



Life with Jesus

52 Devotions to jump start your week

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Learning to Live with Jesus

Eight months after our last child left the nest, my father went to heaven on January 4th, 2007. That was a wake-up call for me. It made me consider my own mortality. What should I do with the time I had left? I thought I should ask God about that, but didn't know how to hear from him. Then it dawned on me. I knew *about* God but didn't *know* him. I *professed* Christ but didn't *possess* him and I'm not sure how much of me *he* possessed, either. Could I get close to him? Does he even want me to? To find out, I read every book and article I could find on getting to know God. I also discovered quite a bit of scripture on the subject that I somehow missed before. I had always heard that Christianity was not just a religion but a relationship, but had never seemed to be able to do more with Christ than just reading my Bible occasionally and praying to him when I needed something.

I came to see that God made us to love us and for us to love him, not just to serve him. He wants us to work *with* him, not just *for* him and to work *closer* with him, not just *harder*. But he won't force himself on us. He's waiting for us to make the first move, as Jeremiah explains in chapter 29, verses 13-14:

“You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord.”

So, how did I seek him? I began to talk with him all throughout the day and let him speak to me through his words in the Bible and other authors and friends who helped me along the way. I also included him in everything I did. I began to realize that every beautiful thing on the earth and in my life came from him and it made me grateful. My worship became natural and I started to sense and enjoy his presence more and more, which filled me with peace and joy, even through hardships.

My life is no longer compartmentalized to sacred or secular events. *Everything* that happens to me has spiritual implications and nothing happens by chance. I now see the Lord's handiwork and involvement in my work, my relationships, and the awesome complexity and beauty of his creation. He even uses my trials, heartaches, and frustrations to teach me and help me grow my faith. When I drift from him for even one day, my withdrawal symptoms manifest themselves in my attitude, behavior, and countenance.

Becoming aware of God's presence and really experiencing him will revolutionize our lives. And it's not just a private benefit; as we keep company with Jesus, he infuses in us more compassion for others. We'll move out of our passivity as we courageously step out in faith to become the leaders our families and communities need us to be.

If you want more of God or want to want him more, come along with me on these weekly devotionals. They are based on truths I have gleaned from several years of walking with Christ and learned from others who know him well. Getting close to God is not just part of the Christian life, it is THE Christian life. If we get this right, everything else will fall into place. And when we live with the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, he gives us the assurance and abilities to become all that he created us to be!

May the Lord bless you on this quest,
Rob

“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” - Jesus, John 10:10

Week 1

Is it time to turn over a new leaf?



During the coldest time of year, when the trees are bare and the nights are long and signs of life are hard to find, a shimmer of hope breaks through with the emergence of a brand new year. I used to wonder why people celebrate so much on January 1st. But the more I consider the implications of a new year, the more I see how wonderful it is that unlike all the other creatures on earth who merely survive through every season year after year, mankind has the opportunity to look back, take stock and reflect on how we did and resolve to do better going forward.

In the 16th century people referred to pages in a book as “leaves”. When they turned over a new leaf it meant they were turning to a blank page in a workbook to start a new lesson. This phrase became another way to say you’re turning over a page of your life and starting a new one.

So, it’s that time of year again. When we try to muster up enough self-control and self-confidence to accomplish some self-improvement to boost our self-esteem as a result of our self-reliance. I don’t suppose I need to ask you if you see a pattern here.

I’m not against trying to become better at something or aspiring to get into shape or wanting to kick a bad habit. I just think it’s time we got off the hamster wheel long enough to share our desires and dreams with the one who can help us get past January 31st before running out of steam.

When Israel’s biggest enemy, the Philistines, heard that David had been anointed king, they came out in full force and spread out in the valley. David had already accomplished much success in his military campaigns, including sneaking into the water shaft to take Jerusalem from the Jebusites. If anyone had a right to feel self-confident, it was him. But he still checked in with the Lord before the battle. “Shall I go and attack them? Will you hand them over to me?” The Lord said, “Go, for I will surely hand the Philistines over to you.” The enemy was defeated but undaunted so they came back for more. David might have been tempted to try what always worked before, but he paused to consult again with his heavenly General. It’s a good thing he did, because he received a different tactic that time, instructing him to circle around the enemy and attack them from behind, resulting in such a devastating blow that it launched Israel as the super power in the region.

Can we learn from David as we consider our goals for the New Year? “Should I do this, Lord? Will you help me succeed?” Don’t wait until you have improved yourself enough before you approach God. He wants you as you are right now, warts and all. He graciously gives us second chances to start over with a clean slate, not just at the beginning of the year but whenever we confess our shortcomings to him. Then he enlists the Agent of Change, the Holy Spirit, to help us produce what we can’t on our own.

As we set our goals for the New Year, let’s put at the top of the list the things we will do to gain more of Christ, to include him more and more in our hearts and minds and lives. Then watch in amazement how he uses us to accomplish much more than we can do on our own!

Week 2

Can you read just one page from your Bible every day?

Reading through the entire Bible in one year is a worthy goal, but that requires at least 3 chapters a day and encourages one to rush through the verses instead of taking the time to study and prayerfully meditate on them. However, you can read the entire New Testament in one year, along with the Psalms and Proverbs by reading just one chapter a day, which is about one page in your Bible. While the chapters average 32 verses, most of the Psalms are only about 16 verses long, so you can read two of those per day, except for Psalm 119, which has 176 verses!

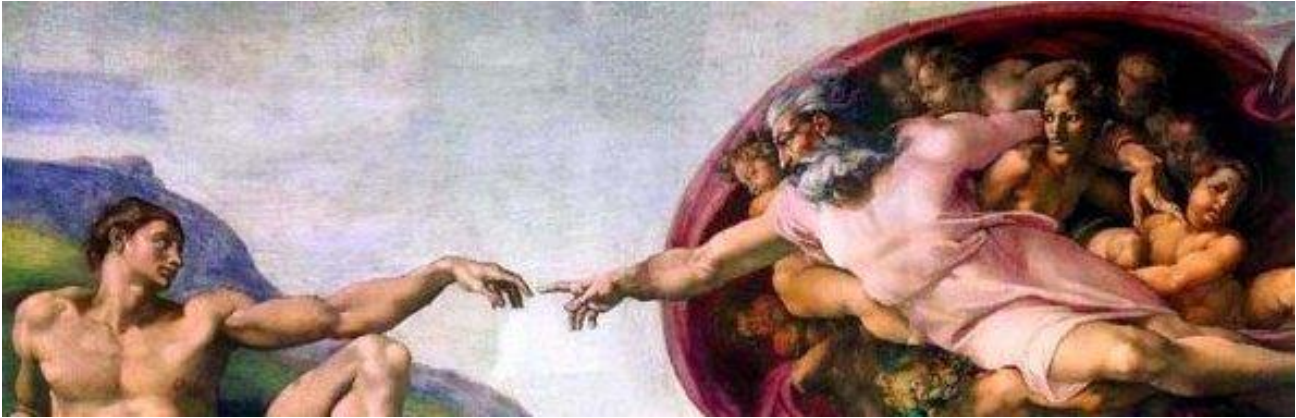
There are many Bible reading schedules out there but I personally don't like reading all of the gospels together. I would like to hear from Jesus all throughout the year, so I mix them in with the rest of the New Testament. I do this with the Psalms and Proverbs as well. You can also read some of the Old Testament, but at a more leisurely pace. You can start reading anytime; you don't have to wait until the beginning of the year.

Sharon and I have been using this schedule for the last several years. We read the same scripture in our quiet times, then get together once a week to share what we've learned and then pray together. It's been great!

| <u>First half of the year:</u> | <u>Second half of the year:</u> |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Matthew | Luke |
| Psalms 1-14 | Psalms 86-99 |
| Proverbs 1-3 | Proverbs 19-21 |
| Acts | 1 Thessalonians |
| Psalms 15-29 | 2 Thessalonians |
| Proverbs 4-6 | 1 Timothy |
| Romans | 2 Timothy |
| Psalms 30-43 | Titus |
| Proverbs 7-9 | Philemon |
| Mark | Psalms 100-113 |
| Psalms 44-57 | Proverbs 22-24 |
| Proverbs 10-12 | John |
| 1 Corinthians | Psalms 114-123 |
| 2 Corinthians | Proverbs 25-27 |
| Psalms 58-71 | Hebrews |
| Proverbs 13-15 | James |
| Galatians | Psalms 124-137 |
| Ephesians | Proverbs 28-29 |
| Philippians | 1 Peter |
| Colossians | 2 Peter |
| Psalms 72-85 | 1 John |
| Proverbs 16-18 | 2 John |
| | 3 John |
| | Jude |
| | Psalms 137-150 |
| | Proverbs 30-31 |
| | Revelation |

Week 3

God is close and he wants you to know him



What comes into your mind when you think about God? A. W. Tozer says that is the most important thing about you. Do you know God personally? Do you think that's possible? Have you ever wondered why God made people? The Bible explains,

"From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:26-28).

Over and over in scripture we are told to seek God. Here are a few examples:

Seek the Lord and His strength; Seek His face continually. (1 Chronicles 16:11).

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. (James 4:8).

***You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.
I will be found by you, declares the Lord.*** (Jeremiah 29:13).

What does seeking God look like? Think about someone that you love to be around. How often do you talk to that person or hang out with him/her? Or think about something you love to do. How much time do you spend doing it, reading about it or watching videos about it? If we would put that much effort into cultivating our relationship with Christ, we would no longer have to try to trust him; it would be an automatic reaction whenever we face any kind of difficulty. Walking closely with the Lord throughout the day affects our worldview as well as our thoughts and ultimately our behavior.

"Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Jesus, Matthew 28:20

The most frequent promise in the Bible is "I will be with you." Jesus is called Immanuel, which means, God is with us. God is not watching us from a distance, as the song goes. He is up close and personal. He not only wants us to know him, he wants us to invite him to help us thrive, and not just survive. He is ready and willing to supply everything we need as well as satisfy the deepest longings of our heart. But unless we muster more enthusiasm than Adam as pictured above in Michelangelo's painting, we will miss it all.

So, what does God want from us? Does he really need us to do anything for him that he can't do for himself? Yes, there is something he wants from us: our love, our time, and our devotion; not just to serve him but to be with him and know him. What are some things people brag about? How smart they are, what they've

accomplished, or how wealthy they are? Is God impressed with that?

This is what the Lord says, "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let him who boasts boast about this; that they have the understanding to know me." (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

My prayer is for the Lord to use these devotions to encourage you to walk ever closer with him!

The LORD said, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." (Exodus 33:14).

Week 4

Can you see what is not seen?



We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2nd Corinthians 4:18).

How can we see what is unseen? This is actually accomplished in many ways. People once thought that grains of sand were the smallest thing there was, until optical microscopes enabled us to see smaller objects, like cells. Today, electron microscopes let us discover things that are 100 million times smaller, like bacteria, viruses, molecules and atoms. We once thought that atoms were indivisible, until we split them - revealing protons, neutrons and electrons inside. Then we found even smaller things inside them! But what about things that are further away than we can see? Astronomers have found more than 500 solar systems in our Milky Way Galaxy in addition to our own and they're discovering new ones every year. The Hubble Space Telescope has discovered an estimated 100 billion galaxies in the universe, but when the James Web Telescope reaches its target 1 million miles away it will be 100 times stronger than the Hubble. Who knows what that will pick up? What really blows my mind is how fast the Milky Way is hurtling through space - 1.3 million miles per hour! It doesn't just hang there in space, as the pictures show. The fact that it hasn't yet collided into another galaxy is a testament to how huge the universe is.

Do you see a pattern here? The closer we look, the more intricate and complex our world and universe appears, which points to an intelligent Designer, who is more intricate and complex than we will ever comprehend. Just like the universe he fashioned, there is no limit to what our Creator can do, so why should our perception of him be limited only to what we can observe with our puny senses?

Some of us are like Doubting Thomas; we won't believe in something if we can't see it. But that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. We can't see the wind. We can't see sound waves, which are used by sonar to locate things under water that we can't otherwise see. We can't see radio waves, either, but they are used by radar to track things in the sky and in the ground. We can't see radiation or magnetic fields, but x-rays and MRIs can see inside our bodies. This should help us to believe that there are other things we can't see either, like spiritual entities.

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Ephesians 6:12).

The phrase, "What you don't know can't hurt you" is ludicrous. Just ask people who found they had a disease too late to treat. The same thing applies to what you can't see, like natural gas and carbon monoxide and life after death. How can we train our senses to become aware of the spiritual dimension, not only of evil forces but also to recognize the movement of God and experience his presence? The first step is to have the barrier of sin removed that separates us from his holiness, by accepting and trusting his son, Jesus, who gave himself for us on the cross. Then, seek him with all your heart and cultivate a relationship with him by reading the Bible, praying often and following him. There's more to it, of course, which we'll explore in future devotions. But I will

mention one more thing now that we need to do – *relax!*

Look at the stereogram image below. At first, it looks like a jumbled up mess. But if you quit trying to focus on it and relax your eyes, you will see some fish appear. You may need to put your nose up to it, let it go out of focus and slowly pull it away from you. The first time I looked at this, I saw three fish. Then, when I tried to relax even more I saw three more fish in a different layer of 3D!



“I was blind, but now I see!”

With some practice, we can train our spiritual eyes and ears to see and hear from the Lord. We just need to sit still long enough to listen to him, then keep in touch with him with ongoing conversational prayer throughout the day.

It is so sad to think that many people never learn to connect with God. They go through their lives wondering how they got here but never take the leap of faith required to look beyond the obvious and peer into the realm of the unseen, where love, joy and peace abound, even amidst the struggles and hardships of the seen world. It's not easy to see past the natural and into the supernatural, but,

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.

(1 Peter 1:8)

Week 5

Get in front of the Son



I live in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, which is right in the middle of the state. We have a saying: “If you don’t like the weather today, just stick around, ‘cause it’ll change very soon.” I’m writing this on January 30th and it’s 68 degrees. Last weekend we were playing in the snow.

Earlier this morning I ventured outside under a sunny and cloudless sky with the temperature in the 40’s. I sat down at my favorite place out back and after a few minutes the sun moved enough to break through the bare branches above me and it warmed my face. It was as if God was saying to me, “I’m glad you came. Bask in the light of my glory for a while.” You probably think I let my imagination run away with me, and you may be right. But these days I see the Lord’s handiwork as his personal gift for me to enjoy and it brings me closer to him.

We can read or watch videos depicting people doing fun things together but it’s not the same as experiencing those things first hand, is it? Reading the Bible is very important, but if we don’t let it lead us to a close relationship with God, then all we’ll have gained is a bunch of facts about him. As A.W. Tozer puts it in *The Pursuit of God*,

“It is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself, and unless and until the hearers find God in personal experience they are not the better for hearing the truth. The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, that they may delight in His presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of the very God Himself in the core and center of their hearts.”

I would not have experienced this beautiful morning if I had stayed inside and it made me realize that I can’t delight in the warmth of God’s presence if I don’t get in front of him, no more than I could have felt the rays of the sun had I not been in the right position. I let so many things obstruct my line of sight to Jesus. But like the sun’s movement around the branches, he finds a way to reconnect with me and for that I’m grateful!

“I have set the Lord continually before me; because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body will also rest secure. You have made known to me the path of life; In your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever.” Psalm 16:8, 9, 11

Week 6

Don't leave home without Him!



Back when I worked on multifunctional office machines, I learned the value of preventive maintenance. Those workhorses could copy, print, scan, and fax all day long, week after week. But if they were not allowed to go off-line long enough for a good cleaning, calibration, and replacement of worn out parts, pretty soon their performance would suffer and they eventually broke down before their time.

We are also multifunctional in our roles as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, friends and employees, aren't we? We are constantly pushed and pulled in many directions and after a while we begin to wear down. Some of us are driven by the almighty dollar and some of us try to please everyone but up end not pleasing anyone well. Doing our best is admirable, but if we don't take scheduled maintenance breaks to let our heavenly Technician clean, adjust our focus and energize us, we will break down before our time.

He that dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. (Psalm 91:1).

Serving God and trying to live right is very important, but how many of us prepare properly before we go out? How many of us just wing it without first putting on the armor of God? How can we take up the shield of faith or swing the sword of the Word if we're not prayed up or filled up with scripture? Tackling your day without that protection is like going into battle without a weapon. Reading your Bible and praying may seem like a counterproductive use of your time at first. But if you stick with it, you'll soon acquire a taste for your "daily bread" and your soul will begin to crave spiritual food.

We've got to dwell in the secret place before we enter the public place.

I think one of the reasons it's called the secret place is because so many of us never find it. Our *restlessness* keeps us so busy we don't slow down enough to become *restful*. We need to go off-line and get alone with God, rest for a while and quit trying to figure everything out on our own. We don't have to pray long, elaborate prayers. Sometimes I don't know how to pray or even have the energy. That's when I just sit down with my hands open and relax in his presence. I usually don't hear or sense anything from the Lord, but that's OK. He knows I'm surrendering some time to be with him and I usually come away refreshed and confident to tackle whatever the day will bring because I know he'll be with me.

My quest to know Christ on a personal level is accomplishing at least two things for me. First, it lifts me out of dependence on apologetics to try and convince me of the reality of God. The closer I get to him, the more affirmations I receive of his existence, which removes my doubts. Second, I have found no greater satisfaction in life than seeing God do something through me that I could not do on my own. My pride wants to pull myself up by my bootstraps, but the only way to real and lasting change is walking with the Spirit. It is not simply letting go and letting God. It is shifting my focus and energy from trying to do it all by myself, to seeking God with all my heart before and while I work. I have found this to be more of a challenge, actually, than just staying busy doing things for Him. Yes, I have to fight my urge to go it alone, but his joy is stronger than pride, trust is stronger than fear, and peace is the glorious result. This is heaven on earth, a preview of the eternal bliss that awaits us. Don't leave home without him!

Week 7

Who do you smell like?



“We are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To one we are the smell of death; to the other an aroma of life.”

(2 Corinthians 2:14).

Our sense of smell is very powerful. It can lead us to food, let us know when something’s burning, and what (or who!) to stay away from. It can also trigger memories, both good and bad. Cologne or perfume can remind us of those we know, or knew. Almost everything we encounter has a particular odor attached to it, from a rose to a rainstorm.

When we allow the Lord to scrub our lives clean of all our sins and garbage, people can’t help but pick up the refreshing scent of love, grace and peace that spontaneously exudes from us. At least they should, if we take the next step. Did you notice there are two bars of soap in the picture above? If not, take a look at this picture of the same bar from another angle.



The little bar was almost used up when I grabbed a new one, but instead of throwing it away I left it in the tray with the new one. The two stuck together and after a few showers, the small bar conformed to the curved shape of the new one, even though it was flat at first.

“We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” 2 Corinthians 3:18

The more I devote myself to God, the more I will be like him. As the small soap bar gave in to the mold of the larger one, I have to let go of my own ways and submit my life into the hands of the Potter to shape me into his image.

Different people affect us in different ways, altering our moods and even our behavior. Let me ask you: What do people notice and feel when they are with you? What persona or aura do you give off? Are they refreshed and encouraged by your presence or are you a drain and a downer to be around? Do they hear hope and cheer or complaining and sarcasm? Who does most of the talking, the listening?

I can hear some of you saying, “That’s just the way I am. I’m not outgoing or friendly. I’m basically shy and keep to myself.” Well, so am I, but we need to change. I don’t think the Lord wants us to stay in our comfort zones. It’s a stretch for me, but I want to be more inviting and approachable, even to strangers. I challenge you

to smile at everyone you pass tomorrow and see how many people return your smile. That's more fun than looking past them, as if they don't exist.

I had a dream recently where I was with my dad. I felt his warmth and acceptance and humor as strong and real as I remember it from years ago. I enjoyed hanging out with him for a while, even if it was only in a dream. Just thinking about certain people can bring me to tears or make me smile.

What a wonderful day that would be, if, when people cross my path, they would see Jesus more than they see me. This goes beyond asking "What would Jesus do?" It's being *in* Jesus and him in me, so others see the real thing. Am I there yet? Nope. It's going to take a lot more showers from the living water to conform me. But one day we will *all* be like him:

"For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself." Philippians 3:20-21

Do you smell like Christ?

Week 8

Look at Jesus instead of the waves.



Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. (Hebrews 12:2).

The apostle Peter was a fisherman and knew how to swim. One time he got out of the boat to go to Jesus, only that time he did it on *top* of the water instead of in it! Scripture records that the disciples were straining at the oars, battling the waves because a strong wind was blowing and the waters were rough. That didn't seem to faze Peter, because he got out of the boat when Jesus said, "Come!" and he began to walk toward Him. But when he took his eyes off Jesus and let the fear of the wind and the waves overwhelm him, he began to sink and cried out to the Lord to save him. This was not the serene scene on a calm sea that many have illustrated. If it was, Peter could have simply swum back to the boat.

All of us have, are, or will be battling the wind and the waves of fear, frustration and failure. I have a habit of asking the Lord for help and then going right back to tackling the problem myself. But when I continue to stay in touch with him through the trial and trust him to work everything out according to his timing and His glory, I experience a calm during the storm. It's like he's saying to me like he did to the disciples in the boat, "*Take courage! It is I; do not be afraid.*"

Be anxious for nothing, 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 comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7).

The world's definition of peace is the absence of conflict but the peace of God is most often felt in the worst of circumstances. To experience the kind of peace explained above in Philippians, however, we must come to understand the previous verse that is often overlooked: ***The Lord is near.*** (Philippians 4:5b).

