

# What's the Plot?

31 days of  
rediscovering  
your place in  
God's story

MARK BALLENGER

Copyright © 2015 by Mark Ballenger

All rights reserved. This book is protected under the Creative Common license. No part of this publication may be used for commercial use. No part of this ebook is to be changed, altered, or reproduced. No part of this publication may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author, Mark Ballenger, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

All downloads are to take place solely through [www.AppyGodsWord.com](http://www.AppyGodsWord.com).

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

# Contents

Introduction.....	1
Day 1: Where Do The Ripples Lead?.....	3
Day 2: Why Do We Long For A Story?.....	5
Day 3: The Real Point Of A Painting.....	7
Day 4: Who’s “Following” Who?.....	9
Day 5: Asking To See So We Can Show.....	11
Day 6: Be “In” Christ And “At” _____.....	13
Day 7: Untangling Your Identity From Your Role.....	15
Day 8: Who’s Pulling Your Strings?.....	17
Day 9: Desire Reveals Design.....	19
Day 10: Forgiving When, Not If, People Hurt You.....	21
Day 11: The Prize Is Greater Than The Pain.....	23
Day 12: You Are Going To Get Cut.....	25
Day 13: Grace Does Not Cancel Training.....	27
Day 14: Private To Public.....	29
Day 15: Is Greatness Contagious?.....	31
Day 16: Find A Mentor By Being Useful.....	32
Day 17: Reading The Bible Is Not The Point.....	35
Day 18: Confused About Life? Try The Lens Of Love.....	37
Day 19: Overcoming The Unknown.....	39
Day 20: The Danger Of “I Wish”.....	41
Day 21: God Won’t Live Up To Your Expectations.....	43
Day 22: When Life Sucks, You Still Have Life.....	45
Day 23: The Secret To Happiness.....	47
Day 24: Don’t Be Distracted By The Disasters.....	49
Day 25: Are You Creating A Bad Sequel?.....	51
Day 26: A Testament Or A Temptation.....	53
Day 27: Your Crown Is Meant To Glorify Christ.....	55
Day 28: Time . . . The Great Healer?.....	57
Day 29: Knowing When To Die.....	59
Day 30: Dying with Joy As A Witness To Christ.....	61
Day 31: Resurrection Chapters Are Ahead.....	63



## Introduction

*plot: (noun) a series of events that form the story in a novel, movie, etc.-Webster Dictionary*

There is a common desire in all of us to know the plot. I've felt it, you've felt, because every human has felt it.

We all seek to understand the theme to life, whose who in the character list, and what part we are to play in the story unfolding before us. "Why am I here?" is the most asked question with the most varied answers. Even when someone demands with all the intensity of a Baptist preacher that surely we are all here by chance, randomness, and an unexplainable explosion at the "beginning" (whatever that means), their passion pokes a giant hole right through the story they seek to explain.

The problem with claiming there is no true meaning to life is that if this was true, you would not feel the need to even make that claim. No one would long to place meaning on life if there really was no meaning to life. As C.S. Lewis claimed in his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, "Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple. If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning."

The fact that the debate is so heated, that we all argue about what the storyline has been, if nothing else, proves there really is an explanation. Working your hardest to prove that none of this matters is like cutting off the branch on which you stand. If none of this mattered, then those who believe none of this mattered would not feel the need to explain anything. The best evidence that we have no higher purpose, that there is no absolute truth, and that we all turn into nothingness once we die would be total silence on this topic all together. I think we can all agree total silence on this debate has yet to happen.

The contradiction in answers to "Why are we here?" don't prove there is no answer; it proves there is a real void among the masses for the true answer. Most explain the plot wrong, but since all feel the need to find an explanation, surely there must be one. There are countless theories on how the bullet hit Kennedy, and while most people do not agree with one another on which is true, the excessive amount of theories on how it happened, if nothing else, prove the President really was shot. Likewise, the religious leaders, scientists, and atheists of the world surely have not agreed on what the plot of the universe is. The only thing they do agree on is that there really is a plot.

Scientists, theologians, and atheists alike seek to explain the world around them because every time they make a "discovery" they feel some part of the forgotten storyline is restored. Everyone seeks to find the rhythm to the song that we all can just barely hear in the background to our life. We all have in our hearts a memory we can't quite bring to picture, but we know somewhere

behind us, something happened that would explain this confusing state of existence we all find ourselves in. We're all looking for the answer to the question: What's the plot?

*Day 1: Where Do the Ripples Lead?*

*All the ends of the earth  
will remember and turn to the LORD,  
and all the families of the nations  
will bow down before him,  
for dominion belongs to the LORD  
and he rules over the nations.-Psalm 22:27-28*

There is a giant hole in the universe that can be felt no matter where you turn. Every song you hear, every show you watch, and every novel you read has some echo of this hole reverberating through its content. Passionate poems describing the perfections of a beauty that no human could actually possess, the moving songs which heartbroken former lovers listen to on repeat, the headshaking bewilderment at the evil we all see on our social media news feeds – all of it is connected. Like a rock thrown into a perfectly placid lake, all the ripples and waves on this earth can be traced back to one act, one void.

God. He's the reason, or more accurately, the absence of him. Everywhere the eye turns, if it was truly opened, would see that everybody and everything is responding to the absence of God, rippling back to the effects of our first parents' sin. Because of sin, God's presence is not with us as it was supposed to be, leaving no place on earth where the consequence of this divine tragedy is not painfully felt.

We turned from him as a whole human race, and as the years have gone by, the distant memory of him continues to fade, but it does not fully die. And so we continue to search. Where we search is as varied as the people who walk this planet. They may explain this story by saying there's no explanation, they may explain it by looking to the wrong authors (false gods), or they may even turn to the one and only God who actually came to earth to explain all the confusion – however they seek to make the dull picture clear, the fact that we are all looking for answers certainly undermines any notion that there aren't any.

We know there had to be a first cause to everything now in motion, and so we come up with ridiculous alternative storylines that take far more faith to believe than simply accepting the biblical truth that way-back-when Someone made us. "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible" (Hebrews 11:3).

God is telling a story. The plot is that this is supposed to be all about him displaying his greatness while we worship and enjoy him. He made us, we rebelled, he came to save us, and like any good story the end is going to be full of both tragedy and amazing victory depending on the decisions we as characters make. What part of the plot we choose to live in is our choice. But

God is going to keep sovereignly writing these pages, and they are the only pages that matter. You can live how you want to live, but God really is writing a story that will affect us all for eternity. The fact that we all long to know what the story is proves that there really is one. May we remember what we have forgotten, the most basic truth to our reality – that God is real

And so to work for world peace, have rallies for non-violence, to fight global warming, to seek political equality for all – these are band aids for a universal epidemic that has already fully spread. The only cure to every problem on this earth is going to come from God and his grace expressed in the Gospel of Christ because every problem on this earth ripples back to the absence of God and his grace. The heartache fueling the chaos in this universe is because the heart of man is no longer intimately connected to the heart of God. Only when this relationship is restored will order be restored. One day everyone will see the ripples and waves, which started with man's rebellion towards God, go calm as God wipes the universe clean of all the mutiny against him.

Let us repent of the real problem which started the waves to begin with, before the Last Act of the play actually happens. “God, I confess that all of the pain, boredom, betrayal, loneliness, evil pleasures – all chaos and sin in my life is because I am not connected to you as I should be. Come into my life as I know you desire to be. Through the grace offered in Jesus, I do plead these things in your name, Amen.”

“Therefore let all the faithful pray to you  
while you may be found;  
surely the rising of the mighty waters  
will not reach them.  
You are my hiding place;  
you will protect me from trouble  
and surround me with songs of deliverance.”-Psalm 32:6-7



*Day 2: Why Do We Long for a Story?*

*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
my soul knows it very well.-Psalm 139:14*

To describe what an apple is like, you can't say it is like an apple. Everything you define, you define it by comparing it to something else. To define a word you cannot use that word in its definition. Therefore, we are constantly describing and defining things by comparing them to other things. This is what God does to reveal himself to us.

When God seeks to explain what he is like, he cannot just say, "I am like God." Therefore, to show the world what God is like, God has placed the world in the midst of a story. Everywhere we look there are stories playing out before us, time is ticking onward with things happening every millisecond, and all that exists is meant to point us back to God and help us understand the context in which we live. God is like a protective father (1 John 3:1), like a tender nursing mother (Isaiah 49:15), like a lover with his bride (Song of Solomon), like a strong lion ruling over creation (Revelations 5:5), like a king ruling his subjects (Psalm 24:8), like a faithful husband to a wayward wife (Hosea), and like so many other created things created to show something of God.

In the book of Esther God's name is never even mentioned. But through the details of this story, you walk away learning how God is in complete control of everything in a far greater way than you would if you simply read the words "God is sovereign." This fact is clear: without stories there would be no understanding of what God is like. He's made the world and everything in it as a way of revealing something about himself.

Life is a story meant to give each of us an opportunity to see what God is like. To miss the real point of creation (including our own lives), is to miss out on knowing God all together forever. The temptation in life is to think that the stories we live are centered around us. But they are not. All that exist is meant to reveal who God is.

God reveals himself most clearly in Jesus Christ and his written word, but he also reveals himself through his relationship with us. The way God relates to humans is one of the primary ways he intends to show his invisible qualities in a visible way, thus brining glory to himself.

When you first read Psalm 139, you are tempted to think it is a psalm about God's love for people. And indeed it is, but the main subject is not people. When the psalmist explains that God knows his every thought before he ever thinks it (verses 1-4), this is really meant to reveal God's omniscience (all knowing). When the psalmist explains how God has ordained his every day before one of them came to be (verse 16), he is really describing the omnipotence (all powerful)

of God. When the psalmist explains that he cannot go anywhere without the presence of God being there too (verse 11-12), he is really describing the omnipresence (all present) of God. And when the psalmist describes how the Lord has delayed the slaying of the wicked (verse 19) and when he asks God to lead him in the way everlasting (verses 23-24), he is really describing God's omnibenevolence (all loving).

In all that God does in his relationship to man, he does it ultimately for the expression of himself which leads to the glorification of himself. The purpose of man is to give God the opportunity to display all his wonder and magnificence for the glorification of himself.

You immediately understand the holiness of God when you read the story of Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6 when he touches the Ark and instantly dies. To read the life of Peter and how God loved him so much, then to see Peter deny Jesus, but then be forgiven, explains the merciful character of God in a far greater way than the nine letters that spell "forgiving." The Gospel story, ultimately is a story of God showing the full extent of his character in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4).

God gives each one of us a story to live so that on the different pages of our life, God will have the chance to reveal his character as he relates to us in our varying circumstances. To simply say that God is love, that God is holy, that God is all powerful, does not fully reveal the true meaning of these words that attempt to describe God.

So as the clock ticks in our life, we must look past the details on the page and look to see what God is seeking to reveal about himself to us in the help he wants to give through Christ. All that is happening around us is God's attempt to open our eyes to the reality of his greatness. Without a real story showing what God is like, all we have are meaningless words that move us to do nothing. God does not want this for us, therefore he lets us live a story, hoping we will see that his plot, with all its ups and downs, should be leading us closer to him with every page that is turned.

Don't live the plot of the story but miss the point. Everything that is happening is happening so we can know God more. So to answer the question, "Why do we long for a story?" Answer: Because we long to know God.

*Day 3: The Real Point of a Painting*

*<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. – Romans 1:18-20*

Why do humans stare at beautiful paintings of nature? But when we see nature as it is in the real world, we often gloss over it and move on with our daily tasks. Perhaps it is because a painting is in a format we don't often see. Like an old man married to his bride for 50 years, waking up next to her every single morning may have dulled his senses to her beauty, something that would never happen in their first year of marriage.

