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This photo, which I took on a trip to California, is a reminder that there's no guarantee we'll see the path ahead, even when we are following God's will for our lives. What we can always count on, however, is that He will help us reach our full potential if we'll follow Him in faith (Hab. 3:17-19).

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NEW ZEALAND OFFICE, Box 33-1260 Takapuna, Auckland 1332 0-800-446868
www.intouch.org

All prices are in U.S. dollars unless otherwise noted.

E-mail magazine-related comments to magazine@intouch.org.

For Customer Care, call **800-789-1473** Monday–Friday, 8 A.M.–8 P.M. (ET).

For Canadian telephone orders, call **800-323-3747**.

To discontinue receiving this magazine, or to report receiving multiple issues, call **800-789-1473**, or e-mail customer@intouch.org. Please include your name and address.

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DR. STANLEY PORTRAITS
BY DAVID SMITH.



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A Publication of
InTouch Ministries
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*To lead people worldwide
into a growing relationship
with Jesus Christ
and to strengthen
the local church*

Finding God's Will

» Operating Within His Boundaries



With so many changes in our world these days, people everywhere are asking, “How do I find God’s will for my life?” Businessmen who have relied on their company’s loyalty for decades are suddenly wondering how they’ll support their families. College graduates who had planned to enter a career are finding it’s almost impossible to get work. People are losing their homes and their vocations, and in the midst of it all, they are losing their sense of direction in life.

How does a CEO prepare a résumé and start all over again? And how does a single mother find a new home for her family? Why would God let this happen, and what does He intend for us to do about it?

First, it is important to know that the Lord does have a plan for each of

Many accept Jesus as their Savior but avoid making Him Lord over every area of their life.”

our lives. And when we operate within its boundaries, we soon discover His will for the many situations we face. Jeremiah 29:11 tells us that God’s plan includes the future—He sees the big picture when we can’t.

But living within the will of God requires something from each one of us. We must yield our lives through personal surrender

to Jesus Christ. Many accept Jesus as their Savior but avoid making Him Lord over every area of their life. They believe that He died for their sins and yet continue to spend their money and time without a second’s thought about what God would have them do.

Faced with a certain death, Jesus prayed, “Not My will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42). The surrender of Christ is our standard. When you surrender to God, you no longer choose to live your life for yourself; instead, you are deciding to live the way He has chosen for you. That means very real changes will take place in your daily activities.

The Lord takes every part of the believer’s life—the good and the bad—and weaves all of it together to form a beautiful work of art (Rom. 8:28). Some people can’t imagine how God could possibly bring good out of their situation. But He does it every day.

a barometer



for spiritual growth

13 signposts to mark your progress

BY CHARLES F. STANLEY

A lot of people fall away from the will of God without even noticing until they're in deep trouble. Because it is easy to stray from the path that the Lord has set for our life, we are wise to check ourselves once in a while. Spiritual growth is a tricky thing to track, let alone outright define. We are called in 2 Peter 3:14 to "be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless." By "diligent," Peter means that we are always to be on alert, with our mind focused on our development in Christ. Yet how can we best measure that growth?

I certainly do not claim to have it all figured out myself, but after decades of studying God's Word and pastoring thousands of men and women, I recognize several markers that are helpful in tracking spiritual growth. These are all things that we can expect to take place as we grow more mature in our faith.

Let's run down a list of 13 different spiritual signposts that we can use to mark our path toward maturity. I encourage you not to read this article just once and then set it aside. Instead, take out a slip of paper and write these things down to keep in your Bible. This list can be a reference for believers who want to grow in their faith.

1 **A hunger to know God more**

If we are maturing in our Christian walk, then we will certainly have a growing hunger to know God. We will not be satisfied with how well we know Him or His ways; instead, we will constantly yearn for deeper understanding of our Father.

2 **A desire to know the truth of the Word**

If we are growing in the Lord, then we will want to know what He says about everything. A vital part of our maturity is understanding the power and relevance of God's Word for us today, in every area of our lives. We must seek to discover what Scripture says about our families, relationships, ministries, churches, careers, politics, and every other aspect of life.

Let me ask you a tough question: How much time do you spend reading the Word of God, compared to the time you spend watching television, reading magazines, or scanning newspapers and Web sites? I know that it is important to stay up-to-date on world events, but we must be careful not to give too much of our time away to worldly things. Personally, I would much rather know what God has to say than what man has to say.

3 **An increasing awareness of our sinfulness**

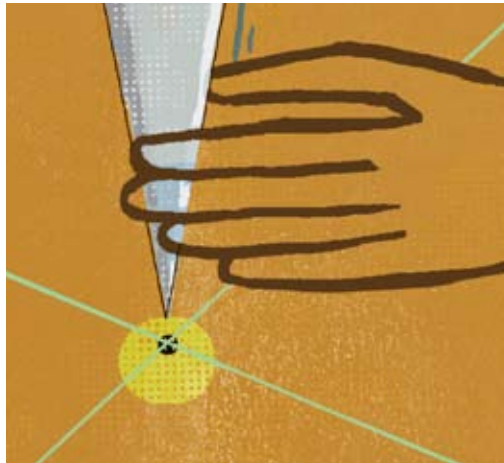
As we grow closer to the Lord, we become more and more aware of our desperate need for Him. This doesn't mean that mature Christians should view themselves as worthless or devalue their self-worth in any way. Rather, this awareness means that our maturing spirit simply will not tolerate the same sins that once came so easily.

At salvation, we become new creations (2 Cor. 5:17), but as long as we remain in our earthly bodies, we're subject to the human drives and desires of the "flesh."

However, when we abide in the Holy Spirit, those things are brought under His control, and we become increasingly aware of our own weaknesses. By recognizing these "danger zones," we can more effectively guard against them.

4 **A quick response to sin, involving genuine repentance**

Immature believers put off dealing with iniquity for as long as they can. Many people even admit, "Well, I know God will forgive



me anyway, so I'm just going to hang on to this sin for a little longer." What a horrible misuse of the grace of God.

When we are growing spiritually, we will no longer be able to loiter so effortlessly in sin. Then if we should stumble, we will want to bring that offense to the feet of God and repent of our actions as quickly as possible.

5 **Joy in the midst of intense spiritual battles**

As we mature in our faith, spiritual warfare will become more intense. This means that our problems may seem bigger and our temptations more inviting. However, as we trust in the Holy Spirit, we can still rejoice, because we know that God is in the process

of developing us into mature believers. Every time He brings us through a battle, we are left with the assurance that there is nothing beyond His power to overcome.

Understanding trials and temptations as opportunities for growth

When do you think Christians grow more—during times of hardship or times of success? The truth is that we generally learn the most about the Lord during those periods when everything seems hopeless.

Mature believers show confidence in God by asking for bigger and bigger things while allowing the Holy Spirit to guide their requests.

Even though the situation is painful, mature believers recognize the potential for God to reveal Himself in a mighty way.

When our backs are against the wall and we have no choice but to trust the Lord's power to see us through the trial, we discover things about His character that could not have been revealed otherwise. In that, we find that the benefits far outweigh the losses in our struggles (2 Cor. 4:17).

Viewing service to God as an honor, not a burden

If we are growing in the Lord, we will want to serve Him. You have most likely heard the old adage, "Love is spelled T-I-M-E." My friend, if you love the Lord, you will want to show that by giving Him your time.

What's more, the motivation for your service will be *love*, not responsibility or

obligation. No one will force you to serve God. However, if you are maturing in the Lord, you will truly enjoy the time you spend in service to Him. This doesn't mean you must keep your life filled with "busy work." Remember that even though we're called to serve, we are also called to observe a day or season of rest. God wants us at our best, but that cannot happen if we take no breaks and work ourselves to exhaustion.

Viewing everything both good and bad as coming from the Lord

Too often when tragedy occurs, we try to *protect* the Lord by saying, "Well, surely God had nothing to do with that." My friend, God does not need our protection, nor does He need us to make excuses for Him! If we are to be mature believers, then we must understand the Father's complete and total sovereignty. In other words, everything that happens—whether good or bad—is under His control.

At times we may not understand the Lord's purposes for certain things; nevertheless, we are to trust that His will is perfect and He is able to bring good out of any situation. It is important that His children believe what He says in Romans 8:28—that God can and does work all things together for good to those who love and serve Him.

Faith to ask God for bigger things

As we mature in Christ, so does our faith and confidence that God will answer our prayers. The Lord wants us to pray big; there is nothing we can ask that will be too much for Him to accomplish.

Of course, His answer may be "No," but God is honored by the size of our requests. It takes a great deal of faith to ask for something that seems impossible. Mature believers show confidence in God by asking

for bigger and bigger things while allowing the Holy Spirit to guide their requests.

Eagerness to share Christ with others

One of the signs that you are growing in the Lord is that you cannot stay quiet about it. God's overwhelming grace may overtake you in such a way that you just *have* to tell someone what He is doing in your life.

As our faith matures, we develop a heart for other people. And since we know what God has done for us, the most sincere way to help others is to share the good news of Jesus Christ. When we are overcome with the need to tell others, we can be sure that God is doing a mighty work in our lives.

Earnest desire to give to the Lord's work

One key evidence of a believer's maturity is what happens to his pocketbook. Over and over again, Scripture warns us about the dangers of money. Did you know that Jesus taught more on this subject than any other topic in the Bible? The issue is that if we are unfaithful with something as temporary as our money, why should we expect God to entrust us with something of eternal value?

Our checkbooks are little windows into our souls. If we are not faithful in that area, then every other part of our Christian life will be skewed. Matthew 6:21 reveals that the heart—our true focus—will be where our treasure lies. If your heart is for ministry, then you will give gladly to the work of the gospel.

An increasing awareness of God in every area of life

A mature believer is one who is constantly aware of the presence and work of God. First Thessalonians 5:16-18 tells us that a growing Christian prays continually. This does not mean that we must walk around every moment of the day with eyes closed

and head bowed. Rather, it is an instruction to abide in the presence of God at all times.

A true believer cannot compartmentalize his life. This means that the person you are at church on Sunday is the same as the person you are during the week at home, work, or school. Faith is not a part-time commitment. If we are believers, we must believe at all times.

The priority of a personal devotional life

The most important part of the day for a mature believer is the time dedicated solely to growing closer to the Father. It is then that we are filled with power, direction, and comfort. Our time of devotion sets the tone for the whole day; if we frantically rush through praying, chances are great that our day will be unorganized as well. A Christian who is truly growing in the Lord will certainly guard that precious time with Him.

What now?

