

Vision to Be Holy

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." 1 Peter 1:14-16 ESV

Our culture is a doing culture. Often the ones who are the most productive and get the job done are also the most celebrated and rewarded in our jobs, government, and families. The mindset that our value comes from what we do has so influenced us as people that our churches are full of people who are great "doers" for God and His church, but often are far from His holiness in their thoughts and motives.

Holiness is the state of being set apart or separate from unclean or common things. God doesn't tell us to "do holiness", but His command is to **be** holy. I've often read the above verse as "you need to work hard at pleasing God and obeying, and then you will be holy." Recently I've been realizing that this is missing the point of what Peter was trying to say. Just as Jesus set an impossible standard for His disciples when He told them, "You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect," Peter's admonition to be holy is beyond our grasp to accomplish in ourselves. It ultimately shows us how far we fall short and instead shows how our holiness is dependent on someone else; it is dependent on Jesus Christ

Before Christ we were like the rest of the world; we were common, ordinary people stained by sin and dead in our spirit. No matter how hard a dead man might try, he will never be clean. But Christ, being rich in mercy toward sinners, came and poured out His blood on the cross to cleanse us from sin, and to make us creatures with completely different natures. He transformed us from being dead to having life. He changed us from being common to being set apart to be like Him. *We are made new: we are given the Spirit of God and the very righteousness of Christ.*

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Kings 18:13-19:37
 Acts 21:1-17
 Psalm 149:1-9
 Proverbs 18:8

Friday, July 3

The Cross and the Purpose of God

. . . this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. Acts 2:23 ESV

The Cross: The Cross is no accident or surprise, at least to God. The Cross was pre-planned and predetermined by God Himself! This was God's "fixed" plan that He determined before the foundation of the world.

The Cross: The Cross, therefore, is not peripheral or ancillary to human history. It is the centerpiece of human history.

The Cross: There is an interplay here, a spiritual tension between God's sovereign plan and human responsibility. In God's foreknowledge, the Lord knows the future and all potential futures. He knows, ordains, allows and uses all of our choices to fulfill His sovereign purpose and plan.

The Cross: The Cross is no mistake. It is the very plan of God that changes everything for all time. The Cross not only changes everything in this cosmos—it also changes me. It puts my broken life back together again. It restores my soul. It makes me fully human and renews the image of God from which I am carved out.

The Cross: There is nothing like it in the entire universe. There is no one who can thwart the purpose and power of the Cross.

The Cross: It is time to embrace it.

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Kings 22:3-23:30
 Acts 21:37-22:16
 Psalm 1:1-6
 Proverbs 18:11-12

Friday, July 3

Vision to Be Holy – 2

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." 1 Peter 1:14-16 ESV

Peter isn't telling the saints he is addressing in the verses above to "work harder" to be holy. He is reminding them that through Christ they have *already been made holy*. We now need to rest in the finished work of Christ and live out the new nature God has already given us. What good news! The work is finished!

I encourage you right now to take two minutes to simply sit with God and "be" with Him. No doing; no anxiety. Just sit and enjoy His work for you through the Gospel. Then take a little time to ask yourself if your "holy conduct," your obedience and works, are from a place of deep transformation and thankfulness or out of a striving to be something you are not yet. Ask God to help you see where you need to surrender and be transformed into the image of Christ.

Remember that *there isn't essentially anything left to do in order to be holy; it is "done" through the cross of Christ.*

You are holy, so be holy.

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Kings 20:1-22:2
 Acts 21:18-36
 Psalm 150:1-6
 Proverbs 18:9-10

Saturday, July 4

Celebrate!

They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. Psalm 89:16 NIV

I love the fact that you can find something to celebrate every day. There is a National Potato Chip Day, a Plant a Flower Day, and even an International Day of Awesomeness. But more important than celebrating is why we do it; the Old Testament gives us some great examples.