So when we see the beauty faintly glimmering through in a different format, even though it is veiled compared to the real and raw things we can touch and feel in the world, the portrait awakens our senses to what we've taken for granted. Therefore we love paintings because they remind us of the beauty that is real, captioned in the painting but captured ultimately out in reality. A good painting awakens our heart to what we can no longer see because of our sinful familiarity, and we love it for that.

Perhaps God is seeking to do this very thing through the whole world we live in. Perhaps this world is meant to be a painting, a parable, a story which stirs our heart not so much because of the art, but because of what (or Who) this masterpiece is reminding our hearts of. When we look out over a placid lake with the morning fog still hovering, with the sun gently dancing on the face of the smooth reflective surface, and our hearts begin to swell at the majesty before us, perhaps the joy is really stemming not from the natural beauty but what it is reminding our inner being of – God's beauty.

We have forgotten him. He is everywhere all the time, and humanities familiarity with him has grown deep and is rooted in each child born. We've taken his protection, his provision, and all his common grace given to each individual life for granted. But he is calling us through his art, his creation. He seeks to remind us through our children about the real Father-to-child relationship we long for with him. He seeks to remind us through young love, passion, and romance of our spirits longing to be intimate with his Spirit. A new house which brings comfort and joy to its owners is reminding us of the comfort and joy we long to have in his eternal mansions prepared for his people. All good in life is a work of art picturing something much more ultimate and profound - God himself.

We love the pictures we find in this earth because of what they are captioning, but we must remember they are not truly capturing what we ultimately are looking for. God is the real subject

of all the natural paintings we find on his earthly canvas. Art is a means to remembering the real beauty in the world. Likewise, God's creation is not the real point, but is reminding us of the Real Point. Therefore, like a painting of mountain which makes us want to walk out of the gallery to see the real Alps, when we look out over the beauty on earth, we must try to look past the natural and go out from this gallery and seek then Real One we've been reminded of.

To stay forever inside looking at books and pictures describing the amazing world outdoors is a wasted life. How much more a waste to look at all the beauty on the earth and stay focused only on this worldly beauty which is meant to open our eyes to the glory of God. This world should cause us to go look for the real Beauty, the Beauty the painting is reminding us of.

The world is a painting meant to draw us to the real subject pictured. Don't let the world's beauty blind you from the greater beauty of God.

*Day 4: Who's "Following" Who?*

*So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.-Genesis 1:27*

*Bring all who claim me as their God, for I have made them for my glory. It was I who created them.-Isaiah 43:7*

Why do people want to be at the center of the story, to be famous, to have more followers (did you get my creative title?) on their social media platforms? Why is there even a need for words like "selfies"? Even the recluse is often a loner not because he hates the attention of people but because he wants it so bad it has paralyzed him, making him so fearful of rejection he would rather avoid everyone all together.

The Christian knows in their spirit this desire is wrong, even if they don't know why it is wrong. Aside from the fact that there are plain verses all over the Bible condemning all forms of idolatry, including the idolatry of people, I think there is one main reason the Christian feels the guilt of self-exaltation. It has to do with glory.

Everything God does, he ultimately does for his name's sake, for his glory (Psalm 19:1-4, Psalm 23:3, Ezekiel 20:9, Ezekiel 36:22-32, John 8:50, John 12:27-28, John 17:1, Romans 1:5, Romans 11:36, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Colossians 1:15-20).

But what is God's glory? When you see some invisible quality of God in a visible (or knowable) way, it's called "the glory of God." That's why, for example, when God would reveal himself in the Old Testament to the Israelites in a cloud or in fire it says the "glory of God" would appear (Exodus 24:15-18). In Isaiah 6:3 the angels are singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." You would expect the text to read that the whole earth is full of his holiness; but when the attributes of God become visible, in this case his holiness, the Bible calls it glory.

Jesus glorifies God the most because he makes the invisible qualities of God visible better than anyone else ever could. Colossians 1:15 states, "The Son is the image of the invisible God," and Hebrews 1:3 explains, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." John 1:14, 18 (ESV) adds that "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." What we know about God is what we can see in the face of Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:4, 6).

God's writing this story we are all living in so he has the opportunity to express himself to the people he loves, and in expressing himself he is bringing himself glory, making the invisible

visible. God made us with the same intent. He made us for his glory (Isaiah 43:7), therefore he made us in his image (Genesis 1:27). The problem occurred when we veered from God's plan.

The literal translation of the word "sin" means to "miss the mark" and was used to describe an arrow missing the intended target. To understand how we miss, we must first know what we were supposed to be aiming at. Sin is breaking God's commands. But God's commands are not a random lists of do's and don'ts, as though God could have reversed all the ten commandments and then those would have been the law (e.g. thought shall murder, though shall commit adultery, est.). God's law, like everything in its original form, is an expression of who God is. God commands us not to murder because he is just, he commands us to have one wife because he is faithful, he commands us not to steal because he is honest, "for it is written, 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:16). All the commandments of God are an extension of the very character of God. Therefore, to break God's commands is to conceal God's expression of himself, to cast a shadow on his glory.

Romans 3:23 explains, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." You'd think it would say that all have sinned and broken God's commands, but to break God's commands is to fall short of hitting the mark of reflecting God properly. To obey God's commands is to bear his image, reflect his nature, and thus glorify him by making his invisible qualities visible through actions which reflect God's character. You know who is Lord of your life by who you are seeking to bring praise. If you are mainly seeking personal glorification (visibility), they you are seeking to live as your own god, as the main character in the story.

To right what went wrong, we must seek the transforming grace of God so we will be able to once again play the original part God made for us in his story. And it is *his story* we are living in, whether we choose to believe this or not. God is at the center, the sun is symbolizing him, as we are caught in his orbit, reflecting his rays. Our purpose is to glorify God, to bear his image, and reveal the truth about him to the watching world. Since Jesus is the exact visible representation of God because he is God (Hebrews 1:3), our goal must be to walk as Jesus did (1 John 2:6).

Romans 8:28-29, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son . . . ." God has a purpose for us all, and that purpose is to make us look and act like his Son. The more we look and act like Jesus, the more we will reveal God to the world, making the invisible visible, thus glorifying our Lord.

God's plot is to bring glory to himself, thus our purpose, in union with the Spirit, is to reveal God by following Jesus.

*Day 5: Asking To See So We Can Show*

*... who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles . . . -Galatians 1:15, 16*

The glory of God is the public display of his beauty and character. How then do we glorify God? By making him “visible,” either through living out our image bearing with deeds, and by preaching, teaching, and witnessing about the truths of God with words.

To reveal God to others we must first see him for ourselves. But the only way for us to know God is if he reveals himself to us. Notice that the disciples had to ask Jesus to reveal what the parables meant (Matthew 13:26), God had to give Paul new eyes (Acts 9:18), and in James 1:5 we are told if we lack wisdom we should ask God to give it to us.

Therefore, the only way we can truly glorify God is through the Spirit of God. For only by the Holy Spirit will God’s truths be revealed to us.

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. (John 16:13,14)

So if we hope to reveal God to the world for the glory of God, we must ask God to reveal himself through his Spirit to us. The Spirit brings glory to Christ because he alone reveals the truth about Christ (1 Corinthians 2:6-16). This is why it is so important to understand that the Holy Spirit is the author of the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21). If you want to be Holy Spirit led, then you must obey the word of God since the Holy Spirit wrote it. If you want to be full of the Spirit, then you must be full of Scripture, because every verse is from the mouth of the Spirit.

We can trust and proclaim the truths revealed about Christ in the Bible because the Spirit is its inspiration (Mark 12:36). The only way to know God is through the Spirit, and the Spirit has spoken most clearly through Scripture, which is written by the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17). Therefore, since the Holy Spirit always exalts Christ (John 15:26), and since the Holy Spirit inspired every word of Scripture, we must study every word of Scripture to know Christ, which then enable us to reveal Christ to others. We must see so we can then show.

To glorify God we must study the Scriptures, pray the Scriptures, and cry out for God to reveal himself to us by his Spirit who wrote the Scriptures so we might be able to glorify him. Let us pray like the psalmists:

Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law (Psalm 119:18).

Send out your light and your truth let them lead me let them bring me to your holy hill  
and to your dwelling! (Psalm 43:3)



## Day 6: Be "In" Christ and "At" \_\_\_\_\_

*To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi . . . . –Philippians 1:1*

What's your calling? Who are you? How do you define yourself? These are the questions we seek to answer from a young age. Everybody is born with a need to know what their specific identity and place in the world really is. This is why people don't just play sports, they describe themselves as a baseball player, a runner, or a golfer. People who engage in adventures don't do adventures; they find their identity in them, labeling themselves as a rock climber, a backpacker, a skier, or a kayaker. People who find their identity in their careers don't practice law, work at a hospital, or write books; they typically would say that they are a lawyer, a doctor, or a writer.

There's no point to become legalistic in how we speak and in what labels we use to describe how we spend our time, but so often the way we describe ourselves reveals where we are truly finding our identity. The danger in finding your identity in anything other than in Christ is that everything else eventually fails or fades away. When you find your validation as a person in your career as a counselor, what happens when you retire from counseling? You lose your identity. If you find your ultimate place in life as a mother, what happens when your kids move out and move on, as healthy people should do? You either lose your direction in life and have a identity crisis, or you try to hold onto your identity as mother and smother your grown up kids and become an overly intrusive grandparent.

In Paul's opening remarks to the Philippians, he is careful to describe them as "the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi." Paul knows that a true Christian's deepest identity is found only "in Christ Jesus." Who we are is based in the finished and gracious work of our Savior, even though we will be "at" many places on earth. This is profoundly helpful because the character of Christ which is transferred to us through faith by grace can never be taken away. When you know who you are because you know you are Christ's saints, you will have a security and direction in life that will not eventually crumble as all other identities do.

In fact, our identity in Christ should actually fuel and support our missions on earth. To be the best at what God has called you to *do*, you must first know who he has already made you to *be*. Your identity should dictate your roles in life; your roles in life should not dictate your identity. If we are finding who we are through our positions in life, then when these positions are not going well, our identity as a person will begin to crumble. But when we are secure in our identity in Christ and the roles we operate in begin to grow unstable, we will still be able to thrive because our personhood is no longer tied to our earthly positions.

Therefore, next time your role as a spouse, parent, boss, employee, ministry leader, or one of the other thousands of roles you will fill on earth begins to grow unstable, remind yourself that you

are a “saint in Christ Jesus” who is simply at “\_\_\_\_\_.” You don’t work for this church or that business or for this family . . . you work “at” those places.

To fulfill your earthly roles well with all their uncontrollable ups and downs, you must always know you work “for God” “in Christ” but “at \_\_\_\_\_ (you fill in the blank).”

*Day 7: Untangling Your Identity from Your Role*

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*

*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: [Jesus], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.-Philippians 2:3-7*

Taking orders is difficult. Like players yelling at the officials in a sports competition, our natural reaction is to rebel against anyone who may exercise their authority over us. Like when a professor gives us poor marks on a paper we thought was top quality, we can instantly feel the need to attack her verbally behind her back not because we disagree so much but because we despise the idea of the professor being able to do what whatever she wants to our paper.

As Christians, whenever we rebel against authority, we feel guilty of course, and yet we also feel unvalued and diminished if we do not stick up for ourselves when someone in authority exercises their rights over us. Nobody likes being summoned to the boss's office no matter what it's for because we simply do not like someone being able to summon us at all.

And so we cringe when we see in Scripture commands to "value others above yourselves," "Wives, submit to your husbands," or "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities." We cringe because we want to obey God's commands and yet feel we will be hurt and devalued if we do.

