



Lord, give me strength.
The Christian life is a journey filled with mountaintops and valleys. This enriching devotional overflows with thought-provoking questions and keen biblical insights. Stowell encourages us to consistently turn to the Word of God for sustenance on this lifelong pilgrimage. Your faith will be nourished and refreshed.

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STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY

“BE STRONG...THAT YOU MAY BE SUCCESSFUL WHEREVER YOU GO.”

—Joshua 1:6–7

Kids have a wonderful way of colorfully depicting the realities of life. I remember the day that our little Matt came running in from the backyard, flopped breathless and exhausted on the couch, and exclaimed, “I’ve lost all my power!”

We’ve all felt that way spiritually. Many times the journey feels long and is fraught with bumps and turns, steep climbs and valleys. We weary of that same old temptation that keeps battering our will. Insecurities drain our souls of courage and confidence. And unsuspected surprises in relationships, finances, and health threaten to exhaust our will to win.

But for determined followers of Jesus, there is an always-available source of strength and renewal. Tapping into it empowers us to keep Jesus first, where He belongs and blesses. When we live in the safety of His strength things like money, relationships, dreams, and desires submit more readily to His perfect will. And gladly; fear, anxiety, and doubt are rendered weak by the courage and peace that only the strong enjoy.

Strength for the journey is drawn from a daily connection to the fullness of God. His presence and power are available for every moment of our day as He waits to meet us with the strength that we need. Actively casting all your care on Him and checking for wisdom and direction at every turn provide a constant reminder that you are not a lonely stranger.

Though Joshua led Israel through the toughest of times, he found his strength by tapping into the reality of his God. As God promised, “No one will be able to stand up against you. . . . I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous. . . . obey all the law . . . that you may be successful wherever you go” (Joshua 1:5–7).

Strength comes to those who instinctively ask, “What is there about God’s presence in my life that will give me strength and confidence now? What is there in His Word that turns the lights on in this situation? How should I pray for His wisdom, grace, and strength to move forward in His will?”

Be strong! Plan to consciously tap into the power at every turn in the road today!

TOOLS OF DEVOTION

“ASK AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU; SEEK AND YOU WILL FIND; KNOCK AND THE DOOR WILL BE OPENED TO YOU.”

—Matthew 7:7

I finally got organized and set up a workroom in my basement. It's amazing how much more I get done now that I know where all my tools are. Here are some tools to help you get organized in a daily encounter with the living God. I have found them to be helpful.

Select a slot on your schedule and a corner of your world, and claim it for God. For some, the morning may be best. “In the morning my prayer comes before you” (Psalm 88:13). Others prefer the evening and agree with David's prayer: “May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice” (Psalm 141:2). Others prefer many encounters during the day. The psalmist did: “Evening, morning and noon I cry out” (Psalm 55:17).

How much time should you take? My advice is to value the quality of the encounter over the length of the meeting. I suggest that your quiet time last long enough for you to say what you want and for God to say what He wants.

Read prayerfully. God speaks to you through His Word. Ask God to help you understand the Bible. “The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you” (John 14:26 NASB). Before reading the Bible, speak with the author. Don't go to Scripture looking for your idea; go searching for His.

Read the Bible expectantly. Jesus told us, “Seek and you will find” (Matthew 7:7). God commends those who “chew on Scripture day and night” (Psalm 1:2 THE MESSAGE). The Bible is not a newspaper to be skimmed but a mine to be quarried. Look in His Word for wisdom the way you would search a mine for silver; and if you read for understanding as you would hunt for hidden treasure, you will find it (Proverbs 2:4–5). God is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Take time for Him. He is there . . . waiting.

AMAZING LOVE . . . HOW CAN IT BE

WHO LOVED ME AND GAVE HIMSELF FOR ME.

—Galatians 2:20

Life thrives on the crest of good relationships. Particularly relationships that are essential—our relationships to parents, spouses, our children, friends, and other significant people in our lives. I suppose there are some people who could care less about relationships, but they are few and far between.

Recently my dad said that he thought I was doing a good job at Moody. I'm fifty-seven years old and still thrill at the approving statements of my parents. Martie tells me that I am her favorite preacher. And our grown children call on us for counsel. No amount of money or material gain can measure against the rewards that are only found in relationships. As good as the rewards are, the real joy in a relationship is the pleasure of making someone you love the object of your service and adoration. Nothing makes me happier than to serve Martie in ways that make her happy.

Relationships are the backbone of life when you realize the worst day at the office is not that bad, because there is a friend or a family member who believes in you—who, in effect, reminds you that there are things in life more important than the drudgery of unrewarding daily routines that go south.

It is for this reason that I am taken by the way God approaches the matter of connecting with us. It is profound enough that God would even want to connect; but that He desires to connect in the context of a loving relationship is an overwhelming thought. Among the world's great religions, Christianity alone is defined by the reality that the relationship between God and His people is driven and defined by a deep exchange of love. Other religions call their adherents with no thought of love to enter ritualistic contracts of sacrificial performance of duties and oft-repeated rites.

If you ask me, I am delighted to be a follower of Jesus. What amazing grace that He loves us and desires our love in return!

“Amazing love! how can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me.”

KNOWING YOU, JESUS

THAT I MAY KNOW HIM.

—Philippians 3:10 KJV

We all know who Jesus is.

We preach about His will and His ways, tell His stories by heart, celebrate Him in worship, and serve Him with enthusiasm. But there is a gnawing sense that there should be more to this relationship. Why is it that He often feels so far away? So historical? So Other? So church related?

The distance between knowing about Him and knowing Him is vast. The space between these two experiences separates the spectators from intimate participants.

It's a pretty safe bet that if you are reading this devotional you probably can recite stories of intrigue from His life and perhaps even spin a few theological paradigms about the nature of His existence. But the unfortunate reality is that most of us stop there. Seemingly satisfied with knowing *about* Him, we have no conception of the deep richness waiting for those who *experience* Him. And so we live our Christianity all dressed up with nowhere to go, keeping all the rules, exchanging clichés of “Bible-speak,” and passing the theological tests of orthodoxy—yet never really *knowing* Him.

If that's your story, get ready. The best is yet to come. He intends for you to experience the pleasure and reassuring peace of His presence in our lives. He didn't die for us to simply strike a deal guaranteeing heaven. He died for us to make us His own and to give us the privilege of experiencing Him personally. He lives to connect with the entire you. In fact, He sent us the Holy Spirit to make the total connection possible and He gave us His Word to show us the way. And you can know the pleasure.

The words of my grandmother's favorite hymn capture the privilege: “He walks with me, and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own, and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.” Knowing my grandmother, I have the feeling that she had tapped the secret of getting past knowing about Him for the joy of experiencing Him.

Read Philippians 3:7–10.

EXPERIENCING JESUS

THAT I MAY KNOW HIM, AND THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION, AND THE FELLOWSHIP OF HIS SUFFERINGS, BEING CONFORMED TO HIS DEATH.

—Philippians 3:10

Most of us who have grown up in “church world,” particularly of the evangelical kind, tend to want God to come in neat packages that are clearly defined and identifiable. He seems safer that way. Don’t misunderstand. God is both definable and identifiable. It’s just that He is more than that. There is a mystery about God that escapes the limited definitions of our finite minds and an experiencing of Him that often escapes our capacity to describe. If you are longing for more of Him, then you must be willing to seek Him in places where He can be found, . . . beyond the boundaries of definitions and dogma.

Paul, at the end of his life, declared that it was his passion to know Christ. Interestingly, he used the word that means to know by experience, which is noteworthy, since no one has ever experienced Jesus more intimately than Paul. He had a personal encounter of the Jesus kind on the road to Damascus and then spent an extended season in the “third heaven” (2 Corinthians 12:2) with Jesus. Yet he longed for more. Which only proves that you can’t get enough of Jesus.