When the winds of adversity start to make you go under, don't try to keep your head above water all by yourself. Bob Sorge, in *Secrets of the Secret Place*, says,

"While none of us asks God for hardship, we can't deny the fact that hardship produces desperation, which in turn produces intense intimacy...In some cases God will allow extreme duress to press His servant into the depths of the Spirit with an unprecedented passion."

Let's start getting out of the boat when Jesus says "Come!" even when it is inconvenient or frightening to do so. Then keep our eyes on Him and watch Him do amazing things through us no matter how strong the wind blows!

Week 9

Give yourself a break!

I'm grateful for my Christian upbringing. It kept me from making some regrettable choices. The downside is that I emerged with an overconfidence of my self-righteousness. Unaware of my brokenness, I wandered in the desert of roller coaster Christianity for 40 years before I finally got off the ride. I came to realize that I couldn't live a holy life without holy intervention, even if I knew the answer to "What would Jesus do?" in every situation.

We can try to think positive and saturate our brains with endless motivational posts on Facebook, but does it really change us? How can self-improvement help when myself is the one who needs help? Have you ever stopped to think how crazy "self-help" sounds? The one who needs help trying to help himself? And no, the saying "God helps those who help themselves" is not found in the Bible. When I became ready to accept what Jesus said in John 15:5, "***Apart from Me you can do nothing,***" I knew I needed to start trusting him for more than just my eternal destiny. I need him to save me *now*.

Works without faith is dead, too

So, is there any work for us to do? Of course there is. As James says, "***faith without works is dead.***" (James 1:26) We just have to remember not to go it alone: "***without faith it is impossible to please God.***" (Hebrews 11:6) So, works without faith is dead, too. But when "***it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure***" (Philippians 2:13) and we do it for the glory of God, we can give it all we've got! Eric Liddell, in the movie, Chariots of Fire, said, "*When I run, I feel His pleasure.*"

Paul tells us to "***continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught.***" (Colossians 2:6) We have to be intentional in our pursuit of God and to follow him. In John 15 when Jesus tells us to abide in him, he also tells us to keep his commandments. A full life in Christ doesn't just happen naturally. It's not just faith and not just works – it's both!

"When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Mathew 6:5, 6).

No one can get you close to God. This is something you must do on your own. That's why it's called the secret place. Sermons or teachings can be helpful, but they can never be as effective as opening the word of God for yourself and meeting him one on one. We need to shut the door to all distractions and sit still long enough to hear from him. We also need this time to intercede for others as well.

A **spiritual pathway** is the way a person most naturally relates to God and grows spiritually. Some draw closer to God on the *intellectual pathway* as they study scripture and theology. If you have a *relational pathway*, God speaks to you through people. However, if you prefer the *contemplative pathway*, you love a lot of uninterrupted time alone to hear from the Lord. The *worship pathway* uses praise and celebration to usher you into the presence of God. You are on the *creation pathway* if you feel surrounded by God when you are outdoors and enjoying nature. The *service pathway* brings you close to God while you are serving others. You may use a combination of the pathways but it's important to pursue the ones that most help you connect with God.

The most important "meal" of the day

Breakfast (breaking your overnight fast) jumpstarts your metabolism and helps you burn more calories throughout the day. Likewise, starting your day with the Lord as you read his word helps you to keep your focus on him throughout the day.

*In the morning, O Lord, You will hear my voice; In the morning
I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch.* (Psalm 5:3).

The noise and beckoning call of the Internet, TV, and smart phones have hijacked our opportunities to rest, reflect, and recharge. Staying in touch with social media from dawn until dusk camouflages our need to deal with how *out* of touch we are with God and how spiritually shallow our lives have become. We eat on the run and pray on the run. We keep the radio on to keep out the quiet because the silence makes us notice and feel things, like sadness or anger or loneliness. Praying while we work or drive is great, but we can connect more deeply with God when he doesn't have to compete with other drivers or interruptions. He can get our attention when we put our agenda on hold for at least a little while to hear from him. Then we can exchange our hurts and fears for his joy and peace.

I have heard it said that we will never have time for prayer - we must make time.

1. **Set a goal:** If you're just beginning, start with 10 minutes; 5 to read your Bible and 5 to pray. Gradually increase your time. Any new change in lifestyle is difficult at first, like getting to bed earlier in order to get up earlier. But if you stay with it, I believe you'll begin to look forward to being with the Lord.

Your initial goal for your daily meeting with God: _____ minutes

2. **Make an appointment:** If you just meet with God whenever you get around to it, you won't do it very often. Schedule a recurring appointment with God and put it on your calendar. I prefer first thing in the morning since it sets the tone for the rest of the day and is a catalyst for my walk with him. But you may choose lunch or an unhurried time in the evening.

Your daily appointment time: _____

3. **Read:** Don't try to do an exhaustive study of scripture if you only have a few minutes in the morning for your quiet time. Deep Bible study is important, but that should be done when you can devote more time to it. For now, just start reading a section of scripture at a time, asking the Holy Spirit to impress on you what he wants you to hear. Don't speed read. Reading out loud will keep you at a good pace.
4. **Reflect:** When you come to a passage that grabs your attention, read it again a couple more times out loud. Prayerfully ponder what God is trying to teach or invite you to do. He may convict you to repent of a sin or he may just want to encourage you. This is **meditation**; reading while praying for insight. Unlike Eastern meditation that empties the mind of all thoughts; Christian meditation replaces our thoughts with thoughts of God and his word.
5. **Record:** Keep a journal of verses that spoke to you and what you learned as well as questions to research later when you have time.
6. **Pray:** Begin with worship and thanksgiving. Next, lay your concerns and the needs of your friends and loved ones at his feet. My 90 year old mother still wants to know how my family and I are doing and she prays for us every day and I am grateful for it!

Do you ever get bored or have trouble concentrating when you try to read your Bible or pray? Well, guess what? So does everybody! Don't feel guilty if your mind wanders or if you miss a quiet time. Don't get discouraged; this is a marathon, not a sprint. Just keep directing your thoughts back to God and continue where you left off. You'll eventually establish a habit, one that you won't want to kick!

If you don't take time to pray, power is wasted that could have helped you or someone you love. When you do pray for someone, you may be the only one praying for him/her that day. One of the best ways you can love people is to pray for them.

Week 10

Are you hungry for God?

*“I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.
Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.” (Psalm 81:10).*



We all hunger and thirst for many things, don't we? And it's not just for food and water. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, once our basic physiological needs are met, we then aspire to satisfy our psychological and self-actualization needs, such as intimate relationships, feeling of accomplishment and achieving our full potential. While all these needs can be met to a certain extent, there is a need that spans across all the levels, and if recognized and satisfied, it fulfills our deepest longings far beyond what we dream is possible.

Unfortunately, it's a need that many people don't even know they have, so it gets neglected. And like any need that's ignored and unmet, it can lead to frustration, boredom and depression, which is not what we were created for. When created things don't fulfill their destiny, like cars that won't start or refrigerators that won't cool, that can be pretty aggravating. But when people don't get to experience the joy, excitement and contentment of living the kind of life that they were created for, then that's a tragedy.

Know the Greatest Need

So, what need does our Creator want us to be aware of and to quench? I'll give you a clue: What do parents and grandparents enjoy the most about being with their kids? I can tell you from experience, it's when they run to me, snuggle with me and tell me that they love me. It's a mutually enjoyable exchange. Now, since we were made in the image of God, I can't help but think that he longs to have that mutual experience with you and me.

We need to ask ourselves, "What do I have an appetite for? Is it to do and acquire things that I can't take with me when I meet the Lord and have to give an account of what I have done with the time and resources he has given me? Or will I devote myself to follow closely after him and help as many people come to know him as I can? That option is not easy to accomplish, but it satisfies our greatest need, not only in this life but in the one to come.

Acquire a Taste

Remember the first time you tried a certain food or drink that at first you weren't crazy about? Then, after awhile, you began to like it, maybe even crave it. That's the way I was with reading my Bible and prayer. It wasn't until I decided to pursue God relentlessly to see if he could be known by digging into his word and reading helpful books and talking with him more than at meal times that I began to sense his presence and see what I had been missing. I acquired a taste for his daily bread and a close walk with him!

Taste and see that the LORD is good. How happy is the man who takes refuge in Him! (Psalm 34:8).

Open your Mouth Wide!

I think that a lot of us don't expect much from God. Maybe he hasn't answered our prayers the way we wanted him to or we have become so accustomed to living mediocre lives that we don't ask him for much anymore. If that's the case, my friends, then we have set the bar way too low. We have let our faith lie dormant. Jesus said that "*the Kingdom of God is within you*" and the apostle Paul said that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in us. Let's tap into those amazing resources! I like how Charles Spurgeon put it:

Let us come and open our mouth and pant, as David did when he said, "As the deer pants after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God." So let us come before our God...come with your mouth wide open, and stand there before God. Or be like the little bird in its nest; open your mouth towards heaven. Mark how the parched earth, in times of drought, cracks and opens its mouth for the rain. Let your parched heart begin to pray in the presence of your God, and ask for His grace."

Let's give our consent to accept all that the Lord has promised to give us. He says he wants to fill us up, if only we will open our mouths wide enough!

Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! For he has satisfied the thirsty soul, and the hungry soul he has filled with what is good. (Psalm 107: 8-9).

Week 11

Keep in touch

As for me, it is good to be near God. (Psalm 73:28).

My dad's favorite hymn was *In the Garden* and he sang it quite often. Charles Miles composed it back in 1913 to describe the fellowship he enjoyed with his Savior which began at dawn and was so sweet and delightful that even as night was falling he didn't want it to end. Here's the chorus:

*And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.*

Dad didn't just sing those lyrics – he lived them. I remember back when I was a little guy I would sometimes hear him talking to someone while he was in the bathroom with the door shut (before cell phones!) I later found out that it was his prayer closet. He liked psalm 91 so much he put a couple of the verses to a tune he made up. I'll never forget the last words we heard him utter. When he could no longer communicate with us in his weakened condition, we sang his song over him,

“He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High, shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.”

From seemingly out of nowhere, we heard him finish the song with us,

“shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.”

I know that sounds incredible but I'm telling the truth. His body was almost gone but his spirit was still very much alive and would soon be in the presence of the Almighty, no longer just in his shadow.

Enclosing us, embracing us

We can get so wrapped up in our little world that we sometimes forget that there is another world, an even bigger reality, which we fail to recognize. In the movie, *The Truman Show*, Jim Carrey portrays Truman, who is unaware of the real world that lies just beyond his controlled little town that is actually a set with actors created for the reality show. He grows up dreaming of leaving town but never gets the courage to do so until the end of the movie. At one point, Christof, the creator of the show, says, “We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented.” I think we do the same with our physical world that we can see, hear and touch, and like Truman, we are not even aware of the fantastic possibilities awaiting us from the supernatural dimension. As A. W. Tozer describes it in *The Pursuit of God*:

“A spiritual kingdom lies all about us, enclosing us, embracing us, altogether within reach of our inner selves, waiting for us to recognize it. God Himself is here waiting our response to His presence. This eternal world will come alive to us the moment we begin to reckon upon its reality.”

This reality involves more than an altar call or a weekly church service. There is so much more to experience. And the vehicle that takes us there is prayer. Richard Foster, in his book, *Prayer*, says,

“Prayer changes things,” people say. It also changes us. The later goal is the more imperative. The primary purpose of prayer is to bring us into such a life of communion with the Father that, by the power of the Spirit, we are increasingly conformed to the image of the Son.”

Is prayer your first resource or your last resort?

I have been guilty of prayerlessness, squandering this precious gift, resulting in blessings withheld and needs unmet. Too many times I have prayed without passion instead of crying out to God on behalf of others. The best way I can watch your back is to cover you with prayer, but I don't do that nearly enough. Jesus promised,

“Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” (Mark 11:24).

His will is sovereign and he may say, “Yes, No, or Wait,” but until he does, we need to believe, and believe *BIG*. We should keep praying, even when things don't change. Have you become gun-shy because God didn't give you what you asked for in the past? Is your fear of disappointment keeping you from expecting great things from him? He hears and answers *every* prayer because he promises us he will and he always keeps his promises. This doesn't mean we can use God as a vending machine to give us everything we want, though. As we get to know the Lord and his word better, we'll know how to pray more accurately according to his will.

“As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you.” (1 Samuel 12:23).

Let's take a look at some of the ways to pray and what to include. We'll begin with our secret place, which allows time to incorporate the elements of the Lord's Prayer that he taught his disciples. **ACTS:**

- A:** Adoration (Praise and worship, praying scripture out loud)
- C:** Confession (ask for forgiveness while forgiving others)
- T:** Thanksgiving (for God's many provisions to us)
- S:** Supplication (bringing your needs and interceding for others)

I keep a list of people I pray for. When I don't know how to pray for someone, I take the advice of Frank Laubach, a missionary to the Philippines, who wrote,

“Holding them steadily before the mind and willing that God may have His will with them is the best, for God knows better than we what our friends need, yet our prayer releases His power, we know not how.”

Staying connected

Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? (1 Corinthians 3:16).

One really cool thing about dwelling in His Secret Place is that it's not limited to one physical prayer closet. Since our body is a temple of The Holy Spirit, we can take him with us wherever we go. Some translations of John 15 use the word “remain” instead of “abide.” I think both together provide a complete picture. We need to abide, or live in Christ, but we also must remain and stay with him, not just to come and visit once in a while. If we want to live like we should all day long we need to keep in touch with Jesus all day long. We are told to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). *All day long?* How do you do that? If I'm not careful, I can have a great quiet time in the morning but then go all day without even thinking about God. But when I remember that he is with me, I can keep him on my mind, even if I don't verbalize everything.

In order to maintain a continual conversation with God we need to move beyond formality and invite him into everything we do. Engage in small talk with what's happening, what you like or don't like, and your fears. Don't wait until you have exhausted all options on your own to solve a problem; involve the Lord from the very beginning. I once heard a pastor say he offers up a quick prayer before every new activity, whether it's a phone call, a meeting, or anything, big or small.

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving. (Colossians 4:2).

Week 12

Safe in His arms

The steps of a man are established by the Lord, and He delights in his way; though he stumble, he will not fall, because the Lord is the One who holds his hand. (Psalm 37:24).

Ever notice how trusting small children are? You can swing and throw them up in the air, and when they fall back into your arms, what do they say? “*AGAIN-HIGHER!*” They don’t doubt your ability or resolve to catch them. OK, go ahead and laugh at my short shorts. Just remember, it was the 80’s!



Who do our kids run to when they are hurt or afraid of something? To the ones who have always been there for them—their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings and friends. That is where they find safety, protection, and comfort. They know they can trust us and that calms their fears.

How was your first ride in a sky rail? Stephanie wasn’t too thrilled. Ah, the good old days at Opryland!

Time goes by, we grow up, get betrayed and let down, and each abuse erodes a little more of our ability to rely on anyone or anything. For many, hope gets lost, fear takes over, and depression sets in. The writer of Lamentations was an eye-witness to the fall of Jerusalem: “*My spirit is greatly troubled; my heart is overturned within me...my soul has been rejected from peace; I have forgotten happiness...my strength has perished.*” A friend once pointed out to me that some of the most encouraging and cherished promises in the Bible were just a few verses later in the same chapter:

“Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.” (3:21-23).

Yes, people have dropped us and disappointed us, but the Lord *NEVER* ceases to show his love to us because his compassion *NEVER* fails and his faithfulness is *GREAT!* Think of one person right now you know you can always count on. Now multiply that loyalty a hundred times and it still won’t come close to your Heavenly Father’s track record. That’s because he loves you more than anyone else, and has the ability to care for you like nobody else. When he says he will be with you and not fail you or forsake you (like he does many times in the Bible) you can take that to the bank!

So then, why do so many of us Christians still worry and lose sleep over stuff even after praying? Perhaps it’s because we have a false image of a busy and powerful boss in heaven that doesn’t want to be bothered and puts

our requests at the bottom of more important matters. We just can't grasp the reality of unlimited omnipresence and omnipotence combined with a love that's as wide and long and high and deep as the love of Christ (Ephesians 3:18). I feel we have an edge, so to speak, that not everyone has, to personally know such a powerful and important person! I need to approach prayer with more respect and responsibility. An amazing potential is waiting to be unleashed; Almighty God is actually waiting and holding it back, granting us the privilege of interceding for others. I believe the very instant a petition is transferred from our thoughts or lips, heavenly forces are set in motion to change the laws of nature, if necessary, to achieve glorious results. My 90-year-old mother is not as strong as she used to be, but I believe demons shutter when that prayer warrior intercedes for us!

Then again, maybe we just need to somehow re-capture the spirit of our youth and trust God with abandon, knowing he won't let us fall. Maybe that's why Jesus said, "*I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.*" And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them (Mark 10:15-16). If they had pictures or videos back then, I'm willing to bet we would see Jesus enjoying holding them as much, if not more, than the children liked being held. I know I did with mine...



Week 13

Come to the table!



Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. (Psalm 119:97).

I have recently retired, but most of my career was in the technical field, which relied heavily on calibration. We had to make sure our measuring instruments were accurate in order to produce products that were able to perform to the specifications our customers demanded.

Our spiritual lives need calibration as well. Otherwise, we could end up following a worldview that looks enticing but may not lead to God's best for our lives. We would be like pilots who crash because they relied on their guts instead of their instruments. Our inner compass may not be calibrated with the truth.

So, what should we base our beliefs and values on? Where do we get the truth? Well, I trust the words of the God who made me and knows me and wants the best for me. And the vehicle he uses to reveal his words is the Holy Bible.

I used to try to get in my daily quota of scripture but didn't get a whole lot out of it until I learned to approach it differently. I've heard the Bible described as the manual for life, but it's much more than that. As Tim Chester explains in his book, *Enjoying God*,

The Bible is a relational book. Its purpose is to create and deepen our relationship with God. It's not a quick reference tool. It's a place in which we hang out with God and get to know him...It's not a book to raid for a few facts about God. It's a means of communion...We go to the word to hear our Saviour speak to us."

When we read a book, it is a one-way communication. When you read a letter or email that was meant for you, that's more personal. When you are texting someone back and forth, that's even more engaging because you are interacting with that person. Did you know you can experience two-way communication with the Bible? It's not just a bunch of words written thousands of years ago. In Hebrews 4:12, it is described as being living and active and able to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart. How does that work? That's where the Holy Spirit comes in.

Savoring

The goal is not simply to stuff as many verses into your brain as you can, but rather, to take your time with smaller portions; contemplating, meditating and asking the Holy Spirit to speak to you. He is our teacher and counselor and he uses scripture to speak specifically to *you*, right now where you are. But you need to invite him to do so before you start reading, then ask him to show you what he wants you to know as you read or listen to the words. The Holy Spirit may give you a unique application but the truth is the same for everyone. Bible dictionaries and commentaries can help shed some light on hard to understand Bible passages. Web sites, such as Biblehub.com show parallel translations that can help as well.

Don't be in a hurry. Ask God questions. Take time to reflect on what he may be trying to teach, encourage, or nudge you to do. This is where meditation comes in. Unlike Eastern meditation that empties the mind of all thoughts while chanting mantras, Christian meditation strives to fill our minds with thoughts of God and his word.

Instant Recall

Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You. (Psalm 119:11).

All the instruction and wisdom and guidance and encouragement that's in the Bible won't help us unless we take it with us wherever we go. And that's not always practical, is it? That's why we are advised to commit as much scripture as we can to memory. That way, it will always be readily available as situations arise for us to apply it.

Chuck Swindoll wrote, *"I know of no other single practice in the Christian life more rewarding, practically speaking, than memorizing Scripture...No other single exercise pays greater spiritual dividends! Your prayer life will be strengthened. Your witnessing will be sharper and much more effective. Your attitudes and outlook will begin to change. Your mind will become alert and observant. Your confidence and assurance will be enhanced. Your faith will be solidified."*

Reciting verses out loud during the day will also keep you closely connected to Christ. It's great to be able to speak scripture out loud as a prayer to God as you go about your day. For those of you who don't think you're up to memorizing verses, listen to what James Nicodem says in *Prayer Coach*:

"I know Christian men who haven't memorized a Bible verse in months (or longer), but they can reel off the batting averages of their favorite team's players. Or the Dow Jones averages for countless stocks. Or the par for every hole at the local golf course. Or the Internet addresses for a dozen interesting Web sites. Or the stats on a sports car they're considering."

The best way I found to memorize scripture is to write verses down on 3x5 cards and put them where you will see them often. Then read them out loud every time you see them. Before long you will no longer need to look at the cards. The key is repetition.

So, I have a challenge for you. This week, write down 7 verses that you would like to memorize, one for each day of the week. Then, come up with a key word for each day that will help you remember the verse for the day.

I know you can do this. Here's why I know: soon after my little children began to talk, I got them to repeat the verse for the day every day for many years. Over a quarter of a century has now past and they still remember most of those verses!

Week 14

Was that you, God?



I want to have more than an intellectual assent of God. It's not enough for me to simply believe that he exists. It's not even enough to see him answer my prayers or to know that I will see him in heaven one day, as wonderful as those things are. I want, no, *I crave* for feedback from God, to hear from him, to experience a relationship with him. Some might say that is not possible, that God doesn't work that way; that I just need to trust him. Or that he stopped speaking to us after the last word was penned in the Bible and those words are all we'll ever need. While I cherish my Bible and believe that scripture is the primary way he speaks to us, I don't think God cuts off communication the minute we close our Bibles and head out the door to face our day. When Jesus said to abide and remain in him, I don't think he meant that would only happen when we have a Bible in front of us. We are told to pray without ceasing and I believe that prayer works both ways.

