

# Paul Chappell

Lessons Learned from an Unexpected Trial

## stewarding

# LIFE

one lifetime,  
limited resources,  
eternal priorities



stewarding

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limited resources,  
eternal priorities



Paul Chappell

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# Dedication

To four people who have helped me—in incalculable and sacrificial ways—to steward my life:

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Finally, thank you to the Lancaster Baptist Church family for cultivating a heart of stewardship and committing yourselves to love God, grow together, and serve others. I count it one of the greatest privileges of my life to be your pastor.

# Foreword

The story is told of a taxi driver in Washington D.C., who gave his rider an impromptu tour of the city. As they drove along Pennsylvania Avenue near the National Archives Building, the driver pointed out the statue “The Future.”

The figure is of a young woman with an open book on her lap. Her eyes, however, are off the page as she looks toward the horizon. Inscribed at the base of the monument are five words from Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*: “WHAT IS PAST IS PROLOGUE.”

“To put Shakespeare’s words in plain English,” the cab driver explained, “they just mean, ‘You ain’t seen nothing yet!’”

I have known Paul Chappell now for over twenty-one years. And I’m confident that I could ascribe either Shakespeare’s or the cab driver’s words to his life. He is a man who is continually growing—studying, learning, applying, reaching—constantly hungering for more of God’s fullness in and through his life.

Pastor Chappell wrote this book shortly after a significant season of trial in his life and shortly before his fiftieth birthday. He explains in the following pages that the book was birthed out of the trials, but in reality, it is the fruit of half a century of personal growth.

As I have had the privilege of close friendship with Dr. Chappell over the past two decades, I have seen not only his

personal growth, but also his growing humility. From the outside, we see God blessing Pastor Chappell and the Lancaster Baptist Church with increased fruit year by year. The church grows numerically and in every other way. Lancaster Baptist Church is filled with growing Christians who love each other, pray for each other, and labor together to reach people for Christ.

But I believe that the reason behind it all is that Pastor Chappell can say with John the Baptist, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Anyone observing Dr. Chappell’s ministry will immediately see personal fruit and ministry growth. Yet, as I have closely observed the man himself over the past twenty-one years, I have seen the decrease of Paul Chappell and the increase of Jesus Christ in his life.

The book you hold in your hands is a unique combination of Dr. Chappell’s growth and humility. It is written by a man who for as long as I have known him has had an intense hunger and overwhelming passion to make his life count for Christ. It is also written by a man whose personality has been tempered by the Holy Spirit’s work of grace as he seeks to exalt Christ.

You will find the truths in these pages immediately applicable, and yet, you will also find them deeply challenging. No doubt, you will find that they instill in your own heart a passion to grow and a conviction to more fully surrender every resource in your life to the Lord.

Thank you, Pastor, for writing this book. But thank you most of all for your personal growth and humility. I am privileged to be your friend, and I am thankful to call you my pastor. Thank you for stewarding your life to the glory of God.

Dr. Don Sisk

*President/Director Emeritus*

Baptist International Missions Incorporated

*Chairman of the Missions Department*

West Coast Baptist College

## Author's Note

Life—it's made up of time, relationships, priorities, influences, decisions, and a million other variables. And it is our job to manage and balance these gifts.

We want to invest our lives in that which has lasting significance, but sometimes, we struggle just to make it through another day—let alone know how to make each day fit into a larger, long-term picture of success.

This book was birthed out of a struggle to manage life's resources and my realization that I was *spending* rather than *stewarding* them.

God has a better plan. He intends for us to look past the frazzling details of our daily schedules and effectively steward His greatest gifts. Through His power and His truth, He gives us the courage and resources to live out His purposes and priorities for our lives.

# 1

## The Gift of Life A Theology of Life

Walk into any bookstore, and you will find dozens—maybe even hundreds—of books on life management. There are books on organizing, scheduling, budgeting, prioritizing, administrating, setting goals, managing people... obviously, life management is a popular and necessary skill.

Even a surface skim through these books will reveal a common subtheme. Authors attempt to teach you how to be successful by living out your dreams. They encourage you to dream big and then use management skills to become the best *you* that you can be—to reach your full potential of leadership and growth.

*Stewarding* life is a different concept. Rather than focusing on self-fulfillment and personal legacy, we start by recognizing that life is a gift from God, and He has entrusted it to us to steward for *Him*.

God has attached to your life a profound purpose that only you can live out. Stewarding life is not about learning to tap into inner reservoirs of creativity and effectively manage them with helpful systems. It is about studying God's principles for how He wants us to handle the resources He has given us—

and then applying those principles to wisely and diligently live out God's purpose for our lives.

A steward is one who spends by investment. He or she is commissioned to purposefully and wisely appropriate the resources of the master or boss. *This* is what we want to do with our lives. We want to discover the purpose God has built into our lives and live it out by fulfilling His goals for us.

As we begin to understand stewardship, we will lay a biblical foundation for the gift of life. Before we know how to properly steward the resources God has given us, we must understand what life is all about. We must answer the question: *What is my purpose on earth?*

It would be impossible to learn God's plan for life without starting in Genesis—where life itself began. Let's visit the scene of one of the earliest recorded miracles to gain a basic theology of life.

## **God's Signature Masterpiece**

Have you ever wished you could travel back in time to observe some of the miracles of Scripture? One that I would love to see is recorded in Genesis 2:7, "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

How many times have we hurriedly read this passage and never paused to take a glimpse of that incredible moment when God crafted His creative masterpiece of human life? God literally formed Adam from dust and then breathed His own breath into Adam's nostrils. God is a master artist, and human



life is His signature creation.

Understanding the beginning of life is significant because of what it tells us about God. We learn that God is eternal—the source and upholder of all life. The psalmist eloquently said, “For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light” (Psalm 36:9). And the prophet Jeremiah wrote, “O LORD, the hope of Israel, all that forsake thee shall be ashamed, and they that depart from me shall be written in the earth, because they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living waters” (Jeremiah 17:13).

God alone is self-existent. No one made or created God. He is eternal life, and He alone has the power to create and give life.

## Why Life Is Special

Until we understand the value of the gift of life, we are prone to squander it. Thus, we recognize that life is sacred because it is provided by God.

In fact, *your* life was purposefully created by God, specially planned even before you were born. Scripture affirms this truth through several passages. God told the prophet Jeremiah, “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5).

Of John the Baptist, Luke 1:15 says, “and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb.” Again, we see that even within the womb, life is significant to God.

The psalmist sang of God’s detailed interest and intervention in the prenatal care of human life: “For thou hast possessed my

reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well. My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them" (Psalm 139:13–16).

From the moment of conception, life is sanctified and recognized by God. This is a valuable possession and one that we should learn to wisely steward.

The value of life is further seen in that we are not free to end our own lives—or anyone else's life. The sixth of the Ten Commandments prohibits murder: "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13). In that one statement, God reinforced the value He places on human life.

God not only created life, but He protects it as well. In Genesis 9:6, God first gave human government the responsibility to protect life: "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man." The New Testament likewise affirms the right of government to impose the death penalty. Romans 13:4 says of government authorities: "For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil."

Obviously, God values life! He created it. He sustains it. He sanctified it. And He protects it.

# Sovereignty and Blessing

We know that God creates life, but let's go a step further to remember that *only* God creates life. He is completely sovereign over life from conception to death.

Some of the most well-known Bible accounts that support this truth are of ladies who wanted children and were specially given them by God. Sarah (Genesis 18:13–14), Hannah (1 Samuel 1:5, 19–20), and Elisabeth (Luke 1:7, 11–14) all experienced the reality that only God opens and closes the womb.

I have often had the privilege of praying with a couple who desired a baby and seeing God bless them with a little one. Sometimes He has answered our prayers by prompting them to seek medical treatment and blessing it, and sometimes He has simply opened the womb. Either way, these couples are reminded that only our sovereign God creates life.

Additionally, God is sovereign over the *length* of life. King Hezekiah was “sick unto death” in Isaiah 38, but upon his earnest request, God promised, “I will add unto thy days fifteen years” (Isaiah 38:5).

So, if God gives life, and if God takes life and even lengthens life, we need to learn to steward our lives according to *His* directions.

As Moses prepared for his death, he reminded the Israelites (whom he had led for forty years) of the determining principle of life: obedience to God. He challenged them to obey God's commands and then stated, “See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil” (Deuteronomy 30:15).

Obedience to God is a choice, but it is the choice that determines the quality of our lives.

Life is too complicated for us to manage on our own. The wisest man ever to live, King Solomon, told God, “I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in” (1 Kings 3:7b). Life contains a million variables, and many of them are outside of our control. If we want a life of significance and success, we must look to God—the giver and sustainer of life—for instruction on how to steward our lives. And we must commit to following His directions for success.

## **Your Purpose for Living**

Since God creates *and* sustains life, we are dependent on Him for fulfillment in life. Life is God’s creative masterpiece, and He alone has the power to sustain it and give it meaning and purpose.

To attempt to live apart from God and for our own purposes is both foolish and futile. As long as we view ourselves independently of God, we will fill our days trying to pursue our self-made dreams. And we will end our lives never having accomplished that for which we were created.

So, what *is* the purpose of our lives? Why did God invest His creative expertise in us? Revelation 4:11 provides the answer: “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.” God created us for His pleasure, and only as we live to glorify Him will we be fulfilled.

Jesus further commissioned us to bring God glory by telling

others of His great gift of salvation: “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). So to live for God’s glory is to make spreading the Gospel a central part of our lives.

Over twenty years ago, I decided to write a purpose statement for my life. I wanted a concisely written statement by which to evaluate my goals and activities. Here is what I wrote:

The purpose of my life is to glorify God, by living with the mind of Christ, loving and providing for my family, and impacting my generation with the Gospel of Christ.

If you were to write a purpose statement for your life, what would it say? I’m sure it would be different than mine, but it should be centered around investing your life in bringing God glory.

Here’s the exciting part of living to glorify God. It is a purpose that we can know *will be fulfilled*. In Numbers 14:21, God says, “But as truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD.” The book of Revelation further confirms that God’s eternal purposes of creation and redemption will one day culminate in absolute fulfillment. When we invest our lives in pursuing God’s goals for us, we are assured of victory before we even start!

## **Individual Designs in the Master Plan**

We were all created with the same main purpose—to glorify God. But God has given each of us a unique set of desires,

aptitudes, and gifts to creatively fulfill our purpose. Even as your fingerprints are distinct from every other person's, so your personal set of opportunities and gifts are unique to you.

Scripture tells us that even before birth, God has specially crafted individual purposes for our lives. Remember Jeremiah? God's affirmation of His unique plan for Jeremiah's life bears repeating: "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5).

God didn't design us to live "cookie-cutter lives." He has given every Christian a big-picture mission to glorify Him by making His salvation known, but He gives each of us individual ways to fulfill that purpose. For instance, God has given me the responsibilities of loving and leading my family and pastoring my church. He has also given me a passion and opportunity to teach the next generation of Christian servants in biblical ministry. When I consider how I should steward my life, I must keep these purposes as my priorities.

You, too, have a unique set of desires, opportunities, and responsibilities. God will give you a passion and dream for achieving His purposes for your life. He will give you both the faith and resources to see those dreams fulfilled. But it is up to you to wisely steward the resources He has given you. Determine now that you will invest His resources in *His* purpose for you.

## **The Greatest Gift—Eternal Life**

God is sovereign not only over the giving of life, but also over

the conclusion of our earthly life. No matter how well we steward our days on this Earth, the most important issue for us to settle is where we will spend eternity.

Many people believe that eternal life is something we earn—perhaps by good works, perhaps by a spiritual heritage, perhaps by sincere intentions. God tells us, however, that eternal life is a gift. Romans 6:23 tells us, “...the gift of God is eternal life.” As a gift, it is not something that we can earn or purchase. It is already paid for by God Himself.

How do you receive this gift of eternal life?

First, you must understand why you need it. Scripture plainly tells us that we are all sinners: “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). All of us have broken God’s perfect law.

Romans 6:23 describes the price tag for sin: “For the wages of sin is death....” This verse is speaking not only of the death of our earthly bodies, but also the eternal death apart from God in Hell. (See Revelation 21:8.)

This is where the gift of eternal life comes in. Romans 5:8 says, “But God commendeth [proved] his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” The penalty for our sin is death, and Jesus Himself paid the price when He died for us.

Jesus Christ came to earth as God in the flesh, lived a perfect life, and then voluntarily died on a cross because He loves you. On that cross, He paid for all of your sins. He took your blame! What a gift—what love! The Bible tells us that He is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

To actually own the gift of eternal life, you must receive it; you must turn to Christ and place your full trust in Him alone as your personal Saviour. Romans 10:13 says, “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

If you’ve never asked Jesus Christ to be your personal Saviour, you could do that right now. You could sincerely pray something like this:

Dear God, I know that I am separated from You because of sin. I confess that in my sin, I cannot save myself. Right now, I turn to You alone to be my Saviour. I ask You to save me from the penalty of my sin, and I trust You to provide eternal life to me.—Amen

You’ll never regret that decision! If you have just trusted Christ and received the gift of eternal life, I would love to hear from you! Please email me at [stewardinglife@strivingtogether.com](mailto:stewardinglife@strivingtogether.com).



## 2

# Your Role as a Steward

## Stewardship and Its Alternatives

I really believed I was having a heart attack. And frankly, I wasn't surprised. I was only forty-eight years old, but I had spent the last twenty-five years running at a pace that could have killed me years earlier.

The room spun. I struggled to focus on the quartet that was singing. In a moment, I was to get up and speak.

This was the fifth consecutive night of our church dinner series, a time of vision-casting and faith-encouraging that, over the years, I had anticipated and cherished. But tonight, I just couldn't seem to think straight.

It was February 18, and I had preached twenty-one out of the past twenty-three nights. Maybe this was just fatigue. That's what the doctor told me on Tuesday of that week when I had made a quick trip to the emergency room before that evening's dinner.

I mentally searched for clarity. In just a moment, I would be sharing with our people what God had laid on my heart. This year, our church was preparing to expand our overcrowded facilities with a three-phase building plan to add capacity to our existing building. In the end, we would have additional

nurseries, classrooms, a foyer and fellowship lobby, and an additional one thousand seats added to our auditorium. The seat shortage was really the most pressing—and, judging by the way things looked twenty-five years earlier, the most miraculous—need.

Almost twenty-five years prior, a group of less than twenty people had called me to be their pastor. Their church building was in foreclosure, their pastor was leaving, and it looked like the end of the line for this struggling congregation.

I hadn't even known I was candidating the night they voted for us. Our family had just been passing through the area on vacation, and my friend who was the pastor asked me to preach. I was shocked when, after the service, they voted to call me as their new pastor.

Initially, Terrie and I said we couldn't come. We were happily serving on a church staff in Northern California. But God changed our hearts, and before we had even left town, He gave us a burden for this desert community and the small church who had asked for a shepherd.

So, at God's direction, Terrie and I moved our young family to Lancaster, California, and we poured our heart, soul, and meager savings into this small flock. And then, we watched God do the miraculous. Before long, the Lancaster Baptist Church was flourishing and growing—faster than any of us could keep up with. We threw ourselves in with whole-hearted involvement as we watched God transform life after life by His grace.

As the spiritual shepherd, I worked long, diligent hours to feed the Lord's flock. I went soulwinning, disciplined new

converts, and worked into the early hours of the morning preparing expository messages.

The early situation with the building foreclosure proved to be the least of our building worries. As our people flourished spiritually, God blessed, and the church grew numerically. Soon, our church family was giving sacrificially to purchase land to expand. From that point forward, it seems we have been in one unending building program. Every year, there is need for more space to accommodate the growth as God keeps adding to the church.

In 1995, our church founded and opened the doors of West Coast Baptist College. Training young men and women for Christian ministry has been a delightful privilege. It has also added substantially to the daily challenge of pastoring a mega church.

In the early days, as our facility needs expanded, we launched each building program with a one-night “giving banquet.” But our last giving banquet was years ago. As God blessed our church, we transitioned to a “dinner series,”—a full week of vision-sharing banquets. Every night for a solid week, I would pour out my heart to our church family—one group at a time.

This particular year’s series was a challenge because our church was smack in the middle of a recession. Some of our people were unemployed. Many were struggling. Yet, every night, I challenged a new group to look into the future, even into eternity, and make an investment of faith for the people we could reach for Christ.

Additionally, the past couple of years had been incredibly

challenging for me personally, and I was still carrying the weight of the recent trials. The season began when we discovered that our church had been the victim of embezzlement. Navigating through this issue required long and intense hours of administration as well as heart-rending ministry decisions and counsel.

Just as we began to come through this experience, my son, Larry, was diagnosed with cancer. He underwent two serious surgeries and months of chemotherapy. Although Larry himself maintained a consistent hope in the Lord through the cancer diagnosis and treatment, it was excruciating to watch him suffer.

Less than a year later, one of our associate pastors, Cary Schmidt, was also diagnosed with cancer. Brother Schmidt is like a son in the faith to me, and although he went through chemo with courage and grace, his illness was a burden to all of us who know and love him.

This long season of challenges took a greater toll on me—both mentally and physically—than even I realized.

But here at the dinner series, my mind was on none of those challenges. With everything that was in me, I wanted to see God once again do the miraculous as we as a church family would give by faith to see His work go forward.

The quartet began the last verse of their song, and my chest throbbed. Once again, I struggled to gain the focus I would need to stand up in a moment and help our people see the vision God had placed on my heart. In that moment, it seemed the full weight of the burden was literally on my heart—centered squarely on my chest. This had to be more than

fatigue. I concentrated on one breath at a time.

The quartet finished. But I couldn't stand up. John Alvarez, one of our godly deacons, caught my eye. Instantly, he knew something was very wrong.

In an instant, a faithful doctor from our church who was present was taking my blood pressure. Simultaneously, the doctor and John Alvarez said, "Pastor, you're going to the hospital. Right now."

I didn't have the strength to argue.

Our city mayor happened to be sitting at my table as well, and he jumped in the car with us. As we sped across town, I heard him call the emergency room to tell them we were on our way.

I also remembered something else, something I had told my church less than two years earlier. I had preached a message from Galatians 4:19, "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you." As best I could, I had described to them the burden I carried for their spiritual growth and the continual exertion on my part to see each member growing in Christ.

As if I were listening to a sound byte from that sermon, I heard myself reiterate a statement and answer, "You say, 'Pastor, this will kill you.' Maybe it will."

Soon, I found myself on an examining table, and from somewhere far away, a doctor was asking me to unbutton my shirt. But I didn't have the strength to raise my arms.

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In the days that followed, I underwent a battery of medical

tests. The prognosis was a good news/bad news scenario. The good news was, I did not have a heart attack. In fact, although my chest was still pulsating, my heart was fine.

The bad news was, I had to take time away to rest. My doctor and a specialist both clearly warned me, “If you don’t get away, this will kill you.” That was tough news for someone who enjoyed a full calendar.

But even if the doctor hadn’t told me to rest, I had no other choice. I had hit a wall of fatigue like I had never known before, and I simply had no strength to go forward—not even to answer the phone. Or unbutton my shirt.

My doctor, a godly Christian man, reminded me of the principle of Sabbath rest, and he pointed out that I hadn’t really taken a full day of rest for many, many weeks. Dr. Kohl was greatly used of God in my life at that moment. His scripturally based insight was exactly what I needed to hear.

The cardiologist I saw a few days later was not a Christian, but at that moment, he was a minister of grace to me when he said, “You need to go rest. And you need to do it in good conscience.”

The deacons graciously gave me time away. In fact, they *adamantly* gave me time away. “Take as much time as you need, Pastor; and don’t come back before you should.”

My kids took my cell phone away from me and drove Terrie and me to the airport.

We traveled a little, and then settled at the family farm in Colorado for a much-needed, unoptional “sabbatical.” My uncle has a beautiful hunting cabin there which became a sanctuary to me as I prayed, studied, read, and rested. With a

large sketch pad for a journal, I stepped back and looked long and hard at the “big picture.”

## **Squanderers, Spenders, or Stewards**

Unbeknownst to me, I had begun a stewardship journey through which I would reevaluate how to best use the resources of life. I had decided years ago to live my life for God’s purposes, but that night in the emergency room caused me to question how effectively I was managing the resources at my disposal.

As we saw in our last chapter, life itself is a gift from God. Additionally, every resource we have comes from God. Our time, finances, health, relationships, influence—every component of our life is a resource from God. They are tools that can be used to accomplish God’s plan for our lives.

Our approach to the resources God has given us will determine our success in fulfilling God’s purpose for our lives. In my life and through years of counseling, I have observed three basic methods people choose to appropriate the resources God has given to them—squandering, spending, or stewarding. Let’s take a few moments to examine each.

### **SQUANDERERS—A TRAGIC WASTE**

First, we could squander God’s resources by indiscriminately wasting them in purposeless living. This approach is rampant in our society today. People all around us, with no concept of

the fact that they have a divine purpose for living, coast through life with the motto “live, and let live.” And in the process, they waste their lives.

Our propensity to waste our lives—one moment and one resource at a time—makes it essential that we learn to strategically plan and purposefully budget God’s gifts of time, finances, relationships, and health.

But the squanderers are a broader group than you may realize. Some are directionless wasters, but others waste by using life for less than it was designed to accomplish. I would include in this category even the most successful and disciplined executives who are investing their resources into selfish or temporal pursuits.

When you consider that we have the opportunity to successfully live with a divine mission and invest our lives in eternal purposes, anything less is a tragic waste.

## **SPENDERS—AN UNWISE EXPENSE**

On the opposite end of the spectrum from the squanderers are the spenders—those who spend God’s resources without allowing them to be replenished. Often, the motivation is right—we want to selflessly give to others; but the method is wrong—we are failing to depend on God by ignoring His built-in cycles of rest and renewal.

I have come to several points in my life when I realized that in my fervency to live for Christ, I was spending my resources faster than they could be replenished. In fact, the impetus to write this book came after I crashed from this kind of living, particularly after the series of events mentioned previously. I



learned that I needed to step back and reevaluate my strategy for fulfilling my purpose—giving God glory through my life.

For years, I enjoyed and thrived on a full calendar and filling every moment with pouring myself into either my family or my ministry. Without realizing it, I became addicted to the resulting adrenaline rush as I learned I could function on fewer and fewer hours of sleep.

My motives were right, and God was blessing our ministry exponentially. But, through that painful season, I learned that life cannot sustain a breakneck pace forever.

It was in the weeks of recovery that I began to understand my need to *invest* God's resources rather than simply *spend* them. Completely drained and physically incapacitated, I asked the Lord to retrain my thinking.

Those of us who have already determined to live for God's glory long to see God multiply our resources, and we fiercely drive ourselves to give ourselves fully in ministering to others. For a while, we may thrive on the adrenaline of such sacrifice. We may even convince ourselves that God is miraculously enabling us to serve like Superman. But the truth is, if we give without being replenished, we will eventually be empty. And, believe me, the crash is painful.

God created life to optimally function with natural rhythms of work and rest. As we will see more fully in chapters 4 and 5, to invest at peak performance, we need to be willing to pause and seek God's times of replenishment.

I'm not saying we should give less than our all to the Lord. As a pastor, I can heartily echo the words of the Apostle Paul, "I will very gladly spend and be spent for you" (2 Corinthians

12:15). It is my delight to give myself to the Lord and to the people He has allowed me to serve. First John 3:16 makes it clear that this is the privilege of every Christian: “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” Jesus laid down His life for us, and He gives us opportunity to selflessly give of our lives to serve others.

But we cannot give what we don’t have! This is why it is vital that we don’t foolishly expend our lives without receiving God’s replenishing grace. Not only does God create life, but He sustains it as well. When we turn life into a personal “rat race,” struggling to keep up with the high demands we have placed on ourselves, we forget the most fundamental truths of the Bible: all of our resources come from God, and He alone has the power to replenish them.

We must humbly remember that our lives are not ours to foolishly spend. We should invest our lives only at a pace in which we can receive God’s enabling resources.

## **STEWARDS—A PURPOSEFUL INVESTMENT**

A better option than *spending* our lives is *stewarding* our lives. Stewarding life means I recognize that life itself is a gift from God and I purpose to use it for His glory. It also means I recognize that God graciously provides the resources I need to carry out His purposes. He gives *and* sustains life. He provides *and* replenishes my resources.

Thankfully, God has given us a guide for wisely stewarding

the valuable resources He has entrusted to our care. Stewarding life means I choose to use my God-given resources according to the principles set forth in Scripture—principles God has promised to bless. Discovering these principles is what this book is all about.

## **Begin with the End in Mind**

Wise stewards look beyond the choices of today to the outcomes of tomorrow. What investor opens a portfolio with no plan or predicted outcome? No one wants to indiscriminately funnel money into a non-defined investment.

Even as investors handle their resources with strategy and an end goal in mind, we, if we are to wisely steward our lives, must look far beyond today and determine what we want the end of our lives to look like.

Dr. Howard Hendricks once said, “Sometimes we think we’re in the land of the living on our way to the land of the dying; when in fact, we’re in the land of the dying on our way to the land of the living.” The sooner we realize this is true, the better. We so easily live only for today. Our default mode is to only expend energy in filling our lives with comfort and pleasure, but that’s because we forget about eternity.

Many of the resources God has given us can be replenished or restructured. But our lives as a whole can only be lived once. We just have one life. And eventually it will end. The question is, what do we want the end to look like?

Remembering that our lives can’t last on Earth forever is not morbid. It’s wise. It motivates us to purposefully invest in

eternity. As the famous missionary C.T. Studd wisely wrote, “Only one life, ’twill soon be past, Only what’s done for Christ will last.”

At the end of our life, we will stand before Christ to give an account for how we have used the resources He has allotted to us. My overwhelming desire is in that moment to hear my Lord say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant...enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Matthew 25:21).

But hearing our Lord’s words of praise won’t happen tomorrow unless we plan and live for it today. We must remember that we are God’s stewards of the resources of life.

## **Your Role as a Steward**

Our natural tendency is to define ourselves by what we do. But there in my uncle’s cabin in southwest Colorado, the Lord taught me so much—about life, about Himself, about myself, and, especially, about my role as a steward.

Weak as I was, there were times I wondered if I would ever preach again. It seemed as if I had been stripped of every action-based facet of my identity.

It was then that the Lord reminded me that if I wanted to invest my life for Him, I must learn to steward it wisely. In the pages of my sketchpad journal, I rewrote my life strategy, this time with a fuller understanding of my role as a steward.

Much of this book is the outflow of that journal. It is a transparent compilation of the answers the Lord gave me in a Colorado cabin when I stepped back to look at the big picture. It identifies the key areas of life and the greatest resources God

has given us to steward for Him.

# 3

## Investing in the Bank of Eternity Stewarding Time

If life is a gift, then time is the vehicle by which it is delivered to us. Each day we live, we have at our disposal 24 hours—1,440 minutes—86,000 seconds...and every moment is a precious gift from God.

Someone calculated how a typical lifespan of seventy years is spent:

- Sleep**—23 years—32.9%
- Work**—16 years—22.8%
- Television**—8 years—11.4%
- Eating**—6 years—8.6%
- Travel**—6 years—8.6%
- Leisure**—4.5 years—6.5%
- Illness**—4 years—5.7%
- Dressing**—2 years—2.8%
- Religion**—0.5 years—0.7%

I don't know if this estimate is accurate, but it does remind me that the ability to steward our time wisely is vital. Benjamin Franklin sagely observed, "Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time, for it is the stuff life is made of."

Just as with life itself, we have three options for how we use

our time: we can waste it, spend it, or invest it by wise stewardship.

Time is a slippery commodity. You can't hold onto it, and you can't save it for future use. If you aren't prepared to allocate this moment, it is gone forever. Time is here for a moment, and then it's gone forever—with one possible exception.

## **The Bank of Eternity**

Imagine your bank calls to ask you to help them pilot a new program. The plan is both lavish and simple: Each morning, the bank will credit your account with \$86,000, which you will be free to spend or invest as you please. But every night, your account will close with a balance of zero. It will carry no balance from day to day, meaning that you must spend or invest the deposit each day or it will be wasted. I think if most of us had such an opportunity, we would manage to find good use for the \$86,000 every day!

The truth is, you *do* have a bank that credits your account each morning. Its name is *Time*, and it generously gives you 86,000 seconds daily. But like the bank we described above, every morning the non-refundable deposit is cancelled by evening. Whatever you don't spend or invest is wasted. Failure to use the day's deposit results in irreplaceable loss.

A wise steward of time learns to redeem his or her moments from the Bank of Today and invest them into the Bank of Eternity. Eternity knows nothing about the fleeting nature of time, and anything deposited there will be forever preserved.

This is the heart of Paul's instruction in Ephesians 5:15–17: “See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.”

This passage instructs us to develop an eternal value system for our time. We redeem today when we wisely invest it into eternity—before it expires. When we thus invest our time, what we have done with it will last forever.

## Defining Success

Time—however many years of it we have—is our opportunity to achieve success in life. But if we don't clearly identify what success looks like, we may come to the end of our lives only to realize that we lived for the wrong goals.

What is your definition of success?

From a secular perspective, success may be making wise financial investments, climbing to the top of the ladder in a career field, or accumulating prestigious possessions. None of this is necessarily wrong, but neither does it quantify true success. After all, good financial returns, high positions in a career, and material possessions won't last forever. If these become the goals of your life, when your time is gone—so is your success.

When God tells us to steward our time with wisdom—to redeem the time—He spells out what He means —“understanding what the will of the Lord is.” Success is knowing and doing the will of God. It is investing our time in that which will last for eternity.



As a pastor, I've stood by many deathbeds. I've listened as people have looked back over their lives and whispered their final regrets. Never once have I heard someone say, "I only wish I had worked more overtime" or "If only I had become the CEO." But I have heard many people lament, "I wish I had spent more time with my children" or "I wish I had invested more into the work of the Lord."

It is entirely possible to diligently spend your time on fleeting goals. Some things just don't matter when you approach the bridge between time and eternity. If you don't clearly identify what true success is, you will come to the end of your life and realize that you lived for the wrong goals. At that point, you will wish you had invested more into eternity.

I've known people who died in their eighties and nineties but have been unsuccessful by eternal standards. And I've known children who have died having accomplished more for eternity than I've done in a lifetime. Who would you say is successful?