The reason we cringe when we must take the role of a servant or submit to the authorities in our lives is because we have confused our identities with our roles. Your identity is who you are, your role is the position or office that you fill. The world, since they lack any true insight on their hearts and relationship with God, seeks to find their identity in their roles. They say they are "called" to be a teacher, a fireman, a nurse, a mom, a husband, a political figure, or some well paid business person. They attach their identity as a person to their role. Therefore when their role requires them to submit, they can't accomplish the role without feeling degraded as a person. When their role is not turning out the way they hoped, they feel their "calling" as person is crumbling before their eyes.

When our identity is firmly found in Christ, only then will we have the ability to function in different roles without letting the ups and downs control our lives. Jesus could take the very nature of a servant and not feel threatened by those he was serving because he knew his identity. His role was to be a servant for a period of time but he was still the King in his identity.

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing,

and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.  
(John 13:3-5)

Because Jesus knew who he was and where he came from, he was able to serve humbly without feeling degraded. Your identity is always found in your relationship to God; your role is found in your relationship to people. Your identity in Christ can never be taken away; your role in this world will always be taken away. Your sole identity is only "in Christ"; you can have many different roles. Your identity will never change; your roles are constantly in flux. You can never leave your identity behind; you can check your role at the door once you are no longer on the clock for that position. You're identity should never be defined by your role; rather, your identity should be defined by who you are in Jesus Christ.

If you are still confused on what your identity is and what your roles are, ask yourself this question: When I die and go to heaven, will I still have this label? When we go to heaven, we will not be married to our spouses, we will not still be the parents to our children, we will not be citizens of an earthly country, and we will not still have our corporate titles. What will remain is the life of Christ uniquely expressed through our truest selves (which is why our gender will remain in heaven as it is essential to our identity and image bearing of God).

We must imagine ourselves as actors in a play. Some of us may be doctors, some of us may be janitors at the hospital, and others of us may be the sick patient in the bed. But when the play is over, the curtain is drawn, and the costumes come off, the actor himself remains and the character he played is no more. And sometimes the best actor may be playing the character in the play with the lowest social prestige if that role is the most important to the plot. But when the play is over, none of the other actors are going to look down on the better actor because he played the beggar in that night's show. Likewise, when we reach heaven, our earthly titles will be stripped away and only the trueness of each man will be left. We will not be judged on what role the Director gave us, but on how well we played it, and how well we fulfill our roles will be based upon what type of person we are at our core (identity).

We will fulfill many functions, offices, positions, relationships, and roles in this world, but we are called to have only one identity found in our belonging to God. If we are not secure in who we are to Christ, we will always feel threatened, devalued, and like a failure in our earthly roles. Let us believe what God says of us that we may never come under any lies of this world.

(For a few references regarding a believer's identity in Christ, see: Galatians 2:20, 1 John 3:1, 2 Corinthians 5:17, 1 Peter 2:9-10.)

*Day 8: Who's Pulling Your Strings?*

*“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. <sup>2</sup> But the more they were called, the more they went away from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. <sup>3</sup> It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. <sup>4</sup> I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them. <sup>5</sup> “Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent? Hosea 11:1-5*

Whatever you worship is what has power over you. Therefore, if you wonder what you are worshipping, all you need to do is look at what controls you.

Like puppets on a string, we have knee jerk reactions to our idols. Do you instantly freak out when someone cuts you off on the highway? Perhaps respect is your god. Do you withdrawal into your own inner world whenever a certain individual's name is mentioned who you use to have a significant relationship with? Perhaps you have made that person your idol. Do you instantly bust out your credit card when you see that commercial advertising the next newest technology? Perhaps materialism is your god.

Whatever is pulling your strings is your god, thus the importance of works in Christianity. In many modern American churches, the “W” word is heresy. They are correct to emphasize that we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ alone, but they are wrong to say that works don't matter. A quick reading of the book of James or 1 John will demystify this lie really quick.

We are certainly not saved by our works, but what we do proves what we believe. Whoever is pulling your strings on a consistent, regular basis throughout your life is who your god, or God, really is. We mustn't seek to do good to get close to God, but if we notice that our life is full of bad it may mean we don't really know him. Our actions are the symptoms, not the solutions to our heart's condition.

So let us pay attention to what or who is controlling us, not so we can seek to be saved through our efforts, but so we can make sure Jesus is really in control of our life. If he isn't, or hasn't been for a period of time, repent. God sent Jesus to cut the false strings that are linked to evil puppeteers seeking to manipulate us.

1 John 1:9 states, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” God can cut the strings and bond you to himself with cords of unfailing love. But to be free we must first admit we are in bondage.

Jesus, open our eyes to the false gods in our lives that we may repent and so you may cut off their control. We confess that we are saved through faith in you alone, and when we know you we will be free indeed. May this freedom bear out in our lives.

*Day 9: Desire Reveals Design*

*Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Corinthians 9:16)*

It can be confusing to know what God has called us to do. One way to know what God has called you to do is to look at what you have a longing to do. While not every desire will come to fruition, and certainly not come to fruition the way we thought it would, it still brings wonderful direction to what God has planned for us by looking at what good desires he has placed on our redeemed hearts. For as John Eldredge said so well in his classic book for men, *Wild at Heart*, “Desire reveals design.”

Of course this does not include sinful desires. When we follow God, our desire will change and we will desire to be what he wants. With that said, none of this means that our calling will always correspond to our desire for ease and smooth sailing towards our ideal vision of life for ourselves.

Just because you have to do things you don't like to get trained for the season you want is not reasons to doubt that you are walking in God's will for your life. God's plan does not contradict our need to put forth hard work to become what he has planned. The fact that God has a real plan for life just means that we will be miserable if we buck and work our hardest to reject that plan. By rejecting rather than embracing the will of God for your life, you will achieve neither what you want nor what God wants for you. True happiness is found when we work hard to become who God has preplanned for us to be (Ephesians 2:10, Philippians 3:12-16).

Like Paul who used to persecute believers of the gospel but who was then transformed by God's plan, Paul's desire drastically changed when he followed Christ, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16). This verse shows not only how Paul's desire drastically changed, but how miserable he would be if he were to reject God's plan for him. Likewise, if we do not do what he calls us to, we will eventually have to cry out “Woe to me.” Desire reveals design. Just as Paul's desperate desire to preach revealed his calling and gifting to preach, we too should seek to do what we cannot do without.

To balance all this, we must be humble enough to know that some of the desires we feel are not yet fully sanctified and developed by God, therefore we should not expect to know our whole life plan at the age of 21, 45, or even 75. We must be contrite enough to know that who we are now is not who we will always be as we continue to grow and mature, thus we must expect some of our desires to not be fulfilled the way we originally hoped, or in some cases not at all.

God has a good plan for our lives. Therefore, life should not be a journey in seeking to be what we think we want. Rather, we should seek God above all, and then see what he makes us into. When we seek to obey and please God, we need not worry that our life will be miserable, fearing

God has planned something for us which we will not desire. For when we seek God, our plans will change through the course of our lives, but so will our desires.

When Paul was Saul, he could never have guessed his ultimate desire would be to preach the gospel he was persecuting. But when Saul was transformed by the grace of God into the Paul who loves Christ, Paul's desires changed too. The same will be true of us. The more deeply we come to love God and are sanctified in him, the more our desires will be conformed to the plans God has for us.

So under the context of when you are following and obeying God, a good road marker to knowing what God has planned for you to do is to look at what you desire to do.



*Day 10: Forgiving When, Not If, People Hurt You*

*<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. . . .*

*Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' (Matthew 18:21-22, 32-33 ESV)*

It's interesting how Peter phrases the question in verse 21, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?" Jesus and Peter's conversation is not a hypothetical "if someone sins against you," it's a factual assumption made clear with the words that our brothers and sisters "will sin" against us.

C.S. Lewis states: "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable."

And so we can begin to see why Jesus is spending so much time on teaching us to forgive one another. You see, divorces don't happen after years of sinning and cruelty towards one another. Divorces happen after years of sinning and cruelty towards one another without there being any forgiveness. The difference between a healthy friendship and a broken friendship is not that there are less arguments, less stress, or less wrongs. The difference is that one friendship is committed to forgiving the offences and moving on in love and the other friendship never forgives and thus can never move on. Church splits don't happen because members of the church hurt each other, rebel against the pastor, or because of sin. Church splits happen when the people of God are not willing and eager to forgive one another when these things do happen, because eventually they will.

Jesus knows from experience that if you want to be happy in your relationships it's not going to happen by finding perfect people who never let you down. When Peter betrayed Jesus, he didn't write him off forever and say, "You know . . . I was wrong about you. I was planning on starting my church with you, Peter, but now that you sinned against me it's over." No, before Peter betrayed Jesus, Jesus predicted he would deny him three times and Jesus was already planning on forgiving him before the offense ever took place. Jesus knew the only way he would be able to have a relationship with those he loved would be if he was willing to forgive them often.

And so all this raises the question that Jesus is going to answer for us. If people are going to treat us this way, even the people who we love the most, how can we protect ourselves from becoming, as C.S. Lewis said, hard hearted people who never risk being vulnerable? How can we avoid becoming the type of people who protect themselves from hurt by choosing to feel nothing but in the process also cut themselves off from feeling love? How are we going to find

the motivation to love those who don't deserve it? How are we to forgive people after we have already forgiven them so many times before?

The answer is found in verse 33, "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" The way you will find the love to forgive is by basing your love not in the one who wronged you but in the One who has never wronged you, Jesus Christ. The only way you will be able to forgive your fellow servant after he sins against you again and again is to do it for the sake of the Master who has forgiven you again and again. To have the motivation to forgive others of much you will have to do it out of your gratitude for the One who has forgiven you much more and out of your eager expectation for the full redemption that awaits you even though you don't deserve it.

For God's sake, not for people's sake, are we to forgive unconditionally as he forgives us unconditionally. Because Jesus was secure in the love of his Father and sought to please him above all else, he was free to forgive even when others did not deserve it. This is what he now expects of us. To reflect and glorify God, I must forgive others as he has forgiven me.

*Day 11: The Prize Is Greater than the Pain*

<sup>20</sup> *Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.* <sup>21</sup> *A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.* <sup>22</sup> *So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.* -John 16:20-22

Throughout Jesus' time on earth, he promised that his people will, without question, experience much pain, turmoil, and persecution on this earth. What is often overlooked is that he also promised that the prize for enduring these things for the sake of Christ will be far greater than the pain. Mark 10:28-30 explains:

<sup>28</sup> Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you." <sup>29</sup> Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, <sup>30</sup> who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.

Jesus is so clear. He doesn't deny that to follow him we will have to leave many of the good things in life behind. This isn't easy, it will be hard, but we are called nonetheless to take up our cross and follow Jesus. But in the very next verse he also makes clear that whatever pain we must endure, the prize will be immensely greater. Jesus strains to be as clear as possible by explaining that this prize will be mixed with persecution, but that does not change the fact that the greater prize remains.

Why does Jesus talk about the rewards of following him? Doesn't it seem to cheapen our efforts if we are motivated by the reward we will get for serving Christ? Jesus has no shame in motivating his people to follow him by telling them about the great prize they will receive if they do because:

1. He is that prize, so when we endure pain to have a richer relationship with Christ it shows the great worth of Jesus.
2. He knows that for people to pass up earthly pleasure they must know they will receive a greater form of pleasure in return.

Notice in John 16:20-22 that Jesus states that our time on earth is like a woman giving birth. It's incredibly painful (so I hear) to deliver a child. So why do women who give birth typically decide to give birth again to more than one child? Because they know the joy of bringing life into this world is greater than the pain they experience to do it. If there was not such a massive payoff there would be zero women choosing to be pregnant. Likewise, if there was not such a massive

payoff to being a Christ follower on a planet that opposes Christ, then there would be no Christians.