What's keeping us from hearing God?

The first thing we need to ask ourselves is, "What is my motive? What do I want to do with the information the Lord gives me? Is it to serve him better or to get something I want? Am I willing to obey what he tells me to do? Is there a persistent, unconfessed sin that is keeping me distant from him? Have I given him a good reason to speak to me by the way I live?"

If a self-examination has revealed pure motives, then perhaps our signal bars are too low and the static is too loud (distractions) and we need to improve our reception. We have to prepare ourselves to listen to God. My cousin, Curtis Coleman, wrote a devotional book called *Stop, Look, and Listen*. He describes an African safari where the natives carrying the gear would not go out on the seventh day. They said, "We do not go today, we rest today—we must let our souls catch up with our bodies."

Another reason we may not be hearing from God is that we really don't expect him to speak to us. But he does just that through the Holy Spirit who guides, teaches, and encourages us. There are three places back in my woods that I like to pray but my favorite is on a rock ledge. When I get out there early enough I can watch the sun come up. It's my favorite spot because that's where I hear from God more than any other place. I eagerly go regardless of the weather because I fully expect to meet the Lord there and hear from him and feel his presence. Bob Sorge, in *Secrets of the Secret Place*, says,

"Intimacy precedes insight. First comes the secret place, then comes divine guidance. God doesn't simply want to get you on the right path; He wants to enjoy you throughout the journey. He doesn't want you to discover His will and then take off running, leaving Him in the dust. God's primary desire is that you draw near to Him and come to know Him. God wants to be known!"

If you've tried everything you know of to get an answer from God on something and you've waited on him for a good period of time but he appears to be silent, you shouldn't automatically come to the conclusion that you're doing something wrong. God may want you to stay put or he might be giving you the freedom to choose for yourself. As we grow closer to him and get engaged in his work, we won't need to be told what to do all the time. We'll learn what's important to him and respond accordingly. He's already told us a lot of things to do in

the Bible! Getting direction from God is not the only thing we should be seeking, anyway. We can also enjoy a conversational relationship with him, inviting him into everything we do.

How does God speak to us?

God uses many ways to communicate with his people. So far in my life, God has not spoken to me audibly. Scripture is the primary way God speaks to us, provided we ask the Holy Spirit to help us understand what he wants us to consider. But I believe he also uses people, events, and circumstances to get through to us, as well. Has God ever given you words to say to help or encourage a friend?

Have you ever had a thought so profound and powerful that it would not be any clearer if someone spoke it to you? Or a persistent inclination or prompting that won't go away? If we are attentive and receptive, the Holy Spirit will impress upon our thoughts and feelings to communicate with us. It's kind of like learning a new language, or for that matter, a new accent in a different part of the country.

Soon after I moved from Chicago to Huntsville, Alabama, I was in church hearing a lady talk about the woman at the *whale*. I was confused, so I asked, "You mean *Jonah* and the whale?" She said, "No, silly, the *woman* at the whale, not *Jonah*. And Jesus was there, too!" It took me awhile, but I eventually learned to understand southern talk, which included cutting out the vowel "i," adding syllables to words like ambulance (ambulayance,) and changing my bub (bulb) and my o (oil). And don't forget to put out that "far." But to be fair, they had to learn my Yankee talk, too!

The longer you experience a close walk with Christ, the better you'll get at recognizing the distinctive characteristics of his voice amidst all the other thoughts coming at you.

***Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-his good, pleasing & perfect will.
(Romans 12:2).***

Week 15

Break free from the harbor, spread your sails and hold the rudder!



Walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. Galatians 5:16

Our souls are slaves to our bodies' needs to quench our passions and desires through the vehicle of our senses. We crave what we can see, touch, hear, smell and taste. Pleasures are gifts from God, who created us with the ability to enjoy them. Unfortunately, the pursuit to fulfill them often leads to various degrees of overindulgence and selfish endeavors, which, if left unchecked, results in addictions, damaged relationships and irreversible regrets.

When we accept Christ as Lord and Savior, the Holy Spirit begins a work in us that we must cooperate with. Repentance is not automatic and requires a devotion to turn from sin but also to seek the Lord with all our heart, who will then empower us to overcome temptations as we learn to trust and lean on him.

I like the way Madame Guyon illustrated this process when she wrote this in the late 1600s:

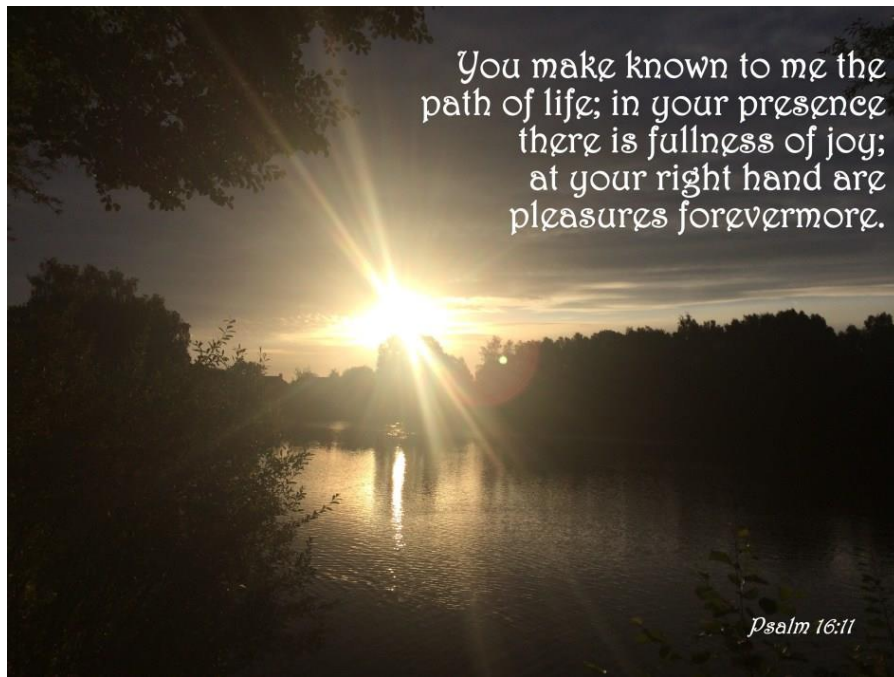
“When the vessel is in port the mariners are obliged to exert all their strength that they may clear her thence and put to sea; but at length they turn her with facility as they please. In like manner, while the soul remains in sin and creaturely entanglements, very frequent and strenuous endeavours are requisite to effect its freedom; the cords which withhold it must be loosed; and then by strong and vigorous efforts it gathers itself...pushing off gradually from the old port.

When the vessel is thus turned, in proportion as she advances on the sea, she leaves the land behind; and the farther she departs from the old harbour, the less difficulty and labour is requisite in moving her forward: at length she begins to get sweetly under sail and now proceeds so swiftly in her course that the oars which have become useless are laid aside. How is the pilot now employed? He is content with spreading the sails and holding the rudder. To spread the sails is to lay one's self before God in the prayer of simple exposition, that we may be acted upon by His Spirit: to hold the rudder is to restrain our hearts from wandering from the true course, recalling it gently, and guiding it steadily to the dictates of the Blessed Spirit, which gradually gain possession and dominion of the heart, just as the wind by degrees fills the sails and impels the vessel. While the winds are fair the pilot and mariners rest from their labours, and the vessel glides rapidly along without their toil; and when they thus repose and leave the vessel to the wind, they make more way in one hour than they had done in a length of time by all their former efforts: were they even now to attempt using the oar they would not only fatigue themselves, but retard the vessel by their ill-timed labours.

This is the manner of acting we should pursue...it will, indeed, advance us in a short time, by the Divine impulsion, infinitely farther than a whole life spent in reiterated acts of self-exertion; and whosoever will take this path will find it easier than any other. If the wind is contrary and blows a storm, we must cast anchor to withhold the vessel: our anchor is a firm confidence and hope in our God, waiting patiently the calming of the tempest and the return of a favourable gale as David *waited patiently for the Lord, and He inclined unto him and heard his cry* (Psalm 40:1). We must, therefore, be resigned to the Spirit of God, giving up ourselves wholly to His Divine Guidance.”

Week 16

Do you enjoy God?



"These things I have spoken to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full." – Jesus, John 15:11

How well do you know God?

In order to enjoy God, we must have a correct concept of what he is like. In his classic work, *The Knowledge Of The Holy*, A. W. Tozer does an incredible job of describing the attributes of God. Being aware of his power, wisdom, holiness, grace and love, just to name a few, enhances our worship and our relationship with him.

What is your view of God? We're supposed to love him, but do you *like* him? Or do you think of him as an impersonal force? Or a judge that doesn't approve of you or have time for you? Here's the truth: God is crazy about you!

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! (1 John 3:1).

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16).

When Paul was a prisoner in Rome, he wrote of being joyful and rejoicing 16 times in the four short chapters of his letter to the Philippians. How could he do that? He had learned that no matter how bad things got, the love of Christ always carried him through. He prayed that we would *grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ* (Ephesians 3:18).

God made us to love us and for us to love him. And when we turned our back on him he still loved us by sacrificing his son for us. But it didn't end there. Did you know that he enjoys hanging out with us?

A man's steps are established by the LORD, and the LORD delights in his way...the LORD takes pleasure in his people... he rescued me because he delights in me. (Psalm 37:23, 149:4, 18:19.

God enjoys us and we can enjoy him, too:

Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Psalm 37:4.

*“Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said,
‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” -Jesus, John 7:38*

The more time you spend with Jesus, the more you'll begin to delight in being with him, and before too long, he will give your heart the desires it *should* have. You will no longer serve him out of duty; you'll *want* to please him. And you'll begin to have an unquenchable love for him. You may even find yourself break down one day as you weep for joy, overcome by the goodness of God toward you!

“God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.” – John Piper

Devote yourself to pursuing a relationship with God

To enjoy the company of someone, you need to be close to them. Long distance relationships don't provide much intimacy. The same holds true with our relationship with the Lord. First century Jews had a blessing that expressed the commitment to stay in the presence of the one he followed: *“May you always be covered by the dust of your rabbi.”* This is often referred to as practicing the presence of God, which makes me think of Brother Lawrence. A lay monk in *17th-century Paris*, he was assigned to the monastery kitchen, where, amidst the hectic chores of cooking and cleaning, he honed his intimate walk with God:

“I make it my business to rest in His [Christ's] holy presence which I keep myself in by a habitual, silent, and secret conversation with God. This often causes in me joys and raptures inwardly, and sometimes outwardly, so great that I am forced to use means to moderate them, and prevent their appearance to others...To choose an expression, I would call this state the bosom of God for the inexpressible sweetness which I taste and experience there. If, at any time, my thoughts wander from this state from necessity or infirmity, I am presently recalled by inward emotions so charming and delicious that I cannot find words to describe them.”

If you haven't read the collection of Brother Lawrence's fifteen short letters, do yourself a favor and follow this link to read them: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/lawrence/practice>

I'll take happiness when I can get it, but there is something better. If you take happiness to the next level, you get joy, which comes from the Greek word *chara*, and means to be exceedingly glad. We draw strength and enthusiasm and fulfillment from the joy of the Lord. It pulls us out of depression and refreshes our weary souls. For me, it's not so much of an exuberant high as it is a satisfying feeling of well-being and contentment. When I think of Jesus, thoughts of love, gratitude and delight fill my mind, like when I think of my wife and what she means to me.

I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight. (Psalm 43:4).

Week 17

Don't keep The Secret Place a secret!



When the moon is full on a clear night, you don't need a street light to see where you're going. It's easy to forget that the moon does not generate the light. It only reflects the rays from the sun. When Moses came back from spending time with God, his face shone so bright that he had to put on a veil to keep from freaking people out. It has been said that we cannot give away what we don't possess. That's why it's absolutely essential to pursue Christ, as he explained in John 15:5,

"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

The closer we get to God, the more he fills us with his spirit and his love. Then, like the moon, we are in the right position to reflect his light and help others find their way.

How can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?
(Romans 10:14).

Jesus told us to *"let your light shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven."* But he doesn't want us to stop there. You see, if we don't help people find Jesus, they'll just think we're good folks, and go on their merry way. When Jesus told the parable of the sower, he encouraged us to be like *"the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty."* (Matthew 13:23). The sad truth, though, is that many of us don't come anywhere near helping thirty souls find Christ, much less sixty or a hundred. So, what's holding us back?

I'm afraid of rejection.

Sharing Christ isn't as life threatening in this country as it is in others, but we shouldn't expect everyone to accept it with open arms, either. I have to ask myself, "Am I willing to face some pushback in order to offer the news of salvation that Christ died for?" Most of our fears are unfounded, however. I've experienced very little resistance when bringing up spiritual topics with people. In fact, it's something that many people like to talk about, as long as we approach it the right way:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. (1st Peter 3:15).

How do I handle objections?

It's perfectly natural for people to express doubts about the claims of Christ, especially if it involves a life-changing choice. One of the biggest hurdles that keep people from accepting Christ is that he claimed he was "the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me." (John 14:6). This appears exclusive and intolerant to all other religions. We need to explain to them that according to the Bible, all of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, but he sacrificed his sinless son in our place so we can live in his presence, now and for eternity. It's the only way because that's the way God provided for our redemption. If they say they don't believe in God, politely ask them how they came to that conclusion. It helps to know where they are coming from so you can help them overcome their objections. If they say they don't believe the Bible, there are many resources you can turn to, such as Josh McDowell and Lee Strobel to help you provide

overwhelming evidence to back up the validity of the authorship and integrity of the texts, as well as archeological evidence and outside historical documents to corroborate the events recorded in scripture. If you are asked something you don't have an answer for, tell him/her that's a good question, and then let them know you'll get back to them.

“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.”

In Matthew 3, Jesus used this prophecy from Isaiah to describe the role of John the Baptist, but I believe the Lord also wants us to help people take their blinders off and remove the obstacles that stand between them and God.

I don't know how to bring God into a conversation.

I had lunch with a customer awhile back. Christmas was coming up so I asked him if he observed any religious traditions. He said, “No, we just have the family over and open gifts.” I then asked him, “What do you think about Jesus?” He didn't hesitate; he told me he thought Jesus was alive and was the only way to salvation. I needed to know what he had done with that knowledge, so I asked him if he had ever asked God to forgive his sins and if he had accepted Christ as Lord, and he said, “Yes.” I don't always get that kind of reply. Before that, I was talking to a lady who said she didn't believe in a personal God. But my point is, you can use a topic such as Christmas or Easter as a non-threatening way to naturally lead into a spiritual conversation.

I like to ask people questions about their family and if their parents are still living. Then I mention how I miss my dad and how his passing caused me to ask questions about God and how to get closer to him. If the conversation concerns health issues, I'll briefly share how the Lord brought me through my thyroid surgery and restored my voice. I then ask, “What is *your* religious preference?” I try to be a good listener. Remember, people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. So, ask questions that lead to spiritual icebreakers. Ask your friend to tell you his story. If a discussion includes someone that died, you can ask him, “What do you think happens to us when we die? Do you think you'll go to heaven? How do you know?” One of my goals is to bring God into every conversation that I can. I like to ask people how their day is going and if they tell me it's not going well, I try to say a quick prayer for them right then and there, even if I'm talking to them on the phone. I try not to just say, “I'll be praying for you.”

You don't have to be a Bible scholar or an expert in apologetics to lead people to Christ. Just briefly share what Christ has done for you. They can't argue with your story. But don't stop there. Ask them what *they* think and what *they* believe. Most people know this world (and probably their life) is really messed up and they are just waiting for someone to show them that there is a God who loves them and can offer them forgiveness and freedom and hope and joy. You don't have to be pushy or close the deal with every conversation. First of all, that's the Holy Spirit's role. So relax. Salvation is usually a process, though, and takes time. You may seed or water for someone else to do the harvesting. Just be ready for opportunities. I like to use three verses from Romans. Remember: **A, B, C:**

Acknowledge that your sin will keep you out of heaven.

Romans 3:23: *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

Believe that Jesus died for you, rose from the dead and is alive today.

Romans 5:8 *God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Confess your sins and confess Jesus as your Savior and Lord.

Romans 10:9: *If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*

You can then guide them to pray, including asking God to forgive their sins and accepting Christ to be their Savior and Lord.

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Week 18

Transaction or Interaction?

“Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'” (Matthew 7:22, 23).

Doing things for God is important. He has given us many tasks to perform. But apparently that's not enough. He wants more. He wants...us. To know him.

We Americans are so driven to achieve and accomplish things. We want to be noticed, recognized, admired and praised. We climb the ladder to gain status over others and to keep up with the Joneses. There's nothing wrong with striving for excellence and doing our best. It's just that we can become so self-absorbed and self-sufficient, even doing good things for God, that we don't call on him until there's an emergency. When we meet Jesus for the first time, we are filled with gratitude and joy and peace. We walk and talk with him and soak up the Bible. But then, if we're not careful, something happens, but it happens so gradually that we don't notice it. We drift from him. We still believe in him but our faith becomes dormant. We lead decent lives, but so do others who aren't Christians.

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Notice the verse doesn't say, “If you obey all God's commands, then you'll become a new creature.” It simply says *If anyone is in Christ*. How can we do that? I think it means accepting Christ as *Lord* and getting to know him by abiding and remaining in him all day long; trusting while obeying.

God wants more from a relationship with us than we have with a cashier who says, “May I take your order?” He wants it to be more than a transaction. Yes, he already knows what we are thinking and feeling but he wants us to verbalize it, to interact with him. The goal is not to bring Christ along with us but to *go with him*. He's the pilot, not the co-pilot. He says, “Follow me.” Making your life count for something and living a life of significance is not found in self-actualization or trying to find yourself. This may sound counterproductive, but Jesus offers the best plan for fulfillment:

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”
(Matthew 16:24-25).

Jesus liberates us from the losing battle of trying to find happiness through feeding our appetites for pleasures that always fall short. God created longings in us that only he can quench. Think about how good it feels to be in the company of someone you like and knowing that they like to be with you, too. I love it when my little grandkids' faces light up when they see me and squeal with delight as they run into my arms. As wonderful as that is, being aware of the presence of God is so much better. This is why Jesus said,

“Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (John 4:14).

Here's the difference: Jesus satisfies. Unlike everything else in the world that leaves you wanting more, Jesus is enough.

Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. (Psalm 73:25).

Week 19

Live in the Vine!



“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser...Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me.” -Jesus, John 15

After trusting God for our salvation, many of us think that it’s all up to us now to obey and serve him. As Andrew Murray explains in *Abide in Christ*,

“The idea they have of grace is this-that their conversion and pardon are God’s work, but that now, in gratitude to God, it is their work to live as Christians, and follow Jesus. There is always the thought of a work that has to be done, and even though they pray for help, still the work is theirs. They fail continually, and become hopeless; and the despondency only increases the helplessness.”

God doesn’t save us and then say, “OK, show me what you can do now!” The reason we try to do it on our own is that we have just enough natural abilities that lead us to think we are self-sufficient, so we tend to only call on God when we really need him. This is even more prevalent in our affluent society that makes our lives easier and gives us a false sense of security. But no matter how hard we try, we will never be able to follow God’s standards on our own. It’s just too hard without him. My slogan used to be “Do your best and trust God for the rest.” I’m beginning to see that I must trust him *first*.

The vine doesn’t have to try and produce the fruit - it just happens when the right combination of sun, water, and nutrients are brought together. The same thing happens with us when we are connected to the Vine, which is connected to the Root for a firm foundation that sends up the life-sap of the Holy Spirit. Add some light rays from the Son, drink in his living water and we are transformed into living examples of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Compassion for lost souls is also kindled, “bearing fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.” (Mark 4:20). Trying to produce this spiritual fruit on our own is no more possible than a branch surviving on its own apart from the vine. As a friend of mine explained to me recently, “We don’t *produce* the fruit; we *bear* it when we cooperate with the Holy Spirit. Another friend put it this way:

“Like a fruit tree, we must have the seed of our life planted in fertile ground. And as we grow and are nurtured, we need to have our limbs extended to heaven to receive the sun light. And it will take some painful pruning as limbs grow in the wrong direction. And we have to be careful of finding ourselves in the shade (wrong influence). where our growth can be stunted and/or severely deterred.”

It is such a wonderful mystery, how God is in us and we are in him and how he works through us. I don’t understand how he does it, but it’s good to know that:

God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Colossians 1:27).

Week 20

The lens of your heart



“The eye is the lamp of your body; when your eye is clear, your whole body also is full of light; but when it is bad, your body also is full of darkness. Then watch out that the light in you is not darkness.”
Jesus, Luke 11:34 (NAS)

There are quite a few verses in the Bible concerning light and darkness. You’ve read them; I don’t need to list them here. The light is used to represent Christ and everything that is holy and right. The darkness refers to evil and everything that is unholy and wrong. When a book or movie is described as being dark, you can usually count on it to include extreme violence, cruelty and death. While most verses talk about the light and the need for us to be the light, I’m especially intrigued by the one above because it deals with how to get the light *in* us, which is important, since we can’t give away what we don’t possess, nor do we even care to try, if there isn’t enough light in us to motivate us to do so.

You can prevent heart disease - not just the physical kind!

