear on one important point: Fame and fortune may be the external *results* of success, but they themselves are not success. Remember, success is not about what you *have*, but about what you *are*. In its purest sense, success is simply being the man or woman God has called you to be.

When we think of it this way, there is no doubt that God is interested in our success! Not only is He interested, but He *intentionally encourages* us to be triumphant. Scripture offers four proofs.

First, God plans for us to succeed.

We see this in the lives of many men and women in the Bible. For example, do you remember the story of Joseph in Genesis

chapters 37-50? By the world's standards, he was doomed from the start. The young Hebrew had been beaten and sold into slavery by his own brothers, and for years he lived a life of servitude and imprisonment. However, in everything Joseph did, God made him thrive.

In those important chapters of Genesis, we see Joseph as a shepherd boy, then a slave, later as a prisoner, and ultimately as the prime minister of Egypt! Surely God had planned for the faithful servant's good fortune, even during those years when all seemed hopeless.

We see similar accounts throughout biblical history. Moses, David, Nehemiah, and Joshua all demonstrate this same kind of greater divine plan for distinction. And, of course, let's not forget the apostles—they thrived in the first century and spread the good news of salvation around the world. No doubt, their mission must be considered a success, or we would have no churches or record of Jesus Christ at all.

In each of these examples, people discovered what the Lord wanted them to do, committed their lives to it, followed godly principles, and achieved their goals. In the eyes of God, they were all successful.

Second, God provides for our success.

I have shelves of books on this topic, and I've yet to find an overriding principle of achievement that is not also found in God's Word. The Bible contains every fundamental concept on success that I've ever read in any other book. Different authors may pluck an idea out of the Scriptures and write a book about it, but they didn't create the principle.

Something I've often seen mentioned in these books is the utter need for faith. Now, some authors may say success depends on faith in one's self, while others point to belief in some "higher power." But as followers of Jesus Christ, we can name that source of our strength: almighty God,

who cares for us. You see, God alone is the author of success. Without Him, a person will ultimately know only failure—and in the meantime, perishable wealth at best.

Third, God equips us for success.

Because He calls us to be shining lights in a dark world, He has provided what we need in order to be successful men and women. For example, every believer has been given certain abilities, or spiritual gifts. These are amazing endowments that enable us to do the things that God calls us to do.

The Lord has also equipped us by giving every believer the presence of His indwelling Spirit. The Holy Spirit brings us into intimate contact with the heavenly Father, empowers our daily lives, teaches us the things of God, and gives us His discernment. In the power of the Holy Spirit, we have access to supernatural decision-making processes. You see, the Lord doesn't set people up to fail. He would get no glory from that. Instead, He gives us what we need to be successful in what He has called us to do.

Fourth, God promises us success.

You may argue, "Well, if God has promised me success, then somewhere along the way, He messed up." No, He hasn't. However, if we're struggling to find any areas of accomplishment in our lives, it may be that we ourselves have gotten off course.

What did the Lord tell Joshua? He told him to be strong and courageous, to obey His Word, and to be careful to keep His commandments. And the result? "For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success" (Josh. 1:7-8). Do you see? The formula for success is right there in black and white in the pages of Scripture.

Conditions for success

Now, here is what we must not miss: God may have planned, provided, equipped, and promised, but our personal success has some conditions. After all, the Lord will not

make us victorious in spite of ourselves!

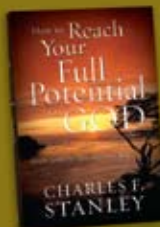
Therefore, we must pay attention to three specific conditions: We are to . . .

1. Establish God-given goals. Search for the Lord's will and set measurable goals for what He wants you to accomplish. His will does not happen by accident; we must make a decision to seek after Him.

2. Walk obediently before the Father in the process of achieving these goals. How can we expect God to help us succeed in life when we choose to disobey the principles of His Word? Scripture tells us how to live; we are to abide by its guidelines as we pursue our goals.

3. Rely fully upon the Holy Spirit as we practice godly principles of success. We cannot go about the Christian life as though we were acting in a one-man show. We can be successful in Christ only when we submit completely to the leading, direction, and empowerment of God's Spirit.

The Lord is intimately concerned with our success. Since He determines our goals and equips us to meet them, we should never be too ashamed to claim the blessings He gives for that purpose. Therefore, we must often stop to take an honest look at how we define success, and then measure our understanding against Scripture. There is truly only one way we'll ever achieve success—God's way. 🙌



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LOVE



WAR

A conversation with John and Stasi Eldredge
about fighting for your marriage

BY ERIN GIESCHEN

Since 66 percent of married couples in the U.S. never reach their 25th anniversary, marriage counselors John and Stasi Eldredge are technically anomalies. But the authors of the new book *Love & War* say otherwise. “We’re pretty normal, here,” Stasi says. According to John, their story began “with two profoundly broken people who got married and then watched it all hit the fan.” Three years into it, divorce was sounding rather logical; later, around year ten, they came close to separating again.

Sure, they were committed Christians; in fact, they were deeply involved in church. Which, in a way, made matters worse. There was enormous pressure to pretend they had their act together, when things were actually falling apart at home. But they fought through the tough times, and God brought monumental healing. Yet on a day-to-day, moment-to-moment basis, an epic battle continues to rage, and that isn’t exactly a bad thing—because it’s part of something far bigger.

In Touch caught up with the Eldredges to discuss just what love and war actually have to do with each other.

IN TOUCH: *You’ve said that marriage is basically a love story set in the middle of a war. Most couples show up for their wedding thinking, “Love Story.” Rarely do they think, “War.”*

JOHN ELDREDGE: This comes as a big surprise for most of us. When we encounter so much hardship, disappointment, and real crisis that we can’t seem to find our way through, we think it’s either our fault or our spouse’s fault—we’re just not doing something right. But Scripture tells us that we live in the midst of a spiritual war. It’s such a basic worldview in the Bible. But it can also be a great relief when you realize this: You have a very real Enemy, and it’s *not* your spouse. The Enemy hates marriage, so of course he’s going to throw all kinds of opposition against it. It’s not just you; there’s more going on behind the scenes.

STASI ELDREDGE: So instead of fighting each other, you can fight *for* each other, *for* your marriage.

IT: *Why do you think we so easily forget about the third party involved?*

JOHN: We don’t like that part of reality. It’s just so much easier to blame a person rather than recognize that there is this huge spiritual story going on. We don’t want to have to deal with that.

STASI: And Satan doesn’t

want to be dealt with. He's very good at pulling the wool over our eyes [so we assume] our spouse is just irritating. **JOHN:** Think back to the garden. I mean, Adam and Eve were amazing, right? They weren't fallen, broken, or wounded yet. They didn't even have parents to mess them up . . .

STASI: They lived in a world that wasn't set against them.

JOHN: Everything was right, and yet they both fell into sin. [Satan] is really, really good at getting us to blame something or someone else.



“Learning to love requires having compassion for your spouse’s brokenness while choosing to turn from your own self-protective style of relating.”

IT: *You look around and see marriages falling apart, or the struggle in your own. Yet if God is for marriage and considers it to be extremely important, why do you think He allows Satan to attack marriages so relentlessly?*

STASI: You can look all over the world and say, “Why does He allow *any* kind of suffering or war that’s going on?” It really changes your worldview of who God is. He is after our transformation. This life is a journey of our sanctification and our transformation to become like Christ. And that requires something of us. So it’s almost as if we’re in a training program. He’s given us everything that we need to battle well: the full armor of God; all the authority of

Jesus’ name. He wants us to use it to grow up in Him and to prepare us for the next story, Act IV—what’s coming.

JOHN: I think that’s the other big surprise: that marriage is about our transformation. We think it’s just about our happiness. But God knows that until you’re holy—until you’ve dealt with your brokenness and your sin—you can’t *really* be happy. And there’s nothing on earth like marriage to make us holy, or at least provide the opportunity to become holy (He never forces it on us). It can be a perfect storm because your woundedness, your sin, and your style of relating will collide in devastating precision

with your spouse’s. Yet God is in that. If we embrace transformation as a big part of what He’s up to, it will completely change the way we see our marriage.

It’s all quite hopeful, because these discoveries lead us to the secret of life—that we’re here to learn how to love. And learning to love requires having compassion for your spouse’s brokenness while choosing to turn from your own self-protective style of relating.

STASI: There’s a greater joy to be had when you do rise up, stand firm, and fight on behalf of your spouse and experience breakthrough. When John battles for me, when I rise up and battle for myself and for him, telling the Enemy, *You can’t have us or our family!*—then there’s victory. That leads to dancing and wow, it’s a happy day.

IT: *What does “fighting for yourself” look like on an everyday basis?*

STASI: I can tell you what it looked like this morning. It’s a misty, foggy morning here in Colorado, and that same fog was over my heart when I woke up. I was groggy and *not* happy; I felt discouraged. So I went for a walk and prayed the truth of Scripture, affirming who I am in Christ and who He is to me. I took a stand and said no to discouragement and despair, and aligned myself with the truth that God is the God of all hope. And the discouragement broke off and left. I came back without the heaviness, [but] with confidence in the truth that I belong to God, that life is *good*, and that I have good things to offer. Rather than just moping around and waiting until I could get more caffeine in my system, it looked like choosing to pray first and become aware that *yes, the negative feelings are real, but they’re not my truest reality.*

JOHN: These are the internal choices we make personally that our spouse never sees. It’s really so beautiful, that I’m choosing today not to make an agreement with the lie that marriage is just too much work. Because if we make that simple agreement with the Enemy, some part of us suddenly checks out—we shift it into neutral; we coast.

Then there are those choices towards each other. Sometimes it’s a disarming conversation. Earlier this week, I could tell there was something sort of funky between Stasi and me. You know how there’s just sort of an awkwardness? So I simply asked, “Hon, are we okay? Are you okay?” as a way of inviting a conversation. If something needs to be talked about, let’s disarm it, deal with it. Right here, right now. And so that’s another way. We call that lifestyle warfare. There’s a time where you have to pray directly against the Enemy, and we do a lot of that together. But we can disarm so much potential destructiveness without

it turning into full-blown combat by simply relating well and making choices toward each other.