Jesus makes clear that the massive payoff to the pain it will take to follow Jesus is Jesus himself. Jesus states in John 16:22, “Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.” When grief comes for being a Christ follower, the reward will be that we will see Jesus in and after our pain; and when Jesus becomes our joy, our joy will never be taken away because no one can take Jesus away from us.

To get through the pain we all will experience on this planet, we must know there is a greater Prize than what we are giving up. And since the ultimate prize God gives us is a relationship with himself through Jesus Christ, we are benefited and God is glorified. So, like Paul, may we make it our aim to, “press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14).

*Day 12: You Are Going to Get Cut*

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.*

*-John 15:1-2*

Try as we might, no one can avoid getting cut in this life. God touches everyone, and many times his touch hurts, but how we respond to these trials will be the evidence of what type of wound we have received. God cuts everyone but everyone who is cut does not experience the same outcome.

There are two and only two choices in life when it feels like we are being severed in half. The pain, sorrow, and all the other millions of difficulties that will make us bleed can be used to draw us closer to God and to bear more fruit, or these hurts will turn out to be our final knockout blow. The variable in life is not how much tragedy you will experience, how much relational heartache you will face, or how much suffering you will be required to endure. These things are a given. You will not escape this life unscathed. If you breathe the oxygen on planet earth you are going to breathe the pain of a broken planet no matter how hard you try to avoid it.

The variable to life, however, comes after the initial blow. Once you get punched in the face by life and you're lying on the ground wondering how you got there, the next choice you make will be the great determining factor on what type of cut you just received from God. If you run or try to get up and hurt the world like it just hurt you, then you are taking the path of becoming an unpruned branch that is picked up and thrown into the fire. But if you choose to use the pain as a catalyst towards Christ, if you desire what God desires in that the difficulties are drawing you closer to God rather than farther apart – well then the cut you received will turn out to be God pruning you.

God cuts of the branches that do not glorify him and he prunes the braches that are glorifying him so that they will glorify him more. When you are cut off you will know it because you will no longer be connected to Christ. But if you are pruned then your connection with Christ will eventually become even stronger as God cuts away the excess in your life that is hindering your connection to Jesus.

The obvious fact, however, is that God is going to cut us. This cut will either separate us from God as our sinful responses choose, or his cut will sanctify us so our aim of pleasing God will be pruned and thus more effective. Whether sliced off or pruned, it always hurts when you are cut. Pain is not a variable for the dead branch or the pruned branch. The variable comes in the form of our choice to either remain on the ground to shrivel up and dye or to seek healing and a deeper walk with Christ through the cut. This choice will be the evidence of what type of branch we are.

Wounds to the heart can kill it or serve as entry ways for the love of God to come in. When we are assaulted by life, we have a choice to make. We can allow the beatings to toughen our hearts and thus hinder our receptivity to God, or we can allow them to soften and tenderize us, allowing the cuts of the heart to help and not hurt our reception of God's care. As A.W. Tozer wrote, "It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply."

You cannot avoid being cut deeply in this life, but you can avoid being cut off. May we seek the grace and healing of Jesus Christ so that through the pain we will face, we will bring God more glory than if we were not cut at all. This is God's hope for us, that "every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. . . . By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples" (John 15:2, 8).

Pain doesn't prove anything. But when you are pruned, this proves God is working in your life as you grow to glorify him more.

*Day 13: Grace Does Not Cancel Training*

*His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence,<sup>4</sup> by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.<sup>5</sup> For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge,<sup>6</sup> and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness,<sup>7</sup> and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.-2 Peter 1:3-7*

Just because the gifts of God are free does not mean following Christ isn't going to cost you. Our works and efforts can never earn us the salvation and regeneration that Jesus acquired for us through his death and resurrection, but this does not mean you are not going to have to work. God gives us everything that we need for life and godliness, but this doesn't mean we will not have to put forth effort.

It is right to remind ourselves daily of how gracious and merciful our God really is. To know that God loves us because of who he is and not because of what we do is a great relief because we all know, when honest, if it was based on our actions we would be lost. However, when we begin to talk about the free love and grace of God, we must not go beyond what the Bible teaches.

In 2 Peter 1:3-7 we learn that God "has granted us all thing that pertain to life and godliness." However, it goes on to say, "For this reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with . . . ." The point is clear: the free gift of God is not an excuse to be lazy but rather the reason for why we should be putting such massive effort toward seeking and pleasing God.

Every athlete knows that if you want to be great you are going to have to put in the work. The big game is won in the gym before you ever step on the field. In 1 Timothy 4:7-8 Paul likens our training in the faith to athletic training. He instructs us to "train yourself for godliness." Training is tough work. In Hebrews 5:12-14, we are told that the immature are "unskilled in the word of righteousness" and that the mature are discerning because they have been "trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil."

Like nothing else in life, Jesus freely gives us that which we could never earn on our own. But like everything else in life, if we hope to grow and mature we are going to have to work for it. Grace is when God gives us what we don't deserve, but nowhere in the definition of grace does it say God isn't going to require you to dedicate yourself to strict training. You don't deserve what you get when you work hard because as sinners we deserve nothing good, but God still requires us to work to grow and develop even though we don't deserve the blessing of growing and

developing. Working to mature is still under the canopy of grace because none of us deserve the right to work and mature due to our sin.

If you want to know God's word, you are going to have to read it more than five minutes before you run out the door for the day. If you want know what the Spirit is telling you, you are going to have spend massive amounts of time on your face in prayer through your whole life learning to hear the Spirit, not just when your life is falling apart. If you want to be great at preaching, leading, following, serving, or anything else that is a gift from God, you are going to have put in the work and the time it will take to be trained. Our working does not earn us anything as all good things are by grace, but God uses our working as a means of grace to transfer good to us.

Everything good is a gift from God, but nothing truly good, including the gifts God freely gives us, require nothing of us.



*Day 14: Private to Public*

*And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.-Luke 1:80*

Whatever you want to be in public, you need to start training for it in private. When you start studying the lives of those God has used greatly, you notice a similar theme in all of their journeys. The details are different but everyone of those men and women who God has used in significant ways have always gone through a period of private training with the Lord before he used them publicly.

Before Joseph became second in command in Egypt, God was training him through private trials through his family, his time in Potiphar's house, and his time in prison. After many years of humbly tending the sheep after he fled from Egypt when he angrily murdered an Egyptian who was beating an Israelite, Moses and God had to have their private meeting at the burning bush before Moses was used publicly before Pharaoh. Mary had an individual dream in private before she was used to give birth to and raise Jesus. John the Baptist grew up in the desert before he was used to prepare the way for the coming Messiah, Peter was a follower of Jesus in the Gospels before his exploits in Acts, and even Jesus himself did not begin his three year public ministry until thirty years of private training and ministry took place.

It's not that God will not use us in meaningful and significant ways during the private training period. Before a general becomes a general, he had to fight on the front lines. Every soldier knows the best type of training is hands-on, where live ammo is involved. A private never jumps rank to instantly become a general without ever getting his hands dirty and participating in less grand duties compared to those of his superior officers. Likewise, God takes his people through many different twists and turns before he uses them publicly in massive ways. Again, the ministry done behind closed doors or in less public settings is not less important to the overall mission. Being a general would not be significant if there were no privates fulfilling the orders.

To be balanced, we must recognize that God's goal for everyone does not include making us all famous, public figures. But he does want us all to be used in deeper and wider ways the more we grow in him. We can't skip the process. We must embrace it and enjoy it.

Champions may be revealed on the largest stages, but they are formed through many years of training and focus when no one else is watching. If we desire not to waste our lives, we must not waste our times behind the scenes. If you want to be a preacher one day, then start studying God's word and learning to form sermons in your free time now. If you want to be a counselor one day, start going to school now. If you want to be a foreign missionary one day, start sharing the gospel with your neighbor across the street. If you want to be a mother one day, start taking

care of other children today. If you want to be published author, start writing books now even if no one will ever read them.

We can't guarantee God will allow us to be what we are working towards. But we can guarantee God is training us right now for what he has planned for us, and he always plans for us to bring him massive glory in all that we do, present and future. If you want to become who God wants you to be in forty years, start working towards who God wants you to be right now. If you want to do what God has planned for you in the future, start doing what God has planned for you in the present, even if you don't know what the end result is going to look like. Every moment presents an opportunity to do something useful for the Kingdom right now. We can't be paralyzed by not fully being what we want to be in the future.

The more significant the role God has for us, the more time he is going to spend in training us. Let us embrace the training and trust his good plan for our lives.

*Day 15: Is Greatness Contagious?*

*He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm.*

*—Proverbs 13:20*

Is greatness contagious? I think so, along with weakness. Both the splendor and sins of the human spirit are cultivated through the companions with which one invests his time. Always, when you do a little digging, you will find that those truly admirable were inspired and, to some degree, sculpted by the other great men and women surrounding them. Children whose parents are professional athletes or gifted academically seem to have a greater knack for similar accolades. Sure, one can make a case that it's all in the genes, but surely this is not the main variable in the equation of greatness.

Wisdom, beauty, strength, a strong work ethic – all of these spread to those who witness them. Indeed, he who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm (Proverbs 13:20). Perhaps this is why Jesus wants us to spend so much time with him (Romans 13:14). He is the greatest of all people, through whom and for whom all things were made (Colossians 1:16). He said himself that everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher (Luke 6:40). Do you remember how Jesus taught his disciples? He lived with them, day in and day out. He lavished on them the gift that everyone wanted from him, the only thing that he had a limited amount of to give . . . time. Jesus, the eternal God, limited his earthly ministry to about three years, making time with him in the physical one of the most favored gifts given to any human ever.

And now, two-thousands or so years later, through the incomprehensible grace of God, we all have the opportunity to spend as much time with Jesus as we dare, for as Ephesians 3:12 states, “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.” I deeply desire for my life and my personhood to develop into something glimmering of greatness. I must, therefore, surround myself with those who look as I want to look, think as I want to think, and believe as I want to believe. And the person who is far above every other person in every good way is Jesus himself.

Let us all surround ourselves with those, but especially with Jesus, who will help shape us into the people we deeply desire to be.

*Day 16: Find a Mentor by Being Useful*

<sup>37</sup> Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. <sup>38</sup> But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. <sup>39</sup> And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. -Acts 15:37-39

*Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. -2 Timothy 4:11*

In every Christian, whether they would admit it or not, there is a desire to have a strong, wise mentor who is willing to invest in them. So few find an older, wiser Christian who is willing to help guide them through life, ministry, and the unfolding story as a good mentor should. “Where are all the mentors?” is often a question really meant to be an accusation against the generation above us.

But perhaps the blame does not always lie in the lack of mentors available but also in the demands and expectations of those desiring to be mentored. In our early years, out of the love many of our parents have for us, they do all they can to give us the best chance of maturing into responsible adults. They often worked an extra job if necessary to get us to the best school or on that travel sports team. There the coach came prepared to practices and games with a plan to help us succeed. We live in a society where we go to school and the teacher’s are expected to pour into the students. Students then go off to college, pay enormous amounts of money, and there again the expectation is for the professors to go above and beyond to help the student who needs the help. Often times these adults are even blamed for the younger person’s lack of success.

In none of these scenarios is the child, player, or student expected to be an asset to the parent, coach, or teacher. In the Bible, however, those being mentored or apprenticed were actually useful to the mentor. Paul had many younger men in his life that he was mentoring, but all of these men were also working towards the same goal as Paul during the mentoring process. Paul had a singular focus in advancing the gospel and when anyone started to hinder this goal, even young men in need of mentoring, Paul cut ties with them for the sake of the larger mission.