“The eye is the lamp of the body,” the lens of the heart. The heart processes what it sees and hears and then shapes our values and drives our behavior accordingly. While the NAS states “when the eye is *clear*,” most translations interpret it as “when the eye is *healthy* or *good*.” I like the way the King James Version interprets it, though, because it’s closer to the literal interpretation of the Greek. It reads, “when the eye is *single*.” When our focus on life has a single purpose, which is to follow Christ, we see clearly how to think, react and respond to everything life throws at us. This is like a single lens camera. But when other interests divide our loyalty, it’s like adding a zoom lens with all its extra glass elements. Not as much light can get through and distortion is introduced.

What are you feasting your eyes on?

What are we looking at and listening to the most? Our TVs, our phones, the Internet? Do we take time to gaze upon the faces of our kids as we play with them or look into the eyes of a friend over coffee or get outdoors to enjoy the beauty of God’s creation, like fresh fallen snow or majestic mountains or gorgeous flowers coming out in the spring? Whatever it is, it all gets recorded in our minds, for better or for worse.

Are we holding our thoughts captive or are our thoughts holding *us* captive?

The Letter to the Hebrews tells us to fix our eyes and thoughts on Jesus, but I don’t always do that. Competing thoughts, temptations, and busyness build up a cataract on the eye of my heart, which clouds and blurs my vision and primary purpose in life, which is to bring glory to God. Even seemingly harmless TV shows or

movies can slowly but surely fog up my moral compass and erode my values. If I'm not careful, my commitment to Christ will eventually become hazy and lukewarm. Proverbs 4:23 warns,

Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.

The ability to get close to God depends on the condition of my heart:

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” (Mathew 5:8).

So, let's keep our eyes and minds on Christ and on his word. Then,

“If therefore your whole body is full of light, with no dark part in it, it will be wholly illumined, as when the lamp illumines you with its rays.” (Luke 11:36).

We won't have to worry about being the light. We won't be able to contain it!

Week 21

How God led me to my wife

One of the strongest promptings I have ever encountered from the Lord was after I had turned down a radio announcer position at a contemporary Christian music station in Huntsville, Alabama. I was working as a supervisor at an electronics production plant in Carol Stream, Illinois, when I got a call from my cousin in Huntsville about an opening at WNDA. Even though I had graduated from North Central College in Naperville as a major in Speech Communications, I was not able to find a job in radio that paid even close to what was available in the electronics industry. But the idea of living in a warmer climate enticed me. So I drove 9 hours to the hills of northern Alabama to check it out.

Being a disc jockey and producing commercials sounded more like fun than work, so I was ready to jump on board, even though it was going to be the night shift. But then they revealed the salary, which was less than half of what I was making in Carol Stream. Trying to hold back my laughter, I said, "Thanks, but no thanks," and drove to my parents' home in Cleveland, TN, to visit them while I was in the area.

On the drive, a heavy feeling of remorse and depression washed over me. My emotions were confusing. I clearly made the right decision, I told myself. How was I supposed to live on that salary? So, where were these dreadful feelings and thoughts coming from that were telling me to go back to that little station and join that ministry and trust...OK, God, I'll do it, I'll do it already! Immediately, the darkness left me and peace, joy, and excitement filled my soul. This was going to be an adventure - fun, but scary.

When I came to work at the station on my first day, the most beautiful receptionist I had ever seen greeted me when I walked in. She worked in the afternoons so I didn't see her on the morning of the interview. If I had, I would have taken the job right then! I soon learned that she had a great personality, as well. Before long, I realized why the Lord made me turn my car around that day to head back to that little radio station. 42 years later she is still greeting me every time I come home. I am so glad the Lord got through to me back in 1978!



Week 22

The Encouragement that changed my life

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. (1 Thess 5:11).

Back in 2003, I was struggling to make ends meet, in spite of working full time in addition to three part time jobs. This left very little time to be a husband or father. Then I got a new boss who believed in me and my life began to change. It has never been the same since. What stood between me and a better life for me and my family was a piece of paper that contained these words: Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer. The only catch was that my name needed to be on it as well and that wasn't going to happen until I passed seven grueling exams that would test my ability to design and maintain computer networks. Up until that time, I had only tinkered with my own little computer but didn't have a clue how to support servers and firewalls and all the programs it took to keep a network going. But God sent me an advocate, an angel in disguise.

The person I'm about to talk about will not let me use his name because he always refuses to take any credit from the One he thinks should get it. He took me under his wings and constantly pushed me to attempt things I had no confidence or clue on how to accomplish. He also did this with his other employees. But that wasn't enough for him. He wanted to develop my character, as well. He noticed I was a pretty compliant and timid guy, so one day he accused me of something unfairly and it made me so angry I came across his desk with such a furious temper it surprised us both. I'll never forget what he did next. He leaned back in his chair and a big smile slowly formed on his face as he said, "Now *that's* what I'm talking about!" His sneaky plan to make me more assertive, worked.

It was a day in March that he promised he would consider me for a promotion if I could achieve that certification by the end of the year. But after I checked out the objectives of the exams, my heart melted in fear. I learned that Microsoft had created the cert to determine if network professionals knew their stuff. I was doomed!

This is when I learned the power of encouragement and affirmation. When my manager looked me in the eyes and told me that he thought I could do it, he was so sincere and convincing that I began to consider that perhaps he saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. I was given another incentive, as well. He told me that if he had to hire an engineer from the outside, he would have to let one of his technicians go. His head count would be too high. He said it wouldn't be me, but I was now fighting for someone else's job as well as for my promotion. My family lost me to the books for the next nine months, but by the grace of God, on a glorious day in December I did a praise dance in the testing room after passing my final exam! I was just a paper tiger at that point, but it was enough to get the promotion and drop my part time jobs and be a family man again.

Anxiety in a person's heart weighs him down, but an encouraging word brings him joy. (Proverbs 12:25).

It's amazing how powerful encouragement can be. Life can be so hard with so many failures and setbacks that we become discouraged. That word means deprived of courage. We also tend to be our own worst critic, which fuels our feelings of inadequacy. There are people all around us who outwardly appear to have it all together but are tearing up inside with fear, hopelessness, and anxiety. They are starving to hear a kind and encouraging word or to feel a hand on their shoulder or to be embraced with a warm hug. My dad always told me how proud he was of me and my mother still does and that means a lot to me and builds my confidence.

A person finds joy in giving an apt reply, and how good is a timely word! (Proverbs 15:23).

As the verse above attests, there is great satisfaction in being the encourager, as well. Let's not hold back from using such a powerful tool, one that offers hope and inspires courage to press on, to believe that with God, all things are possible!

Week 23

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can REALLY hurt me.



“Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips.” (Psalm 141:3).

Verbal abuse can come from people you don’t know and from those you love. It can come from bullies at school, “friends” on social media and even in your home. The venom people spew with their angry words can cause scars that last for years, even a lifetime. Once you utter those words, you can never take them back. Even if you apologize, the sting is not easily forgiven or forgotten. Countless children have grown up to believe they are worthless because of the relentless attacks on their self-esteem from their parents. People that employ sarcasm may think they are being funny, but those laughs always come at the expense of the person they just wounded. Gossip and slander can ruin a reputation.

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. (James 1:26).

Think about some people that you know who tend to be negative, critical and sarcastic. How successful are they with their lives? How is that attitude working for them? How much fun are they to be around? Since negative thinkers look for the worst to happen, their lives become self-fulfilling prophecies of bad outcomes which they experience with other grumpy people since misery loves company. Positive people, on the other hand, look for the best to happen and find ways to succeed, even amidst struggles and hardships, which attract other achievers to join them along the way. Studies have shown that our mental health affects our physical health as well.

Ask some of your family and close friends to help you see your blind spots. Ask questions like, “What is it like to be with me? What do I do that hurts you? How could I love you better? Am I a good listener? Do I show interest in others or talk mostly about myself? Am I a positive influence or do I complain often?” Let their answers guide you in a time of confession.

Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles. (Proverbs 21:23).

Week 24

How big are your Dreams?



There are some things still in my bucket list. I want to try riding in a hot air balloon, see the Grand Canyon and Niagara Falls, to name a few. But lately I've been wondering if I should be thinking bigger with what I could be doing with the Lord. Notice I said "with the Lord" and not "for him" because accomplishing anything worthwhile for him requires his help!

How about you? Have you wondered if there is something more you could be doing with the Lord? Or is your calendar so filled up that there's no time left over for anything else? Have you ever rushed through a meal so fast that you didn't take the time to savor the taste and enjoy it? That can happen to our lives if we don't slow down. You would think that with all the time-saving devices we have today, that rushing would not be necessary. We can hop in our cars and cover more ground in three hours than a stage coach could do in three days. Many of the things on our to-do list are good and necessary, but come judgment day, when we have to account for what we have done, I don't want to say, "I'm sorry, Lord, but I was just too busy for you."

Ask the Lord if there is something he wants you to do. It may be to join a ministry or an outreach or it may be to engage people right where you are; on the job, in your neighborhood or even your own family. Are you helping your spouse and kids to grow closer to the Lord?

I believe that God is waiting for us to carry out his commissions, but many of us are holding back because we don't feel adequate in our abilities. We absolve ourselves from certain responsibilities by claiming we're not gifted in those areas and so we just stick to what we're comfortable with and know how to do. Life then becomes mediocre, routine and boring.

What we often fail to grasp is that there is no limit to what God can do *through* us. There are plenty of examples in the Bible of people like Moses and Gideon, who did not feel up to the task the Lord gave them, but nevertheless, were used by God to do amazing things. He told the apostle Paul, "***My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.***"

I've come to see that if I'm not totally depending on God for something that I'm attempting, then it probably won't amount to anything that's truly significant for his kingdom. As the author of Hebrews has said, "***Without faith it is impossible to please God.***" (Hebrews 11:6). A little faith accomplishes little. A lot of faith accomplishes a lot.

That may not always seem safe, but it's not boring! Sometimes, it's downright exhilarating. Remember,

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:13).

ALL things! Now, that's a BIG Dream!

Week 25

Don't be a stranger!

How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!

(Psalm 133:1).



It has been said that a joy shared is doubled and a grief shared is cut in half. While it's true that people don't always get along peacefully, it's also true that we wouldn't accomplish nearly as much or enjoy life nearly as much if we didn't have someone alongside of us to do life with. When God created us he intended for us to live in community, regardless of how messy it can get sometimes. Social media helps to keep us connected but there's no substitute for a face to face encounter with someone who can laugh, cry, play and pray with you.

I remember when I was a little guy I loved to go outside and play with my friends. We played baseball, rode our bikes around the neighborhood and engaged in mud ball fights in the hills behind our homes. This was before video games kept children inside. Many of us lose touch with our childhood buddies when we grow up and leave town, get married and start our families. Very few of us live in the same town or even the same state we grew up in so we only see our relatives or old friends a few times a year, if that much. Our lives become a routine of going to work, coming home, going to bed and starting over again the next day. We are hermits in the midst of people, working with them all week long and seeing them in church on Sunday but not really knowing any of them. We've become *A Nation of Strangers*, which is the title of Vance Packard's book, detailing how our mobile society has lost its sense of roots and belonging. When nobody knows you, you not only become lonely but you lose the kind of accountability that keeps you grounded and motivated to live right. Word can travel fast in a small town but you can be anonymous when nobody knows their neighbors.

Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:24, 25).

Christianity is not a solo sport. Don't isolate yourself. We need each other. Fellowship is a necessary ingredient to get close to God, according to Klaus Issler, in *Wasting Time with God*:

"Close friendships are essential for all believers, not only for the joy they give to us, not only for the contribution they bring to Christian community, but also for the help they provide in relating with God. If we do not increase our experiences of intimacy on the human plane, we limit the kind of intimate relationship we can experience with God."

The purpose for getting close to God isn't to withdraw into a spiritual bubble away from the rest of the world. As we get to know the heart of God, we will begin to love others because that's where *his* heart is. Jesus taught us a lot of things, but his main commandment was to love one another (John 15:12, 17). Six out of the Ten Commandments are concerned with how we should treat others.

God loves diversity. This is evident in his incredible creativity with how he made everything. But diversity can cause different opinions. When you combine that with our tendency to be selfish and prideful, you are left with a perfect formula for conflict. That is probably why there's a lot of scripture detailing how we should treat one

another. There are 15 ways to show love to each other in just 5 verses from 1 Corinthians 13:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not arrogant or rude. It is not selfish, is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails...So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest is love.

A good indication of how much we love God is how well we love people. The apostle John put it this way,

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen." (1 John 4:20).

I have learned the value of regularly meeting with other Christian men. I had been on my quest to get closer to God for five years and wanted to see if other guys would like to join me, so with the encouragement of my son-in-law, I put together a three month study while our small groups were off for the summer. I wasn't sure how many would show up, but the Lord brought together 24 guys, who enjoyed it so much that we continued to meet for 6 more years.

Men need other men and women need other women. I love my wife but she relates and processes things differently than I do. So it's good for her to have girl friends to hang out with and for me to be with the boys once in a while, so girls can be girls and boys can be boys. There are things that can only be understood by members of your own sex.

A tactic used by ancient armies was to butt or overlap their shields, shoulder to shoulder, forming a shield wall. Each soldier benefited from the protection of their neighbors' shields as well as their own. The same principle applies to the body of Christ. We draw strength from each other as we hold up our shields of faith together to extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one.

We are more connected but less connected

Remember when people would give their full attention to you and would finish talking with you before beginning a conversation with someone else? Cell phones changed all that, but I don't blame the phones. When we let our phones hijack a conversation because we can't resist answering a call or replying to a text as soon as it comes in, that makes the person in front of us feel less important. We shouldn't let our phones control us, we should control them by keeping them out of sight instead of on the table. If we're not careful, we can be more concerned about how many "likes" we get from our "friends" on social media than we are with developing real friendships with people who can accept us for the way we are. Virtual relationships can be cruel and they can cause anxiety, depression and a lack of self-esteem, especially with teenagers.

We all need a Paul, a Timothy and a Barnabas

As Paul needed his friend, Barnabas, we need accountability partners to help us live right. If we isolate ourselves from other Christians, we'll end up doing our own will. We need to make course corrections from time to time and our friends can point out our blind spots and see through our defense mechanisms that keep the truth at bay. We should pray together and give each other the freedom to confess sins confidentially. I've heard it said, "What is not let out will be acted out."

We also need a Paul, a mentor, for guidance and encouragement and a Timothy to disciple. We will never get to the point that we don't need a mentor and there is always someone we can help as well.

It's good to have friends but it's more important to choose them wisely. As John Maxwell explained in *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, you'll never be nobler than the noblest person you hang out with.

As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another. (Proverbs 27:17).

Week 26

Have you forsaken your first love?



The other day I came across the message to the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2, which affirms our pursuit of Christ as our most important goal in life.

When you read the first verses in chapter two, it would appear that the Ephesian church was doing everything right with their deeds and toil and perseverance. They endured and did not grow weary. But then Jesus delivers this stunning accusation in verse four:

“But I have this against you, that you have forsaken your first love.”

How in love are you with the Lord? Is your fervor, zeal and passion for him as strong as it was when you first met him? Or has it waned and diminished over time? How can you tell? Here are some clues: How often do you think about God or talk with him or spend time in his word? Does your spirit soar when you worship? Do you thirst for more of him? Can you relate to David in his desire for God?

Oh, God, You are my God; I shall seek you earnestly; my soul thirsts for you, my flesh yearns for You...My soul clings to you...My soul longs for You. (Psalm 63:1, 8, 143:6).

Andrew Murray said, *“Ever thirsting is the secret of never thirsting.”* Staying thirsty for God keeps us going to him to quench the longings of our soul. The more we drink the living water, the more we want it!

Psalm 89 shows us what kind of relationship we can have with God:

Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, O Lord. They rejoice in your name all day long; they exalt in your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength. (Verses 15-17).

Which of those aspects of a close walk with God do you experience? I know I would like to walk more in the light of his presence. If you find more enjoyment in the creation rather than the Creator, don't lose heart. You don't have to be held captive to your feelings. You don't have to lament like Gordon Lightfoot sang,

*I don't know where we went wrong
But the feeling's gone and I just can't get it back.*

I think our feelings are like orange juice. You have to squeeze the orange to enjoy the fruit of your labor – those loving feelings. This is true for any relationship. Real love, like anything worthwhile, requires commitment. A commitment to build intimacy. Love is a verb. Exercise it. Practice it. Pray for it. And stick with this quest to get closer to God!

It's not too late to rekindle your love for Jesus or discover his joy for the first time. And when you do, warm thoughts toward him will greet you when you wake up in the morning and his peace will lull you to sleep when your day is done.

Week 27

Really God?



Adversity. It can crush you, frustrate you, frighten you, depress you, hurt you, and even kill you. It happens to all of us at different degrees at different times. The most common questions people ask during difficult times are, “Where are you God? Why did you let this happen to me? Do you not see or care what’s going on here?”

God has gotten me out of more tight spots than I can count, including surviving without injury after being run over by a van and being rescued from a tornado and a hurricane. But sometimes he doesn’t remove all the thorns from my flesh. I think that’s when he’s more interested in my development than my deliverance. There are many examples in the Bible chronicling the suffering of key players, like the prophets, Paul, and of course, Jesus, just to name a few. And it certainly wasn’t because they didn’t pray hard enough or didn’t have enough faith! Israel had to fight battles and lose lives on the way to the Promised Land. So we shouldn’t be surprised when God allows adversity to rear its ugly head in our lives.

***My soul is in anguish. How long,
O Lord, how long?*** (Psalm 6:3).

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4).

According to James, trials are needed to grow us up spiritually. How much would we depend on God if nothing ever went wrong, if we didn’t need him for anything? I think he uses difficult times to get our attention and discipline us when needed. He needs to prune back our pride, independence, and selfishness.

“We may be frankly bewildered at things that happen to us, but God knows exactly what he is doing, and what he is after, in his handling of our affairs...Meanwhile, we ought not to hesitate to trust his wisdom, even when he leaves us in the dark.” – J. I. Packer

It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees. (Psalm 119:71).

You’ve heard the phrase, “No pain - no gain.” How would a body builder develop muscles if his workout equipment did not push back with resistance? How would silver or gold be refined from impurities or glass be sculptured without intense heat? How would we enjoy a cold drink if the day wasn’t hot or savor a meal if we were never hungry?

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33).

On Mother’s Day, 2012, my voice suddenly went dead while singing in church. When it didn’t return in over three weeks and all I could do was whisper, I went to an ENT who peered down my throat with a very irritating tube and discovered that only one side of my vocal cord was functioning. The cause was a nodule that had grown on my thyroid and had pressed down upon the nerve and shut it down. What he then told Sharon and I sent shivers down my spine. He said that in his 20 years of practice he had never seen a non-cancerous nodule

take out a vocal cord. When they wheeled me into the operating room, I was stripped of everything (literally!) except the prayers of my family and friends. But that was enough. I had a peace that didn't make sense. When no cancer was found, I was elated but I was not given much hope that my nerve would come back alive. But God was pleased to restore my voice. It's still not what it used to be, but it's much better than a whisper!

“God’s peace is not something finished and done with...not ours to keep forever. God’s peace is won by accompanying God into battle. It is then that it grows, becomes new and real. It is in battle that we feel the peace.” - Bishop Berggrav.

Are you prepared for the storms?

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” (Matthew 7:24-27).

When you have developed a close walk with Christ, you'll be better prepared to face the storms when they come. You won't let the external conditions shake your faith because you've got an internal assurance that God is with you and will take care of you and those you love. He has left a track record of doing that for you.

We may not have a choice to avoid adversity, but we can do something about how we handle it, and that ultimately determines our attitude towards it. When Paul was a prisoner in Rome, he wrote of being joyful and rejoicing 16 times in the four short chapters of his letter to the Philippians. How could he do that? He had learned that no matter how bad things got, the love of Christ always carried him through. A few years earlier he wrote to the Romans:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:35, 37-39).

Don't let your failures, disappointments, frustrations or heartache keep you down and bitter and ineffective for God's service. There's nothing wrong with pouring our hearts out to God and asking for answers. You never know, he may reveal that we brought the problem on ourselves by poor choices. Being open and teachable is more productive and respectful than shaking our fist at him. Remember, God doesn't owe us an explanation. Os Guinness, in *God in the Dark*, writes,

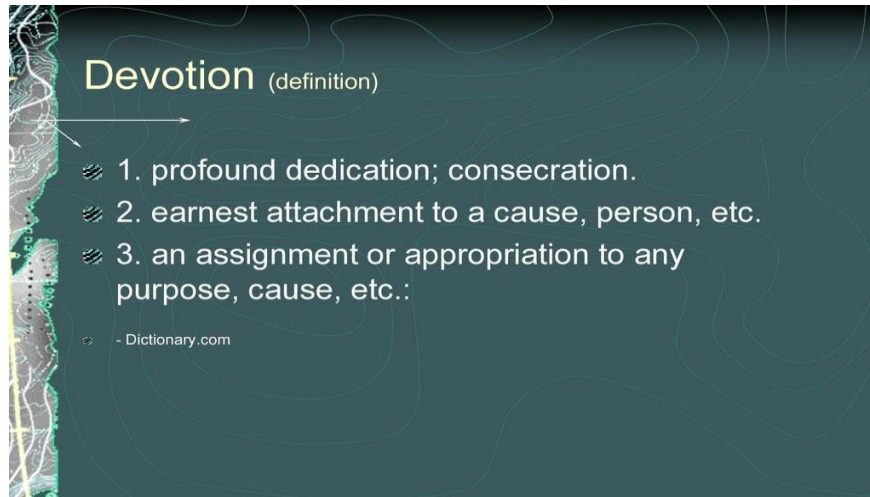
“If the Christian’s faith is to be itself and let God be God at such times, it must suspend judgment and say, “Father, I do not understand you, but I trust you.”