IT: *Are you saying that it’s about uncovering the “illusion” and trying to affirm the truth or discover the truth together?*

JOHN: Absolutely. It’s amazing how many lies come into our marriages undetected and then just go to work there. *He’s mad at me; she’s mad at me; he’s disappointed with me; she’s disappointed in me; I’m not measuring up.* If we embrace these lies when they come to us, they will define our experience. But instead, you can disarm that stuff by naming it and praying against it, through conversations, through loving choices.

IT: *What about those who feel as if they’re fighting alone for their marriage?*

JOHN: Everyone’s situation or story is so unique that you absolutely have to involve God. You have to turn to Him and ask, *Lord, what should I do?* Sometimes your spouse needs mercy, forgiveness, and longsuffering before coming around; Scripture says that your prayer can have a powerful effect on changing the heart of your spouse. So ask the Lord, *Is this just the time for prayer? Do I just pray for my wife?* Sometimes, spouses need consequences for the actions and choices they’re making towards the marriage. I don’t mean threatening divorce, but they need to know that not investing in the marriage is really hurting you, and you can’t just let that go on. You might insist on going to counseling together, talking to your pastor, and dealing with these things you’re not dealing with as a couple.

When things are hard, you have to stop first and ask, *Why are they hard?* A marriage goes through ebbs and flows; could it be just that? Or is something more

serious going on here? We often leap to conclusions:

I am doing everything, and she's just not invested; or he's the problem here—he needs

to change. Well, actually, God may be up to your transformation.

These hard times may first be about your own holiness, and taking the log out of your own eye before pointing out the speck in the other's eye. We might assume, *It's Satan who's doing this to us*, when it might not be Satan; it might be your own sin. So, pause and make sure that you're looking at things honestly. Don't jump to conclusions.

IT: *What, specifically, are the things a husband or wife needs to fight for?*

JOHN: Here's a great quote. The other night I was talking to my son, who's in college, about how a man fights to rescue “the beauty.” (He had done this for a friend, intervening in a really neat way in her life, conversationally and spiritually). And he said, “Dad, the problem with ‘the beauty’ is that she doesn't *stay* rescued.”

I think what it looks like for a man is not letting your wife's needs or moods overwhelm you. That's offering a genuine strength: *I am not overwhelmed by you; you're not too much.* It means loving like that every day, which can be so assuring to a woman. It's a steadfastness that communicates, *I'm not moved by whatever this crisis is. And I'm not going anywhere; we'll get through this together.*

STASI: I think a lot of that also translates well as to how a woman loves a man. Start by cultivating your first love with Jesus—He does need to be first. There might be this

“It's a steadfastness that communicates, *I'm not moved by whatever this crisis is. And I'm not going anywhere; we'll get through this together.*”

huge aching abyss in my heart that I'm trying to [satisfy] with other things.

But John can't fill it. My personal

struggle is to go to food to fill it, but there's not enough food in the world to [do that].

I need You, Jesus. So, fighting for the heart of my man first means that I am going to Jesus and asking Him, “Rekindle my first love for You, Jesus. I want to love You more.” It means finding Him and walking with Him every day.

A woman needs to be steadfast in offering mercy to her husband. And the affirmation that he is a real man, that she respects and believes in him, and that the world is not going to overwhelm him—he does have what it takes.

And when God is the center, you can affirm [to your husband] that the Lord isn't going away and neither are you—and that through His strength, you're going to make it together. 🙌



Visit www.intouch.org/magazine to read the Eldredges' shared advice for different stages of your marriage, what to do when your spouse isn't meeting your needs, and more.



In their newest book, John and Stasi Eldredge teach couples to fight for their marriage instead of *against* each other. See the order form or visit www.intouch.org.

Love and War

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Extravagant Love

» The Kind of Gift That God Values Most

LUKE 7:36-50



It's easy to recognize Christ's love as extravagant—after all, He gave everything He had. But what can we give back to Him to show *our* love and gratitude? Many Christians make sure they do what they believe is expected of them: being involved with church, gaining knowledge about the Bible, and avoiding immoral behavior (as well as those who engage in it). But is this what makes God feel truly loved?

Luke 7:36-50 tells of a sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet at a Pharisee's home. In this account, the Lord teaches us what showing love for Him looks like—and what it *doesn't* look like.

“Most Christians do what they believe is expected of them.”

Unafraid of drawing criticism or looking undignified, the woman demonstrated gratitude and love by sacrificing all she had. Her lavish deed far surpassed the cultural courtesy expected of the host—who, in fact, actually shirked his

responsibility for the sake of reputation and appearance. The kind of love God desires is heartfelt and focused on glorifying Him, not on looking super-spiritual or “respectable” (Luke 21:1-4).

Only the “broken in spirit” grasp how vital and priceless the Lord's forgiveness is. The issue wasn't whether the woman's sins were greater than the Pharisee's. Rather, she understood her desperate need for Christ, which allowed her to love Him more. God is after authenticity; if we want a deeper relationship with Him, we must come as we are (Ps. 51:17; Matt. 5:3; 9:11-13).

Self-sufficiency and spiritual pride blind us to what God truly values. Humbling ourselves brings us closer to His heart (Ps. 138:6; Matt. 23:12-15; James 4:6-8).

The woman came to Jesus labeled by her sins, but she left with a new identity: forgiven, loved, and accepted by the Lord. When we come to Him without pretense and fully receive His forgiveness, He gives us freedom from our old identity (Eph. 2:4-9; 2 Cor. 5:15-17).

Questions for Reflection

1. How do you show your gratitude and love for God?
2. Are you quick to repent and admit when you are wrong, or do you consider it more important to appear righteous or even superior to others?
3. What would giving your best to God and “laying down your life” look like in your current circumstances?

solving**problems**

SEEING THE



BIG BLUE SKY

God is not our memories or fantasies; He's right in front of us.

BY TONYA STONEMAN

THEY call Montana “Big Sky Country” because the sky takes up two-thirds of the landscape. Despite the towering mountains that stretch out for miles and the vast grassy plains, the sky gives you a glimpse of infinity here on earth. Over-sized cartoon clouds leave giant shadows on the prairie below. As I travel from Roundup to Grass Range, I feel like I'm driving in an IMAX movie. I am engulfed by my surroundings, yet I don't feel insignificant. The crisp, chilly air and the fir trees and the old-world telephone poles remind me so much of home that I slip into a peaceful state of nostalgia. It's an open range, so I have to stop periodically to let cows or deer make their way across the road.

I live in the city now, and I don't want to go back there. I want to pack my bags and move out here. This isn't the first time I've felt this way, and I'm already dreading the reentry process when my visit is finished. I'm here to see my very best childhood friend. Celeste and I have seen each other only once in the past 12 years despite the fact that we used to be utterly inseparable.

Last summer when I was having a strangely awful time in Paris, I received an e-mail. My family had been unable to reach me, so this was their only means of communication. Celeste's husband Mark had died tragically while lifting weights

one afternoon. The funeral had come and gone while I was vacationing on an island with no telephone.

After a long cry, I called Celeste. Her voice sounded strong and stable when she answered, but broke when I told her it was me. We wept together, and then she told me she was worried about her babies. She said that the morning after Mark's death, she had awakened to the feeling of his warmth next to her in bed—but then turned over and he wasn't there. She put on his robe and went out to the porch where they used to drink tea together in the mornings.

I ached for my good friend and felt like a loser for not being there to ease her pain. I went outside and took a walk through the gardens near my apartment. I wanted to share the beauty around me with her. And him, too. The cafés, the music, the cobblestone streets—I began to imagine Mark and Celeste relishing it all. Everywhere I looked, I saw both of them. My mind could not conjure an image of her without him. We agreed that I would go to Montana in the fall when all of her visitors had gone and she needed company.

The two-hour drive to her house gives me time to settle from the business of traveling and my hectic life. I've brought coffee from home in case the country folk here don't have the good stuff. I shouldn't have bothered.

As I crest a hill and drive down into a valley, I see a gigantic sign looming 20 feet tall on the horizon. It's literally the only indication of civilization aside from fences and roads. It's a long way off, but big enough to read from a distance: ESPRESSO. "You've got to be kidding me," I say, as if somebody can hear. It turns out the coffee is amazing.

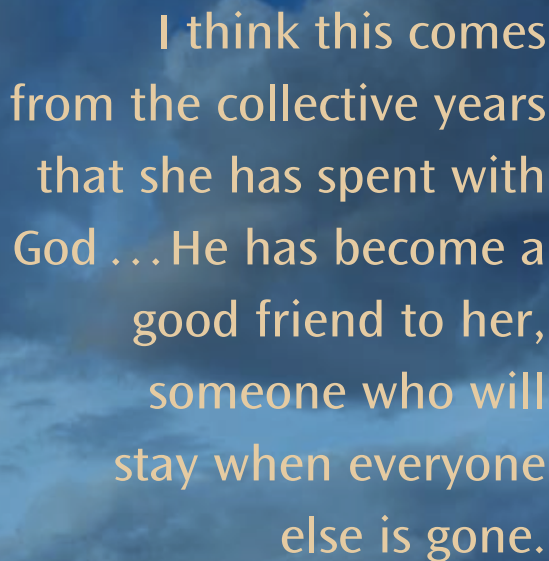
vegetable at the supermarket. We laugh remembering the crazy things we used to do together—I had forgotten all of these memories. I had forgotten how to laugh like this. I'm envious of my friends, of their serene, earthy life and their camaraderie. They are blissfully unaffected by the vain cares of society. None of them owns a television. After dinner, they sip cowboy coffee

and sit around the kitchen table playing word games. Nobody is in a hurry.

Everybody's dishes and stoves are worn—so shabby they're chic. The saucers and bowls have stories to tell. Nothing matches. I think of my self-centered world back home, how I'm irked by my hodgepodge cutlery. All my friends have state-of-the-art kitchenware. (Funny, though, their meals are no better.) It's silly to think of these things—except that we do it all the time. Whether we obsess about our dishes or our careers or our houses or bank accounts or social connections, we pin our hopes on things.