The purpose of this list was not to give a precise report card evaluating whether or not you are "mature." Rather, it is meant to provide a type of measuring stick by which you can assess your Christian growth.

Again, I encourage you to keep a copy of this list in your Bible. Pull it out occasionally, and for each point, ask yourself, "Is this true of me, Lord?" I pray that as you honestly go through this process, you will discover over time that you are, in fact, changing into the person God wants you to be. 🙏



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Team Effort

» All Kingdom Roles Are Significant

ACTS 10:1-48

BY JENNIFER DEVLIN



The football year is coming to a close, and we're entering "bowl season," when the best teams rise to the top. Fans show support by cheering, wearing certain colors, and chanting a high scorer's name. But regardless of who gets the official title of "most valuable player," it's important to remember that the team is made up of a larger number of supporting roles, each of which contributed to success.

An analogous situation can be seen in the local fellowship, where even the least noticeable or impressive members are vital for the whole body to function properly (1 Cor. 12:22). We can also draw parallels to the first-century church. Colossians 1:18 identifies Jesus as head of the church; His disciples and others like Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Barnabas (Acts 15:22; 16:1) actively spread the good news of the gospel throughout the world. But Scripture

“Many lesser-known heroes of the faith helped Christianity to thrive.”

tells us that many lesser-known heroes of the faith helped Christianity to thrive. They are the ones who:

Acknowledged the work of God and spoke words of affirmation and direction.

- ▶ *Anna, the prophetess, recognized the baby Jesus as the one who would redeem Israel (Luke 2:36-38).*
- ▶ *Gamaliel, Paul's teacher, told protestors not to stop the disciples, acknowledging that if they were working with God, nothing could stop them (Acts 5:34-39; 22:3).*

Served at pivotal moments in Jesus' ministry.

- ▶ *A boy gave his lunch away—and the Lord fed thousands with it (John 6:1-14).*
- ▶ *Simon the Cyrene carried the cross for Jesus (Matt. 27:32).*
- ▶ *Joseph of Arimathea donated a tomb and helped with the Lord's burial (Mark 15:42-46; Luke 23:50-53; John 19:38-40).*

Helped the early church grow.

- ▶ *Lydia, a fabric merchant, helped plant a church after her household was converted (Acts 16:13-15).*
- ▶ *Cornelius, after receiving a vision from God, invited Peter to visit his home and preach the gospel (Acts 10:1-48).*

Questions for Reflection

1. Do you see your role in the church as pivotal? Why or why not?
2. How can the Lord use you and your specific gifts to further His kingdom?
3. Are you willing to commit to God's "team," no matter what He calls you to do?

i didn't want to
be a christian,



But...

How running away can take you on an unexpected journey

BY JOSEPH BENTZ

Sara Miles did not want to be a Christian. Anne Lamott did not want to be a Christian. C. S. Lewis did not want to be a Christian. Neither did R. A. Torrey, Ziya Miral, Lin Yutang, Jim Vaus, or a dozen others I could name.

How do people find God when they're running away from Him as fast as they can? As those of us who have agonized over our spiritual journeys know, it's hard enough to find Him when you're searching for Him with all your might—when you're praying, reading Scripture, hearing sermons, seeking guidance from Christian friends and pastors. So how much hope is there for those who simply don't want to be bothered with God? What about those who are actively hostile toward Him, or who don't even believe He exists, or who dislike Christians and Christianity so much that they would be horrified to think of themselves as having any association with such people?

In preparation for a book I am writing on the tipping points between doubt and faith, I have studied dozens of conversion stories and have interviewed many people about how they came to faith in Christ. Some of the most surprising—and inspiring—stories were of converts who didn't just *find* God, but who felt *pursued* by Him.

Sara Miles was not fond of Christians. She describes herself as “a blue-state, secular intellectual; a lesbian, a left-wing journalist with a habit of skepticism.” Though her grandparents were Christian missionaries, her mother and father rejected what they saw as “the whole unbelievable, illogical concept” of God, and they raised their daughter in an atheistic home. Most of what she associated with Christianity she loathed.¹ What could Christianity possibly have to offer her? Why would she even consider turning her life upside down and facing the derision of her family and her entire social circle in order to embrace God?

Anne Lamott does not seem a probable candidate for Christianity either. Like Sara Miles, she grew up in a household of atheists, where belief in God was scorned. As an adult, Lamott enjoyed success as a novelist but also became entangled in drug addiction, alcoholism, bulimia, and unhappy love affairs. Her friends were “brilliant hilarious progressive” people who would not comprehend someone in their circle turning to a faith like Christianity.

Jesus shows up and changes everything.

Both of these women became Christians. Neither of them sought God. Instead, they and others like them describe a process of God pursuing them, and His presence

was not always welcome. As another reluctant convert, C. S. Lewis, put it, “Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about ‘man’s search for God.’ To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse’s search for the cat.”²



When Anne Lamott sensed the presence of Jesus in her room, she was in distinctly unreligious circumstances. Leading up to that night, she had hit a crisis with her alcohol and drug use. She believed she would die soon, but “out of nowhere,” it crossed her mind to speak to a priest at a nearby Episcopal church some family friends had told her about. Her discussions with the priest helped push her a little further toward belief, and not long afterward she began to attend St. Andrew Presbyterian Church because she liked the music she heard coming out of it as she walked by on Sunday mornings. She stayed only for the music and left before the sermon was preached.

She became pregnant around this time, had an abortion, and that’s when Jesus

Believers aren't people who have answered every question about Jesus. They are people who have *met Him.*

showed up. Weak from bleeding and “shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take a sleeping pill,” she lay in bed and became aware of the presence of someone in the room with her. “The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there—of course there wasn’t. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt Him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.” Even then, she did not welcome Him. She was “appalled,” worried about what her friends would think if she became a Christian. Conversion seemed “an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, ‘I would rather die.’”³ She felt Jesus with her there all night, watching her in patience and love, but she did not invite Him into her life until a week later, alone in her houseboat.

For Sara Miles, it was also an encounter with Jesus—unexpected, unsought—that transformed her. One day, out of curiosity, she walked into St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church in San Francisco. “I had no earthly reason to be there. I’d never heard a gospel reading, never said the Lord’s Prayer. I was certainly not interested in becoming a Christian—or, as I thought of it rather less politely, a religious nut.” She looked around, admired the beauty of the church’s interior, and took a seat hoping no one would notice her. She sang with everyone else, feeling a little ridiculous, and then a woman announced, “Jesus invites everyone to His table.”

Miles went forward and stood at the table.

After more singing, someone put a “piece of fresh, crumbly bread in my hands, saying ‘the body of Christ’, and handing me the goblet of sweet wine, saying, ‘the blood of Christ’, and then something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me.”

That was Miles’ moment of conversion, but it so bewildered her that she immediately sought alternate explanations. The word “Jesus” lodged in her mind, and she said it over and over, not knowing why. “But it was realer than any thought of mine, or even any subjective emotion: it was as real as the actual taste of the bread and the wine. And the word was indisputably in my body now, as if I’d swallowed a radioactive pellet that would outlive my own flesh.”⁴

What about all those unanswered questions?

The whole process by which resistant unbelievers find God—or He finds them—is nothing like what I would expect. These skeptics have strong objections to Christianity. I would expect that before they came to Christ, they would seek some opportunity to present these doubts and objections and get solid answers to them. Only after each point of contention on their list had been checked off as adequately answered could they safely give their lives to Jesus Christ.

It rarely happens that way.

Jesus catches people mid-stream. Sometimes He appears when they least expect and least want Him. Some of their doubts about Him may have been answered, but many others remain, and many have not even occurred to them yet. But there He is,

His presence loving and patient and inviting. And they either accept His invitation or they don't. Believers aren't people who have answered every question about Jesus. They are people who have met Him.

God is out to get us.

If God pursues and finds Miles, Lamott, and countless other reluctant converts—

What's one sheep or one coin more or less when you have so many? Plenty of men and women seek God out voluntarily and then devote their whole life to Him. So why would He bother putting forth so much effort to find people like Anne Lamott or Sara Miles? Or me? Or you? Yet I feel—and love—that pursuing Spirit of God whom I sense moving deep within me. I'm grateful



“Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I'm back in the house of God for the rest of my life.”

people with cultural, social, political, moral, and criminal reasons to avoid Him—then who can be said to be beyond His grasp? For whom is it safe to conclude, *This* person is too far from God to ever reach Him? too hostile toward Him? too vulgar? too sarcastic and dismissive? too evil?

The question of who is too far gone for God to reach is a question people have been asking for centuries. When the Pharisees and teachers of the law complained that Jesus spent too much time with “tax collectors and ‘sinners’”—people they considered beyond hope—He answered with parables of God as Pursuer: the story of the lost sheep and the story of the lost coin. In the first one, a shepherd has 100 sheep and loses one of them. He leaves the 99 to go pursue the lost one, and then he calls his friends and neighbors together to rejoice when he finds it. In the next story, a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. She searches diligently until she locates it, and then she celebrates with friends and neighbors.

You might think that for God, 99 out of 100 sheep would be enough. Nine out of ten coins should be more than adequate.

because I know I'm the lost coin He'll turn the house upside to find. I'm grateful that finding God does not depend on my effort alone. Even if I'm hostile, deluded, full of sin, and indifferent, He still wants me.

As a long-time Christian, I still feel God's loving pursuit. Sometimes my own skepticism flares up, or I get angry with the church, or bored, or bogged down with difficulties, or I feel unappreciated or misunderstood. Quitting is a temptation, but something deeper than all those problems—the pursuing, loving, embracing Holy Spirit—keeps me and my fellow believers connected to Him and the church with a deep bond. No matter how discouraged I get, God's deeper sustaining love and purpose hold on to me. As Eugene Peterson paraphrases a verse from Psalm 23, “Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I'm back in the house of GOD for the rest of my life.” 🍷

1. Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballantine Books), xii, 7, xiii.

2. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955), 227.

3. Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 9, 41, 49.

4. Miles, *Take This Bread*, 57-59.

Planning for the Future

» An Exciting Opportunity to See How God Directs Your Decisions

BY JAMES E. OSTENSON



In 1 Timothy 5:8, the apostle Paul wrote about the importance of providing for one's family. Most of us take that responsibility very seriously while we are living. However, the majority of people die without making proper provision for their surviving loved ones.

Though it's easy to understand why an estate plan is needed to ensure that a family's needs will be met, people far too often find reasons for putting off the process of drawing one up. For one thing, the legal terminology used in estate planning can be difficult to understand. It can also feel overwhelming to make significant decisions, such as choosing guardians for minor children or deciding how to divide your assets among family members and the Christian causes you want to support.