He tells us his secret. First, he puts all of self away so that his heart is clear to see Jesus (Philippians 3:4–11). Then he tips us off that he meets Jesus in three specific places: in resurrection power, in other words, in victory over sin; in shared experiences with the sufferings of Jesus; and in the surrender that does whatever Jesus asks us to do, regardless. And here is the mystery. As we seek Him to deliver us from evil and feel His pain as we experience our own, and fully surrender . . . Jesus meets us. Not all of us feel it the same way or can describe it precisely. Yet His presence is manifest in ways that whet our appetite for more.

As Graham Kendrick wrote, “Knowing you Jesus, knowing you, there is no greater thing. You’re my all, you’re the best, you’re my joy my righteousness and I love you Lord.”

Meet Him as He delivers you from evil, in seasons of suffering, and in the Gethsemane of surrender.

CHOOSING JESUS

THE SURPASSING VALUE OF KNOWING CHRIST JESUS MY LORD.

—Philippians 3:8 NASB

“Daddy are we famous?” Libby was only six when she asked the question. I was pastoring a church in a small town in the Midwest at the time, and it didn’t take me long to respond. “No” was the only legitimate answer. She paused thoughtfully and then replied with confidence and a touch of consternation, “Well, we would be if more people knew about us.”

Poor Libby, just six and already concerned with what people thought about us. Wondering where we registered on the Richter scale of people’s opinions.

It is something that Libby will wrestle with the rest of her life. All of us end up being caught in the web of self-intrigue. Since earliest childhood we have been aware of and concerned about ourselves. We mastered words like *my* and *mine* long before we knew the word for *friend* or *share*. Growing up doesn’t help. What do people think of me? Have I been sufficiently recognized for my accomplishments? How am I being treated? Does anyone care about me? These questions still haunt us.

Books about knowing and understanding who we really are consistently make the best-seller list. Obscene amounts of money go to therapists who offer to guide you on a journey through your inner self. Actually, I can’t think of a more unsettling thought: to spend money for an inner journey through me. More important, it is a dreadfully unbiblical thought. If you are in the process of becoming a follower of Christ, life is not about a journey to get to know yourself but an adventure in getting to know Jesus.

Paul knew you can’t have it both ways. Your life will either be about self-absorption or about a Savior who is adored. We will either live for the applause of men or the applause of heaven. No wonder that Paul, after listing his stellar accomplishments, would exclaim, “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3:8 NASB).

Refocus. Concentrate on getting to know Jesus, and living to know yourself will seem insignificant and shallow by comparison.

PSALM 1

*Oh, the joys of those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or stand around with sinners,
or join in with scoffers.
But they delight in doing everything the LORD wants;
day and night they think about his law.
They are like trees planted along the riverbank,
bearing fruit each season without fail.
Their leaves never wither,
and in all they do, they prosper.
But this is not true of the wicked.
They are like worthless chaff, scattered by the wind.
They will be condemned at the time of judgment.
Sinners will have no place among the godly.
For the LORD watches over the path of the godly,
but the path of the wicked leads to destruction.*

ALL THAT WE NEED

JESUS ANSWERED HER, “IF YOU KNEW THE GIFT OF GOD AND WHO IT IS THAT ASKS YOU FOR A DRINK, YOU WOULD HAVE ASKED HIM AND HE WOULD HAVE GIVEN YOU LIVING WATER.”

—John 4:10

*N*eed something from Jesus today? If you are like most of us, there are some items on your “unanswered prayer” list that you think He’s forgotten. In fact, there are times when we feel spiritually abandoned, when He seems to care more about the needs of those who give stunning testimonies of answered prayer—or whose prayers about finding parking places in crowded mall parking lots always get answered.

While traveling through Samaria, Jesus met a village woman at the local well. He asked her for a drink of water. When she answered His request, Jesus said, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water” (John 4:10).

Days before, a group of Jews asked Christ to give them a sign to verify His claim to be God. Jesus responded, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” Confused, the Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” (John 2:19–20).

The Jewish people thought He was going to rebuild the temple; instead, in three days He rose from the dead to conquer death and hell. The Samaritan woman talked of water from the well; Jesus offered her living water. What Jesus gave people wasn’t necessarily what they asked for, expected or, thankfully, what they deserved. Consistently, He had better things in mind.

God gives each of us exactly what we need. And in case you think He has not done much for you lately, think again. With abounding generosity, God has graced us with forgiveness, love, acceptance, security, and substantial healing from the curse of sin . . . and heaven. If He never does anything more for us, He has given us enough to be gratefully praising Him for the rest of our lives—even if we can’t find that parking spot!

What specific gifts has He given you to meet your needs today? Resolve to live today with gratitude in your heart for all He has done.

RUNNING TO WIN

LET US RUN WITH PERSEVERANCE THE RACE MARKED OUT FOR US.

—Hebrews 12:1

Even in the coldest weather, a good runner knows better than to run with a heavy layer of clothing. I can't imagine that in the Olympic games the team from Alaska would run its race in bulging fur-lined parkas.

Running the race for Christ requires that we lay aside every hindering weight and the sin that so easily besets us (Hebrews 12:1). Running for Christ means stripping down to the bare minimum and racing with pure hearts and lives unburdened with willful sin.

Not only do we need to be free to run well, but His race requires perseverance. *Perseverance* literally means to “remain under,” to stay under the strain without seeking ways to escape the pressure. Races are flat-out stressful. Don't expect it to be a cakewalk. The ill winds of life get in our faces. The seductions of life at a more leisurely and self-gratifying pace constantly threaten to distract us. We may even get mud kicked in our face by the runner in front of us.

But this race is not run for our own self-satisfaction. It is not even run for our own glory. *We run for Him*—for Christ's glory and for the honor of His name. We run for the advancement of His kingdom, the rescuing of lost souls, the rearing of godly families, and His visibility through our lives on the job.

And so, with eyes fixed on the finish line, we vow to keep a steady, unhindered, undaunted pace. And when we look to see if Jesus is in the stands, we find that He is always there, “the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2 KJV), lifting a nail-scarred hand to cheer us on to the end.

As I shed the weights, it crosses my mind, *If He could run all the way to the cross for me, then surely no cost is too great to run my race for Him.*

Are you on the track? What's that “weight” on your back?

BEYOND 911

ENTER INTO HIS GATES WITH THANKSGIVING AND HIS COURTS WITH PRAISE.
GIVE THANKS TO HIM, BLESS HIS NAME. FOR THE LORD IS GOOD.

—Psalm 100:4–5 NASB

Prayer is far more than asking God for what we want or need. Prayer is the way we open our soul for Him to see and hear our heartfelt adoration and gratitude. And, as you no doubt have found, He takes the opportunity to commune with us as well. There have been many times that I have gone to prayer only for Him to remind me of Scripture, His character, and His will. In fact, when I go to Him in prayer with undealt-with sin in my life, He always wants to deal with that before I can go on. Any satisfying relationship needs communication: honest, open, and two-way. Can you think of a relationship that is growing where there is no communication, or worse yet, the only time you talk is when you are asking for something for yourself?

Sadly, many Christians have made prayer a toll-free request line to God. Although it is true that often we “have not, because [we] ask not” (James 4:2 KJV), we are more prone to “worship not because we ask a lot.”

When all we do is ask, we stifle our relationship with God. Even self-sufficient secularists turn to God in prayer when they want or need something badly enough. Does that make them friends of God? Of course not.