In Acts 15:37-39 we learn the Mark is becoming a distraction to Paul because Mark is struggling to stay committed to the missionary work Paul was doing. Therefore, even though Mark clearly could have benefited from some extra mentoring by Paul to help him with his commitment problems, Paul thought it was best to not take Mark along anymore. Later, however, in 2 Timothy 4:11 once Mark matures a bit, we see Paul actually requesting Mark because now “he is very useful to me for ministry.”

Perhaps the reason there are so few good mentoring relationships happening now days is because those who are in need of being mentored are expecting older people to drop their entire life and

revolve themselves around the mentored. Often times the mentored want to be the ministry rather than join a mentor in a ministry. Young people often want to be the mission rather than joining older saints in a mission. This is the opposite approach Paul used with his students. He did not join their direction in life but rather invited them to join him in his direction. Likewise, Jesus did not start following the disciples, asking Peter and John when would be convenient time for him to stop by and give them the 8 magical steps to be better fishermen. Rather Jesus told them to follow him so he could teach them to advance his kingdom. The disciples joined Jesus' mission and direction in life, Jesus didn't join their mission and direction in life.

Typically, the types of older men and women we would want to be our mentors are active, busy people who are showing they have great direction and purpose in life. CEOs, great coaches, pastors, or admirable parents, if they are any good at what they are doing, should be busy running their companies, studying their sports, shepherding their flocks, and attending to their families. They don't have time for people who are going to distract them from their primary goals. But, usually, they do have time to train people to accomplish similar goals which they hold. They are typically willing to allow others to walk beside them if that person will actually help them in their life's passion and work.

A great mom is much more likely to take a young wife under her tutelage if the younger woman will come over during the day and help the older woman clean the house, allowing them time to talk as they fold the mounds of laundry the older woman needs to get done before the kids come home from school. A great pastor will be much more willing to invest in a young man if that young man is willing to help him manage the church youth ministry once a week. The CEO might let a MBA intern in her inner circle if that student is willing to be available whenever the phone rings, makes copies without complaining, gets coffee the way she likes it, and does whatever else she and the other board members ask.

Paul wrote Timothy and Titus personal letters not just because Paul was so generous with his time, but also because Timothy and Titus were useful in church planting, which was the goal of Paul. Paul was personally invested in the church at Philippi because he loved them but also "because of [their] partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:5) – the advancement of the gospel being Paul's main passion.

As our life continues to unfold, a good mentor is priceless in helping us journey well. So if you want to be mentored, then perhaps you need to be willing to roll up your sleeves and work, making yourself useful to the ministry your mentor is already committed to, rather than asking a very focused person to make you their new ministry. In short, joining and helping a mentor in advancing their mission is a great way to attract a good mentor.

(To be fair and balanced, Barnabas disagreed with Paul and wanted to still be around Mark, and the Bible does not say who was right or wrong in this disagreement. Perhaps Mark became a more useful person because Barnabas did go the extra mile to help a younger person who wasn't

yet very useful. Colossians 4:10 explains that Mark and Barnabas were cousins, so it seems logical that we should go the extra mile for people who we have a stronger commitment to such as family and close friends.)

*Day 17: Reading the Bible is Not the Point*

*How can a young person stay on the path of purity?*

*By living according to your word.*

<sup>10</sup>*I seek you with all my heart;*

*do not let me stray from your commands.*

<sup>11</sup>*I have hidden your word in my heart*

*that I might not sin against you.*

*-Psalm 119:9-11*

What's the point in reading the Bible? Often times we are told to be a good Christian we must make sure we are reading the Bible, praying, and occasionally fasting. In one sense of course this is true. In another sense, this is totally ridiculous.

Christians are called Christians because following, loving, and glorifying Christ is our purpose. If reading the Bible, praying, fasting, or other such things were our purpose, we would be called Biblians, Prayerians, or Fastians.

To elevate these means of grace (meaning these are ways which we receive grace from God) is to usurp their true purpose and displease God. Notice Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible and certainly the longest chapter on God's word, praises God for his written instructions to us because when we read and take them into our heart they help us accomplish what we most desire – pleasing God.

Verse 11 does not say, "I have hidden your word in my heart that your word might be in my heart." It says, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." Reading the Bible is not an end in itself. Reading the Bible is a means to an end, and that end is to glorify God.

Perhaps the reason many struggle to find the motivation to read their Bible's consistently is because their end goal is wrong. If you think reading the Bible is the goal of Christianity, then Satan would probably be the best Christian since he certainly knows the Bible better than a human mind can know it. Satan, however is not a Christian because his motive in knowing the Bible is to twist it and use it to cause division among God's people. Christians, however, are meant to use the word of God to be empowered, enlightened, and motivated to please God by believing the promises found in the Bible.

To have a passion for the word of God, we must first have a passion for pleasing the God of the word. When you realize that reading, believing, and taking the word of God into your heart actually empowers you to please God, then you will have all the motivation you need to get up and read it every day. Moses prayed in Exodus 33:13, "If you are pleased with me, teach me

your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you.” Knowing the ways of God is a useless pursuit if it is not rooted in a desire to know God more and have a greater relationship with him. The Bible is a light on our path, but God is the Light that we are to pursue (1 John 5:5).

To read the Bible as an end goal would be like having a car with a manual and never driving the car but reading the manual all day. It would be like having a treasure map, reading that map every morning for hours, but never following it to the treasure. It would be like memorizing the script for the play but not showing up for opening night. The Bible is the treasure map, but Christ is the treasure.

Nobody would read a treasure map every day if they had no intention of looking for the treasure. Perhaps you can't find the motivation to read the Bible because your motivation has been to simply read the Bible as a good deed in itself rather than to read your Bible to find the real treasure, which is Christ himself.

This is not to diminish the word of God at all. It is certainly the most important means of grace we have, for without it we would not know how to pray, fast, worship and do all the other things which help us to please God.

I know many capitalize the “Word of God” as a way of showing reverence for the Scriptures. Certainly this is not sinful. But I find it interesting that the Bible itself does not do this. The Bible reserves the capitalization for “Word” only when it refers to Jesus, not the Scriptures, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1).

I believe God ordained the Scriptures to capitalize “Word” when it refers to Christ and not capitalize “word” when it refers to Scripture because Christ is our aim and the Scriptures are another way for us to be empowered in our pursuit of Christ. It's a waste of time to know the word of God if you don't personally know the God of the word.

Reading the word is only useful when we do it so we can be empowered and trained to love and obey the ultimate Word.



*Day 18: Confused About Life? Try the Lens of Love*

*Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.-Psalm 63:3*

If you're like everyone else who has ever lived on the planet, you've probably experienced some confusion about life as the pages keep turning. What am I supposed to do with myself? How can I make more money? When will I meet my spouse? Should we buy this house or not? Why is life so difficult?

These questions and many more can be a weight on our shoulders, replacing our joy for life with worry and confusion. Sometimes God gives us specific direction that helps with our current problem. But other times he doesn't. If we are listening, however, he may be saying nothing other than what he is always at least saying, "I love you." If we hear nothing but this, immediately life will make sense again.

Sometimes all we need to hear is that God loves us. It may sound cliché, but simply knowing that you are loved by God makes life worth living, no matter how difficult the present situation. Likewise, no matter how favorable the situation, life is pure drudgery when we don't know that we are loved, especially when we don't know we are loved by God. We were made to live off of the love of God. We weren't made to be filled by our careers, family life, and all the other things that we fill our time with. We were made to be fueled by God.

The message God is sending us is not always what we hear. Humans are creatures who love signs. Sometimes we don't listen to hear what God may be saying in his word and through his Spirit, but we look to see what he may be saying through our circumstances. God does speak through the events of our lives, but he doesn't always use these means the way we think. For example, when you get done praying about wanting to date Rachel, and then you randomly realize on your way to the grocery store you are driving down "Rachel's Avenue," this is probably not a sign of "yes" from God if Rachel is still not returning your phone calls. Asking a question, and then flipping your Bible open like you are looking into a crystal ball is not always the wisest approach to hearing God. The disciples cast lots to choose a replacement for Judas (Acts 1:26), but they never cast lots again after Pentecost and the Holy Spirit came on them (Acts 2).

The message we are always looking to hear is not found on the surface. We may think that our anxiety is occurring because our political democracy is crumbling, our parents are getting old and sick, or we don't have enough money to get the car fixed. The real reason we feel so uneasy is because we are interpreting these circumstances as God's lack of love for us. We see the easy life as God's message of love and the hard life as God's message of disappointment, or worse his abandonment. So many times we see life like the disciples saw the blind man, "As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his

parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him’” (John 9:1-3). We assume that if something is hard, God must be angry. Jesus reinterprets how we see life by helping us look through the lens of his glory. Jesus sees this blindness not as God’s punishment but as God’s opportunity to show his love and healing.

Complicated problems don’t always require complicated solutions. All we really need in life is to know that God loves us. God is sending his message of affection not only through easy times, but through times of suffering which will develop us, and mostly through filling our hearts with love through the Spirit (Romans 5:5).

“Do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:29-32). I wonder how much better life would be if we simply held tightly to the reality of God’s love for us? Your circumstances may be the same. Your knowledge on what to do next may be the same. But the peace will be perfect when you know that God is really looking out for you. God’s love is enough.

When you know that God loves you, life just makes sense. And even when it doesn’t, you’re okay with it, because you know you are cherished deeply by God. The lens of love clarifies the confusion of life.

So if you’re going through a rough time, don’t immediately try and solve the external problem or interpret it as God’s lack of care. Get to the root of the matter, which is that your circumstance are causing you to doubt God’s love for you, and thus you feel anxious. Dwell on the reality that God loves you with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3), and see if this does not change everything. He often does give us specific answers on our specific problems, but he always is sending a message of love. All we need to do is listen.

*Day 19: Overcoming the Unknown*

*“But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD,  
whose confidence is in him.*

*<sup>8</sup>They will be like a tree planted by the water  
that sends out its roots by the stream.*

*It does not fear when heat comes;  
its leaves are always green.*

*It has no worries in a year of drought  
and never fails to bear fruit.”-Jeremiah 17:7-8*

Don't you just want to be happy? Don't you just want to have an overwhelming sense of peace and direction in your life all the time? I think the average Christian has these feelings sometimes, but too much of our lives are often consumed with anxiety and confusion over the unknown filling our minds.

So what's the solution? We could seek to figure everything out. We can ask God for answers to every little question about the future that may contaminate our thoughts. When will I be married? If we have children, will they be healthy? What career am I going to have? Should I seek a more traditional job or try to become a professional artist or golf pro? If I tithe, how will I afford the lifestyle I desire?

These are but a fraction of the many unknowns that fill our lives. It's not wrong to seek answers from God. However, I don't believe having answers to all our questions and doubts about the future is the ultimate cure to a lack of peace and confidence that all will be okay in the end.

From the way God made us as limited creatures who can only see the past and the present, it seems God has made us to need to trust him. If God wanted us to have full awareness of all that was going to happen in our lives, he would have given us this knowledge. But that's not what God did. Instead he has made us to live most of our lives in the dark about what's ahead. Now the only option left for us to find peace is a radical trust in God.

We are blessed when we trust God not because he reveals every unknown, but because when we are trusting God we have a peace that all will be okay in the end because God is totally trustworthy. Jeremiah 17:7-8 doesn't say that there will be no scorching heat or that the future holds no droughts. However, it does state that those who trust in the Lord will be taken care of during the future times of trouble.

Trusting God is the only solution to finding peace when on the surface there should be no peace. If God was not in our lives, we would be stupid not to be full of anxiety over the future. How am I going to assure there is food on the table for my kids all their lives? How do I know I am going

to wake up tomorrow, or if I don't wake up tomorrow that my family will be taken care of? How do I know my car is not going to explode next time I turn it on?

