

CHASING

— WHAT MATTERS —

Finishing Without Regret

Richard W. Smith

Walden Hill Press

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*To my wife and best friend, Lisa,
whose support and sacrifice
enable me to chase what matters.*

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Introduction

IN JANUARY OF 2008, CHASE Bank launched a series of high-energy commercials to promote their new theme – *Chase What Matters*. One of the ads featured a man drooling over a giant TV in an electronics superstore. Using his mobile phone, he sends a text to Chase to find out his available credit. Playing in the background is Queen’s most popular song of 1989, “I Want It All.” As the man returns home to celebrate the purchase with his wife, the commercial concludes with a silky-smooth voiceover urging the viewer to “Chase What Matters.”

Now that’s an interesting perspective. I’ve bought a few televisions through the years, but I’ve never considered my shopping experience to be a particularly important chase.

I was so intrigued by this commercial that I launched a four-week series in our church in which I asked one question: “Are you chasing what matters?” It was a crossroads moment for many as they assessed the passion and impact of their lives. One CEO began concluding all letters from his office with the phrase “Chasing What Matters.” He would eventually design a gift for our home that continues to sharpen

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our family's focus. Sitting on a bookshelf in our den is a two-foot piece of slate engraved with three words – Chase What Matters. Five years after I asked a few hundred people to assess the trajectory of their lives, it is my hope to put that same question to a broader audience through this book. So let me ask you:

What are you chasing in life?

And if you get it, does it really matter?

Passion Matters

SINCE 2007 APPLE HAS SOLD 86 million iPhones, amassing more than \$50 billion in revenue. In anticipation of the iPhone 5's release in September 2012, company loyalists camped out for nearly a week in front of the Fifth Avenue store in New York. According to one customer, enduring bad weather was the most challenging obstacle: "When it gets cold and chilly, you sort of want to sleep. That's been difficult. Last night was particularly so because it was really quite torrential rain." My favorite observation came from a sophomore at George Washington University who had waited eighteen hours to be first in line at Apple's Georgetown store in Washington, D.C.:

I think everyone has something that they love, and for me and everyone else in line, it's technology... Getting my hands on a phone – it's so light, so well constructed. It just feels good when I hold it... Being the first guy in the store is pretty exciting. You have everyone looking at you, cheering you on. You feel like you're really part of something that's special.¹

No doubt that guy is greatly driven by passion. But I wonder if he is driven by a great passion? It's so easy to get out of focus, isn't it? Here's the great tension in life. God says, "Look at my beauty in an ocean sunrise, a baby's smile, a kindergarten's painting, the smell of freshly cut grass, a violin solo or a well-hit baseball. See my beauty as Nigerian villagers sing on the river bank at baptism, as a broken marriage is restored through repentance and grace, and as a paralytic runs through the streets of heaven." All around us are endless expressions of God's beauty, yet our silent response is, "Yeah, that's pretty cool. But look at my shiny new gigathing!"

As residents of the 21st century, we are surrounded by many good things for which we should be exceedingly grateful. But when good things become ultimate things, we become idolaters with little passion for God. The moment we lose focus and passion, we start living a shadow mission.² A shadow mission is the substitute mission we pursue whenever we are not pursuing God. It takes root when we stop dwelling upon God, when we stop forming spiritual strategies to know and serve Him, and when we stop listening to the burdens that are on His heart. Whenever we allow the natural inclinations of our flesh to direct the course of our lives, the result will be a shadow mission that causes us to settle for anything as we "wander down some pointless road to nowhere."³

When I think about a passionate life, first place goes to a man named Paul who wrote thirteen books of the New Testament and spread Christianity on two continents. The following verse reveals the laser-like focus of this impassioned servant:

I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace. (Acts 20:24)

Now there’s a guy who doesn’t wake up each morning bored. Having traded selfish ambition for holy ambition, he wanted his whole life to be a response to the call of God. That’s what he means when he says that he regards his life as nothing. That’s not worm theology in which he is claiming to be a loser who is unable to make it in the world. Just the opposite is true. Paul was a skilled artisan and a leading scholar. He was quite successful but had forgotten where success comes from. He had accomplished much, but in regard to inward peace and lasting influence, the scoreboard still showed zero. But after a transforming encounter with Jesus Christ, he wanted to spend the rest of his life declaring and displaying God’s grace.

If you don’t know the apostle Paul, let me highlight a portion of his biography that’s found in Acts 9. As a teacher of religious law, Paul was on a business trip to Damascus. At that time in his life, his business was persecuting Christians. Paul’s passion was to become head honcho of an elite class within Judaism known as the Pharisees. But this would never happen if the Jewish people continued to flock to Christ. A flourishing church was impeding his climb to the top of corporate Judaism. Therefore, in the name of religion he would do violence to other religious people. Outwardly Paul looked like a fully devoted follower of God. But inwardly he was guided

by his own self-exalting agenda. Like many religious people today, he loved the idea of God but not the person of God.

As he approached the outskirts of the city, a blinding light flashed from heaven and the voice of Jesus spoke. But in that moment of blindness, he could see for the first time in his life. By chasing after his agenda, he had run far away from the source of all beauty, power, wisdom, and love. As Paul lay there on the ground – overwhelmed by Christ and overwhelmed by himself – the Lord gave him this commission:

Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you.

(Acts 26:16)

God's intervening grace changed the trajectory of his life. What he had not found in knowledge, performance, and fame, he found in the kindness of God. Jesus could have killed Paul that day. But instead, He appointed him to be the most powerful human influence the church has ever known. That's what grace does; it "lifts us from the lowest hell to the highest heaven."⁴

John Newton was born on July 24, 1725, in London, England. Upon losing his mother at age seven, Newton was soon influenced by corrupt men who sailed with his sea-captain father. Not only did young Newton become a sailor, he would eventually captain a vessel whose purpose was to kidnap Africans and sell them as slaves in England. But in reality Newton himself was the slave – a slave to sin and

selfishness. Specializing in drunkenness, womanizing, and profanity, he would later write:

I wanted to rank in wickedness among the foremost of the human race. Not content with common oaths and imprecations (cursing), I daily invented new ones.

Bored with his own immorality, he enticed others to walk the same path as well:

...had my influence been equal to my wishes I would have carried all the human race with me.⁵

But one day after his vessel was unexplainably spared from a violent storm, he began to dwell on the God who had obviously been at work behind the scenes. Eventually he would open his life to Jesus Christ and record the resulting transformation:

I, who was a willing slave of every evil, possessed with a legion of unclean spirits, have been spared, and saved, and changed to stand as a monument of almighty power forever. I am one of the most astonishing instances of the mercy and forbearance of God upon the face of the earth.⁶

Newton's encounter with grace was so profound that he would spend the rest of his life preaching Christ's hope. In

preparation for his church's prayer meetings, he began writing hymns to be sung by those who gathered each week. That collection is called the Olney Hymns and contains the most well known lyrics in the world, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!"

As a cursing, drinking, womanizing slave trader, John Newton should have been crushed by divine wrath. But instead, God took a profane sailor and transformed him into a profound pastor. It is the overflowing gladness for amazing grace that ignites obedience and service.

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.
(Titus 2:11–14)

When you mix failure and forgiveness in the same heart, the result is a spiritual heat called joy. The most potent fuel for spiritual devotion is the celebration of a heaven-sent second chance.

From morning to evening, God scans the earth for weary prodigals. No matter what we've done in the far country, the Holy Spirit will travel anywhere to reach anyone. When CBS sports commentator Pat Summerall died in April 2013, his

wife said, “Pat would want everyone to know that it’s never too late.” Despite a legendary broadcasting career that included twenty-eight Super Bowls and twenty-seven Masters telecasts, Summeral’s off-camera struggles involved years of alcohol abuse.⁷ But God didn’t cast him aside. Instead, He transformed his heart through Christ and renewed his liver through a thirteen-year-old donor. So humbled by the patience of God and the gift of life through a teenager’s death, Pat inscribed two words on a large stone gate at his Texas home — “Amazing Grace.”⁸

For every bankrupt life that cries out from their pit of despair, they will see the nail-scarred hand of Jesus reaching down to lift them out. The apostle Paul knew that if Jesus could save him, He could save anyone. Therefore, he would spend the rest of his life declaring and displaying the grace of God.

When the Industrial Revolution birthed a class of impoverished slum dwellers in England, their plight was especially noticed by a Methodist preacher named William Booth. He responded by training an army of workers who carried the hope of Christ to the darkest areas of the city. Booth’s Salvation Army served the poor with such military-like zeal that Booth would eventually become known as the General. Like the apostle Paul, Booth was determined to become all things to all people that he might by all possible means save some (1 Corinthians 9:22). On one occasion when he was criticized for combining popular music and Christian lyrics in his evangelistic meetings, Booth replied, “If standing on my

head, and beating a tambourine with my toes will win a soul for Jesus, I will do it.”⁹

Imagine the impact if we were all gripped by a holy ambition. An ambition that doesn’t leave you with regret at the end of your life. But rather, an ambition that causes you to say with your final breath, “I am so grateful that I gave my life to that thing.”¹⁰

William Borden completed high school in 1904. As a member of the wealthy Borden dairy family, his graduation present was a world cruise. His travels through the Far East introduced him to millions of people who had never heard of Jesus Christ. Burdened for their salvation, William turned down his family’s wealth in order to prepare himself for ministry to the millions of Muslims in China. After graduating from college and seminary, he boarded a ship to East Asia. On the trip over, he contracted cerebral meningitis while in Egypt and died within a month. After his death, someone was browsing through his Bible and found these words penned inside the back cover: “No reserves, no retreat, no regrets.”¹¹

I once saw an advertisement for Havoline Motor Oil in which a group of mechanics were looking under the hood of a race car. Below the caption read, “You’re born. You die. And in between you work on race cars.” Even though that statement didn’t exactly describe my life, I began to think about what I wanted to occur between those two events. I can do nothing about my birth and little about my death. But I can do everything about the dash in between those two dates.

You're born. You die. In between you _____?

The choices we make will determine what goes in that blank. The dash on my tombstone is the sum total of all those things that I thought were important – all those things that I thought were worth chasing.

At one time or another, many of us have read the classic story *Death of a Salesman*. It is the story of a salesman named Willy Loman who burns himself out by doing more than his mind and body could endure. At the end of the story, his son Biff stands by his father's graveside and makes this haunting statement: "He had the wrong dreams."

I don't know what God has planned for you around the next bend of the river. But I do know that when the trip is over, He doesn't want you to experience deep regret from chasing what doesn't matter. He wants to bring you to Himself and fill you with a holy ambition.

In the spring of 2013, Amy Grant released her first album featuring all new music in over a decade. The album, entitled *How Mercy Looks From Here*, was inspired by a comment from an unusual source. While visiting with her mom just months before she died, Amy concluded her time with a reference to an upcoming concert.

Due to a failing mind, her mom had no memory that her daughter had spent her entire life performing around the world. When she "learned" of her daughter's musical abilities, she eagerly asked her to sing something before she left. Amy responded by singing an old hymn that would be welcomed like a familiar friend. As she finished the song and

prepared to leave for her concert, Amy's mother stunned her with one piece of advice: "When you walk out on that stage, sing something that matters."¹²

That's the message of this book. God created a massive universe and personally chose you to be a part of His world. From your temperament to your talents, you are a one-of-a-kind creation. No one will ever touch God's heart quite like you do. No one will ever impact this world quite like you will. Your time on this planet is the only chance you have to fulfill God's vision for your life. So as you walk onto the stage of history, make sure that you...

sing something that matters,

say something that matters,

do something that matters.

2

Satisfaction Matters

ON JUNE 5, 1965, THE Rolling Stones performed to a crowd of three thousand people in Clearwater, Florida. Later that night in his hotel room, a sleepy Keith Richards came up with a catchy guitar riff along with a lyric made up of the most famous double negative in the English language, “Can’t get no satisfaction.” Too sleepy to work further on the song, Richards recorded his work on a cassette recorder, along with forty-five minutes of snoring.

The lyric immediately resonated with lead singer Mick Jagger who saw it as a way to capture the frenzied pursuit of materialism and sex he saw in America. Jagger finished writing the song while sitting by the pool, and the band released the finished version three weeks later. The influence of “Satisfaction” cannot be overstated. It gave the Stones a Beatles-like celebrity, and it introduced a harder feel to rock music that was here to stay. It is arguably the most famous rock and roll song of all time.¹³

Surely no single phrase better mimics the cry of contemporary culture: “I can’t get no satisfaction. But I try, but I try, but I try.” Everyone in this world is searching for the same

thing – to be deeply satisfied, to have their souls thrilled. You can say that people are searching for purpose or meaning or contentment, but ultimately what they really want is to find something that will thrill them. Our heart is a desire factory that continually seeks satisfying pleasures. It seeks to be thrilled through achievements, possessions, relationships, drugs, sex, etc.

People chase after these things because they want to find something that will thrill them. But the big thrill continually eludes them because they search for it in small places. We are like children at a party running after soap bubbles, only to watch them pop when they are grasped. No matter how much stuff we obtain, it never delivers the satisfaction it promised.

At age nineteen, Kylie Bisutti beat out ten thousand contestants to earn a title coveted by teenage girls around the world – Victoria’s Secret Runway Angel. But two years later, she walked away from the modeling industry as she discovered that executives, dietitians, spray tanners and photo-shoppers now owned her body. Fully aware that her dream was no longer God’s dream, she turned away from glamour and wealth to experience the one thing a sparkling world couldn’t deliver – satisfaction.¹⁴ Like Moses, she rejected fleeting pleasures for the lasting happiness of walking with Christ (Hebrews 11:24–26).

Marketing executives know that one of the main keys to a product’s success is its packaging. Psychologists are regularly consulted to explain the effects that certain colors, graphics and shapes have on the consumer’s mind. But no one on Madison Avenue can compete with the marketing strategy

of the tempter. Skilled in false advertising, he daily convinces shoppers that lasting satisfaction can be found away from God.

On track to become the first billion-dollar athlete, Tiger Woods appeared to have it all – fourteen majors, seventy-one wins on the PGA tour, adoring fans, and a beautiful family. Yet a restless heart persuaded him to seek pleasure outside the moral arena that God had designed for him. I don't say that to shame him but rather to learn from him. For we are all tempted to say that if we had what he had, we would surely be satisfied – our pleasure quota would be met. But it's not true; nothing on this earth will ever be enough for the desire factory. This is the basis of Augustine's famous prayer: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee."

The Bible says that God has put eternity into the heart of man (Ecclesiastes 3:11). A human heart created by an eternal person will have eternal desires. God has designed us with such large appetites that no possession or experience is big enough to satisfy that hunger.

Though David rose from humble shepherd to mighty ruler, he still looked to God to quench his thirst: "You are my Lord... you will fill me...with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Psalm 16:2, 11). David was Israel's greatest king, yet nothing in that earthly kingdom satisfied him – nor was it intended to. C.S. Lewis observes: "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."¹⁵ David possessed many earthly blessings, but God was His magnificent obsession:

One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple. (Psalm 27:4)

For those who don't see enough bravado in that statement, it's important to remember that David was a man's man. A king. A warrior. A giant slayer. Despite military conquests, David was not satisfied by his heroic status – but rather by the beauty of God. David marched into battle only when violent men chose to declare war against beauty. But if the choice were left up to him, he would have preferred playing his harp beneath a canopy of stars.

David reminds me of the German Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer – an accomplished pianist who loved museums, operas, and theological discussions. But when the Nazi regime began slaughtering innocent Jews in World War II, he joined a conspiracy to assassinate Adolph Hitler – and was hanged for it. But let's be clear. Bonhoeffer was not energized by political causes but rather by the beauty of Jesus Christ who teaches us to lay down our life for others.

The Desire For Beauty

Of all the things he could have asked for – and many of them he could have acquired – David asked to see God's beauty, the ultimate desire of the human heart. That's why we:

boat on the lake and play golf at a resort.

kayak down rivers and ride
motorcycles across the country.

plant flowers in the spring and put up
Christmas trees in December.

decorate birthday cakes and wrap gifts in shiny paper.

Since March 2007 one million people have stepped off the side of the Grand Canyon onto one of the great architectural marvels in the United States. The Grand Canyon Skywalk combines 1.5 million pounds of glass and steel to form a transparent horseshoe-shaped bridge extending seventy-five feet over the west rim of the canyon. Looking down through this glass, visitors stand four thousand feet above the canyon floor and the winding Colorado River. The location of the Skywalk provides tourists with magnificent views of the canyon that are unobtainable in other parts of the park. One travel writer remarked:

The effect of this Glass Bridge will leave you breathless. Looking out toward the horizon or down to the bottom, you'll feel as if you are floating over the Canyon's ageless depths...Grand Canyon Skywalk is nature's greatest thrill ride. ¹⁶

Why do people fly to Las Vegas and drive 2.5 hours to stand on that bridge? Because they hunger to be thrilled by beauty. Satisfaction occurs as we turn away from ourselves and focus on glorious beauty. God has designed us to be thrilled by seeing His magnificence, not ours. Here's the irony of a trip to the Grand Canyon. Those who look at it feel small – yet not insignificant. This is the foundation of all significance – that we are welcomed into the presence of Him who is infinitely significant. Nothing is more beautiful. Nothing is more satisfying.

The Effect of Beauty

David sought after beauty because he hungered to experience the pleasure that beauty brings. Remember at what point David wrote these words. He begins the psalm by telling us that he is in severe trouble:

Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear;
though war break out against me, even then will I be
confident. One thing I ask of the LORD ... to gaze upon
the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.
(Psalm 27:3, 4)

David is not having just a bad day at the office. An army of evil people is plotting against him. So in the midst of this great adversity he sought pleasure. And that pleasure would come from gazing upon beauty – the beauty of God. Beauty is not something that you just see, hear, taste or touch. It's

something that you experience with your entire mind, body, and soul. You just don't see a sunset with your eyes, or feel a breeze on your skin, or hear a song with your ears. The beauty from those things brings pleasure to your inmost being. And that pleasure is so satisfying, so refreshing, and so renewing that it emboldens your heart to face whatever trial comes against you.