It's not necessarily important to distinguish what exactly captures our devotion. The point is what these things represent. They

are objects of our desire, and they can quickly turn into aspirations. Dr. Zhivago wants to break free from the prison to which his war-torn country has exiled him. He has an affair to sate his starving heart. Jay Gatsby wants to be an aristocrat. He buys a fine old house, fancy cars, and clothes to convince others he is one. Captain Ahab wants to conquer his adversary. In pursuit of victory, he chases the



I think this comes from the collective years that she has spent with God ... He has become a good friend to her, someone who will stay when everyone else is gone.

Hardly any time passes before Celeste and I fall into the familiar routine of talking the hours away. It's just the way it used to be, only it's not. We're 40 now and Mark is dead and everything is entirely different. We meet up with her little sister, who lives on a 9,000-acre cattle ranch. She has about 600 cows, and her garden is bigger than my house. She tells me her goal is to get through the winter without buying a single

white whale to his own watery grave. None of these people find what they really want, but they all die trying.

I drive through the snowy hills of Montana, wanting to live in a world that feeds my hunger for beauty, wanting close friends and pursuits that invigorate, wanting to be free of stress, comparisons, and idleness. I crave the affirmation of knowing that I matter a great deal. But I'm pretty sure that, like the characters I read about, I won't find what I'm looking for by moving across the country.

A girlfriend who is unmarried recently told me, "Most Christians have a place in their life where they experience some kind of longing. Whether a person wants a spouse, a child, a career, a relationship with a parent, financial security, a clean slate, a house, to be healed from a sickness, to be freed from an addiction, or to escape from a Communist country (she's Cuban) . . . whatever . . . How does a believer deal with unrequited desires in a godly manner? How do we trust God whether or not that yearning is ever fulfilled in our lives? And how is God using it all to draw us closer to Himself? That's what we need to know."

It's so easy to romanticize other people's lives. I think of the days I spent living in France feeling miserable. Despite the remarkable world around me, I felt lonely there. My rudimentary language skills made it difficult to connect with others, and even mundane tasks were often trying. At the same time, I remember the day I forsook the mountains of my youth in exchange for a city, thinking rocks and streams could not console me the way people could.

Is a person ever home while living here on earth? My pastor says that to commune with God is to live in the present. The way he puts it, God is not in our memories or our fantasies, but is right

here in front of us. We miss life when we live for the past or the future.

Celeste takes me to see Mark's grave—something I have nervously anticipated. He's buried beneath a stalwart maple tree just a few blocks from their home. She can go visit anytime she wants. His resting place is peaceful, and she does not cry when we are there. I am certain Mark would be happy with this.

She makes me a bowl of wedding soup, pours me endless cups of Paris tea, and even sends me out for a massage (though she has little money). I'm struck that my dear friend cannot stop ministering to me despite the fact that I have come to help her. Can she really see the thirst inside of me? Or is she just so fulfilled that grace spills out of her, even in her time of need? In many respects, I'm jealous of Celeste. Amazingly, I'm envious of my friend who has just lost her husband and faces the future alone. She has learned to commune with God in this present world full of spiritual poverty. There is genuine tranquility in her soul.

I think this comes from the collective years that she has spent with God, a little bit each day. In the evenings, when the children are in bed, she sits in her living room and reads from the Bible and prays. He has become a good friend to her, someone who will stay when everyone else is gone. She sees Him everywhere—in our afternoon walks, in the neighbors who help with household repairs, in the songs of Ella Fitzgerald—and is not remiss in thanking Him for His faithful provision to her.

As I make the long drive away from Celeste's house, I decide I will take something of her with me—I will notice the signposts of God's favor along the way. A smile stretches across my face when, once again, I pass the agrarian espresso stand on Route 87. ☺

by **faith**

curing
Love's
inevitable
side-effect



my boss had just asked whether I would be willing to go to Pakistan this summer if need be, and I'd said yes. Then, the latest Humanitarian Policy Group report on providing aid in insecure environments crossed my desk.

It made for very sobering reading.

Apparently, the relative rates of attacks upon aid workers has risen more than 60 percent in the last three years, with a particular upswing in kidnapping, which has increased by more than 350 percent. The most dangerous location for aid workers remains the road, with vehicle-based attacks by far the most common context for violence. And the 2008 fatality rate for international aid workers exceeded those of UN peacekeepers.

On the bright side (if you can call it that), this massive spike in violence appears to be driven mostly by incidents in just a handful of countries. Namely, Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Chad, Iraq, and . . . Pakistan.

This has evoked, yet again, something that's come to mind much more frequently since meeting Mike and getting married in one delicious yearlong whirlwind—which has brought great love and much happiness into my life. But right alongside has come something else. Something I hadn't expected.

Fear.

Not fear for myself. There are certain risks you run when you travel to Third-World countries, but there are also certain risks

you run traveling on Los Angeles freeways. When people ask me about this “risky travel” aspect of my work, I sometimes laugh and quote writer Nevil Shute: “To put your life in danger from time to time breeds a saneness in dealing with day-to-day trivialities.” But I know it's possible—likely, even—that I have the luxury of this flippancy only because so far, I've escaped being on the wrong end of a carjacking, kidnapping, or serious accident. At some deeper level, I probably still believe that “it won't happen to me.”

The problem with this is that I seem to be incapable of applying that same casual tolerance to the risks my husband runs. When it comes to him, there's *no* comforting illusion of invulnerability. After my stints working in a prison, with the police, on a child-death review team, and in trauma relief, I know full well that *it could happen to him*. And when I really think about it, this terrifies me in a way I have never experienced before.

I've never thought of myself as someone who's prone to catastrophizing—that is, taking a small thought or passing fear and following it doggedly until it dead-ends in a worst-case scenario. But lately I've found myself wandering more and more often down those sorts of grim imaginary rabbit trails. The other day, I was stopped at the red light when a car coming the other way lost control, skidded across the intersection, jumped the curve, and sliced the top off a fire hydrant. As water shot 20 feet into the air, it took only two seconds for my brain

*facing the complications
of caring* BY LISA MCKAY

to leapfrog from *Is that woman okay?* to *What if someone had been standing on that corner?* to *What if that someone had been Mike?!*

I don't even need that sort of drama to push me down these mental paths. While Mike was away in Papua, New Guinea, for work last month, I found myself at odd moments toying with the idea of him being mugged and knifed in Port Moresby. While driving to the airport to pick him up, I thought of plane crashes. It's as if, without really wanting to, my mind is trying these thoughts on for size, pushing me to answer the questions that automatically follow:

What would you do then, huh? How would you cope?

And perhaps I keep circling in this direction because I just don't know how I'd bounce back from that. Logically, I know people do. I know that if one of these awful scenarios were to unfold, there's a very high likelihood I would eventually recover to be a walking, talking, functioning member of society. I would probably be able to smile and mean it. I would probably one day even be happy again. But when it comes to this topic and these musings, logic fails completely to breathe life into my imagination. While I can picture the possibility of pain all too well, I can't really see how I'd get past that.

in starting to track these depressing mental calisthenics during the last couple of weeks, I've noticed something else too. A fragment of a single Bible verse is usually trailing quietly on the heels of the bleak visions, towing its own set of questions in its wake: "Perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18).

I had never thought much about this verse before, except to wonder why it was fear that is driven out and not hatred, or apathy. After all, I've heard it said that the true opposite of love isn't the passionate intensity of hate at all, but the emptiness of indifference. Yet lately I've been seeing it differently. Perhaps it's inevitable that the more you value something, the more acutely you realize what its loss could cost you—and that as love grows, so does fear. Perhaps the point of the verse has never been about banishing love's antithesis, but the inevitable side-effects that accompany it.

Thinking through an interdependent link between love and fear kept me occupied for a couple of weeks before those five words confronted me with a second issue: What does perfect love look like, then? If love and fear truly are connected, logic suggests that perfect love would simply breed perfect fear, not cast it out.



In this chaotic and uncertain world, it's only in the context of a love which outstrips and outshines my own that I stand a real chance of untangling my two intertwined emotions.

When I finally went to the source, I learned that the word behind the translation of “perfect” in this verse from 1 John is a form of *telios*, which doesn’t mean *flawless*, but rather, *fulfilling its purpose* or *becoming complete*. *Telios*, in turn, is derived from *telos*, which means *to set out for a definite point or goal* or *the point aimed at as a limit*. When I put this all together, here’s what I think John was aiming at with the expression “perfect love”: a rooted and growing love. A love that is firmly anchored in some sort of external, defined, and stable point, but ever-transforming into a greater and more expansive state of completeness at the same time.

But then just what *is* that external, defined, stable point or outer limit? No one gets any prizes for guessing John’s answer to that question: God. And in a circuitous metaphor that is truly mind-boggling, John also asserts at least twice in that same chapter that God *is* love.

to be honest, this doesn’t sit entirely comfortably with me. Independent to a fault, I like sorting out my issues by myself and on my own terms. The last thorough personality profile I took bluntly informed me that I had “a defiant nature.” When, in the middle of our wedding ceremony, I stumbled on the vows Mike and I had memorized, I didn’t look for a prompt from the very person I was promising to spend the rest of my life loving; I narrowed my eyes and whispered, “Don’t help me!” I don’t *want* to need a God the way five-year-olds need a nightlight to soothe fears of shadows in the closet—even if that God is the very embodiment of love.

But without Him in the equation, love and fear seem locked in a cyclical struggle for dominance—a struggle that *my* love, in its own strength, just can’t win. As long as I’m looking only at my husband, my love

will always be threatened by the awareness of potential loss. That loss might not come this year, or next, or for 40 years. But it is always a distinct possibility. In this chaotic and uncertain world, it’s only in the context of a love which outstrips and outshines my own that I stand a real chance of untangling my two intertwined emotions. Relying on that perfect love is the only way I’ll be freed to nurture love without also nourishing fear.