Honestly, I don't know any of these things. The only thing I know for certain, because God's word is faithful, is that God is trustworthy and takes care of those who trust in him. Therefore, the only cure to living an anxious life is to trust God.

He is faithful, he is good, and his love will endure forever. He is totally trustworthy. When we know this, we don't need to know everything else.

*Day 20: The Danger of "I Wish"*

*Rejoice in the Lord always.-Philippians 4:4*

"I wish it wasn't raining." "I wish I had a better job." "I wish I didn't sin in that way." "I wish God would just listen to me on this one." The "I wish" statements that flow out of our mouths seem so innocent, but out of the heart the mouth speaks (Luke 6:45).

There is a trend in our Christian communities right now which falsely elevates peoples' honesty as holiness. People often think that if they are brutally honest with others about their relationship with God, their walk with God must be very genuine and true. "I had an argument with the Lord today about the weather," "I was like, 'Really God, you're making me do this again,'" or "Come on, Lord, you can bring the success. Why don't you just bring it?" seem like statements that can only be made by someone who "really knows God well." But anyone who knows God well prays and lives a different way. I can't seem to find that verse from Paul that starts with, "God, I wish you did this differently."

Honesty is crucial for holiness, but honesty in one's flesh without repentance is certainly worse than ignorance, for it shows that not only is your relationship with God dysfunctional but also that you don't care. When we state that we wish this or that was different, we are manifesting what is in our heart – discontentment with God.

Paul said, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:12,13). When we are internally satisfied in Christ, we can be content even in the midst of external imperfection.

Paul said, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Corinthians 7:10). When we wish God would have stopped us from some sin and then we allow this to cause us depression, we are claiming what Christ did on the cross is not enough. It's right to have regret over past rebellion, but it is faithless to let that failure consume you and steal your hope in the present and future. God doesn't have to stop our every sin because he sent Jesus, who is more than enough for even the worst of sinners.

We must pray, we must ask God to change those things in our lives which hinder our ability to glorify him, we must ask for our daily bread, we must always be honest with God about our desires, and we must talk to him like a true friend. But we must also remember that God is still the sovereign Lord of all, he is still the holy God that demands honesty, but honesty with respect. He allowed his friend Moses to see his glory upon request but he also hid his face from Moses because God is still God even with his closest friends (Exodus 33:12-23).

The danger of “I wish” statements is twofold. On the one side they show that your relationship with God is not your all satisfying desire. On the other side, it is blatantly disrespectful to order the only sovereign God around because you think you are so tight with him you can. God loves us more than we know, so he seeks to make us happy in him, the best of all. And God is more holy than we know; so no matter how close we get with him, he is still God and there is no other.

May we, like Paul, be able to manifest the true desire of our hearts with the words, “But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ . . .” (Philippians 3:7,8). He’s not wishing things were different. His wishes have vanished in the reality of Christ’s greatness.

Take comfort if you have not obtained this perfect contentment in Christ, for when Paul was on earth he didn’t either. But Paul was not only honest about this; he was repenting of it and seeking God more and more: “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Philippians 3:12).

Honesty about our desires is where we must start. But contentment in Christ is where we must end.

*Day 21: God Won't Live Up To Your Expectations*

*As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.-Isaiah 55:9*

God doesn't act the way we think he should. He doesn't live up to our expectations. He doesn't love like we imagine. He doesn't redeem, forgive, or set free like we had hoped. And this is a good thing. So many times we try to lock ourselves into a humanized version of God, but God, out of his love for us, seeks to always crush these little thoughts of ours. He doesn't act the way we think he should because he is far greater than our minds could ever understand.

He forgives when he shouldn't, he love's when it seems impossible, he remains when he has every right to abandon. God is not like what we imagine. "Who is like the Lord our God" (Psalm 113:5)? No one, therefore no one acts perfectly like the Lord but himself. We often distrust God's lavish grace because we humanize him and imagine him to be like us, and we are all painfully aware of our own gracelessness towards others and even towards ourselves. When we begin to question God's faithfulness after we run, his desire to forgive when we fall again and again, and when we doubt his love through the spiritual droughts our hearts endure on this long journey with all its highs and lows, we must not question our God but rather our beliefs about our God.

So what do you do when your view of God is too small? You do what Paul did – pray:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,<sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,<sup>18</sup> may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,<sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

<sup>20</sup> Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,<sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:16-21)

The problem many of us have is that we are looking for a love that doesn't require the power of God to comprehend it, a love that doesn't surpass understanding. We are seeking those things which in our human strength we can "get it." And so we are left with a view of God that is reflective of the sinful people who impact our lives rather than reflective of the one and only perfect God.

We need something more than what we can "get," we need the love of God that crushes our expectations, rising above them and showing God is loving even when we think he shouldn't be. God seeks to reveal his greatness to us in a way that is immeasurably more than all we asked for

or imagined. But to have this we must throw ourselves upon him in prayer, asking for his power to know his love that rises above knowledge of the mind and goes deep into the heart (Ephesians 3:19). One of the great, surprising joys of the Christian journey is when you realize God does not treat us as we would expect. He won't ever live up to our expectations because he always surpasses them.



*Day 22: When Life Sucks, You Still Have Life*

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.-  
Philippians 4:4-7*

When life sucks a great storm of turmoil rages within our inner being; and to rejoice as we are commanded seems utterly ridiculous. When you know you are failing to be a good husband or wife and you know your spouse is failing you, the inner pull is to give up, to embrace the failure and live in a depressed, lonely state by yourself. When you thought you finally found the perfect career and suddenly you realize you hate it more than your last choice, it seems there is no other option but to give up hope and join the masses of passionless, joyless, soulless slaves stuck in rush-hour traffic to and from their prisons called work.

When we look at all the outer problems surrounding our lives, we can't help but think there is zero possibility for the joy we feel guilty for not having because we know a good Christian should not feel this way. Rejoice always? Really, God? And with all these problems swirling around us, to our amazement, sometimes, despite all our pleas regarding the difficulties in our lives, God seems to be silent. Why?

Perhaps, if we are truly listening, listening not for what we want to hear but for what God is trying to teach us through his silence on our prayers regarding all our problems – perhaps we will see he his silent because we are praying about the wrong things entirely.

C.S. Lewis states, “I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself are the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice?” To rejoice in the midst of being drowned in poor financial choices, to put a smile on when your marriage is a mess and all you want to do is run to your sinful comforts, or to try and find happiness even though it seems like your parenting skills are ruining your children is not what God commands. God's command to rejoice always must be placed in its full context or it will be an impossible and cruel command. God did not say rejoice always, he said, “Rejoice in the Lord always.”

This is a very different command. Suddenly the demand of God for us to be joyful Christians is no longer dependent upon what is happening in our crazy lives but upon Christ. God requires us to rejoice always, even when your marriage is falling apart, your kids despise you, your boss wants to fire you, and you have some part to play in deserving these feelings from others. God requires us to rejoice even when life sucks because in Christ we still have life. He didn't tell us to rejoice in our circumstances but to rejoice in the Lord.

A great wave of relief will break upon the shores of your soul when you suddenly realize you can be happy even if life on this planet is not providing that happiness. There's still hope even when the life you've built for yourself is offering no hope. God is saying that the joy he is offering is totally separate and non-contingent upon what is happening in your life. Your days on earth will be unstable, but Jesus Christ who reigns in heaven is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8), and therefore to "rejoice in the Lord" is a command that can always be accomplished because God will never let you down and never let you go unlike everything else in life.

Your marriage may really be in trouble, your workplace may really be worse than most, and your sinful wonderings may truly be depressing. But there comes a time in life when we either let all of that go and stop demanding these things make us happy, or we keep hoping they will and we forever remain unfulfilled. The simple truth is this: Life, at many times, is really going to suck. The sooner you come to grips with the reality that we really do live in a broken, dysfunctional universe that will constantly not live up to our expectations, the sooner we can grow up and find the real solution to our joylessness. Despite the shocking realization that the life you hoped for as a kid is never going to be found as an adult, God remains faithful, and in the silence to our prayers for relief to our outer problems, God is seeking to teach us a greater lesson. In the midst of all that is happening, he is trying to show us that he alone is the answer.

It's worth noting that when God tells us to pray about everything in Philippians 4:4-7, he doesn't promise that he is going to solve everything we are praying about. What he does promise is that "the peace of God, which surpasses understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." When we pray about our problems, the relief is not going to come because God solved our outer problems, though he may do that many times. The relief is going to come, and the justification to rejoice always will arise, when we come into the presence of God in Christ Jesus. For true joy is not the absence of troubles but being in the presence of the Lord.

The answer to our joy will not be found anywhere else in life; for God himself is the answer, he alone is the Life.

*Day 23: The Secret to Happiness*

*Some wandered in desert wastelands . . . .  
Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he delivered them from their distress. (vs4-6)*

*Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom . . .  
for they had rebelled against the words of God . . .  
Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he saved them from their distress. (vs10-14)*

*Some became fools through their rebellious ways . . .  
Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he saved them from their distress. (vs17-19)*

*Whoever is wise, let him heed these things  
and consider the great love of the LORD. (vs43)*

*-PSALM 107*

The secret to being happy has nothing to do with our circumstances. It has everything to do with our personal relationship with God. We can be in the best of personal circumstances, finally living out the life we thought would make us happy, but eventually discontentment finds us. When this happens, we immediately begin hoping and praying for another shift in our circumstances. Granted, wanting a better job, a marriage, a healthier marriage, a more toned body, or a newer style car are not bad things. But they are also never going to have the effects we hope.

Eventually the new job has problems too, the marriage doesn't make us whole like we thought it would, and a newer model car is always coming out. The circumstances are never perfect. To believe that someday our lives will be perfect and then we will finally be able to be happy is foolishness. Happiness can never be tied to our circumstances because our circumstances are always changing and very much out of our control. The only thing we truly have control over is our response and attitude within the circumstances.

If happiness cannot be found through seeking perfect circumstance, where can it be found? Our happiness or lack thereof is only a symptom of the real issue at hand, the central issue that is always the real issue – our personal relationship with God. Some were in the wastelands, some were in deepest gloom, some drifted at sea, but when any of them called upon the Lord their lives became better.

“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:11-13).

A change in circumstances is sometimes needed, but it is never the root of unhappiness as God’s plot continues to unfold. God wants us to learn that true happiness can be found anywhere because God is everywhere. Let us not constantly be focusing on our external conditions but on the internal posture of our hearts towards God. That’s the secret to true happiness.

*Day 24: Don't Be Distracted By the Disasters*

*<sup>17</sup> The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" <sup>18</sup> And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. <sup>19</sup> Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. <sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. -Luke 10:17-20*

If you were to walk into the ER doctors' break room, you might be surprised at how calm and casual these men and women are who have just been in life and death situations. Eating food, reading the comics, laughing about something one of the nurses said, only to then step back out to treat a life-threatening gun wound. It might seem an odd thing to look into a bunker full of soldiers at war playing a game of cards before the next mission. To watch a crime scene investigator sip his coffee as he approaches a murder scene might be a bit chilling to the average citizen.

From the perspective of those on the outside looking in, it may seem that people like this have grown callous. And perhaps there is some of that. But to those on the front lines, they know that they would not want to do battle with the rookies, civilians, and other novices so shocked and emotionally struck that they lose focus of the tasks at hand. Would you really want a surgeon who was as horrified at your wound as you are? Would you really want an army of men with the same fear in their eyes as you when you are confronted with a real enemy shooting back at you? Those who lose focus of the mission at hand are those who are star-struck in the heat of the moment.