The Awareness of Beauty

This craving for beauty is what sets us apart from all animals. It is very much a part of what the Bible means when it says that we are made in God's image (Genesis 1:27). One of the primary things that separates man from the rest of creation is his appreciation of beauty. If you travel to the caves where the earliest humans lived, you will find walls, pots, and even weapons decorated with pictures. This is not true with the animal world. By instinct they build homes that are functional – not beautiful. Mama birds don't think about painting the nest before her eggs hatch. Daddy beavers don't build a flower box on top of the dam. Lions don't think about buying new furniture for the den. But man thinks about both form and function, because the Creator has put it in his heart to love beauty.

That's why Christians are grieved over the immoral condition of the world. Because they know what beauty is, they also know what beauty is not. The restored image of God within them causes them to see the ugliness of perverse values. Their hunger for the beauty of God results in a grief over the ugliness of a sinful world.

The Source of Beauty

When David looks at the canvas of creation, his craving for beauty does not end by merely looking at that which is beautiful. No, he wants to know the artist who constructed and adorned the cosmos. That is why David specifically uses the phrase “the beauty of the Lord.” The purpose of a rainbow is not to lead us to a pot of gold but to refresh our soul through God’s beauty. The existence of beauty proves that the world has been made by a beauty-loving person of infinite creativity and ability. David spoke of this in an earlier psalm when he told us the beauty-revealing purpose of the sky and stars:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.
(Psalm 19:1,2)

Whether it is a multihued sunset or the vivid colors of fall, your conscience shouts that what you are beholding is beautiful. But just admitting that the scene is beautiful is not enough. As we enjoy God’s many expressions of beauty, we deepen our satisfaction by entering His studio and thanking Him personally for His wonderful work. We teach our children to say thank you when they are blessed by another individual. Yet our prideful world resists the joyful privilege of saying thank you to its Creator:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him. (Romans 1:21)

Most people who benefit from the world's beauty never thank God for His holy generosity. To not worship Him is similar to a homeless person receiving a million-dollar house yet refusing to say thanks. The cosmic tragedy of the world is that those who are most blessed by God are least impressed with God.

Not only is it infinitely wrong to resist worship, refusing to thank the source of beauty will lead you farther and farther from experiencing beauty.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. (Romans 1:24)

When you seek to find beauty without seeking God, you will become enslaved to things that will eventually lead you far away from beauty. This is the foundation of all addictive behavior. An addiction is simply a misdirected passion. It's someone searching for beauty yet not searching for God. Every addiction begins with a good desire – the desire for beauty and pleasure. Yet that good desire becomes a perverted action when someone pursues beauty without pursuing God.

Because we are created in the image of a massive God, we are filled with massive longings to experience great excitement and pleasure. We err, however, when we seek to satisfy those longings through illegitimate pleasures which

are actually lesser pleasures. In John 4, Jesus stopped for a drink of water at a well near the town of Sychar. There he met a woman who had been married five times and was now living with another man. Using the metaphor of water, Jesus told her that He could quench her thirst if she would drink from the water He offered. Her problem was not thirsting; it was not being thirsty enough. Only a God-sized encounter could fill the God-sized longings of her heart. She believed His words and opened her heart to the satisfying life that Jesus offered. This worship service at the well so thrilled her that she joyfully announced to her whole village, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did” (John 4:29). There was no longer any need to hide, for she had discovered that the safest place on earth is confessing brokenness in the presence of infinite love. Only when we discover infinite love and infinite beauty will we begin to taste infinite satisfaction. This is the reason for which God sent Christ into the world:

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32)

This verse doesn’t mean that God will lavish us with all earthly comfort – that very promise was made to suffering people. God will not shield us from discomfort on this earth. But He will always satisfy our deepest longings. This was the purpose of Christ’s sacrifice: *Jesus died to satisfy the payment that our sins demanded.* And once that demand was satisfied, the cross became a bridge to heaven and to God’s peace. The

logic is clear. If God was willing to give the most costly gift for our satisfaction, then He is willing to give anything else we need to serve Him until we see Him.

But again, this does not mean He will give us anything we want. Imagine a man whose father gives him everything he asks for. He doesn't work or serve anywhere. He sits in a big house and drives a big car and goes on big vacations. He eats and drinks whatever he wants. He has no obstacles and makes no sacrifices. He spends all his time and money purchasing earthly comfort.

That life might sound quite appealing at first, but when you get to know that man, you will discover that he is utterly miserable – and most miserable to be around. God loves you too much to assign you that misery. Therefore, He will not give you everything you see and covet. When the Bible says that God gives us all things, it means that He gives everything we need to experience deep satisfaction on earth and perfect satisfaction in heaven.

When my father died in 2010, it was the thought of perfect satisfaction that most comforted me. My dad loved the beauty of God and was certainly filled with the peace of God. But like a lot of men in their retirement years, there were times in Dad's life when he struggled to be content as he considered the impact of his life. His peace was further challenged by a grueling battle with cancer for the final seven years of his life. So on that Sunday morning when Dad finished his earthly race, I found great hope in the eternal satisfaction he had begun to enjoy.

This is the good news of the gospel. That somewhere over the rainbow there really is a land of perfect satisfaction. A land where there are no regrets, no worries, and no evil. Once we arrive in that new city, there will be nothing to hinder us from perfectly enjoying the beauty of God. After we've lived there a thousand years, the next day will be as thrilling as the first. There won't be one moment of boredom in this place, for citizens of this country will possess new bodies with infinite capacities to enjoy infinite beauty (1 Corinthians 15:42, 43).

Christ came to our world that we might live in His world. He gave His life to open the door of heaven's splendor to us. On the last night of His earthly life, Jesus prayed specifically for our satisfaction: "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory" (John 17:24). That would be an egotistical and idiotic statement for a mere mortal to make. But when those words are spoken by the architect and artist of the cosmos, no one questions His motive or His competency. Jesus can deliver the goods because He is infinitely good.

Because we are formed by the hand of God, our hearts are designed to be filled with God. Nothing else can fill that void, for it is a God-shaped void that craves a God-sized thrill. Having opened heaven's doors through His sacrifice on earth, Jesus stands ready to satisfy all who would say yes to His glorious invitation:

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20)

3

Atonement Matters

AFTER EARNING MORE THAN 130 million dollars in gross sales, *Atonement* was nominated for six Academy Awards in 2008. The movie is based on Ian McEwan's novel which TIME included in its list of all-time greatest novels. The story focuses on the wayward imagination of a thirteen-year-old named Briony. She is an aspiring writer who recklessly accuses the wrong man of raping her cousin. Her testimony leads police to imprison a family friend (Robbie) who is then separated from a woman he deeply loves (Cecilia). Though she eventually confesses that she did not see Robbie commit the crime, she is unable to reverse the years of pain she caused. Decades later she releases a novel called *Atonement* in which she fictitiously produces a happy ending for Robbie and Cecilia.

Briony's dilemma is one that all humans face; there is no rewind button. Like a tour golfer who doesn't get a mulligan, the choices we make are recorded on the scorecard. Life simply does not offer us a redo. There is no way for us to make atonement for what we have done. This is why the gospel brings such hope to the guilty heart. When a man or woman

has failed God, they are overwhelmed by their inability to make amends for their actions. They can't do anything, give anything, or say anything that will undo what they've done. But this is precisely the moment where God is at His best. As the psalmist says, "When we were overwhelmed by sins, you atoned for our transgressions." (Psalm 65:3)

Regardless of one's knowledge of the Bible, the flow of this verse is clear. In desperation, the man cries out, "My sins are stronger than me." And then with thankful confidence he concludes, "But God is stronger than my sins." As Paul says in Romans 5:20, "... where sin increased, grace increased all the more." No matter how long we've been running from the light of God, the power of atoning grace shines hope into every darkened heart.

In the Old Testament, the word "atone" comes from the Hebrew word "*kaphar*," which means to make a satisfactory payment to someone who has been wronged or suffered loss. Imagine that you and I are fishing on a pier. I ask to borrow your cell phone. Unfortunately, in the process of making my call, I drop your phone in the ocean. As I stare in disbelief at what I've done, you suddenly say, "Hey, don't worry about it." That is certainly great news – at least for me. But the fact is that by telling me not to worry about it, it means that you are now going to worry about it. I broke something of yours. And either I pay for it or you pay for it. But someone has to pay. This is the concept behind the word "atonement." As God looks at the compensation due to Him for the many ways we have violated His laws, He says, "I will provide the

payment that you owe Me. I will sacrifice My resources to make amends for your actions.”

God began declaring this message very early in the Old Testament on the most special date of the Hebrew calendar – the Day of Atonement. Once a year the nation of Israel would gather to worship at a sacred tent called the Tabernacle. Inside the innermost room of that tent was a box called the Ark of the Covenant which contained the Ten Commandments. Listed in Exodus 20, this is what those laws would sound like were God to write them today.

1. Don't give your devotion to anyone more than Me.
2. Don't rely on anything more than Me.
3. Don't dishonor or trivialize My name.
4. Celebrate My worth each week through a special day of worship.
5. Seek to bring joy to your parents through an honorable life.
6. Don't dishonor your spouse through lust.
7. Don't destroy innocent life.
8. Don't take something that doesn't belong to you.
9. Don't destroy people through careless words.
10. Be satisfied with what I give you.

That is an impressive set of values that indicts every one of us. But rather than comparing their performance against

God's standards, most people gauge their goodness by comparing themselves to others. An Olympic athlete may exceed my best broad jump by twenty feet, but that's of little comfort if he's trying to jump the 175-foot span between the soaring Petronas Towers. You may sin less than your neighbor, but you are far from sinless. When we compare ourselves with God's holiness, all of us fall significantly short of His goal for our lives (Romans 3:23). If you sinned just once a day and lived to be seventy years old, by the time you died you would have sinned twenty-five thousand times. Whether you live in Indiana or Istanbul, anyone who takes an honest inventory of their life will realize they have often failed to properly honor God.

Many people rely on religious ritual to remove impurity from their heart. Between January and March of 2013, Allahabad, India, hosted 120 million people who sought purity from sin through a religious festival called Kumbh Mela. This Hindu celebration, held once every twelve years, is centered around the mythological belief that a few drops of immortality once fell on four cities in India.

In order to accommodate the massive numbers of pilgrims who make the trek, five thousand acres of land were transformed with thirty-five thousand toilets and tens of thousands of street lights powered by five electrical substations. Many in attendance used all their resources to attend the two-month festival. Regardless of their background and occupation, all participants gathered for the same purpose – to wash away their guilt in the polluted Ganges River.¹⁷

Scores of people try to remove their guilt through distinctive acts of service – hoping that the good will outweigh the bad. You might remember the final scene in *Saving Private Ryan* that takes place in a German cemetery near the Normandy invasion. An aging James Ryan finally locates the tombstone of a soldier who died while trying to save his life during the war. As tears stream down his face, he turns to his wife and says, “Tell me I’ve been a good man.”

Throughout the earth, people are trying to convince themselves they are good. But the question they should be asking is, “How good is good enough?” Most everyone does some good things. But how many good things does one need to do in order to be accepted in heaven? Imagine taking a class at school in which the professor neither teaches during the semester nor tells you what to expect for the final exam. You would obviously spend the whole term living in fear that you are not prepared for that one day that will determine whether you pass or fail. If heaven depends on our goodness, yet we live in fear because God hasn’t made it clear how good is good enough, then God is not good and heaven is not desirable.¹⁸ But fortunately God does prepare us for that final exam by telling us on the first day of class that none of us are good enough on our own:

There is no one righteous...there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God... there is no one who does good... (Romans 3:11, 12)

God is so good that He tells us in advance that our goodness is not good enough. This candid instruction should compel us to prepare for “finals” through a God-approved method of atonement.

While some people hope to work their guilt away, others try to ignore it altogether. Imagine this scenario. The day before a big party at your house, you drop a can of black paint on white carpet. You try blotting it with a towel, but you barely notice a difference. Eventually you cover it with a rug so that guests don't see it. But when the party's over, you are again confronted with the truth; the carpet is still stained.

No matter how much we disregard our guilt, we are still guilty. After Pontius Pilate sentenced Christ to death – with full knowledge that Jesus had committed no crime – he washed his hands in front of the people and said, “I am innocent of this man's blood” (Matthew 27:24). Pilate assumed that he could atone for murder by rinsing his hands.

On March 12, 2008, Eliot Spitzer resigned as governor of New York after news emerged that he had been a long-standing client of a high-end prostitution ring. I don't highlight the story to imply that his heart is more sinful than mine – it is not. But he definitely misunderstood the extent of his sin. In the opening line of his resignation speech, Spitzer said, “In the past few days, I have begun to atone for my private failings...”¹⁹ I am certain that he regretted his actions. But he failed to understand that tears and apologies do not atone. Despite his personal remorse, public resignation, and family reconciliation, there is a stain on his heart that sorrow cannot erase.

The Bible makes it clear that God cannot and will not shut His eyes to the stains in our lives. Those stains are a result of our rebellion against His laws. Because God is a just and good judge, He must issue a penalty that will satisfy the demands of justice in regard to our crime. From the moment God began revealing His values to this world, He made it clear that the price of atonement would always be the shedding of blood. In order to forgive Israel's sins on the Day of Atonement, each year a priest would sacrifice a bull and goat and sprinkle their blood on the ark where the Ten Commandments were kept. The particular place where the blood touched that box was called the mercy seat. In response to that sacrificial blood, God would mercifully pardon sin. His holiness demanded a sacrifice. His love provided the sacrifice He demanded (Leviticus 16:14).

We don't have to think very long to realize that the blood of bulls and goats is not suitable to take away a man's sin. Every Old Testament sacrifice was designed to point to the ultimate gift that God would provide – a man's blood to be shed for mankind's sin. This is the purpose for which Jesus came:

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:25,26)

Many people believe that God should just sprinkle heaven dust throughout the world so that all sin will be forgiven. But doing this would compromise His own standards. A good judge does not dismiss the law just because he pities the criminal. The law must be honored. God is an infinitely holy judge who loves justice as much as He loves people. He will not ignore the sin just to forgive the sinner. God demands atonement and then provides the very atonement that He demands. He sets guilty people free by assigning their guilt to Christ. The cross was a magnificent wedding of mercy and justice.

Atonement for sin through the substitutionary death of Christ was the fuel of Paul's passion. He wanted everyone everywhere to know that God is a righteous judge who makes unrighteous people righteous without Himself committing unrighteousness.

One afternoon while traveling with several pastors in India, we came to a tollbooth as we were making our way toward the sprawling city of Hyderabad. Having ridden on many sub-standard roads in other parts of the country, I was amazed at the near perfect quality of this highway. Therefore, I was not surprised that we would have to pay a toll. But what did surprise me was the question that our driver asked the worker in the booth, "How much is the atonement?" If I had never heard that word before, I would still know exactly what he was asking. How much is the payment? What do I have to give you in order to pass through that gate and travel on that highway?

If you ask God how much is the atonement to enter heaven, His answer will be the blood of Christ. At this point

many ask, “Why is Christ the only way? Why is Jesus the only one who can atone for our sin?” The answer is straightforward: Our sin is more serious and therefore more costly than we imagine. Picture this scene in a school. If a child gets mad in a classroom and hits another child, he has done wrong. However, if his anger causes him to hit his teacher, he has done a greater wrong. He has insulted someone of great dignity.

The seriousness of an insult rises with the dignity of the one insulted.²⁰

Because God is infinitely worthy of respect and obedience, any rebellion against Him is infinitely wrong. Because an infinite crime must be met with infinite punishment, God provides atonement through His infinite Son. If Jesus were just a man, He could die for one man. But because He is fully God and fully man, He can provide atonement for the whole world. No one can atone like Jesus because no one else is like Jesus.

I love every chapter in this book, but none thrills me quite like this one. Because in years of counseling, I have seen many people set free from paralyzing guilt as they discovered that God does not want to punish them. He delights to take failure from our shoulders and place it on His. After Jesus rose from the dead, He walked into a room where His disciples were gathered in fear. They had abandoned the Lord during His trial and crucifixion. And they had no intention of continuing His mission now that He had been murdered.

They had failed so miserably that all hope was gone – until Jesus walked through the door. And to these cowardly, unreliable and now-trembling friends, He says, “Peace be with you” (John 20:19).

What was the Lord’s message in that moment? “I’m not angry with you. That’s what the cross was all about – to provide a place where God could judge sin, including the sin of betraying and deserting Me. It’s all been taken care of. Peace be with you.”

Atoning grace changed these men from utter cowards to courageous disciples. Confidence in God is birthed in the womb of despair. It is through the bitter experience of failure that we long to drink living water that refreshes the anguished heart.

All of us will fail just as the disciples did. And in that moment, all of us will hear a condemning rant from our spiritual foe:

You are a failure, a liar, a hypocrite.
You are perverted, selfish, and jealous.
You are weak, indifferent, and cold.

Do not be dismayed, believer. For in that moment of condemnation, the resurrected Christ will walk through your door and say to you:

You are forgiven.
You are cleansed.
You are Mine.

You are chosen.
You are new.
You are Mine.

I will not shame you
nor hold the past against you.
You are Mine.

I have saved you
because I love you.
You are Mine.

No matter who you are or what you have done, Christ extends the scepter of hope to you:

...all have sinned and fall short of God's glory

...all are justified freely...through...Christ Jesus.