Considering the embodiment of love and trustworthiness he had witnessed with his own eyes, John sketched out the core of this dynamic in 13 simple words—words that I hope will, in time, come to my mind as readily and vividly as all the catastrophic possibilities I’m so talented at conjuring: “And so we know and rely on the love God has for us” (v. 16).

Because whenever I sit with the mystery those words represent, when I really savor them, I breathe a bit more deeply. And as my lungs fill with air, pushing against my chest from the inside, I sense my love expanding too—growing just a tiny bit more perfect, making room for peace, edging fear out just a little more.

Fear will never leave permanently in this life, I’m guessing. Casting it out is going to be something that happens in fits and starts. In steps forward and steps backward. In a rhythmic, intentional orientation and reorientation that will hopefully get both easier and faster as we put our hope into practice.

My husband gives me reason to believe that’s the case, anyway. I’m perfectly confident that he loves me, so perhaps he’s currently much more practiced than I am when it comes to waging war on fear. Either that or he hasn’t read the HPG report yet, because when I told him I may be headed to Pakistan this summer, all I got was, “Oh.”

There was a very long pause, and then bright hope.

“Can I come?” 💎

From Small Beginnings to Great Endings

»How I Paid Off My Mortgage With Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwiches

BY BILL PROVENZANO



When I became a trader at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, I continued bringing my lunch to work each day, even though my income had increased substantially. By brown-bagging my noon meal, I saved about \$105 per month. In order to leverage that savings, I created the “Index Card System,” which ensured that the money I saved each month was redirected purposefully, not wasted. I wrote the months “January” through “December” and “\$105” on index cards and placed them among my regular monthly bills. Then, when my mortgage was due, I sent an additional \$105 towards its principal balance. As a result of sticking to the Index Card System, I knocked seven years off of the life of my mortgage and saved almost \$14,000 in interest.

“Find “brown bag” opportunities to save money, and be intentional about redirecting those savings to pay off what is owed.”

The Index Card System can be used to eliminate any debt. You just need to find “brown bag” opportunities to save money and be intentional about redirecting those savings to pay off what is owed. Consistency is the key to slowly but surely wiping debt out of your life forever.

Overwhelming debt, however, can be discouraging. The hill looks too high to climb; the finish line seems too far away. Scripture reveals that this is exactly how God’s people felt as they went about the daunting task of rebuilding the temple. The Israelites’ enthusiasm ebbed and flowed during the project. Their discouragement was a result of wanting to see bigger and more immediate results. Zechariah 4:10 tells us that in the midst of their impatience, God told them, “Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin” ().

*In Touch Foundation
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or call 800-967-2200*

For many years at the Mercantile Exchange, I stood in the trading pit next to a guy named Joe. He had a great saying: “Small chips make big piles.” As you intentionally apply your small chips towards existing debt, you will, over time, see those small beginnings produce a great ending! Liberated from the shackles of debt, you will be in a position to redirect that money to fund the kingdom. With new focus, you can be the person who “gives freely, yet gains even more” (Prov. 11:24).

Bill Provenzano is founder of Upside Breakout, a biblically based coaching and mentoring program for traders.

Outsourcing Worry

» Giving God Our Cares

BY LINDA CANUP



I was reading the other day about a man who wanted to outsource his life. After delegating work tasks and other personal responsibilities, he decided to subcontract his anxiety. So he hired a virtual assistant in India to worry for him.

It worked spectacularly. Any time he started fretting about the things he'd told his assistant to worry about, he stopped himself and thought, *You don't need to concern yourself with this; [name] is worrying about it for you.* This allowed him to focus on the tasks he needed to accomplish that day without the interference of nagging anxieties.

What a wonderful idea to apply to our spiritual relationship with God:

“[He's] way better than a virtual assistant worrying for us, because we've given our anxieties to the One who can truly make them disappear.”

We ought to be outsourcing our worries to Him! It's way better than a virtual assistant worrying for us, because we've given our anxieties to the One who can truly make them disappear. Our concerns are not simply put aside or made to be somebody else's burden. They are

acknowledged and resolved by the Lord Himself.

You might be thinking, “That's sweet—but a little too simple for my life.” I wouldn't blame you. It's hard to stop worrying about where you'll get the money to pay your mortgage or the possibility that your ailing parent might not get better. I'm not trivializing these things. In reality, though, whether your worries are big or small, only God can truly take care of them.

When I concentrate my efforts on giving God the big stuff during sustained prayer and “outsourcing” the little stuff to Him as it crops up (“Lord, I'm late for work and I've lost my credit card—I'll let You deal with that for now”), life becomes a little easier.

It's amazing how things seem to miraculously work themselves out: lost stuff reappears; I make it to work with time to spare; another parent at the soccer match has a spare jersey for my kid; there's money left over at the end of the month. When this happens, I don't outsource the praise!



What do you do when you start to worry? Can you remember when you learned to give your concerns to God? Share your tips and tales at www.intouch.org/rebeccacorner.



ONE WRONG CAN MAKE A RIGHT

HELPING YOUR KIDS LEARN FROM YOUR MISTAKES

BY RICHARD VANCLEAVE

I knew I'd blown it. My son had spent the day with me for "take your child to work day." We had a great time, and we even convinced the maintenance team to give us a tour of the "haunted" tunnels under the old hospital where I work. Later, there was a cake and ice cream affair for the kids. Everything was going great. Then, it happened.

I have a coworker who, to put it one way, has different values for his children than those I choose for my own. He's a nice guy—don't get me wrong—just different values. Earlier in the day, I had to ask his daughter (my son's age) not to finish a crude joke. We were able to avoid most conflicts around these differences throughout the day. Then, as the end of

the afternoon approached, my coworker and his kids began viewing an online video of a comedian they often watch at home. My son and I stared at the screen as the comic told jokes that were definitely not appropriate for a nine-year-old. The worst part was, I laughed a few times at the inappropriate jokes before realizing what was happening. A sense of shame crept over me as I knew what my son must be feeling: disappointment.

I'd waited too long to bring the situation to an end, and even gave the impression that what we were laughing about was all right with me. I had that sick feeling you get when your kids are watching you do something that is the exact opposite of what you've taught them.

On the way home, my son said, "You laughed because you were trying to make them think you thought it was funny—to not hurt their feelings." He said it in a way that showed he was trying to defend my actions. It was not what I wanted him to learn from the incident—that's its okay to compromise your standards just to protect the "feelings" of others. I knew I had to rectify the situation.

There's a part of us that wants our kids to think we're superheroes. It's easy when they're four or five: everything you do is right. I used to tell my son, "Everyone makes mistakes," and his quick comeback was always, "Not you." I would laugh and try to explain that of course I made mistakes. Back then, he wasn't convinced of my fallibility. I was floored how anyone, especially my own son, could think I don't make mistakes. What I've learned since then is that being looked up to isn't the only reason to "do the right thing" as a parent.

Beyond our need to be respected by our kids, there are other legitimate reasons for being a good example. As parents, we strive to "train up a child in the way

he should go" (Prov. 22:6), and we inherently know that the best way to do so is by example. So we strive to do things the right way, to walk the walk and not just talk the talk. But sometimes—more than we'd like to admit—we fail.

Thankfully, trying to do everything right is not the only way to be a great example. There's another way: by showing them how to deal with mistakes. Proverbs tells us that a fool never learns from his mistakes (26:11). Shouldn't we show our kids how not to be foolish? We can demonstrate how to recover from the inevitable failures they will encounter in life.

The first step in teaching your kids how to learn from your mistakes can be intimidating: admitting that you've made one. From there, you can use the situation as a learning opportunity. What did you do wrong? Why was it wrong? How would you do it differently next time? Our kids need us to be strong. But they also need to know that we are strong enough to admit when we're wrong. Don't we expect the same from them? Besides, what child wants to have to live up to the (false) image of a perfect parent?

My conversation with my son about the work incident ended better than I expected. I told him, "No, what I did was wrong. That's my fault. I made a mistake."

We talked about it a while longer. Once I had admitted I was wrong, the conversation was easy. The weight of trying to be perfect in his eyes was lifted, and we could talk about how to deal with these types of issues when they come up in his life.

I walked into the situation wondering how my son would deal with my blunder. I left with a sense of accomplishment as God helped me turn the failure into a success. My son summed up perfectly what had happened:

"Its okay. No one's perfect, Dad." 🙌

stronginspirit



[A Matter of the Heart]

CONNECTING EMOTIONALLY WITH GOD

BY CHRIS TIEGREEN

"I feel like a new Christian," my friend told me. He wasn't—not at all. But like me, he had recently discovered a new dimension to his relationship with the Lord. God was showing both of us, as well as several of our friends, what it means to share His heart.

It felt like a spiritual awakening.

This awakening couldn't have come at a better time for me. Not long before, I was almost at the end of my rope as a follower of Jesus—burned out and completely unmotivated. I felt dry, barren, and unfulfilled. For years, I had pleaded with God to help me know Him more deeply, and I'd done all the things my solid evangelical training had taught me to do. I studied the Bible, prayed persistently, obeyed as well as I knew how, read lots of good books on how to live the Christian life, and worked hard to make an impact for His kingdom. I gained a lot of head knowledge and did a lot of good things, but I still didn't feel connected to God. The "abundant life" I'd been promised didn't seem very abundant.

I had always been taught that the Christian life was simply knowing God's Word and doing it—a practical obedience that doesn't rely on desires and feelings. So anytime a personal preference or honest emotion would rise up within me, I would "take it to the cross" and leave it there. After all, feelings have nothing to do with discipleship when it comes down to it, do they? I'd heard it preached plenty of times: *Faith isn't a feeling, love isn't a feeling, you can't trust your feelings*, and so on. No, discipleship was supposed to be about truth alone. And I was determined to live in it.

THE WHOLE PERSON

What was wrong with my picture of Christian discipleship? Well, for starters, it completely ignored about a third of my personality—or *anyone's* God-given per-

sonality, no matter what temperament. We were created as complex people, our soul encompassing at least three main aspects of who we are: the mind, the will, and the emotions. In Mark 12:30, Jesus made it clear that He desires us to love Him with *all* of us, yet the discipleship I was trained to ascribe to emphasized only the mind and the will. I'd been taught that what we need most is to study God's Word and apply it—in other words, it's all about understanding the truth and then living it out. That's the Christian life. Or so I thought.