## **Priorities by Purpose**

Most people enter each day on a treadmill of meaningless routines. Each day is a repeat of the last, and they go to bed to catch the rest they need to do it all over again tomorrow. Routines are, of course, beneficial, but only as they contribute to an overall picture of success. Our lives should be more than getting up, going to work, coming home, watching the news, going to bed, and repeating the cycle the next day.

Look back over your last week. Are your moments being

spent in ways that contribute to fulfilling God's will for your life? Are you investing in eternity by investing in people—loving your wife, spending time with your children, witnessing to your co-workers, encouraging godly friends, ministering to others? These are eternal priorities that must be woven into the fabric of our days, and we will learn more about them in upcoming chapters.

## **The Enemy of Time and Purpose**

If we are to accomplish God's will for our lives, we must obey the admonition in Ephesians 5:15 to “walk circumspectly.” To be circumspect means to be cautious and vigilant, to keep the entire circumference in view.

Why the need for such alertness? God warns us from the outset that we have an enemy who seeks to devour our lives and our time. “The days are evil” (Ephesians 5:16), God warns. He cautions us to “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

Satan will do all he can to destroy your time on Earth. If he can't destroy it in sinful living, he will devour you by eating up your time with activities of no eternal value. Either way, the end result is the same—a wasted life.

This is why you must purposefully steward your time. You must guard against Satan's tactics and live to accomplish God's purposes.

I have a strong aversion to the phrase “just hanging out.” (Ask my children!) We live in a time period in which sin

abounds like never before. But this also means that the opportunities to live for God abound like never before. This is not the time to waste our lives in frivolous activities. As one author observed, “More time is wasted not in hours but in minutes. A bucket with a small hole in the bottom gets just as empty as a bucket that is deliberately kicked over.”<sup>1</sup>

Because Satan is actively working to devour our lives and the minutes of which they are comprised, we must purposefully engage our time in eternity. We must *plan* to redeem every moment for the glory of God.

## Be Careful by the Rims

Some of the most treasured memories of my childhood were made on my grandparents’ pinto bean farm in southwest Colorado. The fields, the orchard, and especially the canyons were a young boy’s adventure dreamland. My grandmother often warned me, however, “Paul, be careful by the canyon rims.” She knew what she was talking about. One slip of the foot at the top of a canyon wall, and serious injury was sure to follow.

When God warns us to walk circumspectly, He is underscoring the need to walk with balance. We must tread ever so carefully around the cavernous areas of our lives. Even good uses of our time have dangerous possibilities if we neglect balance.

How many people have you seen slip off the rim when they gave *all* of their time to one pursuit? I know husbands who have lost their marriages because they spent all of their time at

the office. I know preachers who have lost their families because they invested all they had in the church. I know ladies who have lost their health because they gave all of their time to ministering to others.

Survival requires that we learn to walk with balance. It is not possible to give too much of our lives to the Lord—He deserves our all! But it is entirely possible, even with pure intentions, to live an unbalanced life. When we engage all of our time in one pursuit, injury is sure to follow.

How can we avoid slipping off the canyon rims? We must allocate our time so that we steward *all* of the resources that God has entrusted to our care—including health, family, finances, and ministry.

Unfortunately, balance is more easily preached than practiced. In my own life, I've often experienced a measured slip on the rim before I realized I was teetering on the brink of serious injury. God is good to allow us to feel the pain of an unbalanced life when we are losing our equilibrium. We, however, must be sensitive to Him during these times.

Early in my ministry, my tendency was to invest so much in the church that I failed to see the needs of my family. More recently, I realized I was investing so much in ministry that I neglected my own health. It took some occurrences of stroke-level high blood pressure to get my attention. Only then did I realize that no matter how good your intentions or how well-meaning you are in pushing yourself forward while off balance, if you slip on the rim, you go down.

Thankfully, God freely provides a resource to give us balance as we steward our time.

# The “Must Have” for Your “Must Do” List

I live by lists. I have a list of priorities, a list of goals, a list of upcoming sermons. I keep a prayer list, a project list, and a to-do list. Lists help me keep my time focused on written priorities and predetermined plans. I am a major advocate of the advice, “Plan your work and work your plan.”

Yet, in all of our planning there is an ingredient we must have if we are to know how to steward our time for eternity. Our lists must be made through the grid of this resource, or we will simply be determinedly spinning our wheels.

What is this “must have” for your “must do” list?

Wisdom.

When God instructs us to walk circumspectly—with vigilance and balance—He equips us to do it with His wisdom. He even specifically tells us to walk, “not as fools, but as wise.”

Walking in wisdom is knowing and doing what matters most. Wisdom teaches us which priorities and activities have eternal significance. Wisdom helps us avoid time wasters. And wisdom helps us avoid being driven.

The polar opposite of a lackadaisical, time-wasting lifestyle is driven living. But it’s not significantly better than the other. Driven living makes *us* the center of our well-planned schedules. It may stem from a passion to live with eternal purpose, but it signifies that we believe God’s work depends on us and neglects to acknowledge that God created us as

finite resources dependent upon *Him*.

Drivenness can be a tendency in my own life, and it was a topic of thorough study and specific soul-searching during those days in my uncle's cabin in Colorado. I jotted down three characteristics of driven people:

**Driven people** are sometimes busy doing the wrong things. (Activity is not the same as productivity. We can have a full schedule of unproductive activities.)

**Driven people** are caught in the uncontrolled pursuit of expansion. (Bigger isn't always better. God doesn't measure our work by size, but by our surrender to Him.)

**Driven people** are often unconsciously trying to prove something to themselves or to others. (Their motives may be to live for eternity, but they want to be sure their critics see it happen.)

Driven living is a treadmill with no relief and no escape—except wisdom. Only wisdom can teach us to define success not by activity, expansion, or self-validation—but by God's will for our lives.

## **Stewarding Your Time with Wisdom**

Of course, wisdom doesn't come overnight. Rather, we grow in wisdom as we seek it in God's Word (Proverbs 2:2–6), specifically ask God for it (James 1:5), listen to the counsel of others (Proverbs 1:5), and through trial and error apply it to our

lives (Proverbs 6:23).

Often, when I have felt the effects of living without balance or have been convicted that I didn't use my time as wisely as I should, I have earnestly sought God's wisdom for my time.

One of the most intense seasons of learning for me in this was in the weeks following my emergency run to the hospital. In my journal, I outlined important truths on which I needed to base my decisions regarding time. These notes would be a turning point for me in helping me walk with wisdom rather than feeling that I was running a desperate, unwinnable race.

**What God has given me is sustainable.** It isn't God's nature to give us more responsibilities than grace. He doesn't give us more to do than we can get done in the time He has provided.

**An opportunity does not equal an obligation.** More opportunities present themselves to us than we are physically able to accomplish. Only wisdom can help us separate between the good, better, and best. If we fail to make the distinction, however, we will find ourselves overburdened and underequipped. What *God* gives us is sustainable. What we put on ourselves may be unbearable.

**I must identify and focus on the most important things.** Every opportunity looks important at the moment it presents itself, but living with an eternal perspective will help us sort out what matters most. Often, looking beyond time helps distinguish between the trivial and the truly

important. Sometimes it is helpful to ask, “What is going to matter when I stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ?” It has been said that great leaders attribute their success not to things they said “yes” to, but to the things they said “no” to—the things they didn’t do.

**Tarrying times are not idle times.** We like to see immediate results. But there are seasons when all we can do is wait on the Lord. Contrary to the counsel of our busy natures, waiting on God is good use of our time. These seasons allow us to sense *His* purposes for our lives, and they equip us to serve with His power (Isaiah 40:31).

**I will center my time on the main thing God has called me to do.** There are some things that only I can do. For instance, nobody else can fulfill the husband/father needs of my wife and children. Regardless of any other life achievements, if I neglect these responsibilities, I have failed—and my family members are the ones who will suffer. The same could be said for other areas of my calling. God has called me to be the senior pastor of Lancaster Baptist Church. As the pastor, there are some things that I am responsible to do—preparing spiritually nourishing sermons, for example. If I spend my time doing what many others could do, to the neglect of my primary call, I’ll miss the purpose God has given to me. In your case, the main thing that God has called you to do may not be to pastor. But whatever it is, you must identify it and then center your time around it.



# The Universal Law of Time

Wherever you go and whatever your responsibilities may include, there is a law of time that is non-optional and unchanging: Time is a limited resource.

Have you ever noticed that anything can become more valuable when you realize that it is a limited resource? This is why “limited editions” of art sell for more than their easily reproducible counterparts. Time is no different. When we recognize that we are finite—that our days are numbered—we are more careful to use each day with wisdom.

Wisdom leads us to pray with the psalmist, “So teach us to number our days...” (Psalm 90:12).

Dr. Mark Rasmussen, who serves as Vice President at West Coast Baptist College, developed a visual reminder of the limited nature of life. On his fiftieth birthday, he calculated how many weeks he had left if he were to live the full lifespan of seventy years mentioned in Psalm 90. He then purchased a large glass bowl and filled it with 1,040 marbles—one for each week. Every Saturday night, he removes one marble from his bowl and tosses it in the trash—never to be regained. He is thus reminded on a continual basis of the limited and fleeting nature of time.

Living with a sense of numbered days is not morbid. It is motivating. It propels us to make every day count for the glory of God. It reminds us that there is an end to our days and that we don't want to reach that point only to look back and wonder how we could have wasted so much time.

# Assumption and Presumption

The opposite of remembering the limited nature of life is described in James 4:13: “Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain.” Here James describes the epitome of a person who assumes life will continue as it always has. This assumption leads to presumptuous living. The person described in this passage assumes success and presumes upon God that he can live according to his own plans—never seeking the will of God.

James has an important reminder for our presumptuous tendencies: “Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.” In other words, “Your days are numbered. Live with an awareness of eternity.”

Stewarding our time with wisdom means we won’t assume tomorrow will be like today. Today’s opportunities may disappear tomorrow. Tomorrow itself may disappear before today ends. Thus, James instructs us, “For that ye ought to say, *If the Lord will*, we shall live, and do this, or that.”

Investing our time in accomplishing God’s will requires that we pause periodically to *seek* God’s will. It is so easy to be lulled by the patterns and rhythms of our daily living into a slow drift away from eternal living. We need to set predetermined checkpoints to reevaluate our schedules and recalibrate our spirits.

## Establishing Checkpoints

A vital checkpoint in my life takes place each morning as I spend time with the Lord in prayer. I ask Him to give me wisdom to steward the day for Him, and I review my to-do list of what I plan to accomplish. I ask Him to show me if He wants me to redirect my plans for the day.

Then, each week, I set aside time for a brief review. During this time, I look at my list of priorities and take a few minutes to evaluate how accurately I've been allocating time to the highest priorities in my life. Then, with these priorities at the forefront of my mind, I sketch out a plan for the week ahead—being careful to make my schedule reflect my God-given priorities. Often, through this review, the Holy Spirit will prompt me to spend more time with Terrie or to specifically seek out time with one of my children. Sometimes, He will burden me for a church member who needs encouragement or a friend who needs a call. By setting aside time to seek the Lord's direction, I insure that, to the best of my understanding, my coming week reflects God's will for my life.

In addition to my daily time with the Lord and my weekly review, I periodically—usually about once every quarter—set aside a day to take a more thorough personal inventory.

In whatever form and whatever times you pause to evaluate your use of time, it is vital that you do it. James' message above is clear: Don't just drift through life. *Think* about what you do. Seek God's will for your days.

# The Tyranny of the Urgent or the Urgency of the Important?

We live in a driven society. Whatever time we don't plan will be filled. As one author suggested, unplanned time or unwise priorities cause us to live under the "tyranny of the urgent." We live busy—but empty—days, and we end each of them wondering how we could have been so occupied accomplishing so little.

The only escape from the tyranny of the urgent is to live with the urgency of the important. Rather than allowing the loudest voice or most pressing issue to consume our attention, we must choose to focus our time on the urgent matter of fulfilling God's will. What God has called you to do can only be done by you, and it can only be done in one lifetime. Numbered days demand focused lives.

The urgency of the important reminds us to recognize the fleeting nature of time against the greater weight of eternity. It calls us to invest our time in that which counts forever. It compels us to reach lost souls and love our families. It shapes our schedules to God's will for our lives.

Don't miss today's opportunity to invest your time into the bank of eternity. You don't want to live your life but waste your purpose. Steward your time with the wisdom that directs your moments into accomplishing God's will for your life.

## 4

# Back to the Basics Stewarding Health (Part 1)

Before you cringe at the subject matter of this chapter, let me assure you that I am not a health nut. In fact, my repertoire of humor includes a broad selection of jokes on health.

My friend, R.B. Ouellette, has for years told me that I should exercise more. I retorted with the oneliner, “Every time I get the urge to exercise, I lie down till the feeling passes.”

When I started putting on weight, I enjoyed teasing, “The second day of a diet is always easier than the first. By the second day, you’re off it.”

But the day came when I couldn’t ignore the need to steward my health. My chest was throbbing and my blood pressure was 220/115—stroke level. When, at the doctors’ orders, I took some time to rest, I knew I needed a different approach to health—a more biblical one.

## Why Christians Care about Health

I read and researched through more than a dozen books during my much-needed break, but I especially focused on reading and meditating on Scripture. With a new paradigm on health, it

was amazing to me how much Scripture speaks to the subject of caring for our bodies. I knew (and even sometimes preached) this before, but I hadn't taken it seriously. Not seriously enough anyway.

Reading 3 John 2 in the wake of a physical collapse, I understood more clearly than ever the need to steward health in order to further ministry. “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.”

The Apostle John wanted his dear friend Gaius to enjoy the same robust health physically that he already possessed spiritually. Undoubtedly, spiritual health is by far the most important of the two, but physical health—to the degree that it lies within our power to strengthen—is important as well. John wanted Gaius to be free from the distraction of illness and pain that he might best carry out the work to which God had called him.

Scripture is clear that God's purpose for our physical body is that we would use it to His honor. When He purchased us, He didn't just claim our souls—He purchased our bodies as well. First Corinthians 6:19–20 makes it plain: “What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.”

As Christians, we belong to Christ—lock, stock, and barrel. Our bodies are His possession—His temple. As a temple is made for worship, we are to use our bodies to bring honor and glory to Christ.

This is why the Apostle John wanted Gaius to have strong health—that he might have the strength to expend his life in service for Christ. The ultimate reason for desiring strong health and prolonged days is that we might more fully glorify God.

Much of our culture's emphasis on health panders to self-gratification. Yes, it is pleasurable to be healthy, but our primary motivation for stewarding our health is the realization that our bodies do not belong to us, and we are responsible to use them in Christ's service.

## **Bigger than How I Feel**

There are many aspects of health and sickness that we do not understand. I don't know, for instance, why my son Larry developed cancer; and I don't believe it was due to physical neglect on his part. Neither do I understand why many of the dearest, godliest Christians I know are crippled in pain and limited by physical suffering.

But I do know that Romans 8:28 is true and that the “all things” referenced in this verse includes sickness and health. “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

In God's sovereignty, He has promised to work all things for our good and His eternal purposes. Although I wish that I and every other Christian I know could enjoy continual health, I recognize that in God's providence, He has a bigger purpose than I can see.

Throughout Scripture we see the providence of God in health and sickness. Consider King Hezekiah, for instance. Isaiah 38:1 records that he was “sick unto death.” The prophet Isaiah told him to settle his earthly affairs, for he was soon to die.

Hezekiah cried out to the Lord, asking Him to spare his life. God answered his request and gave him an additional fifteen years of life. God then gave Isaiah a physical remedy for Hezekiah’s sickness: “Let them take a lump of figs, and lay it for a plaister upon the boil, and he shall recover” (Isaiah 38:21).

Hezekiah’s testimony reminds us that God is sovereign over the beginning and end of our lives. Even if we consume only the healthiest foods, exercise properly, and are careful to rest and replenish, we really cannot control how many days we have on Earth.

Another story reminds us that even in days of illness or disease, God has a purpose bigger than we can immediately see.

Jesus and His disciples passed by a man who had been born blind. The disciples immediately took the path our flesh craves—they tried to find a *reason* to tag onto the malady. And so they questioned Jesus, “Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2).

Aside from their question being ludicrous (how could the man’s sin have caused blindness *at birth?*), it was foolish. As Jesus explained to the disciples, God’s purposes in our sickness or health are often beyond our comprehension. “Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him” (John 9:3).



And then Jesus healed him.

And God was glorified.

If the blind man had spent his years trying to understand the reason he had been born blind, he would have been frustrated and confused. Only *later* could he see God's purposes in his blindness and healing—in God's perfect timing.

As you seek to apply God's principles of health to your life, remember to trust His purposes. In both sickness and health, God desires that our lives would bring Him glory. Bigger than how you or I feel is how fully we are magnifying Christ.

The purpose of the Christian is always that God would be glorified through our lives. To this end, we want to do all we can to steward our health so we have the greatest capacity possible to serve the Lord. And, we also choose to leave the unknown and unfixable aspects of our health in the Lord's wise providence.

## **Keep It Simple**

In recent years, libraries of material have been written on health and wellness. From gimmicks to solid research, it seems there is a never-ending stream of new discoveries and suggested tricks.

Some of the plethora of health research is nothing more than marketing strategy. There are complicated diets for the perfectionists, and there are clubs for the socialites. Many of the books have their own companion kits—complete with special cookbooks, exercise equipment, and perhaps even a few promotional pens or notebooks to track progress.

Yet, in my reading, I've observed that the most solid research and expert advice has a common vein of simplicity. In fact, much of this research supports the basic testimonies of health in Scripture. In this chapter, we will look at two of God's choicest servants—Daniel and Elijah—and learn from their lives three simple, but often overlooked, principles for stewarding our health.

I'm certainly no doctor, and as I already admitted, I've often neglected common sense when it comes to health. But I'm a bit wiser now for the repercussions, and I'd like to invite you to focus with me on some of the basics.

## **Eat for Nourishment**

You know the story of Daniel. He was taken captive from his homeland of Israel and carried to Babylon. Included in the group of educated, skilled young Israeli men, Daniel was to be educated in the ways of the Babylonians for three years and then serve in the palace.

There was a definite problem with these proceedings for Daniel. He was required to partake of “a daily provision of the king's meat, and of the wine which he drank” (Daniel 1:5).

At first glance, this would seem to be an ideal situation. The other captives from Israel certainly weren't getting to dine on the king's food! “But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank” (Daniel 1:8).

Why wouldn't Daniel eat this scrumptious fare? God had given the Jews dietary laws, and the king's meat and wine no

doubt violated those laws. And so Daniel “requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself” (Daniel 1:8). He even suggested an alternate plan, “Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink” (Daniel 1:12).

Daniel chose a simple, nutritional diet consisting of high fiber and vegetables and omitting unclean animals as specified by the dietary laws in Leviticus.

While we recognize that in this age of grace we are no longer under the Old Testament dietary regulations, one can also see God’s wisdom in providing this basic code of dietary ethics. Leviticus 3:17 commanded, “It shall be a perpetual statute for your generations throughout all your dwellings, that ye eat neither fat nor blood.” In Leviticus 11, God gave a detailed classification of which animals could be eaten. The land animals that were clean had to have a split hoof and chew their cud. This would include cows, sheep, and deer. Unclean animals God mentioned included pigs, camels, hares, and coneys.

Many of the dietary laws in the Old Testament were given for the physical health and protection of God’s people. Although they did not understand the medical reasons behind avoiding fat, blood, and unclean animals, they were healthier for following God’s laws.

We live in a culture that lives to eat rather than eating to live. Many have observed that in our unrestrained love for food, most of us are digging our own graves with a fork and spoon.

The astounding part of this is that healthy eating is not complicated! Sure, there are plenty of detailed diets for weight

loss or needs of particular illnesses and allergies. But, for the most part, we would all be healthier by simply eating the fiber-rich, vegetable-plentiful diet of Daniel and abiding by the Levitical laws concerning which meat to consume.

As I noted earlier, I'm no fan of diets, and I can tell dieting jokes with the best of them! With my heart and soul I believe the old proverb, "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach"! Yet, I've also come to believe that as a matter of stewardship, I honor the Lord when I exercise self-control and eat primarily for nourishment rather than for pleasure.

## **Intensely Hunger for God**

Not only did Daniel choose a simple diet—he also craved God more than food. In fact, Daniel hungered for God and for His wisdom with an intensity that is convicting.

Years after Daniel was taken to Babylon, God gave him a special revelation of the future through a vision which Daniel only partially understood. With an overwhelming hunger for God's wisdom, Daniel fasted and prayed for three straight weeks (Daniel 10:1–3). In answer to Daniel's spiritual hunger, God delivered the wisdom and understanding he needed.

Daniel's concerns in fasting were not obesity, type 2 diabetes, or the other diseases that plague our indulgent lifestyle today. He wanted the power of God, and he wanted it more than anything else.

The definition of a scriptural fast is "to restrict food for a spiritual purpose." Throughout Scripture, we see many leaders who did this.

**Moses**—Exodus 34:28

**Elijah**—1 Kings 19:8

**David**—2 Samuel 12:16-23

**Jehoshaphat**—2 Chronicles 20:3

**Josiah**—Jeremiah 36:9

**Ezra**—Ezra 10:6

**Nehemiah**—Nehemiah 1:4

**Daniel**—Daniel 10:3

**Esther**—Esther 4:16

**Anna**—Luke 2:37

**Jesus**—Luke 4:1-2

**Paul**—2 Corinthians 11:27

**Cornelius**—Acts 10:30

**Church leaders and elders**—Acts 14:23

Through fasting, these men and women said, “I’m not going to allow the lusts of the flesh to control my life. More than I want any physical appetite fulfilled, I want God’s blessing.”

Perhaps one of the reasons that fasting is so absent in the lives of many Christians is that we’ve forgotten the purpose behind it. Fasting allows us extra time and motivation to earnestly seek the face of God. Fasting is an outward expression of our inner hunger for God. It curbs the appetites of the flesh and helps us affirm and develop a heart that desires God more than physical pleasure.

Fasting can be a tough battle, and I don’t pretend to know when or how often you should engage in it. But I do know that fasting should not be foreign to the life of a believer. As one author pointed out, “We need to make a choice as to whether the Holy Spirit will have control over our beings or we will give

those reins to the flesh.”<sup>1</sup>

While there are medical conditions that preclude some forms of fasting, even then we can still find a way to earnestly seek the Lord. If you are unable to fast for an entire day or meal, ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in ways you *can* fast. Perhaps you would abstain from a particular type of food or activity. In whatever way the Holy Spirit directs you, your emphasis in fasting should be on seeking God, rather than performing a routine.

Daniel’s testimony concerning health and godliness makes it obvious that food was not his god. I’m afraid that if we’re painfully honest, we couldn’t often say the same about ourselves.

Let’s look at one more Bible character who reminds us of yet another basic element of caring for our health—one we easily forget in our driven schedules.

## **Remember to Replenish**

If there was ever a man who knew the hand of God’s power on his life and ministry, it was Elijah. And if there was ever a time in which he saw God’s power mightily displayed, it was when he called down fire from Heaven on Mount Carmel. Yet, if there was ever a time when Elijah hit rock bottom, it was at the foot of Mount Carmel—just after the greatest victory of his life.

Elijah heard that Queen Jezebel, seeking retribution for his victory, had determined to take his life. First Kings 19:3–4 records, “And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and...went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and

sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.”

Shocking, isn't it? Or perhaps it is familiar.

We live in a culture that demands a level of speed, urgency, and pressure which humans cannot sustain indefinitely. Combine that with the spiritual warfare in which every committed Christian is engaged, and you have a drain on your resources that requires purposed, frequent replenishment.

When we find Elijah under the wilderness juniper, he is so depleted that he doesn't know how to replenish and doesn't even see it as a possibility. Yet, the next several verses display God's tender care in renewing the strength and passion of His servant.

God's gracious provision for Elijah reveals three ways that you and I can likewise find the replenishment we need to serve for the long haul.

**1. Find solitude.** “But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness...” (1 Kings 19:4).

Elijah was not a man of halfhearted effort. For years, he had invested himself completely in service to God, but he was now completely spent. Elijah had reached a point of spiritual, emotional, and physical depletion, and he needed time to recuperate.

Is solitude foreign to your vocabulary? Before you hit rock bottom, take time periodically to disengage and to renew your hope and strength in the Lord. I had to learn (the hard way) that you simply cannot sustain a breakneck pace without making sufficient solitude part of your routine.

**2. Rest.** “And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree...and laid him down again” (1 Kings 19:5–6).

It may sound unspiritual, but Elijah needed sleep—good, solid rest. God built us with the need for sleep, and when we neglect this basic necessity, we find ourselves feeling overwhelmed and defeated. If you are running on sub-standard levels of sleep, take God’s prescription for Elijah—rest.

**3. Receive nourishment.** “...then an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat. And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head. And he did eat and drink...And the angel of the LORD came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee. And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God” (1 Kings 19:5–8).

When Elijah hit bottom, God dealt so kindly with His weary prophet. Elijah thought he was permanently done in, so far gone that requesting to die seemed his best option. But God understood his overtaxed, depleted state and gave him the rest and nourishment that he needed to renew his strength.

Do you find yourself on a treadmill of activity, unable to take time for solitude, rest, or balanced meals? Learn a lesson from Elijah—make time to replenish.

Whatever measure of health we have been given is a gift from God. Although there is much we don’t understand and there are certainly areas we can’t control, we are often too quick to neglect the basic disciplines of stewarding the health we have.



Romans 15:4 tells us, “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.” As we look back on the Old Testament saints, we find rich lessons to apply today. Let’s learn lessons on health from the lives of two of God’s greatest prophets—Daniel and Elijah: Eat for nourishment rather than indulgence. Hunger for God and His power more than the filling of physical appetites. Remember to replenish—purposefully and frequently.

In our next chapter, we will see from the life of Christ an important principle in stewarding our time and rest so we can best fulfill God’s purposes for our lives.

## 5

# Margin and Rest Stewarding Health (Part 2)

Our family has enjoyed many memorable vacations together. One vacation stands out in our minds—not so much for the destination, as for the trip.

Our children were still pretty young, and they were excited at the prospect of seeing extended family and having fun on the family farm in Colorado. Terrie and I were really looking forward to the time of rest and the encouragement that always accompanied spending time with my granddad and grandmother.

The Sunday afternoon before we left, I told Terrie, “Tomorrow morning, I’m going to get up at 4:00 so I can load the car early and we can be on the road by 6:00. That way, we can get through the desert before it gets too hot.” Terrie agreed and did all she could to finish packing that afternoon before the evening service.

Like every Sunday, the day proved to be full and busy, and we returned home late that night. The next morning, I was sleeping soundly when 4:00 came—and went. I was still sleeping when 6:00 came—and went.

When I finally woke up around 7:00 and realized the time we

had already lost, I bolted out of bed and stirred everyone to action. We gathered the suitcases, bags, pillows, and food. Larry and Matthew helped me throw them in the car, and we were finally on our way.

As we drove through the desert, I asked for my sunglasses. Terrie told one of the kids to look in the blue duffle bag with all the toiletries. After a few minutes of digging around in the back of the car, Larry reported that there was no blue bag.

I knew the bag had to be there. Less than two hours ago, we had thrown all the bags in the back of the car! So I tried to prompt my wife to be more specific. “Which blue bag, Sweetheart?”

“The one I told you to get from the top of the stairs as we were rushing out of the house.”

I won't go into the next details of this story. But I will mention that I purchased a new pair of sunglasses in Flagstaff, Arizona. Also, when we returned home from vacation, we had double the toiletries that Terrie had so carefully packed in the blue bag that was at the top of the stairs.

I don't like to make excuses, but I think I could make a good case for mental overload that morning!

Truly, our society is an overloaded society. In every age and in every generation, there have been burdens to bear and difficulties unique to that time period. One of the most pressing problems in our day, however, is encapsulated in one word: *overload*.

One of the very helpful books I read during my rest in my uncle's cabin in Colorado was *Margin* by Dr. Richard Swenson. In this book, Dr. Swenson listed nineteen different forms of

modern overload and described how each burdens our lives and our society. Below is a slightly condensed version of his descriptions:<sup>1</sup>

**Activity overload.** Booked up weeks in advance, we are a busy people. In an attempt to squeeze more things in, we try to do two or three at the same time. Activity overload takes away the pleasure of anticipation and the delight of reminiscence.

**Change overload.** For millennia upon millennia, change was slow, controlled, assessable; now it convulses at warp speed. “Nothing defines our age more than the furious and relentless increase in the rate of change” (historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.).

**Choice overload.** In 1980, there were 12,000 items in the average supermarket; today there are 30,000—“As the number of choices grows further, the negatives escalate until we become overloaded. At this point, choice no longer liberates but debilitates. It might even be said to tyrannize” (sociology professor Barry Schwartz in *The Paradox of Choice*).

**Commitment overload.** Most of us have more commitments than time. “Some people...are trying to be all things to all men all at once all by themselves” (Dr. J. Grant Howard).

**Debt overload.** Currently every sector of society is awash in red ink. In our foreign trade deficit, we are the world’s largest debtor nation. Corporate and personal consumer debt levels function more like anchors than catalysts.

**Decision overload.** Every year we have more decisions to make and less time to make them. Trivial or tough, having too many decisions to make in too short a time is overload.

**Expectation overload.** With increased communication abilities

and technologies comes a steady rise of expectations. We are now expected to be available to anyone at all times.

**Fatigue overload.** With generator indicators continuously pointing to “discharge,” it is little wonder our batteries are drained. Fatigue overload attacks our emotions, leaving us self-protective; it attacks our bodies, leaving us weak; and it attacks our relationships, leaving us isolated.

**Hurry overload.** Our lives are nonstop, lived at a breathless pace. We walk fast, talk fast, eat fast, and then excuse ourselves by saying, “I must run.”

**Information overload.** A single edition of the New York Times contains more information than a seventeenth-century Britisher would encounter in a lifetime. We are buried by data on a daily basis.

**Media overload.** Ninety-nine percent of American homes have television, with the average set turned on 55 hours a week. We buy more books per capita than ever before and can choose from 63,000 new titles every year. How does one read a three-and-one-half-inch thick Sunday paper?

**Noise overload.** Noise has become one of the most universal forms of pollution in the industrial world. Every day 50 percent of the U.S. population is exposed to noise that interferes with speech or sleep. True quiet is extremely rare.

**People overload.** Each of us is exposed to a greater number of people than ever before. Socialization and community are wonderful. Unfortunately, crowding often leads to depersonalization and rudeness.