(Romans 3:23, 24)

These two massive pillars are the foundation of the gospel – “that you were more evil than you ever dared believe, but you are more loved than you ever dared to hope.”²¹ Throughout your life you will fail to honor God in many ways. But if you have chosen to follow Christ, that record of failure has been removed from your body. It has been taken to the cross where the suffering of Jesus washed away every trace of guilt. And now, on that freshly-cleaned white board of your heart is written every moment of the completely perfect life of Jesus Christ.

Every one of your imperfections has been judged at the cross. Every one of Christ's perfections has been placed in your account. So now there is nothing left to separate you from God. Your guilt is truly gone. In its place is the infinite goodness of Jesus Christ draped around your body. What defines you is not your failure but His forgiveness, not your poor record but His perfect record.

So what will you do with this great promise? You stand at a crossroads of decision regarding whether or not you will place your faith in what Christ has done for you. That's why Paul emphasized the necessity of faith:

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement...*to be received by faith.* (Romans 3:25)

Faith is the only key that opens the door to an eternity of God's grace. The only sin that can separate you from God is self-trust in the sufficiency of your own goodness. The number one grace killer in the world is pride. What must you do to be saved? Believe in Jesus. Place your trust in who He is and what He has done. Salvation was so hard for God, yet He has made it so simple for us – faith.

For you to be freed from eternal death, Christ had to die. You must only believe.

For you to be brought near to God, Christ had to be separated. You must only believe.

For you to be pardoned for sin, Christ had to be condemned. You must only believe.

Christ purchased your redemption with His blood. You receive it with belief.

God required His Son to suffer. He requires you to trust in that suffering.

You rebelled. Christ suffered.

You believe. God saves.

Jesus has done everything necessary to atone for your sin. Now you must decide if what He has done will become the foundation of your life and the source of your hope. If you are not yet a follower of Jesus Christ, you might feel a bit of pressure right now. That pressure is God prying open your heart and offering you the gift of faith. He is making it possible for you to see Christ, to believe in Him, and come to Him. Receive His love by faith. Don't wait until you understand everything that is happening to you; God is bigger than your mind can comprehend. Don't wait until you feel clean enough to come; God knows what you are bringing to Him. You have wrestled with God long enough; trust Him. There is no other way to enter the race; the grace of God has always come the same way – *sola fide* – through faith alone.

Purpose Matters

WILLIAM THOMAS, A 19TH CENTURY British novelist, once commented,

Anyone who thinks they're important is usually just a pompous moron who can't deal with his or her own pathetic insignificance and the fact that what they do is meaningless and inconsequential.

How would you like to have this guy speak at your motivational seminar? I think William Thomas needed a hug. He also needed to read this vital Scripture:

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10)

If there were no God, William Thomas would be right about the irrelevance of our lives. But when the Creator uses our hands in His work, our lives become eternally significant. You've been created for tasks that matter to God.

We are qualified to serve

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus...
(Ephesians 2:10)

When the Bible says that we are God's "workmanship," it uses the Greek word "*poema*" from which we get our word "poem." It can be translated as "masterpiece" and is a reference to any work of art. God intends to do His most beautiful work not in the snow-covered mountains or colorful sunsets. He wants to do His most beautiful work in and through your life. You are His masterpiece.

Many people consider themselves disqualified to serve God because they are haunted by guilt. They feel like a work of art that has been vandalized with spray paint. But the restoration of damaged lives is precisely why Jesus came into the world. No matter what you've done or where you've been, when your life becomes fused with Christ, your life takes on a special beauty. That's why Paul is careful to say that we are created "in Christ." That phrase is so important it is used 150 times in the New Testament. *In* Christ, *through* Christ, *with* Christ – His beauty flowing into us is what makes us beautiful.

Consider the physical world in which we live. Before God created sprawling oceans, mighty oak trees, soaring hawks, and starry skies, beauty did not exist. Likewise, no life possesses ultimate beauty until it is re-created by Christ. That's why Jesus told a religious leader named Nicodemus that he needed to be born again.

Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3)

When the Bible speaks of being born again, it is referring to the process of being totally renewed through a relationship with Jesus Christ. When you said yes to Christ, God didn't touch you up or repair you. He re-created you. He re-made you. He took all the sin from your heart and transferred it to the cross where Jesus died. And He took all the goodness of the resurrected Christ and transferred it into your body. Had this transfer not taken place, you would still be serving God with an unclean life. It would be like a plumber on his lunch break offering a coworker the other half of his sandwich without washing his hands after cleaning a septic tank. When Christ purifies our hearts, we are able to serve God with pure hands. Jesus enables us to give clean gifts to the Lord.

We are free to serve

Some people are so careful to teach that faith alone saves, they fail to stress that saving faith is never alone. Paul highlights both truths in Ephesians 2:

it is by grace you have been saved, through faith ... **not by works** (v. 9)

we are ... created in Christ Jesus **to do good works.** (v. 10)

Do you see what Scripture is saying? We are not saved by OUR works, but we are saved for HIS works. One of the most beautiful miracles in Christ's ministry occurred in that moment when He raised Lazarus from the dead. Four days after this man's death, Jesus went to the town of Bethany, walked to the tomb where His friend had been laid, and commanded that he come out of the grave.

Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."
(John 11:43, 44)

Having been dead for four days, Lazarus was powerless to save himself. But through the miracle of Christ, he was now empowered to do great things. Lazarus was not saved by his work, but he was saved to do good works.

As I read that story, I wonder how much time passed between the raising of Lazarus and the removal of his grave clothes. Think about it from the disciples' perspective. They watched Jesus command an embalmed corpse to walk out of the tomb four days after the man's death. The natural response to that event would be fear. The unnatural response would be, "Hey, that was cool; let's go unwrap him."

From the vantage point of the 21st century, we agree that Lazarus definitely needed to be unwrapped. It would be crazy to raise him from the dead only to let him spend the rest of his life wandering around in his grave clothes. It is

equally crazy in our generation when a Christian celebrates his salvation but does not engage in spiritual works. In essence he looks just like Lazarus – alive yet unwrapped.

Can you imagine Lazarus's joy as the last piece of burial clothing was removed from his body? His mouth was now free to speak of Jesus. His hands were free to serve Jesus. His feet were free to walk to villages that did not know of Jesus. Within weeks after this event, the Bible says that Lazarus threw a party in his home where Jesus was honored. No one had to persuade him to use his time and resources for Christ's mission. He longed to serve the One who had so graciously served him. That's what free people do.

Soon after his release from a maximum security prison, Chuck began leading our church to serve the families of inmates through the ministry of Angel Tree. By bringing gifts to the children of incarcerated men and women during the Christmas season – and sharing a message of Christ's hope in their homes – we have been able to remind hundreds of families that God has not forgotten them.

But Chuck's vision didn't stop there. Over 650,000 men and women are released from prison each year in the U.S. A one-way bus ticket takes many of them to cities where no one is waiting for them. In order to prepare them for reintegration into society, Chuck helped launch JumpStart. It is a ministry that provides assistance with transitional housing, jobs, and a Bible-based mentoring program for one year after an inmate is released. One of our family's most cherished friendships came to us through this ministry. After Aaron served thirteen years in prison, he found a home in our city

and our hearts. Every hour I spend with this dear brother reminds me of Christ's great promise, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Since 1987, audiences around the world have seen love's power through Broadway's fourth longest-running show, *Les Misérables*. The principal character in Victor Hugo's masterpiece is Jean Valjean, a recently paroled convict who served nineteen years of hard labor after stealing bread for his sister's dying child. Desperate for a new start, he encounters a doubting world who shuns him without knowing him.

Having lost all hope, he steals several pieces of silver from a priest who had given him food and shelter for a night. Soon after, he is arrested and returned to face charges. But the priest shocks him by informing the police that the silver had been a gift and was not stolen. With the threat of prosecution gone, the priest explains his actions to the stunned thief: "...my brother, you no longer belong to evil. With this silver, I have bought your soul ... and now I give you to God." That tangible act of love freed Jean Valjean from the prison of bitterness that was still holding him.

There is no greater joy than offering practical help to a broken life, enabling them to hear the eternal priest Jesus Christ say, "You no longer belong to evil. With this blood, I have bought your soul ... and now I give you to God."

We are designed to serve

...good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10)

I can't save every card I receive in the mail, but for the past six years I have saved one. It is a picture of a potter's hands shaping a lump of clay into a vessel of his choice. To the right of the picture is this quote from Roy Hession:

You're here not by chance but by God's choosing. His hand formed you and made you the person you are ... He has allowed you to be here at this time in history to fulfill His special purpose for this generation.

The works that God calls you to are not arbitrary and are certainly not unimportant. They have been selected by God for you. The clear teaching of the New Testament reveals two things about your service to the Lord. *You have been prepared for specific works. Specific works have been prepared for you.* Do you see the difference in those statements? The first one talks about abilities. The second talks about opportunities. God carefully shapes us and strategically positions us. He equips us through the work of the Holy Spirit and then leads us through open doors where our lives will have maximum impact. G. Campbell Morgan offers this insight regarding the Lord's work in our lives:

He has been ahead of me preparing the place to which I am coming, manipulating all the resources of the universe in order that the work I do may be a part of His whole and gracious work.²²

God is working with a plan. Everything matters to the One who created all matter. Experience, education, resources, acquired skills, spiritual gifts, success, suffering – all things are guided by God’s rhythm that we might be able to uniquely reveal His love through assignments that are custom-made for us. Each moment of your life is like a drop of rain that trickles into a stream, which finds its way into a creek, which connects with a river and empties into the ocean. Along with millions of believers throughout the earth, God is weaving every detail of your life into a beautiful tapestry of works through which He displays His love to a broken world.

As a counselor I expect to see deeply wounded hearts walk into my office. But it is particularly difficult when those wounds have resulted from sexual abuse suffered as a child. Such was the case with a young mother who was victimized by an uncle on summer vacation when she was only nine years old. By God’s grace this woman had experienced so much healing that she now longed to assist others. But because she had no professional training, she felt ill-equipped to serve. I will never forget how she voiced her frustration: “I don’t have a skill; I just have a past.”

I don’t know when I’ve heard more profound innocence. What a delight it was to help her see that the key to powerful ministry was already in her hand. Her redeemed past would open the doors for many others to be freed from the chains of their pasts. Never diminish the story of Christ in you. Everything about you matters.

Shortly after they were married, Amber and Thurston moved to East Asia to encourage believers in the underground

church. Their ministry was effective but also eye-opening. Apart from translators, they were quite limited in all aspects of daily life. This feeling of vulnerability birthed a passion in their hearts for the thousands of internationals living in the U.S. whose poor language skills often force families to live in oppressive situations.

Such was the case with a Pakistani family who moved to the U.S. to participate in a family business. When that job failed to actually materialize, Amber found a husband and wife who were trapped by the same language barrier she and Thurston had faced overseas. Through much personal guidance, they helped this family begin to navigate in our culture. Because God's love was tangibly demonstrated, a Pakistani family is now working in our city and worshiping in our church.

Having learned what steps are most helpful, Amber and Thurston have launched a ministry in our city called English Crossing. Each week, volunteers offer language classes to internationals who are unable to function in a community where they long to connect and contribute. The ministry is called English Crossing because it meets two objectives. Families have an opportunity to learn English. And they also hear how God has met their deepest needs at the Cross. Former Syracuse professor Rosaria Butterfield articulates the one central truth that motivates volunteers to dedicate time and resources to this ministry:

God has set apart a people from before the foundation of the world to receive his grace, and they are waiting for you in every nation and people group.²³

We are inspired to serve

On the night before His crucifixion, following the Passover meal, Jesus stunned the disciples through an act of service that underscored the entire message of His life:

[Jesus] got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet. (John 13:4, 5)

The moment was almost too much for Peter to bear. In the past eighteen months, he had seen Jesus control the wind and the sea, command the dead to rise, and force demons to flee. How could he allow this man – who was far more than a man – to kneel before him and wash his feet? Jesus told Peter to stop resisting His actions but rather learn the intended lesson:

I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. (John 13:15)

It is Christ's example and command that have fueled the amazing work of Dr. Tom Catena in Sudan, Africa. As an All-Ivy nose guard and Rhodes Scholar candidate at Brown University, Catena majored in mechanical engineering. But a desire to address human suffering among the developing world compelled him to study family medicine at Duke University and general surgery in Kenya.

In 2008 he moved to the Nuba Mountains in central Sudan to open the eighty-bed Mother of Mercy Hospital. It is the only surgical hospital in the region. Catena is the only permanent physician on campus. He saw two hundred patients on opening day. From treating people to training staff to managing a hospital, the pace has never changed.

Endless types of suffering have forced him to learn more skills than a large team of specialists. Malaria, leprosy, meningitis, ectopic pregnancies, Caesarean births, bowel surgery, urological operations, brain tumors...are among the thousands of cases that Catena has addressed – always working in sub-par conditions.²⁴

His anesthesiologist is a Sudanese man with an eighth grade education. Flies must be chased from the primitive operating room. Mosquito nets hang throughout the wards. Unwashed bodies fill the hospital with a foul stench. The African heat is oppressive.²⁵ And Sudan's civil war produces horrific wounds that often require amputation. Bombs have frequently fallen so close to the medical compound that Catena ponders why his hospital has not been hit.

So why does he stay? The example and command of Jesus. Catena says:

The idea is to serve. You use Christ as your guide, your mentor. This is what He did. He came to serve, not be served... We're supposed to be missionaries... It's not a time to bail. ²⁶

We are empowered to serve

If you have placed your faith in Christ, the Lord has placed His Spirit in your body. The purpose of the Holy Spirit is to deepen our affection for God, strengthen us against temptation, and to equip us for spiritual influence. On one memorable occasion, Jesus spoke of the Spirit's work:

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me...rivers of living water will flow from within them." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. (John 7:37-39)

At the time of this announcement, Jesus was in Jerusalem for a holiday in which the Jews remembered all God's provisions during Israel's forty-year wilderness journey. As the people celebrated the water that had sustained their lives, Jesus highlighted His ability to satisfy man's eternal thirst. By promising to satisfy every longing of our hearts, Jesus separates Himself from all religious leaders in history.

When the Bible says that Jesus raised His voice, it uses a word which means to speak as loudly as possible. He was pleading for all the world to drink from the cup of eternal life He offered. There will always be people who are satisfied in their sin and do not thirst for the life that God offers. But for those who desire relief for their dehydrated souls, Jesus is an "unfailing fountain of consolation."²⁷

But the aim of Christ is to not simply quench our thirst. By inviting us to drink of the His Spirit, He enables satisfied people to become satisfying people. Drinkers of living water will become suppliers of living water. God intends for the blessed to bless. This is such a foreign concept in our generation where people think Christianity is primarily about Jesus meeting their needs. No. Jesus didn't save you for you. He desires to meet your needs so that He can meet the needs of others through you. Church is more than a place where you catch a buzz from the Holy Spirit.

In his book *Why Give?* John DeVries makes this indictment against the modern church:

Many of the calls of the gospel are little more than a call to spiritual parasitism.

As you know, a parasite is one organism that sucks the life out of another organism without returning anything. DeVries believes that this behavior is being repeated in the church:

We teach people that Christianity is all about what Jesus gives to you, what the Father gives to you, what the Spirit gives to you. But never what you give to the Lord.

The message of the gospel is not come and receive but rather receive and give. Christ poured living water on the dry soil of your heart to produce a flowing river – not a retention pond.

Sharing hope with hurting people has become the great desire of Roland Bergeron. Roland was fifty years old when he received Christ into his life. At that time he was a successful builder enjoying many earthly blessings. But his walk with Christ would soon turn his focus away from himself. God gave him a deep love for “the forgotten people of this world, the people who live at the end of the street that nobody cares about – but people whom God loves.”

Roland soon discovered that the one thing that many of the world’s poor have in common is no access to clean drinking water. Whereas the average American uses one hundred gallons of water per day, millions of the world’s poor subsist on five gallons a day. In many African countries, women walk an average of 3.7 miles per day just to get to water. Sometimes their water-filled backpacks can weigh as much as fifty pounds.

Repeated trips to transport water can easily fill an eight-hour day. But it’s something they must do to keep their families alive. Water-borne diseases are the leading cause of death in the world, and eighty percent of hospital beds in developing countries are occupied by patients with water-borne diseases.²⁸ According to the United Nations Task Force on Water and Sanitation, diseases from drinking unclean water contribute to six thousand deaths every day.

Realizing the dramatic difference clean water would make, Roland formed Water of Life Ministries and began digging wells in Africa and India. Whenever they dig a new well, an entire village is set free from the prospect of water-borne

illness. And women are now free to pursue education, earn income, and offer better care for their families.

But the greatest joy that comes from his ministry is to answer a question that is often asked by villagers, “Why did you come?” His answer is simple: “Jesus sent us.” Roland has no desire to meet the immediate physical needs of villagers without addressing their eternal thirst as well. Therefore, the purpose of every mission trip is “to partner with local pastors to provide life through water, to introduce Christ, and to change the world, one village at a time.” Everywhere he travels, Roland is told by villagers that they have been praying for someone to bring water relief to them. Surely we all agree with his response to such a statement: “Nothing warms your heart more than to be told you are an answer to prayer.”

5

Discipline Matters

WILLIAM BRADFORD, GOVERNOR OF PLYMOUTH Colony for thirty years, was not just a strong civil leader, but a man with deep spiritual roots. His intense devotion to God was common among a group of people that history refers to as the Puritans. Their literary contributions of the 17th and 18th centuries are still impacting the church today. The Puritans knew God deeply because they sought Him through what they called “the means of grace.” When the Puritans spoke of the means of grace, they were talking about those specific pursuits through which believers could experience the grace of God.