In Leviticus 23 and 24 we read about all the festivals that God commanded the people to keep: Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks, and the Festival of Booths. I loved reading about them for two reasons. First, celebrations help us to remember God's amazing provision and inspire us to trust Him even more deeply in the future. They also cultivate gratefulness in our hearts. Recently I was visiting my daughter Abby in Madison, Wisconsin, while she was in the hospital. She asked me to tell stories about our family in their growing up years and of my courtship with her dad. I talked about how I trusted God in hard times like my other daughter's open-heart surgery at age three. We live such busy lives; it is so good to pause and to think about how far God has brought us and what He has taught us. It is also why we take pictures. They can be a beautiful legacy of God's goodness.

These feasts were all about creating holy time that would allow the Israelites to remember God's faithfulness and to renew their trust in Him. It made me think about what ways I create "holy time" with God. Every year I take a day between Christmas and New Year's to read over my journal and review the verses that struck me and what God taught me. It is like my personal festival to celebrate with God. But you can simply take a few moments tonight to reflect on how you sensed God's presence *today* and then thank Him!

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Kings 23:31-25:30
 Acts 22:17-23:10
 Psalm 2:1-12
 Proverbs 18:13

Vision to Be Loved

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. John 15:9-14 NIV

Sometimes I get silly old songs stuck in my head. Do you? For instance, when considering today's topic, the Beatles' song, "Love is All You Need," came to mind. And the more I listen to such lyrics the sillier they seem . . . However, might there be some truth to this simple chorus?

As we read the above passage, there is much to consider. There can be no greater love than that which is between our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. Love is part of God's perfect character (1 John 4:8). *Jesus loves us with that same love.* Since we can't know as God knows because we are not God, Jesus gave us a very tangible way for us to understand His love for us: He gave up His life for us. When we take hold of God's love for us, it is then that *we can experience true and complete joy that surpasses understanding.*

According to this passage, the way to take hold of God's love, to experience His joy, is by obeying His commands. Specifically, the command given here is to love our brothers and sisters in the family of God. There are many other commands like this given in the Bible.

What can I do today to express the love of God for my brothers and sisters in Christ?

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One-Year Bible Reading
1 Chronicles 1:1-2:17
Acts 23:11-35
Psalm 3:1-8
Proverbs 18:14-15

Vision to Be Loved – 2

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. John 15:9-14 NIV

Sometimes our selfish nature (the "old nature" or our "flesh") gets in the way of loving others. Sometimes we fail to live in obedience to God's commands. Instead, we live for ourselves. We get slack in our quiet times. We start praying less and less. We begin looking for affirmation from work, hobbies, or other people. We will do anything that will make us "feel good." Ah, but there is the deception! When our flesh gets in the way, we may "feel good" for a short time, but *we have lost our joy.*

Clear vision comes as we draw near to our Heavenly Father in the Word and in prayer. It is there that we are reminded of the greatness of His love. It is there we begin to develop a vision to live for Him and not for ourselves. Instead of thinking of the Beatles' song, let's consider this one by Stuart Townsend:

*How deep the Father's love for us,
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.*

Can you see clearly now?

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1 Chronicles 2:18-4:4
Acts 24:1-27
Psalm 4:1-8
Proverbs 18:16-18

From the Depths to the Dew

*By His knowledge the depths were broken up and clouds drop down the dew.
Proverbs 3:20 NKJV*

We know that God sees all, knows all. But it never hurts to be reminded of those realities. Our verse today offers such a reminder.

Sustained noise above 85 decibels can cause hearing damage. A jet taking off can hit 120. Decibels north of 130 have been registered in football stadiums like Arrowhead in Kansas City and the Superdome in New Orleans. On the other hand, there are events that occur in silence. A human hair falling on soft carpet would not cause a sound to be registered by our ears.

God is familiar with and in on events large and small, loud and silent. When "the depths were broken up" at the start of Noah's flood, the noise would have been deafening. It would have made the Superdome seem like a meeting of Quakers. As people attempted to run for cover, they probably covered their ears.