**Possession overload.** We have more “things per person” than any other nation in history. Having first imprisoned us

with debt, possessions then take over our houses and occupy our time.

**Technology overload.** It has been estimated that the average person must learn to operate twenty thousand pieces of equipment.

**Traffic overload.** Roadways are called “clogways,” our national flower has become the cloverleaf, and rush hour is neither rush nor an hour.

**Work overload.** Work is God-ordained. Work overload, however, was not part of the original plan. We often find total family work schedules exceeding eighty hours a week—yet another family “over-working and under-relating.”

I’m not one to attribute every physical illness to stress or busyness. But I do have a renewed respect for the fact that overload is a reality in many people’s lives. Sometimes we don’t recognize it. Sometimes we see it and then ignore it. Sometimes we deny it. Sometimes we’re so overloaded that we can’t even begin to think about how to lighten the load without tipping the whole cart over.

Regardless of our coping mechanisms, the overload isn’t going away. And if we don’t learn to balance our personal loads, we will be crushed beneath the weight.

Of particular importance to us as stewards of the health God has given us is recognizing that overload induces stress which adversely affects our health. When we are overloaded in the ways described above, we are not able to live, serve, and function at peak performance. Sooner or later, we will encounter physical depletion or mental exhaustion, and it’s a downhill

slide from there.

Is there something we can do with this heavy load? Is there a way to redistribute the weight or relieve the tension? I believe there are two biblical answers—margin and rest.

As we'll see in this chapter, both margin and rest are closely related. Margin is created as we schedule according to our biblical priorities. Rest is our affirmation that the priorities God has placed into our lives are sustainable. Let's take a closer look at both of these answers.

## **Creating Room to Breathe**

Jesus Christ was the most productive person to ever walk this Earth. And yet, I don't picture Jesus going about His days in a hurried, overloaded frenzy. Do you?

As Jesus preached, mentored His disciples, healed the sick, and ministered to others; I see Him giving, loving, and serving with calm and deliberate purpose—aware of the passing time and yet focused on eternal priorities.

How is it that two thousand years later with far more time- and labor-saving devices, we are more driven, more hurried, and have less to show for it? I believe that we are suffocating ourselves and our purposes by our lack of margin.

What is margin? The most helpful definition I have read is by Dr. Richard Swenson: "Margin is the space between our load and our limits. It is the amount allowed beyond that which is needed. It is something held in reserve for contingencies or unanticipated situations. Margin is the gap between rest and exhaustion, the space between breathing freely and

suffocating.”<sup>2</sup>

Margin is the “white space” in our lives and schedules. It is room for emergencies. It is space to breathe.

The need for margin was one of the most significant truths I brought home with me when I left my uncle’s cabin in Colorado. Before those weeks, I had what most people would see as an extraordinarily planned and structured life. But I had no margin. When emergencies came, as they invariably do, I had no time or space for the overflowing demands.

Like so many Americans, I began to live on adrenaline. I worked into the wee hours of the morning, or in many cases, all night. I pushed harder and tried to work faster. I kept myself motivated by remembering the importance of the work of God and the eternal nature of my activity.

When friends and family protested at my intensity, I reminded them that I would have a chance to catch some refreshment during our family vacation. But even the margin I tried to create through this annual vacation absorbed some of the overflow. I brought work with me or had it FedExed to where I was “resting.”

Did God give me grace through this foolishness? Yes! Did He bless my labor? Yes! But I still bore the painful repercussions of marginless living. And I’m even now learning the importance of margin.

I truly believe that what God has given each of us is sustainable. In 1 Corinthians 10:13, He assures us, “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to



escape, that ye may be able to bear it.”

Through studying the life of Christ, I am convinced that one “way of escape” God provides to our overloaded lives is margin. If we neglect this path of release, allowing the inevitable tendencies of overload to burden our lives, we may not be able to bear the strain.

How do we set this margin? How do we prevent the stress of overload from taking its toll on our bodies? How did Jesus do it?

## **Start with an Accurate Perspective**

It’s staggering to contemplate the demands placed on Jesus’ life. Not only did He come to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10), but He was continually sought out by the multitudes. Naturally, once you heal a blind man and cleanse a leper, you’re pretty much in high demand!

Jesus could have spent all day every day and pulled frequent all nighters to meet the expectations of others, and He still would have had more to do than could be completed in a lifetime.

So how did Jesus determine what should have His attention each day? How did He replenish Himself so He could give freely to the needs of others?

The answer is simple. He spent time with the Father.

Throughout the Gospels, we see Christ seeking out quiet and solitude that He might hear the voice of the Father and enjoy fellowship with Him. Often, this meant that Christ rose early to carve out this time before the demands of the day

descended upon Him. “And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed” (Mark 1:35).

Beware of the trap of proud drivenness that places productivity above worship. We put ourselves into such positions of frenzied importance that we believe the world will cave in if we pause our activity long enough to spend time with the Lord. In reality, the only way to discern what really matters most and to be a wise steward of our time and energy is to spend time at the feet of Jesus. It is in these moments that we gain His perspective and listen for His direction. It is here that we are reminded of His sufficiency and ask Him for His strength for the day.

The answer to overload is not trying harder, but to comprehend the work of the cross and to live in a more vital awareness of God’s grace. Thus equipped with God’s wisdom and perspective, we have the capacity to live, give, and serve according to the priorities God has placed in our lives.

## **Schedule for God-Given Priorities**

If we are to schedule margin into our lives, we need a center around which to fill our time. And we need the courage to say “no” to that which does not fit into our sphere of priorities.

What is this center? Christ’s example shows us that it is “the will of God.” In John 4:34, “Jesus saith unto them, My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.” And in John 6:38, He said, “For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.”

When Christ ascended to Heaven, there remained thousands of sick people in Israel. The graveyards were still full. The leper colonies were yet populated. There were still heavy demands on His time.

Yet, when Christ ascended, He had completed the will of God and finished the work He had come to do.

The answer to our overcrowded lives is to discern God's priorities for our time and energy and to center our time on the main work God has called us to do.

In chapter 3, we discussed the need to schedule our time according to our priorities. But what are those priorities? I would suggest four biblical priorities for every Christian.

**1. Walk with God.** No amount of Christian activity can replace a personal walk with God. Refuse to be so busy that you cannot spend time daily reading God's Word, hearing His voice, and bringing your needs (and those of others) before the Lord in prayer.

The Old Testament saint Enoch lived 365 years. Surely, in this time, he had accomplished much. Yet Genesis 5:24 sums up his life, highlighting his most significant priority of his over three and a half centuries: "And Enoch walked with God...."

**2. Care for your family.** I've never met a man in his sixties or seventies who said, "Wow, I wish I had spent more time with my boss. I wish I could have given more time to my company." But nearly every person I talk with who is reaching his senior years says, "I wish I would have invested more time into my children."

Whatever age you are, take this message to heart today. Care for your family, and spend time with your wife and

children. Ephesians 5 and 6 tell us how to do it, but it is up to us to actually make our family a priority.

**3. Labor at work.** Work is one of God's gifts. Investing our energy into labor and having productivity to show for it is gratifying. In Ephesians 6:5–7, God commands us to do our work “in singleness of . . . heart, as unto Christ . . . doing the will of God from the heart . . . as to the Lord, and not to men.” When you are on your work time, give all of your energy to your responsibilities.

And yet, a warning: be careful that work takes a second priority to family. Men, in particular, have a tendency to get this priority out of line. We too easily find our identity in our work success, salary amount, or job title. Sometimes we even make our vocation an idol. Though a gift, a job is simply a means to an end—to glorify God by having the resources to provide for our families and support God's work. Work diligently, but give time and margin for the other priorities of life.

**4. Worship and serve God.** I've noticed a strange phenomenon. Often, as soon as people are convinced they need margin, they decide that church attendance and personal ministry are the first areas to be cut from their schedule. Yet God's plan for every Christian is that, within the local church, he would find the support and encouragement to maintain balanced priorities that center on exalting the Lord. Hebrews 10:24–25 instructs, “And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”

Your corporate worship of God and your service to God through the local church is one of the most meaningful, fruitful priorities in your life. Hold it fast. Keep it as one of your non-negotiables.

With these priorities in mind, take a moment to review your use of time and your activities over the past month. Ask yourself, “How much time do I really spend in pursuit of these priorities? Do I schedule time each week for activities that are directly related to my priorities?”

There will be seasons in life that pull you slightly off balance toward one of your priorities. For instance, during my children’s senior year of high school, I invested more time into their lives. I attended more of their games, spent more time praying, dreaming, and planning with them concerning upcoming life choices, and joined them on their senior trips when possible. Another season in which I plan for imbalance is during our church’s annual “open house.” I know ahead of time that, for a few weeks, I will devote a great deal of extra time to door knocking and soulwinning, and then to follow-up afterward.

Brief seasons of imbalance are simply part of real world living. Just be sure that these seasons are only temporary, that they involve a true priority, and that you purposefully restore balance and resume margin as the season passes.

When we schedule according to priorities, we find there is always time for the will of God. Our time troubles usually arise when we fail to discern what the will of God is or when we fail to invest our time in that which matters most.

## Big Yes, Easy No

Frazzled drivenness is usually an indicator that we are allowing incidentals to crowd out what is truly important. Because of overload, we have more requests and opportunities than we can begin to track, let alone *do*!

The only way to live with margin and still accomplish our main priorities is to say “no” to that which doesn’t fit the scope of the priorities God has given us. It means cutting out the frivolous (remembering that a measured amount of restoring recreation is not frivolous) and wisely evaluating the demands of others in relation to our God-given purpose. The ultimate outcome of learning to say “no” is that we will have the space to serve others during times of unexpected need.

Is saying “no” difficult for you? It is for me. But as one author pointed out, “It is easy to say ‘no’ when there is a greater ‘yes’ burning inside.”<sup>3</sup>

What is the greater “yes” burning in your heart? For Jesus, it was finishing the work God gave Him to do. And with that purpose, He made margins in His schedule to renew His soul. He made deliberate choices in His schedule to attend to His highest priorities.

All of us have heavy demands on our time and our energy. But, truly, we are finite resources. No matter how we stretch our limits or push our boundaries, in the end, we have only so much time, so much energy. Scheduling margin around our God-given priorities is a humble acknowledgement of our limits. It is wise stewardship of our health that we might be equipped to fulfill God’s will daily.

## Receive the Gift of Rest

One of the non-optional margins you must schedule into your life is rest. Coming from someone who rarely scheduled time margin, this statement represents a major paradigm shift! Yet, I have come to realize that rest—both in the form of sleep and recreation—is a significant part of stewarding our health so we have the strength we need to serve God for the entire journey.

The Old Testament commandment to the Jews to take a weekly Sabbath was a precious gift from God to His people. Like many of the commands in the Old Testament, honoring the Sabbath was something God's people did out of obedience without knowing the full benefits this obedience brought to them.

In Mark 2:27, Jesus pointed out, “The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath.” In other words, this day of rest was God's *gift*. He designed it for human benefit.

Since Christ's resurrection, our day of worship has been moved to Sunday, and we are no longer bound by obedience to honor the Sabbath. Yet, I still see a biblical principle of Sabbath rest. We need time to replenish our bodies, and doing so acknowledges our dependence on God.

In recent months, as I've more clearly seen the need for rest in my own life, I've encouraged our church staff to monitor the time input of ministry volunteers. If one of our church members is regularly spending hours on Sunday in ministry, I prefer that this servant not also spend hours on Saturday for soulwinning or visitation, but to do visitation on a weeknight. I want our church family to have a day when they can refresh physically,

emotionally, and spiritually, and be able to focus on their family.

We often view sufficient rest as a possibility only after all of our work is completed. But it has been said, “We do not rest because our work is done; we rest because God commanded it and created us to have a need for it.”<sup>4</sup>

If completing our to-do lists is a prerequisite for Sabbath rest, we will never take that rest. We may crash and rest here and there, but we will not be sufficiently renewed and deeply refreshed.

As I recorded in my Colorado journal, “A sacrificial life will always be unfinished.” My to-do list is never complete. And it never will be until I stand before my Lord to give an account of how I have stewarded my life. The most effective stewardship occurs as I obediently take time to pull apart and replenish my body, mind, and spirit.

## **Rest Must Be Planned**

Mark 6:31–32 gives us insight into the strenuous schedule of Christ as well as the importance He gave to rest: “And he said unto them, Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat. And they departed into a desert place by ship privately.”

As the larger context of this story reveals, no sooner had Jesus gotten to the desert than He was sought out again by the multitude. Graciously, He gave of Himself to them. But He still made time for rest. Eventually, “he...sent them away” and then “departed into a mountain to pray” (Mark 6:46).



In an overloaded society, rest never just happens. It must be planned. Sometimes this means scheduling a mini-vacation or a day to disengage right after a busy season. Sometimes it means a short getaway with your wife. Sometimes it means planning a “date” with your grandchildren.

Whatever forms of rest you schedule, don’t neglect the most basic—sleep. When we try to get by on fewer and fewer hours of sleep, we shortchange ourselves of the energy and vitality we need to most effectively serve the Lord. Because we are sleep deprived, we don’t have the physical or mental energy to give ourselves as fully to our God-given priorities.

Consider the following three benefits of sleep:

1. Sleep boosts the immune system.
2. Sleep lowers cortisol levels.
3. Sleep improves brain function. (And we all know that we need as much brain function as possible!)

If you have trouble unwinding before sleep, plan to do something that will relax your muscles and mind. Anger-stimulating news or adrenaline-pumping movies just before bed induce the opposite reaction in your body—they set your muscles and mind in a tense ready-for-anything mode. Note what calms you physically and emotionally, and purpose to end your day with those activities.

Remember, rest takes time. Don’t shortchange yourself. Taking time for adequate rest humbly acknowledges our dependence on God’s intervention in our lives. Psalm 127:1–2 reminds us, “Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman

waketh but in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep.”

Rest is God-ordained, and it is God’s gift to His beloved children.

## **Use the Gift Wisely**

When properly stewarded, God’s gifts of margin and rest protect us from the perils of driven living. Misused, however, they can become an excuse for self-indulgence and neglect of God’s priorities for our lives.

I have often told the young men in my college class, “Laziness is the scourge of the ministry.” Although not the norm, I know of men in ministry who work with less diligence than those they lead. This is a misuse of God’s gift of rest.

If you sense, however, that you are not properly stewarding margin and rest, ask the Holy Spirit to guide you into a balanced use of His gifts. Schedule margin and take rest, not to indulge yourself, but to serve the Lord with wise priorities and full dependence on Him.

## **Soul Rest**

As vital as physical and mental rest is, there is a deeper rest available and necessary for every child of God. No amount of sleep, no abundance of recreation, no weeks of vacation can give sufficient rest to the person who is overloaded with envy, bitterness, unresolved conflict, or guilt. These types of

burdens truly do affect our health, and we cannot enjoy Christ's rest without release from them.

In Matthew 11:28–30, Christ offers, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Christ offers a level of rest that no seminar, tranquilizer, counselor, or vacation can deliver. It is the deep soul rest of serving one Master and pulling with Him on the light end of an easy yoke.

A.W. Tozer said it well: “Jesus calls us to His rest, and meekness is His method. The meek man cares not at all who is greater than he, for he has long ago decided that the esteem of the world is not worth the effort. The rest Christ offers is the rest of meekness, the blessed relief which comes when we accept ourselves for what we are and cease to pretend. It will take some courage at first, but the needed grace will come as we learn that we are sharing this new and easy yoke with the strong Son of God Himself.”<sup>5</sup>

If you are wanting for soul rest, if you are tired of being driven by the cruel taskmaster of pride, surrender to Jesus. Repent of any hidden sins holding you in the prison of guilt, and trust in Christ's forgiveness. Lay aside envy and bitterness, and extend forgiveness to others. Willingly take Christ's easy yoke, and find rest for your soul.

## **Maintenance Is an Investment**

I spent the summer before I went to Bible college working on my uncle's bean farm in Colorado. Before I left, he gave me a little red and white pickup truck.

I was excited to own my first vehicle and to drive it out to college in California.

Then I learned about upkeep. And oil leaks. And the cost of gas.

Suddenly, driving a truck wasn't quite as exciting. *Owning* a vehicle was a great deal more attractive than *maintaining* a vehicle!

Our health is something like that truck. We simply can't keep running forever without fuel and maintenance. For a season, we may be able to continue on the fumes of adrenaline or sheer willpower, but eventually we will wear ourselves down.

As a seventeen-year-old, purchasing fuel and oil and investing in regular maintenance seemed costly to me, but it was far less expensive than purchasing a new truck! The same is true with our physical bodies. It may seem costly to make time for margin, rest, and proper nourishment; but in the long run, it is wiser to maintain health than to regain health.

Maintenance is an investment.

## 6

# God's Prescription for Peace Stewarding Thoughts (Part 1)

A 1971 advertising campaign first introduced the slogan, “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.” They were right—both in and out of context.

The immediate cause the slogan addressed was to raise money so young people's minds would not be left to lie fallow without education.

But approach this statement from another perspective. What if our minds are wasted by *overuse*? What if their energies are directed in pointless circles of fear or worry? What if the peace which God offers us is neglected while stress and anxiety flood our thoughts and eat away at our minds?

These were questions I had to face head-on in my uncle's cabin in Colorado. As I mentioned in chapter 2, the night I left the dinner series for the emergency room came on the heels of a long season of trials. In addition to a season of ministry burdens, my son had been diagnosed with cancer. Larry's health had been a greater burden on my mind than I even realized. Over and over, I entrusted my worries and fears for my son to the Lord, and over and over I found myself picking them up again.

As I sought God's wisdom for physical healing and planned exercises to lower my blood pressure, I knew there was a bigger picture involved. If I were to climb back up the landslide that had pulled me into the emergency room, I would need a stronger medication than my doctor could give.

I found that medication in the book of Philippians 4—God's prescription for peace.

I don't know what your current stressors or concerns may be. But I do know that the five-part prescription God used in my life is able to give you victory. I'd like to share it with you in this chapter.

## **Rediscovering God's Plan for Handling Stress**

We live in a unique era of history that literally vibrates with stimulants and inundates us with choices. Some argue that we have embraced previously unknown levels of stress-inducers and that is why we struggle to cope.

Truthfully, we *do* live in stressful days. And no doubt, part of our difficulty is that we have filled our lives to capacity and then some, crowding out relationships and rest. Left unchecked, stress and its companion of worry overcome our thoughts, rule our emotions, and compromise our health.

We often blame stress itself for the tension brought about in our minds, bodies, and relationships. And, truly, there are some stresses that we could avoid (such as the all-nighter brought about by our own procrastination or the extra part-time job

because we couldn't control our spending).

But what about the stresses that come into our lives over which we have no control? What about when sickness affects your family? Or you lose your job and your house is foreclosed? What about the uncontrollable events of your life that keep you awake at night? There is nothing you can do to change them, but neither can you ignore them.

Everyone handles stress in their own way—sometimes an adaptation of the responses they observed as a child. But I would suggest that there are two basic responses to stress that encompass a variety of subset responses. They're quite simple—negative and positive.

Negative responses to stress include the all-too-common lifestyles of our frenzied society: becoming critical of others, hiding in work, expecting sympathy, substance abuse, and living without any balance or margin in life.

Stepping back to look at the big picture, these responses don't provide any long-term solutions. They may alleviate the pressure or redirect our emotions briefly, but ultimately they create more problems of their own, and they rob our hearts of peace.

The alternative is refreshing. Romans 12:2 provides the answer, plain and simple: “be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.” The answer to confronting stress and anxious thinking is to *renew* our minds. Long before modern science discovered that our thoughts create physical and emotional responses, God's Word provided the answer to handling stress.

A Christian doctor once shared, “The sickest people I have

encountered—those who were ill not only in their bodies but also in their emotions—were those who were harboring long-term resentment, bitterness, anger, and even hatred against another person, against God, or against themselves.” He continued with an incredibly significant statement, “I have found that stress levels change dramatically when a patient changes his perceptions.”

This doctor, as well as many medical studies, confirm what God’s Word already teaches—that changing our thinking is the best cure for stress. And the best way to change our thoughts is to renew them through Scripture. Stewarding our thoughts, then, is a process of learning to think biblically in stressful times.

## **First-Century Stress**

Although our stress factors may be different than those in the first century, stress itself is nothing new. A close look at the first-century church in Philippi reveals stress inducers that would lead most twenty-first century Americans to the brink.

The Christians at the church in Philippi were living their faith in the midst of a Roman culture that shunned, ridiculed, and even condemned Christianity. To be a Christ-follower in Roman society meant that you were part of a hated minority, a subset of the culture that was deemed stupid or expendable, and often used as sport. Roman Christians were persecuted and martyred by the thousands—imprisoned, crucified, burned alive, and fed to wild beasts.

Talk about stress! Talk about anxiety! This church was well



acquainted with both.

And it was to this church that the Apostle Paul penned God's prescription for peace. Through the words of Philippians 4:4–8, these Christians would find encouragement to persevere and admonishment to think biblically.

One of the helpful books I read during my time in Colorado was John Haggai's *How to Win Over Worry*. Some of the core thoughts below were adapted from his book and are shared with specific truths the Lord taught me regarding how to apply His prescription for peace.

In this chapter, and the next, we will examine this five-part prescription.

## Prescription 1: Think with Praise

*Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.*—  
Philippians 4:4

Maybe you're like me—you don't leap out of bed when your alarm goes off, excited to conquer a new day! Most of us need help fueling our “praise thinking” at the beginning of the day—or at any other point.

If the command in Philippians 4:4 were to rejoice in our circumstances, we could reasonably use the excuse we often employ—“I'm just not wired that way.” But the command to rejoice is not rooted in our circumstances; it is rooted in the infinite goodness of the Lord.

We have a limitless supply of reasons for praise in the person of Jesus Christ. When we focus our hearts on Him, we have a perfect and unchanging object of praise. “**He is thy**

**praise**, and he is thy God, that hath done for thee these great and terrible things, which thine eyes have seen” (Deuteronomy 10:21).

Most of us rejoice when we get a raise, develop a new relationship, acquire a new toy, or find a fulfilling hobby. Joy, however, is not an emotional response to circumstances. It’s better than that. Joy is the heart’s response when we choose to obey God’s command to rejoice in Him.

You see, thinking with praise really boils down to your relationship with God. Your ability to praise is directly hinged—not on your temperament or circumstances—but on your concept of who God is.

A.W. Tozer said it eloquently:

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man’s spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God.

Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God. For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.<sup>1</sup>

The deeper your relationship with God and the fuller your understanding of who He is, the more reasons you will have to rejoice in Him. We praise God, not because everything is going well, but because He is God and He is good. We rejoice *in the Lord!*

## **Opportunities for Praise**

Most of us would do okay with the command to rejoice in the Lord if we could pick and choose which days to do it. But there's that one meddling word in this command that disallows that choice—*always*.

Even on our worst days.

Even when we get bad news.

Even when the car won't start.

Even when the kids are testing our last shred of patience.

Even when we get a bad report from the doctor.

Even when we have more month than we have money.

Always.

The apostles knew how to rejoice in the Lord always—even when they were beaten for preaching the Gospel. (I would say that an unjust beating makes for a pretty bad day—the sort of day most of us would feel justified to indulge in self-pity.) Acts 5:41 records, “And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.”

These apostles were ordinary men, like us. They felt the pain of every stripe laid on them. They felt the humiliation of being unjustly accused and mistreated. They felt the severity of their situation. Yet, they rejoiced.

How could they respond this way? The apostles carried such a high view of Christ that they rejoiced in *anything* that was attached to His name.

Convicting, isn't it?

The psalms are filled with the praises—not of a man who had no problems, but a man who knew the Lord well and found in Him reason for triumphant praise. With the joyful heart of

personal experience, he penned, “The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in him, and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise him” (Psalm 28:7).

Rejoicing in the Lord is the right choice not only because God commanded it, but also because it is good for *us*. Dr. Archibald D. Hart pointed out, “Anxiety and laughter cannot coexist.” When we choose to rejoice, we are choosing God’s plan for relief from stress.

As believers, we always have reason to rejoice—and that reason is Jesus Himself.

## **Prescription 2: Think with Poise**

*Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand.*—Philippians 4:5

It would be hard enough to think with praise if the only opponent was difficult circumstances. But we have a real—and active—enemy who constantly works to undermine our hope.

Satan is a master at planting thoughts in our minds that accuse or belittle us. He is an expert at suggesting that we are losers, that we are on a one-way trip down, and that every negative in our lives is our own fault. Revelation 12:10 points out his self-determined role: “the accuser of the brethren.” Satan makes it his business to steal our joy and magnify our stress. As one author observed, “Satan wishes to destroy our faith through suffering; God desires to refine it.”<sup>2</sup>

So what is the answer to the bombarding lies of Satan? It is to think with moderation—or poise.

Have you ever known someone who seemed to never get ruffled, who even in mounting pressure maintained a sweet disposition? This is a picture of moderation. It is a sweet reasonableness that maintains contentment and joy regardless of circumstances.

Most of us are never truly content in God alone. We worry about our accomplishments and about others' perceptions of us. Our minds are consumed with the condemning lies of Satan or the anxiety of our own insecurity. A.W. Tozer described the restless state of our minds: "The heart's fierce effort to protect itself from every slight, to shield its touchy honor from the bad opinion of friend and enemy, will never let the mind have rest."

When stress begins to mount—internally and externally—God wants us to find our contentment in Him. Like the frightened child who finds rest when Daddy is near, we need to remember, "The Lord is at hand."

Remembering the attributes of God brings praise to our lips. Remembering the presence of God brings poise to our souls.

## **Rest in His Security**

As you might guess, poise can't be rushed. It is only acquired as we take time to wait on God, to obey the admonition of Psalm 46:10, "Be still, and know that I am God." As we spend time in God's presence, His peace seeps into our souls and wraps us in the secure confidence that He is on our side (Psalm 56:9).

Waiting on the Lord calms our spirits and helps us to gain the right perspective of our circumstances in relation to our

position in Christ. It reminds us of the reality of Hebrews 13:5-6: “Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.”

In our frantic schedules, driven by the idolatry of accomplishment, we fear rest. But waiting time is not wasted time. It renews our souls and refocuses our energies toward investing in what really matters.

Those of us with a bent toward drivenness thrive on adrenaline. We “Type A’s” think constantly, rapidly, and polyphasically (on multiple tracks at the same time). We like progress and achievement. Frankly, we’d rather spin our wheels than stand still.

But as thrilling as this may be for a while, there is a down side to it. Overextending ourselves heightens our stress, and overcommitting ourselves creates a sense of false guilt as we struggle to keep the promises we’ve made. Activity is not the mark of accomplishment; doing the will of God is. Sometimes, we simply need to step out of the traffic and rest a while.

For years, I resisted rest. I had my schedule so packed for normal living and working that when additional challenges came, the only reservoir of time from which I could draw was what should have been rest time. Multiple overnight flights and only rare days off put me into a state of chronic depletion. I still made time to spend with the Lord daily, but because I was running only on fumes physically, I wasn’t operating with the mental poise God makes available.

I had to learn to slow down my thinking and find poise through resting in God's security. We can't have poise any other way. Silence in God's presence increases our security, and it decreases our anxiety.

Sometimes it takes a trial in our lives to slow us down long enough to be still and hear God's voice. While I am not a subscriber to the majority of C.S. Lewis' material, I love this quote: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

In my life, pain has often been my best opportunity to be reminded that God is God and I am not. As I bring my pain to the Lord, I once again am able to rest in His security.

## **Rest in His Sovereignty**

Job knew a level of pain that few of us will ever experience. Even a quick read of the dialogue recorded in the book of Job reveals that Job was hurting and confused. The tragedies that had befallen him jarred his preconceived beliefs about God's justice. He longed to know why his life had unraveled, and he was desperate for an opportunity to hear from God.

But through the fog of confusion and darkness of despair, Job found peace in remembering God's sovereignty. Shining in brilliant clarity is Job's well-known declaration: "But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). Job found rest in remembering that God knew what Job didn't, that God had a plan, and that God's good purpose would be fulfilled. It was raw faith that

refused to release God's goodness—even when every outward indicator denied it.

When your thoughts are flooded with confusion and the trials are mounting, remember that you can walk through your trial with poise because God is sovereign. He sees you; He knows all about your needs; and He is in control.

There is, however, a caveat to finding poise in God's sovereignty; it is a rock-solid belief that God is good. As John Edmund Haggai pointed out, the “peace of God has its foundation in the fact that God does all things well.”<sup>3</sup>

Randy Alcorn explained, “Your state of mind determines whether the doctrine of God's sovereignty comforts you or threatens you.”<sup>4</sup> If you believe that God is good and loving, His sovereignty brings comfort to your soul. But if you doubt His motives or question His wisdom, you'll miss the security of His sovereignty.

Margaret Clarkson, a woman who had firsthand experience with intense personal pain and deep loneliness, wrote, “The sovereignty of God is the one impregnable rock to which the suffering human heart must cling. The circumstances surrounding our lives are no accident: they may be the work of evil, but that evil is held firmly within the mighty hand of our sovereign God.... All evil is subject to Him, and evil cannot touch His children unless He permits it. God is the Lord of human history and of the personal history of every member of His redeemed family.”<sup>5</sup>

How do we find mental poise? We pause to rest in the sovereignty of God.



## **Standing on the Rock**

Hidden in the back of our family farm in Colorado is one of my favorite boyhood haunts—a large rock that juts out over a canyon. As a boy, I thrilled to the risky, daring sensation of bravery I felt as I stood at the tip of that rock. One slip, and I'd fall into the yawning canyon below.

But today, standing on the rock feels safe. I have often retreated to this place of serenity when it seemed my world was caving in. There under the expansive Colorado sky and invigorated by the bracing mountain air, I find rest in realizing that nothing has changed. The canyon is still there; the rock is unmoved.

Waiting on God is like standing on that rock. It brings perspective to our world, and it recalibrates our hearts in what is eternal. It calms our minds with the poise that can come only by realizing that “the Lord is at hand.”

In our next chapter, we will see the final three components of God's prescription for peace. Before you read any further, however, take a moment to “stand on the rock.” Pause to meditate on the greatness of God and to praise Him for His faithful consistency in your life.

Remember, medicine works only if you take it.