We can be pretty inconsistent about this. When our understanding doesn't line up with God's truth, what do we do? We try to conform our mind to what we know to be Christ's. When our behavior doesn't line up with His instructions, what do we do? We try to conform our actions to the example of Christ. But when our feelings don't line up with His heart, what do we do? We cast them aside and tell ourselves that feelings just don't matter and can't really be trusted. That's two-out-of-three discipleship, and I'm pretty sure God isn't satisfied with it.

And, when I got honest about it, neither was I.

HOW WE CONNECT

God designed us for relationship, and relationships consist of emotional bonds. We know that by the ways we connect closely with other people. This doesn't happen simply through shared information or shared experiences. You can sit in a long class or business meeting sharing a lot of information with a lot of other people, but your relationship with them may not be any deeper after the meeting is over. You can watch a movie with a group of friends but have a completely different reaction to it than they do, and not feel any closer.

The key isn't the facts you're exposed to with others or the situations you encounter together. Closeness is created by the shared emotional responses to that information and those experiences. When our feelings line up with someone else's, we feel a connection. When they don't, we don't. That's how we bond in a relationship.

It's the same way with God. He doesn't tell us just to learn His attributes and be able to describe what He is like, or even just to obey Him. He calls us into a relationship—one that is deep and intimate. We're supposed to grow continually closer to Him throughout our lives. That simply can't be done apart from our emotions. When we eliminate feelings from the discipleship process, we're bypassing the one component that creates closeness in a relationship. If we don't learn to feel the way He feels, we don't connect; we never really know Him.

I believe feelings are the missing ingredient in most people's discipleship. This is why many of us feel empty or distant from Jesus in spite of His promise of an abundant life. Scripture is clear that God has a whole range of emotions—love, joy, delight, zeal, anger, and even jealousy, to name a few. We were designed to have His heartbeat: to come to feel the way He feels, love what He loves, get angry about the things that anger Him, and feel compassion when He feels compassion. But far too often, when He stirs up feelings within us—or even just wants us to confront our own human emotions—we push them aside, thinking it's safer just to focus on knowing and doing. We rely on our own intellect and willpower. The result is that we learn a lot and perform some good works, but our heart doesn't beat with His.

CONFORMED TO HIS IMAGE

God's desire is for us to be made in the likeness of His Son. This means that we'll be moved with compassion—Jesus cer-

tainly was (Matt. 14:14; Mark 1:41; 6:34). It means we'll look on some situations with anger, as He did (Mark 3:5, 11:15-16). It means we may offer up some of our prayers with loud crying and tears (Heb. 5:7). If we're going to be like Jesus, we'll need to be pretty emotional.

I know how unconventional this idea can seem. I have encountered some pretty confused or even negative reactions when I've been interviewed on this topic. "Surely you aren't saying we decide what's true based on our feelings, are you?" one interviewer asked. Of course not. God's truth is true whether we feel warm and fuzzy about it or not. The emotional side of discipleship has nothing to do with apologetics or the objective reality of Scripture.

But we can't grow closer to God without connecting to Him through our emotions. Just as a married couple doesn't develop a deeper bond by hanging their marriage certificate on the wall and staring at it together, we don't connect with the Lord simply by memorizing truth and agreeing with it. We grow closer to Him as we go through experiences with Him and learn to feel His heartbeat.

When we ask, His indwelling Spirit will help cultivate in us the emotions He already has. Instead of saying our feelings don't matter, we bring our heart into alignment with His and embrace the feelings that we share. Why? Because real relationships were designed to flourish at a heart level. And God desires nothing less from us than a real relationship. 🌱



For more on this subject, purchase Chris Tiegreen's book. See order form or visit www.intouch.org.

Feeling Like God

► Softcover | \$14 (U.S.)

Terry Brown

» Communicating Christ

BY PATSY MELVILLE



Jesus likes Terry Brown. She talks to Him every day, especially at work. As an emergency room nurse, she meets a lot of people with questions about God. When she speaks about her divine friendship, patients almost always ask for prayer.

“Last week, a 52-year-old guy came in with a backache,” she says. “We checked him and he was full of cancer. I prayed, ‘Okay Lord, what do You want me to say?’ Those are the moments where you want to be bold enough to share your faith. I told him, ‘Jesus likes me. When I talk to Him today, I’ll pray for you.’” The man reached out and held onto her hand for a long time without

saying anything.

Sharing her faith is something Terry is good at, and she’s passionate about helping others do likewise. This year she realized a long-term goal by launching Communicate Christ, a multi-media campaign to share the gospel. The cornerstone of the initiative is a simple bracelet stamped with the word *COMMUNICATE*.

“A major factor is that people don’t grasp the power their words have—for bad or good.”

“Today we live with amazing electronic media and a million ways to communicate, but we still don’t get it right,” she says. “Kids don’t talk to parents; parents don’t talk to kids. So many relationship problems stem from our failure to communicate.” A major factor, she contends, is that people don’t grasp the power their words have—for bad or good.

The idea behind the bracelet is that a believer wears it and, upon sharing Christ, passes it along to that person. In this way, the bracelet moves from one individual to the next; a tracking number allows its progress to be followed on www.communicatechrist.com.

Since opportunities are unpredictable, Terry always wears her bracelet. She notes that people in need of good news are everywhere—not just in obvious places like the ER—and Christians should be prepared to share their hope (1 Peter 3:15).

Terry is inspired by the people who led Dr. Charles Stanley and Reverend Billy Graham to Christ. A firm believer in what she calls “the power of one,” she hopes to help others realize how speaking about Jesus can have widespread influence. “Wouldn’t it be great,” she asks, “to know that by sharing their faith they can impact millions?”



To order your bracelet, visit www.communicatechrist.com.

READ | PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8

In our world of electronic banking and charge cards, it's easy to ignore what things cost. The same is true with sin. Our culture enjoys temporary pleasures while disregarding what God says is the price of transgression (Rom. 6:23a).

The Bible tells us what it cost Jesus to pay for our sin. For our sake, He suffered . . .

Physical pain. In the hours leading to His crucifixion, Jesus was mocked, beaten, and humiliated. In His weakened state, He was forced to carry the instrument of His death—the cross. Then He was nailed to it and hoisted up to die an excruciating death.

Man's sin. Jesus lived a perfect life on earth and never knew the disgrace of sin or the bitterness of regret. But at the cross, the Father placed all of mankind's sins upon the Savior (2 Cor. 5:21). There, Christ experienced the fullness of our transgressions, guilt, and shame.

Abandonment. In the final hours, Jesus was separated from His Father (Mark 15:34), their fellowship broken for the only time since eternity past. Our sin became the barrier that kept them apart until Christ's work of atonement was finished (John 19:30).

Divine judgment. God's wrath was poured out upon our Lord because of man's sin. Christ experienced the condemnation that we deserved.

EARLY LIGHT

Our Savior suffered greatly on our behalf. He gave His life so we might become part of God's family (John 1:12). He calls us to a life of sacrificial service—doing the Father's work and living to please Him. In light of what our salvation cost, how can we do anything less?

READ | ROMANS 3:10-12

Some people believe that good works are like a "get out of hell free" card. What these folks do not realize is that an individual isn't condemned by the Lord because of the things he *does*. He is condemned because of what he *is*—a person with a spirit bent away from God. We choose to sin because it is our nature to do so.

To find proof that mankind does not naturally obey, all one has to do is observe any two-year-old child. Why does a toddler tug on the lamp cord after his mom says, "Don't touch!"? His impulse to do what he wants is greater than his desire to please Mother.

Complying with authority is a choice that we learn to make. In the meantime, we all have a rebellious nature. Not one single person is good enough or wise enough to remain sinless and pleasing before the Lord. Therefore, we have all sinned and are under a death sentence (Rom. 3:23; 6:23).

The Word of God says that until the moment of salvation, we are dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). This means that although the body has not yet undergone physical death, the spirit is lifeless apart from the Lord. We are helpless to save ourselves.

EARLY LIGHT

We are a people in need of rescue. The instant we receive the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior, our spirit is brought to life and our heart undergoes transformation. In the moment that God saves you, He makes you into a new creature—one with a nature surrendered to Him and His will.

4 *The Danger of a Hardening Heart*

READ | HEBREWS 3:7-19

God repeatedly calls to His children, but the condition of each heart determines the result. Those with soft and tender hearts hear His voice and yield to Him in obedience, but those with hard hearts resist His warnings and instructions. Surprisingly, upon hearing the same voice, some believers are motivated to a deeper and more obedient relationship with the Lord, while others reject and refuse Him.

Since hardening is a slow process that's often accompanied by rationalizations and excuses, the danger signs may not be readily recognized. How do you respond when the Lord speaks to you through His Word, your conscience, or messages based on Scripture? Carefully consider the following characteristics of a hardening heart:

- Insensitivity or resistance to what God says
- Refusal to put yourself under His authority
- Disobedience to what you know the Lord is instructing you to do
- Justification of sinful conduct
- Resistance to the reproof of others
- Preoccupation with the things of this world (career, relationships, possessions)
- Little interest in spiritual matters
- Absence of private devotion (Bible reading and prayer)
- Avoidance of public worship (gathering with other believers)

EARLY LIGHT

A hard heart does not have to stay in that condition. If you have discovered any of the above traits in your life, begin today to return to the Lord. Ask Him to give you a new heart to know Him (Jer. 24:7). Remember, He specializes in making all things new (2 Cor. 5:17).

5 *Developing a Tender Heart*

READ | EZEKIEL 36:25-28

The Lord wants to give each of us a "heart of flesh" so that we will be pliable and responsive to Him. When touched by the finger of God, a tender heart yields to the pressure and assumes the form He desires, much like a lump of clay that allows the potter to determine the shape of the vessel.