On the other end of the spectrum, there is complete silence when "clouds drop down the dew." Have you ever listened in on the formation of dew? Neither have I. Dew is formed in complete silence. But God knows all about it.

God is familiar with the great upheavals of our lives, as well as the mundane. For me, He was there when our house (and church building) flooded in 1997. He was also there to preserve our people when our leadership team experienced Richter scale earthquakes, and a pastor departed. And He was there when I slept peacefully last night and had my usual toast with Jean's homemade bread and honey this morning.

Whether it seems like the depths are breaking up or nothing more sensational than morning dew in your life, He knows and He's there.

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One-Year Bible Reading
1 Chronicles 4:5-5:17
Acts 25:1-27
Psalm 5:1-12
Proverbs 18:19

In Light of Eternity

*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
Ecclesiastes 1:2 ESV*

In an effort to reduce the number of books and papers we save, I decided the time had come to throw out our glossy, well-bound *Friends of Chamber Music Kansas City 2019-2020 Season* book. Our March 20th concert had been canceled due to the coronavirus outbreak. Then the rest of the season had been suspended due to the uncertainty about how long social distancing would continue. Before I tossed it, however, my attention was caught by the splendid picture on the cover. And just inside the cover I found a full-page explanation of Jean-Marc Nattier's painting.

A young woman dressed in a gorgeous gown of bright scarlet with intricate gold patterns is holding a *viola da gamba* (which evolved into what we would call a cello). Her dress probably took 20 yards of cloth to make. The light hits her face and upper body—she couldn't be prettier or more poised than she is. Her chair is ornate, and behind her is a drapery of dark green velvet between two massive columns. Close to her left stands a beautiful harpsichord. Who is she? A French princess, daughter of King Louis XV, who lived from 1727-1752. She truly possessed every advantage in life. One could even feel a little jealous.

But in reading the history of the painting I was suddenly surprised. This charming piece of art was painted "two years after Henriette's death from smallpox." I did the math. She was only 24 or 25 when she died. All this splendor, beauty, wealth, talent didn't even exist when the painting was created. What of it mattered in the light of eternity?

Lord, "So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90). Nothing is to be taken for granted. Nothing is guaranteed, not even life itself. Are we living in light of eternity?

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One-Year Bible Reading
1 Chronicles 5:18-6:81
Acts 26:1-32
Psalm 6:1-10
Proverbs 18:20-21

A Heart of Wisdom

Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.
Psalm 90:12 NIV

How ought a man or woman to live? How might a man or woman live? These two questions expound on the limitless choices and thus the possibilities of how one might live his life. And hanging in the balance is the quality of one's life with these choices before us every day.

The psalmist gives us some tremendously wise advice with this one verse. It's this: give careful consideration to each day and how God would want you to live, and then how you and I will live before God.

"Numbering our days aright" means but these two things. Our life on this earth is short—a *vapor*, James says. Do you consider and do you live each day, as it is, a gift from God? Today stands alone, with no promise of tomorrow and without living or dwelling on the past. Are you living focused on this one day?

Second, our life is short—indeed, a mist that appears for a brief span. But that doesn't mean it's not important, or it doesn't matter how we live. The psalmist tells us that the wise live their lives unto Almighty God!

It's brief indeed, but eternity hangs in the balance; eternal rewards hang in the balance. A life lived unto Almighty God, for His purpose and with His purposes in mind, will in fact ensure the best quality of life, a quality unlike any other.

In this is the wisdom of God.

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Chronicles 7:1-8:40
Acts 27:1-20
Psalm 7:1-17
Proverbs 18:22

Saturday, July 11

From Fear to Fear

He said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Exodus 3:6 NASB

When I first gave my life to Christ over 40 years ago, I imagined God to be a loving yet demanding God. I naively believed if I had a good day then I must have done everything right and pleased God. But if things didn't go well one day, I had made God angry and He was punishing me. I feared what God might do to me.

Now, having walked with God for more than four decades, my perspective has changed. I have come to understand more God's love, compassion, and intimate care. My fear of what God might do to me has turned into a holy awe of who He is.