“The majority of people die without making proper provision for their surviving loved ones.”

And yet, estate planning does not have to be a drawn-out, painful ordeal. It can actually be an exciting opportunity to prayerfully see the Lord direct your thinking so that you can leave a legacy of love and blessing to the individuals and organizations that He has brought into your life. To help you get started, In Touch Foundation would like to offer you a complimentary estate planning guide titled *A Legacy of Godly Stewardship*. The guide will explain the process and terminology involved in preparing your estate plan. It will help you to think through the questions you must consider and also to gather the necessary information.

One of the biggest decisions in the process is the choice of a qualified attorney to help you. There may be less expensive alternatives on-line or with computer software, but those approaches are only “fill-in-the-blank” forms. In Touch Foundation will be glad to try and assist you in finding an experienced estate planning attorney in your area.

To receive your free copy of the In Touch estate planning guide, please contact us by phone at 800-967-2200 or by e-mail at foundation@intouch.org.

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

byfaith.

JUST A

DR



EAM?

VISIONS OF JESUS: A NOT-SO-RARE PHENOMENON

BY SANDY FEIT

In *Genesis*, Revelation, and scores of times in between, the Lord communicated with man through dreams and visions. Using the mind's eye and ear, God revealed Himself, His plans, and His purposes to an assortment of individuals, including rich, poor, Jew, Gentile, apostle, apostate, and even a donkey. These personal "visits" were powerful—no one had to convince Abraham or Hagar or Pharaoh or Saul of the encounter's authenticity or importance. And as a result, lives, nations, and human history were altered.

Perhaps you, like many Christians, consider such occurrences a biblical phenomenon. But the prophet Joel told us to expect that "in the last days . . . old men will dream dreams, and . . . young men will see visions" (Acts 2:17). Then it shouldn't be surprising to discover God still speaks in this way—and the people He visits are often so compelled by the experience that they take bold steps in His direction, despite the likelihood of ridicule, persecution, excommunication, or even death.

What may come as a surprise, though, is how common dreams and visions are—especially in cultures closed to evangelism. After surveying more than 600 Muslim-background believers, *Mission Frontiers* magazine (March, 2001) reported, "Though

dreams may play an insignificant role in the conversion decisions of most Westerners, over one-fourth of those surveyed state quite emphatically that dreams and visions were key in drawing them to Christ and sustaining them through difficult times."

Pastor Ali Arhab is one who knows. He estimates that during his childhood in Algeria, there were no more than 30 Christians in the entire country. The culture was exclusively Islamic, with essentially no avenues for examining claims of other religions. But certain questions plagued him, especially about earning one's way to heaven: "If you're assessed by a balance of good works versus bad, where do you go if you're 50/50? And who decides?" Though he was not an ill-behaved child, he considered his own past and concluded, "Disaster! I don't have good works!"

Ali first heard the gospel in 1983 at age 18, while vacationing in West Berlin. A group of street preachers explained the good news, but he found the message baffling: "A young lady named Ruth . . . told me about Jesus being the Son of God, and that He died for me. I thought, *I can't believe this—Jesus died 2,000 years ago, and you're telling me He died for me today? It doesn't make sense because of time; it's an anachronism.* I thought she

was making up stories; I just didn't get it."

Culturally, Ali explains, there was an additional hindrance: "From the Muslim perspective, for a woman to convince a man, it was like a weakness, which I would not allow back then." He tried to decline Ruth's invitation to church, but she was so relentless that he finally gave her his local address just to be done with their conversation.

Sunday morning, Ali had no clue who could be knocking at the door that early—to his mind, the discussion with Ruth had ended. He was startled to answer and hear, "So will you come to church?"

Out of embarrassment, he apologized and pretended his alarm hadn't gone off. "She caught me," he admits. "She took me for my word—so it was the first time I ever in my life entered church." He didn't know what to expect, but instead of the stereotypes he came in with ("I thought maybe there were idols"), he left with impressions of "singing—very joyful—beautiful!"

Returning to Algeria, Ali sensed that "somehow the first seed had been sown that never let me remain indifferent to what I heard." He still wrestled with theological questions and disparities, but always with "the thought deep in my heart that I was meant to believe in God."

Then, a few years after visiting Germany, he had an extraordinary experience: "One day, as I was seeking and asking God to reveal Himself to me, I had a vision of Christ. It was just like He appeared in my room. I was not sleeping; I was fully awake. He had a crown of thorns around His head, and there was a blazing fire around His head and around His body."

Up to that point, Ali had read no Scripture except the beginning of John's gospel, and yet the Lord's identity was unmistakable: "When He started to talk to me, I didn't have to ask—I just knew it was Jesus Christ. I saw His holiness, His purity."

The young man realized that the Lord

knew him better than he knew himself: "He shed light on my life from the past to the present time. I could see all my sins, and I was struck by the glory of God. I knew I could just not get any closer to Him because of who He is. [It was] the first I knew I was a sinner and needed to be saved. I knew God was calling."

Devastated, Ali watched as Christ unveiled all his "dirty stuff." He tried to come up with excuses but recalls, "Just at that moment, I could see a big screen next to Jesus. I saw my heart building lies—I saw my heart the way it is: corrupt, lying, sinful. And then I realized there is no way I could justify myself. I thought I was going to die."

Yet at the same time, he recognized that Jesus was gentle—and that every condemnation he was feeling actually originated within himself. He then did something he never expected: he wept, "Please forgive me. If You give me one more chance, I will live for You."

He heard Jesus ask why he'd waited "until it is almost too late." Then, as a heaviness came over his body and his eyes began to shut down, Ali assumed death was imminent. He tried to hold his eyelids open with his fingers but was powerless.

"The following day," he says, "I woke up and touched the chair next to me. That was real, and I realized I didn't die. Then I heard a voice that was so clear: 'From now on, you live for Me.' And I was never the same since that day. He forgave me, and I had a new life—Ali ceased to exist."

"WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT?" (ISA. 53:1)

His reaction was euphoric: "The reality of what I experienced was just so wonderful—so beautiful—I thought I would tell all my friends, and the whole city will believe me. It didn't work out that way. My best friends said, 'You are crazy. Are you hallucinating?'"

Ali asked God for "five people to pray

“HE SHED *light on my life* FROM
THE PAST TO THE PRESENT TIME. I COULD SEE
ALL MY SINS, AND I WAS STRUCK BY
the glory of God.”

with,” but over the next three years, the Lord astonished him with even more. However, they had no place to meet—not even Ali’s home, since he still lived with his Muslim parents. So the group would periodically go off to worship in the mountains for a couple of days. He says, “We’d bring in two or three new people, and they would accept Jesus. And we went on like that.” Ultimately, more than 50 confessed Christ.

Ali’s father became suspicious and threatened to kill his son if he truly was following Jesus. “So I kept a low profile,” Ali recalls. “[Over time,] a number of people who came to faith gave a good report about me, and my father completely changed his perspective. He accepted the fact that I was a Christian.”

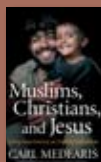
Ali then served the Lord openly, starting a church and also developing a distribution center for Christian literature. Delivering materials to believers in “the four corners of Algeria” was risky, but he didn’t really sense danger: “[When] I was stopped by the police, I would witness to them, pray for them, and give them the gospel.” He remarks that no one gave him a hard time, not even in the late 80s, when he’d show the *Jesus* film in theaters and afterward engage in debates. “A lot of people came to know the Lord,” he says, “and I started another church in Algiers.”

Eventually, though, Ali learned of threats on his life and was advised to leave the country. So he attended seminary in Holland for three years and then went to England. There, he joined Worldwide Evangelization for Christ, and in 1998, WEC sent him to start a church in France.

Ali questioned whether he had enough in common with the French to win them to Christ, but God once again surprised him: “Muslims started coming to Christ. And then the Muslims brought their French friends. So I thought, *Fantastic! Let’s focus on whoever we get.*”

Ali also started a TV ministry to North Africa (www.cna-sat.org). The broadcast, which currently airs several hours a day, highlights personal stories of faith. Ali explains, “Testimonies are so powerful. I had a vision, and a lot of Muslims [who come to Christ] had a vision or a dream. You see, [He] has the power to break into our lives when we are conscious or in our subconscious, whether in our intellect or in our emotions. The Lord is using everything that could lead us eventually to love Him, to know Him, to worship Him. And we have every month about 1,000 positive responses. Of these, [many] are ready to commit their lives to Jesus.”

“The Lord has really blessed me,” says Ali. “I never thought I would be a Christian. I never thought I would leave my job to serve the Lord. I never thought I would say to Him, ‘If You would just give me one more chance to live, I will live for You.’ It all started with just one lady—Ruth—in Germany.” And a vision of Jesus. 🌟



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THE PROPER CARE AND FEEDING OF OGRES

IS ONE LIVING IN
YOUR HOUSE?

BY JOANNE KRAFT



Once upon a time, in a kingdom far, far away, there lived a lovely young damsel. As all great stories go, this fair maiden met her prince charming, and they were soon wed. It wasn't long before they were blessed with the most beautiful child in all the land.

As their angelic babe grew, the mother and father were alarmed when, now a toddler, he began to misbehave. Biting, demanding, and the occasional temper tantrum took the parents by surprise. Their blessed babe was fast becoming an adolescent. Replacing the smiles, giggles, and playful laughter was a disrespectful, self-centered creature who now stomped its way through their home—nipping at whoever dared come too close. Who was this frightening creature (and what had it done with their beautiful child?) There was only one terrifying answer to their question. An Ogre.

When we first brought our little ones home from the hospital, I could not imagine these beautiful children would one day grow up and have the ability to make me mad, frustrated, and red-hot angry. Think about it. Teenagers and toddlers have more in common than we'd care to admit. As the mother of four children—a few of them now teenagers—I understand this logic. Completely.

Toddlers want your full attention. Able to feel only their own discomfort, they become hostile and demanding when their needs aren't immediately met. Teenagers are frighteningly similar. Though they no longer use their teeth to bite, they have learned to use words in the same way. The effect is the same. It hurts. They, too, want your full attention (though they pretend they don't) and are known to have their own tantrums when they don't get their way. What? You

don't believe me? Go ahead and ask any parents who have told their ogre—*ahem*, I mean “teenager”—that he or she can't use the family car or go out with friends.

I consider myself an expert when it comes to the proper care and feeding of these ruffians. So, as a mother who has experienced her fair share, I'd like to give a bit of sage advice to those of you with one currently living in your home.