Think about it this way. If you want to watch sports on television, you can't do that by turning to the History channel. You need to go to ESPN because that's the channel that will take you to sports. When we talk about the means of grace, we are really asking, “What channel should I choose to be strengthened by the grace of God?”

In order to see a beautiful waterfall in the mountains, I need to walk on a path that will lead me to experience its beauty. The waterfall is available to everyone but will be

enjoyed only by those who walk on the designated path. So yes, God's grace is free. But there is a path on which you must walk in order to receive it. Those paths are the means of grace. And because you must discipline yourself to walk daily on those paths, the means of grace are also known as the spiritual disciplines. This is why Paul instructs Timothy:

Train yourself to be godly. (1 Timothy 4:7)

The word "train" comes from the Greek word "*gumnazo*" from which we get our word "gymnasium." How does one get to be a great basketball player? By *trying* to be great? No. But by *training* to be great. You discipline yourself to train in a place that will most likely help you accomplish your goals. The means of grace, therefore, are those disciplines that place you in settings where you will most fully encounter God.

During the 2012 London Olympics, AT&T featured an ad of a swimmer diving into an ocean-sized pool. As he begins swimming toward the horizon, the viewing audience hears the athlete's thoughts:

Luck didn't get me to the Olympic Games. You can't wish your way onto the podium. You can't buy it or hope for it. It's not enough to dream about it.
I swam here.

Those who prosper in athletics don't *try* to win as much as they *train* to win. They don't try to be fast; they train to be fast. They don't try to be strong; they train to be strong. This

is exactly what Paul meant when he said, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training” (1 Corinthians 9:24,25).

On October 18, 1978, a group of athletes gathered in Kona, Hawaii, to participate in an unprecedented endurance event. They called it the Ironman. In order to settle an argument concerning who was the most fit among runners, swimmers, and bikers, Navy Captain John Collins assembled fifteen men and gave them the following instructions:

Swim 2.4 miles! Bike 112 miles! Run 26.2 miles! Brag for the rest of your life!²⁹

Of the fifteen men who began the race, twelve finished. Gordon Haller, a taxi cab driver and fitness enthusiast, crossed the finish line in eleven hours, forty-six minutes, and fifty-eight seconds. Instantly he was hailed as the original Ironman.

Normally when we think of the Ironman triathlon, our amazement comes from the fact that a human can actually accomplish this. But what is equally amazing is the weekly training these athletes endure in order to be prepared for the race. The average Ironman triathlete spends eighteen to twenty-four hours each week training for this event. A typical week includes 7 miles of swimming, 225 miles of biking, and 48 miles of running.³⁰ Ironmen aren’t born. They ascend to their amazing levels of fitness through thousands of hours of training. Likewise, if you want to become an excellent servant of Jesus Christ, you must enter into a life of training.

Someone might ask, “Does all this talk of spiritual discipline mean that we must daily complete a list of activities in order for God to continue loving us?” Of course not. The Bible says that...“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). According to that verse, when did God love us? When we were living in rebellion! Spiritual discipline does not increase God’s love for you, but rather it increases your love for God. The only reason we even have access to God is because He took the first step: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). We insult God if we try to repay Him for such kindness. But we dishonor Him if we respond to Him with a yawn. As Dallas Willard says, “Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning.”

We are loved by a God who created the universe, sustains life, controls history, and forgives sinners. He is the source of all beauty, power, achievement, and peace. Our goal is to know Him that we might be thrilled by Him. In order for that to occur, we must discipline ourselves to stay in His presence, participating in those things that will cause us to see Him and love Him.

Spiritual maturity doesn’t happen because you want to be mature. Nor does it happen because you walk through an emotional meadow that leads you to look heavenward and say, “God, I really want to know Your will. Please arrange the clouds into words that tell me what You want me to do.” Our impatient flesh would love that. But no meaningful relationship is developed in this manner. Knowing God occurs as we daily discipline our lives to seek Him.

Often when we hear the word “discipline,” our first impression is somewhat negative. It is imperative that we retrain our mind through three principles:

Discipline maximizes your potential

A train rolls down the tracks not just because it is led by a powerful engine, but because the train itself is confined to a set of tracks that are spaced at 56.5 inches apart. If that train were not limited (or disciplined) by those tracks, it would be useless. After all, how many trains have you seen chugging down the middle of the interstate?

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar said Earl Manigault was the greatest basketball player to ever come out of New York City – and maybe the most talented player he had ever seen.³¹ As a middle school student, Manigault once scored fifty-seven points in a single game. His fifty-inch vertical leap and monstrous two-handed dunks were legendary throughout Manhattan. His innovative moves were similar to those of N.C. State’s David Thompson and the legendary UNC Tar Heel Michael Jordan.

So why have most people never heard of Earl Manigault? Because his undisciplined life led him to quit college, return to the streets, and start using heroine. While Jabbar was building a Hall of Fame career in the NBA, his childhood friend was in and out of prison. In his later years, Manigault spoke of his friendship with Jabbar: “Growing up, Kareem and I were very close. We both had talent and we both ended up taking separate roads in life. He chose his road, and I chose mine – and I paid for it.”³² Discipline matters.

Discipline expands future choices

Most people associate the word “discipline” with something that limits their freedom. But, in reality, proper discipline enlarges your freedom. Think about someone who takes piano lessons. You could say that for an hour a day their freedom is limited. But, in reality, their freedom is enlarged. Because, after a period of time, they are free to enjoy the piano. They can play it anytime they want. But take someone like me who quit piano lessons when Mrs. Burris told me that I had to learn to play the black keys too. I didn’t want to discipline myself at that level so I’m not free to play the piano. So all those days when I thought I was enjoying freedom from piano lessons, that actually took away my freedom to play now.

Anyone who resists present discipline will forfeit future blessings. Not because God is unforgiving, but because we are unbelieving. As we stand at the crossroads of self-discipline and self-indulgence, God says that His best plans for us are found on the former road. Yet we convince ourselves that an unrestrained life will eventually lead to the same opportunities. It is simply not true, for by rejecting the path of discipline, we are walking away from specific encounters and experiences through which God intended to bless us.

Discipline honors grace

If we choose to reject a life of spiritual discipline, we become guilty of embracing what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” Bonhoeffer was a German pastor whose stand

against Adolph Hitler eventually cost him his life. He was greatly concerned as he watched the established church play at Christianity through grace that rejected discipline. With a prophet-like passion, he called the church to turn from this groundless theology:

Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church...
Grace without price; grace without cost! ...we suppose that the account has been paid in advance; and because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing.

Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.³³

There are a lot of people who approach God with cheap grace. As a result they live weak, shallow, unreliable lives. Because they have never disciplined themselves to know God, they have no desire to serve Him and sacrifice for Him – and certainly not suffer for Him.

Several years ago I visited the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. Its size and beauty stirred my heart with an increased affection for our glorious and massive God. As I walked through that sanctuary, I remembered a story that is alleged to have been told by an archbishop who once served there. He said that many years ago three godless young men walked into the great cathedral with no intention of worshipping God. In fact, they dared themselves to fabricate a confession so wicked that it would rattle the priest in the confessional. One of them agreed to do it. He walked into

the confessional and poured out his bogus story to a priest who had analyzed their plot. After listening to the boy, the priest replied, “I give you this penance. Go to the center aisle and kneel before the great crucifix and say three times, ‘All this you did for me but I don’t give a damn.’”

After leaving the confessional, the boy swaggered over to his friends, reported the conversation, and then proceeded to leave. But his friends reminded him that the gag was not over until he carried out the penance prescribed by the priest. The boy made his way down the center aisle, knelt down, and looked at the Christ on the giant cross, and began to say those words. “All this you did for me but I...” That’s all he could say. So he tried a second time. “All this you did for me but I...” He couldn’t do it. After failing a third time, the boy left in utter silence with an enormously heavy heart. When the Archbishop of the Cathedral of Notre Dame concluded telling this story, he shocked his audience by telling them, “I was that young man.”

Cheap grace occurs when we look at God’s beauty in Christ’s sacrifice yet make no effort to discipline our lives to know Him. Whenever we engage in spiritual disciplines, we are saying that knowing God matters, loving God matters, and serving God matters. In the next two chapters we’ll look at two spiritual disciplines that have been most celebrated throughout church history – Bible study and prayer.

6

Scripture Matters

AT THE CONCLUSION OF EVERY summer camp I attended in high school, our student pastor would pose this question to the youth group before we got on the bus: “What temptation or trial will seek to bring you down when you get home?” I am grateful for his wisdom as he prepared us to go from a week of spiritual growth into a year of spiritual challenge.

Though none of us face the exact same conflicts, the battle strategy is always the same – communing with God through His Word. When Paul met with the Ephesian leadership for a final time of worship and instruction, he warned them of hostile forces that would rise up against them. And he directed them to a faithful ally that would embolden them in the hour of testing:

I commit you to God and to the word of his grace,
which can build you up. (Acts 20:32)

Regardless of the trial, Paul knew that God’s Word would yield necessary strength. Because of the Scripture’s

importance in our lives, it's not surprising that we would be tempted to ignore it. J. I. Packer says:

If I were the devil, one of my first aims would be to stop folk from digging into the Bible. Knowing that it is the Word of God, teaching men to know and love and serve the God of the Word, I should do all I could ... to frighten people off ... from using their minds in a disciplined way to get the measure of its message.³⁴

I fully believe that there is a real devil who uses real temptation to keep us from a real God. There is a concerted effort by spiritual forces to keep people from the Bible – because that book is the primary means through which God infuses truth and power into our lives. As we look back at the past year, I wonder how many opportunities we missed to receive a word of grace from God. Waiting to strengthen us, He sat by the bed, the couch, or at the kitchen table. But the cry of technology or a lengthy “to do” list distracted us yet again. You cannot know the depths of God’s love, nor will you experience the fullness of His power, without a continual inflow of His truth into your life. Ultimately His Word of grace is the only thing that can build you up.

Once you become conditioned to read your Bible daily, you will be surprised how closely the words of Scripture parallel what’s occurring in your life. During my freshman year of college, I began reading the Bible for the first time in my life. I was so ignorant of the Scripture that I went to

the Clemson bookstore and found Cliff Notes on the Old Testament. They had gotten me through Shakespeare; I felt they would offer great assistance here also. On a recent trip to my alma mater, I showed my daughter the rock wall where God began to change my life. For it was there, between my business classes, that I would read my New Testament. My system was not developed by a NASA engineer. If I read John 1 today, then I would read John 2 the next day. And eventually I arrived at Revelation 22 as I completed the New Testament.

That feeble attempt to start reading the Bible produced a lifetime of meeting with God each day in the Scripture. And by moving from chapter to chapter, God has profoundly used specific verses to address deep needs in my life. On September 25, 1994, my wife was driving us to Atlanta where I would undergo a six-hour procedure to remove a tumor in my right hip. I had been diagnosed with chondrosarcoma, a rare form of cartilage cancer. Because the cancer had attached itself to the bone and tissue of my pelvis, part of those areas would have to be removed from my body. During this intense journey, I continued to read my Bible with the same pattern I had established in college – one chapter after another. On the day before surgery, my quiet time took me to Psalm 51. I was in the passenger seat as my wife drove several hours to Crawford Long Hospital in Atlanta. You can imagine my joy when I came to this verse:

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. (Psalm 51:8)

Imagine that — I am about to have surgery to remove a major bone from my body and God gives me a verse on bones! That verse did not assure me that I would be healed by a miracle, or that the cancer would never return (it did five years later). But it did tell me that the God of this universe was riding to Atlanta with me. And that the God who created my body was mightily at work within my body.

I'm not a brilliant scholar. I don't have unusual leadership skills. I often swim in the kiddie pool of faith. But I know God. I know what He values and what He wants. I know why I was born and what will happen to me when I die. I know that God hears me when I pray and forgives me when I sin. I know why suffering exists and that God will use it for good. How do I know all this? Because the Bible tells me so:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16, 17)

A. W. Tozer rightly says that “the Bible is the eternal expression of the mind of God.” All Scripture has originated from the breath of God and perfectly reveals the desires of God. Not one word in the Bible will ever lead someone to miss the will of God. That's why it's vital to build our faith on a biblical foundation. Solid doctrine prevents us from re-creating God into a powerless deity who bows to our agenda and endorses our behavior. Ancient Israel insulted God when it attempted to redefine Him. The Lord was not subtle in His

response: "... you thought I was exactly like you. But I now ... set my accusations before you" (Psalm 50:21).

At no time in history has God ever breathed another book into existence as He did the Bible. It is the only Word of God. It doesn't matter whether you bought a Bible yesterday or use one that belonged to your great-grandfather, Scripture always offers perfect counsel in every generation. That fact may not impress you until you try to apply this to other books. How would you like to be treated by a surgeon who is using a 150-year-old textbook? But the Bible's counsel is always right because it was written by Someone who is eternally right. It's the most important collection of words you will ever read.

During the fifty years that John Wesley served the Lord (eventually establishing the Methodist church in England), he would travel on horseback 250,000 miles, preach forty thousand times, and write four hundred books and pamphlets. His passion for Scripture is obvious:

I am a spirit come from God and returning to God
... I want to know one thing, the way to heaven ...
God Himself has condescended to teach me the way
... He has written it down in a book. O give me that
book! At any price, give me the book of God!

Wesley could not have referred to the Bible by any sweeter title. It is the book of God that contains the truth of God. It is true that Scripture made its way onto paper through human hands. But flowing into the minds that moved those

fingers were the very thoughts of God. How else can you explain a unified book that tells one primary story, despite the fact that it was written over a period of 1,500 years, on three different continents, in three different languages, by forty different men who often had no relationship with each other? The Bible explains the reason for this miraculous unity. Those human authors were perfectly guided by God's Holy Spirit. That's why, over 3,300 times, we see this phrase in Scripture: "Thus says the Lord."

Archaeological discoveries have validated many events and places mentioned in the Bible. Likewise, those who are skilled in apologetics have also produced skillful arguments to support the Bible's claim to divine inspiration. But nothing creates belief in the Bible's divine origin as does the sheer effect of Scripture upon the reader:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Hebrews 4:12, 13)

The Bible speaks and energizes

In verse 12, the word "living" comes from the Greek word "*zoe*" from which we get the word "zoo," a place that's full of life. One of the largest zoos in the world is located in

San Diego, California. Established in 1916, it sits in a one-hundred-acre tropical garden that provides a home to four thousand animals. Three million people visit there each year for one primary purpose – to see, hear, touch, and even smell life. If you want to see things that are old, static, and extinct you go to a museum. But if you want to see things that climb and crawl and swim and slither and walk and fly and eat and breathe – things that live – you go to a zoo. So the first thing that the Spirit wants us to understand about Scripture is that it pulses with life.

This obviously doesn't mean that there's any life-giving power in the beautiful leather cover or the featherweight paper used in the production of many Bibles. But the Bible is living in the sense that the words on those pages were spoken from the mouth of the living God. Therefore, whenever you open the pages of Scripture – whether it be in your kitchen, on the side of a mountain, or at a table in Starbucks, the Spirit of the living God – the AUTHOR of the book – sits beside you and speaks to you through those words. No other writer makes house calls to those who read his work. But the author of history's greatest book comes to your location every time you open His Word.

When the Bible is described as “active,” the writer uses the word “*energes*” from which we derive the word “energy.” Therefore, whenever you read the Word of God with a humble and hungry soul, two things happen. First, the Spirit of God comes and sits beside you while you are reading. And then as you say YES to what He reveals, the Holy Spirit imparts His energy to you, enabling you to apply what you've

read. No matter what you need in order to do the will of God, when you read the Bible in the presence of the Holy Spirit, He will impart energy to you so that you can walk in obedience and love.

One of the big hindrances to Scripture reading is the false belief that you have to understand everything you read. Not true. I'm fifty-two years old. I've been preaching for thirty years. Yet I still read verses that are a mystery to me. Even the disciple Peter expressed his inability to comprehend all that God taught through Paul's writings (2 Peter 3:15, 16). I wish every Bible came with a warning label that told us not to fret over those things we can't understand right now. Because the things that will help you love and obey God will be made abundantly clear. God will always speak to a heart that truly wants to know His heart.

The key to understanding Scripture is captured in a great biblical word – “meditation”:

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

Puritan pastor Thomas Watson said, “The reason we come away so cold from reading the word is because we do not warm ourselves at the fire of meditation.”³⁵ By using the word “meditation,” I'm not suggesting that you strike a favorite yoga pose and make humming noises while reading your Bible. Meditation simply requires that we slow down long enough to ask a few simple questions as we read Scripture.

Does this text reveal:

a new truth I should believe about God?

a blessing I should thank God for?

a change I need to make in my attitude?

a sin that I should turn from?

direction about a decision?

a ministry opportunity I should consider?

something I should pray for?³⁶

The difference between reading the Bible just to check it off your list – versus meditating on it for the purpose of encountering God – is like the difference between taking a long shower versus quickly wiping off your body with hand sanitizer. In both instances you can say you bathed, but anyone standing close to you will be able to tell the difference. Meditation helps us slow down as God washes us with His truth.

Asking the provided questions may seem a bit mechanical at first, but it will soon become second nature. There is something in the sports world called “muscle memory.” It occurs as a portion of the brain is trained to remember what body movements will best accomplish the most efficient athletic move. A golfer may feel awkward as he learns to think about changes to his swing. A baseball player may feel uncomfortable with his new stance at the plate. But over time the athlete’s body will learn to do the right thing

without thinking about it. That's what happens over time as you learn to meditate on God's Word. Initially it feels "unspiritual" to ask a list of questions about a passage. But very soon into the process, you will no longer need those questions as your heart is trained to hear God each time you open His book.