So just what is it that makes a Christian’s prayer unique and effective? There is a simple acronym you can use as a reminder: ACTS. It stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Notice that *asking* comes last.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that we should be afraid to approach God with our requests. D. L. Moody said it well: “Spread out your petition before God and then say, ‘Thy will, not mine, be done . . .’”

It is easier to ask in the context of His will when we have spent time telling Him how grateful we are for the goodness of His character and the pleasure of His loving grace.

Pray through the ACTS plan. Make it a habit!

A TEMPLE FIT FOR A KING

FLEE FROM SEXUAL IMMORALITY. . . DO YOU NOT KNOW THAT YOUR BODY IS A TEMPLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT? . . . THEREFORE HONOR GOD WITH YOUR BODY.

—1 Corinthians 6:18–20

*L*iving in a sensual culture places the follower of Christ in tension with an increasingly seductive environment.

From the subtle erosion of moral sensitivities by a constant dose of the “soaps,” to advertisements that push the edges of what is acceptable to sell their products, to the blatant availability of pornography, our generation faces a continual barrage that threatens the very definitions of what is right and wrong. For this we are paying dearly in changed attitudes and the destruction of safe and sane moral boundaries.

Even more important, God’s Word notes that when our desires are fulfilled through illegitimate means, we defile the temple of God. That’s a heavy charge. When the moneychangers defiled the temple in Christ’s day, He turned over their tables and, with a whip, expelled them from the temple. God does not take lightly the defilement of His home. In explaining His actions, Jesus said that His house was intended to be a place of prayer, not a place of sordid gain (Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46). Think of the offense to our Lord when our bodies—His home—are used for sinful pleasure.

What, then, shall we do? We must stand as priests at the gates of our temples to guard against the intrusion of moral defilement. It is our responsibility as royal priests to guard the threshold of our eyes, our ears, our minds, our hands, and our total bodies.

Our motive for refusing the defiling input of our world is not simply because someone told us it was bad. We remain pure because we love God enough to guard against anything that would desecrate His dwelling place. My guess is that if we all wore signs that said, “God Lives Here,” we would behave differently and would allow far less impurity to seep into His temple.

Is there a guard who is off duty at one of the entrances to the temple of your life?

SUPPORT THE ARMY

ENDURE HARDSHIP WITH US LIKE A GOOD SOLDIER OF CHRIST JESUS.

—2 Timothy 2:3

I am frequently brought face to face with the everyday struggles of missionaries who serve as soldiers for Christ. It takes many of them years just to get to the front lines because the funds they need are not available. Others feel forgotten and neglected during their stint on the field. When they finally come home, they feel that they somehow don't fit.

I also have the privilege of talking heart to heart with pastors who labor here in the homeland. While some feel loved and supported, others speak of the difficulty they face in trying to focus their church's attention on the advance of the gospel. They tell of bickering and petty agendas that turn the congregation inward and end up dividing and sapping its strength. How tragic that our personal preferences and prejudices should drain support and hinder the eternal cause of Jesus Christ!

Those not called to "ministry" also need support. Slugging it out at work and in our homes can be a daunting challenge.

Soldiers of faith desperately need support troops. An unbridled, enthusiastic show of support for one another would be a great source of encouragement.

Let's put away what is petty and temporal and concentrate on what will advance the cause of Christ. If we pledge to pray consistently and specifically for those involved on the front lines, we will provide vital support. If we put our money where we say our hearts are, we will keep the battle lines well supplied, the troops well fed, and the equipment well maintained.

We are all enlisted as soldiers and called to unashamedly advance the gospel of Christ. At the end of life we should be able to say, with Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

Is there a fellow soldier you can encourage today?

HE CALLS YOU “FRIEND”

NO LONGER DO I CALL YOU SLAVES . . . ; BUT I HAVE CALLED YOU FRIENDS,
FOR ALL THINGS THAT I HAVE HEARD FROM MY FATHER I HAVE MADE
KNOWN TO YOU.

—John 15:15 NASB

I don't remember much about my mom's decorating, but I do remember the plaque that hung on our dining room wall. It read, "Friends are like melons; let me tell you why: to find a good one, you must one hundred try." Which may explain why I often heard my dad say, "Joe, the greatest treasure in life is trusted friends."

You really can't beat a good friend. Friends care for you regardless. They are there when you need them. They laugh with you and cry with you. They cover your faults and affirm your strengths. They share secrets and keep your confidences. Life is enriched when friends are close.

All of which makes it an amazing thought to hear that Jesus considers us His friends. As He taught His disciples, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). His death proved not only that He loves us, but that He loves us as a friend.

The thought that God treats me as His friend stuns my needy heart. To think that He "walks with me, and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own" gets me through a lot of rough water. That He never leaves me and doesn't forsake me secures my anxious soul (Hebrews 13:5–6). That He has experienced every pain and therefore feels my pain comforts me in distress. That He freely supplies abundant grace and mercy in my time of need fills my staggering spirit with fresh resolve (Hebrews 4:14–16).

What a privilege to sing, "There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus. No not one! No not one! None else could heal all our soul's diseases, No not one! no not one! Jesus knows all about our struggles, He will guide till the day is done; there's not a friend like the lowly Jesus. No not one! No not one!"

What a friend we have in Jesus!

Bask in the blessing of His friendship.

PSALM 3

*O LORD, I have so many enemies;
so many are against me.*

*So many are saying,
“God will never rescue him!”*

*But you, O LORD, are a shield around me,
my glory, and the one who lifts my head high.*

*I cried out to the LORD,
and he answered me from his holy mountain.*

I lay down and slept.

*I woke up in safety,
for the LORD was watching over me.
I am not afraid of ten thousand enemies
who surround me on every side.*

Arise, O LORD!

Rescue me, my God!

Slap all my enemies in the face!

Shatter the teeth of the wicked!

Victory comes from you, O LORD.

May your blessings rest on your people.

REVERSING THE FLOW

“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS, FOR THEY WILL BE FILLED.”

—Matthew 5:6

Engineers got the idea that if they could reverse the flow of the Chicago River, the power and resources of Lake Michigan would flow into it. The water from the depths of the great lake would be fresh and clean, and the flow from the greater to the lesser body of water would be a source of long-term satisfaction and strength to the city.

The engineers did just that. They reversed the flow of the Chicago River so that today it is the only river in all of the Great Lakes system that receives its water from the lake. Because of this, the river is clean, strong, and never lacking for a source—unlike tributaries that draw their water from lesser and often unreliable sources, such as rainfall, snow melt, and underground springs.

Unfortunately, some of us are like the Chicago River before its flow was reversed. We have never permitted God’s Spirit to restructure our passions nor allowed ourselves to draw our satisfaction from Him and His clean resources. As a result, our passions draw their fulfillment from the world around us, and all we have to contribute is the debris and pollution we have accumulated. Sadly, a bird’s-eye view of Christianity looks like that at times, with the pollutants of misplaced passions spilling into the sacred seas of church, home, and friendship.

To reverse the flow means that we need to restructure our longings. We must realize that we have cultivated a longing for lesser, sometimes-impure things. Then, we must repent and turn our hearts toward God and seek to be satisfied in Him and in all that He so wonderfully provides for us. When we do, our hearts sing with the psalmist, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” (Psalm 42:1–2). Having our deep thirst for God fully satisfied in Him should be the goal of our lives.

What is the source of your satisfaction in life? Is it lesser things or the Living God?

STRONG SPIRITUAL WEAPONS

FOR OUR STRUGGLE IS . . . AGAINST THE SPIRITUAL FORCES OF EVIL IN THE
HEAVENLY REALMS.

—Ephesians 6:12

Paul states: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes” (Ephesians 6:10–11). “Watch out!” is Paul’s way of getting our attention. This is no time to relax. He calls us to stand firm and be on guard.