When Moses first met God in the burning bush on Mount Sinai, he hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. Yet, 30 chapters later, back on Mount Sinai, Moses begs to see God's glory. And God allows His glory to pass by Moses; Moses sees the back of God.

What made the change? Moses had heard God speak and intimately experienced God. He had seen God do many miracles in Egypt, part a sea to save the Israelites, care for them in the desert, and faithfully lead them through the good and the bad.

Have you thought back on how your perspective of God has changed? Over the years, as He's walked with you through every circumstance, you have no doubt come to understand Him more intimately. Do you take time to remember and write down those moments? They're so valuable to think on.

David says in Psalm 22:10, "You have been my God from the moment I was born." He sure has!

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Chronicles 11:1-12:18
Acts 28:1-31
Psalm 9:1-12
Proverbs 19:1-3

Nothing To Lose and Nothing to Prove

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. Philippians 4:21-23 NASB

How do you live your life? Do you live free, cheerful, and with excitement about what God is going to do in you and through you by His grace? Or, do you live under a cloud of uncertainty, always feeling like you need to do more to gain God's approval? Do you feel like you must do something for God, or you will lose what you have? The latter is a terrible way to live, or should I say exist? It certainly isn't the abundant life of freedom Jesus said He came to give us by dying for all our sins. What is going on in our heads that makes us live under this pressure?

Paul addressed every church family as saints. That declaration as to their standing before God was profound! God considered them to be holy ones! They could not become any more righteous, holy, or clean in His eyes. They were in Christ, and therefore He had completed them. They had nothing to lose and nothing to prove. They were free from sin, and now free to live under grace.

Recently, a good friend of mine was greatly relieved to hear that God wanted him to live with "nothing to lose and nothing to prove." He had allowed himself to live under the relentless pressure to perform, to prove that he and his church were healthy. He was re-examining how he got to this place by "destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and . . . taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5 NASB). You too can live free in Christ's grace with nothing to lose and nothing to prove!

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Chronicles 9:1-10:14
Acts 27:21-44
Psalm 8:1-9
Proverbs 18:23-24

Saturday, July 11

"Call the Sabbath a Delight"

. . . if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way . . . then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob. Isaiah 58:13-14 NIV

A little over a year ago, I made a real commitment to celebrating a true 24-hour Sabbath. Honestly, I found it profoundly boring for the first six months. I enjoyed connecting with God and family, I enjoyed the nap, and the 20 minutes of silent meditation while I listened to birds sing in my front yard. In truth, I delighted in getting things checked off of my Sabbath to-do list. Then the other 20 hours of the Sabbath loomed large in front of me. But I stuck with it while I tried to find something that I delighted in to fill my Sabbath and remind me of eternity's delights.

One of our university students and I have joked that on the new earth we will let everyone else crowd into the new Jerusalem—we want backpacks and hiking boots to see the rest of the world filled with animals, plants, and scenery only dreamed of on *this* earth!

I was still praying about this **and** being faithful to "endure" my Sabbath in September when my wife and I were invited to spend our 35th anniversary with friends from Scotland—who were also celebrating their 35th. We were going to go to an outer island to see puffins because wild animals and wild scenery delight me, but we were two weeks late for the season.

Seeing my disappointment, my wife quickly researched any animal excursions she could get me to and found two: a sheep dog demonstration and a hawk flying expedition. Yes, we saw battlefields, architecture, and history galore, but it was on a nature walk with a hawk that God really surprised me. I'll tell you more on that tomorrow, but here's a question for today: Has God ever surprised you with an unexpected delight?

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Chronicles 12:19-14:17
Romans 1:1-17
Psalm 9:13-20
Proverbs 19:4-5

Sunday, July 12

“Call the Sabbath a Delight” – 2

Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Psalms 37:4 NIV

Yesterday, I talked about hiking with a hawk in Scotland. This hawk flew along above my wife and me and other tourists as we walked through the fields and, when called, he would fly to my arm to get a snack. I didn't know what all it entailed, but the idea of partnering with a wild hawk while it hunted seemed delightful to me.