The Bible cuts and heals

How does the Word of God produce life? One way is by destroying the malignant cells within us that keep us from life. In order to remove those diseased portions, Scripture has to cut us. But this wound from God's sword is mercifully exact. A Roman soldier might wield his sword at any vulnerable part of his opponent. Not so with the Bible. Scripture does not wound us indiscriminately. God cuts us precisely at the point where we are struggling to obey. He deals only with those issues that are unique to our relationship with Him.

When we read that the Bible can pierce between someone's spirit and their soul – or between their joints and bone marrow – it is a reference to Scripture's ability to identify a problem that may be hidden to all others – even to ourselves. God's Word will travel to the furthest corner of the heart in order to confront the ultimate issue. Even if it's buried under years of denial, God will uncover it that we might deal with it and be done with it. The potential discoveries are unlimited:

arrogance, pride, envy,
fear, doubt, bitterness,
lust, greed, anger,
guilt, regret, retreat,
self-sufficiency, self-righteousness,
self-centeredness,
disbelief, dishonesty,
filthy or slanderous speech,
racism, apathy, cowardice,
a lazy attitude toward knowing God,
a lethargic attitude toward serving God.

Whatever is keeping you from the life that God wants you to have, His Word will find it and reveal it. This reality led Martin Luther to say, “The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.”

The most comforting aspect of the Bible’s work in our lives is that as soon as it starts cutting, it starts healing. I once asked a surgeon how he was able to cut through so many blood vessels without causing his patients to bleed to death. He told me that when he is working in a highly vascular region, he uses a knife called a cautery. It has a setting on it which allows cutting and coagulation to work at the same time. As the blade cuts through the blood vessels, a cauterizing element actually binds the vessel back together. He uses a knife that heals as it cuts – a knife that gives life.

That’s exactly what the Word of God does. It cuts you that it might heal you. And until you let it cut you, it can never heal you. Countless people have walked away from

church simply because the Word of God cut them and offended them. Had they let God finish His work in their lives, they would have discovered that He cuts us only to heal us. But right at that moment when God was ready for surgery, they walked out of the operating room, choosing against a life-saving procedure. Are you teachable? Are you willing for God to cut you so He can heal you?

The Bible has the first and final word

The Bible says in Hebrews 4:13 that we will all give an account to God. This is a sobering reminder that we can deal with God now, or we can deal with Him later. But He who uttered the first word will have the last word. I have a friend whose brother is a highway patrolman. On one occasion he was pursuing a speeding car whose reckless driver created a situation where it was too dangerous to continue the pursuit. When we asked the patrolman if it bothered him that he couldn't catch him, he said, "Oh, not to worry. He may outrun my car. But he can never outrun my radio."

This is the essence of verse 13. No matter how far we run and how long we stay, we are eventually going to have a conversation with God. It is a sobering reminder to all the world that God is not going to stop being God. He doesn't stop speaking when the world stops listening. Despite the world's protests, He's not going to resign as the Judge of history. But before the great day of judgment comes, He will continue to press His finger upon our hearts that we might be persuaded to believe Him and turn to Him. Because of His great love,

He wants to settle this out of court so that we will not be found guilty on the day of judgment. If God's Word has already spoken to you, then I urge you to receive His offer. Admit your sin and transfer it to the cross of Jesus Christ. Trade all of your unforgiven sin for the perfect goodness of Jesus Christ.

So what's the point of this chapter? To ask you to dedicate a portion of your day to reading the Bible. It is impossible to chase what matters until you know what matters to God. This is why He gave us His Word. God desires to plant a holy ambition in your heart. But that flame ignites only when one reads the Bible with a sincere desire to encounter God. This pure approach to Bible reading can be seen in a letter written in 1936 by Dietrich Bonhoeffer to his theologically liberal brother-in-law:

I believe the Bible alone is the answer to all our questions, and that we need only to ask repeatedly and a little humbly, in order to receive this answer. One cannot simply *read* the Bible, like other books. One must be prepared really to enquire of it...Only if we seek him, will he answer us...If it is I who determine where God is to be found, then I shall always find a God who corresponds to me in some way, who is obliging...But if God determines where he is to be found, then it will be in a place which is not immediately pleasing to my nature...This place is the Cross of Christ. And whoever would find him must go to the foot of the Cross...And I would like to tell you

now quite personally: since I have learnt to read the Bible in this way...it becomes every day more wonderful to me....I know that without this I could not live properly any longer.³⁷

Prayer Matters

YELISAVYETA KRUKOVA IS EIGHTY-FOUR years old. She is a member of the Baptist Church in Novokuznetsk – a city of 500,000 people in southern Siberia. Her primary role is to organize the overnight prayer meetings that take place every Wednesday and Friday. If something prohibits you from praying in the time slot you have signed up for, sister Krukova insists you find someone to fill your place. The prayer time cannot be broken. She is devoted to prayer because she has seen it sustain her when earthly answers were inadequate.

During the Russian Revolution that began in 1917, she says, “My family relied on prayer for our very existence.”³⁸ They moved to western Siberia in 1912. Eventually ten children would be born to her parents. Five would die before adulthood. From the moment they arrived in town, her father shared the gospel to anyone who would listen. As a result of his witness, he was twice imprisoned during her childhood (once for six months and once for a year). Both times when he was released, he began preaching immediately.

In 1938, he was arrested for a third time which led to a ten-year prison sentence. His witness was as strong in prison as it was in the city. And because he would not stop preaching behind bars, he was fatally wounded in 1944. Krukova says that life was hard during this time. But their family and church never stopped crying out to God. God did not remove their pain but sustained them through it. Eventually she fell in love and married a man who is now the father of her ten children. Today they have fifty-seven grandchildren and thirty great-grandchildren. And their source of strength remains the same: “We rely on prayer for our very existence.”

Do you know why we pray poorly in the West? Because we replace the word “prayer” with a swarm of other answers.

I rely on _____ for my very existence.

I rely on _____ for my success.

I rely on _____ for my happiness.

When we think of prospering in this world, numerous things come to mind before prayer does. And for many, the word “prayer” never does come to mind. We write down our goals. We look at our resources. And we conclude that we can do it without prayer. That’s what we’re saying when we don’t pray – “I rely on me for my very existence.”

Do you know who depended on prayer for every situation He faced? Jesus Christ. Every major event in His life came after a period of prayer. It was after He prayed for forty days in the wilderness that He stood against the massive temptations of the devil. It was after He spent a night in prayer that He

chose the twelve disciples upon whose preaching He would build the church. And of course we can never forget the agony of His last night on earth. The next day He would suffer immeasurable physical torture – followed by the horrific transfer of the world’s sin into His soul, for which He would endure the wrath of God. And in preparation for the greatest trial ever faced by anyone, He spent the night in prayer.

As you read the gospels, you will find Christ praying on fifteen different occasions in His three-year ministry. Surely He prayed more than that, but these images have been preserved so that we might learn how the Son of God constantly relied on prayer. Every decision, every opportunity, every need, every trial – Christ always responded by praying. It is no wonder then that Jesus told His disciples “they should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1). S.D. Gordon says:

The greatest thing any one can do for God and for man is to pray. It is not the only thing. But it is the chief thing. ... You can do more than pray after you have prayed. But you can not do more than pray until you have prayed.³⁹

The priority of prayer is the theme of Paul’s brief charge to the church at Colossae: “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful” (Colossians 4:2). To be devoted to something is to be fully attentive and fully engaged. All of us know of people who are fully devoted to a certain thing. They stand out. Every time their name is spoken, you immediately think of the one thing they are known for. If I mention

the name Roger Federer, you immediately think of a thirty-year-old Swiss tennis star with freakish talent. When he's not winning one of his fifteen Grand Slam titles, he works out for two hours a day in addition to his work on the court. He describes himself as someone who is 200 percent fit. In regard to tennis, he's fully devoted, fully attentive, and fully engaged.

So when the Bible says "devote yourselves to prayer," it means that we are to become fully engaged in prayer. Let it be your primary focus – the one thing you most rely upon. When facing challenges or celebrations, it is to be your default response. No matter how busy your daily schedule is, you find time to eat. Why? Because your body says it must have food. That's the way the God-dependent person regards prayer. "No matter how busy I am, I must pray. I don't have to do this thing or that thing, but I must pray." People who are devoted to prayer have no more extra time than the rest of us. But they find that time by taking it from something else. That's what it means to be devoted to prayer. They sacrifice an important thing for something that is more important.

You will never become fully devoted to prayer until you trust God more than any resource in this world – including your own ability. Imagine for a moment that you are driving to an appointment where you're going to make a big presentation. About a half mile from your destination you run out of gas. You can't walk there because all the materials you need are packed in the car. So you decide to push the car the rest of the way.

A few minutes into your journey, you see a gas station three blocks down a side street. You consider walking there

to purchase a one-gallon can of fuel, but then you convince yourself that this will take too long. So you continue pushing your car. But by doing so you get to your meeting much later than if you had taken the time to get the gas.

I have a feeling that many people reading this book push much more than they pray. You know you need help, but you convince yourself that you don't have time to pray. Instead of praying about your job, you push. Instead of praying for your spouse, you push. And if God were to walk up beside you and ask if you would like some help, you would basically respond, "Lord, I don't have time to talk right now. I've got to get this done."

I doubt this qualifies as an ancient Chinese proverb, but I'm going to submit it for future consideration: "If the brick wall hasn't fallen after beating your head against it, it probably won't come down by beating your head harder." We are all faced with the same choice – to bring God into the equation through prayer, or resort to more frenzy and worry. To repeat an earlier statement, you will never become fully devoted to prayer until you trust God more than any resource in this world. Only then will you fall at the feet of Jesus, grab hold of Messiah's robes, and cry out, "Save me. Save my world."

If someone were to ask you to define prayer, how would you respond? The following definition is not exhaustive, but hopefully it will bring clarity to our discussion:

Prayer is a conversation in which you deepen your relationship with God by expressing your heart through words.

Prayer is about relationship. Relationships grow through words. Prayer is the means by which you experience God's love and power through words. Listen to how this biblical writer puts it:

...building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in God's love.
(Jude 20, 21)

It's important to note that the only verb in that sentence is found in the last line – *keep yourselves in God's love*. So the verb “keep” tells us what to do. The two participles tell us how to do it. We keep ourselves in God's love by *building up our faith* (through Scripture) and *praying in the Holy Spirit*.

It will be worth our time to remove any confusion regarding the phrase “keep yourselves in God's love.” Some people have come to the frightening conclusion that you have to pray and read the Bible in order to keep God loving you. That is not at all what Jude means. We know this because of the very familiar words that serve as the conclusion to this book:

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory.
(Jude 24, 25)

What a promise! God will keep His children in the race until the end. No doubt we will stumble along the way – and

may even limp or crawl across the finish line – but we will make it to heaven. Why? Because God will keep us.

But Jude wants us to understand that the way God keeps us until the end is by keeping us loving Him along the way. And *the means by which God keeps us loving Him* is through prayer. So to make this as concise as possible, we can say:

God keeps us from falling away from Him as He keeps us loving Him – through prayer.⁴⁰

It is truly amazing that the Creator of the universe invites us to talk with Him. God is so wise and strong, yet He delights to hear simple words spoken from humble hearts. No matter how unknown you are on earth, or how weak you feel in this world, God so loves you that He invites you to come into His presence and share your heart with Him through words. The God of history, the Maker of the stars, invites you to speak to Him any time about anything. The following verse highlights this great invitation:

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:16)

When you think of a throne, you normally think of a king. And when you think of a king, the last thing that comes to mind is an invitation to go see him. Several years ago when I was visiting Washington, D.C., I walked by the gates of the White House and saw a Secret Service vehicle just inside.

As I raised my camera to take a picture, one of the agents looked at me and shouted at the top of his voice for me to put my camera down and back away. I felt like shouting back, “But President Bush shook my hand at the Beacon restaurant when he was campaigning in Spartanburg!” I doubt that would have helped very much.

But when the Bible speaks of the king of the universe, it describes His throne as one of grace – implying invitation, access, and acceptance. I love how God is described in this verse. His name is not even mentioned. Instead, the text describes one primary piece of furniture in His office – a throne of grace. It is as if the writer wanted you to walk into the throne room of heaven and see God’s throne surrounded by holiness, wisdom, power, and judgment. But there seated on the throne itself is grace.

You are coming to a king, so come with respect and submission. But you are coming to a king whose throne is grace so come with confidence.

Bring all of your defects and come with confidence.

Bring all of your failures and come with confidence.

Bring struggling faith and come with confidence.

Bring simple words and come with confidence.

Bring every need and come with confidence.

But don’t misunderstand; prayer is not just about your needs. It is about the world’s needs. In His plan for mankind, God has chosen to use prayer as a primary way of distributing

His blessings on earth. The Bible is filled with people who changed their world through prayer. Armies were defeated, cities were spared, and hearts were changed – all because people chose to pray. Mission leader John DeVries says:

Prayer is the link between a supernatural, all-powerful God and the material world. It is through the channel of prayer that God rules through us.⁴¹

I love the imagery of that statement. It contains two key words that will determine your commitment to prayer – link and rule. We live on a material earth with material needs. Prayer links us to a supernatural being who possesses all resources to meet those needs. We live on a fallen earth where sin reigns in the hearts of many. Prayer links us to the ruling power of God which breaks Satan's grip and sets captives free.

Your worldview will determine everything about the way you pray. You see the earth either as a playground or a battlefield. If you think it's a playground, then prayer will be irrelevant to you. Nothing will ever really alarm you. But if you think it's a battlefield, then you will be quite concerned that spiritual forces are mightily at work "to kill, steal, and destroy" (John 10:10).

In the 8th century B.C. spiritual darkness engulfed the nation of Israel. Through the corrupt leadership of a wicked king, true teachers had been replaced by lying prophets who served a man-made god named Baal. In order to awaken the nation, God sent a man named Elijah to confront the 850 false prophets. He called them to meet him on Mount

Carmel. The false prophets would prepare an altar to Baal. The faithful prophet would prepare an altar for the Lord God. Elijah explained how the winner would be determined:

The god who answers by fire – he is God. (1 Kings 18:24)

After the prophets of Baal failed to provoke a response from their absentee deity, it was time for Elijah to pray:

Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again. (1 Kings 18:37)

If you want a litmus test regarding where you are spiritually, evaluate your prayers by that prayer. Elijah wanted two things to come from his action. That God would make the greatness of His name known. And that idolatrous people would turn from their sin – and honor the true and living God. His prayer was not lengthy, but it was quite effective:

Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. (1 Kings 18:38)

The fire was so powerful that it not only burned up the sacrifice, but also the water, stones, and soil associated with the altar. But most importantly it yielded the result for which Elijah prayed:

When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD – he is God! The LORD – he is God!"
(1 Kings 18:39)

Where is the God of Elijah? He's waiting for Elijah to call on Him. I want to call on God with that kind of passion. I want to pray Elijah-like prayers. I want to pray with such earnestness that God responds to my words by driving out evil. Years ago Karl Barth said, "To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."

Prayer is a declaration of war. Not against anyone but against all evil. We pray because we hate the presence of evil in our land and in our lives. We are enraged by demonic strategies; we detest demonic strongholds. And through prayer we launch one attack after another against the kingdom of darkness. We pray for the renewal of the church and the transformation of the world. We ask for the liberation of those whom Satan has captured and is leading to destruction. As Richard Foster says, "We cry out with Abraham for the fate of the city. We cry out with Moses for the fate of the people. We cry out with Esther for the fate of the nation."²²

Through prayer we plead the case of orphans and widows and all who share in their helpless estate. Through prayer we speak for bruised and broken lives that cannot speak for themselves. We lift them up and carry them to the throne of God. The world will tell us that we are wasting our time – that our actions are irrelevant to real life. But we'll not let our flame be quenched. We are emboldened by the words of

Helmut Thielicke who reminds us that “the world lives by these uplifted hands, and by nothing else.”

True prayer refuses to quit asking God to reveal His glory upon this planet. If the answer does not come today, it will knock on His door tomorrow. Daily we ask the Spirit to open blind eyes to the infinite worth of God. Above all things, the praying heart wants to see the gospel advance into new homes, new lands, and new tribes – so that new people will have a new peace and a new power and a new hope and a new future.

Risk Matters

WRITING WITH HIS TYPICAL WIT and wisdom, author John Ortberg writes:

... the most dangerous object in your home is ... a back-reclining, deeply-cushioned, foot-resting death trap called an easy chair (usually spelled EZ because using only two letters takes less effort). We don't buy these chairs because of their beauty. And they're not called "challenge chairs" or "adventure chairs." They're EZ, and we buy them for one reason: comfort.⁴³

Our flesh craves comfort. Therefore, it resists anything that disturbs comfort. But what your flesh doesn't know is that the most fulfilling and influential life belongs to those who risk for God. The apostle Paul clearly understood this, as evidenced by his words to the leadership of the Ephesian church:

And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.
(Acts 20:22)

Paul had ministered in Ephesus on two separate occasions for a total of three years. With a population near 250,000 people, it was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. It had significant influence. The gospel had already begun to make a strong impact there. Paul knew that the church would face various threats in the days ahead (his most recent ministry had caused a city-wide riot). God was definitely at work and therefore Paul desired to encourage the leadership of the Ephesian church to be faithful – no matter what.

You would be hard pressed to find a more beautiful scene between a missionary and a church than what took place in that meeting. There were recollections, instructions, warnings, and tears. Because his presence in Jerusalem would incite protest, his visit with these believers was a tearful goodbye. Despite their urging him to not go, Paul said that he was willing to risk everything in order to finish the task of testifying to God's grace.