DON'T BEFRIEND YOUR OGRE. Teenagers and parents cannot be best friends. This is the cardinal rule for parenting a young adult today. But unfortunately, a lot of mothers and fathers have muddied the waters here, and boundaries have become blurred. Parents, listen up. Friendship is the kryptonite for successful child rearing. Face it, Mom and Dad, you can't be a colleague to your children until they pay their own taxes.

I'll try and make this easy to understand. Don't talk with your teenagers about your marriage; they should never be a sounding board for their parents' fears, insecurities, and shortcomings. Do not include your teens in intimate adult conversations—*ever*. There is no reason that your daughter or son needs to know about your friend's alcoholic mother. And no matter what anyone tells you, hanging out with your teenager and his or her friends is just plain creepy. Remember, your best friend should be your spouse, or, well, your best friend, but *not* your teenager.

DON'T TOLERATE BITING. Words hurt. Being bitten by a tiny crumb-cruncher can be a pretty painful experience, but the bite from a teen's angry words can take much longer to heal. I want to listen to what my adolescents have to say, but I don't tolerate biting language. I want them to speak to me the way they would speak to a favorite teacher or coach—with respect.

I don't ascribe to the “do as I say, not as I do” theory of parenting, so I try very hard not to say things that I will regret later. It isn't easy. Often, I will go to another part of the house to give myself a moment to cool down before I deal with a volatile situation.

DON'T LET YOUR OGRE PUT DEMANDS ON YOUR LIFE. One of the most interesting things about teens is that they are self-centered people who grow more and more selfish each time you meet any one of their demands. They will try and manipulate those around them by doing things like sabotaging a family outing with a poor attitude or a sulky pout. Remember, parents, you can tread water longer than they can make it rain. Demands should not be indulged, no matter the cost.

I have a friend who would drive her teenage daughter to the mall whenever she insisted on going. Never did this girl do the dishes, clean her room, show kindness to the family, or demonstrate appreciation to her parents in any way. Why should she? She didn't have to. Her demands were being met. Never pay a ransom for your child's love. Ever.

SAY WHAT YOU MEAN AND MEAN WHAT YOU SAY. One of the biggest parental mistakes is to give an ultimatum or a potential consequence and then not carry through with it. When your teenager behaves poorly, there should be a consequence. If you threaten to take away television or car privileges, *then do it!* Unless you stand by your word, you'll lose the war long before it is obvious that you're even in a battle.

SPEND TIME WITH YOUR OGRE. When was the last time you spent a little time alone with your teenager? Go out for breakfast together. Grab

your son and take him along as you run errands. Stop off at a bookstore with your daughter, and talk over your favorite books or magazines. I used to think that when my children became teenagers, I wouldn't be needed as much. Not true. My teenagers want my attention as much as they did when they were two-year-olds.

Always keep up with their current companions. Your teens *want* you to ask where they are going, who they're hanging out with, how they are doing in school. If they try to sell you a different story, don't buy it. But let's be honest here. Not many of us navigated those years without falling into pits on one side of the road or the other—why should we expect something more from our kids?

LISTEN TO YOUR OGRE.

Your teenagers want to share their thoughts, dreams, and ideas with you. When was the last time that you sat down and gave them your full attention? Try not to lecture or make your point during every conversation. Remember what your grandmother used to say: "You were given two ears and one mouth, so you can listen twice as much as you speak" (James 1:19 makes a similar point).

Try and include your teens more in your decisions—no, this doesn't mean decisions regarding what to do about your workaholic husband (see rule number one). Include them in decisions more along the lines of what color you should paint your kitchen walls, or solicit their thoughts on whether to buy a dog, or where they want to go to college. Allow them to interject their ideas and opinions, and praise them when they share from their heart. Take a moment and ask them for their thoughts on a subject. If you make it a point to listen and not to speak, I promise you will be amazed at what you hear—in a good way.



OGRES NEED DAILY SHOWERS. Just like toddlers, teenagers make big stinky messes. Try to be understanding. This is an awkward time for them. Your teens crave your attention and will often create mayhem just to get it. Many times, they are so eager to be seen as grown-up that they make tough decisions without thinking things through. When this happens, lather your ogre with love and encouragement. These are the soap and water needed to clean things up. Remember to shower them daily with both.

So, what happened to the ogre who was wreaking havoc in that land so far away? His parents made a point to spend more time with him. They asked him more often what he thought about things and listened more intently when he answered. They showered him daily with love and encouragement. And then immediately took away his cell phone, iPod, and driving privileges until he learned to respect his parents and behave correctly.

*And they all lived happily ever after.
The End. 💎*

Making Work Work

» Choosing to Strike a Good Balance

BY JILL HART



My five-year-old came home from preschool after studying careers. “They told us to stand up and tell what we wanted to be when we grow up. I said I wanted to be a mommy,” she said thoughtfully. Then she paused and added, “But I wouldn’t work on my computer as much as you.”

Ouch. My chest tightened as her innocent words pricked my conscience. I must work to help keep our family financially afloat. I’ve chosen to work at home to build the best relationships possible with my kids. Like many working

“Use your work experience to teach godly characteristics.”

women, I struggle to balance mommy time and work time.

Here are a few ways we can maximize our time at home.

Schedule. Work around your children’s schedule. If you’re a morning person, try getting up an hour or two before they do. When kids are young, naptime provides a “margin” to complete work.

My children attend a Mom’s Day Out program one morning a week. This lets them play with other kids while giving me the chance to catch up on work in a quiet environment.

Share. Use your work experiences to teach godly characteristics, such as stewardship, forgiveness, and love. Our children watch how we handle pressure and react to tough clients. If we’re compassionate and kind, chances are they will be too.

Share your workload when possible. Encourage responsibility by letting kids help with age-appropriate aspects of your business. They’ll develop a sense of pride in your achievements—and theirs.

Spend time wisely. E-mail, blogs, and Web surfing can monopolize more time than you realize. I set a rule that I will check e-mail once every two hours. That way, I answer several at once and can still respond to customers quickly.

The telephone is another time waster. I schedule an hour or two per week for necessary business calls and take care of everything else through e-mail. It’s amazing how much time this saves.

Rebecca’s Corner is a Web site for women of all ages that offers relevant resources for believers. Named for Dr. Stanley’s mother, the site encourages women to learn about and share with others the timeless wisdom of biblical living.



Jill Hart is founder of Christian Work at Home Moms. Her Web site, CWAHM.com, is devoted to helping moms strike a successful balance between motherhood and career. For other encouraging resources, visit Rebecca’s Corner at www.intouch.org.



Releasing Hope

There's power in the Word during our darkest times.

BY ANN VANDE ZANDE

Just beyond Mom's hospice bed, Dad was slumped in a chair, napping. My father had always been a quiet man, but now that he would soon lose his bride of 59 years, he slept often—or stared with sadness-soaked eyes. During the deafeningly silent hours, I searched for a means to encourage my parents, but abject helplessness created a black hole where hope was banished.

Just as I was about to take off for another aimless walk down the hall, my mother stirred. "I'm here, Mom." Her dim eyes met mine and glanced sideways to her Bible. "Would you like me to read Scripture?" In response, she generated a slight, "Uh huh."

Lord God, please show me what to read,

I prayed. Immediately, instead of the expected Psalm 23, unanticipated verses from Ephesians 6 came to mind. *Lord, not that passage. Mom needs comfort, not a challenge.* When the Spirit's impression remained, I opened to Ephesians 6:13 () and began reading, "Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand." I continued through the spiritual armor passage, ending with the call in verse 17 to take "... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

The stone rolled away, and my spirit lifted as hope penetrated the room. *Thank You,*

JESUS, I prayed, knowing He'd strengthened me so I could support my parents. Then a rustling drew my attention. My mother was sitting up and struggling with her pillows. She caught my eye and resolutely stated, "Read it again." After the second reading, she directed me in some tasks. Then she noticed her wheelchair. Though she'd refused a ride earlier, she now said, "Why don't we take a trip down the hall?"

That day I learned our spirit remains alive while our other capacities fade. It also became clear that in addition to a physical battle, Mom was fighting a spiritual one. I guess I'd subconsciously assumed our malicious, vile Enemy would reduce attacks on this weakened, dying saint (as if evil has a conscience)—that the prowling lion would turn away from the wounded. I was very wrong.

So I often wonder what specifically assaulted Mom's mind while she struggled under the strain of disease and painkillers. Did she need a "helmet of salvation" (v. 17) because fear of hell taunted her? Was she tempted to believe that heaven didn't exist, or if it did, that she was undeserving? Was that what the "shield of faith" (v. 16) deflected? Did the "breastplate of righteousness" (v. 14) stop her mind from running a "filmstrip" presentation of her failings? Some of these doubts assailed Mom during her faith walk, so why wouldn't the challenges intensify when she was severely weakened? Isn't that true for all of us?

Moreover, I became aware that our Enemy's attacks seem to center on annihilating hope. Why? Perhaps at least in part because when that magnificent angel, Lucifer, fell from his holy position, *he* lost all hope. Now he rages against ours.

For God's chosen, hope is fundamental to faith, as Hebrews 11:1 states: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Hope in Jesus Christ holds us "... as an anchor for

the soul, firm and secure" (Heb. 6:19). Each day, hope creates fresh opportunity for change, for righting a wrong, for redemption and deliverance. Hope keeps us persevering, prevailing, and proceeding forward.

In death, because of Christ's imparted righteousness, we are "... heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:7). God's generous hope carries His battle-weary children even to their last breath. And when we are grieving, our promise of "a hope and a future" (Jer. 29:11) prevails, assuring us of overcoming the painful present and reuniting with loved ones after life on earth.

I'm not suggesting we'll never feel weary or overwhelmed. Those realities can crowd in on us regardless of strong faith. That's

It became clear that in addition to a physical battle, Mom was fighting a spiritual one.

why it's so incredible that hope isn't conjured up by strength of will. We don't draw that power from ourselves—it comes from the Lord, and we find it throughout Scripture.

God created an ordered universe out of chaos by speaking, "Let there be ..." (Gen. 1:3). The same power authoritatively counters confusion in our lives. That's why speaking the Creator's thoughts out loud can bring clarity—not some clever message we summon from within, but divine truth accessed by reading the Living Word. The Logos reveals the mind of God and releases hope.