When I got home, I found that only two active, licensed falconers lived within a 100 miles. After a little research, I found that I had a mutual friend with one of the falconers who also lives in Blacksburg. I had met him nine years previously when we were visiting churches the summer before we planted Ablaze; we had lunch together back then.

This falconer graciously let me go out with him two to three times a week for an hour or so to hunt with his Red-Tailed Hawk. As I ran through the woods, crashing through briars and brambles in search of game to scare up for the hawk to chase, I recollected hunting in my youth. I was 13 when that life ended, but now I felt like a young teen again. My body didn't always agree the next day, but my spirit was filled. Being in nature with this wild animal was delightful (no, these are not tame pets—they are wild animals that stay with you because you help them to hunt and you protect them at night when they are most vulnerable).

I found that I was delighting in my Sabbath and everything that surrounded the sport of falconry. But that was only the beginning. Tomorrow see how God was about to give me even more of the desires of my heart.

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Chronicles 15:1-16:36

Romans 1:18-32

Psalm 10:1-15

Proverbs 19:6-7

“Call the Sabbath a Delight” – 3

Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Psalms 37:4 NIV

Falconry, first experienced on an anniversary trip with my wife in Scotland, had become a part of my normal Sabbath in Virginia! I was out in nature with a wild animal chasing other wild animals, and my heart was filled with delight. Then God added the other object of my delight—people who need Him.

I had never considered how many people who don't yet know Jesus might also delight to be out in the woods helping a hawk do what God intended it to do. But God knew. The falconer and I started inviting other people to go out with us and spent time loving on them in that setting.

Then my first falconry meet occurred, and about 25 people from all over the state came together. By God's plan, at both dinners I sat by men who were going through rough patches in their relationships. I got to spend that time ministering to them and encouraging them to reconcile with their wives and fight for their families. Which they went home and did!!

The second meet was hosted right here in Blacksburg, and I was one of the “local guides.” I took one older gentleman out who asked, “What is a pastor?” So I got to share with him. And at dinner the first night, by total “chance,” I sat across from a couple who was obviously struggling. This is the story that the wife shared: “My daughter just told us last night that she doesn't love her husband anymore.” Having done some marriage counseling, I volunteered to meet with this couple if they wanted. But being a total stranger, I had no expectation they would respond to me.

When our hearts are fixed on God, delighting in His ways, He opens doors for us to be of use to others. God was about to use falconry for His glory. Tomorrow I will tell you how . . .

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Chronicles 16:37-18:17

Romans 2:1-24

Psalm 10:16-18

Proverbs 19:8-9

“Call the Sabbath a Delight” – 4

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

As I sought God for how to delight in an activity that would rest and refresh me on the Sabbath, I was introduced to the sport of falconry. Now the falconry that I was delighting in was rapidly merging with the desire of my heart to see people healed mentally and spiritually. The mother who I mentioned yesterday, who I met at a falconry meet over the weekend, had given me her son-in-law's number, so Monday afternoon at 4:03, I called to let him know I was willing to listen. I knew his wife was unhappy in their marriage.

Here is the story this man recounted to me: “I went to the old homestead and called every Christian marriage counselor in the area, and no one called me back (and they are so busy that they still haven't called him). So I got in my car to kill myself in a way that looked like an accident so the kids could get the insurance. I was one mile from the bluffs I was going to drive over when you called. Until that very moment I never believed there was a God.” The next day at lunch he gave his life to Christ and started a whole new life.

Do you ever get prompted to call or text someone? What keeps you from doing it? Too busy? In these trying times, be super-vigilant for those God is putting on your heart. You just don't know what good work prepared in advance for you to do you might miss, if you ignore that prompt.

Sometimes when we are looking to delight in the Lord, He places some pretty great desires in our heart. I now have a sponsor and a hawk house, so I can attempt to be a falconer myself in the fall. I can't wait to see how God will continue to use falconry for His glory.