Imagine that you are a correspondent for a local news network. Your assignment that day is to interview the aging apostle Paul. Almost every poll shows that he is quite unpopular. At sixty years of age he looks so worn. You heard he's a good writer, but his manner of speech is unimpressive. By the time you catch up with him, you learn that an angry crowd just ran him out of the previous town. And now he is embarking on a twenty-mile walk where he will deliver a counter-cultural message in the capital city of Jerusalem. And there on that dusty road, in the heat of the day, you ask him if he still believes it's worth it. Listen to his reply: "Are you kidding me! Do you know the joy that Christ has

birthed in my life? And how He equipped me to share that hope with others? It doesn't matter what the risk is; sign me up. I'm all in! Just let me make known the grace of God to as many people as possible."

When we talk about risk, we are basically referring to any action that increases uncertainty and therefore decreases comfort. Risk has an amazing influence on the body. Whenever our brain senses that we are in a risky situation, all sorts of things begin to happen in our body. Blood pressure rises. Respiration and heart rate increase. Pupils dilate. The pituitary gland releases adrenaline. Reserves of glucose flow to the muscles. The message of our body at this time is simple, "Whatever you're doing, stop it!"

Each of us has a different capacity to tolerate risk. But the one thing we all have in common is the requirement to deal with risk. The risk of driving 100 miles on the interstate may be less than the 2.5 miles of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, but both involve risk. Because none of us have perfect knowledge of the future, we cannot take one step into the future without some risk. Ultimately, the only way to avoid risk is to do something in which you have complete knowledge of the outcome. Good luck with that!

So the issue in life is not *whether you will risk*. No, the more pressing question is *whether you have found anything for which you would voluntarily risk everything*. I'm not talking about rafting down the Zambezi River in Africa or base-jumping off a cliff in New Zealand. Though courageous, these actions are not ultimately heroic. For a true hero is someone who puts himself at risk for the benefit of others.

On October 14, 2012, Felix Baumgartner ascended to an altitude of 128,100 feet in a fifty-five-story helium balloon. That was record number one. Record number two occurred when he jumped from his twenty-four-mile-high perch, free falling for the next four minutes at 833 mph, thus becoming the first skydiver to reach supersonic speed.⁴⁴ If you want to jump to earth from the stratosphere, go for it. It would certainly be a risk – but not a noble one. Because a risk like that does not benefit others but merely causes a psychological high.

Nothing in Scripture affirms daring risks for the sheer sake of rush. The devil tempted Jesus to jump off a mountain and let angels catch Him in mid-air. Jesus responded by saying it's not right to deliberately test the Lord (Matthew 4:7). So when we talk about risk taking that is honorable, we are referring to those risks that bless people whom God is trying to reach. And those risks are always beneficial.

Risk draws us to God

God has designed us to experience Him through risk. Therefore, it is impossible to experience Him apart from risk. A person who does not follow God into a life of risk will never be fully alive because they will never fully experience God. This is the central meaning of the following verse:

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

As you read the rest of that chapter, it is the story of all the great risk takers of the Bible. To Noah, God said, “Start building a boat in the desert and wait 120 years for a flood to come.” To Abraham, God said, “Pack your bags and take your family to a land I will show you.” What kind of direction is that! Everyone who experienced God in Hebrews 11 accepted an assignment that involved great risk. The word “*faith*” is so closely connected with risk, it is fair to restate this verse like this: “Without risk it is impossible to please God.” God rewards the risk takers.

Every Christian would love to be listed here in the spiritual hall of fame of Hebrews 11. We would all love to do great things for God. And we would – if only He would guarantee the outcome of every risk we take for Him. Sorry, but that sort of violates the whole faith thing. Risk implies an unknown future. Faith is trusting God for that future. God is pleased with those who trust Him for a future that has not yet been revealed to them. As John Piper says, “You don’t have to be a great big important person to do extraordinary things for God. But you do have to take risks.”

Speaking of little people who did extraordinary things, listen to Paul’s utterly transparent confession to the church at Corinth as he reflected on his first visit with them:

I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. (1 Corinthians 2:3)

The city of Corinth was a massive pool of moral impurity, religious darkness, and worldly power. As Paul thought

about preaching there, his soul literally trembled. How did he conquer his fear of preaching in Corinth? By preaching in Corinth. The only antidote to fear is risk. You know when you go. And until you go the only thing you will know is fear.

My family catches me talking to myself quite often in the house. I wish I could prove that this behavior was an indication of brilliance, but I cannot. I just enjoy talking to whoever is home inside my head. In reality we all talk to ourselves a great deal – especially when God invites us to risk. We say things to ourselves like:

I'm afraid.

I can't handle this.

I feel inadequate.

I don't know enough.

I've failed too much.

If you're going to spend the rest of your life talking to yourself, would you please include one more statement in that list: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

Every time you come to a crisis of uncertainty, you will experience God more deeply as you adjust your life to His agenda and accept His invitation to risk. *Radical results require radical risk.*

One of the great joys of our church involves a partnership with a gifted church planter in southern India. Over the past fifteen years, the Lord has used Ephrata to plant one hundred churches in villages and slums extending as far out as two hundred miles

from the city. Threats, vandalism, and physical persecution are commonplace for those who serve in this ministry.

In March 2009, a Hindu woman heard the gospel and received the grace of Jesus Christ. Upon hearing the news of her salvation, her husband threatened to douse her with gasoline and set her on fire if she was baptized. But both she and Ephrata felt that it was the will of God to proceed with the baptism celebration at any cost. On the night before the service was to take place, Ephrata heard a knock on his door. He described this midnight meeting later in a journal entry:

I went to the door and saw the woman's husband through the eyepiece. I waited there a few minutes as he rang the bell continuously. Then I took courage and opened the door. He came in and sat down and was quiet for a long time. I offered him coffee and something to eat. He accepted it and started to talk. He said to me, "I do not object for my wife to take baptism. You go ahead and do it. I will not come and make trouble. Nor will I do her any harm. I have also come to believe in Jesus Christ and will take baptism when the appropriate time comes."

Radical results require radical risk.

Risk enlarges our influence

When Esther was queen of Persia, her husband (the king) was persuaded to pass an insane law that all Jews be killed.

Obviously he did not know his wife very well, for she was a Jew. (Surely this would have come up had they gone to pre-marital counseling.) As soon as the news spread regarding the fate of the Jews, Esther's uncle Mordecai exhorted her to speak boldly to her husband:

Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ...And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this? (Esther 4:13, 14)

Even though she was married to the king, to approach a monarch in this manner could cost Esther her life. But she was a true biblical hero – and therefore risked all for the sake of others.

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me... When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." (Esther 4:15, 16)

But she didn't perish. Instead of killing her and her countrymen, the king ordered the execution of the man who advised him to pass the law. Esther's actions had resulted in the rescue of the entire nation of Israel. *Radical results require radical risk.*

I doubt that anyone loves the story of Esther more than an Indian leader from the state of Tamil Nadu. In 1996, I travelled to south India where I would spend two weeks teaching a group of evangelists who had gathered for a

time of training and encouragement. In order to communicate to all three hundred students who had come from five states (which meant five different languages), every phrase I communicated had to be interpreted through five different translators. The man to my far right, whose name was Joseph, was responsible for translating my words into Tamil.

One morning as I was teaching the story of Esther, Joseph became visibly upset. At the conclusion of the class, he hurried to his room and began to weep. His grief was so obvious that a member of our team immediately met with him. He wasted no time explaining the reason for his tears. Years earlier he distinctly sensed the Lord calling him to establish a ministry for orphans. But as he contemplated the huge obstacle of financing such an operation, he chose the safety of guaranteed income as a translator. But as he translated Mordecai's conversation with Esther, the finger of God pressed heavily upon his heart. He realized that he too had been raised for a specific purpose. And this was the last invitation God would send.

Joseph said yes to God that afternoon. And within months he had moved to Chennai where he began a children's home. The first orphan rescued from the streets was a nine-year-old boy who was competing with wandering cattle for discarded scraps in the local trash. Having no resources of his own, Joseph provided the boy a place to sleep in his father's garage. And now, fourteen years later, El Shaddai Children's Home is a multi-building, debt-free campus that provides physical and spiritual nurture to sixty-three beautiful children. *Radical results require radical risk.*

Risk clarifies our confidence

Faith is risky business – not because we are uncertain about God’s character but because we do not fully know His plans, purposes, and paths. Risk implies uncertainty about the future. That’s what our flesh doesn’t like. But this is where God seeks to deepen our faith – that we would walk with hope in the present because He governs the future. To those who cannot see that good awaits them on the path ahead, God says:

I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. (Isaiah 46:10)

God knows the future because He’s in the future working on the future. That’s the unshakable foundation of all our risk taking. We can risk because God never does. God doesn’t live with uncertainty like we do. He experiences great pain as we see in the life of Jesus Christ. But none of that pain surprised Him. Listen to what Peter said at Pentecost about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ:

This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead. (Acts 2:23, 24)

God gave His all on the cross but risked nothing. The death of His Son was His plan to accomplish His purposes. Likewise, God will allow us to experience hurt and loss as we risk for Him. But every fragment of that pain will be strategically used to accomplish His great purposes. The foundational hope for all Christ-exalting risk takers is that God is leading us with a plan into a future that He is controlling.

Our greatest struggle is to trust God's sovereignty when it is our turn to risk. Our flesh wants to hold on to visible answers rather than an invisible God. Scripture warns of the danger of placing our hope in the wrong thing during times of uncertainty:

I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them. But those who trust in idols, who say to images, "You are our gods," will be turned back in utter shame. (Isaiah 42:16, 17)

For the rest of your life God is going to lead you into opportunities to serve Him through risk. And every time He does, you will be tempted to trust in a visible yet worthless idol. Or you will place your hand in the invisible yet all-powerful hand of God. If you trust in God, you will experience the satisfaction that comes as He empowers you to fulfill His purposes. But if you place your trust in idols, you will not experience His

power, and you will certainly miss His purposes. God blesses the risk taker who says yes to Him. But He will not affirm faith that waits until all uncertainties are removed. As Alexander Maclaren says, “Morning-after faith is no faith at all.”

Risk magnifies our hope

The book of Hebrews was written to a 1st century church that had been battered by persecution. Following Christ had led to public ridicule, imprisonment, and even financial loss. As some believers sought to avoid any more risk, the writer reminds them of the hope that had sustained them in earlier days:

You...joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. (Hebrews 10:34)

According to Scripture, it is right to desire the rewards of heaven. The one good thing about a volatile world is that it increases our craving for heaven’s permanence. That’s why all the Old Testament risk takers fixed their gaze on “a better country – a heavenly one” (Hebrews 11:16). This eternal hope was the compelling force behind all of Bonhoeffer’s risk taking. He said that “Death is...the greatest gift of grace that God gives to people who believe in him...it is the gateway to our homeland...the everlasting kingdom of peace.”⁴⁵

Many in the Western church do not long for heaven because they have so much stuff on earth. In their minds, death

is a time when you lose your house, your car, your money, and your status – only to spend eternity as a nobody on a puffy cloud. But according to the Bible that is not what heaven is like at all. The end of verse 34 says two glorious things about our heavenly possessions. They are better and they are lasting.

God doesn't have to tell me much more about heaven other than it is better than earth. Better colors! Better music! Better tastes! Better joy! What will our relationships be like with loved ones in heaven? Better than any earthly relationship. What will our bodies be like in heaven? Better than any earthly body. What will our homes be like in heaven? Better than any earthly home. No matter what you have seen, heard, or imagined on earth, everything in heaven is better (1 Corinthians 2:9).

But not only will our possessions be better in heaven, they will be lasting. The great Old Testament risk takers were longing for “the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10). The only problem with the great cities of the world is that they will one day crumble to the ground. In one sense, they are all built on the San Andreas Fault.

God's risk takers do not pursue earthly security because they know it doesn't exist. They have learned that control is an illusion. That's why Jesus said to “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matthew 6:20). Just as it is impossible to keep anything on earth, it is impossible to lose it in heaven.

For the past fifteen years, my wife and I have been privileged to share life with an utterly courageous and compassionate

risk taker. Within months after retiring as an educator, Chip accepted a children's ministry position with an inner city church. The people she serves belong to one of the 15 percent lowest income communities in America. The Huffington Post included it among the most dangerous neighborhoods in America. Absentee fathers and overwhelmed mothers force most of the children to raise themselves.

How do you help a child who sleeps on the floor, needs more food, and hopes his angry, intoxicated father doesn't come home? You buy him a bed, bring him some food, and tell him that there is an eternal God in heaven who longs to be an ever-present Father on earth. And you walk beside that child until he's able to believe that there really is a God who stands with us in our pain.

For the sake of these vulnerable lives, Chip has immersed herself in their world. But as one of her letters reveals, this noble mission requires that she be anchored to eternal hope herself:

As far as my job goes, I am very aware that I am in danger. There is a good chance I could die there. I try to take smart precautions, but at times I am so focused on relieving someone's need that I don't stay as alert as I should. I am increasingly aware that evil abounds in this place. Because I did not serve the Lord earlier in my life, I hope that He would let me serve here another twenty years. But if God chooses to take me home before then, you can know I have in fact finally gone home.

The danger of a risk-free life

Surprisingly, the one chapter in the Bible that exalts faith also provides a glimpse into the consequences of no faith. In Hebrews 11:29, the Bible honors the people of Israel who trusted God to part the Red Sea as they walked through it. In the next verse Scripture commends those people who trusted God to knock down the walls of Jericho by marching around the city. Without question these are among the two greatest events in the Old Testament. But what most people fail to remember is that they are separated by forty years. And in those forty years – between verses 29 and 30 – two and one-half million people disappeared!

In other words, the people in verse 29 are not the same people in verse 30. Where did they go? They died in the land of the faithless. Their story is told in the Old Testament book of Numbers. In Numbers 13, God told Moses to send a group of twelve men on a reconnaissance mission to spy out the new land where He was leading His people. They were to bring back a faith-building report about the condition and potential of the land. But they focused more on obstacles than opportunities:

They gave Moses this account: “We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large...”
(Numbers 13:27, 28)

“We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” And they spread among the Israelites a bad report. (Numbers 13:31, 32)

Moses sent an advance team so the nation could pray with passion and fight with wisdom. But instead they held a business meeting to vote against God’s will. Refusing to risk, they soon plotted a course they thought would keep them safe. But safe turned out to be forty years of wilderness wanderings ending in the death of that entire generation (Numbers 14:32).

By refusing to trust God, we experience the very pain we are seeking to avoid. It is a dangerous thing to resist the leading of God in order to walk upon a risk-free path. As John Ortberg reminds us:

Every time someone says yes to God,
the world changes a little bit.
Every time you say no to God –
you change a little.
Your heart gets a little harder.
Your spirit dies a little.
Your addiction to comfort
gets a little stronger.⁴⁶

Radical results require radical risk. God rewards the risk takers.

9

Suffering Matters

RECENTLY WHILE READING A MAGAZINE on biblical leadership, I noticed that, in addition to its excellent articles, there were a number of advertisements for Christian colleges. Some made promises about their academic excellence. Others focused on their commitment to ministry development. But none of them took an approach similar to this:

Come study at Bright Hope Seminary.
We'll teach you how to suffer.

No marketing company would advise a school to promote itself in this manner, yet this is exactly how God advertised the ministry to which he had called the apostle Paul. As we mentioned early in the book, Paul met Jesus Christ while attempting to destroy all those who followed Christ. Paul didn't know the Lord and hated everyone who did. But on his way to do battle with the church, Jesus did battle with Paul –

A light from heaven flashed.
The Lord Jesus spoke.
Paul's life was changed.

Spiritually and physically, Paul had seen the light – so much so that he was temporarily blinded. The Lord summoned a local disciple named Ananias to go to the house where Paul was staying and lay his hands on his eyes that his sight would be restored. Like all Christians in that region, Ananias knew of Paul's life up to this point. Therefore, he basically asked the Lord if He had pulled the right folder out of the file cabinet when selecting Paul. Listen to the Lord's answer:

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." (Acts 9:15, 16)

What an interesting call to ministry. Not "I will lavish him with comfort, honor, and ease." But rather, "I will show him how much he must suffer."

God never promises an easy road to anyone He calls to serve Him. Imagine this scene in 600 B.C. God establishes a job placement service in the Middle East. One day a man named Daniel steps through the front door. The Lord hands him this brochure:

Exciting Career in Persia

- Experience religious persecution.
- Spend a night in a den of lions.
- Change the heart of a king.

God will always bless our obedience for the accomplishment of His purposes. But nowhere in the Bible is there a hint that this blessing will remove us from pain. To the contrary, many times the greatest success will come through suffering. Soon after Paul was saved, he began preaching in the synagogues of Damascus. Without question his ministry was immediately effective:

[Paul] grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. (Acts 9:22)⁴⁷

That sounds fun. I like the word “powerful.” It reminds me of other attractive words like “commanding” and “inspiring.” That’s the kind of ministry results we all want. But look at the very next verse:

After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him... But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. (Acts 9:23, 25)

Paul's ministry was fruitful yet costly. The Bible is clear. The gospel makes its greatest advance through sacrifice and persecution. That message is almost extinct in our ever-growing slick religious empire in the West. How many media testimonies have you heard that sounded something like this: "I was sad and miserable. After losing everything, I decided to become a Christian. Now life is great. We've found a cool church that has something for everyone. And my business is booming. I made so many sales last quarter at work that I am now a regional vice-president."

Compare that with the factory supervisor in a communist country whose testimony might sound like this: "I was successful in this world. I had a good job, enough money, and a happy family. Then I received Christ as my Savior. I lost my job and now sit in prison for the crime of loving Jesus. My body is cold but my heart is warmed with the love of Christ."