## God's Prescription for Peace Stewarding Thoughts (Part 2)

We live in a stressed-out society where our minds, rather than being renewed, are flooded with anxiety and overwhelmed with care. Statistics reveal that 5–10 percent of American adults are suffering from symptoms of major depression, and 25 percent will suffer from it at least once in their lives. Depression is one of the most common conditions addressed by primary care physicians, and anti-depressant medications are some of the most commonly prescribed drugs, at a cost of \$13.5 billion annually.<sup>1</sup> Although I recognize that some depression is rooted in physical causes, these statistics reveal a staggering reality: we need help in coping with stress!

What does God's Word tell us to do when the trials keep coming and it seems we can't win? How do we steward our thoughts when they attempt to control us?

### **Prescription 3: Think with Prayer**

*Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.—Philippians 4:6*

The poise that God desires for us to possess is not the result of stuffing our emotions away, pretending that life doesn't bother us. Neither is it a calm manifestation of tight-lipped, clenched-jaw resolve. God doesn't ask us to ignore the cries of our overwrought, heavily-burdened souls. He simply asks us to bring those burdens and stresses to Him.

In this one verse, God uses three different words in reference to prayer—*prayer*, *supplication*, and *requests*.

*Prayer* refers to the generic term of addressing God. It reminds us of the general action of prayer. *Supplication* speaks of persistence and urgency in prayer. It implies seeking, asking, entreating. *Requests* is about the actual petitions we offer. While these three terms are not so much a theology of prayer, and we could learn much more on prayer through a concentrated study throughout the entire Bible, they do emphasize a specific need in our lives. We all have the need to invoke God's action by specific and consistent prayer.

## Request without Worry

God specifically commands us, “Be careful for nothing.” The word *careful* is pretty self-defining. Just flip the compound parts around, and you have a functioning definition—“full of care.” The word *nothing* literally means “not even one thing.” So there you have it—a command forbidding even the smallest amount of worry.

But how many of us, in reality, live without worry? This natural tendency of our minds is exceedingly detrimental to our faith. Anxiety takes our thoughts captive, playing their faulty

script over and over through our minds.

When you really think about it, anxiety is a form of pride. It stems from the erroneous conviction that we are responsible for the outcome of circumstances that, in reality, are quite often beyond our control.

The illusion of control will always develop anxiety. Dr. Archibald D. Hart pointed out, “High adrenaline, caused by overextension and stress, depletes the brain’s natural tranquilizers and sets the stage for high anxiety.”<sup>2</sup> If you believe that you can (or should be able to) work through every situation that enters your life, you will live with anxiety. Life is bigger than us, and sometimes God allows overwhelming needs so we will remember to put our trust in Him.

So what do we do with the anxiety?

I have at times related to poor Charlie Brown when he said, “I also worry about my worrying so much...” and then exclaimed, “My anxieties have anxieties!” At times, I have feared that the very fact I struggled with worry indicated that I wasn’t walking with the Lord as I should be. It was a relief to me to realize that great men and women of God have struggled with worry, anxiety, and fear.

David, the man after God’s own heart, wrote, “What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee” (Psalm 56:3). There were times when David feared. But rather than wasting his energy condemning himself for fear, he resolutely turned his fear over to the Lord and trusted in God in spite of it.

The sin is not that fear comes into your life. Sensing fear is an indication that you are human! The sin is when we don’t purposefully trust God through the fearful times.

So God gives us the cure to worry: “Let your requests be made known unto God.” We simply bring our concerns to the Lord in prayer, confessing to Him our concern and sharing with Him our grief. We acknowledge that the situation is beyond our control, and we ask God for His help.

Years ago, an older preacher gave me a nugget of advice that has proved to be invaluable: “Turn every care into a prayer.” This is God’s cure for worry.

## **Request with Thanksgiving**

Worry corrodes our faith; gratitude strengthens it. This is why when God told us to bring Him our every concern, He included the words “with thanksgiving.”

Our needs change, and our emotions fluctuate. But Jesus is “the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever” (Hebrews 13:8), and He is always worthy of our thanks. Randy Alcorn observed, “Gratitude never comes from avoiding difficulty, but from finding yourself sustained through it.”<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of the gravity of your needs, learn to bring every request to God with confident giving of thanks in who He is. “In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). When you think about who He really is as you thank Him, you remind yourself that He is the trustworthy answer to every need of your life.

## **Prescription 4: Think with Peace**

*And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.*

—Philippians 4:7

In the midst of our chaos, God extends peace—the most needful commodity for our circumstances. We usually think our need is a change in circumstances, a repair of relationships, or an escape from emergencies. And sometimes God does provide these comfortable answers, but still, time and patience are often required before the answers are fully realized. Thankfully, whatever the answer, God promises peace *through* the problems.

It's worth noting that there are two kinds of peace: peace *with* God and the peace *of* God. Peace *with* God is established at the moment of salvation. Romans 5:1 explains, "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." No one who rejects Jesus Christ is at peace with God. (See section on "[The Greatest Gift](#)" if you are unsure that you have peace with God.)

But peace *with* God is just the beginning. There are many Christians who have peace *with* God, but do not have the peace *of* God in their hearts and minds. I know—because I've been there.

The peace *of* God is available as we follow the simple condition of the Isaiah 26:3 promise: "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee." When we keep our minds fixed on Christ, His peace calms our souls and steadies our emotions. Just like with the choice to think with praise, we can't fix our minds on Christ without filling our minds and hearts with God's Word.

Many of the World War II heroes spent a good portion of the war confined in concentration camps—relentlessly interrogated and mercilessly tortured. One such man was a courageous German pastor by the name of Martin Niemöller—imprisoned because he opposed the Nazis’ state control of the churches.

I have been to Dachau, the second of the two concentration camps where Niemöller was imprisoned. Walking through those now infamous gates and seeing firsthand the sites where indescribable scenes of violent torture and execution took place, it is not difficult to imagine the darkness and depravity of the place during its years of operation.

After Niemöller’s release, he wrote concerning the sustaining power of Scripture, “What did this book mean to me during the long and weary years of solitary confinement and then for the last four years at Dachau? The Word of God was simply everything to me—comfort and strength, guidance and hope, master of my days and companion of my nights, the bread which kept me from starvation and the water of life that refreshed my soul.”

We often stagger through our crises without the peace of God because we simply don’t pause to search for it in His Word. God’s peace is only a promise away.

## **The Guardian of Your Heart and Mind**

With unrelenting determination, Satan aims for our minds with

an arsenal of powerful weapons. Doubt, despair, frustration, fear, confusion, overwhelmed thinking, worry, desperation, anger—he uses them all, and more besides. And what is our defense? “The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds . . .”

The phrase *shall keep* in Philippians 4:7 is from a military term, meaning “shall mount guard.” God’s peace is not a dormant asset, an emotional luxury available simply to make us feel better. It is an active release of God’s power to guard our minds from Satan’s onslaught.

This weapon is released as we make the decision to obey Colossians 3:15, “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts . . .” God’s peace provides health and protection to our hearts and minds, but we must give it liberty to rule our thinking. As we turn our worries to the Lord in prayer, the natural outcome is that His peace protects our minds.

Is your life chaotic? Is your soul stormy? Are your emotions volatile? Are you struggling without peace? We cannot be victorious in mental combat with Satan on our own. We need the peace of God to mount guard over our minds.

## **Prescription 5: Think with Purity**

*Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.—Philippians 4:8*

The final prescription for stewarding our thoughts is to



rebuild our thinking processes. Once our minds are refreshed and renewed through the Scriptures, the only way to remain protected from the continual assault of anxiety and stress—to remain on the victorious side—is to think properly going forward.

We may not be able to control some of the external pressures or stresses in our lives, but we can choose what thoughts we allow to take hold of our minds. In Philippians 4:8, God provides us with clear boundaries for our thoughts.

**True** (Greek: *alethes*)—loving the truth, speaking the truth; true in character

**Honest** (Greek: *semnos*)—to be venerated for character, honorable

**Just** (Greek: *dikaios*)—righteous, upright, approved of God

**Pure** (Greek: *hagnos*)—free from carnality, chaste, modest, clean

**Lovely** (Greek: *prosphiles*)—acceptable, pleasing, winsome, amiable

**Of good report** (Greek: *euphemos*)—sounding well; highly regarded, well thought of

This six-part outline is to be a filter for our thinking. Biblical thinking is the outflow of a mind stayed on that which is true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report.

# The Choice

How do we develop pure thinking patterns? The key is found in one simple word—*think*.

*Think on these things.*

If our minds are to be filled with pure thoughts, it will be through deliberate choice. And that is why God used the word *think*. To think requires concentration of focus—meditation and consideration. We are to switch the stressful thinking that we've allowed to flood our minds into biblical thinking that will shape our thoughts according to God's will.

Second Corinthians 10:5 describes this process in vivid language: "Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."

Too often, we get that verse turned around and let anxiety take us captive. God's prescription for peace, however, requires that we turn the tables. We must choose to examine the thoughts that enter our minds by the filter of Philippians 4:8. If a thought is not true, honest, just, pure, lovely, or of good report, we simply refuse to think on it and replace it by meditating on the truths of God's Word.

A commitment to think biblically will require some hardcore decisions. We must be willing to do what it takes to guard our minds.

For instance, Terrie and I opted against having a television in our home when our children were young. When the kids became teenagers, we decided to get one, and we have some great memories of watching sports games together. Before we

ever plugged in the television set, however, we framed Philippians 4:8 and set it on top of the TV. As a family, we committed to control what entered our minds—even through the television. Often, that meant we turned it off.

More recently, when I found myself overwhelmed and depleted, I decided to let almost all of my social media interaction go. I still post online, but I interact very little. That may seem like an extreme decision, but it was more than worth it. For me, it came to a basic realization that if I were to be filling my life with serving others, I didn't have the emotional capacity to follow controversial conversations that I could do nothing about. There were parts of it that I missed at first, but it was a decision I'm thankful I made.

If we are to steward our thoughts with biblical thinking, we must avoid media and people that are negative or speak frivolously. This may mean you need to quit watching the news right before you go to bed. It may mean you pry yourself away from relationships that thrive on gossip or criticism. But whatever it means, do it. Make whatever decisions are necessary to free your mind to think on that which passes the filter of Philippians 4:8.

Mental discipline doesn't come easily, but it does simplify our lives. When we bring negative, untrue thoughts into captivity and turn our focus toward that which is virtuous and praiseworthy, we experience the freedom of a renewed mind.

And, oh, what freedom it is!

## **Pulling the Prescription Together**

This chapter contains some of the most recent, personal truths the Lord taught me. Yes, I knew them before, but I learned to apply them in a far more personal way as I meditated on Philippians 4 in my uncle's cabin. It was in those hours alone with the Lord that I began to understand the significance of stress in our lives and the reality that I had been allowing anxiety to corrode my thinking.

I wrote out a simple prayer that was a help to me then and in the days following. I pray it will be a blessing to you as well as you go forward in biblical thinking.

Lord,

Today, I want to **praise** You because Your sacrifice for me is immeasurable, and Your love for me is unfathomable. I praise You because You are merciful and faithful to me.

Today, I want to express **poise**, real moderation and peaceableness because You are sovereign and You are at hand. With poise, I want to model joy in ministry and family life. Help me not to worry, but to live peaceably. Remind me to place rest and margin on my schedule that I may hear Your voice.

Today, I want to **pray** with supplication for Your power and filling. I surrender myself, my tendencies, my past, present, and future to You because of the cross. I ask You to help me make this world less to me, and for Your power to dominate my heart. I thank You for saving me and providing for me. I thank You for a loving family and the privilege to serve You.

Today, I pray for the **peace** that passes all understanding. Give me peace that comes from a proper vision of You and faith in Your sovereignty. Help me to sleep well.

Today, I want to practice **pure** thinking, positively meditating on that which is lovely, pure, and true. I ask You to renew my mind today through Your Word.

## 8

# Good Gifts in Dark Packages Stewarding Trials

When you were a kid, did you ever try to figure out what was wrapped inside your Christmas presents before Christmas? I did—every year! Once I even played with my BB gun before it was given to me.

Do you ever find yourself trying to guess the value of the gifts God sends your way? Some gifts we quickly recognize as personally profitable—time, relationships, finances. These, we eagerly receive and diligently work to steward so as to gain their fullest potential.

Other gifts, not so much.

Take for instance, unemployment. Or chronic illness. Or the death of a loved one. These gifts, we'd just as soon pass over. If we could, we'd send them back with a short “no thanks.”

But what if God's best gifts are wrapped in black paper? What if the heaviest packages are full of God's richest grace?

And what if the gift inside only becomes ours if we unwrap the dark packaging? What if stewarding our trials turns out to be key in receiving God's blessings from our trials?

I don't know what words of pain or fear you may have heard recently. A frightening doctor's report? A warning from your

boss? A pink slip? A threat? A criticism? A rejection? Whatever it may be, I'd like to encourage you to make a decision now that will radically impact your current trial's benefit to your life. Determine that you will steward this trial for the glory of God.

## **Shall We Not Receive Evil?**

I can't explain the intricate theology behind it, but I do know that it's true that God allows both good and bad to enter our lives. Take, for instance, Job.

When we first meet Job, he is the wealthiest man in the East. He has everything a heart could wish for—great wealth, a close-knit family, leadership in the community, and the respect of all who know his name. Yet, in one day, Job loses it all—his prosperity and his children, and soon, his health as well.

Job didn't lose his life, although at times in his misery he wished he had; and he didn't lose his wife, although he did lose her support. As he sat on an ash heap scraping his painful boils, his wife advised, "Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die" (Job 2:9).

In that moment, Job made a choice. Facing a reality darker than his worst nightmare could ever have conceived, he chose to steward his trial, receiving it as coming through God's hand. He answered his wife, "Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10).

Job didn't pretend the trial didn't hurt. In fact, at one point he cried out, "When I looked for good, then evil came unto me:

and when I waited for light, there came darkness” (Job 30:26). But he chose to patiently endure until he found good on the other side. (And, not to get ahead of our story, but Job did indeed find blessing beyond his wildest dreams after his dark package was fully opened.)

## **What Acceptance Receives**

Stewarding trials is a unique aspect of stewardship, and it raises a seeming contradiction. How do you steward something over which you have no control in the first place? No one *chooses* trials—they invade our lives without invitation.

When we speak of stewarding trials, we do not mean that we want to *control* trials. This stewardship is not the same as budgeting money or scheduling time. Rather, it is a choice to receive the trials of life with acceptance and yieldedness so that God is free to work in our lives and bring good from the trials.

When we receive trials as from the Father’s hand and, rather than resisting Him, trust Him, we then have the ability to steward the trials with God’s grace. Through this process, He works miraculous growth and blessing in our lives.

One of the most prominent biblical examples of a man who received the grace of God to wisely steward his trials is the Apostle Paul. Through his life, we see the purpose of trials and the power of grace.

## **The Man behind the Message**

When I read a book, I'm often just as interested in the character of the author as I am in the content of the book. For instance, if I'm reading a book on time management, I'm curious to know what the author's schedule looks like and how his written suggestions apply in his personal routines. If I read a book on parenting, I'm interested in the author's interaction with his children. Are his insights effective in his own family? Whatever book I may be reading, if I know the author or have heard that his life truly is consistent with what he has written, the book's impact on my life is magnified. The writer's reputation validates his message.

Obviously, the Apostle Paul preached a tremendous message. He traveled all over the known world preaching the wonderful news of salvation through God's grace. He planted churches, disciplined new converts, and raised leaders to continue the work.

Additionally, the Holy Spirit used Paul to pen much of our New Testament. Although the words were God's (2 Peter 1:21), He used Paul to record His grace and to give instructions on how to appropriate grace in the routine aspects of our lives. Paul penned at least thirteen of the twenty-one New Testament epistles, about one-fourth of the entire New Testament.

But what about Paul himself? Was his life consistent with the message he preached? Can his message withstand a scrupulous investigation of his personal life?

We read about Paul's work throughout the book of Acts, but in 2 Corinthians, we get a fuller glimpse into the life of this first century legend. Second Corinthians is actually the most biographical of any of Paul's epistles. In it, he gives an



abbreviated account of the great suffering he endured while preaching the Gospel:

*Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.*  
—2 Corinthians 11:24–28

After reading of Paul's intense suffering, determined heart, and persistent hope, near the end of 2 Corinthians, we find ourselves face-to-face with an unanticipated catalyst for his success. Much of the effectiveness in Paul's life came not from the churches he planted or the suffering he endured, but from a mysterious difficulty which he carried throughout his ministry.

*And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the*

*power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.*—2 Corinthians 12:7–10

What was this “thorn in the flesh”? And how did it so impact the life of Paul?

## **Painful Realities**

Biblical scholars have speculated for years concerning the identity of Paul's thorn. Scripture does not provide a definitive answer, but there are two main schools of thought. Some believe Paul was referring to the continual persecution throughout his ministry that was stirred up by unbelieving Jews. These men hated the Gospel and often drove Paul out of cities, hindering his work.

Others suggest—and I am inclined to agree—that Paul was speaking of an incurable eye disease that hindered his effectiveness in ministry. Several passages seem to hint this direction. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he mentioned an “infirmity of the flesh,” reminding them that “if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me” (Galatians 4:13, 15). Apparently, these Christians loved Paul so much that they would have been willing, at extreme personal sacrifice, to meet the greatest need in his life—which seems to have been healthy eyes.

Whatever Paul's thorn was, be it persecution or a physical malady, it was an unrelenting reality—a constant and painful burden. To Paul, it felt confining—to the point that he believed

that he could minister better without it. In fact, three times he urgently pled with the Lord to take it from him. This thorn was more than an annoyance; it was a severe trial that brought real and constant pain.

Do you have a “thorn”? Is there something in your life that constantly pricks you? Something so real that you can’t ignore? Or overcome?

## **Just Who Gives These Gifts, Anyway?**

One of the most unsettling phrases in the passage about Paul’s thorn in the flesh is when Paul describes it as “the messenger of Satan to buffet me” (2 Corinthians 12:7). The messenger of *Satan*?! Trials are never easy, but somehow it would seem easier to accept them if we knew they came directly from God.

Yet, Paul knew that his thorn came from Satan. In fact, he said it was the messenger of Satan “to buffet” him. *Buffet* is a word we don’t often use; it means “to strike with the fist, to give one a blow.” Buffeting is what Jesus endured at the hands of the soldiers before He was crucified (Mark 14:65). And buffeting is what the child of God may endure at the hands of Satan.

Job’s story, too, identifies Satan as a provoker of our pain. Who instigated Job’s losses? Who stole his wealth, killed his children, and destroyed his health? The startling truth is that it was all triggered by Satan (Job 1:9–11). And he had Job’s complete destruction in mind.

Satan's blows would be overwhelming were it not for God's protection. These two stories—of Job's sorrows and Paul's pain—reveal the comforting truth that even Satan can go no further than God allows. Satan is not allowed to bring freewill destruction into our lives; he is leashed by God's sovereignty.

God has His protective hand around our lives (Job 1:10), thus everything that comes our way—although it may not be sent by God—is filtered by our loving Father. This means that absolutely *nothing* enters our lives accidentally. It also means that God allows nothing into our experience that He does not have the power to redeem for our good and His glory.

## **Our Source of Hope**

God has given us a promise that would be unbelievable had it been made by any human. But because it is made by our loving Father and sovereign God, it gives us hope.

The promise is Romans 8:28: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

“All things” includes loss, physical pain, emotional suffering, mental anguish, slander, loneliness, cancer, persecution...“all things.” It even includes the “messenger of Satan.”

So, before we even begin to consider how to steward our trials, remember that God Himself has promised to all of us who love Him that He will bring good from bad, beauty from ashes, joy from heartbreak.

When we choose to receive what comes our way with

yielded acceptance and trust in God's goodness, He uses those very trials to work miraculous growth in our lives.

The blessings we gain through trials are numerous and varied. Through Paul's testimony of receiving God's grace, we see three particular gifts God gives all of us as we steward our trials.

## **Gift 1: Humility**

If there was a Christian in the first century who could boast, it was Paul. He had literally been allowed to view the "third heaven"—paradise itself (2 Corinthians 12:2–4). Most Christians allowed this privilege would have returned and written a book about it! They would have lined up television interviews and started nationwide seminars, "How to See Heaven and What to Do When You Get There!"

Paul could have done likewise. He could have profited financially—or at least garnered recognition and respect—from his trip to Heaven. But he didn't. He didn't even speak of the event except this once, over fourteen years after it occurred, and even then he did it in third person. Why?

God had used the very buffeting of Satan to work the sweet fruit of humility in Paul's life. Paul himself referred to his thorn, this messenger of Satan, as having a divine purpose: "lest I should be exalted above measure." What humility!

We may be able to fake humility, but we can't manufacture it. It is a grace developed through the process of seeing our frailty and trusting in God's strength.

As you reflect on your own life, do you see God graciously

humbling you through your trials? Problems, difficulties, and heartaches remind us that we are dependent upon God—for everything. In our good times, we may attempt life and ministry in our own strength. But when trouble comes our way, we see our frailty for what it is and humbly turn to God for help.

## Gift 2: Stability

Trials reveal a paradox of strength. In the midst of adversity, we *feel* so unstable. It seems that we will collapse under the weight of suffering. And yet, during these times, God infuses us with His strength. He provides a stability that is beyond human comprehension.

With an illuminated realization of this truth, Paul exclaimed, “When I am weak, then am I strong.” And deeply desirous of God’s singular strength, he continued, “Most gladly therefore will I rather *glory* in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

There is one sole vehicle that can deliver God’s strength to us. It is His incredible, amazing grace. When we feel the very weakest, God energizes us from the inside out through His grace.

Through six simple, easily understood words—“My grace is sufficient for thee”—God gives us one of the richest promises in the Bible. Think of it: *God’s* grace—to *me!* We can’t begin to wrap our minds around the sufficiency of this gift. We literally become wealthy—rich in grace—through our times of weakness.

As I spent those weeks away for much-needed, albeit forced,

rest, I found myself frustrated with the sudden collapse of strength. God used that time, however, to reveal to me the stark contrast between my weakness and His strength. In this point of complete exhaustion, 2 Corinthians 12:7–10 became incalculably precious to me. On one of those painful days of rest, I committed in my journal, “I will embrace my weakness that I may glory in my Christ.”

Weakness delivers to us a fresh awareness of our finite strength and God’s all-sufficient strength. It reminds us that ministry is only accomplished by God’s grace.

One of the ways God strengthens us by His grace is through purification. The phrase “made perfect” in 2 Corinthians 12:9 comes from the Greek word *teleioo* which means, “to complete; to add what is yet wanting in order to render a thing full.” In other words, in our times of weakness, God’s grace purifies our lives and matures our faith.

Throughout the entire Bible, we see that God uses fiery trials to purify our faith in a similar fashion to that of a goldsmith using a furnace to purify his precious metal.

Job testified of this purification in Job 23:10: “But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.” First Peter 1:7 encourages us, “That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.”

When you are tempted to question God’s goodness in allowing your suffering, remember that God deals with us in the same way He tried Job—always for our benefit and for His honor and glory.

## Gift 3: Ability

Through our trials, God gives us humility and stability; but He also uses them to give us His supernatural ability. It is through *God's* strength that we find the power to carry out His work. Paul found God's power so sufficient that he exclaimed, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." The dynamic power of God works in and through us when we most need it.

Because we are born proud, we think that God's work is dependent on our ability. And then, when trials outside of our control and beyond our strength strip us of our perceived ability, we find ourselves wondering that God uses us at all.

One of the most discernible patterns in both Scripture and history is that God chooses defeated people to do dominant things.<sup>1</sup> Abraham, David, Jonah, Esther, Mary Magdalene, John Mark, and so many others were defeated, weak, unable. Yet, God used them to show us that it is through our very weakness that His power is most vividly displayed.

Louis Albert Banks told a story of a Christian singer who was diagnosed with cancer of the tongue. Just before the surgery that would remove both the cancer and his ability to sing, the singer questioned the doctor. "Sir, are you *sure* that I will never sing again after this surgery?"

The doctor nodded.

The patient asked if he could sit up for a moment. "I've had many good times singing the praises of God," he reminisced. "And now you tell me I can never sing again. I have one song that will be my last. It will be of gratitude and praise to God."



And there in the operating room, the man sang God's praise.

I'll praise my Maker while I've breath,  
And when my voice is lost in death,  
Praise shall employ my nobler power;  
My days of praise shall ne'er be past,  
While life, and thought, and being last,  
Or immortality endures.<sup>2</sup>

Only God's grace could give a man the ability to sing that song at that hour.

First Corinthians 10:13 is an oft-claimed promise: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, *that ye may be able to bear it.*" The word *able* in this verse is a form of the same Greek word for *power*. God enables us—through His power—to bear the trial or affliction which He has allowed in our lives.

Paul obviously found that God's power enabled him to endure, and he chose to patiently trust God through pain. And what was the result? God gave Paul the ability to minister in ways that transcend human power.

## Trust His Ways

How is it that we gain this ability of grace? Trials alone do not produce supernatural ability. There are many who suffer but do not know God's divine enabling. *Knowing* that God gives grace and *experiencing* the reality of His power are worlds

apart.

This is where stewarding our trials comes in. What do we *do* during times of difficulty? How do we appropriate the grace God gives us?

First, we must trust God's ways. James 1:3–4 reminds us, “the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.”

Patience requires faith; it means we are willing to remain under the burden which has been placed upon us, trusting that God will work good through it. We must choose to place our life completely in God's hands, trusting that His ways are perfect.

Faith trusts God, even when it can't trace Him. Any of us can trust when we *see* how circumstances are working together for good. But when we can't see, when it looks as if nothing good could come of our circumstances, this is when true faith is developed.

My journal from Colorado records Psalm 31:15, “My times are in thy hand.” To solidify my choice to trust God's ways, I wrote next to that verse, “The rest of my life is in His hands.”

Trusting God is a matter of contentment—not because we resign ourselves to a bleak outcome, but because we put our confidence in God's commitment to work out the situation for His glory and our good.

Author Jeremiah Burroughs wrote, “Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.”<sup>3</sup> This kind of contented faith honors God,

and it is the first step in stewarding trials for His glory.

## **Seek God's Wisdom**

An American missionary couple to Africa brought national African pastors to a conference in the States. During the afternoon break, the African pastors wanted to walk around the city. Concerned they would get lost, the missionaries wrote their phone number on a slip of paper, handed it to one of the pastors, and instructed the men to call if they needed help.

About an hour later, the missionary's phone rang, and one of the pastors was on the other end. "We're lost," he confessed.

"Lay the phone down and walk to the nearest street corner," the missionary instructed. "When you get there, look for the street signs, and come back and tell me what they say."

The missionary waited on the phone while the national pastor followed his directive. A few minutes later, the pastor returned. "I'm near the corner of 'Walk' and 'Don't Walk.'"

Have you ever felt that you were standing at your own corner of "Walk" and "Don't Walk"? Even when we are trusting God's ways in a trial, sometimes we struggle to understand our surroundings and make wise decisions. Conflicting advice and confusing information cause us to feel overwhelmed and frustrated.

God has the perfect resource for just such times, and in James 1:5, He instructs us to ask Him for it. "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."

To steward our trials for God, we must seek His wisdom.

God's wisdom is available through prayer (James 1:5), through diligently reading and studying His Word (Proverbs 2:2–6), and through wise counsel (Proverbs 1:5). When you are in a time of trial and don't know which way to turn, earnestly seek God's wisdom. He will give it to you!

Surprising as it may be, this need to seek wisdom is one of the *benefits* of the trial. As Dr. Richard Swenson explained, “At times it appears as if the cumulative weight of suffering and sorrow will sink the entire world. People hurt, families hurt, friendships hurt, churches hurt, communities hurt, nations hurt. What should we do about all this pain? First, let's thank God for it. Anything that redirects us to Him is of benefit.”<sup>4</sup>

It is through our very seeking of God's wisdom that we grow in our relationship with Him. This intimacy with Him becomes one of the greatest gifts of our trial.

## Rest in God's Love

It seems we are all “fix it” people to some extent. (I know I am!) We want to *make* God's ways work—now. We want to seek His wisdom and get answers—immediately.

But there comes a point when we must simply rest in His love.

Even without answers.

Even without immediate direction.

We trust God, not only because it is right, but because He loves us. In this realization, we can rest; we can trust that *He* will make all things work together for good in the best possible timing.

A statement by Augustine made a profound impact on me during my time of weakness and forced rest: “Lord, You made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.” This quote now sits on a card in my office and on a table at the entry to our home, reminding me that relief from the burden and strength from the weariness doesn’t come by answers, but by simply resting in God’s love.

Romans 5:3–5 encourages us to remember that each trial allowed into our lives has the potential of increasing our hope in God’s love, if we will trust Him through it: “And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.”

Dr. John Edmund Haggai observed, “The peace of God has its foundation in the fact that God does all things well.”<sup>5</sup>

Many questions will never be answered this side of Heaven, and many circumstances won’t be understood until we see our Saviour face to face. Until then, we must settle in our hearts that God is a good God and that He loves us. And we must choose to rest in that love.

## **His Will Is Better than My Want**

Although we often can’t see it in tough circumstances, God’s ways are always perfect. To borrow another statement from my journal, “His will is better than my want.”

We want ease, but God’s will is to give us strength. We want

comfort, but God's will is to conform us to the image of Christ. We want pleasure, but God's will is to give us joy—even if it comes through a season of pain. With a long-term perspective, God's ways are immeasurably higher than our immediate desires.

Trials are, in fact, the very spotlights that illuminate our need for grace. Most of us don't often pray for grace on our good days. We don't passionately rush to the throne of grace when we perceive no need in our lives. It usually requires a fresh experience of our weakness for us to seek a fresh surge of God's strength.

In those moments, we learn through vibrant experience just how sufficient God's grace is when we seek it and how perfect His strength is when we rely upon it.

## Open the Box

If God were to line up all of His gifts for our selection, we'd eagerly reach for the bright packages—those gifts we know would benefit us and give us immediate pleasure.

But God doesn't work that way—He doesn't give us the option. Sometimes the packages He hands us are dark and heavy, and we have no choice but to hold them.

And, some Christians do nothing *but* hold them. With grudging bitterness, they curse God for dumping the heavy box into their lives, and their very spirit absorbs the darkness of the package they are forced to carry.

Other Christians, such as Paul, open the box. With motions empowered by the grace of God, they willingly accept the

package and unwrap the dark paper.