Sometimes we have to wait a very long time before our situation changes. Oswald Chambers wrote in *My Utmost for His Highest*,

“Patience is more like endurance. A saint’s life is in the hands of God like a bow and arrow in the hands of an archer. God is aiming at something the saint cannot see, and he stretches and strains, and every now and again the saint says – “I cannot stand anymore.” God does not heed, He goes on stretching till His purpose is in sight, then he lets fly. Trust yourself in God’s hands.”

My soul weeps because of grief; strengthen me according to Your word...If Your law had not been my delight, then I would have perished in my affliction...Trouble and anguish have come upon me, yet Your commandments are my delight. (Psalm 119:28, 92, 143).

Week 28



We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us. (2nd Corinthians 5:20).

I recently retired from being a Technology Services Engineer with Ricoh USA. If I had not performed the duties that came with that responsibility, my title alone would not have made me very useful to my company. Neither would my certifications if I had not put them to use.

Those of us that have the title of Christian have the responsibility of being ambassadors for Jesus. That involves more than just going to church and being nice people. If I'm not striving to follow Christ, I'm not being very useful for his kingdom that I'm supposed to be representing. That would be like being a member of a health club but never going there to work out.

As followers of Jesus, we're called to be always growing and becoming more like him in purity and holiness. But we won't get far without an intentional, deliberate and relentless pursuit of God, who helps us every step of the way. It also requires submitting to his authority before following our own agendas. When we accept Jesus as our Savior, we should also accept him as Lord. We may retire from a career but we should stay devoted to him forever.

The righteous...will still bear fruit in old age. (Psalm 92:14).

Procrastination is a tool Satan uses to keep us from pursuing God. He starts when we are young and assume we have all the time in the world. We think, "I'll have more time for God when I settle down and get married." Years later we say, "It looks like I'll need to wait until the kids move out." Then, it gets pushed until after we retire. It is then that we realize that we forfeited the best years of our lives by living for ourselves instead of helping to build the kingdom of God.

"If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. -Jesus, Matthew 16:24

Is pursuing Christ worth risking everything for? Let's hear from someone who thought so:

I consider everything a loss compared to 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 and be found in him.

Paul, Philippians 3:8

The more we become captivated and consumed with the love of God, the more we will recklessly abandon all restraint on our time, talents, and treasure, and willingly release them for his purposes and glory. Only then will we understand the motivation behind Paul's devotion and others who gave up everything to follow Christ. They discovered that being a willing slave for him is better than being free to follow their own desires which never stay quenched.

The late missionary Jim Elliot said, *"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."*

*"Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.
What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?"* (Matthew 16:25-26).

How do you know if you are denying yourself or not? Listen to how many times you hear "me, myself and I" in your thoughts and speech: **I** don't want to do that. **I'm** not comfortable doing that. That bothers **me**. That's awkward for **me**. What will they think of **me**? **I** don't have time for that. **I** don't want to give that much money." I know those thoughts because I think them. But I don't want to. Like Paul said in Romans 7:19, "What I do is not the good I want to do." But he goes on to say, "Thanks be to God-through Jesus our Lord!"

I don't want my life to end before I come to the end of myself.

I don't want my pride to fill my final years with regret. Admitting we need God doesn't make us weak. It makes us stronger as he empowers us to be all he made us to be.

We make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.
(2nd Corinthians 5:9)

Week 29

People can tell when you've been with Jesus



When they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus. (Acts 4:13).

Has there ever been someone in your life that you admired and respected so much you just had to be around them whenever possible? Maybe it was an older sibling you looked up to, or an Aunt or Uncle that took a special interest in you. In school, it could have been a teacher or professor.

I remember a particular summer when my family made one of our annual treks from Chicago to Pensacola, Florida. I got to spend some time with my cousin, John, in nearby Fort Walton Beach. He was about 16 years old at the time, and even though I was just a few years younger, in kid's years that was a BIG difference. He could drive, pull a boat, pilot the boat, and catch fish! I thought he was so cool, I wanted to be just like him. His life seemed so adventurous to me.

Most of us didn't learn our manners, skills, or trades on our own. We were taught and mentored by our parents, relatives, friends, and business associates, weren't we? We spent a lot of time with those people, who influenced us and helped to shape our values as well as our abilities.

Today we have long distance learning, offering degrees and certifications on line, but most professions still require some type of apprenticeship or internship to become competent in their fields. I certainly wouldn't want to have open heart surgery performed on me by someone who had only *read* how to do the procedure!

Mark recorded that Jesus appointed twelve disciples "so that they would *be with Him* and that He could send them out to preach." According to Wikipedia, the term "disciple" is derived from the New Testament Greek word "μαθητής", coming to English by way of the Latin "discipulus," meaning, "a learner". The word *disciple* is used in English generally to mean "follower" or "pupil." What a privilege it must have been to be one of those chosen to live and learn from the Master himself every day for three years!

How do people get trained to spot counterfeit money? By spending a lot of time in front of *real* money, feeling the texture and carefully studying the print quality.

You can usually tell when someone is genuine or just trying to impress, can't you? The same thing applies to being a Christ follower. We can do our best to imitate great Christians we know, or even try to be like Jesus, but as soon as someone pushes our buttons or becomes too much trouble, our true nature comes to the surface and exposes us as cheap imitations, or even worse, hypocrites. That's because living a pure and holy life, and putting others first does not come natural to us and never will. We can only learn this from cultivating a relationship with Christ, who not only will show us how it's done, but will work it out through us.

When we willingly supply our time, hands, and feet, God does some really cool supernatural things through us that we could never do on our own. He even works on our attitudes. I remember the first time I was asked to lead a small group at our church. It required more than just facilitating a Bible study. I was supposed to actually care for those people. Well, I didn't really like people much back then, much less care for them. But as soon as I agreed to do it, a love that I never felt before came over me for those in my group. I actually wanted to know

how they were doing and found myself praying for them! This probably was a result of getting on my knees for wisdom since I knew I wasn't qualified for the job.

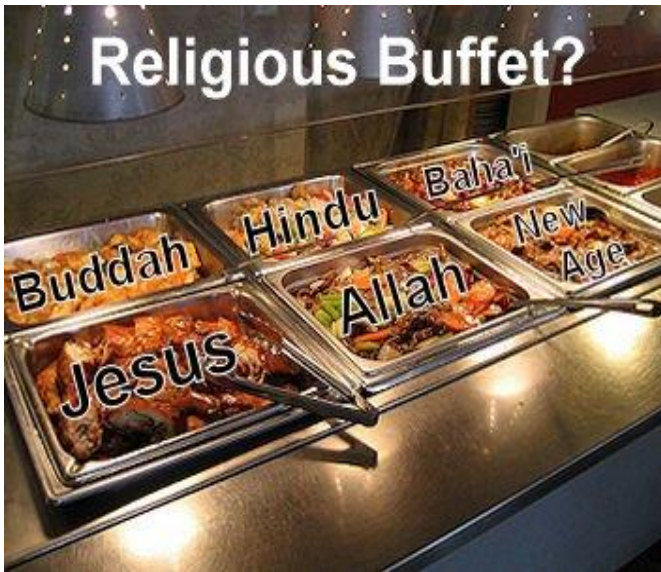
If you are wondering how to get close to God, then you and I will become friends very quickly, because that is my deepest passion these days. I strongly believe that if we can get properly connected to the Father, most sermons preached today would not be necessary and people would have fewer regrets. I haven't figured it all out yet, far from it, but I have learned a few things since I started this quest 15 years ago. It pretty much boils down to time spent reading the Word and good spiritual books, starting your day resting and waiting on the Lord, praying and singing to him throughout the day, and hanging out with other Christians who will stand by you and encourage you. Memorizing scripture and speaking it out loud whenever you get a chance will also help. These are not easy disciplines to maintain, and I'm not as consistent as I would like to be, but they are well worth the effort.

We tend to become like the people we hang out with. Our moods and demeanor are also affected. People can make us laugh or cry, encourage or discourage us. They can bring out the best or worst in us, which is another reason to become a good friend with the Lord Jesus.

If our daily planner includes time with the Lord, our faces probably won't glow like Moses' did when he returned from his appointments with God, but people will notice that something is different about us. Wouldn't it be cool if they realized that we have been with Jesus?

Week 30

Are religions preferences of choice on a buffet line?



Everyone will get fed no matter what religious entrée you choose. And heaven is the dessert at the end of the line, right?

Welcome to America, where we practice tolerance and freedom of religion. Here you can sample and choose whatever brand or style of God that appeals to you. But are they all nutritious soul food or will the wrong choice give you heartburn or even food poisoning?

According to USA today, surveys over the last two years have shown that 47-59% of Americans have changed religions at least once and 70% said that many religions can lead to eternal life. Since most Americans claim to be Christians, this means one of two things: they don't know what their Bible teaches or they don't believe it.

The most important decision in your life is the one you make about Jesus. Just who was he, anyway? Islam, along with some other religions, acknowledges that he was a great prophet and teacher. They just don't believe in the Incarnation, that he was God in the flesh, the only begotten Son of God. Did Jesus himself make such claims? Let's hear from him:

"Before Abraham was born, I am!...I and the Father are one... Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 8:58, 10:30, 14:9).

Words like that are what almost got him stoned, and did eventually get him killed, although that was God's plan all along for the redemption of mankind. ***"We are not stoning you for any of these (miracles)," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God."*** (John 10:36).

I heard it said that if you don't believe Jesus is who he said he was, then he must have been a great liar or a raving maniac, but certainly not a great teacher!

Another thing we need to understand is why Jesus came. It wasn't just to help people and tell us how to live: ***"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*** (Mark 10:45). ***"He suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."*** (Hebrews 10:9b). The only way we can have right standing before a holy God who cannot tolerate sin is to accept the sacrifice Christ made for us when he took on our punishment so we wouldn't have to. In fact, that's the *only* way we can spend eternity with God, because we will never be good enough on our own strength. I don't understand why God set it up this way, but ***"without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."*** (Hebrews 9:22b). Mohammed can't do this for you and neither can Buddha.

"I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved" (John 10:9).

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6).

"There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 2:5).

"There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12).

That appears exclusive and intolerant to all other religions, even though God *"is not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."* (2 Peter 3:9b). But God sacrificed his sinless son in our place so we can live in his presence, now and for eternity. It's the only way because that is the way God provided for our redemption and it is available to everyone.

I've been using scripture to support my case for Jesus, but if you don't accept the Bible as truth, this is probably not helping you much. I don't have time here to defend the Bible but if you have any doubts about it, please wrestle with it until you find your answers. There are many good apologetic resources to help you, like books by Lee Strobel and Josh McDowell.

Please don't dismiss the Bible as an old-fashioned book full of myths that don't relate to us today. Values like honor, justice, love, and integrity, just to name a few, are timeless and there's no better place to learn about them than in the Holy Scriptures.

Apologetics alone will not convince you to trust Christ, however. There comes a time when you must let go of your common sense and give the Lord a chance to break through and connect with you. It's like how a pilot needs to fly by his instruments when everything within him wants to go the other way. Faith is the ticket your spirit needs to enter the spiritual realm. Intelligence is not enough, if anything it can make you overconfident and close-minded to new ideas. When you are born again and become a new creation, it isn't your body that goes through a change, it's your heart, soul, mind and spirit.

"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Corinthians 3:9).

"There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." (Proverbs 14:12).

Once upon a time, everyone thought the world was flat. When anyone suggested that it might be round, and that the sun is not really rising and setting every day, that it's the earth that's moving, they got laughed-out-of town. The same thing applies with the Intelligent Designer of the universe. We can't begin to understand his ways until we become his child.

Maybe you believe the Bible has a lot of wisdom but you just can't accept its "narrow" plan of salvation, warnings against homosexuality, or descriptions of Hell. I would strongly caution you not to pick and choose what appeals to you and throw out what you don't like. If you don't believe *all* of the Bible, how do you decide what's true or not true? I'm afraid more and more people are trying to do that anyway, just doing what's right in their own eyes. That's what the Israelites did when they turned from God to idolatry and it resulted in moral and cultural depravity.

My fellow Christians, it's time we took Jesus out of the closet and start introducing people to him and quit worrying about appearing intolerant. There is more at stake here than what church they'll end up attending on Sunday morning - it's where they'll spend eternity!

Week 31

Sit Still!



Have you ever been left behind? Has anyone ever made plans without you, or forgot to include you, and then wonder why you didn't show up? How did that make you feel? Well, guess what? We do that to God. We leave him behind, make our plans without him, and forget to include him, then wonder why he doesn't show up when things fall apart. How do you think that makes *him* feel?

It's actually to our benefit to include and wait on God:

Wait on the Lord. Be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart. Wait, I say, on the Lord. (Psalm 27:14).

I don't know about you, but I don't wait well. Maybe that's because that requires another attribute I don't do very well, either: patience. Have you ever regretted making a hasty decision? I have and so did King Saul. The Philistines showed up for battle with 30,000 chariots, 6,000 horsemen, and soldiers like the sand is on the seashore in abundance. Saul was vastly outnumbered since he could only muster 6,000 warriors. He was supposed to wait seven days for the prophet Samuel to arrive and offer the sacrifice. When the seventh day came, Samuel was not in sight, so the king took the matter in his own hands. Samuel arrived as Saul was finishing the offering. That act of impatience cost him his kingdom.

How many times have we taken matters in our own hands without waiting for God?

Isn't it amazing that we will seek out advice from friends or experts or Google but fail to call on the one who not only knows what we should do but will give us the ability to get it done? Oh, we will pray for wisdom, but if we don't hear something soon we just do what we think is best and expect God to bless our decision. But is that what it means to wait on God?

I don't think waiting on the Lord to show up and serve us is quite what he has in mind. After all, isn't the waiter supposed to be the server? A good server gets to know the preferences of her regulars. Just as a close friend knows what you like or dislike, we need to spend time with our Savior to get to know him intimately before we can expect to be able to please him.

Waiting on God is part of what is required to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. It's more than waiting on him to catch up. It's letting him *lead*. But how can we follow someone we can't see or hear?

When we were kids we were told to be quiet and sit still. Even as adults we find that hard to do, don't we? Some of us are more driven than others to stay busy, but most of us stay preoccupied with *something*, even if it's just watching TV. Our waking hours are full of sounds, from the radio to the traffic. Some leave the TV on all the time, even when they sleep!

Have you ever missed something important because you were preoccupied with something else? Of course! We all have. Many of us are lousy listeners because we won't let go of our own world long enough to tune into someone else's. When we do let the other person get a word in, we use that time to think about what we'll say next.

Waiting on God requires us to give him our undivided attention. We obviously can't do that throughout most of our day, but we need to carve out some consistent, undistracted time to devote ourselves exclusively to seeking and listening to our creator.

My soul, wait in silence for God only; for my hope is in him. (Psalm 62:5).

We need to slow down enough to be quiet and still and clear our minds so we can hear the Holy Spirit speak to us as we spend unhurried time in the scriptures. If we can't set aside a consistent routine to read a chapter out of a good spiritual book, read our Bible and pray, then we need to rearrange our schedule to fit God in! We always find time to do what's most important to us. Any skill takes a lot of time to practice and master. If we want to get close to God and see him do amazing things in our lives, then we've got to make abiding in Christ a priority, not just during the morning watch, but throughout the entire day.

You might be thinking: this waiting and being still sounds too boring and lazy, especially for you type A's who don't feel worthy until you work to the point of exhaustion. But I can tell you I'm finding that this lifestyle is exciting and liberating and far from easy, since we must learn to use our spiritual senses to connect with the Lord and daily surrender our will to his. When he does give us a job to do, then we will give it our best.

Finally, waiting on God includes eagerly anticipating his promise of deliverance and joy, and ultimately, his return! I think trusting him this way pleases him.

Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31).

Week 32

Eternal life begins NOW!



We spend our entire lives feeding and maintaining the outward, physical vehicle that our souls reside and travel around in, but out of ignorance many neglect the most important thing of all—the needs of the human spirit. They may believe there is a God or some type of a spiritual dimension, but since they can't see, touch, or smell it, they really don't give it much thought. That is the biggest tragedy in life. Because just as gold requires digging to be found, God and all his wonders can be discovered only if we take the time to learn how to seek him. The tools of faith may be different than the usual scientific methods, but then again, there are things that science cannot explain.

Here is another tragedy: many Christians do not experience the abundant and joyful life Christ wants to give them. They may go to church, read their Bible, pray, and try to serve God, but at the end of the day they wonder if it's worth the effort. They don't seem to be any happier than their non-Christian friends. So they convince themselves they are not supposed to be happy; their purpose in life is to be as good as they can while they are still in this miserable world. When they get to heaven, then, and only then, will everything be OK.

I'm here to tell you some good news. You don't have to wait until you die to start tasting heaven! Did you know that eternal life can begin *now*? Jesus explained this in John 17:3: ***"This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."***

Not just *eternal* life, but *eternal life!*

You are born again (*now*), not just for later.

Here's how important the apostle Paul felt about knowing Jesus:

"I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them mere rubbish, so that I may gain Christ...I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings."

(Philippians 3:8, 10)

Well, then, what about all the things the Bible tells us to do? Isn't faith without works, dead? Didn't Jesus say, *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments"* in John 14:15? Yes, of course, but we must look at the order:

*"If you love me, you **will** keep my commandments."*

We don't work so God will love us. We work *because* he loves us.

When we really get to know Christ and personally experience his love, serving him is not a duty, chore, or obligation. It is a *privilege*. We will *want* to share him with others, not only because we've encountered the incredible joy and peace that passes understanding, but because Christ begins to freely love through us. Jesus saves. Not us!

A. W. Tozer said *"We are to be worshipers first and workers second. Labor that does not spring out of worship is futile and can only be wood, hay, and stubble in the day that shall try man's work."*

"Without faith it is impossible to please God." (Hebrews 6:6). In other words, if you do it without trusting God to help you, it doesn't count. God is all powerful. He doesn't need us to do anything for him. But he does take pleasure in helping us do things for others. The same way a parent enjoys teaching their child a new skill or a coach seeing his team win a game.

Does God really want a personal relationship with you?

David said *"The Lord delights in a man's way...O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up and are intimately acquainted with all my ways."* (Psalm 37:23, 139:1-3).

Jesus said *"he who loves Me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him...Abide in Me, and I in you."* (John 14:21, 15:4). Does that sound like a God who is "watching us from a distance?"

The real question is: Do *you* really want to know God?

I'm finding that getting and staying close to God is not easy. I can't just be myself or do what's natural if I want to live a *supernatural* life. In fact, I am my biggest obstacle. I can't be filled with the Spirit if I'm full of myself, my plans, and my interests. I have to let God be the pilot, not the co-pilot. It's not that he wants us to be his puppets. Rather, he wants to enhance and empower the unique personalities he gave to each of us. We can only go so far with our own abilities. With Christ, there are no limits! Rick Warren said *"Nothing is more powerful than a surrendered life in the hands of God."*

"I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me." (Colossians 1:29).

The kind of eternal life Jesus is talking about is the kind of life we can have right here and now. The degree we experience it is directly proportional to how fiercely we pursue Christ and desire to know him. His kind of love gets us through any hardship, and when we get to heaven, being with him will even beat walking pain-free on the streets of gold. His love moves us to say, "Just give me Jesus!"

Week 33

Praise and Worship – a weekly event or a lifestyle?



*I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come?
My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121:1-2).*

I love hiking in the mountains. It's my favorite spiritual pathway. There's something about being up high and looking down that changes my perspective. It makes me look so small and makes God look so big. It reminds me of what the prophet Isaiah said, "The mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands." So how can I not help but do the same?

I can easily take God for granted and forget about his awesome attributes and what he has done for me through his amazing grace. But you may wonder, if God is all sufficient and doesn't need anything, why should we give him accolades? God does want us to praise him, but not because he needs it to feel good about himself. It's for *our* enjoyment as we take pleasure in him. John Piper explains it this way,

"God desires our greatest good. But what greater good is there in the universe than God himself? If, therefore, God is truly to love us, he must give us himself. But merely giving us of himself is only the first step in the expression of his affection for sinners. He must work to elicit from our hearts rapturous praise and superlative delight because, as C.S. Lewis said, "all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise." That's the way God made us. We can't help but praise and rejoice in what we most enjoy. The enjoyment itself is stunted and hindered if it is never expressed in joyful celebration. Here's how Lewis explained it:

'I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed.' So, Lewis is telling us that God's pursuit of our praise of him is not weak self-seeking but the epitome of self-giving love!"

There are many people who don't know why they are here or what to do with their lives. But the answer is revealed in 1 Peter 2:9:

*You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may **declare the praises of him** who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

We are told to proclaim and acclaim the glory and majesty of God. When we proclaim, we announce and when we **acclaim**, we enthusiastically applaud and cheer, like we do for our favorite sports team. Are we doing that for our heavenly Father?

Familiarity has replaced the "Awe Factor."

We humans are always fascinated with amazing stories, inventions, athletic achievements and accomplishments. Our news outlets thrive on them; even the weather broadcasters get excited when tracking natural disasters. We can't wait to tell people about the latest and greatest thing. So, what's keeping us from admiring *God* as fully as we should? And from spreading the news to our friends? I think familiarity has replaced the "Awe Factor."