I'm not suggesting that we rush to sign up for a harsh prison sentence. But neither should we expect and engineer a life that is easy, comfortable, and quiet. In fact, God used Paul to tell us to expect trials. After he was saved, Paul spread the gospel through three missionary journeys. The following scene takes place during mission trip number one:

Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. (Acts 14:19, 20)

Look at this! A crowd stones you. Disciples pray for you. God restores you. And you go back into the very city where this riot happened! Don't change the channel; this story is far from finished:

The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe. They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. (Acts 14:20, 21)

That's not exactly what I was expecting to read. Shouldn't it say, "The next day Paul went to the hospital for x-rays and then returned home to write a book about suffering." No, the next day he is preaching in Derbe – and a whole bunch of people are getting saved. But the story gets even wilder:

Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. (Acts 14:21, 22)

I love how Luke just throws in the word "Lystra" as if it's just another city. That's the city where the people stoned Paul! Yet he's back again. And look at the message he leaves with these people:

We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. (Acts 14:22)

This is not a theoretical statement about possible suffering. He was speaking of a reality that he would personally walk into.

Just before dawn on September 8, 2009, a patrol of Afghan forces and their American trainers were walking through a narrow valley to meet with nearby village elders. As they made their approach, every light in the village went out, followed by a barrage of Taliban fire. As injuries and death began to mount among the pinned-down patrol, Corporal Dakota Myers and Staff Sergeant Juan Rodriguez-Chavez jumped into a Humvee and headed straight into the war zone. Chavez drove while Myers manned the machine gun in back. From every door, window, and alley, armed villagers and Taliban soldiers fired AK-47's, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades at the trapped patrol. Five times that day, Chavez and Myers drove in and out of the killing zone. Though four Americans died, thirty-six soldiers were saved. Later, when a wounded Myers received the Medal of Honor, he was asked about his mindset in that moment. He said, "I didn't think I was going to die. I knew I was."⁴⁸

That sentiment is what makes Paul's life so gloriously intriguing. He labored in cities where his suffering was certain. This is evident as we finish reading his final words to the Ephesian believers:

And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. (Acts 20:22, 23)

As we looked at verse 22 in the previous chapter, we affirmed that Paul was a Christ-exalting risk taker because of his willingness to follow the Lord into an uncertain future. But when you read verse 23, you see that his future was not that uncertain. He knew he was going to suffer greatly in Jerusalem! Yet he went. Why? Because he had discovered one of the most significant keys to endurance in all of Scripture – *our suffering illuminates Christ's suffering*. Paul explains this in his letter to the Colossian believers:

I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.
(Colossians 1:24)

Before we can grasp the intended meaning of this verse, it is crucial that we understand what it's not teaching. When Paul says that something is lacking in regard to Christ's suffering, he is not implying that Christ's death did not fully remove our guilt. For who can forget the Lord's final statement while he hung on the cross for our sins:

Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:30)

The book of Hebrews clearly tells us that Jesus Christ is a perfect priest who offered a perfect sacrifice – resulting in our complete forgiveness (Hebrews 7:27; 9:26). The suffering of Christ is able to remove any sin from any person anywhere

at any time. There is a bridge from earth to heaven, paved by the blood of Christ. That bridge is fully constructed. It is finished. All who desire to live with God are invited to walk across it. So when we talk about completing the sufferings of Christ, we are not talking about adding to His massive sacrifice through our mini sacrifices. It is ludicrous to think that our imperfect obedience could add anything to His perfect obedience.

So what does Paul mean when he says that we are to complete what is lacking in regard to Christ's suffering? The answer is found in a special delivery. On one occasion when Paul was imprisoned in Rome, the church at Philippi collected an offering to help with his needs. Even though their collection was finished, it was not beneficial to Paul until someone took it to him. A man named Epaphroditus received that assignment. In the process of transporting that gift, Epaphroditus almost died. Paul commended this man in a letter that he would later send to the church at Philippi:

So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy ... because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me. (Philippians 2:29, 30)

When Paul says that Epaphroditus made up for what they could not give, he uses the same Greek phrase that he used in Colossians 1:24 to talk about what is lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions. So what's the point? The church at Philippi had already made the sacrifice for Paul. *Epaphroditus*

could add nothing to that. But the sacrifice that the church had made was of no value until Epaphroditus presented it to Paul. And in order for their sacrifice to be of use to Paul, Epaphroditus had to sacrifice. In that sense he completed what was lacking in their sacrifice.

In the same way, Christ has made the only sacrifice that can take away the world's sins. But many in the world do not know of this sacrifice. And many others do not value it. In order for the world to clearly see the greatness of Christ's suffering, we must present the story of His suffering to them. That presentation will require our sacrifice and our suffering. That's how we complete Christ's sufferings. We suffer in order to make known His suffering. Author Trevin Wax says it well:

The early Christians embraced suffering, torture, even martyrdom, because they knew that their sufferings gave them the opportunity to best proclaim the gospel message. Early Christians could not evangelize through public crusades and evangelistic rallies. The one place you could get a public hearing for the gospel was in a trial for martyrdom.⁴⁹

It was Christ's suffering on the cross that persuaded a godless Roman soldier to declare that Jesus was the Son of God (Mark 15:39). Here was a man who had never thought about his relationship with God. But when he saw how Christ suffered, he worshiped the Lord.

Voice of the Martyrs founder Richard Wurmbrand once asked a woman if she was afraid that her affiliation with the

underground church might result in great suffering. She replied, “I don’t mind suffering if the salvation of the torturers is the result.”³⁰ Throughout history it has been the faithful suffering of God’s people that has captured the world’s attention. We are called to share in Christ’s suffering that we might point people to His suffering. Our suffering makes it possible for people to hear of His suffering. And only when they trust in His sufferings will they be saved from eternal suffering. Two thousand years ago God loved the world enough to send His Son to suffer for its sins. Today He loves the world enough to send us to tell them of Christ’s suffering – even when our going costs us everything.

Martha Myers was born on March 13, 1945, in Montgomery, Alabama. Upon graduating from Lee High School in 1963, she spent the next four years studying at Samford University. During her junior year, she traveled to the Middle East where she served at the Jibla Baptist Hospital located in Yemen.

God had already impressed her heart with a call to missions, and He would use this trip to identify in what part of the world He desired for her to serve. After completing her senior year at Samford, she pursued a medical degree in obstetrics from the University of South Alabama in Mobile. This was followed by seminary studies in Kansas City and language school in London.

In 1977, Dr. Myers moved to Yemen where she would spend the next twenty-four years of her life serving at the Jibla Baptist Hospital – an eighty-bed facility that treats forty thousand people annually. Initially she worked six days a week in the following areas: two days in surgery, two days

in the outpatient clinic, and two days traveling to surrounding villages where she immunized children, distributed medicine, and taught principles of health care.

Eventually her ministry to the villages came to occupy the majority of her time. She spent hours in her Toyota Land Cruiser traveling across high mountains on the poorest of roads. At times she worked so late into the night that she would sleep in the villages inside her Land Cruiser. On some occasions she would arrive at a patient's home in the middle of the night and would awaken the family by throwing stones against the side of the house.

Martha Myers loved being a doctor to the people of Yemen. Nothing brought her greater joy than to kneel by the bed of an Arab child and administer healing medicine. Some referred to her as the Mother Teresa of Yemen. When funds from the mission ran out, she used her own finances to pay for medical supplies and procedures. And when her own savings ran out, she sold personal possessions to provide care for these people whom she so loved.

Throughout her time in the region, she was well aware of the dangers of practicing medicine in the name of Christ. In 1998, armed men hijacked her Toyota with the intent of stealing it. They forced her to lie down in the back, threw a rug over her, and threatened to kill her if she uttered a word. Their plans failed when the van stalled, causing them to abandon the vehicle. After this incident, some family and friends suggested that she return to the States. When she asked them why, they stated the obvious, "Because you might be killed." To which she replied, "Well, I'll be in heaven."⁵¹

Why did Martha Myers serve without fear in such a hostile region? Because her goal was not staying alive – but rather living with Jesus.

On December 30, 2002, an associate of Al Qaeda, Abed Abdel Razzek Kamel, walked into the Jibla Baptist Hospital, carrying a concealed weapon, and killed Martha Myers along with two other missionaries. Just a few months prior to this, Dr. Myers had treated the assailant's wife – and shared with her the hope that is found in Jesus. The woman's husband was so concerned about the birth of a Christ-centered joy in his wife's life that he made a commitment to kill Dr. Myers before she won the whole country to Christ.

Though Dr. Myers was wonderfully eulogized in a worship service in the Sage Avenue Baptist Church in Mobile, and even though the Samford library contains a bronze likeness of her, the greatest words about the life of Martha Myers were spoken by the people of Yemen. Dr. Myers requested that she be buried in the country that had captured her heart. Her wish was granted on a piece of land behind the hospital. And on the tombstone above her grave, the people wrote these words – first in Arabic and then translated into English: "She loved God."

No matter what possessions we acquire or success we attain, the ultimate thing that matters at the end of our lives is that we have loved God – and loved Him enough to suffer for His purposes. Martha Myers understood that the goal of life is not to stay alive but to use whatever life we have to advertise the grace of God to as many people as possible. As

you contemplate such a well-run race, would you honor her witness by answering these questions:

Am I satisfied with a life that is comfortable and quiet – yet has little influence for Christ?

or

Am I willing to make true sacrifices so that many will know the hope of Jesus?

10

Finishing Matters

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 2008 college football season, Urban Meyer, head coach for the Florida Gators, gathered the squad to issue a firm directive: “Guys, this year we’re going to be a team that finishes strong.” From that moment on, every aspect of the program reflected the team’s commitment to their coach’s challenge. The phrase “Finish Strong” was written on their shirts, on their shorts, and even on plaques around the city. Every workout and every sprint at every practice was about finishing strong.

On the day of the National Championship game against Oklahoma, Coach Meyer reminded his team of the pledge that had carried them to this point: “Guys, I’m so proud of you. This year you have finished strong...until now. But so much of that will be forgotten if you don’t finish strong tonight.”

With three minutes left in the game, Florida quarterback Tim Tebow threw a touchdown to wide receiver David Nelson that put the Gators ahead by ten points. They were going to win the National Championship. As Tebow made his way off the field, he saw Coach Meyer walking toward

him. With tears streaming down his face, Coach took off his headset, hugged his quarterback, and said, “Timmy, I just want you to know that I love you, I’m proud of you, you finished strong.” As the celebrations came to an end that night and Tebow sat in his hotel room, he thought about Coach Meyer’s statement in a different context. Tebow said, “How cool it would be when my time here on earth is over, and I’m standing before my heavenly Father, and He comes up to me with arms open wide, hugs me, and says, ‘Timmy, I just want you to know I love you and I’m proud of you; you finished strong.’”

Finishing well is not easy. Many leaders have disgraced their record because they quit running well in their final years. The race that God calls us to run is not a sprint but a marathon. Rare are those individuals who cross the finish line still running hard after God. Finishing strong was the great passion of the apostle’s life:

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. (2 Timothy 4:6, 7)

The apostle Paul had been part of the world’s most magnificent journey. After missing God for the first thirty years of his life, he spent his next thirty years courageously serving Jesus Christ who had mercifully changed his life. And now after three decades of service and sacrifice, he sat in the lower dungeon of the Mamertine Prison in Rome, awaiting

his execution. He had begun his spiritual journey with one ambition: to “finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24). And in this final letter of his ministry, he was truly able to say, “I did finish that race. I did complete that task.”

Paul is writing the last words that would ever come from his pen. And he wrote them to a young man named Timothy who was pastoring the vulnerable church of Ephesus. As you read both letters that Timothy received, you get the sense that this young pastor was tempted to stop running his race. Therefore, when Paul wrote these words, he was using the backdrop of his own life in order to set this one challenge before Timothy – finish well the race God has set before you.

Recently in our church a husband and wife responded to God’s call to serve in a mission hospital in Guatemala – the fourth poorest country on earth. Because the wife was a pediatrician, she needed to tell the members of her practice that she, along with her husband and five children, had been called by God to labor in a new medical field in South America. After hearing of Laura’s decision, one member of her team asked her what was the compelling reason to do this. She replied, “Because when I get to the end of my life I want to be able to say that I completed the assignment that Jesus had impressed upon my heart – to care for children, to care for the poor, and to share the gospel with them all.”

Early transitions to the mission field were so stressful that Laura sometimes doubted if she could actually serve in this capacity. But one day as she met with the director of the

language school in Costa Rica, she saw an unusual carving the man had acquired at a Goodwill Store while traveling in the U.S. It was a cross that was etched with a verse not often combined with crucifixion art: “The Lord will fulfill His purpose for me” (Psalm 138:8). It was the very verse God had used to call Laura to the mission field as a teenager twenty years earlier. Weeks later, when Mike and Laura completed language school, the director presented her with the engraved cross from his desk, reminding them that God would indeed complete His work in them.

One of the best ways to chase what matters is to ask if the present direction of your life will enable you to say that you too have finished God’s race – that you did what He asked you to do. Few things have had more impact on the church than the teaching and writings of John Calvin. Grieved by the theological dark ages of the 16th century, Calvin stood like a faithful lighthouse, shining the light of Scripture on a stormy sea of apostate beliefs. When he was thirty years old, Calvin described an imaginary scene in which he, at the end of his life, would give this account of his ministry to God:

The thing at which I chiefly aimed, and for which I most diligently labored, was, that the glory of thy goodness and justice . . . might shine forth conspicuous, that the virtue and blessings of thy Christ . . . might be fully displayed.⁵²

For the next twenty-four years that vision statement guided his life. Through the loss of a young child, a

precious wife, his own health, and vicious persecution, Calvin was still laboring for that very goal when he died at age fifty-four.

Don't wait until the end of your life to ask yourself how you did with your race. Like Calvin, imagine yourself there right now. Or, as one friend suggested, view every funeral you attend as a dress rehearsal for your own. When you arrive at the end of your earthly journey, what do you want your epitaph to say? What can you do now to make sure that you will also finish well? Through Paul's epitaph we are presented with five principles that will enable us to cross the finish line with vigor and joy:

Serve with true hope

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering,
and the time has come for my departure. (2 Timothy 4:6)

When Paul uses the term “drink offering,” it appears that he is thinking about a passage of Scripture in Numbers 15. In that chapter, God describes several types of offerings that the Israelites were to offer in their worship of the Lord. Toward the end of that list is a drink offering. Therefore, Paul is using this imagery to say that after having made a lifetime of sacrifices for Jesus Christ, he is now ready to make the final one – his death.⁵³ But as you can clearly sense in his words, there's not a hint of defeat or dread in his voice. Death will surely bring sorrow to our hearts, but we must never forget that believers' tears always fall on the fertile soil of hope. Two

realities serve as the foundation of hope as believers prepare for their final step of faith.

The timing of death

There are several words that Paul could have chosen to speak of the timing of his death, but he specifically uses the Greek word “*kairos*.” It is a word that does not refer to time in general but to a chosen time. It is the same word used to describe the safe passage of Jesus Christ through an angry crowd midway in his ministry. It is clear they wanted to kill Him but the Scripture says “his time had not yet come” (John 7:30). When Pilate attempted to intimidate Jesus by alleging that he had the power to kill Him or release Him, Jesus was quick to remind the governor: “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above” (John 19:11).

All matter and energy come from God, belong to God, and are controlled by God. Therefore, even when suffering occurs through secondary sources, it only comes because the ultimate source of life and energy has willed that it should come. As Abraham Kuyper famously said, “There is not one square inch of planet Earth over which the risen Christ does not say, ‘Mine!’” Paul faced death with hope because he knew that this day was inscribed in heaven before it was enacted on Earth. Neither man nor fate controls the timing of our death. Every child of God will be escorted through the valley of the shadow of death by the sovereign and merciful hands of Jesus Christ.

The nature of death

I love the way Paul speaks of death throughout Scripture. On several occasions he refers to it as sleep. And here he describes it as a departure. Rather than using the normal word for death, “*thanatos*,” he uses a much more vivid word, “*analusis*.” The word was used in Greek literature in a number of beautiful ways. It described:

the removal of a yoke from an animal that had been pulling a heavy load;

the loosening of chains on prisoners who had been set free;

the untying of ropes so that a tent could be moved to a new camp;

the releasing of mooring ropes, allowing a ship to set sail for a new land.

When Paul contemplated death, his focus was not on loss but on gain. God was releasing him from all burdens of this world. He was being freed from the chains of this sinful and vulnerable body. He was setting sail for the safe harbor of heaven.

On March 19, 2011, our community was shaken by an unthinkable tragedy. A kiddie train at Cleveland Park derailed, injuring more than twenty children and ending the life of six-year old Benji Easler. Three days later, his

father, Dwight Easler, spoke at his son's funeral. As a pastor, Dwight had spoken at many funerals. But on this day he could barely make eye contact with the precious church that was grieving with him. But with a hope that is not of this world, he made this declarative statement about the fateful train ride that ended his son's life: "On the second turn of the third lap, Benji traded a train for a chariot." As Christians, we do not deny the pain that death inevitably brings. But as we consider the eternal satisfaction of all who dwell in heaven, our wounded hearts are filled with an ever-present peace.

Fight the good fight

I have fought the good fight... (2 Timothy 4:7)

I am so grateful that Paul described the Christian life as a fight (because it certainly feels that way to me). Life is hard. Following Christ does not exempt us from pain; it sometimes magnifies it. C.S. Lewis once said, "If you are looking for a religion to make you comfortable, I wouldn't recommend Christianity." Yes, the Christian life is a fight. But, as Paul says, it is a good fight. If we don't admit that we are in a fight, we are not being honest. And if we are not persuaded it is a good fight, we will quit.