To be a good Christian worker, pastor, or counselor, we must get over the shock value of sin and remain focused on the mission – proclaiming the work of Jesus Christ. To the church member who has never been confronted with the raw details of a husband cheating on a wife with the neighbor, that member may be surprised at how unimpressed the old pastor is when he hears the details and points those involved back to repentance, reconciliation, and to Jesus. The sign of a novice is nervousness. To be shocked or flabbergasted by the evils of this world prove that one has not had much exposure to ministering to real sinners. The point is to stay sensitive, not growing bitter and calloused, but to also be unimpressed with the details of sin so that we might not lose focus of the real mission – pointing sinners to Christ.

Additionally, those who are unfit for heavy ministry are those who are easily overwhelmed and cannot go on in the normal affairs of life once the battle is over. Surgeons need to be able to leave the operating room and then go eat their left over spaghetti dinner in the break room because if they were to become so engrossed in their patients needs they could no longer function normally, they would become useless to their patients. If the soldier cannot leave the firefight mentally he will be less the warrior once he is called back to the fight physically.

Christians must not be so overawed with sin that once exposed to the evil effects of it, they cannot mentally let it all go. The pastor, counselor, or average church member who becomes overwhelmed with the needs of those they serve (to the point where they can't relax and stop thinking about it) will be less useful to serve the more overwhelmed they become. The thought of sin and the hurt it creates must grieve us, but it must not overtake our lives to such a degree that the main focus becomes sin itself.

We can all take comfort in how unimpressed God is with the horrors of the world and how singularly focused he remains on saving it. He is anything but hardened to the need for healing. He is not cynical or hopeless when evil is exposed. He's seen it from the beginning, he knows what is truly in a man, and thus he alone is able to best assess the right course of action in the most chaotic of sinful situations to lead people to his Son.

Sin saddens the heart of God, but it does not shock him. Let us, too, not be overcome with sorrow and emotion to such a degree that we are of no use to our brothers and sisters dealing with the rawness of real sin. We must not get sidetracked with the joys or horrors that revolve around what truly matters, Jesus Christ. For he has said, "Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." In other words, don't be distracted by the demons, the disasters, the destruction, or even the joy of healing, but remain focused on your relationship with Christ which will last for eternity and produce an everlasting joy itself.

To focus on anything else as the main point other than Christ is to lose focus of the mission.

*Day 25: Are You Creating a Bad Sequel?*

*So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"-John 12:19*

*. . . being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.-Philippians 1:6*

Sequels are usually not nearly as good as the original. Most sequels fail to live up to the greatness of the original story because they are trying to recreate the magic that happened the first time rather than building on the story. Some sequels, like those in *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*, are successful because they are not remakes, they are a continuation of the story. Each book builds on the last book, the drama and plot keeps moving forward, and without the later books the first book would not have a proper ending. Bad sequels have a circular plot line where the same things happen in hopes that the audience will feel the same way they felt the first time.

In our Christian walk, it's all too easy to fall into this circular pursuit. We experience God in some amazing way, he moves powerfully through us, but instead of moving on in the story, we get stuck. We don't want to see what is ahead, we want to recreate and live in the past experiences forever. When this happens, we begin to worship the experiences of our past rather than the God who wants us to love him in the present. With each attempt to recreate the magic, our life grows that much staler because we are so committed to recreating a bad sequel.

When our focus, however, moves away from the experience and back onto God, we then have the freedom to look forward, no longer being obsessed with the glory days of the past. The crowds may not be a part of the pages ahead, the success in ministry may not be the same, the friendships could be less rich, but when we move forward with God, we will have what is most important – a genuine walk with God. Even if the rest of our life is not nearly as thrilling as the past was, when we move forward with Jesus, we are sure to avoid living a stale and fake life where time has kept moving but we haven't.

The Pharisees demise was that they could not embrace the beauty ahead; all they could do was cling to the past. They didn't want God to change the old ways. They didn't want Jesus to establish a new covenant. All they wanted was to cling to the good old days. Their commitment to the past is what killed their hearts. They stopped worshipping God and started worshipping their own past experiences. But God moved the story forward without them, and instead of joining him to see the beautiful progression of the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, they got stuck and missed the pleasure that could have been theirs. They feared that everything good God had done in the Jew's rich history would be lost. But God was not starting a new story, he was simply building on the story he started "in the beginning." Likewise, when God wants us to

move on, he's not saying what happened in the past was not important to what he plans to do in the future.

To cling to the past, hoping to recreate it in the future, is to miss God's plan for you in the present. Parents get stuck being parents long after their kids have moved out, and in the process they miss what God wants to do through them in their elder years. People still wear their high school letterman jackets way too many years after it was appropriate and miss the joy of being a responsible adult who can be counted on. Sometime a married couple nears their forties without starting a family not because they can't have children but because they want to act like newlyweds their whole lives, and they end up missing all the beauty of raising a family that could have been theirs.

The past may have been beautiful, but to cling to the past, hoping to recreate it in the future, is to not only miss God's plan in the present, it can also cause you to be living in sin during the present. To reject what God has for you now because you have idolized what happened back then is to be in rebellion towards God's wonderful plan for your life.

May we trust God in the days ahead that we may be spared of living a bad sequel, unable to move forward into God's future for us.



*Day 26: A Testament or a Temptation*

*I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD.-1 Samuel 1:27-28*

A strong union of love will always create life in a selfless way. Ideally, therefore, children are supposed to be a sign pointing to the health of the marriage. Likewise, God was perfectly happy in communion with himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He had no need within him that caused a desire to create humans. Rather, his desire to create us was because he was so full of love and joy within himself, thus he made others out of love so they too could enjoy him. It was not an emptiness or need that made him make us, but fullness within himself. In a perfect situation, a healthy marriage does the same, not having children to make them happy, but rather having children so the two can share their love and stability with others. The children are supposed to be an ongoing legacy testifying to the strength and joy of the marriage.

Everything goes downhill when husband and wife have children and then forget each other. Often times, instead of growing and loving their family out of the love within their marriage, the children become the main thing and the marriage suffers. Ironically, not only does the marriage begin to weaken with every degree the focus turns to the children, but the children suffer too, needing two strong parents in a healthy marriage far more than they need to be the idol of others.

The earthly marriage bond between man and woman is supposed to reflect the heavenly union between Christ and his church. Therefore, we can see these same principles when our relationship with God creates life. If we are truly growing in Christ and participating in a real love relationship with him, this bond is sure to produce ministries, disciples, the fruits of the Spirit, new churches, growing churches, and so many other good things. Just like children are a living testament to the health of the marriage, the good that comes from our union with Christ is a testament to the health of our heavenly marriage.

However, just as the children can be a threat to the health of the marriage if the original union that created the children in the first place is not protected, so can these good things threaten the health of our union with God if he does not remain the true focus of our lives. Just as children can become a distraction to the love between husband and wife rather than an opportunity for ministry together, so too can the good fruit God produces through us distract us from him. And, ironically, not only will our union with God suffer, but so too will all the ministries suffer that were birthed through this marriage.

Therefore, with every child comes a greater opportunity for distraction. Of course the solution is not to abandon the kids or never seek to share our love with others. The solution is to keep everything in its proper place through honest intentionality on our part, empowered by grace. Children were never supposed to become the main thing in marriage, just as ministry was never

supposed to become the main thing in our Christianity. The love relationship with our spouse is what brings us children, and the love relationship with our spouse is the best way to raise healthy children. Likewise, ministries were birthed through valuing above everything else our relationship with God, and ministries will only flourish through continuing to value our union with God above everything else.

Ministries, like children, are supposed to be a living testament to a greater love that birthed them. They are not to take the place of the marriage, but rather be a reflection of those from whom they came. Raising a child, or developing a ministry, can either make or break your marriage. May we spend the time with our spouse, and more importantly with our Spouse, that we need so the health of our relationship will be reflected in the health of our offspring. Healthy ministries, just like healthy children, are a sign of a healthy marriage. No matter the good that comes through our love, may we never neglect our First Love.

*Day 27: Your Crown is Meant to Glorify Christ*

<sup>4</sup>*Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. . . .*

<sup>9</sup>*And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, <sup>10</sup>the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,*

<sup>11</sup>*“Worthy are you, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honor and power,  
for you created all things,  
and by your will they existed and were created.”*  
- Revelations 4:4, 9-11

Why does God ultimately bless his people with crowns? To receive a crown is to receive honor, authority, beauty, favor, and notoriety. In James 1:12 it says that those who persevere under trial will receive the crown of life. In Psalm 103:4 it says that God, “crowns you with steadfast love and mercy.” In Ester 2:16-17, Ester is brought before the king, and she pleases him so much that “she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head . . . .” Like Ester, God puts crowns on his people symbolizing the grace and favor we have with him.

Because of Christ, we have been crowned with glory and honor (Psalm 8:5). Christ bore the cross so we could get a crown of salvation. Jesus put on the thorns which we deserved so that we might be able to wear the crown of grace and mercy (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Without denying the incredible grace, honor, and glory God has placed on his people, his true motivation was more than to simply bless his people (but certainly not less). In Revelations 4:4, regarding what the twenty-four elders represent, Matthew Henry says this:

“He saw *four-and-twenty seats* round about the throne, not empty, but filled with *four-and-twenty elders* . . . representing, very probably, the whole church of God, both in the Old-Testament and in the New-Testament . . . Their sitting denotes their honor, rest, and satisfaction; their sitting about the throne signifies their relation to God, their nearness to him, the sight and enjoyment they have of him. *They are clothed in white raiment*, the righteousness of the saints, both imputed and inherent; *they had on their heads crowns of gold*, signifying the honor and authority given them of God, and the glory they have with him. All these may in a lower sense be applied to the gospel church on earth, in its worshipping assemblies; and, in the higher sense, to the church triumphant in heaven.”

So God has blessed his people, symbolized by these elders, with thrones representing his delegated authority, white garments representing the gift of purity and holiness he has bestowed on them, and with golden crowns on their heads showing the favor and love he has placed on them. But then in verse 10, the fuller picture of God's purpose in blessing his people is revealed. Of verse 10, Matthew Henry states

*“They cast their crowns before the throne; they gave God the glory of the holiness wherewith he had crowned their souls on earth and the honor and happiness with which he crowns them in heaven. They owe all their graces and all their glories to him, and acknowledge that his crown is infinitely more glorious than theirs, and that it is their glory to be glorifying God.”*

God gives authority, righteousness, and greater value to Christians than to any other part of his creation so that we might be able to worship him as he deserves. It is a greater act of worship for a person with authority to fall down on the floor out of their thrown. It is far more beautiful picture for purity and righteousness to be singing to God rather than dirty rags stained with sin. God gives us golden crowns not that they might sit pretty on our heads to show the great value we have, but rather so we can have something of value to cast before our Savior's throne, acknowledging that he alone is the reason we have a crown at all.

The cross of Christ certainly purchased, for all who believe, a crown of life. But our crowns are meant to be cast at his feet in worship. We are glorified, loved, and redeemed so that we might be made worthy through Christ to worship our awesome God. God does not want the worship of sinful people still stained with their own rebellion. So he makes a kingdom of priests so that they might serve him (Revelations 5:10)

God blesses his people with crowns so our souls might bless him (Psalm 103:1-5). God crowns us with life so that we might love him and live for him (James 1:12). God crowns us with glory and honor (Psalm 8:5) so we might cry out, “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8:9). And like the twenty-four elders in Revelations 4, we are blessed immensely not so we can sit pretty on our thrones with white robes and golden crowns, but so that we might be better suited to sing the praises of God:

Worthy are you, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honor and power,  
for you created all things,  
and by your will they existed and were created.”-Revelations 4:11

*Day 28: Time . . . The Great Healer?*

*Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.-Proverbs 13:12*

Whatever has the power to bring you great happiness also has the power to bring you incredible sorrow. Whether a marriage, a relationship with a friend, or being a member of a church, to open yourself up to the possibility of joy is to open yourself up to the possibility of disappointment.