We've seen so many colorful sunsets and beautiful mountains and creatures and flowers with their intricate designs that we simply take them for granted. Or we give the credit to "Mother Nature" and chalk it up to millions of years of evolution.

No matter how good something is, I can take it for granted; even the love and grace and grandeur of God. But when we praise Him, we are acknowledging his greatness. As we begin to notice the blessings of God and the beauty of his creation, his showcase, we can't help but magnify him. When you use a magnifying glass, you can see things much more clearly. When we magnify the Lord, we are making his glory known to everyone around us. And the closer we get to God, the more we want to worship him. Our degree of worship is a barometer of our walk with Christ.

If I don't start my worship as soon as I get out of bed on Sunday and pray for the upcoming service, I will probably be distracted when I get there. I'll be critical of the musicians or the song selections and become detached from my mission, which is to focus on the glorious meeting with my Savior and enjoy the privilege of making music (or at least a joyful noise) to the Lord with my Christian brothers and sisters. I need to **worship God acceptably with reverence and awe**. (Hebrews 12:28).

When I arrive at the church, is the praise and worship segment something I can stroll into after it's started as long as I get into my seat before the sermon begins or is it something more than a preliminary, something that I should be on time for to prepare my heart to hear from God?

"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain." Isaiah 29:13

Am I just mouthing the words like a robot when I sing, "*All that is within me bless his holy name*" or am I giving it all I have? Am I expressing my love and thanks to the Lord my God with all my heart and soul and mind and strength or am I just going through the motions? Do I expect the worship leaders to bless me or do I have some responsibility to shoulder, like blessing the *Lord*?

We can read all day long about how to worship, but until we let go and praise the Lord with all our heart and soul we won't know what we've been missing. Some people can worship in a service without any outward signs of emotion but some of us let our pride rob us of the joy and release that comes with raising our hands or bowing down or kneeling. Scripture encourages expressive worship and it helps us show the Lord how much we adore him. It also generates enthusiasm in a congregation. It's contagious! I once read some good advice on this:

"Never do anything because others are looking at you, and never refrain from anything because others are looking at you."

Actually, the most intense worship experiences I have are when I let loose outside when no one is around. That's when I can cry out and let the tears flow!

***Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.
I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name
I will lift up my hands.*** (Psalm 63:3-4).

Week 34

Keep in step with the Spirit!

“When he, the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.” (John 16:13).

The Holy Spirit, who resides in those who have accepted Christ, connects us to Jesus and the Father. He also guides and teaches us, mainly through the Bible, by making the words jump out of the page and into our hearts to convict and encourage us. But he doesn't force himself on us. When The Holy Spirit is mentioned as working powerfully in people's lives in the Bible, it usually refers to them as being *filled* with the Spirit. The little books of Galatians and Ephesians mention “the Spirit” 30 times. He comes up in the book of Acts over 40 times. Even though Christians already have the Holy Spirit, we are advised to walk by, be led by, live by, pray by, keep in step with and be filled with the Spirit. That is how we can defeat sin in our lives:

Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. (Galatians 5:16).

The Holy Spirit is responsible for producing spiritual fruit within us and he empowers us to boldly share Christ. He also gives us supernatural abilities, called spiritual gifts, to serve one another. We need to keep filling up with the Spirit, though, because we “leak.” How is this done? Scripture records elders laying hands on people and on other occasions the Holy Spirit filled people without human intervention. I believe you can ask God to fill you, as well.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23).

The Holy Spirit guides and protects us as well, as described in Acts 16:6:

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.

Let's take a look at walking by the Spirit. Instead of trying to fit God into your schedule, make him a part of everything already on your schedule. Invite him into whatever you're doing; when you walk, when you drive, when you are waiting in line, even while you work! It is spiritual multitasking. You can also listen and sing along with the great Christian music that's available. That will draw you into God's presence as well.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14).

As you become aware that the Holy Spirit is always with you, you can continually carry on a conversation with him, in words or in your mind. You can shoot up quick prayers or verses, such as “Help me Lord,” or “Thank you, Lord,” or “I can do all things through Christ.” Repeating these short prayers throughout the day will help keep you connected to Jesus through the Holy Spirit. This is what Paul meant when he said we are to pray without ceasing. This may sound silly, but I like to sing the doxology while washing my hands!

If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. (Galatians 5:25).

Week 35

Is it time you took a leap of faith?



When God called Moses and Gideon and many others recorded in the Bible to do something big, they all felt inadequate and tried to get out of it, usually because he asked them to do something that was beyond their ability to accomplish. In fact, just to make sure that the odds were definitely stacked against Gideon and his army, he told Gideon to pare down his fighting men from 32,000 to 300! That way, Gideon and his men would have to depend on God and would give him the glory for the victory. I get encouraged when I read the accounts of how God used ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things. But it's even more exciting to know that he's still doing it today.

*"If we never pray audacious, courageous prayers, how can he answer them? If we never follow him to positions where we need him, how can he show up and make his presence known? Live...as a person dependent on him, desperate for God the Spirit to show up and make a difference." - Francis Chan, *The Forgotten God**

I strongly believe that all of us should be attempting something that we can't possibly achieve unless God shows up. I must warn you, it involves challenges and risks. It won't be easy but it won't be boring, especially when God begins to do stuff through you that you know didn't come from your own strength or talents.

*"It may be that we rarely experience the Spirit of God because we never need him. Our lives are too secure. Our prayers are too safe. Our expectations are too low...Do not complain that God never does anything dramatic in your life if you never attempt anything outside your comfort zone." - Tim Chester, *Enjoying God**

What do we need to do to get ready to be used by God? Four things: **pray, be available, be courageous, obey.**

Pray: "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." (Matthew 14:28). Carve out time every day from your busy schedule to talk with the Lord and hear what *he* wants you to put on your schedule. Ask him for confirmation. After all, Gideon used a fleece!

Be Available: I've heard it said that God is more interested in our availability than our ability. Our willingness to obey also helps. Don't limit yourself to what you know you can do or how you think God has or has not gifted you. Where's the challenge in that? He may want to bestow a *new* gift on you! As Oswald Chambers explains in *My Utmost For His Highest*,

"When it is a question of God's Almighty Spirit, never say 'I can't.' Never let the limitation of natural ability come in. If we have received the Holy Spirit, God expects the work of the Holy Spirit to be manifested in us."

"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." -Jesus, Matthew 19:26

Be Courageous: When Joshua was about to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land, he knew that the current inhabitants would not move out without a fight. So Moses told him,

"Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them." (Deuteronomy 31:6).

I don't think God expects us to try and muster up courage and stuff our fear, though. Moses went on to tell Joshua, "**The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.**"

He is saying that we have *no reason* to fear because he goes before us and is always with us.

Live in the power of the possible with God!

When I was around 12 years old I had a paper route, and the worst part of the job was collecting the money. If my customers didn't pay then I didn't get paid because that's how it worked back then. Some people wouldn't answer their door, and others were quite rude and wouldn't pay me a dime. This went on until my dad found out about it. Just having him by my side as we walked up to their doors washed away all my fear and anxiety. They could not get rid of my Dad as easily. He wasn't leaving until we got the money! When you are close to God, you have the assurance that there is no way you can fail in what he calls you to do. But we have to step out. When God told the Israelites to cross the Jordan River, he didn't hold the water back until they got their feet wet. Is it time for you to quit playing it safe and take a leap of faith?

Obey: *"I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls."* (2Corinthians 12:15). Paul did not count the cost, look at the salary or the working conditions and neither should we. Adele Calhoun, in her *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, points out:

"Christians are the very presence of God to others. We become God's vehicle of blessing on planet earth. We will never really serve others unless we see that the needs of our neighbors are as real and important as our own. This may seem obvious. But the truth of the matter is many of us look right through others and never see them, let alone care about what they need. When we are preoccupied with our own concerns, much of the world is simply invisible to us...Jesus maintains that radical love for others demonstrates whether we know God or not."

God will be with you and help you but he's not going to do everything for you. It's going to take everything you've got, and then some. You will serve him by serving others. You'll need to give more than you'll receive, listen more than you'll talk and you'll let others get the credit. It will not be glamorous work but it'll be glorious because you will be in the zone of the call of God on your life. Remember the formula for **Joy**: put **J**esus first, **o**thers second, and **y**ourself last.

A pastor once asked two very important questions: *"What are you doing with your life?"* and *"At the end of our days, will we celebrate or regret the past, living the way we're living now?"* Just staying busy doesn't count for much if we don't do those things with and for the Lord. How we spend our time with our short existence here will affect our lives for eternity. When I finally get to see my Lord face to face, I want to hear him say, "Well, done, my good and faithful servant!"

Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31).

You may not think you have much to offer God; maybe you've failed before and don't feel confident or worthy to begin or join a ministry. I want you to know that God is a God of second chances and all things are possible with him, no matter what you've done or how old you are. He wants to breathe new life into your soul and use you to be a blessing to others. Even Timothy apparently got bogged down since Paul needed to tell him,

Fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. (2 Timothy 1:6).

Let's not be like the servant in the parable who buried the talent he was given. His master was not happy with him and gave the talent to the other servant who had put his talents to good use. That was a good example of the truth, "Use it or lose it!"

*"Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.
And when I am dying, how happy I'll be,
If the lamp of my life has been burned out for Thee." C.T. Studd*

Week 36

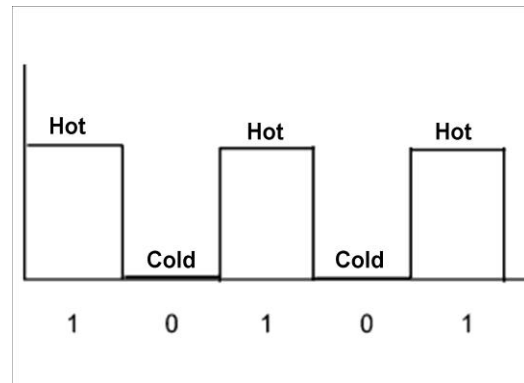
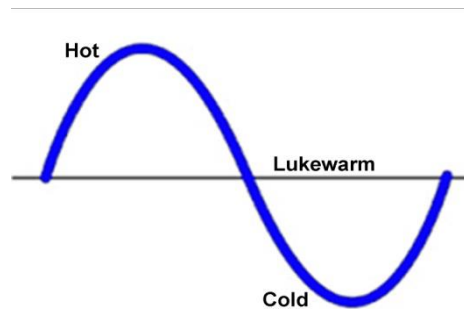
A life set apart vs. a part of your life

When is the last time you threw yourself into something that consumed most of your thoughts and your time? It's amazing what we can accomplish when we put our hearts and souls into something. So, it's no surprise when a lukewarm attempt yields a mediocre result. The same principle applies to our Christian walk. The angel's message from God to the church at Laodicea in the third chapter of Revelation was,

“Because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.”

For many of us, our dedication to the Lord is like an analog signal. It varies at different levels at different times. We may have started out on fire for the Lord, but over time we have become satisfied with just knowing that we have a reservation in heaven waiting for us and we only talk to God when we need something or to bless our meals. We may go to church, but the rest of the week we just do our own thing, oblivious to what our lives could become like if we were more fully devoted to him. Fear, doubt and depression grows when we are not in our Father's arms.

A digital signal is either on or off, with nothing in between. This is what God requires of us – totally in or totally out. Hot or cold. Not maybe or later or I'll think about it. He doesn't want closet Christians or even casual ones. Jesus said, ***“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.”*** (Luke 9:62). But who among us always stays hot for God and plows perfect furrows? Only one that I know of – Jesus. So, how can we even come close to that standard? That's where the Converter comes in to play.



Sound waves are analog in nature because they vary continuously. If you want to use a computer to produce musical recordings or to get a fax machine to print pages from signals coming from analog phone lines, you need an analog to digital converter. I was a technician back when fax machines first came out and I went on a service call where the user showed me what was wrong. She dialed the number and the document went through the scanner. She then said, “Do you see what's wrong? It's still here!” I guess she expected it to somehow shrink through the phone line! Analog to digital conversion can be pretty mysterious. Spiritual conversion is also mysterious, but wonderful.

When we accept Christ as our Lord, we are saved, but our conversion is a process. It's not a onetime thing and we're done. Our converter is the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to be more consistent in our Christian walk over time. But we have a part to play as well.

Consecration demands concentration

To consecrate is to set apart or dedicate something or someone to a divine purpose. Oswald Chambers, in *My Utmost for His Highest*, explains,

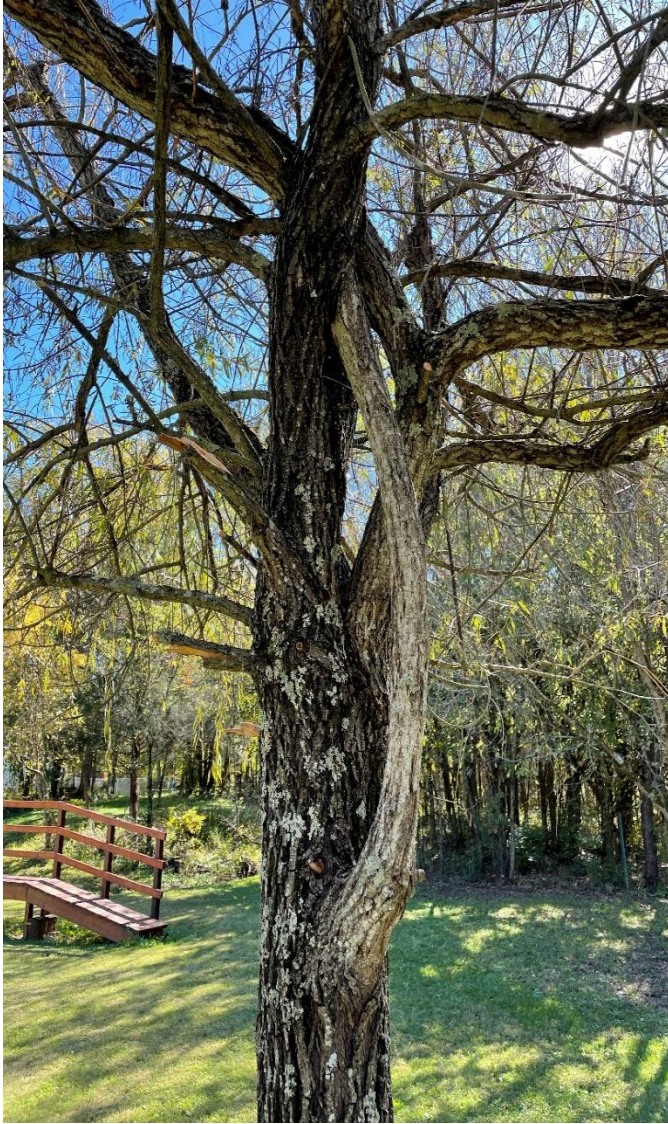
“Consecration means the continual separating of myself to one particular thing. We cannot consecrate once and for all. Am I continually separating myself to consider God every day of my life?” He goes on to say, *“The golden rule for your life and mine is this concentrated keeping of the life open towards God. Let everything else—work, clothes, food, everything on earth—go by the board, saving that one thing. The rush of other things always tends to obscure this concentration on God. We have to maintain ourselves in the place of beholding, keeping the life absolutely spiritual all through...Never be hurried out of the relationship of abiding in Him.”*

It all comes back to getting and enjoying a close relationship with God. Until we experience that, we will not only fail to please him, we won't even *want* to give him more than a small part of our lives, since we all end up doing what we want to do.

I have to constantly remind myself of what my ultimate purpose in life is – to bring glory to God and bring people into his kingdom. I need to carry that mindset with me all throughout the day. There's nothing wrong with having fun and enjoying things he has given me, but I shouldn't stay in a continual feast of feeding my appetites because that will never fully satisfy. What I'm slowly beginning to discover is the delicious fruit of pursuing Christ, which then compels and propels me into his service through the power of the Holy Spirit. Is this easy? No. Is it worth it? Absolutely. There is no better way!

Week 37

What my tree taught me about abiding in Christ



Do you see something unusual in this picture?

This weeping willow tree in my back yard is exhibiting a phenomenon known as inosculation. The bottom branch actually grew back into the trunk further up in the tree. How did that happen?

When the branch was growing up, instead of going its own way, it worked its way back to the trunk. As the tree moved in the wind, the bark on the touching surfaces gradually abraded away as they rubbed against each other, exposing their cambiums, the growing part of the tree. This caused the branch to graft into the trunk as they expanded in diameter.

After observing this, I thought, what a great way to illustrate how to abide in Christ. When God gives us life and we begin to grow, we have a decision to make. We can hang out on our own and hope we will hold up under the winds of our tribulations or we can stay close to Jesus and abide in him, drawing on his strength to hold us up through the storms of life.

“Abide in me, and I in you.” - Jesus, John 15:4

Week 38

What's between you and God?

Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23, 24).

I'm not a very good judge of my own character but I'm an expert at spotting the faults of others. When I do consider how I fall short, I grade myself on a curve, and since there are always people that appear to sin worse than me, I give myself a passing grade. Another way I excuse my sin is to rationalize my behavior or blame others for it. If left to myself, I often simply ignore my sins altogether.

"He who has been forgiven little, loves little." (Luke 7:47).

If we don't think our sins are that bad, we won't see the need to change. But overwhelming love is the response of those who realize the extent of their sin and experience the amazing grace of God who forgives us completely, no matter what we've done.

We may not have murdered anyone or robbed a bank, but what about the subtle areas of sinfulness, such as pride, selfishness, unbelief, greed, envy, lust, and impatience? If we don't confess these to God and ask him to help us on our road to repentance, we'll be severely handicapped in our mission to get closer to him.

Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear. (Isaiah 59:2).

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14).

God has blessed us with many fun things to enjoy, especially in our affluent culture. But we need to be careful that we don't chase after and love the creation more than the Creator. Otherwise, our purpose in life becomes nothing more than feeding our appetite for what A. W. Tozer called our self-sins: self-indulgence, self-pity, self-absorption, self-aggrandizement, self-deception, self-exaltation, self-sufficiency and a host of others just like them. People who claim they can do whatever they want are never happy for long. That's because the "self" is a harsh taskmaster who is never satisfied with our performance to carry out our selfish desires. We need to be set free from the childish habit of always wanting to get our own way, of acting like overgrown little boys and girls who refuse to carry out the responsibilities that God gave men and women to perform. We can't be filled with the Spirit if we're full of ourselves.

We will never be sinless, but with God's help we can sin less

We have been acquitted of our sins and justified before God through the blood of his Son, but as Paul explains in Romans,

"Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Romans 6:1-2).

I don't think we're trapped to stay in a broken state of continual sin or resign ourselves to live a life of a hopeless sinner. We will never be sinless, but with God's help we can sin *less*. But this can only be accomplished if we possess Christ, and not merely profess him. Faith and works are a package deal. God wants us to walk with him, but he has also given us guidelines for living, and as Jesus said, if you love me, you will keep my commandments.

Repentance is resolving to change our behavior. It must follow confession. I don't think God is pleased with continual confession of the same sins committed over and over again. That's an abuse of his grace. Jesus did not condemn the woman caught in adultery. But he did say, "From now on sin no more."

"Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." (James 4:17).

The sins of omission are not as obvious as the sins of commission. We may not harm others, but we might ignore them and remain indifferent to their plight. Instead, we should help the helpless, like giving babies the chance to be born.

Abstain from every form of evil. (1st Thessalonians 5:22).

We are told to avoid every form of evil, but if we invite violence and immorality and profanity to be portrayed and heard in our homes through our TVs, phones and computers, the continuous consumption of a secular worldview will influence us and shape our values over time.

Set aside some time for self-examination. Ask yourself, "*Who have I injured through thoughtlessness, neglect or anger? Who do I need to forgive?*" Ask the Holy Spirit to bring these people to mind. Then apologize to them and forgive those who have hurt you. This not only helps them, it helps you, too.

Take your spiritual pulse:

We need to ask ourselves how we're doing on the following qualities. This is not a legalistic list of requirements or a checklist, but rather, some indicators of spiritual maturity. It reveals what is captivating our hearts and shows us where we need to grow. Nobody does this perfectly, but these are things that we should strive for with the help of the Holy Spirit:

I have a daily quiet time for prayer and Bible study
I memorize and recite scripture often
I keep a prayer list and pray for those people and concerns
I share my testimony with others when there are opportunities
I pray regularly for lost people by name
I generously give of my resources to my church & other ministries
I seek reconciliation and forgiveness when needed
I am trusting God and involving him in everything I do
I treat my spouse, children, and others with love and respect
I have compassion for those who are hurting and I help them
I pray regularly with my spouse and children
I use my tongue to encourage rather than criticize or cuss
I am not easily angered or offended
I honor God by my choices of entertainment
I keep in touch with the Lord throughout the day
I have a grateful heart for all the blessings I receive from God

What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.
(Micah 6:8).

Week 39

Forgive



“Holding a grudge is like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies.” - St. Augustine

All of us get hurt by others. This we cannot avoid. But we can do something about the anger, resentment and bitterness that follows. If we don't, it will eat us up alive. We want them to pay for what they did to us, but we are the ones that end up paying the price if we don't forgive them.

What actually is involved in forgiving someone? Basically, it's deciding to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge. But why should we let our offender off the hook without punishment, especially when they don't apologize to us? Because when we do, we are actually letting *ourselves* off the hook by avoiding years of playing the victim to what others do to us and it releases the control they have over us.