When we likewise open the box we discover a wealth of surprises. We find that the darkest moments of our lives, the bleakest circumstances we encounter, the most painful times we endure are all gloriously transformed into our greatest blessings and fullest sources of joy.

God's grace is so great that He can turn the very buffeting of Satan into a vehicle by which He gives us His humility, stability, and divine ability. God turns the trials of life into His most precious gifts.

Are you in the midst of a trial? Is your life tormented by the constant prick of a thorn? Choose to receive what comes your way with trusting acceptance and steward it as a gift from God. Trust His ways; seek His wisdom; and rest in His love.

God, who is always good, truly does make all things work for His glory and your good.

## 9

# To Hear “Well Done” Stewarding Resources

One of the early families to visit our church was a young couple by the name of Paul and Sherry Tierney. Both Paul and Sherry were engineers, and their careers moved them to Lancaster, which is home to several aerospace engineering and test flight facilities.

One Tuesday evening following the Tierneys' visit to our church, I had the privilege of leading Paul to the Lord in his living room. In the weeks following, Paul was baptized, and Sherry (who had previously been saved and baptized) joined our church. It was an absolute joy to watch them grow in the Lord and begin applying His truths to their lives as they began their family.

A few years later, the Tierneys invited Terrie and me over for dinner. We gladly accepted, and we looked forward to the fellowship.

We were surprised, however, as we stepped through the front door. Like a typical Southern California home, the foyer led directly into a large, open room. But in this oversized dining room, there was no furniture—no couches, no chairs, just a tile floor.



Paul noticed my surprise at the empty room and off-handedly explained, “This is our banquet room.”

*Banquet?* I wondered. *What is “banquet” about this room? It is absolutely empty!*

“We’ll furnish it someday, I’m sure,” he continued. “But every time we accumulate the savings to purchase furniture, we instead decide to give the money for the church building banquet. That’s why we call this the banquet room.”

Those were the days when we had an annual giving banquet as part of our program to meet the need of facility expansion. At the banquet, our church members would generously and sacrificially give to see God’s work furthered through our church.

As we walked through the “banquet room” to the kitchen table, Paul turned the conversation to another subject, but I took another look at the empty room and thanked God for a couple who put God’s work before their own comfort.

This couple, who were both successfully advancing in a specialized career, understood something that many Christians miss: Our use of finances both reveals and directs our hearts.

God has entrusted many gifts to our stewardship, and most of them are intangible. Our health, time, thoughts, relationships—these can be stewarded, but they are difficult to measure, and our gauges are sometimes subjective.

Finances, however, are different. God’s gift of financial provision is our opportunity to steward a *tangible* asset for Him. This is a resource that physically passes through our fingers—either in cash or in ledgers. It can be objectively measured in concrete amounts. As such, it is a physical gauge

of our heart. As Jesus said, “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21).

The way we steward our finances indicates our most passionate interests. Perhaps this is why Jesus so frequently taught on financial stewardship. In sixteen of Jesus’ thirty-eight parables, He spoke about money or possessions. One of these parables is told in Matthew 25:14–30. This story in particular points to our accountability as stewards.

## **A Story of Talents**

As a wealthy businessman prepared for lengthy travel abroad, he called three of his servants. He gave each servant a large sum of money to manage and multiply through investment. The businessman took into account the experience and ability of these servants and apportioned their responsibilities accordingly. Then he left for his journey.

Two of the servants immediately busied themselves with trading and investing. Both of them, over the course of years, doubled the initial investment, making a phenomenal 100 percent profit.

The third servant panicked. Instead of investing his talent, he dug a hole and buried it deep—safe from failure but inaccessible to success. Although there was no chance it would multiply in the ground, he reasoned that it would at least be safe.

One day, the businessman returned. As you can imagine, the first people he called in for an appointment were the three servants to whom he had entrusted the talents. It was

accounting day for them.

The first two servants were eager to show the master their portfolios. There it was in black and white—they had doubled his money. The master was pleased and praised them—both in word and by entrusting them with greater responsibilities:

“Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Matthew 25:21).

Now it was time for the third servant to give his report. Before he admitted that he had made exactly zero interest, he defensively explained, “Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: And I was afraid...” (Matthew 25:24–25). Basically, he said, “I knew I couldn’t please you, you gave me too much to manage, so I did nothing.”

What was the businessman’s response to this servant? It wasn’t the sympathy the servant likely expected—the businessman had known the servant’s ability before he gave him the talent. Rather, the owner sternly and justly condemned this servant’s cowardice with the words, “Thou wicked and slothful servant...” (Matthew 25:26). He followed this reprimand with some of the sternest words of judgment in all of Scripture: “cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 25:30).

Not only had this servant acted with irresponsibility and indifference, but he had accused his master, “Thou art a hard man.” In reality, the master was a generous man. Through offering this servant the position of stewardship, he had given

him the opportunity to better himself and increase his areas of responsibility. The servant's accusation reveals that he did not truly know the master.

In this chapter, we will draw parallels from this parable to our lives and to our stewardship. But before we begin, we must debunk one of the most common misconceptions about financial stewardship: that God is hard or selfish in charging us with the responsibility of stewarding our finances for Him.

We need to remove from our minds the idea that God is “using” us to further His interests at our expense. If we will take the time to get to know Him, we will find that He is a benevolent master and that the opportunity He has given us of financial stewardship is a privilege.

God has entrusted us with His resources to steward for Him. But more than appropriating His gifts, He desires that we would know Him—our gracious Lord. Perhaps the most tragic mistake we ever make in relation to financial stewardship is not in squandering God's resources, but in failing to grow in our knowledge of Him! He is a loving God “who giveth us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Timothy 6:17).

As we seek to faithfully steward God's resources, let us not be like the unfaithful servant who did not know or trust his master. We can confidently walk in faithfulness to Him, following His principles of stewardship, and look forward to the day that we hear those words, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”

Where does it all begin? How can we faithfully steward our resources for our Lord?

# The Source of Every Blessing

One of my favorite songs is the “Doxology.” I love the very first line, which exclaims, “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow!” These words echo the truth of James 1:17: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above....”

Like the master in Jesus’ parable, God is the original source of every blessing. Everything we possess flows from His gracious hand. Psalm 24:1 declares, “The earth is the LORD’s, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.” God is the owner of all things, and every material good in our life is entrusted to our care by Him.

This truth is foundational to our understanding of stewardship, because it reminds us to look past the distribution point to the ultimate Source.

When my children were young, it was fun to watch them when I withdrew money from an ATM. They had no concept of a bank account supplying my transaction; they believed the money came directly from the machine.

The ATM in your life may be a job or business. It may be a savings account or investment. But the real source of these blessings is God Himself.

As King David made his lavish gift for the building of the temple, he joyfully recognized God as the source of all wealth:

*Wherefore David blessed the LORD before all the congregation: and David said, Blessed be thou, LORD God of Israel our father, for ever and ever. Thine, O LORD is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and*

*in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all. Both riches and honour come of thee, and thou reignest over all; and in thine hand is power and might; and in thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all.—1 Chronicles 29:10–12*

There is great security in recognizing God as the owner of all things. It reminds us that our dependence is not on our financial prowess or our opportunities for success. Even those with great riches have no guarantees of tomorrow.

Our security is in God Himself. Should every national economy fail tomorrow, He will never fail! No wonder 1 Timothy 6:17 advises, “Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy.”

God made it all; God owns it all; and God entrusts it to our care to enjoy and to steward for Him.

## **We Are the Stewards of His Blessings**

We are virtually managers of a “trust.” The essence of our lives is not ownership—trying to accumulate more and more; it is stewardship—managing the resources God has given us as He would manage them.

In the book *The Treasure Principle*, Randy Alcorn observed: “If God was the owner, I was the manager. I needed to adopt a steward’s mentality toward the assets He had entrusted—not

given—to me. A steward manages assets for the owner’s benefit. The steward carries no sense of entitlement to the assets he manages. It’s his job to find out what the owner wants done with his assets, then carry out his will.”<sup>1</sup>

Often when we think of financial stewardship, we relate it primarily to giving. In part, this is probably because we know that in God’s economy, our resources are to be invested in eternal purposes. But we must recognize that stewardship encompasses far more than giving. It is a matter of accountability, recognizing that *all* of our assets—including the ones we give, save, or spend—belong to God.

Practically applied, this principle means that we seek God’s will in every financial decision—not just as we determine how much to give. It means that we budget and spend our money according to God’s principles and that we seek His wisdom. It means that we live with an awareness that it all belongs to God and we are stewarding it for Him.

It is worth noting that the master in Jesus’ story entrusted his assets to his servants according to each one’s “several ability” (Matthew 25:15). In other words, the master knew each servant’s capacity for success, and he didn’t hold them to a higher standard than their own capability.

Likewise, in our stewardship, God blesses us according to our ability to steward for Him. Some people are eager to promise that if they had great resources, they would gladly give all to the Lord’s work or diligently live by a budget. The only problem is, they don’t presently give and save from the resources they *do* have! A catchy piece of advice by an unknown author points out, “It’s not what you do with the

million if fortune should ere be your lot, but what are you doing at present with the dollar and quarter you got?”

The single determining characteristic of a steward's success is not volume, but faithfulness. First Corinthians 4:2 highlights this truth with elegant simplicity: “Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.”

Our church hires an outside accounting firm to audit our books annually. These CPAs are not so concerned with the *volume* of the financial transactions on our ledgers, but they check and double-check the *accuracy*. Similarly, our faithfulness in stewarding our resources according to God's will is far more important than the volume of resources we have to steward.

## Real Success

Although there were three servants in Jesus' story, it is easy to see that they fell into just two categories—faithful and unfaithful.

The two faithful servants “went and traded with the same.” The interest these men made was not gleaned from a few lucky transactions. In fact, the story specifically states that it was “a long time” before the master returned. Through those many days, the two faithful servants were diligently and consistently doing business with their master's money.

As a pastor, I shudder when I see someone jump into a speculative, get-rich-quick opportunity. Not only are these types of investments financially risky, but they usually place the prospector in a spiritually dangerous position. Paul warned



Timothy, “But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition” (1 Timothy 6:9).

This verse doesn’t speak against being rich or having wealth. I know many godly men who are wealthy, and I praise the Lord for entrusting these faithful stewards with resources which they use to further His work. The verse does warn against having an overwhelming desire to acquire wealth. It describes someone whose burning passion is “I *will be* rich—at all costs.” And often, a too-good-to-be-true, get-rich-quick scheme impoverishes the investor, both financially and spiritually.

It has been said that money is a great servant, but a lousy god. When we see our money as a resource from God which we are responsible to steward for Him, we can use it to make a difference in eternity. But when it becomes our goal and is set above God in our lives, we are setting ourselves up for temptation and a snare. Eventually, we’ll discover just how empty money is. Regardless of the speed of the method used to acquire wealth, our primary concern as stewards is pleasing God—not increasing our own riches.

The two faithful servants were successful because they maintained a stewardship mentality. Their greatest pleasure and highest goal was in appropriating their master’s money in ways that would further his interests.

The unfaithful servant was the polar opposite. He sought to protect his own interests, and in so doing, lost his opportunity for advancement. As the master pointed out, he could have at least made a conservative investment by trusting the money to

a bank for a low interest rate. Anything would have been better than burying the money in the ground!

Which servant best identifies you? Are you faithfully stewarding your finances for God's glory? Or are you lacking faith in God's goodness and hoarding resources for yourself?

The story is told of a man who asked God, "What is a million years to You?"

"Like a second to you," God answered.

"What is ten million dollars to You?" the man questioned next.

"Like a dime."

"Well then," the man continued, sure his case was set perfectly, "may I have a dime?"

"Sure," God responded, "just a second."

Sometimes instead of faithfully filling our role as stewards, we try to better our financial position by manipulating God. Or we attempt to manufacture quick success without hard work.

A faithful steward operates with consistent discipline through the years. Like the faithful servants in Jesus' parable, when we see our resources as belonging to God and determine to use them to advance *His* cause, we find our true success.

## **What Faithfulness Looks Like**

It's easy to talk about faithfulness and to assume we are faithful just because we have the desire to be. But what does faithful stewardship look like in terms of our day-to-day operations?

Over the years, I have observed five habits consistently

present in those who wisely handle finances. These disciplines acknowledge God as the owner of our resources, and they allow us to faithfully multiply the material possessions which He has entrusted to our care.

**1. Work diligently.** God blesses hard work. Throughout the Bible, especially in Proverbs, God commends diligence:

*He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand: but the hand of the diligent maketh rich.—Proverbs 10:4*

*The hand of the diligent shall bear rule: but the slothful shall be under tribute.—Proverbs 12:24*

*The soul of the sluggard desireth, and hath nothing: but the soul of the diligent shall be made fat.—Proverbs 13:4*

*The thoughts of the diligent tend only to plenteousness; but of every one that is hasty only to want.—Proverbs 21:5*

*Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men.  
—Proverbs 22:29*

Diligence is a character trait, not a gift. Although God has gifted some people with sharp business intuition or a natural ability to make wise investments, *all of us* can develop diligence.

Also, diligence is not hinged on a location or position. A truly diligent person will be just as hard a worker between jobs as he would be were he presently employed. I have often counseled those in need of work to apply themselves to searching for a job with as much vigor as they would invest if

they were working a job. And through the years, even during times of recession or leanness, I have seen God's particular hand of blessing on those with a commitment to diligent labor.

**2. Transfer ownership.** Although everything we have comes from God and already belongs to God, we are prone to forget that very truth! Making a conscious choice to acknowledge God as the owner of our material possessions reminds us that He is our generous provider.

When we mentally retain the ownership of our resources, we end up eternally bankrupt—if not financially bankrupt. The sooner we purposefully turn it all over to God and enlist ourselves as His stewards, the better.

**3. Steward efficiently.** This is a two-sided discipline that requires both contentment and discernment. On one hand, we recognize that being caught up in the proverbial competition with the Joneses or having our spending determined by our own insatiable appetites is not worth the price. The old adage “a penny saved is a penny earned” is true, but it can be lived only by those who possess the godly trait of contentment.

First Timothy 6:6–8 teaches, “But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content.” Efficient stewardship requires that we learn to live within our means.

In addition to contentment, we need wise discernment in our budgeting. I've known people who were struggling to purchase groceries and pay their electric bill, all the while maintaining a cable television subscription. Sometimes we need to step back and evaluate our financial priorities.

There is no doubt in my mind that my wife's contentment and wisdom have been crucial to our family's financial stability. Consistently—through both lean and comfortable seasons—she has frugally shopped and joyfully lived within our means. Many times, this required a courageous combination of faith and discipline. And I'm thankful she practiced both.

**4. Save regularly.** As I began my first job of mowing lawns, my parents insisted that I both tithe and save. With my payment from each job, I set aside 10 percent for the Lord and 10 percent for the bank. I'm thankful for learning early the discipline of saving, and I taught my children a similar principle when they were young.

Some Christians struggle with the idea of saving, because they feel that any unused money in a particular month should be given away. But Proverbs 11:16 says, "A gracious woman retaineth honour: and strong men retain riches." It is wise to retain—or to save—as long as you remember that your savings belongs to the Lord just as much as any other possession.

When Terrie and I moved our family to Lancaster, we emptied our savings account to fix up the dilapidated church building. I'm thankful we had previously saved so we had something to give. And I'm thankful we were willing to give it when we knew that was what God wanted. It was a well-spent investment that God has richly rewarded.

Maintain your savings account with an open hand, ready to use that blessing to honor the Lord in whatever way He directs you.

**5. Give generously.** Just as diligence and contentment are

disciplines, so is giving. Giving is not a matter of *can* or *can't*, but of *will* or *won't*. In other words, we will be faithful to give based on our willingness, not on our prosperity. This is how the Christians Paul mentioned in 2 Corinthians 8:3 were able to give “beyond their power.” They were so willing, so desirous to have part in God’s work that they chose to give even at the point of extreme sacrifice.

Someone once said, “The more passionate our faith, the more consistent our giving.” Our willingness to give to the Lord is a tangible measure of our love for Him.

God sees far beyond the actual amount of a gift to the heart of the giver. It is our love that He desires—not our money. Second Corinthians 9:7 makes it clear: “Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.”

In God’s economy, giving to fund God’s work is our opportunity to invest in eternity and to express our love to the Lord.

Perhaps giving, like no other area, reveals our sense of accountability and stewardship. In Jesus’ parable, He specifically pointed out that the master called “his own servants” (Matthew 25:14). When we give to the Lord, we acknowledge that we are God’s servants and that we delight in furthering His cause.

George Mueller, a German missionary who opened orphanages in England, wrote, “Let us walk as *stewards* and not act as owners, keeping for ourselves the means with which the Lord has entrusted us. He has not blessed us that we may gratify our own carnal mind, but for the sake of using our

money in His service and to His praise.”

Our giving is a reflection of our love, and it is an evidence of our ownership. Jesus’ parable reminds me that if I want to hear the words “well done,” I cannot be miserly with my God.

## The Words I Want to Hear

Our decisions and disciplines in managing God’s resources have eternal ramifications. One day, we will stand before Christ to give an account. Romans 14:10–12 says, “...we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. **So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.**”

In that day, Christ won’t ask us how much we have amassed, but He will ask us what we have done with what He has given to us. As Andrew Murray pointed out, “The world asks, ‘What does a man own?’ Christ asks, ‘How does he use it?’”

The judgment seat of Christ will cover far more than our handling of material blessings. The foundational core of this book has been that our stewardship encompasses every resource God has given to us—not just the ones that can be displayed in dollars and cents.

And yet, financial stewardship is, in many ways, baseline to every other area of stewardship. Speaking of finances, Luke 16:10–11 points out, “He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true

riches?” Our faithfulness to honor God with our finances prepares our hearts to honor God in every other area.

More than anything in this world, I want to hear my Lord say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Matthew 25:21).

To that end, we can confidently and joyfully acknowledge our Lord as the owner of all our possessions, and we can gratefully serve as His steward of them.



## The Stuff of Life Stewarding Friendship

December 28, 2009, was the most difficult morning of my life. One month earlier, my oldest son, Larry, had received that dreaded call from the doctor: “You have cancer.” That very day, he underwent an emergency surgery. Larry’s next surgery, scheduled for December 28, would be major. This extensive surgery would remove cancerous lymph nodes from his body.

Terrie and I drove Larry and his wife Ashley to a hotel near the hospital the evening before the surgery. We were trusting the Lord for Larry’s safety and healing, but as we neared our destination, the enormity of what Larry would face the next day sank in deeper.

“Lord,” I prayed silently, “for almost twenty-five years I have, as a pastor, sat in hospital waiting rooms to pray with my church members before they or their family members had surgery. But this time, *I* am the one needing pastoral care. I need someone to be there for me during Larry’s surgery.”

I dropped Terrie, Ashley, and Larry off at the hotel door and found a parking place. I knew our entire church and friends all around the world were praying, and I was thankful. But in that moment, I had a deep longing for a friend to just be there for

me.

As I made my way to the hotel entrance, I had no idea that one of the richest surprises of my life was just inside those doors. As I stepped into the lobby, I was met by one of the dearest people in the world to me—my friend and godly mentor, Dr. David Gibbs, Jr.

Dr. Gibbs must be the busiest man I know, and I couldn't believe that he would clear his schedule to be with me while my son was in surgery. But he did.

We embraced and prayed together—and Dr. Gibbs will never know how God used him at that moment.

I still don't understand how he could possibly have done it, but Dr. Gibbs sat with our family the following day while Larry was in surgery and for eight long days following while Larry stayed in the hospital with complications from the surgery. I'm sure it cost him more than I will ever know. He didn't bring a briefcase of work. He didn't feverishly answer emails on his laptop. He just sat with us. And his presence along with so many other friends, family, and staff meant the world.

Although Dr. Gibbs said very little in the way of comfort or advice, he did say four words to me while Larry was in surgery that I'll never forget: "God sets the boundaries." I needed that reassurance, and I needed to hear it from a friend. I wrote the phrase on a 3x5 card, framed it, and it hangs today on my study wall—a memorial to God's faithfulness during a desperate time...and to a loyal friend whose presence made a difference when I needed it most.

# Christian Friendship

A true and godly friendship is a precious gift from God, made even more valuable by its rarity. Over the years, the Lord has blessed me with many dear friends, and a few especially close ones—men with whom I share close soul-fellowship. I'm thankful for every one of them and the sharpening influence they have on my life.

God designed us to need spiritual friendships—not just for the crisis moments of life, but for encouragement and strength all along the journey. Relationships are our most valuable possessions, and they are worthy of our focused investment.

In our achievement-driven culture, we too often measure success by business accomplishments or monetary portfolios. Unfortunately, built into this inaccurate appraisal is the propensity to sacrifice relationships as we struggle to climb the ladder of perceived success. Predictably, the result is volatile or broken relationships.

Christians aren't immune to this struggle, either. Although Christian fellowship is a gift from God to help sustain us in our pursuit of Him, many Christians fall into the same patterns of relational neglect as the unsaved world. When we fail to cultivate and steward Christ-honoring relationships, we are destined to go through life isolated and alone or with the continual struggle of unstable relationships.

Thankfully, God has provided us with solid guidelines on how to steward Christ-honoring relationships. He tells us how to wisely choose our friends, and, perhaps more importantly, He teaches us how to *be* a godly, encouraging, help-along-the-

journey kind of friend.

Ephesians 4:25–32 is a passage that deals with how we relate to one another as Christians. Rich in practical instruction, it’s almost a textbook approach to Christian friendships.

*Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another. Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: Neither give place to the devil. Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth. Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.*

As we read this passage in relation to stewarding friendships, remember that these principles apply to marriage as well—a relationship that God has designed to consist of two best friends.

Let’s briefly establish a biblical context for friendship before we delve into Ephesians 4.

## **A Biblical Context**

My closest friends are those with whom the Lord has knit my heart through ministry and spiritual fellowship. These include men in ministry around the world and, of course, my own church family.

In addition to these heart-to-heart friendships, all throughout our community, are a host of people that I have attempted to befriend in a different sense. These are relationships that I purposefully invest in with the goal of leading people to Christ. They include my neighbors, business people, public servants, and others with whom the Lord has crossed my path. Over the past years, I've had the joy of leading many of them to the Lord.

The distinction between these two types of friendships is significant for us to understand. God doesn't call us to friendship with the world. In actuality, He compares Christians who are looking for the world's acceptance and approval to an unfaithful spouse: "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4). When we seek friendship with the world, we deny our loyalty to Christ.

Of course, this verse does not mean we should not be friendly with people who do not know Christ. On the contrary, Jesus Himself came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10), and He associated with and graciously touched those who needed salvation. We most definitely should not isolate ourselves from lost people, but neither should we seek their friendship or make them the ones with whom we share soul-fellowship.

Has God given you relationships with unsaved neighbors, co-workers, teachers, coaches, or family? Cultivate those relationships, and steward them as a trust from God to be a faithful witness for Him! But develop your closest friendships—those relationships that you lean on for spiritual strength—with those who are walking in the same spiritual direction you are going. These are the friendships that will draw you closer to the Saviour, rather than pulling you away from Him.

Even as friendship with the world is a dangerous proposition, so friendship with God is the highest aspiration. In fact, it is foundational to all other Christian relationships. Simply put, horizontal relationships require strong vertical support.

James 2:23 says of Abraham, “he was called the Friend of God.” Abraham’s relationship with God was so close, so relevant to his daily life, so noticeable, that it was his defining factor, and he was recognized as the friend of God. What a testimony!

As we seek to apply God’s principles in stewarding friendships, we are wise to keep our relationship with the Lord as our ultimate priority. Only as our relationship with God is flourishing can our human relationships—marriage, dating, friendships, even business—be as healthy as they should be.

With that context set, let’s walk through Ephesians 4 and learn how we can steward the human relationships God has put into our lives. What does it take to be a godly friend?

## **Value Truth**

True friendship is built on trust. And trust is built on truth. Pleasant personalities, common interests, similar goals, and shared hobbies may provide initial attraction to an individual, but they cannot sustain a long-term relationship. Only truth—deep, heart-level truth—can establish the solid footing necessary for long-term friendship.

This is why Ephesians 4:25 specifically commands, “Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another.” And Psalm 15:2 praises the one who “speaketh the truth *in his heart*.”

As a pastor, I encounter broken trust in almost every relational counseling appointment. I see it in the streaming tears of a wife who has discovered her husband is unfaithful. I hear it in the trembling voice of a man who tells me his wife has left him. I see it in the pained eyes of a friend who has been betrayed or the heaving shoulders of a teen whose parents have disappointed him.

Human nature wants to protect self, but when we do so at the cost of truth, we damage the very foundation of our relationships.

One who values truth will guard against any form of deceit, be it in word, act, attitude, or even in silence. Every distortion of the truth or creation of a false impression does incredible—and sometimes irreparable—damage to a marriage or friendship.

Can your spouse and your friends trust you? Implicitly? Truth in relationships is a reflection of a heart of integrity.

## **Truth's Best Friend**

When it comes to *speaking* the truth, there is a caveat. Truth requires a companion to bring it safely into another person's heart. You might guess facts or statistics—good, solid evidence—to be truth's best friend. Actually, truth's best friend is love.

God places a high premium on truth. But He also instructs us to speak the truth in love: “But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ” (Ephesians 4:15).

Sometimes the truth can hurt. Several years ago, I was standing at the back door of the church, shaking hands with folks at the end of the service. A first-time visitor (who is now a faithful member of our church) clasped my hand and thanked me for the message. “I really enjoyed the service, Pastor.” And then, almost in the same breath, “Here's my business card. Let me know if I can help you.”

He is a hair transplant surgeon.

I got the message.

Henry Ward Beecher pointed out, “It is one of the severest tests of friendship to tell your friend his faults. So to love a man that you cannot bear to see a stain upon him, and to speak painful truth through loving words, that is friendship.”

Biblical friendship is more than making someone feel good about himself. It is truthful and loving. Proverbs 27:6 counsels “Faithful are the wounds of a friend.” As a surgeon knows the incision is a vital requisite to the path of healing, a loving friend knows when the painful truth must be spoken.

I'm thankful for friends in my life who have been courageous enough to tell me the truth when they knew it would hurt. At



times, they have warned me when they sensed my spirit was not what it should be, or they have cautioned me regarding my schedule. Sometimes they have flat-out told me when I handled a situation unwisely. Although their honesty may have stung initially, I'm grateful for it. It saved me from the greater pain of the consequences of error.

## Conquer Anger

Just as surely as truth builds trust in relationships, anger destroys them. Truth spoken in love unites hearts. Truth spoken in anger leaves a wound that may never heal. The oft-quoted admonition, "It's not what you say, but how you say it," is particularly true when it comes to how you speak the truth.

Anger has been the great destroyer of many relationships. There is something about an angry spirit that creates deep insecurity in those affected by it. Words—even truthful words—spoken in anger speak painfully and deeply into another's soul, rattling and shaking their trust.

Ephesians 4 warns, "Be ye angry and sin not." In other words, we may share in God's righteous indignation against sin, but we must not indulge in the fleshly anger that is revengeful, self-defensive, and self-serving. This anger severely cripples relationships.

A few verses later in the passage, God defines this crippling anger in six subsets: "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice."

**Bitterness.** This comes from a root word which literally means “to cut or prick.” Bitterness cannot linger in the heart for long without seeping out in the form of a cutting, sarcastic personality.

**Wrath.** This refers to the passion of anger. A person of wrath seems to continually cycle through relationships, edgy and dissatisfied.

**Anger.** This is the violent emotion that manifests itself in angry outbursts. You see it in the person who is frustrated at life in general and is going to take it out on somebody—whichever happens to be close at the moment of explosion.

**Clamour.** This is a loud, noisy complaint. Some people seem to be always complaining about something. Nothing is ever right for them, but that is because something is always wrong in their spirit.

**Evil speaking.** This is slander and detraction. The evil speaker never has a good comment and often negates the enthusiastic assessments of others. Tell this person that the church choir sounded nice, and he will respond, “Humph, I’ve heard better.”

**Malice.** This is the specific desire to malign someone’s name. It is spiteful, purposed back-stabbing.

Full-blown, these six manifestations of anger are easy to spot in others. But they tend to sneak into our own lives without being noticed. Read through the list again, asking the

Holy Spirit to search your heart and reveal even a hint of anger in your life. If you have a loyal, godly friend who is willing to speak the truth in love, you might also ask him if he sees anger in your life.

I regularly ask the Lord to help me guard against anger. And as part of that precaution, I have determined that my choices for my closest friends will be filtered through Proverbs 22:24–25: “Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man thou shalt not go: Lest thou learn his ways, and get a snare to thy soul.”

Ben Franklin observed, “Anger is never without a reason, but seldom with a good one.” Anger is the natural response of the flesh. In the moment we use it, it seems justified and might even yield immediate results. But the long-term consequences are devastating. James 1:20 makes it clear: “the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.”

If you value a friendship, remember that you will not make it better with anger. Ever.

## **The Tragic Consequence of Anger**

Not only does anger corrode friendships, but it damages our own souls. This is why the passage that begins with a command against anger finishes with the stern warning to “let not the sun go down upon your wrath: Neither give place to the devil” (Ephesians 4:26–27).

Prolonged anger leads to bitterness, and bitterness literally opens our souls to Satan’s influence.

As a pastor for over twenty-six years, I’ve observed this

progression more times than I care to count. It can even begin with a trivial offense, such as, “He didn’t smile at me in the church foyer, and I know he saw me!” Regardless of anger’s beginning—trivial or mountainous—left unresolved, its end is always destructive. Over time, the anger develops into bitterness, and the bitterness internalizes and becomes a stronghold from which Satan will defile your life and relationships.

Hebrews 12:15 calls bitterness a troubling, defiling root: “Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.” Bitter people think their bitterness troubles and defiles someone else. But this verse asserts that it actually troubles and defiles them. As the modern proverb says, “Bitterness hurts more the vessel in which it is stored than the vessel on which it is poured.”

Second Corinthians 2:10–11 admonishes us to forgive, reminding us that one of Satan’s cleverest devices is bitterness: “To whom ye forgive any thing, I forgive also: for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ; Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices.”

We cannot allow even the smallest, most miniscule amount of anger to linger in our hearts. No offence committed against us—be it large or small—is worth our bearing the consequences of anger and bitterness. When someone offends us, God calls us to lay our grievance at the foot of the cross: “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you”

(Ephesians 4:32).