I experienced this power firsthand throughout my mother's four-month battle with cancer. When I think back on that day at hospice, I envision us in the spiritual realm, side by side with shields raised and swords drawn. We were weary, yet not overcome. Only a child of God encounters that kind of strength, because we cling to the one true hope that "does not disappoint" (Rom. 5:5). 🍀

stronginspirit

Bitter to Sweet

*She changed her name to reflect loss and deep despair,
but God made Naomi's life pleasant once more.*

BY ADAM COLWELL



Comedian Milton Berle once said, “You know you’re getting older when it takes more time to recover than it did to tire out.”¹ True, what’s known as the “golden years” can be easily looked upon as a time when our best days are behind us. Yet the Bible teaches us that those same years can be the time of greatest blessing—especially if the experiences of our younger days were not all we’d hoped they would be.

This was the case for a woman we meet in the Old Testament book of Ruth. Her name meant “pleasant,” but for Naomi, life had been anything but. She had neither husband nor sons; just two young widowed daughters-in-law who were both foreign and childless. Naomi preferred to be called *Mara*, or “bitter,” and her words revealed the depths of her despair: “Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?” (Ruth 1:21).

Yet Naomi discovered renewed life through the faithful companionship of Ruth—the daughter-in-law who chose to stay with her—and that young woman’s encounter with a godly landowner named Boaz. The young woman had found favor with Boaz because of her selfless desire to glean leftover grain for Naomi from his harvest fields. Wisely seeing an opportunity to provide for her daughter-in-law’s future, Naomi instructed Ruth about how to approach Boaz in a request for marriage. Her inspired directions would not only lead to a wedding for the couple, but would also bring her an additional, unexpected blessing:

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her. And the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed is the LORD who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. May

he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.” Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap, and became his nurse. The neighbor women gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi!” So they named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David (Ruth 4:13-17).

Naomi had come from a barren existence void of joy to one filled with life and love, faith and family. The blessings declared over her by the women in Ruth 4 were partially accomplished in her grandson, but they were not completely fulfilled until the time of Obed’s future descendant—the son of David, Jesus Christ.

From those blessings, we learn that Naomi’s great descendant was to be:

The Son of Significance (v. 14):
“ . . . and may his name become famous in Israel.” As any grandmother would understand, Naomi’s grandson Obed certainly was important to her. And his name did “become famous” as the story of Ruth was retold, but One far more significant would come from Obed’s lineage.

Jesus stepped from the carpentry shop at age 30 without formal training in either theology or oratory, yet His first public utterance was the greatest sermon the world had ever heard. Listeners were astounded by Him and authorities feared Him. Missions pioneer A.T. Pierson said of Christ, “He stands absolutely alone in history; in teaching, in example, in character, an exception, a marvel, and He is Himself the evidence of Christianity. He authenticates Himself.” Christ also claimed to be fully God and fully man, both natures assimilated perfectly in one personality. He had to be God to forgive and save us (Isa. 43:11), but He had to be human



Naomi's story reminds us that there's always new life with the Lord, no matter how old we are or how hard our circumstances.

to die for our sins (Heb. 9:22). Finally, no other religious leader validated his message by rising from death and proving himself alive with “many convincing proofs” (Acts 1:3).

The Savior for Dying Sinners (v. 15): “*May he also be to you a restorer of life . . .*” Surely, Naomi's life was recharged by her grandson's birth and by being a part of Ruth's new family. Yet for us, restoration from the ravages of sin would become possible only through the son of David.

When music legend Johnny Cash did *American Recordings*, he placed a picture of two dogs on the cover. Cash explained, “Their names are Sin and Redemption. Sin is the black one with the white stripe; Redemption is the white one with the black stripe. That's kind of the theme of that album, and for me, too. When I was really bad, I was not all bad. When I was trying to be good, I could never be all good. There would be a black stripe going through.” Indeed, we all work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). We're all sinners who need to be redeemed. Romans 3:22 declares, “There is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.”

The Sustainer of Aging Saints (v. 15): “. . . and a sustainer of your old age.” No doubt, Naomi found sustaining purpose and identity in her role as grandmother for Obed, but we experience far

more through Obed's holy descendant.

In *The Cure for a Troubled Heart*, Ron Mehl wrote about a dear, saintly old woman who was gradually losing her memory. Throughout her life, she had cherished God's Word, committing to memory many verses from her worn King James Bible. Her favorite verse had always been 2 Timothy 1:12: “For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.” But with the passing of time, even parts of this well-loved verse began to slip away. “He is able to keep,” she would say, “what I have committed . . . to him.” Her voice grew weaker, and the verse became even shorter. “What I have committed . . . to him.” Ultimately, as she was dying, family members had to bend close to hear the few whispered words on her lips. At the end, there was only one word of her life verse left: “Him.” It was all she could remember. But Christ, and Him alone, was enough.

Isaiah 46:4 wonderfully promises, “Even to your old age I will be the same, and even to your grayning years I will bear you! I have done it, and I will carry you; and I will bear you and I will deliver you.” Naomi's story reminds us that there's always new life with the Lord, no matter how old we are or how hard our circumstances. There are blessings of age about which youth knows nothing. Today, give God the bitterness in your life—trusting that He'll turn it into something very pleasant for you in His will and timing. 🌻

¹ Nelson's Annual Preacher's Sourcebook, 2002 Edition, R. J. Morgan, Editor, p. 135. © 2001 Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Matt Redman

»For the City, for the World

BY LINDA CANUP



“I don’t know what it is, but Tokyo just blows my mind. I mean, it’s just white skyscrapers as far as the eye can see,” says singer/songwriter Matt Redman as he reminisces about one of his favorite stops on the 2008 Passion World Tour. But now Passion is going local again. A little over a year ago, Redman and his family moved from a town of 5,000 in England to Atlanta, Georgia, a metropolis of over five million, to join fellow Passion leaders Louie Giglio and Chris Tomlin in starting a new church.

This isn’t the first time the singer has been involved in a church start. He was on the support teams of two others—Soul Survivor in Waterford, England, and The Point on that country’s south coast. He remembers the excitement of seeing

“[Matt] remembers the excitement of seeing home groups turn into dynamic churches.”

home groups turn into dynamic churches.

Matt is excited about the mission of the new church as well, but he expects Passion City to be a completely different experience: “Passion has already gone global, and now it’s going local,” he says. “Louie’s been gathering around these phrases: ‘For God, For People, For the City, For the World.’ In one

way, it sounds very simple, but I think there is a lot of depth in that.”

Redman’s international fans need not worry, though—he has no intention of slowing down when it comes to creating new music. As a matter of fact, in some ways, it’s easier for him now—he’s cut his commute to Nashville, Tennessee, to almost nothing by moving across the Atlantic; and he’s now neighbors with friend and cowriter Chris Tomlin.

The two—and others—worked on his latest release, *We Shall Not Be Shaken*. “It’s the first album where every song is cowritten,” he says, naming his wife Beth, Matt Maher, and Jonas Myrin as a few of the other collaborators. “It’s just been a fantastic team.”

Because of the creation of Passion City Church, Redman feels as though the album has come out of a local community, but it still has a very global application. “The things of this world seem so shakable and changing and fragile and temporary,” he says. “But we worship the God who is the opposite of all those things.”



To purchase Matt Redman’s new CD *We Shall Not Be Shaken*, see order form or visit www.intouch.org.

NOW
YOU CAN
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BOOKSTORE!

READ | ROMANS 5:1-6

Paul used a beautiful phrase to describe the believer's position in Christ: "We have obtained our introduction by faith into this *grace in which we stand* . . ." (Rom. 5:2, emphasis added). This is no puddle of mercy that barely wets the toes, but rather a mighty ocean. The Lord's kindness wraps around us without regard for our worth or merit.

God's grace is an essential concept for believers to understand. He freely offers His favor to mankind because Jesus' sacrifice on the cross purchased forgiveness and salvation for anyone who believes. However, many people think they are *enjoying* God's kindness when what they are really trying to do is *earn* it. If we have to purchase, merit, or work for grace, then it is not a gift. The Lord is very clear that works cannot save us—in fact, He compares our good deeds to filthy rags (Eph. 2:8-9; Isa. 64:6).

On the other hand, grace is not a license to sin or to be lazy; Christians are called upon to serve the Lord every day. From the outside, it is usually impossible to distinguish between works and service in someone else's life. But God knows the heart's motivation. He accepts for His glory those things we do to show Him our love and to express appreciation for His countless blessings.

EARLY LIGHT

Dear Friend, serving God in order to earn His favor or to ensure that He continues to bless you amounts to thwarting grace. You can do nothing to deserve the Lord's kindness! He pours it upon believers freely so that each one is standing in a full measure of grace.



READ | 2 TIMOTHY 4:16-18

Many of us have experienced times of abandonment just when we needed that other person the most. It could have been a spouse withdrawing emotionally, a co-worker who ignored us, or a close friend who seemed too busy to help. The life of the apostle Paul teaches us how not to become discouraged in these situations.

Remember that the Lord is always with us. When we trust in Jesus as our personal Savior, we enter into a permanent relationship with Him, and His Spirit comes to live in us. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus remains with us at all times, regardless of the circumstance. He is our friend—one who will never leave us. And His is the most important friendship we have. Reading our Bible will help us to remember this.

Draw on God's strength. Through the Holy Spirit, we have access to divine power every minute of the day. When we let go of control and depend on the Lord, we will be able to draw on His strength. Then, if family or friends cause hurt, His presence will provide comfort and help us to forgive them.

Look expectantly for God's deliverance. Paul testified that the Lord had rescued him and would continue to deliver him from every evil situation. He knew he could always trust God.

EARLY LIGHT

Paul faced many painful situations without the support of friends. Toward the end of his life, those who cared about him were widely scattered. Yet his attitude remained hopeful because Christ was his constant Friend. Do you know the Savior? Are you aware of His presence throughout your day?

READ | PROVERBS 22:6

From a young age, children observe the behavior of the significant adults in their lives. What a wonderful opportunity to influence the next generation for Jesus!

How do we train children in godliness? We start by investing our time in their lives. Boys and girls need their parents and others to spend quality time with them. Whether it's through outdoor activities, reading together, or quiet conversation, we can be modeling Christian living.

Listening closely is another part of raising our sons and daughters. To influence them toward righteousness, we must know what they are thinking—in other words, what's important to them and what bothers them.

Protecting children through discipline is another aspect of godly parenting. When done with love, this will help them understand the wisdom of God's boundaries and the importance of self-control.

Admitting our mistakes is also necessary, as transparency helps children draw closer to parents. If we seem perfect, kids will find it harder to confess their mistakes to us.

Perhaps the most important aspect of training is unconditional love. My mother consistently loved me both when I had success in school and when I didn't. Because of her steadfast care for me, I tried to do what she would find pleasing.