Forgiveness usually doesn't happen right away. It's a process that takes time, especially when severe abuse is involved. It doesn't mean forgetting or excusing the harm that was done to you. But over time, with God's help, you can learn not to dwell on it as often. And when it does come to your mind, his peace will gradually overshadow the turmoil.

One thing that would prevent a lot of strife is to not be so easily offended to begin with. We need to be grace dispensers, not agents of wrath. Contentious arguing and angry accusations, even on social media, never changes hearts. A gentle answer, on the other hand, turns away wrath (Proverbs 15:1) and sometimes opens a mind to another point of view.

What can help us do this is to look for the good in people and don't assume the worst. Give them the benefit of a doubt. Compliment instead of criticize. Cynics are not happy people and are no fun to be around.

Is there someone you need to forgive? Is there someone you need to apologize to?

Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense. (Proverbs 19:11).

Week 40

Believe BIG!



“It shall be done to you according to your faith.”

Matthew 9:29

As Sharon and I were flying home from our vacation, she pointed out to me a hole in the dark clouds through which we could see the blue sky.

We were in the midst of the clouds and caught a perspective that the people on the ground being rained on couldn't see. As we descended, the hills and rivers of Middle Tennessee gradually came into view. Finally, homes, tiny cars, and miniature people appeared.

The Lord gave us a snapshot of the big picture. We humans can get so caught up in our own little everyday world that we forget that there is something and someone so much bigger out there. Sometimes all we see is the rain around us and we can't see above the clouds where the sun rules.

So many Christians have settled for just a little Christianity. They only want enough to get by. All they need to do is just survive and hang in there until they get to their sweet home by and by.

Do you want more than that? I do. I think God wants to do more for us, too. But he restrains himself when faith is in short supply:

“He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief.” (Matthew 13:58).

I want to see God work *every day*, going before me to soften and prepare the hearts of those friends, relatives, and co-workers who don't know him. I want to see hope restored, relationships reconciled, addictions conquered, families strengthened, jobs found, lives changed, and people healed physically and emotionally. I want to see God speak through me and love through me, because I can't do it. It's not in me, I've tried. Apart from Christ, I can do absolutely nothing of lasting spiritual value. I may be able to get someone to consider spiritual matters, but the Holy Spirit is the one who draws that person to himself. I want to see God ***do "far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us."*** (Ephesians 3:20). I want to see God not only work miracles in my life, but to see him do it in the ones I pray for, as well. I want to see American churches grow and thrive, and make a difference in their communities. Is this asking too much? I don't think so:

***“Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.
All things are possible to him who believes.”*** (Matthew 21:22, Mark 9:23).

These are not carte blanche, name it-claim it statements that apply to everything we want. James warns against that: ***“You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.”*** (James 4:3). But I think everything in my wish list in the above paragraph can be prayed for with confidence.

What's holding us back? One of two things: we don't think God can or we don't think he will. We may believe that miracles happened in Bible times but don't think that God intervenes in miraculous ways today. I have news for you: ***Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*** (Hebrews 13:8). If Jesus says, ***“he who believes in Me will do greater works than these,”*** than I should expect things to happen as he says. Otherwise, he will be amazed at my lack of faith, like he was with the people in his home town (Mark 6). God is not some grumpy old guy who may or may not answer your prayers according to his mood or time schedule. He already knows what you need and has a solution in place.

God may not answer my prayer the way I ask him to, but until I know otherwise, I am to believe that he will. If he has another solution or wants me to wait, then I know it's for the best, so that's even better. God is not just a life raft to save us from our problems. He gives us the peace and power to thrive in the midst of them. Sometimes our *development* is his purpose, not our *deliverance*.

I know that's easier said than done, especially if you're going through an economic or emotional depression, but I hope you'll read something here to help you find a way to strengthen yourself in the Lord as David did when he was stressing because he was about to be stoned (1 Samuel 30).

Our ability to believe determines our level of faith which is directly proportional to the level of success we can experience in our Christian walk.

So, how can we believe BIG?

First, we have to decide who and what to believe. We have good reasons to believe in God, the complexity of nature being one of them. We use our intellect to choose which religion will bring us to God. That's why missionaries are so vital to spread the word that there's a better way to attain God's favor than human sacrifices or "holy" wars. Why is Christianity the true religion? Check out the previous devotion: *Are religions preferences of choice on a buffet line?* Believing in God is an intentional *choice*, not just a state of mind reflecting opinions.

Secondly, we need to raise our expectations. We should eagerly anticipate God to do wonderful things, not just hope that he will. What do you need the most right now? Don't give up hope, no matter how long it takes. We need to recognize that God is who he says he is and will do what he says he will do. Wouldn't it be great if we could come to a point where we just *know* he will, as certain as we are that the sun will rise and set every day?

"I do believe. Help my unbelief." (Mark 9:24).

Thirdly, we need to surround our senses with as much Godly influence as possible: worship services, Bible studies, Christian music, Christian friends, wholesome entertainment, and a steady diet of reading and memorizing scripture to recite throughout the day. ***"Faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the word of Christ."*** (Romans 10:17). Singing hymns and choruses also helps. Some say we are just being brainwashed, but my brain could use a little cleaning now and then!

Fourthly, start trusting God by obeying him. When the Israelites were told to cross the Jordan when it was overflowing its banks, God didn't hold back the water until the priests stepped in and got their feet wet. Have you ever attempted something so big that you couldn't have accomplished it unless God showed up? If not, then maybe you need to believe bigger. Perhaps the Lord is nudging you to start a new career or ministry. Don't dismiss the idea simply because you don't feel qualified or don't think you would like doing it. I've heard it said, God isn't interested in your *ability*, he's interested in your *availability*. Believing big doesn't always result in accomplishing big, important things that people will notice. He may want you to simply smile at someone, lend an ear or a helping hand.

Finally, get close to God. It's hard to do, especially when he seems distant and silent. We need to believe that he is there even when we can't see, hear, or feel his presence. Seeing is *not* believing. Where's the faith in that? ***"We look at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things that are not seen are eternal."*** (2 Corinthians 4:18). Be persistent and relentless with your pursuit of God. The more you commune with him, the better you will know him, and the more you will see him working in your life, which makes it easier to "bear all things, believe all things, and endure all things." (1 Corinthians 13:7). You will also be able to better discern his will in the things you pray for.

I know this all appears to be methodical, maybe even like a formula. I realize I can't fully explain the mystery of faith, I just wanted to take a stab at it, because I think we are just scratching the surface of what God wants us to see and experience if we will only believe, and believe BIG!

It's time to trade in our cold feet and get our feet wet!

Week 41

Don't let your spirit get dehydrated!

When the Samaritan woman met Jesus at the well, she perceived that he was a prophet, and immediately brought up the subject of where to worship:

“Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” (John 4:20).

If we're not careful, we can limit our worship to where we go to church and miss out on what Jesus was trying to teach her...and us:

Jesus said to her, ***“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father...But a time is coming, and even now has arrived, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.”*** (vs. 21, 23).

Jesus was offering her something much better than the water that was in that well: ***“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”*** (v 14).

We humans need food and water to stay alive and we need to worship God in spirit and in truth to keep our faith alive. Striving to love him with all our heart and soul enables us to worship him in spirit and loving him with all our mind and strength allows us to worship him in truth. The connection between our spirit and his Spirit produces the living water that quenches the deepest need of our souls. And seeking and obeying his truth, which is found in scripture, is also a part of worship. This can be done all throughout the day with everything we do.

Last year on New Year's Eve, I went on a hike. It was pretty cool that day and I didn't intend to go very far so I didn't bring water along. But it was a trail I had not been on before so my curiosity kept me going further and further to see what was around one bend after another. By the time I got back I was utterly exhausted. I took a drink but didn't feel overly thirsty. Later that night as I was about to play a game with my family, I asked them if they thought it was cold in there. They said no. I then started to shake uncontrollably. Since that was a symptom of COVID-19, Sharon quickly got me out of there and drove me home. I had a fever for a couple of days and got tested for COVID but it was negative. Turns out I was suffering from dehydration and didn't even know it.

We need to take care of our souls as well as our bodies. If we don't, we will suffer from *spiritual* dehydration. Are you thirsting for God right now? If not, taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8) and take a sip from his living water. It will keep you coming back for more!

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” (John 7:37, 38).



Week 42



Have you ever been told to simply trust God whenever you are faced with challenges beyond your control or when you experience anxiety over them? How does that advice work for you? For many of us, that's easier said than done, isn't it? Trust is not something you can just turn on whenever you need it, unless you're trusting in someone that you know will not let you down. Think about someone you know that has your back and has always been there for you and you can count on. Do you have doubts or fears that they won't come through for you? Of course not. That's because you know them. But you can't trust someone you don't know. So, if we are having a hard time trusting God, our fear and anxiety is a good indication that we don't really know him; that we are not close to him.

Do you know what God wants from us more than anything? I'll give you a clue: the prophet Jeremiah recorded God as saying,

"Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let him who boasts boast about this; that they have the understanding to know me."

(Jeremiah 9:23-24)

I think one of the reasons it is so important to God that we know him is that we won't trust him until we do. Our level of fear and worry and anxiety are directly related to our degree of trust or lack of trust in God. So, how do we get to know him? It involves more than saying prayers at mealtimes. God wants to be more than an occasional acquaintance of ours. He wants us to pursue him relentlessly!

We always want to know the last words spoken by someone as he or she leaves this world. How much more, then, should we pay attention to the phrase that came out of our Lord Jesus just before he gave his life for us on the cross:

"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

King David spoke these words 1100 years earlier. Dr. William Barclay writes,

"Jesus died with a prayer on his lips. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' That is Psalm 31:5 with one word added--Father. That verse was the prayer every Jewish mother taught her child to say last thing at night. Just as we were taught, maybe, to say, 'Now I lay me down to sleep,' so the Jewish mother taught her child to say, before the threatening dark came down, 'Into your hands I commit my spirit.' Jesus made it even more intimate, for he began it with the word "Father." Even on the cross Jesus died like a child falling asleep in his Father's arms."

Have you ever wondered what that phrase means? I think it's the perfect picture of how we should follow Christ, by placing our very lives in his hands. It's giving him complete control of our hopes, dreams, and fears. It's unbridled trust and confidence in his love and capabilities to take care of us, no matter what storms come our way.

As I fall into bed every night and climb out every morning I pray those words. You can't go wrong with scripture. If it was good enough for Jesus and David, it's more than good enough for me!

Week 43

Is it too good to be true?



Let's face it. The Bible has some pretty amazing stories that many people find hard to believe: men that wouldn't burn, people being raised from the dead and Jesus feeding thousands of people with only a combo meal, just to name a few. Some dismiss these stories as myths or try to come up with natural explanations for the occurrences by saying that the crossing of the Red Sea was in a shallow place at low tide, the star of Bethlehem was a comet or that Jesus wasn't really dead, etc. But then how did the pursuing Egyptians drown in the sea right after the Israelites crossed it, how did Jesus turn water into wine instantly or calm the sea simply by telling it to chill out?

Dictionary.com defines a miracle as "an effect or extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed to a supernatural cause." There are over 100 miracles recorded in the Bible. If we have a hard time believing in miracles, then we have a limited view of God and his capabilities.

I have seen some amazing things invented in my lifetime: space travel, computers, the internet and smart phones, just to name a few. These would have been considered miracles to those who lived before I was born. Why? Because they would have had no idea how we did it.

This is the same reason some people have for not believing that God raised the dead or even created the world – they don't know how he could possibly have done those things, not to mention all the other miraculous events recorded in the Bible.

Why does it seem incredible to any of you that God can raise the dead? (Acts 26:8).

Many of us don't understand how tiny computer chips control almost everything. We just trust them to help make our lives a little easier. We don't choose to stop using them because we don't understand them.

So, why can't more people believe that God can do supernatural things? Or trust that he knows what he is doing, even when they don't understand why he does what he does or allows what he allows? Even the very existence of God is beyond the comprehension of some since they can't see or hear him. But not believing in God doesn't change reality. For a long time, people didn't believe the world was round!

The universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. (Hebrews 11:3).

I know it's hard to imagine that any kind of being, even a god, can do anything he wants and make something out of nothing just by speaking it into existence. This is because we live in a world ruled by natural laws and limits that can't be broken. But the same God who set the laws in place can change them or make new ones up as he pleases. It appears supernatural to us but to the Creator of the universe it's perfectly natural and I expect nothing less from him. He may even be using natural laws that we are not aware of on this side of heaven.

Is God still doing his cool stuff today? I believe he is. Lee Stobel is a former atheist who set out to prove that the Bible was false and ending up believing it instead. He hired the Barna Group to survey Americans about their attitudes toward miracles, the results of which he discloses in his book, *The Case For Miracles*. He said that 38 percent of respondents recounted having an experience in their lives that they could only attribute to a supernatural act of God. “*When you extrapolate that, that's almost 95 million miracles among Americans,*” Stobel said. “*Now, discount 95 percent of those, let's say, as being strange coincidences. You still have 5 million examples of people saying 'I've had an experience in my life that I can only explain by saying it's a miracle of God.'*” He also adds a statistic that shows that 55% of physicians in the US say they have seen an incident in their practice that can only be explained as a miracle.

Personally, I have seen the Lord constantly rescue me on my job; one time I had lost thousands of medical records due to the system crashing and then I discovered the backup system had not been working. I was about to update my resume for a new job when the system miraculously came back online!

In 1983 we lived in Fort Payne, Alabama. It was a routine evening for Sharon and me as we were relaxing after a day's work. It was raining outside on May 19th, exactly 10 years to the day when a tornado ripped through that town in 1973. We heard what sounded like a loud explosion. Then the electricity went off and the rain suddenly stopped. Sharon looked out the window and saw our neighbors running down the hill. They kept looking back at something and they looked really scared. That's when she looked up. For as far up as she could see, dirt and debris were flying around in the air. She looked at me and said, “It's a tornado!” The only thing I could think to do was grab her and we huddled down on the floor next to the kitchen cabinets. Then it hit us. The wind was howling, all the windows were bursting and a rock shot through the wall like a missile. The noise was so deafening we didn't even hear the glasses shatter as they fell out of the cabinets above us and hit the floor. But what terrified us the most was feeling our home sliding off the foundation.

When we ventured out to survey the devastation the tornado left in our neighborhood, we discovered that all the homes uphill from us were no longer there. We then noticed some trees had fallen over our home, which may have held it down. We prefer to believe it was the hand of our Lord, who said: “You're not taking *this* home-my children are still in there!”

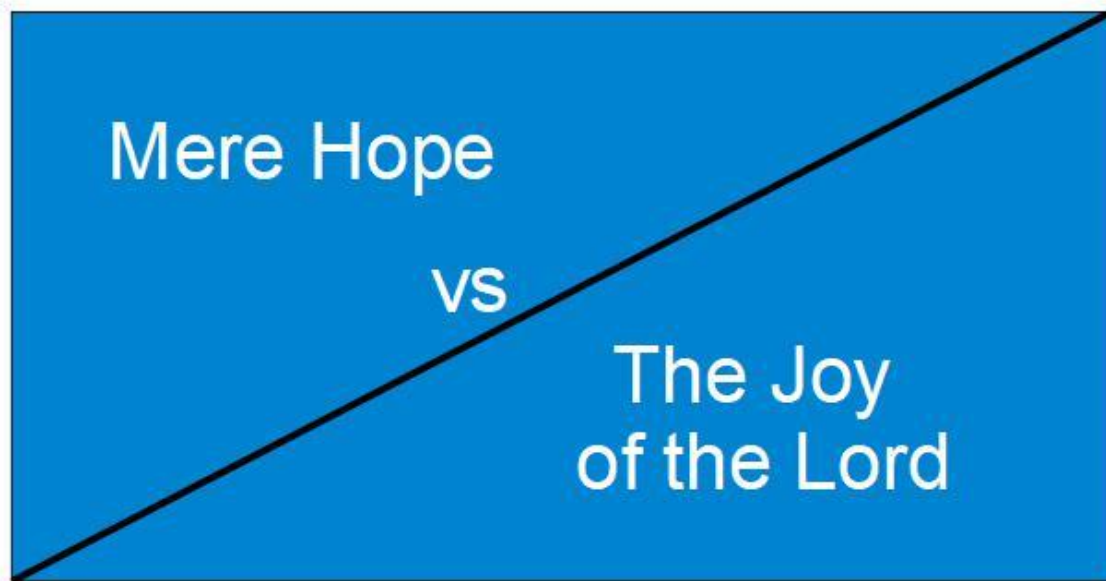
One more example: One day in 1988, when Brian was four and Stephanie was two, they hopped into our van that was parked on our steep driveway. I was loading something in through the sliding passenger door. Before I could buckle them in, Stephanie thought she would try driving the van so she hopped into the driver's seat, stood up and pulled on the transmission lever. Before I knew it, the van started backing down the driveway and down the hill! My fear and adrenaline kicked into high gear as I ran after my little ones in the runaway van. I successfully opened the passenger door which promptly knocked me down (what was I thinking?). When I fell, my legs went under the van just before the right front tire rolled over my knees. It hurt so bad I screamed but I was more concerned for my kids as they continued their descent. Somehow, Brian managed to put the transmission in park. Strangely enough, I was able to stand. I was a little sore, but I could walk and I didn't have a cut, even though my jeans had a hole ripped right through the knee.

I think the biggest miracle of all is when God changes human hearts, like he did with the apostle Paul and the Lee Stobels of today and then empowers them to turn away from destructive living to a life that pleases God and is ultimately more satisfying. Would you like to see someone's heart changed? Don't give up praying for them. Miracles are still happening!

Don't be ashamed of the power of God – embrace it!

Dare to believe in a BIG God. Once we arrive at the place where we believe that God can do *anything* and that he can enable *us* to do anything, a whole new life of possibilities come alive for us, more wondrous and exciting than what fairy tales, science fiction or Santa Claus can come up with. And it's for real. It sounds too good, but it's true. ***How cool is that?!***

Week 44



I wanted a Pontiac Fiero ever since it first came out in 1984. I finally got one recently, and although it looked cool, it was not fun to drive. It wandered all over the road, vibrated horribly and wouldn't brake straight, along with other issues. But I got a good deal on it and I saw potential in it. So I struggled to fix the 33 year old car and had to learn some new skills in the process. But now that it has been restored, it hugs the road so well that it makes me smile.

This is kind of like when we become Christians. Everything seems cool at first, but like an old car that needs attention, if we don't work on our walk with Christ and learn some new skills along the way, he will leave us alone and all we will be left with is a Sunday morning tradition and the hope of heaven. That kind of life is not fun to "drive." I want more than that. How about you?

Some of the warning lights of our faith are: increasing anxiety, depression, and a lack of love toward others. Just as our cars need regular maintenance to run at their best, we need to regularly practice the spiritual disciplines of prayer and worship while referring to our shop manuals for guidance, our Bibles. We also need to give our souls a rest at the service station of our quiet times, where we can fill up our tanks with the Holy Spirit.

There are two types of drivers. Those that simply want to get from point A to point B. And those that enjoy the drive, have a special connection with their cars, know them inside and out and keep them running right. There are Christians like that, too. Those who don't pay that much attention to God but just need him to chauffeur them to their destination, which is heaven. And those who enjoy their close connection with God, know him well, and do what it takes to live right in his sight. Those are the ones who enjoy the journey as well as the destination!

The joy of the LORD is your strength. (Nehemiah 8:10).

Week 45

Get away with God!



"Be still, and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10).

Our increasingly busy and hectic lifestyles have been driving more and more people to seek spiritual solutions to combat stress. Eastern meditation attempts to empty the mind and escape from the world by breathing techniques and chanting mantras, hoping to find one's inner self. Christian meditation redirects our minds and hearts away from ourselves and into an intimate relationship with God our Father and Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit, who fills us with the kind of peace and fulfillment that surpasses what we can work up out of our own efforts. God is at the door of your heart, calling out to you, like he did to Samuel in the Bible. We just need to get ourselves in a position to hear him, so we can say to him like Samuel did, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

There is a time to bring requests, intercede for others and cry out to God in times of trouble. Prayerfully meditating on scripture is also fruitful. But when is the last time you really connected with him and enjoyed his presence? Praying throughout the day is important, but I believe that setting aside a few minutes daily to experience a deep communion with God is highly beneficial.

You know how annoying it is to have someone talk nonstop at you to where you can't get a word in edgewise? You're not going to have a deep, meaningful conversation with that person, are you? I wonder if that's what it's like for God when all we do is tell Him what we want from him.

"If a man wants to be used by God, he can't spend all his time with people." - A.W. Tozer

Jesus needed to get away from the crowds and find a secret place to pray to his Father. The gospels record him getting up before dawn and spending the night in prayer before he chose his disciples. So, if it was important enough for Jesus to get alone with his Father, we should, too! God is jealous for *you*. Isn't that amazing?

Solitude is hard work!

Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to do nothing. The second hardest thing is to let someone do something for you. For some of us, solitude feels like solitary confinement. I'm a troubleshooter by trade, so fixing things is hard coded into me. I have to remind myself that there's a time to act but there is also a time to rest and I need to learn how to get away from it all and wait on the Lord.

Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him. (Psalm 37:7).