To aid in this process, God has sent the Holy Spirit to indwell each believer and awaken responsiveness in him or her. By yielding to the Spirit's promptings with ready obedience, the heart becomes increasingly tender and sensitive to His leading. The Lord is able to impart greater understanding of His Word to a soft heart because it has faithfully accepted and obeyed previous teachings.

Any resistance to God will result in hardening. But those who are accustomed to intimacy with Christ—which is the result of submission to Him—will be quick to deal with sin and return to the place of obedience and blessing.

People with tender hearts stay closely connected to the body of Christ, seeking to build up and encourage others in their walk of faith. Such individuals are not only receptive to what God wants to tell them; they are also teachable, in that they are willing to listen and be corrected by others.

EARLY LIGHT

is week when you read your Bible and pray, let your heart be soft toward the words of God. As He pokes His finger into each hard area, listen to His instructions, and rely on the Spirit's power to help you yield and obey. Let Him shape you into a beautiful and useful vessel.

READ | 1 CORINTHIANS 2:12-3:3

Living accommodations vary widely in the physical world, ranging from mansions to crude shelters. In the same way, the spiritual realm also has different levels.

In our passage today, the Lord reveals three ranks of spiritual life:

1. The Natural Man—Everyone who has not accepted Christ as his Savior is in this category. Many in this group are capable of good deeds, but since their sins remain unforgiven, they are separated from the Lord. Because the Holy Spirit does not dwell within them, they cannot understand the things of God.

2. The Spiritual Man—This group is composed of Christians who are filled with the Spirit and surrendered to His control. Though they're not perfect, they are quick to recognize transgression, confess sin, and genuinely repent by turning back to God. Because the Holy Spirit is ruling in their lives, He is able to guide them by offering wisdom and insight into spiritual things.

3. The Fleshly Man—This designation describes believers who are trying to live in two different worlds. At salvation, all Christians are given a new nature, but the old "flesh" patterns aren't removed. By allowing residual sinful tendencies to dominate their lives, these people are quenching the Spirit within them.

EARLY LIGHT

You are in one of these three categories. Take some time to evaluate your life by asking, *Where am I now? Where would I like to be?* The Lord will help those who want to move closer to Him. Ask Him to work in your life to bring you to the place of the spiritual man.



READ | HEBREWS 5:11-14

Yesterday we learned about the three levels of life. Today our focus will be on the fleshly man. Sadly, many Christians are stuck on this plane of existence. They try to obey the Lord, but the old "flesh" keeps emerging. Life is a roller coaster of spiritual ups and downs.

Sometimes this condition is due to ignorance. There are many people who fail to realize that 1) this lifestyle is not meant to be the norm for believers, and 2) the Lord has given us everything we need to live a godly life (2 Peter 1:3-4).

However, the primary reason believers live fleshly lives is because they have not yet made up their minds who will be in control. There is something they are unwilling to surrender to God—it could be a desire, habit, or source of security or pleasure. Another possibility is that they have sensed His call on their lives but are running from Him in fear or rebellion.

The consequences of living this way are devastating. Without the Spirit's governing control, the carnal Christian is spiritually immature and ruled by his own desires, rights, and expectations. Because he has not applied previously learned biblical truths (milk), he cannot understand the deeper things of Scripture (meat). The result is stunted spiritual growth.

EARLY LIGHT

If you find yourself described here, take courage. You do not have to remain in this condition. What are you holding onto? Letting go can be very difficult, but the power of almighty God resides within you through His Spirit. Relax your grip, surrender to Him, and rely on His strength.

tuesday

9 *When the Odds Are Against You*

READ | JUDGES 7:1-8

The story of Gideon offers scriptural guidance for times when the odds are overwhelming and defeat seems imminent. No matter what your challenges are, the Lord is able to demonstrate His awesome power and deliver you.

God uses difficulty to build faith.

Gideon was willing to believe God and go up against an army four times larger than his own. Trusting the Lord is a process which must be learned through experience. At times God takes the people He uses and places them in impossible situations—in that way, they discover that He is faithful. We may prefer to acquire faith by reading a book, but the Lord knows that the best classroom is a place of utter helplessness.

God may require us to do what seems unreasonable. The Israelites were already outnumbered, but the Lord instructed Gideon to reduce the army to a mere 300 men. That made the odds 450 to one! Although God's ways may seem illogical to us, His wisdom and power are far greater than ours, and His plan can be trusted.

God leads us to do that which brings Him glory. The army was now so small that its men could in no way take credit for the victory. The Lord delights in demonstrating His awesome power and glory through our weakness and inadequacy.

EARLY LIGHT

Consider life's challenges as opportunities for the Lord to build your faith and prepare you for ministry. He uses those who are willing to obey Him even when the task seems illogical or impossible. And He takes pleasure in showing His faithfulness to those who trust in Him regardless of the situation.

THE BIBLE IN
One Year

NUMBERS 1-3

on obedience

"The golden rule for understanding in spiritual matters is not intellect, but obedience."

—Oswald Chambers

"I was not born to be free. I was born to adore and to obey."

—C. S. Lewis

"Nothing is really lost by a life of sacrifice; everything is lost by failure to obey God's call."

—Henry P. Liddon

"You may as well quit reading and hearing the Word of God, and give it to the devil, if you do not desire to live according to it."

—Martin Luther

"When God gives a command or a vision of truth, it is never a question of what He will do, but what we will do."

—Henrietta Mears

"If two angels were to receive at the same moment a commission from God, one to go down and rule earth's grandest empire, the other to go and sweep the streets of its meanest village, it would be a matter of entire indifference to each which service fell to his lot, the post of ruler or the post of scavenger; for the joy of the angels lies only in obedience to God's will, and with equal joy they would lift a Lazarus in his rags to Abraham's bosom, or be a chariot of fire to carry an Elijah home."

—John Newton

"Obey God and leave all the consequences to Him."

—Charles F. Stanley

"It is much safer to obey than to govern."

—Thomas à Kempis

READ | JUDGES 7:9-25

God providentially orchestrated each element of His plan for Israel's success. However, if Gideon had disobeyed even one divine command, his army would have suffered instant defeat. Although the Lord's ways may seem risky or illogical, we can always trust His indisputable wisdom and rely on His mighty power.

God encourages the fainthearted.

When the Lord commanded Gideon to attack the enemy, He also provided a way to relieve the leader's fears. By following God's directions, Gideon was led to the exact location where he would hear an encouraging message that caused him to bow in worship and arise with great faith.

God removes the things we depend on.

Gideon was marching to war with only 300 men armed with trumpets, pitchers, and torches. Their manpower seemed pitiful, and their weapons useless for battle. With traditional means of victory removed, they could rely only upon the Lord.

God works in the enemy's camp on our behalf. Everything is perfectly timed when God is in control—even the parts we cannot see. While Gideon was obeying each divine command, the Lord was working behind the scenes in the enemy camp to ensure victory for Israel. In the confusion and fear of darkness, their panic led to self-destruction.

EARLY LIGHT

e key to a victorious Christian life is obedience. e Lord will faithfully supply you with instructions for each step as you follow Him. His way may not be the easiest or the most comfortable, but it is always the best. As you rely on Him, He will lead you to victory.

READ | GENESIS 25:19-24

Do you ever feel as though you are missing out on God's rich blessings? Certainly hardship is a part of life, and we can't have everything we ask to receive. But if we act foolishly, we might also miss out on some of the good things the Lord has in mind to give us.

That is exactly what happened with Esau in today's passage. He was famished when he returned from a hunting trip. His brother Jacob offered a bowl of soup in exchange for Esau's birthright. And the trade was accepted.

Doesn't it seem foolish that this older brother would make such a swap? Yet we, too, can give up what is excellent for temporary satisfaction, if we're not careful—that is, if we are spiritually shortsighted.

A person acting in this way exhibits certain characteristics. For one thing, he makes decisions based on today, without considering tomorrow's consequences. Next, he is blind to life's essential values, giving higher priority to his appetites and emotions than to the Lord. In addition, he's willing to sacrifice what is lasting for something that brings only fleeting satisfaction. Similarly, he focuses on things that are temporal and not eternal. Finally, he makes decisions in times of physical, emotional, or spiritual weakness.

EARLY LIGHT

At the time, it may seem desirable to base a decision upon an immediate want. But are you willing to pay the price for that kind of shortsightedness? It will never satisfy your heart. Instead, rely on God's Word for truth, and let His Spirit guide you in making every choice.

READ | PSALM 119:103-105

Have you ever chosen a certain path, only to find yourself regretting that decision later? Life consists of a series of choices, some as small as what to eat for dinner, and others with eternal impact.

Facing these crossroads can seem overwhelming, but Scripture offers guidelines to give us confidence and direction. Therefore, as decisions are imminent, we should keep the following in mind:

First, God promises wisdom to His children who ask with faith (James 1:5-6). His Spirit also resides within believers and is available for guidance. Too many Christians try to weigh the pros and cons themselves, and they miss out on the magnificent help from the all-knowing One.

Second, we should delve into the Bible, asking God to open our eyes to His truth and His way. The Lord promises that His Word never returns void (Isa. 55:11). And if we memorize and meditate on Scripture, He will bring the truth to our minds at the appropriate time.

Third, we are wise to be aware of our mental state as we approach decisions. The acronym “H.A.L.T.” stands for *hungry, angry, lonely, and tired*—four states in which we will likely make poor choices. It is well worth waiting until a better time when considering options.

EARLY LIGHT

Our choices determine our direction, so consider carefully how you make decisions. Scripture is clear that we see dimly (1 Cor. 13:12); God alone sees the “whole picture.” It is vital, therefore, to rely upon His wisdom, truth, and direction every time we select an option before us.

READ | LUKE 15:11-24

At times, those of us reading Scripture in English are short-changed by the language’s limitations. For instance, English has just one word for *love*, whereas Paul’s original letters, written in Greek, use two words. Believers are promised that God’s love will reside in them (Eph. 3:19). But they often think that refers to a brotherly concern and affection for others (*phileo*). In fact, the Holy Spirit shows *agape* love in us—a commitment to another person’s satisfaction, security, and development. We have the same capacity for sacrificial love that Jesus showed at Calvary.