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Chronicles 19:1-21:30

Romans 2:25-3:8

Psalm 11:1-7

Proverbs 19:10-12

Slow Obedience

But Lot said to them, “Oh no, [not that place] my lords!” Genesis 19:18 AMP

Every family has sayings that belong to their particular family, adages we live by or remind our children to live by. One of our sayings was “Slow obedience is no obedience.” This meant that after being asked to do something if there was any eye rolling, huffing, or negotiating, this was considered slow obedience and, thus, no obedience. Our expectation was a quick, cheerful, and complete response.

In Genesis 19 Lot is a great example of slow obedience. Before Sodom was to be destroyed, the angels told Lot and his family to get out of the city. When Lot hesitated, the angels physically pulled him out of the city and told him to run to the mountains where his family would be safe. Lot again hesitated, negotiating with the angels to run to the nearby small town of Zoar. But a few verses later we learn that Lot and his two daughters flee to the mountains because they are afraid of the people in Zoar.

We don't know what happened in Zoar, but, whatever it was, Lot was in fear for his life and the lives of his daughters. He suffered worse harm because he didn't obey quickly, completely, and cheerfully.

I say the same is true today. I bet we can all point to a time when we didn't obey God quickly and suffered more harm because of that. God's way is always the best way. May we trust Him with quick obedience rather than eye rolling or negotiating!

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Chronicles 22:1-23:32

Romans 3:9-31

Psalm 12:1-8

Proverbs 19:13-14

If You Want Your Trial to End

It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn Your statutes.

Psalm 119:71 NASB

Have you ever had to discipline a child? If so, you'll understand what I'm about to say. If not, listen up; you'll gain valuable wisdom that will come in handy someday.

A parent and a child often have different objectives when the child is being disciplined. The parent wants the child to learn something—to understand why he is being disciplined and to change his behavior or attitude. On the other hand, the child has a different objective: he just wants the discipline to end.

Thus you have a struggle of wills. Who will prevail: the parent of the child? Will the child actually learn what he is supposed to learn or will the parent grow weary of the struggle and let the child go without learning the proper lesson? But here's a really valuable secret for the child to understand: if he gets in agreement with his parent, accepts the discipline and humbly seeks to learn from it, the discipline usually ends much, much faster.

Do you see how this correlates with our relationship with our heavenly Father?

Here's the secret: when you are going through a trial or difficult time, check your heart to make sure you are not fighting against God. Instead, humble yourself in His presence and ask what He is wanting to teach you through this situation. Not all trials are God's discipline in our lives, but if your particular trial is discipline coming from God, the faster you learn your lesson the sooner it will come to an end. And even if it is not sent as a discipline, there's still a high likelihood God has something to teach you and you should be eager to learn what it is.

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Chronicles 24:1-26:11
 Romans 4:1-12
 Psalm 13:1-6
 Proverbs 19:15-16

Sunday, July 19

One Thing

Because you depended on the king of Syria and did not depend on the LORD your God, the army of the king of Aram has escaped your grasp You acted foolishly in this matter. So from now on you will have to fight wars." 2 Chronicles 16:7-9 GW

Ever wonder how people close to God end up not close to God? In King Asa's case, there was one thing that did him in. One thing.

He started out like us. The beginning of our God-journey is always exciting, and that zeal propels us to pray big things, see God move in our circumstances in big ways, and obey His commands enthusiastically. In 2 Chronicles 14 we see the new king of Judah getting rid of altars of foreign gods, telling the people of Judah to follow the LORD God, and doing what the Lord his God considered good and right. Later in the chapter we see an army twice as big and powerful attack Asa, and he prays a totally dependent-on-God prayer, and the Lord crushed his enemies Amazing, right?!

Eleven years later, Asa faced a similar circumstance. In 2 Chronicles 16 we see that Judah is invaded. But this time, instead of praying, Asa pays off another king to gain battle help. He traded God help for man help.