His words are not meant to traumatize our hearts. Instead, they are meant as a wake-up call to our souls.

We all have the tendency to slide into a comfortable Christianity. We attend worship services, participate in ministry activities, interact with fellow Christians, and enjoy the smooth, sometimes predictable, ride. Paul warns us not to get too comfortable. When we least suspect trouble, we can be a target. Our sense of security is only an illusion. We dare not coast through this world in a mirage of safety and happiness. We are involved in a battle.

So what is the answer? Must we live in fear? No. We are to ground ourselves in prayer and in His Word. We must put on the full spiritual armor He has given us (Ephesians 6:10–20).

Our struggle is against the devastating terror of the unseen systems of evil under Satan’s control. We must train ourselves to be on guard and alert and to stand firm in the mighty power of the Lord. “You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

Alert. Prayerful. Standing. Declaring. Fearless—but only with the knowledge that the advantage of the all-powerful God is on our side. We have been given mighty weapons to extinguish all of Satan’s wicked schemes. In the end, we must use them to be victorious.

Are you living in comfortable Christianity? How might you improve your soldiering skills?

CLEANING AWAY THE CLUTTER

BLOT OUT ALL MY INIQUITIES. CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART, O GOD, AND
RENEW A STEADFAST SPIRIT WITHIN ME.

—Psalm 51:9–10 NASB

A great cartoon shows a chubby, forlorn figure in a bathrobe and shower cap standing on a bathroom scale. Dejectedly he says, “My body is not my temple; it’s my garage.” When I saw that cartoon, I immediately thought about my actual garage. It’s the place where we put everything for which we have no place. Before long, the clutter is unbelievable. Frankly, there have been times when I have been ashamed to open my garage door. My neighbor fastidiously keeps his garage in order. Our garage doors face each other, compounding my guilt. Sick of the clutter, I sometimes dedicate a Saturday to cleaning it up. By the end of the day, the clutter is gone. I feel so good I would like to leave the garage door open for a week to let everyone see how the Stowells keep their property!

I wonder if God sometimes feels as if He’s living in our messy garage when it comes to our hearts and minds. We accumulate a lot of clutter, and we think we can hide it by covering it up with an attractive exterior. But eventually it shows. Garbage in; garbage out. Because our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, we cannot wink at an untidy dwelling place. Take a spiritual workday and discard the thoughts of bitterness. Bag and throw away the old patterns of sexual fantasy. Put memories in their proper place. Organize attitudes. Fill your heart with the virtues found in God’s Word. Make your spiritual residence clean to the core. Live so that you can leave the door open for all to see.

In fact, figuratively speaking, it might be good to place a sign around our neck that says in big letters, “God Lives Here.” I think we would think, act, and react in a new light if that sign were visible for all to see. Can you imagine cultivating an affair while wearing a sign like that? Or attacking someone verbally? Instead, people might see a little more of what Christ really looks like.

What is cluttering your life?

FREE AT LAST

“THEN YOU WILL KNOW THE TRUTH, AND THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE.”

—John 8:32

It's not that freedom is so wrong. Scripture validates the pursuit of freedom. Yet it directs that pursuit in a surprisingly different way. As Christ says, true freedom begins with restrictions.

We find this surprising definition of freedom in John 8:31–32, where Jesus says, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Notice the sequence. True freedom is not doing whatever I wish. Freedom is the result of my actualizing Christ's teaching, of restricting my life to that which is right and true.

Restricting my life to that which is true sets me free from the inevitable bondage of addictive and destructive behavior and allows me to know unhindered joy, a clear conscience, growing relationships, and life at its fullest. When I limit myself to honest, biblical business deals, I am free to enjoy a clear conscience without the haunting fear of getting caught at something unethical. When I resist the temptation to do whatever I want and limit myself to meeting my wife's needs and bringing happiness to her, I set our relationship free for growth, intimacy, and long-lasting reward.

Freedom is a result of hard, unflinching commitments to the time-tested ways of the wisdom of God. Freedom is not a right with which we are born. It is a God-given privilege realized only as a result of righteous living. It comes the old-fashioned way—we earn it with an undaunted commitment to truth.

You've probably noticed that our world's pursuit of personal freedom without restrictions has gotten us into a lot of trouble. Broken families, empty lives, crime, and self-destructive addictions are the hefty price we are paying for spending our freedom any way we wish.

“If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).

What “truth” instructions liberate your life?

STRETCHING THE TRUTH

MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATION OF MY HEART BE
PLEASING IN YOUR SIGHT, O LORD, MY ROCK AND MY REDEEMER.

—Psalm 19:14

*H*ave you ever exaggerated to manipulate someone into doing what you wanted them to do? Or have you ever exaggerated to vent your anger? Anger often expresses itself in exaggerated statements to intimidate or humble those we are angry with. I get a chuckle out of King Nebuchadnezzar, who, in his great anger against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, commanded that the furnace be turned up seven times hotter than usual (Daniel 3:19). The fire would have been sufficient just the way it was, but in his anger Nebuchadnezzar had an exaggerated response.

Sometimes we exaggerate to feel better about ourselves and to help others feel better about us as well. The fisherman whose largemouth bass was *just* three pounds ends up telling people that it was *at least* three pounds. The businessman who makes \$50,000 a year tells his friend that he's making "something under \$100,000 a year." Salesmen face a special temptation in this area. How easy it is to exaggerate the claims of a product to close a sale.

I worked for a carpenter one summer. Occasionally, I cut a board too short. He would say, "Get the wood stretcher." His point was that wood doesn't stretch. Neither does the truth. Some of us want to make Silly Putty out of the truth by stretching it to our own advantage. The problem is that stretching the truth destroys it.

Exaggeration erodes trust and credibility, two building blocks of successful relationships. It is a violation of God's will for us. Yielding our egos to be used to serve God and others instead of our own interests will produce words that help and heal. Then with the psalmist we can say, "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer" (Psalm 19:14).

Tell it as it is, not as you want it to be.

GOD'S RICH LOVE

WHOEVER DOES NOT LOVE DOES NOT KNOW GOD, BECAUSE GOD IS LOVE.

—1 John 4:8

You couldn't have asked for a better place to live or for a more perfect spouse. In fact, in this place, intimacy with others and God was deep and pleasurable. It was Eden. A garden where God's best was provided for the lives of Adam and Eve.

Yet, even there, sin and selfishness rose to interrupt the experience.

In the midst of a loss of intimacy and the arrival of aloneness, it is significant to note that God took the initiative toward Adam and Eve and walked back into the Garden of Eden after the Fall. If we didn't know the story and tried to imagine what might happen next, we might have imagined God's exercising a host of options. He could have annihilated everything and started over again. He could have ignored Adam and Eve and let them live with the consequences of rejecting Him, allowing their new scheme of existence to run its degenerative course. Or He could do the unexpected. He could restore the relationship they had so carelessly given up. He could call them back to Himself and to a consistent moral order that would again make possible intimacy with Him and the development of trusted relationships.

And that is just what He did. It is all the more surprising when we realize that God is the only entity in the universe that can be alone and still be fully satisfied and sustained. It may come as a blow to us that God does not need us! But the beauty of it is that, though He can go for eternity without us, He chooses to love us and care for us, which makes His love and concern for us richer still. He doesn't love us for what it will do for Him. Too many of us have been wounded by that kind of love. He loves us because He is love itself and because He created us for the pleasure of our fellowship and the ultimate glory of His name. It was that kind of love and compassion that drove Him to seek to reconnect Adam and Eve to Himself. He offers the same privilege to us today.

Have you accepted God's invitation to intimate fellowship?