## Scorekeepers and Grace Givers

Perhaps the most needed skill for every Christian is the ability to be a quick forgiver. When it comes to relationships, all of us are either scorekeepers or grace givers. I'm thankful for a host of friends who have been grace givers toward me. Where would I be without these grace givers?

Invariably, when I counsel someone on the matter of forgiveness, they will protest, "But he/she doesn't deserve my forgiveness." That is one of the defining characteristics of forgiveness—it is undeserved.

The truth is that none of us deserve forgiveness. And we especially don't deserve God's forgiveness. Yet He forgave us anyway, and He calls us to extend His grace to others—freely, spontaneously, and quickly.

The disciple Peter was evidently a scorekeeper. Although he tried to keep the score of offenses and forgivenesses even, he hoped that there was a predetermined point he could let the offenses win. Then he wouldn't have to forgive. Matthew 18:21–22 records, "Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven."

Jesus' command is obvious: Forget the scoreboard; make forgiveness a habit.

Do you find yourself often in the role of scorekeeper? Set yourself free—free from keeping score, free from Satan's grip

on your heart, free to extend and receive God's life-giving, relationship-restoring grace.

## Four Relationship Decisions

I came to a crisis point almost twenty years ago when I needed to solidify relationship decisions. It had been a difficult year with unrelenting criticism coming both from within the church and from outside ministries. Relationships that I had thought were strong had crumbled, and those whom I had believed were my friends had defected in the heat.

In a moment of clarity, I grabbed a yellow pad and a pen and jotted down four decisions that I determined would define my relationships.

**1. Avoid unnecessary divisions.** Some division is unavoidable. By definition, truth—pure, biblical truth—will separate from error. I am committed to preaching and standing for the faith, thus I know that I will experience division for the sake of truth. Yet, I have decided to avoid *unnecessary* division. When it comes to matters of preference or loyalties to personalities and institutions, I am not going to pick a fight. I value relationships and am thankful that there is no Christian toward whom I have a personal grievance.

**2. Do not ruin relationships to build a church.** God has created me with intensity, and He has instilled in me a passion to see His work move forward. As a shepherd of people, however, I desire to be a spiritual leader who lovingly and patiently encourages growth in people's lives. The church is meant to build people, not the other way around. For the sake

of relationships, I guard against driving others in outward growth.

**3. Be willing to be taken advantage of.** More times than I can count, I have loved and invested in people only to later experience the pain of having been taken advantage of. Yet, this is part of ministry to people. I have determined that I will take the risk and bear the loss to have the continued opportunity to serve my church and minister to the needs of others.

**4. Forgive as Christ forgave.** Regardless of who has offended me or how they have done it, I want my heart to be right toward the people God has called me to serve. If I harbor bitterness—even to someone outside my ministry—I will restrict God’s grace in my life and consequently limit my ability to lead others to grow in grace.

I haven’t always batted a thousand on these four decisions. But they have served as a relational compass—reminding me to treasure relationships and to love and forgive people.

Perhaps you need to make similar decisions in your relationships. Wise stewards remember that relationships are worthy of investment—giving, loving, forgiving—whatever it takes, even when it takes effort to do so.

## **Persistently Encourage**

As we value truth, conquer anger, and freely forgive, we grow into the position to meet one of the greatest needs of any person—encouragement. Ephesians 4:29 instructs, “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that

which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.”

With the treasure of friendship comes the opportunity to be a “minister of grace”—one who consistently builds, edifies, and strengthens others. What a stewardship—having the ability to renew and replenish others with the life-giving grace of God.

I am blessed with such an encourager in one of my dearest friends—Dr. Don Sisk. His optimism and genuinely expressed joy of the Lord has often buoyed and refreshed my spirit in times of discouragement or just plain irritation. His influence in my life is the picture of two verses from Proverbs: “Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend” (Proverbs 27:17) and “A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Proverbs 17:17). I’m thankful for his consistently sharpening influence in my life.

Perhaps the reason Dr. Sisk is such an encourager to me (and to many others as well) is that he fulfills the prerequisite in Ephesians 4:29 of being an edifier—he guards his tongue. “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth.” Not only does Dr. Sisk always have a positive, praiseworthy word, but he shuns gossip, backbiting, and off-color speech.

Corrupt communication is just plain incompatible with edifying communication. If we are going to be encouraging in our friendships, we must make the conscious choice to “Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt...” (Colossians 4:6).

Speaking to the value of encouragement, William Arthur Ward commented, “Flatter me, and I may not believe in you.



Criticize me, and I may not like you. Ignore me, and I may not forgive you. Encourage me, and I will not forget you.”

Strengthening another soul in grace is one of the most vital opportunities—and responsibilities—of true friends. Determine to be an encouragement giver in every relationship.

## **Be a Consistent Example**

My closest friends, those whom I have given entrance into my heart and the intimate parts of my soul, are men who help me to be a better Christian. They have a sterling testimony and live a stellar example. They fit Henry Ford’s description of a friend perfectly: “My best friend is the one who brings out the best in me.”

I have been privileged to *have* friends who motivate me to growth and godliness, and I want to *be* that kind of friend for others.

Our goal—as we value the truth, guard against anger and bitterness, and encourage others—should be that we would bring spiritual vitality and strength to our friends’ lives.

## **God’s Friend Finder Network**

Perhaps you read a chapter such as this and wonder how such friends are to be found. After all, where do you find people who love the Lord supremely, exert positive influence on you, are willing to speak truth into your life, readily forgive as needed, and persistently encourage? Is this kind of friend a figment of the imagination?

It can be—it all depends on where we seek our friendships. In the past several years, many have been disillusioned and crushed as they looked to social networks to establish their closest friendships, often with identities whom they have never met. In some cases, these friends have been less than their online profile pages would indicate.

Take, for example, the case of Simone Black, a British woman who committed suicide with her 1,082 Facebook friends having full knowledge she was doing so. Not one of them (some of whom lived within walking distance of her home) offered resistance, and a few egged her on.

A drastic example? Perhaps, but it is real, and it illustrates the glaring shortcomings of online social networks as pools from which to draw our closest friends. Social networks may be helpful as a communication tool to augment existing relationships, gain professional or hobby-based expertise, or provide a platform to share truth. But God has a better source for developing our closest friendships.

As God created us with the need for relationships, He lovingly supplied us with the most uplifting place for edification and relationship building—the local New Testament church. Ephesians 4:25 points out, “for we are members one of another.” Through the church, God lavishly provides close, encouraging, sustaining friendships that encourage us as we grow in Him.

Are you a functioning member of the body of Christ—the local church? This is God’s perfectly designed niche for you to develop face-to-face, edifying friendships. Invest yourself into the ministry of your local church and develop relationships

there. Although relationships do take time to build, as you pour your heart into serving through the local church, you will eventually find yourself laboring next to your best friends.

The local church is God's friendship network—and it trumps every other type of social media for depth, substance, and spiritual growth!

## **The Stuff of Life**

It has often been said that relationships are the stuff of life. Jesus Himself placed a high value on relationships. In His three years of public ministry, He was diligent about His Father's business; and He recognized that much of His Father's business was investing into relationships. Jesus healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, opened the ears of the deaf, and even raised the dead. But through all His ministry, He touched lives. He nurtured relationships. In fact, the bulk of His time was spent pouring His life into the twelve apostles. Perhaps Jesus' example should be a clue to us as to where our values should lie.

Relationships—they are indeed the stuff of life. Guard them vigilantly. They are too valuable to allow them to be shattered by a breach of trust or to be corroded with the caustic agents of anger and bitterness.

Invest in them purposefully. They are worthy of consistent energy and persistent encouragement. Love, forgive, care, and continually give.

Value them highly. You'll never regret it. At the end of your life, you'll be thankful that you stewarded friendships.

# 11

## **A Valuable Loan Stewarding Family**

A few years ago Terrie and I were in New Jersey where I was preaching at a conference. In the church that was hosting the conference was a couple whom I had known for most of my life. They invited us to their home Monday evening after the service, and Terrie and I both enjoyed their hospitality and fellowship.

When they heard we would be renting a car the following afternoon to drive into New York City, they insisted that we instead borrow one of their cars. They took us out to the garage to choose which of their two cars we wanted to drive—a Bentley or a Mercedes-Benz.

Immediately, I assured our friends that I didn't mind renting a car. In actuality, I was overwhelmed at the thought of borrowing such an expensive automobile.

But our friends pressed, and the following afternoon found Terrie and me driving into New York City in a beautiful, red Mercedes-Benz. I had never driven a car of that value before, and at first, I loved it.

But then a terrible thought crossed my mind. What if I wrecked the car? Or even just scratched it? I knew I could

never replace it.

From that moment on, the drive into New York wore my nerves thin. I've never driven more carefully in my life. And each time we stopped for fuel, to meet friends for lunch, to visit Ground Zero, I worried over letting the car out of our sight. All day, I felt the weighty responsibility of caring for that borrowed, expensive car.

Every parent has a loaned possession far more valuable than a Mercedes-Benz—a child. Although society downplays the worth of children, Psalm 127:3 affirms, “Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward.”

Our children are on loan to us from God to raise for Him. Is it not incredible that while we take such care of depreciating possessions (even a Mercedes-Benz eventually makes it to the junkyard), we fail to invest the same level of energy in protecting and nurturing our children?

If life is such a gift for *us*, what a trust it is when God gives us another life—a young, impressionable life—to steward for Him. This area of stewardship should be our most guarded, prized, and valued. If you are a parent, whether married or single, I want to challenge you to wisely steward the young lives placed into your home.

Terrie and I have been blessed with four children, all of whom are now grown, married, and serving the Lord in Christian ministry. And now, we're enjoying our grandchildren—immensely. Looking back over the years, I don't regret one moment that I invested into my children's lives. And as a grandpa, I want to give more than ever before. Parenting (and grandparenting) is one of the greatest areas of stewardship we

have been given. I want to invest wisely.

All throughout God's Word, we find timeless, practical direction on raising our families for the Lord. In this chapter, we will look closely at three passages of Scripture that teach us how to nurture young hearts for God.

## The Shema

Children are born with reflexes to help them survive and grow. They instinctively express hunger, pain, and discomfort. But as they grow we parents are responsible to teach them what they need to not only survive, but thrive. We teach them to brush their teeth, clean their room, do their homework, keep good friends, and make responsible choices. But what do we teach them about God? And how do we instill in their hearts a desire to know Him and love Him?

One of the first passages of Scripture which Jewish children learn is Deuteronomy 6:4, referred to as the *Shema Yisrael* or just *Shema* for short: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD." This declaration of faith is foundational for children to understand. And the verses following teach us how God intended for children to learn this truth in their early years.

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou*

*liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.—*

Deuteronomy 6:4–9

These six verses teach how we, as parents, can instill in our children a heart for God from the time they are very young. But the first step may surprise you.

## **Make It Personal**

This passage doesn't begin by telling parents how to teach truths about God to their children. It begins by instructing *us* to develop our own love for God. After all, how can we teach what we do not know?

Make no mistake though; this instruction is not a call to halfhearted, insincere love for God. Thousands of young adults with parents who profess Christianity, but do not have a genuine, heart-level, life-changing personal walk with God, are walking away from the Lord. George Sweeting observed, “May God deliver us from a ho-hum attitude. Young people can read their parents. They can see right through their teachers, and they turn away in disgust from a make-believe faith.”

Listen carefully to the language of God's command: “And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” This is no mere profession, but a passionate way of life. It describes a real, heart-level relationship with God that esteems Him above all else.

God commands us to love Him with our all—our heart, our

soul (seat of emotions, passions, and appetites), and our might (energy and strength). If you want to turn your children's hearts toward God, you must first have a personal walk with God that is real from your heart.

I love the statement by Josh McDowell, "You can con a con, you can fool a fool, but you can't kid a kid."<sup>1</sup> Young people do not want something that their parents demonstrate to be of no value. Regardless of what you say with your mouth, your children are listening to what you say with your actions. If you instruct them to love God, but you have discarded your love for Him, your children are not likely to seek the Lord themselves.

"And these words...shall be in thine heart." It starts with our walk with God as parents. Only after you make a personal commitment to nurture a walk with the Lord are you ready to take the next step—teaching God's Word to your children.

## **Pass It On**

Although our children do closely observe our lives, it is not enough that we model truth; we must purposefully pass the truth to them. God's instructions in Deuteronomy 6:7–9 were to make the home a living, ongoing school of discipleship in which everything centered around God's truth. The Scriptures were to be embedded in the daily routines of life, and they were to be the subject of communication in the home.

I've noticed in many homes a tendency of parents to assume that spiritual training is the responsibility of the church. Although I'm thankful for the many godly men and women



who have influenced my children—Sunday school teachers, Christian school teachers, church youth staff—I recognized that the responsibility to train my children for the Lord belonged to Terrie and me. I didn't assume that my children were getting what they needed without my purposeful instruction.

In contrast to the idea of letting the church raise your kids, Deuteronomy 6:7 instructs, “And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.” God's truth should be so common in our homes that it is part of our daily routines—central to our everyday living.

In Jewish homes, the Scriptures would even be posted on the walls and literally tied to their bodies. I had the opportunity to visit Israel a few years ago, and I observed many orthodox Jews with phylacteries containing Scriptures tied to their foreheads.

Although, I don't believe that we must wear phylacteries or tie portions of Scripture around our hands, I do see that we must strategically incite our children's curiosity in things of the Lord. Scripture verse plaques on the walls, regular family devotions, natural conversations about what they learned in Sunday school, and pointing to God's goodness expressed in His creation can all direct the attention of our children to the Lord and generate questions about God.

As you seek to pass the truth to your children, ask yourself, “What do I use to put God's Word and God's truth constantly before my children's hearts and minds?”

## A First-Century Case Study

What happens when a love for God is modeled and the truths of God are taught in the home? The Bible provides us with a first-century “case study” in the life of young Timothy. As Paul penned the epistle of 2 Timothy, he gave us two windows into Timothy’s childhood:

*When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also. Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands.—2 Timothy 1:5–6*

*But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.—2 Timothy 3:14–15*

If we had known Timothy as a child, we probably wouldn’t have voted him “most likely to succeed in Christian work.” It appears that his father was not a Christian (Acts 16:1), and statistically, that is to a young man’s disadvantage.

But even so, Timothy’s mother and grandmother, Eunice and Lois, managed to give Timothy a firm foundation in Scripture. They were sincere Christians with an “unfeigned faith,” and they taught Timothy the Scriptures, no doubt following the pattern of Deuteronomy 6, from the time he was a young child.

The result? The Scripture Timothy learned led him to see his need for a Saviour and to trust Christ. When Paul made his way to Lystra, Timothy was eager for a godly mentor. By the time Paul penned 2 Timothy, this biblical foundation was already bearing great fruit in Timothy's life. He now displayed his own "unfeigned faith" and was effectively and unselfishly preaching the Scriptures to others.

## **Solid Foundations**

Incorporating Scripture into the routines of a home is the best way to lead a child to Christ. Scripture shows us our need for the Saviour, and it tells the sweet Gospel story of redemption. Every Christian parent should earnestly seek to lead their child to a personal decision of faith in Christ.

But even after salvation, Scripture gives a child the building blocks for a strong, stormproof life. Not long ago, I received the following letter from a young man who grew up in our church. He graduated from our Christian school just months before writing this letter from a university in another state:

My classes are going great, and I am really loving mechanical engineering and most of my teachers. I have been very busy with classes, homework, sports, and God, but have been learning to manage my time better and make sure I put God first in it all. In my political science class I have been challenged on my beliefs about politics and moral issues by a very liberal teacher. I am so thankful for my Christian school and especially Mrs. Demirjian's government class which has helped me to be able to stand up for my political and moral beliefs. I am so glad I was taught by Christian teachers who taught me not only what the Bible says, but why I believe it. Although sometimes it seemed tedious, now I have been able to take many things I was taught and apply them.

Thank you again for being my Pastor and starting Lancaster Baptist Church.

I honestly do not know where I would be had you not followed God's will. I made a decision this past summer at Teen Camp to not just be different because that's the way I am, but to be different on purpose to reflect Christ and be a witness for Him. Please pray for me as I try to be different on purpose here, and try to witness to my roommate and others.

Whether you are a pastor, teacher, or parent, the time, energy, and effort required to pour Scripture into a child's heart and life is a significant investment. But as you can see from the letter above, it is an investment that pays dividends out of this world!

As a parent, are you reaching into your children's hearts with the truths of Scripture? Do they see in you a heart that is personally pursuing a close walk with the Lord and actions that portray your love for Christ?

Are you finding ways to communicate the vital truths of Scripture in your home? Do you have regular family devotions? Do you post Bible verses on your walls? Do you spark curiosity and encourage questions about things of the Lord? Do you pray for your children's salvation and seek to establish their lives on the solid footing of scriptural truth?

The most important foundation you can lay for your children is that of teaching them the Scripture and shaping their hearts for a genuine walk with the Lord that will last their entire lives.

## **A Proverb a Day**

Since the vital practice of daily family devotions is rare in today's homes and since many parents ask me how to get started, I'd like to briefly digress to give some pointers for effective family devotions.

First, it's important that you understand what a family devotion is *not*. It's not a full-length Sunday school lesson. It's not a deep theological expository session (except perhaps occasionally if you have older children with detailed Bible study questions). It should not be boring for young children. And it doesn't need to require much preparation.

In our home, family devotions were simple and sweet. Even when my children were young, they looked forward to this brief close to the day when we would sit as a family and read God's Word together. There is something about it that not only pointed all of us to Scripture, but also drew our hearts closer to each other.

If you are not already in the habit of regular family devotions, a great way to start is by reading a chapter from Proverbs each day. (If you have very young children, perhaps you will read just the first few verses.) Simply read together and ask your children to pick out a verse that caught their attention. You can then briefly discuss the verses mentioned as a family.

Additional ideas, especially for younger children, are to tell them basic Bible stories. You can even act them out—encouraging your kids to have fun with it. With older children, you may want to touch on practical applications from a recent sermon or Sunday school lesson.

Whatever ideas you use in family devotions, it is vital that you are regularly spending time in God's Word as a family. Children need to know that the Bible is as vital to our lives as meals, that we spend time in God's Word every day, and that the Word of God holds instruction and application for every

stage of life—even for children. The time you invest in family devotions will help to stir a hunger for spiritual truth in the hearts of your children.

## **Pattern for Parenting**

Deuteronomy 6 teaches us how to make our homes a living school of discipleship, and 2 Timothy displays the result of this commitment. But what about your patterns of interaction with your children? What guidelines can we as parents follow to gain the entrance we need into our children's hearts to train and communicate truth?

Ephesians 6:4 provides the pattern: “And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” This short verse provides several principles concerning a parent's responsibility to his or her child.

## **Don't Stir Anger**

Because of their God-given influence, parents have an incredible capacity to encourage and affirm the hearts of their children. But this influence also provides the potential to destroy and discourage their children like no one else can. A parent's affirming or provoking can make or break a child's spirit.

Someone once said, “It is the duty of the family to follow the leadership of a father, but the father must manifest such a character that this obedience would be rendered from the

heart.” Do you have a gentle spirit in dealing with your children that causes them to *want* to respond to your leadership in the home? If not, it would be wise to do some soul-searching and personal evaluation before demanding more from your children.

Colossians 3:21 underscores the command to not provoke a child to anger: “Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged.” The word *discouraged* means “to be disheartened, dispirited, broken in spirit.” None of us want to do this to our children, but all of us do it too easily, often without even realizing it.

The command to not provoke children to wrath must have been a shock to the first-century fathers who first heard it. By the Roman law of *patria potestas*, fathers had complete authority over every person in their household—slaves and family alike (including, in some cases, extended family). He could advance them, sell them, or kill them; and he would be accountable to no one.

Over time, this law weakened; but it was so powerful in its day that Seneca, a Roman statesman, wrote: “We slaughter a fierce ox; we strangle a mad dog; we plunge a knife into a sick cow. Children born weak or deformed we drown.” The harshness is chilling.

Today, we don’t publicly determine to dispose of our children (at least not after they are born). But, as parents, we so easily crush the delicate nature and sensitive spirits of our children. Children *need* parents who love them and invest in their lives, who refuse to react with the harshness or neglect that provokes a child to anger and frustration.

# Four Ways Parents Provoke Anger

Hollering and screaming at your children isn't the only way to discourage them. In my counseling—and I hate to admit it, but personal parenting experience as well—I've observed four common ways parents provoke their children to anger.

**By modeling anger.** Many parents who would shudder at the thought of physically abusing their child fail to recognize their verbal abuse—to their children or in front of their children. Children learn by example, and whether we respond in anger to them or demonstrate anger toward others, they learn anger.

D.L. Moody once said, “A man ought to live so that everybody knows he is a Christian; and most of all, his family ought to know.” A father's example matters.

Another author pointed out the subtle undermining effect a mother's disrespect has on her children: “If you are disrespectful to your husband, your children will likely acquire the same attitude. It will be much more difficult for them to honor their father if you are belittling him and speaking to him in a harsh, sarcastic tone of voice.”<sup>2</sup>

**By favoritism.** This anger-provoker has been around for centuries. Isaac and Rebekah played the favorites game with their sons, Esau and Jacob, with disastrous results. Jacob didn't see the error and perpetuated the grief when he chose Joseph as his favorite. The results for Joseph were tragic.

Because of the negative slant our culture has toward



parental favorites, most parents quickly deny even a hint of favoritism without even stepping back to question whether their children might perceive it. For example, what feels to parents like simple delight over a new baby may be perceived by older children as favoritism. Be ever so careful, ever so sensitive.

**By overprotection.** Protecting our children is vital. Children are vulnerable, and protection is one of the reasons that God gave children parents. But there is a fine line between healthy protection and overprotection, and it requires sensitivity to the Holy Spirit to know the difference. One is motivated by love, and the other is driven by fear.

Sometimes what we feel is our duty may be perceived by our children as a lack of trust—I should know, because I probably erred in this area more than any other! Because of the difficulty in knowing when you have crossed the line between loving protection and fear-driven protection, it is vital that you constantly work to build a close relationship with your children. As has been often said, “Rules without relationships breed rebellion.” As vigilant as you may be to protect your children, be ten times as careful to reach for their heart and build your parent-child relationship. In my own family, I know it was these relationships that helped my children to love and respect me even through the times when I frustrated them by overprotection.

**By passivity.** On the opposite spectrum of overprotection

is passivity. Children need boundaries. As much as they may test and push against them, they feel neglected when boundaries are absent. No child likes to be told “no,” but he far prefers that Mom and Dad care enough to enforce a protective parameter than that he always gets his way.

Boundaries for children should be expressed with both firmness and gentleness. First Thessalonians 2:11 describes the heart children should perceive in their parents: “As ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, as a father doth his children.”

Many parents know only the model of parenting by which they were raised, so provoking their children to anger is not intentional; it’s simply natural. But after God forbids provoking in Ephesians 6:4, He provides another pattern: “but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” Rather than reacting to our children in anger or in a way that provokes them to anger, we are to be *proactive*, nurturing and admonishing them in the ways of the Lord.

## **Nurture and Admonition**

Parenting involves hard work, diligence, time, sacrifice, and focus. The goal of raising children is not merely behavior modification; it is heart transformation. Recognize that God has placed precious lives in your care, and He has given you the responsibility to shape them for Him. Steward this privilege wisely.

God gives two tools by which we can bring up our children

—nurture and admonition. *Nurture* refers to the whole training and education of children. It relates to the cultivation of mind and morals, and it requires commands, admonitions, reproof, and correction. Nurture also includes the training and care of the body.

John Wesley, whose godly mother Susannah raised seventeen children, pointed out how nurturing our children makes room for their spiritual development: “The parent who studies to subdue [self-will] in his child works together with God in the renewing and saving a soul. The parent who indulges it does the devil’s work, makes religion impracticable, salvation unattainable, and does all that in him lies to damn his child, soul and body forever.”<sup>3</sup> The great preacher Charles Spurgeon pointed to the nurture of his parents as a tremendous asset in his spiritual protection: “I was cradled in the home of piety, nurtured with the tenderest care, taught the Gospel from my youth up, with the holiest example of my parents, the best possible checks all around to prevent me running into sin.”

*Admonition* refers to the teaching and training of children. It involves focused teaching and biblical discipline. It speaks of intentional and sacrificial parenting.

Admonition has two facets—the gentle, positive side of instructing, teaching, and modeling; and the negative side of correcting mistakes, chastening, curbing appetites, and developing self-control and discipline. We must balance and embrace both aspects for the good of our children. Our children need our gentle hugs, tender affection, and compassionate training; but they also need our firm direction

and corrective action to protect them from spiritual vulnerability.

Proverbs 29:17 admonishes parents, “Correct thy son, and he shall give thee rest; yea, he shall give delight unto thy soul.” Biblical discipline is directed toward growth in the child. In the book *Shepherding a Child’s Heart*, Tedd Tripp wrote, “Many parents have a punitive mindset. They see discipline as the child paying for his sins. Rather than correction having the positive goal of restoration, it has the negative goal of payment. It is like the convict paying his debt to society by doing time in prison. This is not a biblical concept of discipline.”<sup>4</sup>

Nurture and admonishment work best when they work together. As you walk with the Lord yourself and keep the big-picture perspective that you are stewarding a young life and want to shape a heart for God, you will give both nurture and admonition to your child. And you will be reminded more and more every day of your own need for God’s wisdom.

## **How Children Spell “Love”**

As parents, we know we love our children, and we often quantify that love in terms of what we do for them or what we give them. Children, however, spell *love* with the letters T-I-M-E. They need us to personally invest in their lives—to play with them, to help them hands on, and to let them know that we are simply thankful that they are our children.

A recent study revealed that average parents spend less than twelve minutes per day with their children. Contrast this

with the fact that the Adolescent Mental Health Services of New York recently did a study in which it was discovered that parents remain the most significant people in children's lives until age fourteen or fifteen. Our children *need* time with us. Just like they need food, water, and even air, they need Dad and Mom to invest in their lives.

And it isn't just young children who need time either. Teenagers need it more in their stage of life than ever before. They need you to listen to them and to be interested in their lives. They need you to purposefully engage in their interests and concerns. And they need you to be committed to doing whatever is necessary to keep your relationship with them strong until they reach adulthood.

Many were the late-night conversations in our home during our children's teen and college years. I remember talking until the wee hours of the morning on multiple occasions with each child. Their needs ranged from general questions concerning the struggles of coming into adulthood to specific irritations with particular rules or authorities to frustration over decisions Terrie and I had made for them.

Those were long nights. But I'm thankful we talked. In every case, I knew that my son or daughter would have been willing to comply with whatever I told them they had to do. But I also wanted them to know that I was willing to talk as long as they needed. I wanted my children to learn to think matters through from a mature perspective, and I wanted to communicate with their hearts.

Whatever stage your children are in, give them the time that they need. Tie heartstrings, and keep them strong.

Consistently spending time with your children will probably happen only if you schedule it. Plan both “family time” and “individual time” with each child. And make it happen regularly. Recognize this as one of your highest priorities, and guard this time like you would your most vital appointments.

## **Balancing Family and Ministry**

I'd like to insert a specific word to pastors, missionaries, and others involved in Christian ministry. I wasn't as careful to give my wife and children the time that they needed when I first started in the ministry. I worked at it, but I truly didn't understand just how vital it was. I'm thankful for older men who coached me along the way to make my family a priority. I had to come to the place (and I'm thankful that it was while my family was still young) where I recognized that the church is *Christ's* bride, but Terrie is *my* bride—and she needs me, as do my children. God could have used anyone to pastor the church, but only I could meet the time needs of my family.

With my children all married now, I find myself wanting to urge younger men, “Take time with your family!” Your wife needs you. Love her. Listen to her. Take her on dates. Recognize and make time for her needs. Your children need you, too. They need you to give them lots of time—to read the Bible with them, to take them to the park, to take pictures with them...to just enjoy them and let them know how much you love them and how special they are.

Balancing family and ministry, especially when you are fully engaged in serving the needs of people, will always be a

challenge. And you will constantly need to go to the Lord for wisdom in the process. But whatever you do, don't neglect or downplay the needs of your family. Give them your most valuable and their most needed possession—your time.

## **Don't Call It Quits!**

I once heard of a young couple who learned they were expecting their second child. The wife was thrilled, and she happily shared the good news with a friend in the grocery store. As they talked, her four-year-old son cheerfully chimed in with a tidbit he had overheard from his parents' private conversation. "I know what we're going to name the baby," he volunteered. "If it's a girl, we'll name her 'Christina,' and if it's another boy, we're going to call it 'Quits'!"

Actually, most parents face the temptation to call it quits a thousand times *after* their children are born. Parenting is hard work. (And that's an understatement.) It is an investment for the long haul. But during that long haul, there are many times when it doesn't seem our work is paying off. There will be frazzled days when you are sure your two-year-old will eventually end up in the state penitentiary. There will be long nights when you cry out to God for wisdom in shepherding your teenager's heart. There will be trying moments when you think your patience will snap.

Whatever you do, refuse to "be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not" (Galatians 6:9).

Parenting takes time to bear fruit. It is an opportunity to invest in precious lives over a period of many years. Although

it may seem costly today, it is a stewardship responsibility that bears fruit throughout eternity.

Truly, godly parenting doesn't cost; it pays.



## 12

# Lengthening Your Reach Stewarding Leadership and Influence

My grandmother is one of the most remarkable women I know. She married my granddad when she was just sixteen, and together they cleared a ranch in southwest Colorado and developed a bean farm that has become a cherished part of our family legacy.

To date, Grandmother has experienced much through her ninety-three years. Born shortly after the turn of the century, she saw the second world war and the Great Depression. She knows the ins and outs of growing pinto beans through drought and raising a crop of kids in lean times. Yet, even through the hardships, she possesses an infectious energy and joy that make her the most popular person in our extended family get-togethers.

Last Thanksgiving, we enjoyed the rare privilege of celebrating with many relatives—my parents, aunts and uncles, cousins, *etc.* It was a memorable afternoon, and following dinner, everyone settled throughout the living room, kitchen, and family room to play, talk shop, or watch football. I enjoyed

a few quiet moments with my grandmother as she took in the scene.

“Paul,” she broke the silence, “I never cease to be amazed as I look around at all the people in this house and I think of the power of the Gospel.”

Truly, the scene in the house that Thanksgiving could have been so different—had it not been for the influence of one man several decades ago.