EARLY LIGHT

Raising a godly child takes the cooperation of believing parents and family, Christian teachers, and born-again friends. Look for opportunities to spend time with children, listen to their hearts, and demonstrate Christ's love for them. By modeling godliness, you may influence a life for the Lord.

READ | DEUTERONOMY 4:9-10

Our desire as Christian parents is to help our children mature into godly men and women. We want them to believe that God has a plan for them and that they are accountable to Him.

I remember teaching my children from a young age about these important truths, because I wanted biblical principles to shape their thinking and their choices. After explaining about God's will, I told them they were accountable to the Lord for their behavior—as well as to their mother and me. If kids believe their only accountability is to parents, then when they are apart from Mom and Dad, they are likely to think that they don't have to answer to anyone.

When my children objected to my decisions, I taught them to speak to their heavenly Father about it. Over time, they developed the habit of talking things over with Him. This training became very important in their teenage years. Instead of giving a quick *no* to some of their requests, I said, "Find out what God wants you to do. Whatever you two agree on, I will accept." I knew this was risky, but I had to trust the Lord and give my children the opportunity to practice what I had been teaching them—that they are accountable to God.

EARLY LIGHT

Training in godliness begins before children establish a personal relationship with Christ. We should continue the process by modeling righteousness all through life. Kids need to know about the Lord's plan for them and their accountability to Him. They also need parents who speak their name to God.

thursday

7 *Becoming a Prodigal*

READ | LUKE 15:11-19

The Prodigal Son's journey away from home began with a desire. Perhaps he wanted to leave behind some of the restrictions that come with living under a parent's roof. Or maybe he wanted more money to pursue life's pleasures with friends. Whatever the case, his desire gave birth to self-deceptive reasoning which assumes, *There's no harm in what I am doing. I deserve this.* That thinking led to a decision—to prematurely ask for his inheritance—and to his departure, both from home and from everything he had been taught.

A Christian who has turned away from God follows a path similar to the prodigal's. It begins in our minds with a craving for something other than what we have. The longer we allow the idea to linger, the stronger our desire to have it. When we cling to a yearning that is outside of God's protective will, then we likewise deceive ourselves and find ways to justify what we want. We will base decisions on our faulty reasoning and move away from the Lord to fulfill our self-centered dreams. Like the wayward son, we may enjoy the pleasures of the world for a time, but ultimately, we will find ourselves without the essentials we need—unconditional love, security, and a meaningful purpose for living.

EARLY LIGHT

We have an Enemy who seeks to divert us from the Lord's will, a world that places desires above God, and "flesh" tendencies which prefer pleasure over obedience. To avoid self-deception, make Scripture your basis for living—and adjust your thought life and choices accordingly (Rom. 12:2).

THE BIBLE IN
One Year

GENESIS 21-24

friday

8 *Walking Away From God*

READ | LUKE 15:20-32

Like the father of the prodigal son, our Heavenly Father will not force us to remain with Him. If we ignore His guiding Holy Spirit and insist on following an ungodly path, He'll let us go our own way.

Examining the parable, we learn what happens if we move outside of God's plan.

• **Our fellowship with the Father is significantly affected.** The wayward son was no longer in close contact with his dad; their relationship was not as important to him as it had been. If we wander and make ourselves top priority over the Lord, we will also experience a disconnect with our heavenly Father. As Christians, we cannot move off God's chosen path without first closing our mind and heart to His truth and His call on our lives.

• **Our resources—time, talent, and treasure—are wasted.** The son squandered his money on frivolous things and ended up worse off than the laborers at his father's house. God has bestowed spiritual gifts and material resources to build His kingdom, and He's also provided His Spirit to offer guidance. Pursuing our own plan wastes what He has given us.

• **Our deepest needs go unmet.** Chasing after dreams that are outside of God's purposes will lead to discontent. Only in Christ can we find true fulfillment.

EARLY LIGHT

A great weariness will overtake us if we live apart from God. Poor choices can result in lifelong regrets, but they don't have to dictate our future. The heavenly Father will welcome us with great joy and love when we repent and turn back to Him. Have you wandered away? He's waiting for you.

THE BIBLE IN
One Year

GENESIS 25-28



READ | JAMES 1:2-8

The Bible teaches us to walk by faith, having full confidence in God. Yet many people are burdened by doubt. Even believers, who have been saved by faith, can waver in their trust.

For example, there are Christians who back out of their commitment to a ministry. Though originally led to serve in this capacity, they may question whether they have the necessary ability. Lack of assurance is also displayed when financial concerns lead a believer to stop tithing.

Doubt started in the garden of Eden when Satan introduced a question in Eve's mind: *Wouldn't eating the forbidden fruit bring special benefits?* And to this day, the Deceiver still whispers lies that can cause Christians' trust to falter. He will utilize any of the following to erode our confidence in God: ignorance of Scripture, temptation to sin, feelings of guilt, a stronger focus on circumstances than on Christ, and the negative viewpoint of others. All of these inhibit the ability to see truth clearly and to stand firmly upon it.

While a doubter is characterized by negativity, uncertainty, and instability, a believer with full trust in God walks in absolute confidence—decisive, dependent upon the Word, and capable of enduring, even when circumstances seem gloomy.

EARLY LIGHT

e Christian walk should be characterized by faith, not doubt. Have you prayed for something but questioned whether the Lord would answer—or disbelieved He would actually do something He promised in Scripture? Resist doubt, and take hold of the unshakable confidence God offers.

READ | PHILIPPIANS 4:10-13

Our world emphatically proclaims the importance of self-esteem, which is a favorable impression of oneself. Surely, we are told, an individual who values himself highly will accomplish much. Yet Scripture tells us that true confidence flows, not from self, but from our identity in Christ.

In God's Word, we learn that Paul experienced this appropriate assurance. He expressed certainty regarding the message and ministry God gave him (Gal. 1:15-17; Rom. 1:16). The apostle was also sure of eternal security in Jesus (Rom. 8:37-39). What's more, today's passage shows that Paul stood firmly on his belief that He could do anything in God's will because Jesus was living through him.

The Holy Spirit is the basis for our confidence—not positive thinking, right circumstances, or the ability to think highly of ourselves. Even in the midst of difficulty, we can live with boldness because the Spirit of the living God dwells within our being and enables us to follow Him.

Of course, we have a role too. The Spirit directs us and strengthens us, but we are responsible to listen, obey, and diligently follow His guidance each day. We can have assurance in an unstable world because almighty God provides everything we need to live triumphantly.

EARLY LIGHT

Are you facing situations that make you feel inadequate or insecure? Search the Bible for descriptions of His character. Realize that this sovereign, almighty God—the Beginning and the End—lives inside of you. Find your confidence in the one who is your Creator, Redeemer, and Friend.

tuesday

12

*A Reason
for Confidence*

READ | PHILIPPIANS 4:5

Negativity affects us both spiritually and physically. Even spending time with a pessimistic individual can take a toll. On the other hand, positive emotions—particularly godly confidence—can empower us to live fully, as the Lord intends.

Facing each day with the knowledge that our strength comes from Jesus will drive away doubt and anxiety. Yet many things can interfere with a healthy outlook. For example, we often allow wrong advice and negative attitudes to drain us. Sin, too, will keep our hearts from finding full confidence in God. And sometimes false guilt creeps into our minds and robs us of assurance.

Instead, we can purposefully develop confidence in almighty God by maturing in our faith. Meditating on the Word, drawing near to the Lord in prayer, and choosing to believe Him are all ways to strengthen our relationship with Him. The more our friendship with the heavenly Father deepens, the more unshakable trust in Him will become.

As Christians, we have every reason to live with assurance—we have the very presence of God living within us (Phil. 4:5). But in addition, we also have His peace (v. 7), His power (v. 13), and His provision (v. 19).

EARLY LIGHT

Our world is full of distrust, fear, and uncertainty. Don't allow yourself to listen to negative messages, which can make you lose the confidence God gives His children. Instead, focus on the truth in Scripture and the glory and victory of Jesus. Let His perfect love cast out your fear (1 John 4:18).

THE BIBLE IN
One Year

GENESIS 37-40

wednesday

13

*The Power of
the Holy Spirit*

READ | GALATIANS 5:22-26

The Holy Spirit is vital to the Christian life. Read about the fruit of the Spirit in today's passage, and ask, *Can I be such a good person on my own?* We need divine intervention to live as God expects. That's why He gives each believer a Helper, whose job is to produce Christ-like character.

The heavenly Father knows that His children need assistance to comply with His commands. Even Jesus Christ's most faithful followers were, on their own, helpless to obey—for instance, Peter, who pledged to be loyal until death, denied even knowing Christ (Matt. 26:69-75).

Just before returning to heaven, Jesus ordered the disciples to put their missionary work on hold until the Holy Spirit arrived (Luke 24:49). Only with the Spirit's aid could Peter the Coward become Peter the Rock and preach a challenging sermon that convicted many (Acts 2).

The Holy Spirit enters a believer's life at the moment of salvation and immediately sets about the work of producing spiritual fruit. This is the outward expression of a transformed heart. When we yield to God's nurturing hand, our actions and attitudes become more loving, more joyful, more kind, more gentle, . . . He reaps a harvest of service from our life—good works that grow our own faith and expand His kingdom.

EARLY LIGHT

Allowing the Holy Spirit to bring forth Christlike character is not passive. Our part is to meditate upon the Bible so that we can identify righteous qualities. Then, instead of satisfying our flesh, we must make wise decisions each day that allow the Spirit to develop godliness in our life.

THE BIBLE IN
One Year

GENESIS 41-44

thursday

14

*The Holy Spirit,
Our Guide*

READ | JOHN 16:12-15

In this world, all of God's children are on a journey. And as we travel through life en route to our eternal home, every one of us will face a multitude of choices. Forks in the road and unmarked intersections challenge and frustrate us. In such circumstances, how can we know which way to go?

Jesus promised to give us an internal and ever-present Guide. Starting at the moment of salvation, everyone who trusts in the Savior is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who promises to lead believers into all the truth. Like a built-in compass, He will direct us exactly the right way, regardless of the choice. He never makes a mistake.

So you may be thinking, *If He is living in me and never makes a wrong choice, why do I keep messing up?* His leadership is always right, but our reception isn't always clear. Yielding to the Lord is an essential requirement for receiving His direction. We cannot tolerate sin and go our own way in one area and expect to receive His guidance in another.

Sin does to our understanding of God's clear direction what a magnet does to the needle of a compass. If a magnet is placed next to a compass, the needle will point in a multitude of directions. In the same way, sin misleads us.