PSALM 4

Answer me when I call,

O God who declares me innocent.

Take away my distress.

Have mercy on me and hear my prayer.

How long will you people ruin my reputation?

How long will you make these groundless accusations?

How long will you pursue lies?

You can be sure of this:

The LORD has set apart the godly for himself.

The LORD will answer when I call to him.

Don't sin by letting anger gain control over you.

Think about it overnight and remain silent.

Offer proper sacrifices,

and trust in the LORD.

Many people say, "Who will show us better times?"

Let the smile of your face shine on us, LORD.

You have given me greater joy

than those who have abundant harvests of grain and wine.

I will lie down in peace and sleep,

for you alone, O LORD, will keep me safe.

CHOICES

APPROVE THE THINGS THAT ARE EXCELLENT.

—Philippians 1:10 NKJV, NASB

One of the most profound pieces of advice I ever received came from a friend who said, “Our lives are not made by the dreams we dream but by the choices we make.” It’s true. Much of your life today is the sum total of all the choices you have made. So I’m not surprised that God is interested in choices when He directs us to “approve the things that are excellent” (Philippians 1:10 NKJV, NASB).

Granted, restricting our lives to excellent choices can be challenging. We may have to go it alone. We may have to yield comfort, cash, or convenience. But the gain is worth it.

According to Paul, excellent choices render us “sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:10–11 NASB). This text delineates three advantages of a life committed to the best choices.

Excellence brings purity. There is nothing better in life than the pleasure of a blameless, clear conscience. Of not having to look over your shoulder to see if someone saw or heard what you did. Excellent choices set us free from the haunting shadow that “I might get caught.”

Excellence brings productivity. Think of a life that produces the righteous fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience—over the long haul (Galatians 5:22). Think of having a friend like that. Of being married to someone like that. Of being that to others!

Excellence brings purpose. A life of excellent choices brings glory to God, the very purpose of our redemption (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

What makes a choice excellent? According to Philippians 1:9, it is a living commitment to love, knowledge, and discernment. Love chooses what is best for others, not what is best for me. Knowledge guides every choice by the clear principles of the Word of God. Discernment produces wise application.

When we do what is best for others according to the direction of God’s Word, excellence is the product: excellent dads, moms, children, pastors, employers, employees—excellent people!

Remember, your life is not made by the dreams you dream, but by the choices you make.

Plan an excellent choice today!

SUBSTANTIALLY HEALED

ACCORDING TO MY EARNEST EXPECTATION AND HOPE, THAT . . . CHRIST WILL
. . . BE EXALTED.

—Philippians 1:20 NASB

The late Francis Schaeffer called salvation a “substantial healing.” He was talking about the reality that though our redemption is fully accomplished in Christ, it will not be fully appropriated until we arrive in heaven. While redemption cancels the penalty of sin and restores us completely to God, it does not as yet free us from the residual effects of sin. We still get sick, struggle with temptation, and, on occasion, fail.

Cooperating with the Spirit’s work in our lives means that we consistently grow toward greater healing.

One of the marks of that healing is the desire to live for His glory and not our own. For the more substantially healed, personal significance is no longer something we search for—it has already been secured for us in Him. Those who have not yet embraced this liberating reality remain vulnerable to a whole litany of sins. Greed, lying, boasting, self-centeredness, sexual immorality, gossip, and a dozen other poisons from the pit can be directly laid at the feet of needing to feel more important.

If you are a child of the King, what more could you want in the way of significance? In Christ we have all the worth, identity, affirmation, prosperity, and power we need. As such, we are free to live to magnify Him instead of ourselves. As Paul declared, “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death” (Philippians 1:20). He affirmed that since God has “rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption” (Colossians 1:13–14), we are free to serve and celebrate the truth that Christ is the One who deserves the preeminence.

No one can have it both ways. We either live to platform our own significance or live to exalt His.

Do something today that magnifies Christ through your life. Demonstrate the significance of an aspect of His character—love, justice, mercy, grace, truth—and then give Him the credit.

CELEBRATE THE DIFFERENCE

IN CHRIST . . . OLD THINGS [ARE] PASSED AWAY; BEHOLD, NEW THINGS HAVE COME.

—2 Corinthians 5:17 NASB

The French are right when they exclaim, “*Vive la différence!*” When it comes to men and women, it’s the difference that makes life so wonderful. The unique perspectives, notions, interests, and energies between the sexes challenge, enrich, and bless. In the same way, God has redeemed us to challenge, enrich, and bless the world with our uniqueness in Christ. Our “substantial healing” initiates dramatic, sometimes radical, transformations that stand in vivid contrast to the well-traveled ways of our world. We have been forgiven that we might forgive, loved that we might love, made ceremonially pure that we might become pure, given grace and mercy that we might dispense the same to others. And when we live out these qualities, there is a powerful difference displayed that intriguingly engages an unforgiving, often loveless, impure, and graceless world.

Unfortunately, through the centuries Satan has been surprisingly successful in diminishing the difference. Followers who lived in Corinth and Laodicea, to name two cities, were heavily censured in the Bible for their loss of uniqueness. When the disciples were posturing for the important positions in the kingdom, Christ told them their problem was that they were acting like the typical Gentile. He went on to remind them that He had come not to elevate Himself but to serve—all the way to the cross. If they were to demonstrate the difference that Jesus imprints on a life, they too would be more interested in serving than ruling (Matthew 20:20–28).

Think for a moment of the power of a life that is impeccably honest in its business dealings, self-sacrificing in its relationships, trustworthy, just, and generous in all its dealings. When we live out the uniqueness of Christ, some may just ask us why we are the way we are. It is then that we get to tell them of the difference that only Jesus can make. . . . *Vive la différence!*

What is it that is different about you? Is it a difference that Christ has made?

FORGIVENESS FULL AND FREE

WHILE HE WAS STILL A LONG WAY OFF, HIS FATHER SAW HIM AND WAS FILLED WITH COMPASSION.

—Luke 15:20

*I*t was a defining moment in the Prodigal's life when he abandoned life on his own terms and determined, "I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son'" (Luke 15:18–19 NASB). His life was so wasted that his only hope was in the possibility that his father had not abandoned him. He realized, after exhausting all his resources, that what he really needed was a restored relationship. If he didn't have the relationship, he had nothing.

Not quite sure how his father would respond, he left the self-inflicted mire of his life and, with his stomach in a knot and his heart racing, he headed home. Each step closer on what was now becoming a familiar road found his anxiety rising. And with good cause. This boy had deeply offended his father. No Jewish dad would be likely to quickly forgive the embarrassment and squandering of the family assets that he had so wantonly imposed on his family.

But it was wasted anxiety. Jesus notes, "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him" (v. 20 NASB).

Did his father just happen to notice him a long way off? Or was he keeping a vigil? Had he been keeping his eyes on the horizon, waiting and hoping for the day his wayward son would find his way home? I think so. The son was the object of the forgiving father's love. Shocked, he fell before his dad, stunned by his father's grace and mercy. There was no probation. No lecture. Just a celebration.

So it is for us. Jesus meant this to be a picture of our heavenly Father. The very second we too get up from where we are and repentantly embrace Him as our only hope, He is there. Ready. Waiting.

He's not surprised by your sin . . . He already felt it all on the cross where forgiveness was assured!

CHRIST OR CREDENTIALS

IF ANYONE . . . THINKS HE HAS REASON TO PUT CONFIDENCE IN THE FLESH,
I HAVE MORE.

—Philippians 3:4

When life has been good to us, it is easy to get lost in the glory of our own accomplishments. There is something magnetic about the line, “If you’ve got it, flaunt it!” Yet boasting of ourselves is not only seen by God as pride and an affront to His glory through us, but it also inhibits our ability to enjoy intimacy with Jesus.