Jesus subtly described the power of sacrificial love in His parable of the prodigal son. The father must have recognized that greed and wanderlust were gnawing at the young man—and that denying his request for an early inheritance would lead to bitterness. So, despite personal and financial sacrifice, he gave the son his share. Then, the father waited patiently while the prodigal learned his lesson.

No doubt that was a trying time—a good dad wants to protect his children from making mistakes. But a wise man also knows that people often must discover hard truths for themselves. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do is to get out of their way.

EARLY LIGHT

The prodigal son returned home dirty, contrite, and seeking a place in the servants’ quarters. What he received instead was the full force of his father’s love and instant restoration to his place as the master’s son.

It is *agape*, and it is the kind of love that wins hearts and minds for the Lord.

I Will Sing of My Redeemer

I will sing of my Redeemer,
And His wondrous love to me;
On the cruel cross He suffered,
From the curse to set me free.

I will tell the wondrous story,
How my lost estate to save,
In His boundless love and mercy,
He the ransom freely gave.

I will praise my dear Redeemer,
His triumphant pow'r I'll tell,
How the victory He giveth
Over sin, and death, and hell.

I will sing of my Redeemer,
And His heav'nly love to me;
He from death to life hath
brought me,
Son of God with Him to be.

(Chorus)

Sing, oh, sing of my Redeemer,
With His blood
He purchased me,
On the cross He sealed my pardon,
Paid the debt, and made me free.

Lyrics: Phillip Bliss, 1876

Music: James McGranahan, 1877

READ | LUKE 15:25-32

The story of the prodigal son gives us a wonderful illustration of God's love. Jesus told the Pharisees this parable to reveal how the Father cares for human beings and delights when an errant child returns home. However, the Pharisees were lovers of law, order, and the appearance of righteousness. They probably identified more with the angry sibling than with the prodigal or the father.

The older son had already allowed bitterness to take root as a result of his younger brother's departure. Even so, he was apparently proud of his appearance as the "good son," just as the Pharisees would have been (Matt. 23:27). Often forgotten in this story is the fact that there was an inheritance for the older brother too—the land he was working and the animals he tended would all one day be his. In other words, he lost nothing when the wanderer returned.

Yet the brother was eaten up with anger. Instead of rejoicing over the prodigal's return, he complained about the celebration (vv. 29-30). Jesus' unspoken question to the Pharisees was this: Which son is it better to be like—the one who repented of wasting his inheritance or the one who served the father but showed no love to his contrite brother?

EARLY LIGHT

Human nature often desires recognition for doing right and yet begrudges a celebration for someone else. However, the believer has taken on Christ's nature. Through His Spirit, we can love those who need it most and rejoice with them in their triumph, even when our own victories go unnoticed.

16 *The Truth
About the Trinity*

READ | JOHN 14:26-27

The word “Trinity” cannot be found in the Bible, but the truth of it can. While there’s only one God, the Godhead consists of three distinct persons—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All are equally omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal, and unchanging, but each one has unique functions.

Scripture shows how each member of the Trinity fulfills His specific role, and it also reveals how those three roles interrelate. Let me express this idea in simple terms: The Father creates a plan, Jesus Christ implements the plan, and the Holy Spirit administers the plan.

The way of redemption showcases these roles in a clear manner. The Father designed and organized how mankind would be redeemed (Gal. 4:4-5). He set into motion a complex set of events, actions, and prophecies which culminated in the life and death of a Savior. The Son carried out the plan (John 6:37-38). He followed the Father’s instructions to come to earth, even though that meant He would have to die. The Holy Spirit sees to it that every person feels a call toward God’s saving grace (John 14:26; 16:8; Romans 1:19-20). Furthermore, He transforms the lives and hearts of those who receive salvation through Jesus Christ.

EARLY LIGHT

e Father, Son, and Spirit are equal in their divine attributes. Yet each relates to mankind in a different way because He has a specific role. It’s very important to understand this distinction: We do not have three gods; we have one God in three persons functioning uniquely and perfectly.

17 *God in
Three Persons*

READ | MATTHEW 28:18-20

Years ago, after I preached about God’s Spirit, a woman came up to complain, “Why do you talk about the Holy Spirit when people need to hear about Jesus and God?” Sometimes even those who have been Christians for a long time regard the Trinity as a hierarchy. To their way of thinking, the Father is God, Jesus is slightly beneath Him in rank and seniority, and the Holy Spirit is their servant. While this may conform to human models of authority, it is not biblical.

According to the Scriptures, all three members of the Trinity are fully God:

- **God the Father**—Jesus Christ referred to His Father as God (John 6:27).
- **God the Son**—John 1:1 identifies Jesus as divine. While Christ never specifically called Himself “God,” His Father did apply the title to Him (Heb. 1:8). Furthermore, Jesus acknowledged having unlimited power—an attribute possessed only by the divine Creator (Matt. 28:18)—and also accepted worship (Matt. 14:33; John 9:38).
- **God the Holy Spirit**—After declaring that God raised Christ from the dead, the New Testament goes on to credit the Holy Spirit with the resurrection (Acts 4:10; Rom. 8:11). Jesus reinforced that idea when He commanded the disciples to baptize new believers in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

EARLY LIGHT

e Bible confirms that each member of the Trinity is equally God. e Father, Son, and Holy Spirit function as a unit—no one is more important or less essential than the others. All three are focused upon their plan for mankind: salvation, transformation, and glory for God.

thursday

18

*God Makes Us
to Be Like Him*

READ | ROMANS 8:28-31

The Lord manifests His love for mankind in many ways, including a beautiful planet filled with creation's wonders, the promise of His care and protection, and an offer of eternal life with Him. But have you ever considered that God also shows His care through the transformation of His children? The Bible tells us that He is in the process of conforming believers to the image of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29).

In the beginning, God's design was to make humanity in His image (Gen. 1:26). But the plan seemed disrupted when Adam and Eve succumbed to temptation. Of all the privileges they forfeited—Eden's perfect environment, harmony in relationships, and a pain-free life—the greatest loss was their likeness to the Creator. A sinful man and woman do not look much like their holy God. Since each of us has inherited the first couple's "flesh" nature, *we* don't closely resemble Him either.

God wasn't surprised by this turn of events. His plan went on just as He'd always intended, in that He still provided salvation for mankind. Through Jesus Christ's sacrifice, sins are forgiven and the sinner is reborn as a holy and blameless person. The Holy Spirit enters each new believer's life and begins molding the renewed heart and mind into Christlikeness.

EARLY LIGHT

Like any good Father, God is pleased by a child who resembles Him. He is glorified when we put Scripture into practice and act like Him, talk like Him, and live like Him. What could bless the Lord's heart more than for you to bear His likeness to those around you?

THE BIBLE IN
One Year

NUMBERS 25-27

friday

19

Walking by Faith

READ | 2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-8

In the Christian community, we often hear the term *faith*. However, when such a word is used frequently, it can become familiar, and then we sometimes grow immune to its great depth of meaning. So today, we will consider what faith actually entails.

All people have faith. For example, it takes a measure of confidence to sit down in a kitchen chair without first testing its strength. Yet belief in the fact that furniture will hold our weight is quite different from entrusting almighty God with our lives. A wrong judgment concerning the first may result in a physical bruise, whereas the latter determines not only our success in this life but also our eternal existence.

So what, exactly, is a biblical definition of faith? Hebrews 11:1 tells us that it is "... the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." And we know that it is impossible to please the Lord without faith (11:6). In fact, there is nothing we can do that will earn salvation; the only way to heaven is by having confidence in Jesus' substitutionary sacrificial death on the cross, which paid the penalty we owed for our sin. What's more, faith is nothing we can create within ourselves; Scripture is clear that it is a gift of God (Rom. 12:3).

EARLY LIGHT

Have you accepted the Father's gift of faith and embarked on the wonderful journey that He invites you to share with Him? God responds to searching hearts. If you are unclear whether you have trusted your life to Him with full confidence, ask Him to guide you and reveal truth.

THE BIBLE IN
One Year

NUMBERS 28-30

READ | DEUTERONOMY 10:12-13

The Bible portrays the Christian life as a walk. It speaks of walking in the Spirit, in God's ways, in love, and in truth. Our lives, then, shouldn't be stagnant; they ought to move and develop to be increasingly like Jesus'. Scripture calls this "sanctification."

But what if you feel that you're going *backward* instead of forward? Do you know how to turn around? Only by faith in Christ can any of us move in the right direction. Here's how to correct your course:

- First, have assurance that God keeps every promise. The Bible contains an amazing number of guarantees for believers, including wisdom for the asking, God's constant presence, and peace when we focus on Him.
- Second, anticipate the Father's response. In other words, prepare for what He will do because of your confidence in His promises.
- Third, be aware daily of His involvement in your life. By spending time in the Word, prayer, and meditation, you will become sensitive to what He is doing.
- Fourth, pray boldly because you are God's child (Heb. 4:16). Approaching the Father in such a manner isn't a prideful confidence, but an overflow of your assurance in Him.
- Finally, obey the leading of the Holy Spirit. This is the true test of your belief—in fact, the Bible says that without action, faith is dead (James 2:17).

EARLY LIGHT

Can you sense that your life is progressing and you are maturing into Christ's likeness? Or do circumstances and character traits seem to hold you back? God promises to continue making His children beautiful throughout their lives. You can resist Him or cooperate with His gracious work in you.

READ | ROMANS 12:1-13

Do you feel ill equipped to serve the Lord? A sense of inadequacy is one of the many excuses people use to avoid ministering for Him, but it is not a valid one. Failing to follow His call has three consequences: 1) we hinder God's work on earth, 2) we miss a blessing for obedience, and 3) we lose out on rewards in heaven.

Jesus Christ knew all about the human tendency to feel inadequate. That is why He assured His followers they would receive a Helper—the Holy Spirit—who would come to abide in them forever. The Spirit enables, energizes, and equips believers to serve the Lord. One of the ways He aids us is by providing spiritual gifts, which are special capabilities given to believers.