EARLY LIGHT

When a decision is unclear, ask yourself these questions: *Will Christ be glorified in this choice? Can I do this in Jesus' name?* If either answer is no, don't follow that path, because the Holy Spirit is not guiding you there. His leading always aligns with Scripture and brings glory to Christ.

THE BIBLE IN

One Year

GENESIS 45-47

friday

15

*Accepted by
the Lord*

READ | ROMANS 8:14-16

Our heavenly Father knows how we yearn to be accepted and to feel that we belong. He provides for both of these needs when we receive His Son Jesus as our Savior.

Because of Adam's sin, our spiritual connection with the Lord was severed (Rom. 5:12). Consequently, every human being since then has been born with a "flesh" nature that keeps man separated from God. But the Father had a plan to reconcile us to Himself through the shed blood of His Son (Col. 1:20). We must understand that we're sinners who cannot pay the penalty we owe for transgression—and that Jesus' death on the cross pays the debt on our behalf. All who accept Christ's sacrifice will be forgiven of sins and reconciled to God. Having been justified through the Savior's blood—with our debt cancelled and His righteousness counted as our own—we become a new creation in Him.

At salvation, we are accepted into God's family and given the right to call Him our heavenly Father. With this acceptance comes a sense of belonging. We are now part of a worldwide family who are joined together in Christ. On the outside we look different, but on the inside, we are united through the same Spirit (1 Cor. 12:12-14).

EARLY LIGHT

Our performance-driven society tells us that acceptance is based on what we do and how much we achieve. But God's message is the opposite: Faith in Christ is the sole reason for our acceptance by Him. The presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit affirms that we will always belong to the Lord.

THE BIBLE IN

One Year

GENESIS 48-50

READ | 1 JOHN 4:9-10

God's message to His children is consistent: We've been accepted by Him and belong to Him forever. In this acceptance, we discover a sense of security, adequacy, and love that frees us to live for Him.

At the cross, God revealed the extent of His love. He sent His Son Jesus to die in our place—we deserved death as punishment for our wrongdoing but received a pardon instead (Rom. 6:23). By becoming our substitute, Christ experienced God's wrath for our sins, and His sacrifice opened the way for our adoption into God's family (Eph. 1:5). As children of the heavenly Father, we are not only deeply loved but also highly valued. Our worth does not derive from anything in our character or performance but rather depends solely on our relationship with Jesus. What it cost the Father to save us indicates the worth He has placed on us. He has even made us co-heirs with Christ in heaven (Rom. 8:17).

Our adoption into God's family also gives us security and competency. Our heavenly Father has promised to protect us from the Evil One, endow us with spiritual gifts, and provide what we need to carry out His work effectively. The Holy Spirit will equip us with the knowledge, understanding, and divine power we need to serve as His emissaries.

EARLY LIGHT

The world thinks love and worth are tied to performance, while security rests in material possessions. But God showed His love by sending Christ to die for us (Rom. 5:8). In Him, we find value, competence, and peace. Consider whose message you are believing—God's or the world's.

READ | 1 JOHN 5:5-12

Our culture is obsessed with longevity. While the desire for a lengthy existence of good quality is natural, it is also shortsighted. The Bible certainly does emphasize living a godly life now. But it also contains plenty of reminders that believers will remain long after this old world is gone.

There is no pill or diet that can extend our days on earth beyond the number that the Lord has willed. But there is a way to live forever in a perfect home with a flawless body, doing soul-satisfying work. When we believe that Jesus Christ is God's Son and trust Him as our Savior, we receive the gift of eternal life. Believers get to spend eternity serving and fellowshiping with the Lord.

Although we are promised a place in heaven, eternal life is not really about location. The real value of having a soul that never dies is that we are always in the presence of God. For those who reject the offer of everlasting life with the Lord, there is an alternative. We call it *hell*. The souls that end up there suffer a terrible fate—agony and complete separation from the living God. After death, there is no mercy or grace that can bridge the gap between hell and heaven. The matter must be settled while we are on earth (Heb. 9:27).

EARLY LIGHT

Eternal life is irrevocably linked to the person of Jesus Christ. As John wrote, "He who has the Son has life" (1 John 5:12). Reaching a healthy old age is a laudable goal, but nothing is more important than receiving the Savior and the gift of an eternity in His presence.

tuesday

19

A Word About Purgatory

READ | 2 CORINTHIANS 5:1-9

A great many people believe falsely in purgatory—a miserable place where people supposedly go after death. In order to advance to heaven, a person supposedly must either suffer long enough to make restitution for his or her sins or be prayed out by loved ones still living. The doctrine is an unbiblical lie, because purgatory is a thinly veiled second chance for people to get into heaven.

There is not a single verse with which to defend the false theology of purgatory. In fact, the very idea of a second route to heaven runs counter to God's redemptive plan. Jesus Christ was the substitute for you and me, and His death paid our sin-debt. He obtained our eternal redemption with His blood (Heb. 9:12). If there is a place where people can go to suffer for their own sins—in other words, pay their own penalty—then God sending His Son to die makes no sense.

In John 14:2, Jesus told the disciples that He was going away to prepare a place for His followers. Nowhere in Scripture do we find any mention of a detour into misery where we “earn” a pass into heaven. The Bible says that believers are either at home in the body, or absent from it and present with the Lord. There is simply no in-between stopover.

EARLY LIGHT

I respect the right to believe as one chooses. However, I have a responsibility to present biblical truth. Those who reject Christ get no second chance after death. They are eternally separated from God. But whoever receives salvation is completely forgiven of all sin and guaranteed an eternity with Him.

THE BIBLE IN

One Year

EXODUS 8-10

wednesday

20

The God Who Rescues

READ | HEBREWS 10:1-14

In ancient Israel, the priests were continually offering sacrifices to atone for the people's sins. Specifically, the high priest annually entered the most sacred room in the temple to prepare a sacrifice that would absolve the whole nation of sin for that year. This room, the Holy of Holies, was where God's Spirit dwelled in those days.

Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection changed the process. He became the High Priest, and the sacrifice was His own life—an offering powerful enough to pay the sin-debt of all mankind. Through Jesus' one offering, He made holy any person who trusts in Him as Savior. He does not have to die every year. And unlike the Jewish priests who could enter God's presence only once annually, Jesus sat down at His Father's right hand, to remain in His holy presence forever. There, Christ continues the work of a high priest by interceding on behalf of believers when Satan accuses them.

God recognized that in our humanity, we'd remain weak even after being born again (John 3:3), so His rescue plan extends beyond pardoning our sins. He also sends His Holy Spirit to indwell every Christian. That means the Helper is always present to guide us in making wise, righteous decisions.

EARLY LIGHT

The Father's redemption plan meets all of mankind's needs. Jesus Christ offered a perfect sacrifice to cover our every sin, and now He continues to intercede on our behalf. At the same time, the indwelling Holy Spirit molds us into holy creatures while helping us to avoid temptation.

THE BIBLE IN

One Year

EXODUS 11-13

thursday

21

Life After Death

READ | LUKE 12:16-20

The thought of dying frightens many people. But believers have no reason to fear. Jesus' empty tomb proves that there is life after death!

Unbelievers who dread their demise have two different approaches to life. One group piles up wealth, good deeds, or worldly success in the hope of passing it on to their children or to charity. They expect to "live on" in the memories of those who benefit from their hard work. But it is the rare person who's still remembered a few generations later. And none truly live on.

The other group chooses to laugh in the face of death. Their philosophy is "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor. 15:32). Their existence seems pleasurable from the outside, but can you imagine a more futile way to live? God does not intend for us to go through life with such meaninglessness.

Here's the key to significance: fulfilling our unique, God-given, eternal purpose. In this life, we do not labor to leave a physical legacy or waste our days pursuing pleasure. Instead, we help those in need, influence our culture, and reach out to the lost. And when a believer enters the heavenly place Jesus has prepared, he or she keeps on working for Him.

EARLY LIGHT

For the believer, death is not a fearsome end. It is the doorway to a new life of serving the Lord in heaven. Our days on earth are just the beginning of our existence. His time will seem like only a few minutes compared to an eternity spent in His presence.

THE BIBLE IN
One Year

EXODUS 14-16

friday

22

Facing Death
Unprepared

READ | LUKE 23:32-43

God's grace is revealed in His willingness to welcome anyone at anytime into His kingdom, even at the moment of death. The repentant thief who hung on a cross next to Jesus had absolutely nothing to offer the Lord—no good works, no faithful service. He couldn't even be baptized. In his utterly helpless condition, the only thing he could do was believe. But that was all it took, because faith is the only way to be saved.

Although both thieves began their crucifixion by hurling verbal abuse at Jesus (Matt. 27:44), as the torturous minutes passed, one of them had a change of heart. His railing against the Savior turned to rebuke of the other criminal, and then to defense of Jesus, admission of his own guilt, and a plea for a place in Christ's kingdom (Luke 23:40-42).

What was it that turned this mocker into a believer? Even if he himself had little prior knowledge of Jesus, the crowd's taunts supplied him with the information he needed to be saved. Scornful onlookers accused Jesus of being exactly who He was: the King of Israel, the Savior of others, and the Son of God (Matt. 27:42-43). As the condemned man watched and listened, he turned in faith to the only One who could save Him: the One dying for him.

EARLY LIGHT

On the hill that day, one man died *in* his sin, one Man died *for* sin, and the other was saved *out of* his sin. There are only two responses to the inevitability of death. We can either accept or reject Christ's substitutionary payment for our sin. How will you respond?

THE BIBLE IN
One Year

EXODUS 17-20

READ | JOHN 15:9-11

Is your life exciting? Or do you, like so many people, find most days routine and tedious? Have dreams become disappointments? If so, you might feel tempted to give up hope. But God promises fulfillment that can't be found anywhere else.

Joy is a gift from the Lord. It doesn't depend upon circumstances but, rather, is found in Jesus' unchanging character and promises. And that's exactly where to find true strength and power to endure.

Years ago, I found myself being tested on this very point while working on a sermon about joy. A few days earlier, I had baptized a large number of people, and evidently, the repetitive motion had strained my back. There was no pain until midweek, when I tried to lift something heavy. Suddenly, I was dealing with severe backache. Almost immediately, the Lord brought to mind the message I was planning to present a few days later. Even though I complained and desperately wanted to be freed from the pain, I found I could be joyful in the Lord.

Philippians 4:4 tells us always to rejoice in Him. From this command, we know that even in the midst of hardship, we can purposefully choose to live with joy. This choice is possible for believers who are filled with the Holy Spirit and walking obediently (Gal. 5:22-23).