Listen to Paul rattle off his credentials, which in the crowd he ran with would solicit “wow’s” from everyone. “If anyone else thinks he has reason to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless” (Philippians 3:4–6).

But his choice is clear: “But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. . . . I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him. . . . I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings” (vv. 7–10).

Paul was well aware of the radical choice He would have to make if he were to fully experience the presence and power of Jesus in His life. For Him the decision was clear—he chose Jesus. Granted, he had an edge in that he had literally been in the presence of Jesus at least twice. I doubt that any of us would be interested in a self-absorbed life if we had literally met Him face to face! Fast-food hamburgers lose some of their glow after you have had a killer steak! If we could understand the glory of His greatness our boasting would be our shame and our self-enhancing pursuits would seem embarrassingly trivial.

What makes Paul’s decision so instructive is that He had an awful lot to feel good about in terms of glorying in himself. When one who has so much chooses Jesus, it makes a great statement.

It’s unsettling to think of losing the bragging rights you deserve. But, then, the Jesus who welcomes us to lose ourselves in Him assures us, “He who loses His life for my sake shall gain it, but he who keeps his life shall lose it.”

Losing my life to gain it . . . what an interesting thought.

THE TOUGH TASK

LET THIS MIND BE IN YOU, WHICH WAS ALSO IN CHRIST JESUS.

—Philippians 2:5 KJV

One of the major problems with the pursuit of “stuff” is that the goods that we gain or are hoping to gain often eclipse the value of people in our lives. Our love for people is challenged by our love of things. Though it is sheer deceit, we have come to believe that true happiness, prestige, joy, and fulfillment are the direct result of personal gain. The end result is that things become more significant to us than people. Opportunities to gain things drive us to work longer, which then takes us away from our families, churches, and meaningful time with others. If we see people as a means to the end of gaining more things, we will use people, deceive them, and misrepresent them—all to get and gain.

Of course, putting people in their proper place is not always the most pleasant pursuit. Let’s face it; it’s easier to manage material goods and the people who work for us than the people for whom we are most responsible. Kids are snotty and often out of sorts. Spouses don’t always live up to our expectations and complicate our lives with their expectations. Friends disappoint us, and that guy who doesn’t deserve it just got the promotion I deserved. Still others are manipulators, intimidators, or guilt-inducers. We hesitate to get too close lest we get caught in their web.

But, in the face of all of this, Christ still calls us to reach out to others. He is not unaware of the difficulty of the task. He came and loved when it meant great sacrifice to Himself, when it required Him to minister to a world that would rarely reach back and minister to Him—a world that would use Him, misunderstand Him, malign Him, and crucify Him; a fickle world that loved Him and left Him. His example helps us cut through the challenges of our own self-interest and leads us to the toughest, yet most rewarding, of all endeavors . . . the love of our neighbor.

Where do people rank on the list of what is really most important to you?

PSALM 5:1–8, 11, 12

*O LORD, hear me as I pray;
pay attention to my groaning.
Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God,
for I will never pray to anyone but you.
Listen to my voice in the morning, LORD.
Each morning I bring my requests to you and wait expectantly.
O God, you take no pleasure in wickedness;
you cannot tolerate the slightest sin.
Therefore, the proud will not be allowed to stand in your presence,
for you hate all who do evil.
You will destroy those who tell lies.
The LORD detests murderers and deceivers.
Because of your unfailing love, I can enter your house;
with deepest awe I will worship at your Temple.
Lead me in the right path, O LORD,
or my enemies will conquer me.
Tell me clearly what to do,
and show me which way to turn.
But let all who take refuge in you rejoice;
let them sing joyful praises forever.
Protect them,
so all who love your name may be filled with joy.
For you bless the godly, O LORD,
surrounding them with your shield of love.*

MORE OF ME OR THEE?

BECOME MATURE, ATTAINING TO THE WHOLE MEASURE OF THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST.

—Ephesians 4:13

We all know that spiritual maturity is measured by the extent to which our lives reflect Christ. Yet totally abandoning ourselves to allow Him to emerge through us can, at times, feel threatening. After all, He takes control over who we are and what we want to be. And, to be honest, there are times that we don't want to be totally like Him. After all, He was so demurring, soft, and merciful.

Perhaps we have forgotten that, as the perfect God-man, He was the ideal expression of life as it ought to be. Although He had a compassionate side, He displayed strength and power in balance. He knew how to be tough on charlatans and hypocrites and gentle to those in need. He was strong enough to attract as followers tough fishermen, despised tax collectors, cynics, and members of the underground militia. He was so compelling that people gave up their careers and personal ambitions to follow Him. And, we should add, He was the kind of man with whom women felt safe.

Jesus Christ does not compromise our personhood. When we submit to Him, He emerges through the distinct qualities of our uniquely created selves to create a fuller and richer expression of what a truly good person ought to be. He redefines us by replacing greed with generosity, revenge with forgiveness, self-centeredness with servanthood, and polluted hearts and minds with purity. He takes our instincts to protect, nurture, provide, conquer, and accumulate and helps us point them in productive directions away from ourselves and toward others and the kingdom of heaven.

The apostle Paul wrote, "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13). And, I might add, it is the goal of redemption that we become "conformed to the image of His Son" (Romans 8:29 NASB).

Is there more of Christ or more of "me" in your personality profile?

BELIEVING THE LIE

“HE IS A LIAR AND THE FATHER OF LIES.”

—John 8:44

Knowing all that we know now, one wonders why Eve ever did what she did in the first place. At the moment that she ate the fruit, all seemed so right, so good . . . and her God seemed so bad.

But if the truth were known, at the time Eve abandoned God for the supposed benefits of her world, nothing about God had changed. All that had changed was her interpretation of the facts she had previously believed. She now saw the generous God, who had given her and Adam everything in the Garden but *one* tree, as stingy and restrictive, keeping her from something she desired. Worse, He was holding her back, oppressively preventing her from sharing in His great knowledge and power (Gen. 3:1–6).

Once we begin to suspect God instead of respecting and honoring Him, we have begun the trek away from Him. Life is full of scenarios where Satan can steal our affection for God by putting his deceitful twist on our experiences. We must remember that he is the spin doctor of hell and—as Christ said—the father of lies. Satan wants to steal our affection from God by using distorted thoughts like these:

- Blaming God for the evil Satan has inspired and superimposed on our lives
- Defining God as a God who has been good to others but not good to us
- Making us feel that we have been good, but God has used us and not rewarded us, leaving our righteousness an empty sacrifice
- Blinding us to the fact that God can take the worst things in our lives and orchestrate them for good and gain
- Convincing us that God’s ways and His will for us are unduly restrictive and oppressive

Interestingly, persuaded by Satan that God was less than good and not to be trusted, Eve took life into her own hands and ate the fruit—only to find that Satan slithered off, leaving her inexorably damaged by sin, alone, alienated from her God, and ashamed.

It’s important to know whom you can trust and whom you can’t.

Have you been harboring such thoughts toward God? Confess them and start again.

IN GOD WE TRUST

BUT HIS DELIGHT IS IN THE LAW OF THE LORD, AND ON HIS LAW HE
MEDITATES DAY AND NIGHT.

—Psalm 1:2

*A*cross from the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow stands an imposing granite column with a bust of Karl Marx mounted on top. Below the monument is a quotation from Lenin, who said of Marx, “His words will last forever because his words are true.” For seventy years, persecuted Christians in the USSR were no doubt tempted to believe that perhaps Marx’s words had trumped the power of the Word of God. Yet, in less than a century, his words were discredited by history. What an ironic reminder that the only truth that lasts forever is God’s truth.