The prophet Hanani called Asa out. (See our opening verses.) Here comes the one thing: "Asa was furious at the seer. He was so angry with Hanani that he put Hanani in prison" (verse 10). Asa did not accept correction. We will all sin, veer off God's path, make stupid decisions. God has allowed trusted brothers and sisters to speak truth to us, so we can course-correct. Proverbs 3:11 reminds, "Do not reject the discipline of the LORD, my son, do not resent His warning." Asa resented the warning.

Three years after Hanani's warning, Asa contracted a foot disease. "Instead of asking the Lord for help, he went to doctors" (16:12 GW). He died two years later. Accept correction. Stay wise.

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Chronicles 28:1-29:30
 Romans 5:6-21
 Psalm 15:1-5
 Proverbs 19:18-19

If You Want Your Trial to End – 2

It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn Your statutes. Psalm 119:71

What does it look like to fight God? Defending yourself. Anger. Hardness of heart. Stubbornness. Complaining. Blaming. These are all attitudes that prevent you from learning and will just *make your trial last longer*.

What does it look like to be a humble learner? Years ago, when God was bringing me through some major, ongoing trials, *I got tired of fighting Him* and simply prayed, "Lord, I acknowledge that You are smarter than me, wiser than me, You know me better than I know myself, and You love me even more than I love myself. For that reason, from now on, if You and I disagree, I'll settle it right now: You're right, and I'm wrong."

That prayer, coming sincerely from my heart, was a major breakthrough in *humbling myself* and *submitting my will* to the Father. *Has your self-will been broken like this or do you still fight with God every time He tries to mold you as a potter molds the clay?*

Back to child discipline. There are few things more wonderful, freeing, and life-giving for a child than to have embraced his parent's discipline from his heart and to know he's forgiven and loved by his parent. It brings joy to the heart of the child—and to the heart of the parent. *It's the same with us. Accept God's discipline. Learn all He wants to teach you. Embrace it in your heart. Be filled with joy, and fill your Father's heart with joy as well.*

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One-Year Bible Reading

1 Chronicles 26:12-27:34
 Romans 4:13-5:5
 Psalm 14:1-7
 Proverbs 19:17

Monday, July 20

More or Less

There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her. Luke 10:42 NLT

In early January I was listening to a radio show about finding one word to serve as your theme for the year. As I considered this, a word popped into my head: *less*. You are probably thinking that I set the bar low on this one and that it doesn't sound too ambitious, but it is a word I think would take a great deal of self-discipline to live out. Before I elaborate on what *less* would look like in my life, I wanted to look at a great example of "more versus less" in the Bible found in the lives of Mary and Martha.

Martha was the poster child for living out more. She strikes me as someone like me who got great satisfaction from checking things off on her to-do list. She probably felt that a productive day was one where you crammed every moment with activity. The world is constantly pressuring us to be a Martha who strives for more—more commitments, more money, more recognition. But Jesus gently showed Mary that the better way was found in the example of her sister Mary.

As our opening verse tells us, Mary had made the better choice. She knew she couldn't do everything but would make time for what was most important. She wasn't anxious about the things left undone. *Less* activity brought her more peace. Fewer commitments gave her time for more depth in her relationships. *Less* noise brought more opportunities to hear Jesus.

I am excited to see how the concept of *less* will look in my life. I want to hurry *less* and worry *less*. *Less* pride, *less* indulging, *less* activity. This will hopefully make room for more of what God wants to do in my life. This morning before you head off for your day, take some time to pray about the word *less* to see if there might be a practical application for you.

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Chronicles 1:1-3:17
 Romans 6:1-23
 Psalm 16:1-11
 Proverbs 19:20-21

Rekindle God Today

Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth! Psalm 46:10 ESV

Ask yourself when was the last time you were still, sat in silence and were not in motion? And I don't mean asleep in bed.

You were quiet, contemplative, no phone in hand, no voices, no music - absolutely and completely found in the silence of stillness. So at rest you could feel your heart beat, so at rest you could feel your lungs exchanging air.