EARLY LIGHT

Consider your response to both good and bad times. Does a consistent joy in Christ give you strength? Or do you find emotional relief only in the midst of positive circumstances? Difficulty is inevitable, but God's truth is able to sustain you. Rely on Him for emotional security.

READ | PSALM 40:16

Though some people use the terms *happiness* and *joy* interchangeably, there is a vast difference in their meaning. Both cause a pleasant emotional response, but the former relies entirely upon circumstance. As soon as difficulty arises and pain intrudes, a person ceases to be happy. On the other hand, joy is a gift from God that enables believers to find hope and peace—even when life seemingly falls apart.

At times, however, even Christians live joylessly. Sinful behavior, of course, is one reason. But there can be other causes, too, including regret about past failures, fear of future mishaps, or a pattern of discontentment that's ingrained in one's personality.

If you are a follower of Jesus but lack gladness, take a moment to remember who Christ is—and who you are in Him. To begin with, you are saved eternally, and your name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life. The love of almighty God is unconditional, and His indwelling Spirit will never abandon you. He understands everything that you face and promises to provide for your needs.

When you stop to consider the amazing blessings that are yours in Christ, gratitude will likely overwhelm you. Sadness concerning circumstances may still endure, but the joy of the Lord will carry you through even the deepest pain.

EARLY LIGHT

Amid the ups and downs of life, does God's joy sustain you? Or do trials leave you hopeless and discontented? Our Father offers a higher way of living—not without pain but with strength to endure. Continually remember the vast treasure you have in Him and His promises.

On Joy

“Man cannot live without joy; therefore when he is deprived of true spiritual joys it is necessary that he become addicted to carnal pleasures.”

—Thomas Aquinas

“Joys are always on the way to us. They are always traveling to us through the darkness of the night. There is never a night when they are not coming.”

—Amy Carmichael

“Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian.”

—G. K. Chesterton

“Joy is distinctly a Christian word and a Christian thing. It is the reverse of happiness. Happiness is the result of what happens of an agreeable sort. Joy has its springs deep down inside. And that spring never runs dry, no matter what happens. Only Jesus gives that joy. He had joy, singing its music within, even under the shadow of the cross. It is an unknown word and thing except as He has sway within.”

—Samuel Dickey Gordon

“If there is joy in the world, surely the man of pure heart possesses it.”

—Thomas à Kempis

“Joy is never in our power and pleasure often is.”

—C. S. Lewis

“If you have no joy, there’s a leak in your Christianity somewhere.”

—W. A. “Billy” Sunday

“There is more joy in Jesus in 24 hours than there is in the world in 365 days. I have tried them both.”

—R. A. Torrey

tuesday

26

Biblical Fasting

READ | MATTHEW 6:4-18

God’s Word contains commands about many things, from frequency of prayer and expressions of worship to relationships with other people (1 Thess. 5:17; Deut. 6:5; John 13:34). Surprisingly, though, there is no place in the Scriptures where the believer is specifically instructed to fast.

Yet the words “when you fast” (Matt. 6:16, emphasis added) show Jesus’ expectation that His followers would practice this discipline. And there are many biblical examples of godly people who abstained from certain activities in order to draw close to God.

Before we go further, it is important to dispel a popular misunderstanding. Fasting doesn’t serve to change God’s mind, speed up His answer, or manipulate His will. Instead, it prepares us to hear from Him by temporarily laying aside something that vies for our attention or devotion—such as food, sleep, or a time of intimacy with a spouse.

Denying ourselves in this way makes us better able to focus on Christ and hear Him clearly. His Spirit often starts by bringing to mind sin that needs to be confessed. In so doing, He sanctifies our thoughts—then He can use this precious time to intensify our desire for Him, reveal His Will, and grant understanding and peace. In essence, fasting binds us to Him in such oneness that we won’t ever be the same again.

EARLY LIGHT

Do you want to see God move in awesome ways? By removing anything that hinders your focus, you can fix attention solely on the Creator and cry out to Him regarding your needs. As you gain understanding about your Father and yourself, you will grow closer to Him.

THE BIBLE IN
One Year

EXODUS 29-32

READ | 2 CHRONICLES 20:1-25

When God's people humbly call upon His name, He releases awesome power. The Bible is packed with stories of His mighty intervention on behalf of those who cry out to Him.

Take Jehoshaphat, for instance. Today's passage tells of the king's faithfulness and reliance upon the Lord in a time of adversity: he received word that the Moabites, Ammonites, and Meunites were joining forces to wage war against his kingdom.

Jehoshaphat admitted his fear but quickly reminded himself of God's faithfulness to other believers in the past (v. 7). Confessing total dependence on the Lord, he gathered all of the Israelites to cry out to their Father. Through the prophet Jahaziel, God reminded them this was His battle, so they were not to fear (vv. 14-15). The people praised the Lord for His encouragement. And, amazingly, when they "came to the lookout of the wilderness, they looked toward the multitude, and . . . no one had escaped" (v. 24). All their enemies lay dead.

God worked in a more miraculous way than anyone could imagine—and He still exceeds our expectations today. Through such means as prayer, praise, song, and fasting, we can ask Him to reveal Himself. He is ready to respond when we bring heavy hearts and deep concerns to Him.

EARLY LIGHT

Crying out to God and asking Him to work in our lives requires humility and persistence. Though we are unable to succeed on our own, we frequently try. By allowing us to bring our concerns and desires before Him, Jesus lovingly helps us realize our dependence.

READ | JOHN 3:1-6

Nicodemus would probably be welcome at any church today. He seems an ideal member—principled, knowledgeable, morally upstanding, courteous, and humble. However, Nicodemus had two big problems despite all of that outward religious appeal. He was blind to the truth and spiritually dead.

The man was lost. That is, he did not have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus adhered to strict Jewish codes and laws, so he was certainly religious. But the problem of the lost person is not attitudes, conduct, or even character. We can change and control those through sheer determination, and many folks do. What people really need is a change of condition. We come into this world with a sinful nature that is bent away from God.

Jesus explained to the observant rabbi that all his outward goodness couldn't erase, replace, or change his nature. Instead, every person who desires to serve God must be born again. The Lord promised that if Nicodemus received Him as Savior, then he would enter into a brand-new life. His old sinful nature would be transformed so that he could have a real relationship with God. Instead of *appearing* to be a religious man, Nicodemus would be a true believer.

EARLY LIGHT

No one gets into heaven on the strength of good works and kind behavior. When we stand before God, only our condition will matter. In place of our old, dead "flesh" nature, we want to show Him the living spirit we received when Jesus Christ came into our life.

READ | JOHN 3:7-15

Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus was packed with symbolism. He compared salvation to a second birth and likened the Holy Spirit's work to the wind. But then the Lord used an Old Testament illustration that might seem odd to modern readers—He said the Son of Man must be lifted up, just as Moses lifted the bronze serpent (Num. 21:1-9).

Nicodemus would have been familiar with the story: En route to the Promised Land, the Israelites once complained about going the long way around enemy territory. God responded by sending poisonous snakes into their midst. A bite victim would die unless he or she looked at the bronze serpent hanging from a pole in the camp. The statue was a symbolic representation of God's presence among the Israelites as well as a reminder that He was their deliverer.

While we might not mix spiritual birth and a snake on a pole in one testimony, Jesus did so for a good reason. These metaphors describe related events. The Messiah was explaining that He must be lifted onto the cross as a sacrifice for all of mankind's wrongs. A new birth is impossible unless somebody pays the price for our sinful condition. Those who look to Jesus and believe will be forgiven, saved, and born again.

EARLY LIGHT

Jesus' message to Nicodemus becomes clear when we understand how the pieces fit together. The Savior is saying that He must die on the cross so that sinful human beings can be born again. Have you looked to Jesus Christ for salvation? He is the only way to new life.

READ | JOHN 15:1-4

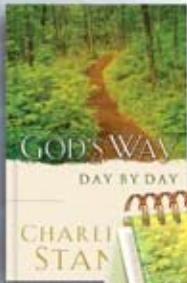
Years ago I lived in Fruitland, North Carolina. It was apple country, and several of my parishioners were growers. When I stopped by to visit one of them, his wife told me that he was in the orchard. So I walked out back to find him mercilessly cutting branches from one of the trees. Without thinking, I said, "You're going to kill that tree!" He turned around and said, "You stick to preaching, and leave the pruning to me."

This gentleman and I became friends, and it was from him that I learned about the pruning process. In order to produce an abundant crop of the best fruit, he had to cut as he did. It might look as if the tree was going to die, but new growth would spring from the wounds. Our conversations helped me to understand why the Lord sometimes acts as a pruning force in people's lives.

To get a plentiful crop of spiritual fruit, our heavenly Father must remove anything that distracts or deters us from serving Him. The process is often painful. I know I've cried out, "More, Lord?" when He has taken the "knife" to me. But the result is always satisfying—I am a better, more accurate reflection of Jesus Christ after God cuts away a fleshly habit or worldly attitude.

EARLY LIGHT

Being loved by God does not mean we will be coddled—our comfort is not His primary interest. A grower must prune an apple tree to get a bountiful harvest. In the same way, God must sometimes let us feel pain so He can bring forth greater growth and more spiritual fruit.



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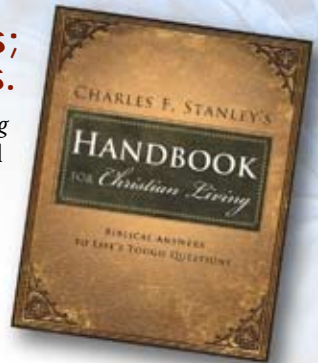
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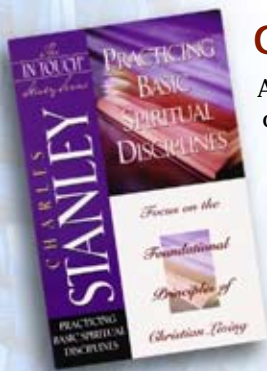
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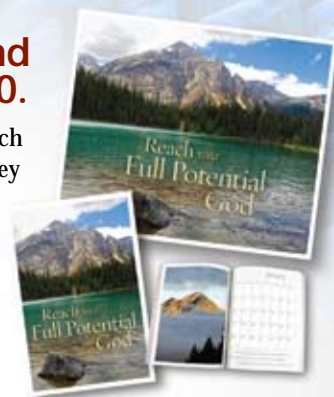
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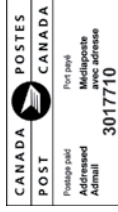
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