I am reminded of the psalmist’s words: “Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One” (Psalm 2:1–2). God’s response? “The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them” (v. 4).

Throughout history, godless people, movements, and nations have had their day in the sun. We have wondered why their power and pride have prevailed. Yet, in the long view, God and His truth are the only realities that stand the test and turmoil of time. Just ask the oppressed followers of Christ who endured faithfully the *temporary* tyranny of godless Marxism.

The reality is that evil does prosper, but only for a season. Our lives are oftentimes victimized by manipulative and abusive people around us who have climbed to pinnacles of power and prestige. Yet, ultimately, their demise is sure.

Those who live righteously and uncompromisingly advance God’s truth and His kingdom will find that when the smoke finally clears, God’s Word prevails.

So, while evil will have its day in the sun, it is far more important for us to place our lives and trust in God’s Son, whom to know is life eternal (John 17:3).

Few things are of lasting value in this brief existence called life. The only things that lend value and worth to life are those that ultimately endure: life and truth in Jesus Christ.

Choose a “word” from God to cling to today.

HE KNOWS

I KNOW YOUR TRIBULATION AND YOUR POVERTY. . . . DO NOT FEAR WHAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO SUFFER.

—Revelation 2:9–10 NASB

After the evening service at a conference where I was speaking, a couple approached me and asked if we could talk privately. As we went into a side room, it was obvious that they had something deep on their hearts. They told me about their son who was a senior in high school. He loved the Lord and was a leader in their church youth group as well as holding leadership positions at school. They wept as they went on to say that he had been killed two weekends before in a head-on collision. It was one of those times when it seems like there aren't any words in our dictionary to express the grief or to console a broken heart. As I searched for ways to help them see it from God's point of view the boy's mother said, "Our pastor told us that God didn't know this was going to happen and that God was just as surprised as we were that our son had lost his life."

I was shocked. If you want to comfort grieving hearts, that's not where you start. While it may be a valiant attempt to excuse God for not preventing the tragedy, this kind of poor theology leaves us as victims of the careless winds of fate. Thankfully, nothing could be further from the truth. God did know. As Oswald Chambers wrote, "The circumstances of a saint's life are ordained of God. In the life of a saint there is no such thing as chance."

He is all-knowing, and nothing escapes His perception or permission. And although we don't always understand why He permits pain, we do know that we can trust in His character. He is a good, loving, and wise God, and He cannot be unfaithful to Himself.

Take comfort in knowing that God knows; that He is never distracted; that nothing escapes His attention. Thankfully, there is no need for contingency plans in heaven. Working all things together for good is not an insurmountable problem for Him.

He knows! Sometimes that is all we need to know.

TOO GOOD TO CARE

“THE SON OF MAN CAME TO SEEK AND TO SAVE WHAT WAS LOST.”

—Luke 19:10

In Luke 19 we learn that it’s possible for really good people—like us—to perform poorly when it comes to compassion for those we consider the “bad” people in our world. The good guys in Matthew 18, the Pharisees, were distraught that Jesus Christ cared for the very people they saw as the enemies of Judaism, the people who shamelessly contradicted all that the Jewish leaders held to be of value and worth. So they grumbled among themselves that Jesus, who claimed to be God, was often found hanging out with what the religious leaders thought was the wrong crowd.

The Pharisees had what I call a “good guys, bad guys” theology. Since God is a holy, perfect, and good God, surely His favor must rest on those who are “good” and not deserving of His judgment. As for those who are “bad,” and deserving of judgment, the only thing a righteous God would extend to them would be disfavor and condemnation. That’s precisely why Jesus Christ was such an enigma to the Pharisees. How could someone who claimed to be God spend time with prostitutes, tax collectors, and other despised elements of Jewish society? If He were really God, wouldn’t He spend His time with the “good guys” and proclaim condemnation on the “bad guys”? The Pharisees were right about God’s holiness and justice, yet they failed to see that this holy God was also a God of mercy, grace, patience, forbearance, and love.

If we are not careful, even if our theology is orthodox to the core, it can become distorted and misapplied. When that happens, life and compassion get distorted as well. If doctrines such as the sovereignty of God and election are not held in clear biblical balance, our hearts can easily cool toward the lost and the distraught. Sinners will become His responsibility and not ours. We will grow long on mad and short on mercy and the attitude of grace will be supplanted by grumbling about the wayward sinners of our world.

No one was ever more orthodox than Christ. Yet no one has ever had a longer reach of compassion.

How far does your compassion extend?

TRUE COMPASSION

AND SEEING THE MULTITUDES, HE FELT COMPASSION FOR THEM, BECAUSE THEY WERE DISTRESSED AND DOWNCAST LIKE SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD.

—Matthew 9:36 NASB 1977

Several words are used in Scripture to translate our English word *compassion*. Their meanings in both Hebrew and Greek are highly instructive.

Two basic words are used in the Old Testament, one of which means “to bear, to become responsible for, to spare someone from trouble.” This Hebrew word deals mainly with our actions. The second Hebrew term is more attitudinal. It means “to be soft, gentle.” It is sometimes translated “womb” and also means to “be wide” in encompassing others and their needs.

The leading word for compassion in the New Testament means “that emotion aroused by contact with affliction.” It is the Greek word used to translate the Old Testament concept of God’s loyal, unflinching covenant love. The stress in this particular word is on the action that flows out of our being as we are touched by another’s affliction. In fact, the difference between sympathy and biblical compassion is that biblical compassion—true compassion—always leads to action. Compassion is not measured by how we feel but by what we do in response to how we feel.

We might define compassion as our commitment to activate ourselves as channels of God’s love, mercy, and grace in tender, thoughtful, understanding acts of help, deliverance, forgiveness, and restoration toward those in need. Compassion really is God’s love, mercy, and grace looking for a place to get busy. Compassion asks, “What can I do to help?”

God’s compassion offers help to all who are in need. He is not like those who withhold a healing, helping hand behind the excuse of their own interests. It looks at life from the point of view of those who are hurting and refuses to callously walk away, casting blame and guilt on the broken. His compassion never takes sin lightly or discounts His sense of justice. But it never forgets that mercy and grace are gifts of love that offer help and hope before judgment.

I am struck that some of us who have so wonderfully received His compassion are so seemingly uninterested in passing it on to others.

What compassion have you received from Him? What act of compassion could you share?

PSALM 6

*O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your rage.*

Have compassion on me, LORD, for I am weak.

Heal me, LORD, for my body is in agony.

I am sick at heart.

How long, O LORD, until you restore me?

Return, O LORD, and rescue me.

Save me because of your unfailing love.

For in death, who remembers you?

Who can praise you from the grave?

I am worn out from sobbing.

Every night tears drench my bed;

my pillow is wet from weeping.

My vision is blurred by grief;

my eyes are worn out because of all my enemies.

Go away, all you who do evil,

for the LORD has heard my crying.

The LORD has heard my plea;

the LORD will answer my prayer.

May all my enemies be disgraced and terrified.

May they suddenly turn back in shame.

OUR ULTIMATE PROVIDER

AND MY GOD WILL SUPPLY ALL YOUR NEEDS.

—Philippians 4:19 NASB

When I went into my first pastorate, the small group of believers in the church made a great financial commitment to insure that I could be involved in the ministry full-time. It was a big step of faith for them. What they didn't know was that it meant a 33 percent cut in income for my family. Those were the manna years of our living. Our whole family learned that all we are and have is from God.