When Grandmother’s kids, my dad and aunts and uncles, were growing up on the ranch, a man by the name of “Pop Kinney” visited the house. He explained that he was with the American Sunday School Union and was holding a vacation Bible school for the kids in that rural area.

My granddad had only been in one church service in his life, and people there told him he needed to be baptized to go to Heaven. Later, he took a family member to a healing crusade, but the family member was apparently too sick—security made sure she never made it to the front of the line. From that day on, Granddad was disillusioned and thought all religion was pretty fake.

But Pop Kinney was a different kind of Christian than anyone Granddad had met before. He was bold in his witness, but kind in his demeanor, and he was not at all ashamed of the Gospel. Pretty soon, Pop Kinney had all of the Chappell kids going to vacation Bible school.

Toward the end of the summer, Pop Kinney held a Bible camp. My Aunt Arlene was the only one in the family old enough to attend, and that week she understood the Gospel and trusted Christ as her Saviour.

Pop's bold witness motivated Arlene, and she returned home to announce her decision. In the days following, Arlene gathered her younger sister and brothers in the bedroom to read them the Bible. (Her brother, Uncle Steve, shared the details of this story with me.)

My granddad noticed the spiritual interest growing in the hearts of his children, and it stirred a hunger for truth in his own heart. He and a friend began to read and intently study the Bible together. Through studying the book of Romans, they understood the simple Gospel of grace, and both of those men trusted Christ as their Saviour. Eventually, each member of Granddad's family was saved.

But the story doesn't end there. After Granddad was saved, he became burdened for his neighbors. He invited others to join him in Bible study, and that group blossomed into Goodman Point Baptist Church.

Once that church was established and had called a pastor, Granddad began Bible studies in another rural town, and soon, another church was born. Before Granddad died, he had helped to plant three Baptist churches, including one as far from his farm as Moab, Utah.

Thus, through the faithful ministry of just one man—Pop Kinney—an entire family was saved and three churches were planted.

But that still isn't the end of the story. Not only were Granddad and Grandmother saved, but their children were saved, their children's children (including me), and even their children's children's children! Many from our extended family have been called into ministry and, through missions, church

planting, and ministry training, have seen many more come to Christ.

Conservatively counting, tens of thousands of people have been saved as a result of Pop Kinney's influence in my granddad's life.

I doubt Pop Kinney had any idea how God would bless his influence when he first knocked on the kitchen door of a ranch home in southwest Colorado. But God used him to change *generations* for the glory of God.

It all started with one man who chose to steward his influence for God. One man had an influence far greater than he could have ever dreamed.

## **Influence off the Charts**

None of us can know the full extent of our influence until eternity, but most of us assume it to be smaller than it actually is.

Our culture gets hung up on titles, and we often buy into the premise that leadership and influence are related to our position on a flowchart or the title on our office door. But as one author observed, "The key to successful leadership today is influence, not authority."<sup>1</sup>

In reality, influence reaches farther than mere title or position. The truest, most lasting influence is felt heart to heart and, when enlarged by God, extends far beyond what we would envision.

True, some people have more *prominent* influence than others—the president of the United States or the CEO of a

company, for example. But this doesn't indicate a more *significant* influence. Henry Ward Beecher observed, "The humblest individual exerts some influence, either for good or evil, upon others."

Consider the influence of just one life—ponder *your* spheres of influence.

Perhaps the most influential person on the planet is a parent. After all, "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." If you are a parent, you hold the power to shape and mold a *life*—that's influence. That's lasting. That's significant.

And who hasn't been influenced by a friend? As someone's friend, you have direct entrance into his heart. You have the power to affect thinking, sway beliefs, stimulate action, and encourage direction.

Teachers, too, have incalculable influence. In recently reviewing my cumulative folder from my school days, I realized that I remember every single teacher—from K5 through high school graduation. Each of them made some kind of impact on my life. As Henry Adams said, "A teacher affects eternity. He can never tell where his influence stops." Are you a teacher? You have the power to affect eternity from your classroom.

If you serve in the workforce, you have influence that can move in multiple directions. Regardless of your position on the flowchart, you have an opportunity to influence those with whom you come in contact—superiors, employees, peers—for the Lord and for truth.

Everyone—parents, friends, teachers, workers, *common, everyday people*—wield the scepter of influence. And this influence often reaches spheres we never realize.

One of the greatest threats to our usefulness for God is the myth that our lives don't have the capacity to make a difference, that what we do has no eternal significance, that there is no reason to extend ourselves to invest in others.

You may not see the immediate effects of your influence. You may not perceive the impact your life is having on another or realize the power you hold through influence. But it's there. And, regardless of your perceived level of influence, it's up to you to choose to steward it for God.

## **Surprising Turns—Serious Tests**

History is full of unexpected influencers—people who inauspiciously rose to positions of prominence. With dogged determination and untiring labor, these men and women found their way up the ranks of leadership into the annals of world-wide influencers.

Consider a different kind of story with me, however—a story of one of history's greatest influencers. His name is Joseph, and you can read his story in Genesis 37–50. Joseph didn't gain influence by persistently climbing the slippery ladder of success or pulling himself up by his own bootstraps.

Joseph had a different motivation and a strength outside himself. He had a specific and repeated promise from God of enlarged influence. Through two almost identical dreams, God gave Joseph a glimpse of his future influence—even over his brothers. In these dreams, Joseph was a powerful ruler, and his brothers bowed before him.

How he, the second to the youngest son of a shepherd,

would trade his staff for a scepter must have puzzled Joseph, but he believed God's revelation to him was true. Better than the most dramatic rags-to-riches novel, the complex plot of Joseph's life reveals the delicate tapestry of God's sovereignty in fulfilling His promise.

Of course, whenever God gives us spheres of influence—or even just the promise of influence, Satan tests that influence. Joseph's life and his unusual road to prominence can be charted by the tests he endured and his victory through them. In the end, his influence was the result of successfully passing the most difficult tests of life.

## Four Tests of Influence

Born into what we would label a dysfunctional family riddled with envy, strife, and discord, Joseph had ten older half brothers who were insanely jealous of Joseph's position as "Dad's favorite" and of his revelations from God.

God, as He often did before the Bible was penned, revealed His will to Joseph through dreams. In faith, and perhaps surprise, Joseph shared his dream with his brothers, but his story seemed to go downhill from there. From that point forward, we can summarize his life in a series of four tests.

First, Joseph endured the test of **persecution**. Seething with bitterness and hatred toward him, Joseph's brothers found a way to rid themselves of Joseph. When their father, Jacob, sent Joseph to bring his brothers food and supplies, they saw him coming and plotted to kill him. Restrained only by their own greed and the happenstance of slave traders passing by,

Joseph's brothers instead sold him into foreign slavery.

Joseph's test of persecution was severe. Imagine the trauma this seventeen-year-old underwent as he was bound and carried into a foreign country. What confusion must have plagued his thoughts. What rejection must have gripped his soul. What pain must have besieged his heart.

Yet Joseph resisted the greatest danger in the test of persecution—the temptation to become bitter. Had he failed this test by allowing bitterness to corrode his dreams, he would have spent the rest of his life as a menial slave. Because he passed the test, his life story moved on, and his influence continued to expand in the most unexpected places.

Joseph's next test was that of **temptation**. He soon found himself as the steward for Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's high-ranking officers. Potiphar's wife took notice of the sharp young administrator her husband had purchased. And she made it her personal mission to seduce him.

With moral strength that only God could provide, Joseph refused—not just once, but repeatedly. The situation finally came to a head when Potiphar's wife “caught him by his garment, saying, Lie with me: and he left his garment in her hand, and fled” (Genesis 39:12). While he lost his coat, he retained his character, and his courage led him to the next test—**suffering**.

Not willing to be scorned by Joseph, Potiphar's wife determined she would have the last word. And she did. At Potiphar's homecoming that evening, his wife falsely accused Joseph of the very action she herself was guilty of! Without any further questioning, Potiphar slammed Joseph into prison,



where he remained for years.

Joseph felt a glimmer of hope for release when he accurately interpreted a dream for Pharaoh's personal butler. But when the butler was released, he forgot to speak a word for Joseph as he had promised.

Imagine how easy it would have been at this point for Joseph to have become embittered and cynical toward God and the dream God had given him. Had he gone this route, failing the test of suffering, he would have missed the great influence God planned for him on the other side of the prison doors.

Then, one afternoon, just as suddenly as Joseph found himself *in* prison, he found himself royally escorted into Pharaoh's presence. To make a long story short, the butler who had earlier forgotten Joseph remembered him after all; and at precisely the right moment, he brought Joseph's name before Pharaoh, who called Joseph into his presence. By the end of the appointment, Joseph was second-in-command of Egypt.

What a divinely woven story! Joseph could not have gone directly from slavery in Potiphar's house to the palace of Egypt. God used the prison to bring him into contact with the man whom God would use to set Joseph in a place of influence. Had he been released two years earlier, he would have been promoted from the prison back to slavery. God used the time of suffering to set the stage for the influence He planned for Joseph.

Joseph used his influence to store provision for the famine God had revealed would come. Seven years later, in the grip of the famine, Joseph's brothers made their way to Egypt to purchase food. And, just as Joseph had dreamed two decades

earlier, his brothers all bowed before him.

If you think it would be difficult to be sold by your brothers into slavery when you were helpless to stop them, consider what it would be like to meet those same brothers when you had the power to even the score! Such is the test of **prosperity**.

Joseph's brothers didn't recognize him, and he chose not to immediately reveal his identity. Instead, he staged a few tests of his own to prepare his brothers for the moment he would make himself known to them.

The second time they came to Egypt, Joseph could no longer contain himself. "And Joseph said unto his brethren, I am Joseph; doth my father yet live? And his brethren could not answer him; for they were troubled at his presence" (Genesis 45:3).

With a grace surpassing human ability, Joseph assured his brothers, "Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life" (Genesis 45:5).

Years earlier, Joseph successfully passed the tests of influence, choosing forgiveness, patience, and faith; and he was now able to trace God's providence through the years and return good for evil.

Through Joseph's influence and leadership, nations were saved from famine, his family was reunited, and we today learn how to steward the influence God has given us.

## **Passing Your Tests**

Through Joseph's faithful success, we learn how we, too, can

pass the tests that would destroy our influence. We learn, through Joseph, how to lengthen the reach of our own influence.

Through each of the four tests Joseph passed—persecution, temptation, suffering, and prosperity—we see how we can wisely steward and multiply the influence God has given us. Let's more closely examine each of these tests and see how God uses them to expand our spheres of influence.

## **Persecution—An Unconventional Platform**

For the Christian who loves and lives for God, persecution is not a matter of *if*, but *when*. It inevitably visits each of us. Second Timothy 3:12 asserts, “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.”

Even as Joseph experienced persecution from his own brothers, don't be surprised if your testing comes from those who should be rejoicing with you in the influence God is giving you. Family members, fellow workers in the ministry, and friends are often our unexpected persecutors. Sometimes it is simply the envy of their own hearts that stirs their contempt or detraction.

Encourage yourself in knowing God has a way of turning the persecution of His people into a platform for expanded influence. Joseph, for example, could never have become the ruler of Egypt directly from the sheep fields. God used the persecution of his brothers to transform Joseph's staff into a

scepter.

One of the most influential pastors of the seventeenth century spent years of his ministry in a cold prison cell. Jailed for preaching the Gospel without the permission of the Church of England, John Bunyan used his time in prison to write *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a classic and enduring best seller that has touched the lives of millions. Thus, what enemies of the Gospel thought would squelch Bunyan's influence instead served to expand it.

Of persecution, Bunyan said, "Therefore, I bind these lies and slanderous accusations to my person as an ornament; *it belongs to my Christian profession to be vilified, slandered, reproached and reviled*, and since all this is nothing but that, as God and my conscience testify, I rejoice in being reproached for Christ's sake" (emphasis added).

The greatest danger in the test of persecution is not personal loss, for God can turn that loss into blessing. The greatest danger is our own propensity toward bitterness.

When you, like Joseph, recognize that the ridicule or hatred leveled toward you is a result of the envy and malice in someone else's heart, you are able to reject bitterness. Years later you will be able to see the platform God built under you was formed with the very materials gathered by persecution.

## **Temptation—A Peril of Position**

Something about prosperity and influence can be intoxicating. The danger comes when we forget Who gave us the blessings. At this point, we become more vulnerable to temptation as we

assume we are now above the rules—beyond God’s moral standard.

Tiger Woods, the pro golfer and highest paid professional athlete in the world, very clearly drew the connection between position and temptation in his public apology for infidelity in his marriage:

I knew my actions were wrong, but I convinced myself that normal rules didn’t apply.... I thought I could get away with whatever I wanted to. I felt that I had worked hard my entire life and deserved to enjoy all the temptations around me. I felt I was entitled. Thanks to money and fame, I didn’t have to go far to find them.

I was wrong. I was foolish. I don’t get to play by different rules. The same boundaries that apply to everyone apply to me.<sup>2</sup>

When God elevates your position and increases your influence, beware! Temptation is not far away.

Even as Joseph was promoted to the position of overseer for Potiphar’s assets, he resisted temptation. Genesis 39:8–10 reveals several contributing choices that kept Joseph pure:

*But he refused, and said unto his master’s wife, Behold, my master wotteth not what is with me in the house, and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand; There is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God? And it came to pass, as she spake to Joseph day by day, that he hearkened not unto her; to lie by her; or to be with her.—Genesis 39:8–10*

**He refused.** Joseph flat said, “no.” And he had to say it not just once, but “day by day” as Potiphar’s wife relentlessly

worked to seduce him.

“Opportunity may knock only once, but temptation leans on the doorbell,” is an oft-heard saying in our day. Many of us can resist the first round of temptation, but Satan doesn’t tempt us just once; he is persistent. By repeated offers, he works to wear down our defenses hoping we will eventually give in to his enticements.

If we are to refuse temptation, we should heed the warning of 1 Peter 5:8, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.” And we should claim the promise of James 4:7, “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

**He set boundaries.** Even in an elevated position, Joseph lived by God’s moral boundaries. He did not justify sin or excuse a breach in boundaries because of his position as the household overseer.

In our contemporary, postmodern culture, boundaries are not popular. Even Christians scoff at standards, calling them “legalistic.” While some people *do* set seemingly arbitrary standards which promote self-righteousness, personal convictions that are firmly affixed to a scriptural principle are not only wise—they are vital.

Joseph’s predetermined boundary was basic: I will not be with a woman who is not my wife. From the first time Potiphar’s wife attempted to seduce him, he made his boundary known: “thou art *his* wife,” and he made a point to avoid her, refusing “to be with her.” Joseph believed in standards; and by them, he preserved his purity.

**He was God-conscious.** Joseph recognized that to yield to

temptation would be a crime against God Himself. He responded, "...how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" Being continually aware of God's presence and our accountability to Him will help us resist sin when it seems that none but God will ever know of the temptation.

Joseph's victory over temptation was the outcome of purposeful choices, and to pass the test of temptation, *we* must follow in his footsteps.

## **Suffering—Patiently Waiting by the Door**

One of the most painful church services of my life occurred less than forty-eight hours after the Friday night collapse I described in chapter 2. My wife and I were staying in an out-of-town hotel, trying to adjust medications and figure out what was going on with my body.

We visited a small country church and slipped in the back just before the service began. The pastor, who must have been in his mid-twenties, preached with obvious care for his small flock. His sermon ministered to me, but watching him deliver it painfully reminded me of my inability to be in my own pulpit that Sunday...and for all I knew at that point, perhaps any *future* Sunday. As I watched that young pastor, I ached to be able to once again preach with passion and care. I yearned to lead our church as the Lord had enabled me to do for twenty-five years.

As I lay on the hotel floor that night (so as not to wake

Terrie when I couldn't sleep), I was seized with the grief of realizing I may never have the strength to preach again. Stripped of strength, I hardly had the energy to pray; but with all that was in me, I pled, "Lord, I want to preach again for Your people."

In the weeks following, as God renewed my strength, I recorded in my journal, "God's delays are not God's denials." God sometimes gives us a glimpse of what He plans to do through us, and then He prepares us to do it through a season of waiting or weakness.

When you find yourself in those seasons, trust God. Wait patiently. And refuse to doubt in the night what God gave you in the light.

Several weeks after I cried out to God in the hotel room, I stepped once again into my pulpit to preach to the people I love. By God's grace and through His strength alone, I preached three times on that Palm Sunday. But even I sensed a difference in my preaching. When the day ended, I knew that every word was by God's grace and through His strength. Through the season of waiting on the Lord, I was far more aware of my dependence on Him as I proclaimed His truth, and I became thankful for those weeks of waiting.

Scripture doesn't tell us how many years Joseph waited behind the prison door—it was at least two years, and it could have been as many as thirteen. (He was seventeen when he was sold into slavery, and he was thirty when he was released from prison, but we do not know how long he served Potiphar.) Because Joseph was faithful and patient during his long test of suffering, when the prison doors swung open, he was ready to



fill the role God had prepared.

The test of suffering is one of the most effective crucibles in which God refines His servants. During the test, there is great temptation to impatiently manipulate relief. But those who endure the season of suffering keep themselves in the place of blessing. On the other side of the prison doors, there is increased opportunity to influence for the glory of God.

## **Prosperity—Blessed to Be a Blessing**

Suffering may be the sharpest test we face, but prosperity is probably the most severe. Too many Christians pray fervently for God's help during the first three tests—persecution, temptation, and suffering. But when God brings them through to the place of blessing, they fail the test of prosperity. They forget the promises they made in their points of desperation. They forget the goodness God faithfully showed them along the way. Rather than stewarding their enlarged influence to return glory to God and kindness to others, they simply squander their prosperity on personal gratification.

God blesses us, not so we can revel in our prosperity, not so we can return in kind to those who made us suffer, but that we might be a blessing!

Are you enjoying God's hand of blessing? Pass it on. Have you seen God fulfill your dreams? Give Him glory, and use your influence for Him.

# Identification and Influence

Throughout Joseph's life, we see a prevailing principle of influence: Identity and influence are inseparably connected.

A contemporary prevailing myth about influence is that by shedding our Christian identity, we make room to influence a larger sector of the world. Nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, the more strongly our identity is attached to the Lord and to His people, the greater will be the impact of our influence for the Lord.

From the day Joseph set foot in Potiphar's house, everyone knew he was a "Hebrew servant" (Genesis 39:17). He didn't attempt to blend in with the Egyptians hoping to covertly extend his influence. Rather, he chose to unmistakably identify with the God of his forefathers.

This is significant as the Egyptians considered the Hebrews so distasteful that they would not even eat with them (Genesis 43:32). Yet Joseph's identification did not hamper his influence; it strengthened it.

In God's economy of influence, we maximize our influence by narrowing our identity.

Wherever you go, with whomever you are, purposefully make your identity clear. As a Christian, identify with your Saviour. As a married man or woman, identify with your spouse. (Yes, wear your wedding ring!) As a Bible-believer, identify with true doctrine. As a bearer of Christ's name, identify with godly friends. As a ministry leader, identify with Christ-honoring methods in ministry.

I often think of the phrase, "Glory in the cross. It keeps you

out of the world and the world out of you.” Our true glory is in the cross and in our Saviour.

*Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD.—*  
Jeremiah 9:23–24

## **Lengthening Your Scepter**

Many of God’s greatest influencers have been unknown and unrecognized by the world. Yet, like Joseph, they possessed the one trait required for true success—faithfulness.

Influence for God is not won by struggle. It is won by faithfulness. In every area of stewardship, God simply requires faithfulness: “Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2).

As we faithfully steward whatever influence God has given us through the tests of life, God lengthens our scepter and expands our influence. In whatever position or place you find yourself, in whatever test you encounter, faithfully use your influence for the glory of God!

# 13

## **Your Intangible Asset Stewarding Your Testimony**

Todd Davis, CEO of an Arizona-based company, has had his identity stolen no less than thirteen times.

Thieves have used Davis' identity to take a loan (\$500), run up cell phone bills with two different companies (\$2,576), enjoy unpaid utilities (\$122), create outstanding debt with a gift basket company (\$312), and rack up bank charges (\$573). In addition to these, several other collection agencies reported a sum of \$1,316 owed in Davis' name.

The irony? Todd Davis' company is an identity protection service.

In a series of advertisements for the company, Mr. Davis broadcasted his social security number on billboards and television commercials. He claimed, "Just like they have with mine, LifeLock will make your personal information useless to a criminal."

Apparently he was wrong.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) thought he was wrong, too, and fined the company \$12 million for fraudulent advertising. The chairman of the FTC commented, "In truth, the protection they provided left such a large hole...that you could

drive a truck through it.”

Identity theft has become a serious threat in our technologically advanced generation. And no one is exempt from being targeted.

But there is an identity thief who is more menacing than any online hacker ever dreamed. His name is Satan, and you are his target. His goal is to steal a facet of your identity that is larger than your bank account or credit score. He wants to ruin your testimony.

## **An Intangible Asset**

Every Christian has a testimony. I’m not just talking about the story of when and where you were saved, although that is part of it. I’m talking about the big picture of your life—your message, your name, your reputation.

Your testimony is of greater value than any material asset you possess. Proverbs 22:1 affirms, “A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold.”

*Identity* and *legacy* have become buzzwords in our generation. We want to shape our image so that it is favorable and lasting. We want others to perceive us well and remember us long. But for the Christian, there is an even larger concern regarding identity, legacy, and testimony. It is *Christ’s* name and *His* reputation.

The most important questions are not “What do others think of me?” or “How will others remember me?” Of utmost importance is, “What do others know of Christ because of me

—now and after I am gone?” What people think of *me* is irrelevant, but what they think of *Christ* is vital. And you and I have the opportunity to steward our testimony in such a way that others think highly of Christ.

As Christians, our goal is to steward our reputation so it honors the Lord Jesus Christ. We want to build a testimony that gives glory to God.

Years ago, as a young father, I had no idea what God would allow me to accomplish in my life or the specifics of what our family would look like years down the road. But I knew I needed a goal. So, I spent some time outlining what I prayerfully wanted the end of my life and ministry to look like. Here is what I wrote:

I envision my life as a life invested in loving my family, laboring for Christ, and leaving a godly example and written philosophy of ministry for the next generation.

I envision my marriage to be an ever loving relationship of spiritual growth, with a sense of godly satisfaction and strategic mentoring in the twilight years.

I envision my children and their spouses to be growing in Christ and in His service. I envision them walking in the truth and leading their families in the truth.

Although I wrote this years ago, I still read through it about once or twice a week. It reminds me of the big picture goal for my life, and it helps me to steward my resources along the way that I might leave this kind of testimony.

I don't know how many years the Lord may give me. I want

to live my life in such a way that my family will mourn my dying more than my living. I want to leave a testimony for my family, church, and friends that speaks of an abundant life and a magnificent Saviour.

Ecclesiastes 7:8 reminds us, “Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof.” Regardless of your testimony to this point, you can choose to end your life with a testimony that exalts Christ and points others to Him.

But it must be intentional. You must purposefully steward your testimony.

## **His Last Words**

One of the most astounding testimonies in Scripture is that of the Apostle Paul. When we first meet this man, he is a zealous persecutor of Christianity. He is an accomplice to the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:58–8:1). And he ruthlessly attempts to quench the spreading flames of the early church. Acts 8:3 tells us “he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.” Acts 9:1 describes his seething hatred toward Christians as we find him “breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord.” This man is intense in his determination to crush Christianity.

But when Paul met Christ on the road to Damascus, his life was dramatically transformed (Acts 9:3–6). From that point forward, Paul developed a testimony that even today challenges us. Throughout the rest of the book of Acts, we read of Paul’s missionary work for the Gospel and his

investment for Christ. His redirected and repurposed zeal was so focused that he quickly made himself a target of those he had previously led in persecuting Christians. But even through personal persecution, Paul lived and breathed for Christ and for the Gospel.

After preaching salvation and planting churches all throughout Asia Minor, Paul's last days on Earth were spent in the Mamertine Prison in Rome. I have stood in this cave-like prison room near the Roman Forum. Nero had sentenced Paul to the death penalty, and he would soon give his life as a martyr for the Gospel that he so loved. But before he died, Paul wrote one final New Testament epistle—this one to Timothy, his son in the faith.

Among the many pieces of counsel Paul gave Timothy in these few pages, he included instructions on finishing his life with a good testimony. Paul knew his days were numbered, but he wanted to challenge Timothy to live wholly and passionately for the Lord.

From Paul's words, we learn how we, too, can steward our testimony for Christ.

*But thou hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, charity, patience, Persecutions, afflictions, which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra; what persecutions I endured: but out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived. But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of,*



*knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.—2 Timothy 3:10–15*

The first phrase of that passage—“thou hast fully known”—grabs my heart each time I read it. Timothy knew Paul better than perhaps any other person. Paul mentored Timothy. Paul traveled with Timothy. Paul poured his life into this young man. And at the end of it all, Paul could say, “Timothy, you fully know me, and you know that my life has been real for God. You know that I have genuinely lived for Christ.”

Often, the closer you get to a person you admire, the more disappointed you become. But in Timothy’s relationship with Paul, the opposite was true. Although he surely saw the human weaknesses in Paul’s life, even with a close-up perspective, Timothy knew that Paul had a genuine testimony for Christ.

How did Paul do it? Let’s listen closely to Paul’s instruction to Timothy and learn how we, too, can develop and steward an authentic testimony that honors God.

## **Foundations Matter**

When you think of establishing a good testimony, you probably think first of your actions. Paul, however, started a little deeper. When he spoke of his testimony to Timothy, his first words were, “Thou hast fully known my doctrine.” Before he mentioned any actions or habits, he referred to the very basis for his actions—his belief system.

When you think about it, what we *do* is actually a result of

what we *believe*. For instance, if I believe a particular investment will pay large dividends, I will invest my money in it. If I believe an earthquake is going to create a landslide in my neighborhood, I will evacuate. If I believe junk food will shorten my life, I will avoid it.

Similarly, what we believe about God, His Word, and His principles of life will affect our actions and thus affect our testimonies. For instance, if I believe based on God's Word that I should love my wife with the love that Christ gave to the church (Ephesians 5:25), I will cherish her, listen to her, and care for her. My testimony to others will be shaped by my belief of God's Word.

Because our beliefs ultimately dictate our behaviors, the substance of our beliefs is paramount. If we are to have a testimony that honors God, we must begin with letting the truth of God's Word permeate our lives.

Many Christians downplay the importance of doctrine, focusing on the "practical" while avoiding the "theological." But this is faulty thinking. We cannot maintain a pure and godly testimony if we are not grounded in the truth of God's Word. Those who downplay doctrine are often the first to adapt their lives to the fads of culture.

Paul warned Timothy of a trend that perfectly describes our culture today: "the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears" (2 Timothy 4:3). In nominal Christianity, people are willing to be entertained, but they don't want doctrine to intrude into their lifestyle and daily choices. They are willing to listen to religious teachers who

merely echo popular culture, but they don't want to hear Bible truth that necessitates a response of personal change.

Many years ago, Charles Spurgeon wisely explained, "A man cannot have an erroneous belief without by-and-by having an erroneous life. I believe one thing naturally begets the other."

If we desire to build our lives and shape our testimonies on the unshakable truths of God's Word, we have no choice but to immerse ourselves in the Scriptures—to saturate our hearts and minds with God's truth. In so doing, we find that God's Word is intensely applicable to our every day living.

Second Timothy 3:16 describes the personal profit that God's Word brings to our lives: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

Did you catch the four provisions of the Scriptures?

Doctrine—it teaches us the truth.

Reproof—it convicts us when we are wrong.

Correction—it tells us how to realign our lives to the truth.

Instruction—it provides directions to live the truth and enjoy its benefits.

I *need* these provisions—doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction—in my life on a daily basis. Thus, I *need* God's Word. The Bible is the perfect source of God's truth. It is God's manual for life.

Wouldn't it behoove us then to read it, study it, memorize it—to make it the very fiber of our lives? If we give only lip service to the Bible but do not absorb its truths into our hearts and minds, our testimonies will crumble in a fashion similar to

those who don't know God at all.

Stewarding our testimony starts with stewarding the truth—with being Christians who nurture a hunger for God's Word and sustain a commitment to daily applying it to our lives.

## Truth-Shaped Habits

Paul not only pointed Timothy to his doctrine, but he also spoke of his “manner of life.” He didn't just *preach* the truth; he *lived* the truth. Paul could say, “Timothy, you know that my life has been consistent with the truth I've taught.” What a testimony!

Truth is not just academic. It holds the power to change the way we live—to shape our testimony for Christ. Second Corinthians 5:17 tells us, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” The “before and after” testimony of a Christian who is applying God's truth reveals the radical difference Christ makes in a person's life.

Sometimes we become so involved in what we *do* for the Lord that we forget to pay attention to who we *are*. We may be busy in ministry, occupied in service, and involved in our families; but if our lives are not radiating the purity and grace of Christ, we're losing the opportunity to impact lives up close with our testimony.

One of the notes I wrote in my journal in my uncle's cabin in Colorado was, “I want to not only preach Christ, but also live Christ in my daily life.” In whatever position of leadership we hold—be it parent or pastor, teacher or employer—this should

be our consuming desire. We don't want to become so involved in and focused on our service for Christ to others that we neglect to let Him transform our own lives!

Paul explained to Timothy that the best platform from which to hold forth the truth is purity in our own lives: "Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience" (1 Timothy 3:9). This statement carries more weight when you remember that Paul didn't inherit a good name from others. His godly reputation and Christ-honoring testimony were a result of his daily choice to die to self and follow Christ even in the routine areas of life.

A godly testimony is the by-product of a conscious choice to absorb God's Word and let biblical truth guide your daily habits and patterns.

## **Remember Your Purpose**

Those who are observing your testimony are watching not only *what* you do, but *why* you do what you do. Your purpose is important. What is the driving passion of your heart—your motive for service?

If Paul were to sit down with parchment and a pen and write his purpose statement, it would be elegant in its simplicity: "To know Christ and to make Him known."

All throughout Paul's epistles he underscores this great desire of his heart. From the moment of his conversion, he passionately hungered to know Christ. He wrote to the Philippian church, "But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my

Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ...That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death” (Philippians 3:7–8, 10).

But knowing Christ wasn't enough for Paul. He also wanted to make Christ known. You can feel the intensity of his spirit in his words, “necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16).