Have you noticed that as you grow older your expectation for fulfillment in life has gone down? Smart parents know not to tell their little children too many days in advance if they are going somewhere fun because they know the child will be too excited to function normally. When you are an adult, there is no longer an innocent, profound expectation for a joyful life.

Why? It could be that we have simply matured and experienced enough of life we know what to expect and how to control our emotions better. But on a deeper level, especially when it comes to our relationships with others, many of us have stopped expecting much because we are guarded from past let downs. And then we have been told by others that when we get hurt time is the great healer. If you are hurting from a breakup or a falling-out with a friend, simply let more time go by and the pain will begin to subsist . . . so we are told.

It's true that time will begin to deaden the pain. However, time doesn't heal anything. Time buries our hurts, numbs our senses, but time alone never solves anything. Through time people's pain softens but so does the ability to feel joy, or anything else for that matter. For a perfect example of this, simply observe the stark contrast in openness to meaningful relationships between someone who has not yet been betrayed compared to someone who has. Teen "puppy love" moves so much faster than adult dating because teens have not yet been hurt as much as adults.

We must face the facts that time is not the great healer, Jesus Christ is. If you have the hope to be healed from some wound, to have this hope deferred for any period of time makes your heart sick. But to have this longing fulfilled in Christ is a tree of life (Proverbs 13:12).

The woman Jesus had healed bled for 12 years (Luke 8:43), in Mark 4 the storm just kept getting worse and worse until the disciples called out to Jesus, and the man he healed in John 9 was blind his entire life. Time heals nothing. Jesus calls us to him to be healed, but we must respond and be an active participant in the healing process. Notice in all of Jesus' healing miracles he lets the people in need play a role. He sometimes waits for them to ask for healing, or he sometimes gives them a set of instruction to follow like the blind man in John 9 who he told to go wash in the pool of Siloam. The point is this: Pain is buried through time but healed through following Jesus.

I don't know what he may ask you to do to participate in your healing. He may be calling you to forgive someone, to ask for forgiveness, to spend prayerful time in his healing presence, to let go of something that is an idol, to trust that he really does care about you unlike your earthly dad – whatever he may be calling you to do, don't let your healing be deferred by time which will make your heart sick.

Time is not the great healer. Nothing but Jesus is. As the song "Nothing but the Blood of Jesus" puts so clearly:

What can wash away my sin?  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;  
What can make me whole again?  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

*Day 29: Knowing When to Die*

*Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.-John 12:24-26*

*So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.-John 19:32-33*

*Beware of refusing to go to the funeral of your own independence. – Oswald Chambers*

Humans are resilient creatures. We don't die easy. We labor and strain for every last possible molecule of air before our longs stop. The wave must knock us down and then the current must come and hold us to the bottom, for we will fight and scratch and kick ourselves to the surface until all goes fully dim. It can take years or even decades for a deadly disease to finally stop our hearts from struggling and struggling and struggling to beat, only stopping long after it seemed possible that it could pump one more life saving pump. Even after a full life lived, an aged and frail little women will labor for weeks in her death bed before her lungs which have moved up and down millions of times through her life finally stop moving. Wars must ravage a nation until every man, women, and child is no longer able to resist the other side who does not defeat them but rather outlasts their foe.

And as a child grows and sees firsthand what type of effort and striving it takes to survive on this planet, they see that those who are most resilient receive the most honor and praise from their fellow overcomers. To survive, to outlast that which is trying to kill you, to breath when it doesn't seem possible to breath one more desperate breath – this is what we idolize and thus seek to become.

This commitment to survive can be used for and against our true selves in Christ. We must never give up following Christ and resisting sin, the world, and the devil. No matter how many times we turn we must always turn back to him. Tooth and nail, we must never stop following Jesus, no matter the cost. But when it comes to dying to the old life so we can be raised to new life, when it comes to dying to the law and works so we can live in grace and freedom . . . well then, this resilience becomes the worst of curses.

Christ says that to follow him we must die. We must die a painful death every day that we desire to follow him, taking up our cross, a torture tool used for centuries as the worst way to lose your life. Many of us want to die to our old selves and live for Christ but that nasty habit of doing

everything we can to stay alive through our own desperate clutch on life comes and resists the command to take up our cross and follow him. We are like the criminals who died next to Christ, still breathing long after Jesus chose to die so he could get on with being raised. Death is painful and it hurts, but it hurts all the more when it's resisted with tooth and nail. If those on the cross would push their bodies up with their legs they could last a few more hours before the suffocation and asphyxiation would eventually overtake them. But if you lived too long on the cross they would come and break your legs so you could no longer use them to push yourself up for air.

And so, in love, God is forced to spend much of our lives killing us. If we linger on our crosses, pushing up with our legs so we can breathe just a few more breaths of our worldly life, eventually God will come and break our legs, making the cross even more painful than it had to be. With every trial we face and resistance we put up, God does all he can to kill our pride, or self striving, our personal righteousness, and our unbiblical optimism when there should be no hope without Christ. He tries to kill us before we are dead to him forever. He tries to make us give up fighting to breathe our own breath so we can breathe his. Dying hurts but without it God knows we will die trying to live rather than living because we chose to die.

“How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. . . . The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:36, 56-59). We must hold fast to Christ and never give up fighting for him and his purposes. But to live in Christ we must die to everything else.

Death hurts, but it hurts more and it takes longer when we resist it. In love God will do whatever he can to kill our old selves, and this killing is painful as all death is. But if we never die then we will never be raised to new life in Christ. Let us pray and know when we must fight for Christ and die for Christ, as both will be needed.



*Day 30: Dying with Joy As A Witness to Christ*

*5 For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. <sup>2</sup> Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, <sup>3</sup> because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. <sup>4</sup> For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. <sup>5</sup> Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*

*<sup>6</sup> Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. <sup>7</sup> For we live by faith, not by sight. <sup>8</sup> We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. <sup>9</sup> So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. <sup>10</sup> For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. – 2 Corinthians 5:1-10*

How we die will reveal how alive we really are in Christ. There are few certain things in this life, but one thing we can all count on is that we will not remain on this earth in this fashion forever. Either we are going to die or Jesus is going to return. The “end”, however, is not something anyone will escape.

With that said, it astonishes me how thoroughly our society, myself included, seeks to erase the very idea about death. Nobody talks about death and we are all utterly shocked when it happens. We mourn and say nice things when death reaches someone we know, but then we move on and try to forget as quickly as possible that our life is one breath closer to our end on earth with every inhale and exhale we take.

And yet when you read Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, he seems so comfortable conversing about death. It seems he almost yearns for it at times because he really believes to be away from this body means to be with the Lord. In Philippians 1:23 he says, “I desire to depart, and be with Christ . . .” Paul not only could face death, he could actually look forward to it due to his passionate belief in the promise of God that to die is a gain because to die is to leave this earth and be fully at home with Christ.

To be clear, Paul did not seek out his own death. In fact he sought to stay alive so he could produce fruitful labor for the Lord and so he could love and help the people in his life while he was able (Philippians 1:20-26). But your personal reaction to death says something about how alive you are to the truth. Mourning is right when those you love pass, fear of the unknown is normal, but terror and horror to our own death are reactions unfit for the Christian. The Christian has a hope in death that should far surpass a hope that is found in this current life, and our reaction to our own deaths will make clear how deeply we believe the great promises of God.

It's certainly not wrong to want to stay alive, but something is wrong if you cling to this life as if it is your only chance to live. Let us not seek out death. Let us labor and strive to serve the Lord with the little time we have. But let us not cling to the cold, metal rails of our hospital beds when it comes to be our time, grasping in fear and avoidance because our faith was found lacking in the love of God.

To die with eager expectation of being with the Lord perfectly should be our last and greatest witness to the world for Christ.

*Day 31: Resurrection Chapters Are Ahead*

*If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. <sup>3</sup> For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.-Colossians 3:1-4*

*And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.-Luke 18:33*

Every great story must go lower before it goes higher. To feel the joy, exuberance, and utter relief that all turned out beautifully in the end, you will have to go through the scenes that make you feel this could never turn out for good.

God is a great story teller. As he writes the larger story that affects all of humanity from the beginning of time until the earth's last days, he also has subplots in each of our individual lives to add to the drama. But his writing pattern is the same: to bring about the best possible ending, he lets the plot grow very dark and bleak throughout our lives. The unknowns ahead, the loss of loved ones, the relational turmoil, wars, famines, suburban boredom, and internal depression that seems to have no cause – all of it can make you wonder, as all good stories should make you wonder, “How could this possibly turn into a happy ending?”

But God is faithful, and as the Director of every scene in both our individual stories and the larger story that involves us all, he has the ability to transform the storyline in ways we never could have imagined. The best stories are not fluffy on every page. Happy endings are truly happy and not cheesy only when before the happiness comes there was true, justifiable sadness.

Therefore, the problem in every story is not in whose directing it, it's in those who have stopped following the Director's cues. The problem lies not when tragedy, extreme boredom, or total hopelessness strikes our lives; the problem occurs when we don't turn the page to see how God wants to write the end of the story.

If you were to read through the gospels and stop at Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, and John 19, you would have a dead, lifeless gospel that would bring no hope to anyone. Jesus really did die, the plot arch really did dip that low, and we as his disciples would be fools to follow him if the story ended there. But the story doesn't end there. Each gospel has at least one more chapter titled, “The Resurrection.” Without Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, and John 20, the Director would have failed in creating the best, most important story ever told. But he did write those pages. Those chapters are there. Jesus really did raise from the dead, conquered sin and death, and now reigns victorious, interceding and bringing victory for all those who believe and follow him.

In each of our lives, there are “resurrection” chapters ahead. The problem is that many of us have stopped turning the pages. We’ve gotten stuck at the low point in the story. We got crucified but since we stopped following the Director’s instructions, we stayed dead. Just like the gospel, we must allow God the freedom to write each of our individual stories the way he wants. The betrayal happened, the disciples abandoned Jesus, and Jesus’ dead body really was sealed in a tomb. But that wasn’t the end of the story. Just as the gospel would be a hopeless story if we stopped reading at the crucifixion, our stories will be hopeless if we stop following Jesus during the low points in life.

There’s going to be real loss, pain, and deep confusion, causing us to questions, “How could this possibly turn into a happy ending?” The answer to that question will never arrive if you stop following Jesus during the dark scenes in life. Instead you must choose to follow him even closer when the scenes unfolding in your story are that dier.

Ephesians 3:20-21, “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” This promise will only come to fruition if we keep turning the pages, not allowing ourselves to get stuck in the moment, believing that there really are resurrection chapters ahead.

Luke 18:31-33, “And taking the twelve, he said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. <sup>32</sup> For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. <sup>33</sup> And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.”

The secret to Jesus faithfulness was that he knew “everything that is written about the Son of Man.” Jesus knew all that had God promised, both the lows and the highs. Jesus knew that he really was going to be betrayed, mocked, spit on, flogged, and then finally killed . . . but he also knew that “on the third day he will rise.” Jesus knew there were better chapters ahead (Hebrews 12:2). What a tragic story the gospel would be if Luke 18:33 simply read, “And after flogging him, they will kill him.” If that was all Jesus said, we would have every right to despair and abandon God. Thankfully, that’s not how the verse ends.

We should always have hope no matter how bleak it looks because in God’s great sovereignty he has already written the end of the story. It’s not going to be nail-biter. When Jesus comes back to earth in all of his majestic strength, no one is going to wonder if he wins. Everyone is going to fall on their knees at the sight of his return and know he is the winner. God has revealed the end of the story in his word so we will have the motivation to not lose heart in the middle.

Take heart and know that you too will endure difficult times in life, but if you follow God until the end, he promises there will be resurrection chapters ahead.