It's a little difficult for us to imagine many scenarios where fighting is good. Take, for instance, two guys in a high school gym class who get into a scuffle, throw a few punches, and are immediately taken to the principal's office. And when the

principal asks them if it is true that they had violated school policy by fighting, one of the boys responds: “Yes, it’s true, but there is no need to be alarmed. It was a good fight.” I have a feeling that wouldn’t work too well.

But Paul passionately believed – and wanted Timothy to believe – that the Christian life is a good fight. In fact, on two other occasions he urged Timothy to fight the good fight (1 Timothy 1:18; 6:12). In general the Christian life is a good fight because of four realities:

what we fight against – evil;
 what we fight for – God’s purposes;
 who we fight with – Jesus Christ;
 where the fight leads – joy.

The primary reason that most people quit fighting is because they do not see any value in the fight. The word “good” comes from a Greek word that speaks of something’s value because of the purpose it fulfills. Jesus used the word to describe a good tree (Matthew 12:33) and good ground (Matthew 13:8). Both the tree and ground are good because they produce something good.

Likewise, our battles are good because they play a vital role in God’s plan for our lives. It’s in the battles that we fulfill our purpose and grow to be most beautiful. We are beautiful when we serve God out of gratitude. We are beautiful when we obey out of love. We are beautiful when we resist evil. We are beautiful when we sacrifice for Jesus. We are beautiful when we persevere in the midst of pain. It’s a

good fight because it fulfills the beautiful purpose God has designed for us.

God does not permit a trial that has no purpose. And for every trial that He does sanction, He supervises every detail to bring about the good He has designed. No verse speaks to this reality more than Romans 8:28: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” This is the believer’s great hope in the midst of conflict. God is so wise and strong that He is able to make any calamity serve His good purposes. Every natural disaster, every scheme of man, every demonic force – He truly makes all things work for our good. God is the master of writing triumphant endings out of tearful beginnings.

Run the right race

I have finished the race (2 Timothy 4:7)

The word “race” comes from the Greek word “*dromos*,” which speaks of the completion of a specific task – such as a job that has been finished or mission that has been completed. One of the clearest illustrations of this is found in the ministry of John the Baptist. He was born to do one thing – prepare the world for the ministry of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul speaks about John’s faithfulness to this assignment by telling us that John completed “his work” (Acts 13:25).

In that verse Paul uses the word “*dromos*” indicating that John had completed a specific calling assigned to him

by God. Doing anything else would have led John to miss God's purpose for his life.

It matters to God what you do with your life. Your beliefs matter to God. Your character matters to God. Your service matters to God. When we place our faith in Christ and become united with God, we spend the rest of our lives allowing Him to infuse His character in us and fulfill His purposes through us. God has a plan for your life. He wants to bring worship from you in a way that has never come from any other heart. He wants to reveal Himself through you in a way that has never occurred through any other human being. This is your *dromos*. This is your race. This is what matters.

Shortly before Hootie and the Blowfish signed with Atlantic Records – and sold thirteen million copies of their debut album – their drummer Brantley Smith left the band to follow God's call to become a youth minister. Knowing that his decision shocked both friends and fans, Brantley made this statement:

I'm a hero to some and an idiot to others. But there is nothing in this world that can come close to a relationship with Christ. For that reason alone I would have left Hootie a thousand times over.

The story is stunning on its own, but several years ago, after a worship service at our church, it took on a much deeper meaning. Just moments after I finished speaking, a couple said to me, "Even we were impacted by the ripple effects of Brantley Smith's decision. Soon after he left Hootie, he

became our youth pastor in Charleston, SC. His example of total surrender challenged us to do the same as students and now as young marrieds.” That couple, along with their four children, are now serving as career missionaries among an unreached people group in southeast Asia. I am so grateful that Brantley Smith ran his race so that others would be inspired to run theirs as well.

Guard the great treasure

I have kept the faith. (2 Timothy 4:7)

When Paul speaks of *the faith*, he is talking about everything that is related to the person and ministry of Jesus Christ – truth He taught, character He modeled, and the sacrifice He made. *The faith* is a treasure chest of all that Jesus said and did to bring us to God. We have been bought with a great price by a great God for a great purpose. We keep the faith by honoring and sharing the treasure we have in Christ.

Throughout his life Paul undoubtedly heard voices telling him that the cost of dispersing the treasure was too great – too much sacrifice. Those voices would urge him to set the treasure down and walk away from it – to chase after worldly treasures that would benefit him more. But Paul never let go of the treasure. He viewed himself as a man who had been entrusted with something that was precious. He wanted to adore and declare Christ until his last breath. As he sat in that Roman prison cell, awaiting the executioner to raise his sword and end his life, he clutched the treasure even more

tightly – so that when he opened his eyes in heaven, he could say to his Lord, “I never let go of the faith.”

Choose the best reward

Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:8)

I once served at a church where one of our elders began a curious tradition. At the conclusion of the service, he would occasionally walk past me and hold up four fingers. After witnessing this a few times, I asked him if there was a specific message in that – i.e., maybe I should have had a fourth point, or I was four minutes too long. He explained the riddle by educating me about his company. He worked for a business that manufactured fire trucks. A four-inch valve was the biggest one this plant made. Therefore, by holding up four fingers, he was telling me that he was giving me the highest award possible – a perfect four.

Once I understood this symbol, that number four meant more to me than any verbal compliment I could receive. But one Sunday after I preached what I felt was a very good message, I thought that my friend would surely hold up four fingers. But as he made his way out of church that morning, there was no gesture and no comment. I thought that if I watched his car pull out of the parking lot, maybe at the last

minute he might roll down his window and hold up a four. But there was nothing.

Later that afternoon he called and asked if I had time to stop by his house. Soon after I arrived he brought out a stainless steel valve and presented it to me. He said that his company was now producing a five-inch valve. He said that he didn't hold up four fingers that morning because the message was more than that. It was a five! I no longer serve at that church, but you can be certain I still own that valve. I keep it as a reminder of that sacred day when Christ will stun us with the most beautiful words a human can ever hear: "Well done, my good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23).

The Christian life is a glorious mystery to me. God has not only forgiven me for chasing after wrong things, but He has indwelled my body with His Spirit and called me to join Him in His mission in the world. And at the end of my life when I stand before Him, He will place a crown on my head and say to me, "Well done." I so want to honor the One who has made all this possible. I want to serve Him until that final day. I want to finish well!

In 1981, a British film company released a movie that would be nominated for seven Academy Awards, eventually winning four. It was entitled *Chariots of Fire* and told the story of Scotland's most famous athlete, Eric Liddell. Liddell was an outstanding rugby player who thrilled fans with his speed and tackling as he played both at Edinburgh University and on the Scottish International Team. But the rugby field did not display his athletic giftedness nearly as much as the track. His specialty was the 100 meters. With "arms churning like

windmills,” his presence on the track electrified crowds as they watched him run to victory – both in individual races and as the anchor leg for relays. Both races were often held on the same day.

Despite his great love of running, it was not the most important thing in Eric Liddell’s life. He ran that he might enjoy God and bring glory to Him through athletic competition. This was most obvious when he made the stunning decision not to compete in the 100-meter event in the 1924 Paris Olympics. In November of 1923, he learned that the qualifying heats for the 100 meters would be held on Sunday. Convinced by Scripture that God had set apart Sunday for worship, he met with the British Olympic Committee and graciously asked that his name be removed from the race. He agreed to train for the 200- and 400-meter races even though his lack of experience did not produce high expectations for victory.

On July 11, 1924, in one of the most anticipated Olympic races of all time, Eric Liddell lined up for the 400-meter race. When the starter fired his pistol, the stadium turned into a mass of frenzied spectators. And 47.6 seconds later, Eric Liddell crossed the finish line five meters ahead of the next closest competitor. He brought home the gold and set a new world record. History agrees with the tribute spoken by Lord Sands at a dinner honoring Liddell a week after the games: “This young man put his whole career in the balance, and deemed it as small dust, compared to remaining true to his principles.”⁵⁴

Soon after the Olympics, Eric studied theology for a year and then moved to China where he taught science and

organized sports in an Anglo-Chinese College located in Tianjin (formerly known as Tienstein). The city held a special place in his heart because, twenty-two years earlier, he had been born there to missionary parents. The city would come to be even more special because it was there that he would meet a young woman named Florence MacKenzie whom he would marry in 1934. Their family would soon expand to include two daughters, Patricia and Heather. Their marriage was known to all their friends as a union where each cherished the other. External circumstances would soon disrupt their precious unity.

In the summer of 1937, Japan invaded North China. Almost immediately, foreigners were looked upon with much suspicion. The tension was so high that Liddell made a decision to send his two daughters and his now pregnant wife to live with her parents in Canada. This decision proved most wise after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Throughout China, Japanese officials classified people from countries allied against them as “enemy nationals” and placed them under a form of house arrest in their homes. Within a year Eric and 1,800 people were moved to a civilian internment camp in a former Presbyterian mission compound near the city of Weifang (formerly Weihsein). Communication with the outside world was restricted to twenty-five-word letters sent once a month through the Red Cross.

Believing that he had been sent to the camp with a purpose, Eric did all that he could to serve those around him. Many teenagers within the camp had come from a boarding

school for missionary children. He reached out to them academically by teaching from a one-hundred-page chemistry book he developed from memory. He reached out to them athletically by using whatever sports equipment he could find to organize games. He also dedicated much time to the care of the sick and the elderly. Frequently he would carry buckets of water to their rooms. And during the winter months he would bring them “coal dust from which they made fuel-pellets for their stove.” Everyone in the camp, from missionaries to businessmen, received great encouragement from a man whose life had been shaped by the words of this hymn:

Gracious Spirit, dwell with me, I myself would gracious be,

And with words that help and heal, would Thy life in mine reveal,

And with actions bold and meek, would for Christ my Savior speak.

In various seasons of his life Eric had been asked to share what the Lord had done for him. He would always accept those invitations but was never able to impress an audience with his speaking skills. One of his roommates at the camp said of him, “He lived a far better life than his preaching.”

In the early part of 1945, Eric began suffering from such severe headaches that he was admitted to the camp hospital. The doctors who examined him discovered an inoperable

brain tumor. Eric Liddell died on February 21, 1945. He was forty-three years old. Yes, we grieve for the great loss to his wife and children, as well as the many he served in that camp. But we rejoice in the picture painted by his life – a picture given to us in 1 Corinthians as Paul reflects on the Athens Olympics of the 1st century:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. (1 Corinthians 9:24)

Throughout his life, on the track and off, Eric Liddell ran well and finished well. He had discovered that what really matters in life is knowing and serving God – and that is what he chased. So let me ask you again:

What are you chasing in life?

And if you get it, does it really matter?

Responding Matters

The purpose of this book is not information – but invitation. An invitation to walk with God, and to embrace His dream for your life instead of your own. If something in these pages has stirred that desire, I urge you to express your heart through the following words:

God, I open my life to the power of Your transforming grace. I devote my life to those things that matter most to You. I want to experience lasting satisfaction that comes from the beauty of Your power, wisdom, holiness, and love.

I have chased after impure and empty things. I receive forgiveness that comes through the atoning power of Your Son's death and resurrection. I want to be filled with Your Spirit that I may live a disciplined life that will lead me to Your best. Please use my body and mind to serve Your purposes on earth.

Strengthen and change my heart through Your Word. Deepen my relationship with You through

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prayer. Give me faith to risk, courage to suffer, and strength to finish well. And always give me wisdom to continue chasing what matters.

In Jesus' Name,
Amen.

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For Further Thought

Chapter 1

- What things did you chase after earlier in life that don't seem nearly as important now?
- At what point in your life did your passion for God begin to grow?
- In what ways has God overwhelmed and motivated you by His grace? In other words, as you look at your life, can you see how God has blessed you far more than you deserved?
- What are the contributing factors that distract and drain us, causing us to not chase what matters?
- What was the primary verse, statement, or concept that most spoke to you? How will that affect you in terms of life application?

Chapter 2

- Do you think most people today are more satisfied or less satisfied than previous generations?
- What expressions of beauty have been particularly refreshing to you?

- Is it natural or unnatural for you to verbally thank God for beauty? In other words, do you find yourself enjoying a beautiful event without expressing your delight to God? Or is it becoming more natural to verbally thank Him for that moment?
- How do you think most people view heaven? Family and friend reunions? Fun activities? Boring singing? OR unending satisfaction because of God's beauty?
- What was the primary verse, statement, or concept that most spoke to you? How will that affect you in terms of life application?

Chapter 3

- What would be your response to someone who asks you to define the term "atonement"?
- Thinking back on the chapter, what are some areas in which people place false hope for atonement?
- Why does God regard the person and work of Jesus as the only valid means of atonement?
- Why is it such a challenge for people to receive God's forgiveness through faith?
- Can you remember a time in your life when faith in God's acceptance of you freed you from feelings of spiritual inadequacy?
- What was the primary verse, statement, or concept that most spoke to you? How will that affect you in terms of life application?

Chapter 4

- When you think about the many needs in the world, what areas continually tug at your heart?
- Why do you think that serving God is often not our top priority? Unresolved guilt? Doubt that our service matters? Unaware of opportunities to serve? Preoccupied with our own agenda? Or _____?
- Referencing a phrase from the book, how do you think the church contributes to producing “spiritual parasitism”?
- Rick Warren uses the acronym SHAPE (Spiritual gifts, **H**eart, **A**bilities, **P**ersonality, **E**xperience) to describe how God has wired us to excel in certain ministry settings. Based on those components, what type of ministries do you think you are best shaped for?
- What role do you think the Holy Spirit plays regarding how we serve the Lord? (This question is connected with Jesus’ promise in John 7:39 to pour out His Spirit upon thirsty people.)
- Roland Bergeron said that nothing warms your heart like being an answer to someone’s prayer – when you are the one God uses to meet a significant need in a person’s life. Who has God used to help you experience Him more fully? (The purpose of this question is to remind us how vital it is that we reach out to others because of the impact that various people have had on us.)
- What was the primary verse, statement, or concept that most spoke to you? How will that affect you in terms of life application?

Chapter 5

- Can you think of a personal example, or one that you witnessed elsewhere, where a great opportunity was missed because of a lack of discipline?
- What do you think Dallas Willard meant when he said, “Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning.”
- Do you think the church has made discipline to be an enemy of grace in an attempt to highlight God’s unconditional love?
- Two of the means of grace are Bible study and prayer (there are others that were not mentioned, such as journaling, fasting, etc.). How have you disciplined yourself to experience God through those means? In other words, is there a time and place (a healthy routine) where you seem to best focus on God?
- What was the primary verse, statement, or concept that most spoke to you? How will that affect you in terms of life application?

Chapter 6

- Why do you think it’s so easy for many in our culture to say that the Bible is not of divine origin – that it has no more credibility and authority than any other book?
- Have you developed a specific Bible reading plan that is meaningful to you? Some people like reading straight through the Bible (several chapters each day). Others like to read a chapter from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament, and one from the

Psalms – and maybe even Proverbs. Can you share what works best for you?

- Can you share a time when the Bible deeply encouraged, challenged, or directed you? (Maybe it was a verse of Scripture that you read or heard this past week.)
- What was the primary verse, statement, or concept that most spoke to you? How will that affect you in terms of life application?

Chapter 7

- When facing an overwhelming situation, what is your first reaction? Panic (or at least worry significantly)? Talk to a friend? Work hard to solve it? Prayer?
- What are some things in your life that you are presently devoted to – things that you would never fail to take care of? Does prayer receive an equal or lesser devotion in your life?
- Since God is capable of running the world by Himself, why does it please Him to hear our prayers? (Your answer may or may not come from the chapter.)
- Do you feel comfortable in bringing every need you have to God? Or do you feel apologetic about praying for things you feel are too small?
- Do you approach God with confidence as you pray? Or do you have to battle things such as doubt, distraction, comparison to others you've heard pray, etc.?
- Do you often pray for large spiritual awakening to come to the world? Or do you primarily speak to God about issues that are more related to your personal circumstances?

- What was the primary verse, statement, or concept that most spoke to you? How will that affect you in terms of life application?

Chapter 8

- Can you think of a significant risk you have seen highlighted lately in the news? Did the risk benefit anyone other than the risk taker?
- Are there any blessings you forfeited because you chose to avoid a risk?
- At what points in your life have you uniquely experienced God because you accepted a risk He had placed before you?
- Why do uncertain outcomes bother us so much? In other words, why are we afraid to experience setbacks and “failures” when we consider a new project or direction?
- What was the primary verse, statement, or concept that most spoke to you? How will that affect you in terms of life application?

Chapter 9

- How have you seen devotion to the Lord lead to suffering (maybe in your life or in the life of a Christian you admire)?
- Explain how Christ’s suffering is complete and incomplete at the same time.
- How have you seen God use sacrifice and suffering to open people’s hearts to Christ?

- How has God strengthened you during those times in which He led you through trial?
- Do you think it's helpful to become more knowledgeable of suffering that is endured by Christians around the world?
- What was the primary verse, statement, or concept that most spoke to you? How will that affect you in terms of life application?

Chapter 10

- Can you name a memorable mission statement used by an organization? What purpose do you think it actually serves?
- Have you ever attempted to write a mission statement for your life? Consider spending some time over the next few days developing a personal mission statement.
- A missions professor once told our class that most great men die ten years too late. That is, they don't finish well. How does a statement like that affect you?
- As you reflect on the many adversities faced by the apostle Paul, what realities truly motivated him to endure?
- Can you remember a "good fight" that you endured and are now grateful for it?
- Do you have a favorite story of "faithful endurance to the end" regarding someone you have known or read about?
- What was the primary verse, statement, or concept that most spoke to you? How will that affect you in terms of life application?