Paul chose to live his life so others would have the opportunity to hear and respond to the Gospel. When necessary (as was often the case), he dispensed with comfort and embraced suffering. In Corinth, Thessalonica, Ephesus—everywhere Paul went—the driving passion of his heart was to make Christ known.

No wonder Paul could write his final words with a testimony that brightly shone for Jesus Christ! His life was wrapped up in Christ and in declaring His Gospel.

American Christians today have a trend of minimal witness. Living in the most affluent society in history, we have made our goals temporal—wealth, fame, comfort. But we've neglected the eternal purpose which Christ assigned to us before He ascended to Heaven: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15).

Regardless of your career, this is a purpose worth investing your life in. This is a purpose worth your sacrifice and sustained focus. This is a purpose on which you can build a godly testimony that will point your children and grandchildren to the power of the incredible grace of God.

Consistently living for a purpose of this magnitude doesn't happen by accident. Although I made a conscious decision many years ago to live to know Christ and to make Him known, I've had to repeatedly choose to maintain a focus on reaching others with the Gospel of Christ. This is my purpose, and I don't want to leave it unfulfilled.

Years from now, when others remember my life, it won't matter which sports team I followed or how much wealth I amassed. I want my purpose to be so well known to those who know me, that when they remember me, they will remember the glorious Gospel of Christ.

## **Perseverance Counts**

A testimony isn't built in a day—but it is built daily. It is the result of a lifetime of repeated choices to build our lives on truth and center our activities on God's purpose for our lives. And these choices will be tested.

Those we respect the most have been faithful through the trials of life. In fact, that is often the reason we admire them. It's as if their perseverance inscribes an indelible testimony into our hearts. We see a real-time display of God's grace, and it confirms that living for the Lord is worth it.

Timothy knew that Paul was no stranger to trials, and Paul's testimony bolstered Timothy's courage. Everywhere Paul went, he endured persecution. In 2 Timothy 3:11, Paul specifically listed for Timothy cities where he endured "persecutions, afflictions," all of them near Timothy's home. Acts 13 and 14 record the events of these four cities—Antioch, Iconium,

Lystra, and Derbe.

At Antioch, unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and “raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts” (Acts 13:50).

But Paul didn’t quit. The next verse records that Paul and Barnabas pressed forward “and came unto Iconium” (Acts 13:51). Here again, the unbelieving Jews made trouble. This time, “there was an assault made both of the Gentiles, and also of the Jews with their rulers, to use them despitely, and to stone them” (Acts 14:5).

So, Paul and Barnabas moved on to Lystra. Again, Paul is persecuted, this time actually stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19). Lystra was Timothy’s hometown, and it is incredible to realize that the sight of Paul’s stoning may very well have been Timothy’s first glimpse of ministry.

Yet, Timothy watched Paul persevere through unbelievable physical pain. After Paul had been dragged outside the city and left for dead, he revived. And “the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe” (Acts 14:20). Can you imagine? Paul traveled forty-one miles, with undoubtedly crude transportation—perhaps walking, perhaps by an animal taxi—the very day after he had been pummeled with stones to the point of death! No wonder Timothy respected Paul’s testimony.

But Paul isn’t the only one who would suffer hardship for the cause of Christ. In 2 Timothy 3:12, he warned Timothy, “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” In other words, if you are going to build a godly lifestyle on the truth, realize that persecution *will* come your way.



All around the world, Christians are persecuted and physically tortured for their faith in Christ. At this writing, Pastor Youcef (Joseph) Nadarkhani in Iran has been sentenced to death because of his refusal to recant faith in Christ. His testimony, along with other persecuted Christians around the world, is one of faithful perseverance, and it proves that the faith is worth suffering for!

In our own country, the persecution is more subtle—a business partner becomes frustrated with you, a family member rejects you, a friend severs his relationship with you. Nevertheless, suffering has always been a part of the faith. And if we are to build a godly testimony, we must be faithful through the difficult seasons of life.

## “Continue Thou”

A few years ago, I was invited to preach in San Jose, California, at the church where I had been raised and was eventually married. As I walked into the foyer, an elderly man greeted me and warmly shook my hand. “Paul,” he said, “it’s so good to see you.”

I immediately recognized him—Mr. Morrelli. Matt Morrelli was a teacher in the children’s ministry at church when I was a young boy forty years ago. He taught me some of the first Bible verses I memorized. He took me out camping with some of the other boys. He modeled a joyful Christian life and taught me things of the Lord. Now, here he was standing in front of me *forty years later*. My heart surged with joy as he shook my hand and I saw his faithfulness to the Lord and to his church.

Some forty years later, although his wife and daughter had preceded him to Heaven and he had endured much hardship, he still had a godly testimony.

Faithfulness brings glory to God, but it requires perseverance through the years. This is why Paul instructed Timothy, “But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them” (2 Timothy 3:14).

Your testimony is one of the most valuable resources God has entrusted to your care. Stewarding it wisely is a matter of committing to Christ-honoring habits for a lifetime. It starts with grounding your life on the truth of God’s Word. Then, as the truth permeates your life, you must make daily decisions to live by the truth—to let it define who you are and shape who you become.

The challenge Paul left with Timothy is simple: Ground yourself in the truth, let it change your life, and ultimately, you will have a testimony for God.

Stewarding your testimony is vital—not because of how others will remember you, but because of what they will think of Christ because of you—today, tomorrow, and after you are gone.

## More Valuable than Life Stewarding Truth

The year 1956 was full of history: President Dwight Eisenhower was reelected in the United States. Soviet leader Khrushchev publicly denounced Stalin and began “de-Stalinization” in the USSR. Israel invaded the Sinai Peninsula. Congress approved the Highway Act, allowing for construction of the US interstate highway system. Fidel Castro began a revolution in Cuba. The first transatlantic telephone cable entered operation. Dr. Albert Sabin developed the oral polio vaccine. The New York Yankees won the World Series (4-3) over the Brooklyn Dodgers. And the Olympic Games were held in Melbourne, Australia.

But none of this mattered to the aboriginal Huaorani people living in isolation along the shores of the Curaray River in Ecuador. Here, semi-nomadic tribes carried on life as they had for centuries—hunt, garden, and move as needed.

These hostile people were both fearsome and fearful. They not only brutally killed any outsider who dared to attempt invasion, but they murdered each other as well.

The Huaoranis were so fierce that the neighboring Quichau Indians called them *Aucas*, meaning “savages.” Ironically, however, *Huaorani* simply means “the people” in their own

language, and they referred to all outsiders as *cowodes*—“savages and cannibals.” This is interesting for a group of people who had the highest number of recorded homicides in history.

It was into this territory that five missionaries—Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Peter Fleming, Ed McCully, and Roger Youderian—sought to bring the Gospel. Having made contact with a Huaorani escapee, a single young woman, they learned phrases of the Huao language and courageously launched what they called “Operation Auca.”

The men located a Huaorani village from the air and dropped gifts by rope to indicate their friendly intentions. After several of these gift drops, the Huaorani returned the gesture by tying their own gifts (such as a parrot and a feathered headdress) to the end of the rope before it was pulled back into the plane. Finally, the men landed the plane at a beach six miles from the village and made their first face-to-face contact with a group of Aucas.

The encounter seemed to be favorable, so the missionaries decided to set up camp at their beach landing spot, which they named “Palm Beach.” The following morning, they were again visited by Aucas—this time, a large group bearing spears. All five missionaries were killed. Their bodies were so mutilated that they could only be identified a few days later by watches, rings, and pocket journals.

The missionaries’ deaths made national news, and the entire nation mourned the tragic loss. These men were bright and gifted. If you had known any one of them, you would have predicted a life marked with accomplishment and punctuated

by successes.

So why did they waste their lives? Millions shook their head in disbelief and even pity as they stumbled over this question. The jungle deaths seemed futile. Surely the men were nothing more than well-intentioned fools.

But six and a half years earlier, Jim Elliot had provided his own commentary on this event. His journal entry for October 28, 1949, records the scribbled words:

*“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”*

And history proves Jim right.

Less than three years after the Palm Beach massacre, the Huaorani allowed two missionaries (actually, a sister and a wife of two of the men they had murdered) to live among them. Eventually, thousands of Huaorani trusted Christ as their Saviour. They established local churches and even traveled to neighboring Indians to preach the Gospel. The missionaries’ sacrifice had taught these people that the Gospel is worth the complete investment of one’s life.

The most important gift God ever brings into our lives is the truth concerning His Son. John 8:32 points to the incredible value of truth: “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

More precious than life itself is truth. This is why Jesus said, “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s, the same shall save it” (Mark 8:35).

As we conclude our study of stewarding life, I would like to challenge you to actively and purposefully steward all of your

resources, including your life itself, into eternity. I would like to remind you that the purpose of stewarding our lives is that we might lose them for the sake of the Gospel. We probably won't be asked to lose our lives at the point of an aboriginal spear, but we can choose to give our lives for the spread of the truth.

## **His Last Command—My First Priority**

Christ's last command before He ascended to Heaven concerns the truth. It is found in Mark 16:15: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."

The Gospel that we are to deliver to "every creature" is summed up in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4: "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures."

Christ came to Earth to make this message possible. And He has now charged us, His people, with the responsibility of making the message known.

Should not this, His last command, be our first priority?

## **The Gospel—A Trust**

For the Christian, the Gospel is more than facts. It is a treasure which God has committed to our trust. Paul understood this trust like few of us do today. Notice his personal ownership of the Gospel.

*But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts.—1 Thessalonians 2:4*

*To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.  
—2 Corinthians 5:19*

God has specifically committed the Gospel to our trust, and He has commanded us to take it to the world. It is a stewardship—a responsibility.

I'm not sure how it happened, but somewhere along the line, American Christians have come to view the responsibility of delivering the Gospel as a command given uniquely to preachers or to those who consider themselves in full-time ministry. But the verses above were written to local churches. They were addressed to every church member—from the pastor to the new convert. All of us are entrusted with the precious truth of salvation.

How seriously are you taking this trust? How fervently are you investing your resources into delivering the truth of the Gospel?

## **The Wisest Investment**

In the simple phrase, “He that winneth souls is wise,” Proverbs 11:30 points out what truly wise life stewardship looks like.

Regardless of your profession or career, you can choose to be a soulwinner—someone who leads souls to Christ.

Since the time I was saved as a young person, I have had many opportunities to share the Gospel with others. On at least a weekly basis, these opportunities have been purposefully carved out and written into my schedule. Other times, they have come through God's providence in crossing my path with someone who needed His truth.

A few months ago, I went to the hospital for an outpatient procedure. The nurse anesthetized me, and I don't remember anything else that happened until several hours after I was home.

My wife tells me, however, that I had a unique conversation with the nurse who was trying to get me awake enough to be discharged. While I was sitting in a wheelchair clad in a flimsy hospital gown, the exchange went something like this:

"Mr. Chappell, you need to wake up. It's time to go home now."

"Leave me alone, I'm trying to sleep!"

Terrie gave me a gentle shake to help me regain consciousness and introduced me to the nurse, Lourdes.

Apparently this was a mistake, for it was then that I remembered a significant fact which I shared with the nurse, "Did you know that they gave me Propofol, the same drug Michael Jackson took?"

Terrie doesn't remember how Lourdes responded, because by this point, she was very eager to get me awake and away!

As we left, I remembered something else to tell the nurse. Still in my groggy, demanding state, I told her, "I'm Paul Chappell, and I'm the pastor of Lancaster Baptist Church." I'm not sure that introducing yourself as a pastor just moments



after you announce that you are on Propofol is generally a good idea, but I was not cognizant enough to realize that. So I continued by asking my wife to give Lourdes a Gospel tract. “Honey, give her a tract so she’ll come to church.”

I’m sure that as Terrie wheeled me out to the car, she softened the conversation with understanding smiles and quietly thanked Lourdes. But as she related the story to me several hours later, I wished I had handled that conversation differently!

Three days later, my secretary called me. “A lady named Lourdes called the church and asked for an appointment with you. She said she is a nurse and that you gave her a pamphlet this week and told her to call if she needed anything.”

I was floored. Apparently Lourdes’s hunger for truth was bigger than could be quenched by a drugged pastor in a hospital gown talking about Propofol!

The very next day, Terrie and I had a meeting with Lourdes. She had a personal life crisis and also recognized that she was at a spiritual crossroads. We shared with Lourdes from the Bible that Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). We shared the verses with her that are found in the section [“The Greatest Gift”](#) and told her how she could have a personal relationship with Christ. A couple of hours later, we had the sweet privilege of leading Lourdes to Christ. Within a matter of weeks, Lourdes, her husband, and her three teenage sons all trusted Christ as their Saviour.

In spite of the gown, in spite of the unusual one-sided conversation, I’m thankful that I gave Lourdes a tract that day. We never know the spiritual condition or needs in another

person's life. This is why we must consistently (and even subconsciously!) be faithful stewards of the truth of the Gospel.

## To See Fruit

Before Jesus ascended to Heaven, He promised that the Holy Spirit would enable us to be witnesses for Him: "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me..." (Acts 1:8). When we faithfully witness for Christ, the Holy Spirit uses our efforts to convict people of their need for salvation. John 16:8 says of the Holy Spirit, "And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment."

So, in one sense we are not so much the "soulwinner" as we are the "witness." Literally, the Holy Spirit "wins" people. But I like the term *soulwinning* because Proverbs 11:30 tells us, "He that winneth souls is wise."

No one becomes a fruitful soulwinner by accident. Those who effectively steward the truth purposefully develop habits of being ready and available for God to use them. Below are seven habits that I have noticed are consistently present in men and women who regularly lead others to Christ:

**Pray for a burden.** Every person is born with an eternal soul that will live somewhere for ever. Scripture plainly states that those who do not trust Christ as Saviour will spend eternity in Hell (Revelation 20:15), and those who receive Christ's gift of salvation will spend eternity in Heaven (1 Peter 1:3-5).

But somehow in the rush of busy schedules we forget that every person we meet has an eternal soul. Don't allow your

burden for people and your awareness of eternity to get buried in projects, meetings, memos, sports, school—day-to-day living.

The heart of Christ, the greatest soulwinner ever, overflowed with compassion for the lost. Matthew 9:36 records, “But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd.”

The only way that I know to sustain a heartfelt burden for souls amidst the responsibilities and pressures of life is to daily pray for God to help me see lost people with His compassion.

**Carry Gospel tracts.**<sup>1</sup> One of the best soulwinners I know is my friend, R.B. Ouellette. The readiness with which he gives out tracts is a challenge to me. When we travel together, he has tracts at his fingertips and will almost always have given one out while I’m still reaching into my pocket for one.

Carrying tracts helps me be soul-conscious wherever I go. Additionally, a Gospel tract equips you to easily begin a conversation about the Lord and salvation. Even if you have only a moment (or, as in the case of Lourdes above, are half-anesthetized!), at least you can leave the other person with a printed Gospel presentation.

**Schedule time for soulwinning.** We should witness for the Lord everywhere we go, but I’ve noticed that our schedules reflect our priorities. Those who regularly lead others to Christ have made soulwinning enough of a priority that they place it in their schedule.

In my own life, I’ve found that if I don’t block off time for soulwinning on my calendar, I’ll never have time. Year round, I

plan weekly time for soulwinning. But there are some seasons of the year (such as our church's Open House outreach or our Christmas or Easter musicals) in which I schedule extra hours to go door to door with the Gospel.

Having regularly planned times of soulwinning helps to make me more mindful of souls at all times. It's as if I have reminded myself that soulwinning is a key priority of my life.

**Keep an updated prospect list.**<sup>2</sup> For many years I have maintained an active soulwinning prospect list. On this list I collect names and addresses of people I have met or visited who have shown an interest in visiting church or in hearing the Gospel. I strive to call, visit, or write every person on my prospect list at least once a week. Scores of the people in our church today were once on my or another soulwinner's prospect list.

I've seen the Lord bless this diligence over and over again. Recently, I had the privilege of leading a man to Christ who had been on my prospect list for six months. I'm thankful I did not simply witness to him once and then move on.

An additional benefit to keeping a prospect list is that it can be used as an accountability tool to help you monitor your own soulwinning. If you keep it updated carefully, you'll easily see how tenacious you are in following up on prospects. You might even consider sharing your list with a friend for added accountability.

**Be attentive in church services.** It is amazing to me that a lost person can attend a Bible-preaching church and leave with no one having talked to him about salvation. I recently led a man to Christ whose wife told me that they had visited twenty-

five churches in the last year, and not one person at one of those churches had asked either of them if they knew for sure that they were going to Heaven.

Christians who are soul-conscious seek out visitors at church, befriend them, and specifically ask them about salvation. They don't just assume that everyone they see is saved, but they make it their mission to find out!

**Demonstrate hospitality.** Some people are saved during a brief encounter with a soulwinner at their doorstep. But many require hearing the Gospel multiple times before they understand their need for salvation. Hospitality allows you to build a relationship that will facilitate multiple presentations of the Gospel. When you invite someone to your home or spend time with them across a restaurant table, it assures them that you are genuinely interested in their lives, and it opens them up to your message.

Of course, hospitality is also an essential ingredient in discipling new Christians. God designed the local church to be a center of Christian relationships, and hospitality helps to foster friendships.

**Involve new converts in soulwinning.** Every unsaved person has unsaved friends. Fruitful soulwinners encourage new converts to reach their unsaved friends. They ask them who their friends are and help new converts share their testimony with their friends.

Wise soulwinners also disciple those they lead to the Lord—teaching them to grow in their relationship with Christ and to apply the truths of His Word to their daily living. They teach young Christians to develop the compassion of Christ for the

lost and to begin their own habits of faithful, fruitful soulwinning.

Soulwinning itself is a habit! Only the Holy Spirit can convict hearts of their need for Christ (John 16:8–9), but He uses Christians who make time to talk to people face to face and share the wonderful news of salvation.

The Gospel is a trust, and it is our responsibility to invest our resources in delivering this precious, life-changing and eternity-changing message.

## **It Is No Sacrifice**

David Livingstone was a Scottish missionary and explorer who spent thirty-three years in the heart of Africa. He endured much suffering as he labored to spread the Gospel and open the continent to missionaries. This godly missionary once remarked:

People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply acknowledging a great debt we owe to our God, which we can never repay?... It is emphatically no sacrifice. Rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, danger, forgoing the common conveniences of this life—these may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing compared with the glory which shall later be revealed in and through us. I never made a sacrifice. Of this we ought not to talk, when we remember the great sacrifice which He made who left His Father's throne on high to give Himself for us.

Stewarding our life for the sake of the Gospel is an opportunity—not a sacrifice. It is a joy—not a burden. It is an investment—not a loss.

In fact, we are not stewarding our lives at all if we are not

stewarding the Gospel. When Paul penned those words on faithfulness that we have looked at throughout this book, he was specifically referring to being a faithful steward of the Word of God: “Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:1–2).

Stewarding the Gospel is the funnel point of stewardship; it is the compelling motivator for stewarding every other area of life with wisdom and balance.

In God’s goodness, He has filled our lives with precious gifts—time, health, finances, relationships, influence, and the ultimate gift—Himself. We can squander these gifts in selfish pursuits, or we can return thanks to our gracious Provider by investing them into spreading the truth of the Gospel.

Should we choose to steward our lives, we will be eternally thankful we did!

# Conclusion

It has been said, “Some change when they see the light, others when they feel the heat.” Unfortunately, I waited until I felt the heat. With zealous intensity I was giving my life to serve the Lord and His people, but it took the tipping point of stroke-level blood pressure and complete exhaustion before I felt the heat and made changes to steward my resources with greater wisdom.

My sketch pad journal from Colorado turned out to fill forty-seven typed 8½ x 5½ pages organized under several headings. Many of these pages detailed the spiritual lessons the Lord taught me about life stewardship—lessons that are relayed in this book.

But there is a section in my journal that I could not include for you here. These ten pages fall under the heading “Adjustments.” Ranging from schedule changes to administrative restructure to philosophical shifts, these adjustments detailed what I would change from that point forward to better steward my life.

I still review these pages on a regular basis (often a few times a week). I wish I could share them with you, but they are specific to my roles, responsibilities, and needs. As such, they wouldn’t be the help to you that they are to me.

I can suggest, however, that you create a similar document. Perhaps as you have read this book, the Holy Spirit has drawn your attention to some adjustments you need to make to better



steward your life. Perhaps He has convicted you of areas He wants you to change. I would encourage you to specifically identify those changes and list them for yourself in a format that makes them a practical continual reference and reminder.

Your list may be handwritten or typed; it may be long or short; it may be jotted down immediately or compiled over a period of weeks. Regardless of its format or length, the most important action you can take is to actually implement the changes.

With the passion of a person who wishes he would have followed the principles of wise stewardship years earlier, I urge you—change now.

Don't wait until you feel the heat. Change if you see the light.

# Appendix 1

## Stewarding Health

### The Facts: Health, Fitness, and Americans

(according to healthchecksystems.com)

34% of the American adult population is overweight. (US Surgeon General, 1994)

After smoking, weight-related conditions are the second leading cause of death in the USA, resulting in 300,000 deaths/year. (US Surgeon General, 1980)

Poor diet and lack of exercise are associated with the top ten causes of death in the US, including the top four: heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes. (US Surgeon General, 1994)

Only 8% of Americans are getting the amount of exercise recommended for minimal health benefits. 29% of Americans are sedentary. (CDC Survey, 1994)

At any one time 45% of women and 24% of men are trying to lose weight. (Journal of the American Dietetic Assoc., 1995)

Only 12% of Americans had 80% or above scores in the USDA's Healthy Eating Index.

- Less than 33% of Americans are eating the suggested number of food servings from the 5 major food groups on

a daily basis.

- Only 23% of Americans eat the 5 servings of fruits and vegetables recommended each day.
- Individuals are most likely to under consume fruits, vegetables and grains.

## **Foods and Activities to Include in Your Lifestyle**

Vegetables

Protein

Fish oil

Exercise

No caffeine

Sleep

Walnuts

Flaxseed

Banana

B-6

Sun

Tomatoes

Beans

Avoid flour/rice

## **American Heart Association Guidelines**

Include both aerobic and strength training exercise.

Increase fiber intake by eating more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and dried beans to lower LDL cholesterol.

Keep fat intake to 15–30% of daily calories.

Increase intake of monounsaturated fats (olive, canola and peanut oils).

Decrease intake of high sugar foods.

Increase intake of Omega-3 fatty acids (but do not supplement—eat fish instead).

Decrease sodium intake (<2400 mg/day).

Balance exercise with moderate food intake to maintain or reduce weight (BMI 19–25).

Don't go ultra low-fat. Less than 15% fat may decrease HDL cholesterol and increase triglycerides.

Be flexible. Consider the balance of foods consumed over a week instead of single meals or single days. Consistency is key.

## **American Cancer Society Guidelines**

Choose most of the foods you eat from plant resources.

Eat 5 or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day.

Eat other plant foods several times per day (bread, cereal, grains, rice, pasta, beans).

Limit amounts of meat, dairy and other high-fat foods.

Become more physically active by including at least moderate activity for 30 minutes or more on most days of the week.

Maintain a healthy weight by balancing caloric intake and physical activity.

## **Letter from D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones**

TAKEN FROM D. MARTYN LLOYD-JONES:  
LETTERS 1919–1981  
[LETTER TO THE REV. LESLIE LAND]

My Dear Land,

I cannot tell you how sorry I was to hear from one of your members who happened to be visiting London that you were not well.

I gather that it is entirely due to over work, and, knowing you, I am not at all surprised.

It has been a great source of grief to me that our busy lives have prevented our seeing one another as frequently as I should like. But I often think of you and pray for you and I have been overjoyed to hear the real and manifest blessing that has attended your ministry at Leicester.

Your present trouble is only temporary. It is quite a common happening at your age and it will in no way affect you permanently. In my medical days I saw many ministers like that and I have seen still more since I have been in the ministry myself.

I have also frequently observed in reading ministerial biographies how often it happens in the forties. It happened to

Charles Simeon amongst others.

And, coming down the scale even the redoubtable and insensitive Sidlow Baxter had to take six months off a few years ago. Indeed I myself, as you may remember, had a very bad patch around 1940. Had I not left my church in South Wales when I did and come to Westminster where I had but to preach once on Sunday I am sure I would have gone down.

So you see that it is quite a common experience and one from which the patient invariably makes a complete recovery.

But I must give you some advice which will hasten your recovery. Let me tabulate it.

(1) Do not analyze your symptoms. Still less be worried about them. Our nervous system can play all sorts of tricks with us and if we begin to consider each symptom we can become very worried. Avoid that. Just relax and give nature a chance.

(2) Don't be in too much of a hurry. Reconcile yourself to the fact that for the time being you must do nothing. That is the way to prepare for the future.

(3) Do not think at all about the work at Leicester. It is God's, not yours and He will care for it.

(4) You will find that this experience will be most rewarding spiritually. It will bring you as it has brought me to rest more in the love and perfect wisdom of God. I am sure that He has something special for you in all this for which you will thank Him all your life. It will enrich your ministry. Rest in Him and abandon yourself entirely to Him.

I know that you are doing this already, but I also know that the devil always seeks to take advantage of fatigue or any

physical disability and always tries to discourage! His one objective only and always is to separate us from Christ, if he can do that by making us concentrate on ourselves, our symptoms, our work, or our future, he is content.

He can only be met and conquered in the Name of Christ. Do not listen to him therefore. Tell him that you are in the hands of Christ and that you are leaving all things to Him.

Your people at Leicester who love you so dearly and value your ministry so highly are praying for you and your many friends elsewhere, among whom I am happy to count myself, are doing likewise. My wife and the girls join me in warmest regards,

Yours ever sincerely,

D.M. Lloyd-Jones

## **Appendix 2**

# **Reading List from My Sabbatical**

*Adrenaline and Stress: The Exciting New Breakthrough that Helps You Overcome Stress Damage*, by Archibald D. Hart

*The Anxiety Cure: You can find Emotional Tranquility and Wholeness*, by Archibald D. Hart

*Beyond Halftime: Practical Wisdom for Your Second Half*, by Bob Buford

*Embraced by the Spirit: The Untold Blessings of Intimacy with God*, by Charles R. Swindoll

*Halftime: Changing Your Game Plan from Success to Significance*, by Bob Buford

*The Hidden Smile of God: The Fruit of Affliction in the Lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd*, by John Piper

*How to Win Over Worry*, by John Haggai

*If God Is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil*, by Randy Alcorn

*Leading on Empty: Refilling Your Tank and Renewing Your Passion*, by Wayne Cordeiro

*Lectures to My Students*, by Charles Haddon Spurgeon

*Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time*



*Reserves to Overloaded Lives*, by Richard A. Swenson

*The Promise: God Works All Things Together for Your Good*,  
by Robert J. Morgan

*Resilience: Rebounding When Life's Upsets Knock You Down*,  
by H. Norman Wright

*Running Scared: Fear, Worry, and the God Rest*, by Edward T.  
Welch

*Surprised by Grace: God's Relentless Pursuit of Rebels*, by  
Tullian Tchividjian

# Notes



## Chapter 3

- 1 Peter V. Deisen, *The Priority of Knowing God: Taking Time With God When There Is No Time* (Kregel Publications, 2000), 100.
- 2 Charles E. Hummel, *Tyranny of the Urgent* (Inter Varsity Press, 1994).



## Chapter 4

1 Susan Gregory, *The Daniel Fast* (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2010), 49.



## Chapter 5

1 Richard Swenson, *Margin* (NavPress, 2004), 60–63.

2 *Ibid.*, 69.

3 Stephen R. Covey, *Everyday Greatness* (Thomas Nelson Inc., 2006), 401.

4 Gordon McDonald, *Ordering Your Private World* (Thomas Nelson Inc., 2003), 266.

5 A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Wilder Publications, 2008), 73.





## Chapter 6

- 1 A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Harper Collins Publishers, 1978), 1.
- 2 Randy Alcorn, *If God Is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil* (Multnomah Books, 2009), 406.
- 3 John Edmund Haggai, *How to Win Over Worry* (Harvest House Publishers, 2009), 206.
- 4 Randy Alcorn, *If God Is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil* (Multnomah Books, 2009), 234.
- 5 Edith Margaret Clarkson, *Grace Grows Best In Winter* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 40.



# Chapter 7

1 *Saturday Evening Post*, July/August 2007

2 Archibald D. Hart, *The Anxiety Cure* (Thomas Nelson Inc., 2001), vi.

3 Randy Alcorn, *If God Is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil* (Multnomah Books, 2009), 414.



## Chapter 8

- 1 Tullian Tchividjian, *Surprised by Grace: God's Relentless Pursuit of Rebels* (Crossway, 2010), 101–102.
- 2 “I’ll Praise My Maker” by Isaac Watts.
- 3 Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (1651), 3.
- 4 Richard Swenson, *Margin* (NavPress, 2004), 205.
- 5 John Edmund Haggai, *How to Win Over Worry* (Harvest House Publishers, 2009), 206.



# Chapter 9

1 Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle* (Multnomah Publishers, 2001), 24.





# Chapter 11

- 1 Josh McDowell, *How to Be a Hero to Your Kids* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), 5.
- 2 Martha Peace, *The Excellent Wife* (Focus Publishing, 1996), 114.
- 3 John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley* (Moody Publishers, n.d.), 106.
- 4 Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Shepherd Press, 1998), 111.



# Chapter 12

1 Ken Blanchard, as quoted by David DeFord, *1,000 Brilliant Achievement Quotes* (Ordinary People Can Win!, 2004), 130.

2 “Transcript: Tiger’s Public Statement,” February 19, 2010, <http://web.tigerwoods.com/news/article/201002198096934/n>



# Chapter 14

- 1 Visit [strivingtogether.com](http://strivingtogether.com) for a selection of preprinted Gospel tracts.
- 2 Lancaster Baptist Church has developed a prospect list smart phone app for both the iPhone and Android. You can purchase this app, called Outreach, through iTunes or the Android Market.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



PAULCHAPPELL is the senior pastor of Lancaster Baptist Church and president of West Coast Baptist College in Lancaster, California. His biblical vision has led the church to become one of the most dynamic Baptist churches in the nation. His preaching is heard on Daily in the Word, a daily radio broadcast heard across America. Pastor Chappell has four children who are married and serving in Christian ministry. He has been married to his wife Terrie for over thirty years.

Connect with Paul Chappell at [PaulChappell.com](http://PaulChappell.com)



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