Find a quiet place to relax, be still and listen without interruptions. Rest in the presence of God. Completely submit and surrender your will, your thoughts, your fears and concerns up to him. Spend some time in silence. This is not easy; it takes practice, because our thoughts like to run wild about anything and everything. Doing it for just one minute is difficult at first. When your mind begins to wander, you can praise him, thank him and tell him you love him with brief sentences. Don't rush it. Enjoy your time with the Lord. It's hard to describe, but when I do this, I feel a close connection to him even if no words are spoken between us. It's like I broke through the barriers of the material world and into the spiritual dimension!

Don't be discouraged if you don't hear from God or feel his presence very often. You will still benefit by slowing down long enough to present yourself before him. It may seem like a waste of time in the beginning, but if you stick with it, you'll soon be amazed at what just five minutes a day of doing this will do for you. You may be uncomfortable with the thought of practicing solitude, but you'll be building a relationship with Christ.

When I'm good with God, I'm good with people

Ideally, solitude should be practiced daily, even if it's only for a short period during your quiet time. But I'd like to encourage you to plan a personal retreat to unplug and get away with God. There are retreat centers that offer rooms to stay in, but you may just want to use a campground or cabin in the woods to spend a couple of days in an unhurried time of rest and reflection with the Lord. I do that for a weekend at least once a year up in some nearby mountains where I can hike and bask in his beautiful creation. It's my favorite spiritual pathway and it's one of the best things I have done to get closer to God - I highly recommend it. When I come back, I'm ready to be social again. As the saying goes, you can't give to others what you don't already have. As Fanny Crosby wrote in her hymn, Blessed Assurance, I need to be "*filled with His goodness, lost in His love.*"

Jesus said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while." (Mark 6:31).

Week 46

Pack light!



“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” (Luke 12:15).

The American dream can turn into a nightmare if you're not careful. In the United States, the average size of a new home has doubled since 1960, from 1,300 square feet to 2,600 today. And that's not enough space to store all our stuff, so we use self-storage facilities, an industry that didn't even exist in the 1960's! Clearly, our drive to acquire more and more stuff has gotten out of control. How did this happen?

Two of the strongest drives for men and women are to build wealth and status. We buy stuff to keep up our image. And for many of us, ordinary stuff isn't good enough. So, we buy bigger and better and newer. But since there is always someone that has cooler stuff than us, we never catch up. Nevertheless, we still try to keep up with the Joneses. Even though it all ends up in the junkyard, anyway.

It's funny how excited we get about our purchases, only to experience buyer's remorse and become disenchanted a short time later when something newer comes along, rendering what we already bought instantly obsolete. We once had a neighbor who bought a brand new Camaro, but the very next year traded it in for an all-new model.

“Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”
(Jesus, Matthew 6:33).

If your household income is more than \$10,000 per year, you're making more than the average family in the world, which puts you in the category of the rich. Funny thing is, the more we make, the more we spend and the less we save and the less we give away. But all our money comes from God and we are supposed to be generous with it. Spending so much of our time, energy and money on stuff leaves little time or resources to help build the kingdom of God. Or we spend the best years of our lives working so hard to save enough money so we can live comfortably for the last 10-20 years of our lives, if we live that long. It's good to work hard and plan ahead as

long as we don't sacrifice the things that are the most precious – time with our families which we will never get back and time that could have been used to serve God. What are we investing in for our *eternal* portfolios? Don't be a collector – be a dispenser!

These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. (Matthew 15:8).

We say everything we own belongs to God, but do our hearts betray him? I once knew a pastor who would say "Your god is what you think about the most."

Our marriages also suffer because we can't agree on who gets to buy what stuff. God understands our tendency to grasp for more; that's why he gave us the tenth commandment, "You shall not covet."

I'll never forget watching an older gentleman dancing and praising God outside of his dirt floor shack in the Dominican Republic. He was so excited seeing us raise the roof on his new church that was going up next door. He had no plumbing or electricity, but he was ecstatic because he had the joy of the Lord. He was rich toward God!

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

(Matthew 6:19-21)

Thankfulness is the key to Happiness

Want to be happy? Be grateful!

There are many things that can rob our joy on any given day but there is one thing that can bring it back, even on a bad day. We've been told quite often in scripture to be thankful, but that's not just a Biblical concept. More and more studies in the field of psychology has shown that being grateful helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal better with adversity, stress and depression, and build strong relationships. It also diminishes feelings of fear, anger and bitterness.

I've heard it said that it's not happiness that brings us gratitude. It's gratitude that brings us happiness. That's because when you enjoy what you already have, you won't be as quick to be dissatisfied with it and won't be as prone to notice things that may look bigger and newer and "better." You won't be as vulnerable to advertising, whose sole purpose is to make you want something else. You also won't go broke trying to keep up with the Joneses. Gratitude is the key to contentment and the cure for envy and greed, the twins that enslave us with perpetual DIScontentment.

When I begin to thank God throughout my day for all the good things in my life, like food, home, clothes, family and friends, it gives me a lift and I'm not so preoccupied with that one thing that I think is keeping me from being happy. You know that questionnaire they make you answer when you go to the doctor's office? It makes me count my blessings when I answer "No" to all the diseases that I could have, but don't.

When something breaks down, like our refrigerator or car, Sharon and I remind ourselves, "That's a first world problem. At least we *have* a refrigerator and a car."

How can we become more grateful? Try:

1. As you go through your day, thank God for EVERY good thing you see and experience.
2. Start a gratitude journal. At the end of every day, record all those blessings.
3. Think of a person who has helped you in life and a person who is helping you now, and thank them.
4. Take a walk outside and savor the fresh air, the beauty of nature, and let the birds serenade you.
5. Look for the good in people and don't assume the worst. Give them the benefit of a doubt. Compliment instead of criticize. Cynics are not happy people.

Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness and for His wonderful works to the children of men! For he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things. (Psalm 107:8-9).

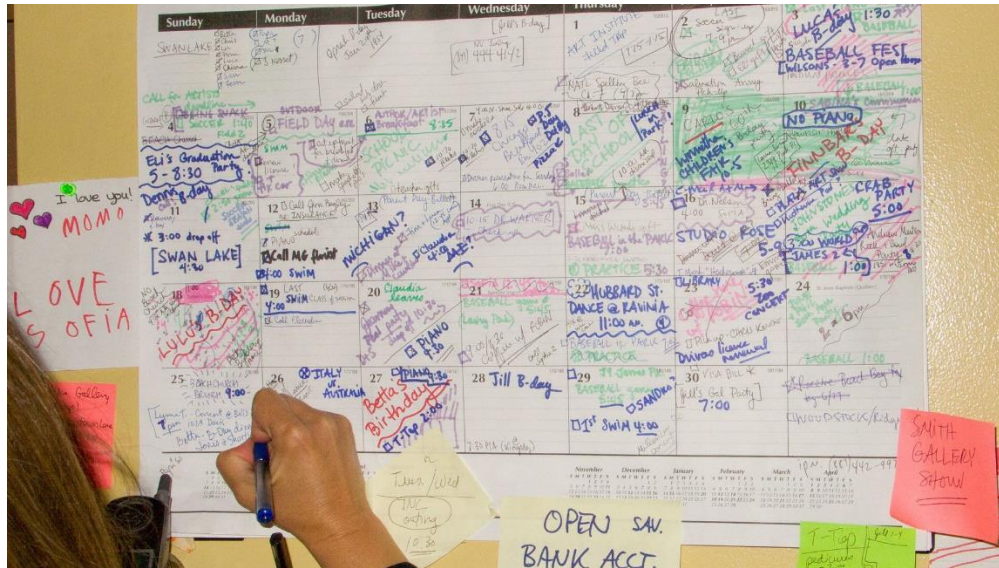
My favorite verse in the hymn, *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*, sums up what we have to be thankful for:

*Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide.
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!
Great is Thy faithfulness!
Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning, new mercies I see.
All I have needed, Thy hand hath provided.
Great is Thy faithfulness,
Lord, unto me!*

Happiness is not getting what you want. It's wanting what you have.

Week 48

Where has all the time gone?



I find it interesting that with all of our time saving inventions, people today are busier than ever. Where has all the time gone? Well, let's see...

We fill our calendar with endless duties; some are necessary, some are not. Then we spend our spare time on hobbies and projects. That is what I fall victim to if I'm not careful. There's nothing wrong with those things as long as we don't become slaves to the to-do lists. Busyness can actually distract us from the most important things in our lives, like our relationships. It can also keep us from self-reflection and examining where our life is heading.

What are we tethered to?

I have set my phone always before me. Because it is close at hand, I will not be shaken.

Psalm 16:8 (21st Century version)

A study by global tech protection and support company Asurion found that Americans check their phones an average of 80 times a day and many of us experience separation anxiety when our phones are out of reach for any length of time. We spend an average of 3 hours a day on our phones and it's not just talking with people. It's amazing what smart phones can do but it's even more amazing how dependent we've become on a device that most of us didn't have just 10 years ago.

Psalm 16:8 is what I picked years ago as my verse for life:

*I have set the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.*

I need to apply *that* version and be tethered to *Him!*

For many of us, our down time is also swallowed up by spending hours watching TV, movies and videos. What if we checked in with God and his word as often as we do with Google?

Here's an idea: If we stopped watching shows and movies that portrayed immorality and taking the Lord's name

in vain, that would cut out quite a few hours of viewing time, wouldn't it? Even though it's someone other than me that's speaking the profanity, I don't want the rooms in my home to be filled with those words.

Rest, Reflect and Recharge

Machines need to be taken off line periodically for maintenance, and computer systems need to be rebooted occasionally to correct malfunctions. Humans are no different in that respect. Over time, we get weary and stressed out. That's why God provided the Sabbath Rest; a day each week for our bodies and souls to take a break.

There are differing opinions on the Sabbath. Some observe it on Saturday, some on Sunday and some don't observe it at all. But I hope that we can all agree that we need to set aside some time to slow down. It is also when we can spend unhurried time to worship and reconnect with our Creator. The writer of Hebrews tells us to "***make every effort to enter that rest.***"

O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.
Saint Augustine

Resting is good for our bodies and souls but it also involves taking a break from doing everything on our own, and doing it our way. It's pausing long enough to get out of the way and let God work in and through us. We should know by now that living up to God's standards is impossible. But we try and fail and try again over and over, dedicate and rededicate, lent and relent. I remember when my daughter, Stephanie, was just beginning to talk. One of her first phrases was "Me do it, Daddy, me do it!" We admire the spirit of independence and the ability to accomplish things on our own. That's why it's so hard to admit we need help.

"Come unto me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." - Jesus, Mathew 11:28

If we're too busy to spend time with God and to serve him, then we're too busy doing things that are not necessary. We have let distractions pull us away from him. When I meet him face to face, I don't want it to be made known that I was too busy for him.

What changes would you make if you knew you only had one year left to live? That's what we need to be doing today because our hourglass could run out at any time.

Week 49

Let every heart prepare Him room



When I sang *Joy To The World* in church last Sunday, the line, “*Let every heart prepare Him room*” hit me like never before. It’s so easy to get caught up in Jingle Bells, Santa and Frosty that I can hardly find time for Jesus. Just as there was no room in the inn for him and his family that night, if I’m not careful, I will not prepare to make room for Jesus in my heart this Christmas. That’s why Sharon and I try to get all of our shopping done by December 1st to relieve stress, and we attend the Christmas program and Christmas Eve service at our church. We need that to remind us of the reason for the season. But even that’s not enough preparation for me to keep my heart open to Jesus. I’m finding that it involves a change of lifestyle.

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Mathew 6:21).

I wish it was natural for me to seek the kingdom of God, but it isn’t. Oh, I would like to, but my heart is drawn to so many other pursuits, like my job, my hobbies, or just plain relaxing. It’s a lot easier to keep to myself and my family and friends, instead of reaching out to my neighbors and coworkers and helping people come to know

the Lord. But when I do break out of my cocoon and help them with things and engage in spiritual conversations with them, my heart is full and I feel like I have been on an adventure with Jesus, even when I don't do it well.

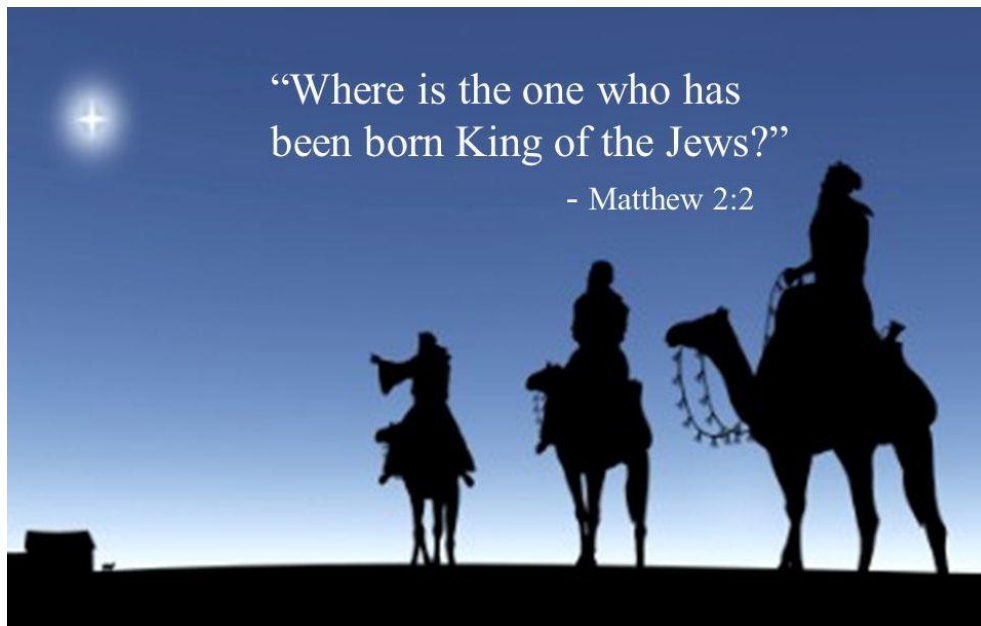
Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. (Proverbs 4:23).

Almost every electronic and mechanical device these days utilizes a controller, or chip, that determines its operation. If it is not programmed correctly, you get undesirable results. Our hearts are the controllers of our bodies. We constantly program them with what we watch, read, listen to and think about day after day. I have to be intentional to guard my heart and discipline myself to read the Bible and Christian literature daily and stay in conversational prayer. It's not easy, but when I make room for the Lord to hang out with me in my heart, he rewards me with his *heavenly peace* and makes me want to *repeat the sounding joy!*

Have a blessed **Christmas**, my friends. I'm glad we're on this quest together to get closer to God!

Week 50

Where is the one born King of the Jews?



Ever since the quest of the Magi, people all over the globe have been drawn toward the Creator of the universe. We want to know who we are, where we came from, and where we fit in. Is there a higher power, a force, or a supreme being we can get some answers from?

Since God is omnipresent, he is "not far from each of us," as Paul explained in Acts 17:27. But just like when you can't hear someone talking right next to you in a room with loud music, we can tune out God with our fast paced, busy, and hectic lives. For example, we are constantly bombarded with all kinds of radio signals we cannot hear unless we have a receiver tuned precisely to the right frequency.

It's all a matter of receptivity on our part.

God is closer than you think. If you have accepted Christ, the Holy Spirit resides in you. But like the landowner who is unaware that he is sitting on an oil field, we can be missing out on the fruits of the Spirit because we are either unaware or unsure how to relate to him.

Maybe you used to be on fire for the Lord but now your spiritual life has been reduced to smoldering embers. As Andrew Murray explains in *Abide in Christ*, “*The blessings you once enjoyed were lost; the love and joy of your first meeting with the saviour, instead of deepening, have become faint and feeble. And often you have wondered what the reason could be, that with such a saviour, so mighty and so loving, your experience of salvation should not have been a fuller one. The answer is simple. You wandered from him.*” He didn’t leave - you did. God is calling out to us as he did to Adam in the garden, “Where are you?”

The question is not “where is God?” It’s “where are we?”

If you grew up in the church like I did, you might have thought that you already had all of God there was to have. A. W. Tozer said the problem with the Christian church today is “*now that we have found God, we no longer seek him.*” There is so much more to experience when Jesus becomes your close friend. The joy and heavenly peace we sing about this time of year can be enjoyed every day of the year.

Wise men still seek him!

Week 51

Dreams, the Magi and GPS



I’m glad we have four authors who wrote the gospels. Matthew presents his as a teacher, Mark as a storyteller, Luke as a historian, and John as a theologian. Each one had a distinct purpose and emphasized different aspects of the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. For example, Matthew and Luke are the only ones that record his birth. Luke includes the most details, but Matthew is the only one that mentions the Magi who came to visit Jesus a couple of years later. He also documents four dreams where an angel visits Joseph to give him instructions and warnings. So I’m wondering, why didn’t the first angel give him the entire plan? The answer: God only tells us what we need to know when we need to know it.

When Mary turned up pregnant, Joseph had a hard time believing her when she told him that the Holy Spirit was the father. So an angel appeared to him in a dream to convince him otherwise. A couple of years later, an angel told Joseph to flee to Egypt to escape the murderous plot of King Herod. How long would he need to stay there? He wasn’t told. But after Herod died, an angel once again showed up in Joseph’s dream to let him know it was time to go back to Israel. When his family arrived in Judea, however, he found out that Herod’s son, Archelaus, was an evil and violent ruler. I’m thinking that Joseph was wondering why God told him to leave Egypt! That is, until the final dream when the angel directed him to go to Galilee, about a hundred miles away, to their home town of Nazareth.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path – but not to my entire route.

The Magi traveled a great distance to get to Jerusalem, thinking the king of the Jews would have been born there, most likely in a palace. They saw the star in the east, but it didn’t lead them to Bethlehem until they arrived in Jerusalem. They then asked where the Christ was, but apparently that wasn’t necessary, since the star

then went ahead of them right to home of Jesus. So I'm wondering, why didn't the star lead them to Bethlehem to begin with? Maybe to announce the arrival of the King of Kings? My pastor said the Magi probably came with an entourage, which would have made quite a spectacle. He said that may be why all of Jerusalem was disturbed. After all, a new king in town would be very big news, indeed!

I'm also wondering why the angel didn't tell Joseph to go to Nazareth from Egypt to begin with, instead of letting him go to Judea first. Perhaps Joseph and Mary wanted to go back to Bethlehem, which was in Judea, where they left in haste years earlier. Or maybe they thought their new king needed to be raised in Jerusalem. We don't know. But their journey finally ended back in their home town of Nazareth, where Jesus would grow up, four dreams and four moves later. What an adventure that was!

When I enter an address into my GPS, I sometimes zoom out to see the entire route. Unfortunately, God's GPS doesn't have that feature. It doesn't even warn us of detours, which delay us and makes us wonder if we lost the signal or if God is playing with us, like my GPS does when it says "You have arrived!" at a business when in reality I'm in an empty field in the middle of nowhere. But I'm learning to relax and say, "OK, Lord, what are you up to?" Sometimes our detours are God's appointments in disguise!

When I was laid off after working as a service technician with my company for 15 years, I was wondering what God had in store for me next. After months of working odd jobs, I found a copier dealer that wanted to groom me to replace their service manager who was going to retire soon. I thought that was what the Lord had provided for me. But after watching the pressure and stress the manager was undergoing, I had second thoughts about that. After 9 months of uncertainty, the dealer got bought by, guess who? The company that laid me off! That resulted in getting my 401k savings back, along with my 4 weeks of vacation I used to get. Then God said, "But wait, there's more!" A position opened up for a systems engineer, which I received after much study and prayer and with the help of my manager who believed that I could do it. So, like Joseph, I have learned to rely on my heavenly GPS, even if I'm only told where to go one turn at a time. Now that's what I call an adventure!

***Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding;
In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. (Proverbs 3:5-6).***

Merry Christmas!

Week 52

What is a herald angel?



***Hark! The herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King!”***

If you're like me, we've sung Christmas carols year after year, without even knowing we were singing them wrong:

*Shepherds washed their
socks by night.*

*We'll perspire as we dream
by the fire.*

For a long time I thought the wise men came from Orient Are. Likewise, until recently, I never gave it much thought why Charles Wesley described the angels as heralds when he wrote that carol back in 1739.

I looked up herald in the dictionary and it said that in years past, a herald was an official who announced important news to the people. Today, it is someone who actively promotes or advocates something or someone. Then it hit me: isn't that what Christians should be doing? We should be heralds as well. It reminds me of another carol,

*Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere
Go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born.*

Almost a hundred years before Charles Wesley wrote about the herald angels, English and Scottish theologians wanted to come to an agreement on the many aspects of their faith so they could be united in what they taught their congregations. So, in 1646, they came up with what is known as the Westminster Catechism of Faith, which consisted of 107 questions and answers, the most famous of which is this:

Q. What is the chief end of man? A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

I need to talk to more people about God and what he has done and is doing for me. I really depend on the Lord to help me with this because I'm not a very outgoing person. I guess it's the geek in me. I don't think we have

an excuse for not being a herald by saying it's not in our personality or skill set to do so. You may be afraid of sharing Christ. I know I am. That's why I daily ask the Lord to help me with this as I look for opportunities to proclaim his goodness in some way. My dad was a natural at this. He never met a stranger and somehow the conversation would turn into a spiritual one before the "stranger" knew what happened! But it was always done in a kind and nonthreatening way. When he went with my mom to the mall, she would go shop while he sat and talked with everyone who walked by.

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!"

The herald angels knew someone very special had come. No it's our turn to spread the good news!

Merry Christmas, everyone, and thanks for taking this year long journey with me!

Rob