Our heavenly Father has a ministry in mind for each of His followers. Therefore, necessary spiritual "equipment" has been selected to help us carry out His work. These gifts will complement and augment the natural talents our Creator built into us before birth. It is His purpose that we combine the two in order to serve Him with all of our heart. Even the smallest job contributes to the Great Commission and the strengthening of Jesus Christ's body, the church.

EARLY LIGHT

The Lord has a plan for every believer. To ensure that we can meet the Lord's expectations, He first builds natural talents into us. At salvation, He adds a spiritual gift.

When God opens doors of opportunity and the Holy Spirit manifests His power so that we can carry out the work set before us.

tuesday

23

A Gift for Every Believer

READ | 1 PETER 4:10-11

Even though the Bible clearly states that every believer receives a spiritual gift, some people nevertheless think they were overlooked. So these men and women mosey through life refusing opportunities to serve. Other folks are so busy wishing they had a different ability that they do not use the one bestowed by the Holy Spirit. Both of these attitudes are sinful.

God has a specific purpose and ministry for every Christian. Our spiritual gifts help us to fulfill His plan. We learn which one (or ones) we possess by getting involved in the life of the church. In other words, a believer will know his divinely appointed abilities when he begins to exercise them.

Moreover, God has a general purpose for handing out spiritual gifts. Christians exercise their special skills for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7). Everyone profits when believers do God's work though the power of the Holy Spirit. We're to use our gifts for equipping, edifying, and encouraging one another (Eph. 4:11-13). To appreciate how this works, we may have to broaden our understanding of words like *evangelist*, *prophet*, and *teacher*. Biblically, these terms describe co-laborers who share Christ, spiritual mentors who explain biblical truths to new believers, friends who uplift the discouraged, and others doing similar work.

EARLY LIGHT

Every member of the Christian fellowship is important, and each one has a work to do. There are no excuses for bypassing God's will. Where He has gifted us and opened doors of opportunity for ministry, He also provides the strength and courage to exercise our abilities.

THE BIBLE IN
One Year

DEUTERONOMY 1-3

wednesday

24

Confronting Closed Doors

READ | ACTS 16:5-10

Facing a "closed door" can be extremely frustrating. The apostle Paul knew exactly how that felt. On his second missionary journey to share the gospel in Asia, he repeatedly found the way blocked by the Holy Spirit. Eventually the apostle was stuck in Troas with the sea before him and closed doors behind.

How strange it must have seemed to Paul that God would prevent him from spreading the gospel. But he knew this wisdom from the book of Proverbs: The Lord will make a straight path for anyone who chooses to trust God rather than himself (vv. 3:5-6). Instead of getting angry or trying to force his way into new territory, Paul got on his knees.

The Bible does not record how long he and Timothy lingered in Troas, but we can be sure that the apostle did not move until the Lord revealed the entrance to a new mission field. Christians in a period of watchful waiting should view the situation as a chance to seek not only God's purpose but also His guidance. This is the time to ask the Lord why He has barred the way forward—perhaps the timing is wrong or we need to deal with unconfessed sin. Whatever the reason, we must be sensitive to the Spirit's leading. We want to be ready for the door that *will* open.

EARLY LIGHT

When an opportunity is blocked, God has a reason. And He is providing love and protection, even in your disappointment. The Lord is also keeping His promise to work everything for your good (Rom. 8:28). When one door has closed, a greater one is about to open. Be wise and watch for it.

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READ | JEREMIAH 10:23-24

A blocked opportunity is a useful tool for teaching. God's ultimate objective is to mold us into the image of His Son, and toward that end, He at times prevents us from doing or having something we desire.

- **Closed doors prevent mistakes.** Just because a path is clear does not mean it is the one God intends for us to follow. Sometimes we won't have the information we need to make a wise decision, so He bars the way either spiritually or physically. The Holy Spirit can see the whole road map for our lives, which is why we are to follow His guidance.

- **Closed doors redirect our walk.** Rest assured, God never leaves a willing servant with nothing to do. The alternate opportunity He has in mind will yield bigger fruit, more satisfaction, and greater glory for Him.

- **Closed doors test faith and build perseverance.** Waiting for the Lord to speak or act is hard, particularly when our desire has been denied. But we'll learn wisdom, patience, and trust by pausing prayerfully until He reveals His will.

- **Closed doors buy us time.** We are not always as prepared as we'd like to think. God may temporarily hold shut an opportunity for service until a believer is properly equipped for kingdom work.

EARLY LIGHT

Despite the repeated references to "closed doors" in this devotion, the real message is that God *opens* doors. He has created a perfect pathway for us to follow. Keep your feet on it, and you will walk over thresholds leading to service, satisfaction, and glory for your Lord.

"And He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief" (Matt. 13:58).

"Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, 'Why could we not drive it out?' And He said to them, 'Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you'" (Matt. 17:19-21).

"And he said, '... If You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!' And Jesus said to him, "If You can?" All things are possible to him who believes.' Immediately the boy's father cried out and said, 'I do believe; help my unbelief'" (Mark 9:21-24).

"And Jesus said to him, 'Receive your sight; your faith has made you well'" (Luke 18:42).

"Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me" (John 14:1).

"For we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7).

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (Heb. 11:1, 6).

"What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead" (James 2:14, 26).

READ | GENESIS 39:1-20

Abiding in God's will requires a steady, trust-filled focus upon Him. The life of Joseph provides us with a good illustration.

Keeping our eyes fixed on the Lord helps us remain faithful in the midst of hardship. Joseph's brothers hated him so much that they sold him to a caravan on its way to Egypt. Upon arrival, he became the slave of Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh's guard. Joseph handled his betrayal and bondage in a godly way. Instead of becoming bitter or refusing to cooperate, he chose to perform every duty with excellence. As a result, he was promoted to oversee Potiphar's household. The entire time, Joseph kept his gaze centered on the Lord who prospered him.

Having a focus of faith allows us to avoid temptation and choose godliness instead. Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce Joseph, but he rejected her advances. When he refused to sin against God (v. 9), she falsely accused him of attacking her—and her lies were believed. Ignoring Joseph's record of hard work and faithful service, Potiphar unjustly imprisoned him. Had we been in Joseph's place, we might at this point be asking our heavenly Father why this happened—or thinking how unfairly we were being treated. However, Joseph did not turn his attention away from the Lord. His belief continued to sustain him.

EARLY LIGHT

Adversity reveals the substance of our faith. In hard times, we discover how much we really trust in the Lord. If doubt about God and His promises takes root in our thinking, it can lead us off His chosen path. Because of Joseph's steady belief, he recognized God's constant presence and flourished.

READ | GENESIS 39:21-40:8

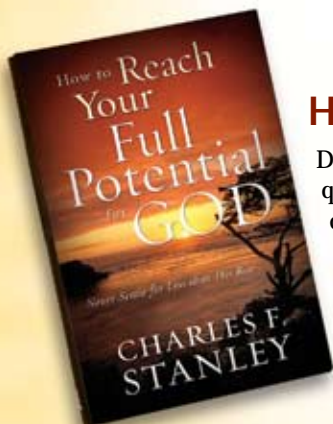
If anyone had reason to be discouraged, Joseph did. His mother died when he was a boy. His brothers hated him, sold him into slavery, and convinced his father that he was dead. Joseph worked hard in Potiphar's household but ended up in prison because of false allegations. Yet he was not an angry person.

The Hebrew slave maintained his faith-filled outlook because he consistently relied upon God, who remained with him and gave him success. Even in prison, Joseph was given responsibility over others (v. 21). Like that righteous young man, we might also be "held captive"—by unemployment, ill health, or a difficult relationship. In those hard places, we can nevertheless experience our Father's presence and thrive: His Holy Spirit will produce godly fruit in us when we depend upon Him (Gal. 5:22-23).

Regardless of his circumstances, Joseph refused to focus on himself. When two royal servants were jailed, he had compassion for them and gave them aid. In times of both blessing and crisis, we are to help others in whatever ways we can (2 Cor. 1:3-4). And notice, too, how Joseph didn't shrink back from speaking boldly about God to these men and to Pharaoh. He told the Egyptian leader that the answer he sought would come from the Lord (Gen. 41:16).

EARLY LIGHT

Whether enslaved, imprisoned, or serving as Pharaoh's second-in-command, Joseph flourished. He endured much hardship but saw that the Lord had used it for good (Gen. 50:19-20). Because the Holy Spirit's presence is in us, we, too, can have a faith-filled perspective that glorifies God.



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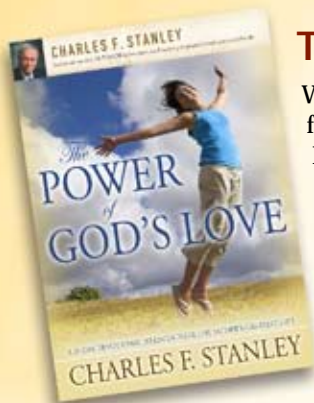
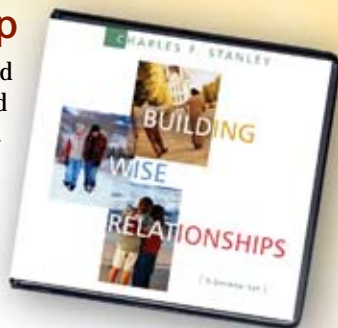
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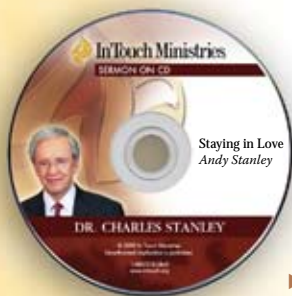
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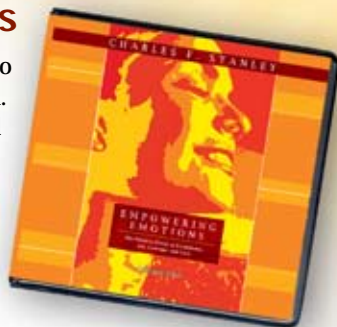
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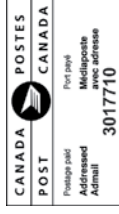


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