I recall coming home from the office one evening and finding on the dining room table a large box addressed to me. It was from a lady in the church where I grew up whom I hadn't seen in years. I eagerly opened the box to find three suits in it. They had belonged to her son, a businessman in Arizona. All three were in perfect condition. They were exactly the styles I liked, and they fit perfectly. No alterations needed!

During those manna years, God clothed our daughter with beautiful, hardly worn hand-me-downs from a family we had met only once. He answered prayer about tires for our car; He kept old cars nearly maintenance free; and He surprised us with unexpected income just when we needed it. In fact, my wife and I used to joke that if a little extra money came in, it was God's advance warning that the washer was going to break down.

Our recognition of God as ultimate provider becomes the joy of a confident heart even in the worst of times. And His provision is not only in material ways. He gives grace to survive, protection to preserve, and wisdom to get us through. In fact the provision of the "daily bread" of our lives is only a reflection of the indispensable provision of His care and love for us. The confidence of living for and serving a generous God translates into the freedom of aggressively becoming all that we can possibly be to the praise and honor of His name without the distraction of accumulating gain for ourselves.

Thank God for making you dependent on Him. He always gives more than He takes!

THE BEGINNING OF THE END?

“I AM MAKING EVERYTHING NEW!”

—Revelation 21:5

Even the most casual observer notices that the more sophisticated and technically advanced our society becomes, the more decadence and despair are evident. Increasingly, I meet followers of Christ who live on the edge of depression about the degenerate forces of society in politics, music, pop culture, and even the church. What we have forgotten is that Jesus warned that we would have trouble in this world . . . but quickly reminded us that He had overcome this world (John 16:33). And that in His time He would create a new world order to replace this sin-seduced planet.

I am not one to jump on faddish bandwagons of speculation, nor am I a date-setter, but I am noticing more than ever that many events begin to come into sync with the return of Christ. History, it seems, has pressed the fast-forward button.

I always wondered how the Antichrist would be able to unify the East and the West. But it's happening—miraculously, as the polarization between long-standing enemies is dissolving economically and politically.

Another indicator of the approaching return of Christ is the rise of supernatural activities. More blatantly than ever, satanism and witchcraft are openly practiced. We should expect the forces of hell to unleash their most blatant attacks when their doom seems imminent. Cultures are descending into decadence as the unrestrained influences of our Western ways infect the world.

The increase of natural disasters may be significant as well. The prophets predicted an increase of such phenomena at the end of the age.

Ultimately, what does this mean for us—fear and despair? No. Christ predicted that the day is coming when He will eternally dwell with us. In that day He will “wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. . . . I am making everything new!” (Revelation 21:3–5).

Could it be that those words will soon be more than a promise? I certainly hope so. Never before has it looked so much like the end, and never before so much like the marvelous beginning.

Live in this hope!

STABILITY IN THE ROCK

“WHY ARE YOU DOWNCAST, O MY SOUL? WHY SO DISTURBED WITHIN ME? PUT YOUR HOPE IN GOD, FOR I WILL YET PRAISE HIM, MY SAVIOR AND MY GOD.”

—Psalm 42:5

Hope is really a matter of focus. If we focus our attention on the world, its unsettled conditions will have a traumatizing effect on us. If, however, we focus on the Lord and His character, Word, presence, power, and sovereign intentions, there will be hope for the stability we need in this rough-and-tumble world. But, let's face it, most of us are more prone to fret and stew about our world than we are to trust God in the midst of our world. Better yet, some of us are bound and determined to try to change the world.

For those of you who wish to change the world, let me help you. Changing *the* world begins with a willingness to change the only world you can really change—*your* world. As we apply the principles of God's Word to the areas we can change—our values, our attitudes, our families, and our relationships—we bring hope and confidence to our own lives and build a platform from which we begin to influence others for constructive change.

The solid stability of truth uncompromisingly applied to our lives will become evident as people see the light from our lives shining through the darkness of the day. They will inevitably be drawn from their deepening despair to a clear alternative—a hope for God's grace in their own lives. Jesus taught, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

What the world needs is something to hope in. Not the hope that simply wishes something could be true, but a hope based confidently on the reality of a God who is certain and true regardless of the turmoil in our own souls and in the world around us.

As the fabric of the world continues to unravel, our stability must be anchored in the One who does not move: Jesus Christ, the solid rock.

What ray of hope could you bring to your world from the light of your life, Jesus Christ?

THE JOY OF SURRENDER

FLEE THE EVIL DESIRES OF YOUTH, AND PURSUE RIGHTEOUSNESS, FAITH, LOVE AND PEACE, ALONG WITH THOSE WHO CALL ON THE LORD OUT OF A PURE HEART.

—2 Timothy 2:22

God has always been interested in knowing what priority He holds in our lives. What we do with our time, money, sensual appetites, friends, family, church involvement, and thought patterns is an expression of whether or not He counts “where the rubber meets the road.”

Why would anyone reject the onslaught of youthful lusts? Why would we forgive our enemies, submit to the needs of brothers and sisters in Christ, love our wives, cooperate with our husbands, nurture our children, guard our minds, and pursue holiness . . . if it weren't for Him?

Our Christianity will either be a list of dos and don'ts or a surrender of hearts that are rightly related to Christ. Glad surrender of the heart keeps the fire of righteousness ablaze in our lives. When life is about Him, our actions and reactions are no longer dependent on circumstances, enforcers, peer pressure, or emotions. We love our wives not because they always deserve it, or even because we always feel like it, but because our hearts are set on surrender to Him. We forgive others regardless of the offense, because our hearts are set to love God by forgiving them. We use our money as an expression of our love for Him and His kingdom work. All we do, we do for Him. Nothing else matters. Loving Jesus is the purest and strongest motivation for righteousness.

It makes sense to hear Christ say that surrender to God is the ultimate priority in our relationship to Him. If we love Him, we will surrender to Him. And when our hearts are surrendered to Him, we will do what He bids us to do. This principle has a multiplicity of applications. In fact, it can serve as a first question in discerning right from wrong. When faced with a decision in life, we must begin by asking, What would it mean to lovingly surrender to God at this time? The answer to that question puts righteousness into action.

Is your heart surrendered? How would the people closest to you know?

THE MENACE OF MORE

BUT IF WE HAVE FOOD AND CLOTHING, WE WILL BE CONTENT WITH THAT.

—1 Timothy 6:8

I recently picked up a paper and read about the marketing of a new cigarette from the R. J. Reynolds Company. “Dakota” is intended to appeal to young “virile females” who like to run with their boyfriends and do what the guys are doing.

The tobacco industry knows that smoking is addictive and deadly. Yet when their research shows that these young women are especially prone to start smoking, they are like predators targeting their prey for the benefit of their profit margin.

This is only one example of our greed-driven culture. Yet in honesty we must admit that the same tendencies often display themselves among those of us who claim to belong to another kingdom.

Think of how often our greed robs from eternity. We spend so much of our time and money accumulating the things that “moth and rust destroy” (Matthew 6:19) that we have few resources and little time left to invest in that which lasts forever. Think of how greed tarnishes the testimony of Christ when we compromise integrity and biblical values to cut a less-than-honorable deal. Or of how greed shreds families when parents devote their best energies to dreams of an extra car, a nicer home, or a better vacation—leaving little strength for rearing children in “the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

Greed contradicts love. It has no regard for values. It gobbles up all that is ultimately precious in life. No wonder Christ told us, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15).

It’s not easy to find contentment in a world in the grip of greed. But we can start by remembering how much we already possess in Christ, whom to have is life abundant. With that truth firmly in hand, we can rid our lives of the love of money and can learn to be content (Hebrews 13:5). And when we are content, we are freed to place loving and caring for Christ, His kingdom, and others above personal gain. May we always treasure that “godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6).

Let contentment liberate your heart!

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