This is exactly what the psalmist is encouraging us with. Stop, be silent, listen—the voice of God is always speaking to our hearts telling us to rest, relax, and renew ourselves in Him. The world is fast-paced, and this fast pace can most easily drown out the voice of God.

He is in control, He is working in the midst of our trial, our trouble, He is sovereign over the earth, of kingdoms and nations and men. Nothing surprises Him, nothing catches Him off guard. He is not fooled—He is not asleep—He is here, now, in the midst of this world and this nation's peril. He even guides my hand as I pen this devotion. Oh, to be in the hands of such a Sovereign God!

Picture the world as a giant chessboard: with every move made by man, God moves to accomplish His will and His plan for your life. A good plan—a plan better than you and I can plan. I know, I've been living that plan for the past 40 years. And it's good!

Be still and know God. Or perhaps rediscover and rekindle God today in your life.

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Chronicles 4:1-6:11
 Romans 7:1-13
 Psalm 17:1-15
 Proverbs 19:22-23

Thursday, July 23

By the Breath of His Voice

*The voice of the Lord is powerful;
 the voice of the Lord is majestic.*

*The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
 the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.*

He makes Lebanon leap like a calf, Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord strikes with flashes of lightning. Psalm 29:4-7 NIV

David pens, with jubilation, both the power and authority of God's voice. How often have you beheld a strike of lightning and then moments later experienced the earth-shaking thunder that followed? This gives us a glimpse of the power and majesty of God's "voice."

It was David who further declared (Psalm 33:6) that God spoke the heavens into existence by the breath of His voice. Can you yet fathom the power of His voice?

I have daily meditated on this verse and thought often of the splendor and majesty of its significance: "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth." Can you and have you imagined what this might have looked like? God spoke the sun, the moon, and the stars into existence by His voice.

Now further imagine this voice—this same power, this same splendor, this same authority is found in your Bible with every word penned. Is it any wonder the writer of Hebrews wrote that the Word of the Lord is more "powerful" than a double-edged sword (4:12)?

I trust that you and I will never look at our Bibles the same when we understand the power of His "voice" is found in its pages. Let us open the Word of God today with the hope, with the anticipation, and with the expectation that God is going to do something powerful in our lives with His Word.

May it thunder and flash over your life today as you read its pages.

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Chronicles 8:11-10:19
 Romans 8:9-25
 Psalm 18:16-36
 Proverbs 19:26

Feast Daily

How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Psalm 119:103 NASB

Berk and I were invited to a very fancy wedding. The church was gorgeous with its stained glass windows and marble floors. A five-person orchestra provided the music. The bride looked stunning walking down the long aisle toward the tuxedoed groom. And the large wedding party all matched, with the bridesmaids in their flowing dresses and the grooms-men sporting coordinating cummerbunds.

After the ceremony we eagerly headed to the reception where we believed we would be treated to an extraordinary spread. We were not disappointed. The center table was laden with smoked salmon, peeled shrimp, and oysters on the half shell. Throughout the banquet hall were equal spreads of fancy food and drink.

But something caught our eye that we had never seen before. Standing right outside the banquet hall door stood one lone person who chose not to enter. Though he was an invited guest, he just stood at the entrance to the hall and ate dainty mints every so often. When we asked him why he didn't come in, his response saddened us. He didn't want to waste time loading up his plate with the delicacies offered. It was much easier for him to stand outside and sample mints.

Does this story sound crazy? Well, it's only half true. We did attend a fancy wedding and eat delicious food at the reception, but there was no one outside who didn't come in. However, the image of a lone person outside reminds me how some view God's Word. We have a banquet spread of God's Word that we can feast on every day, yet we often decide it's not worth the time to "eat;" we choose to only "snack on" a few verses here and there. God's words are, O, so tasty. May we feast daily.

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Chronicles 6:12-8:10
 Romans 7:14-8:8
 Psalm 18:1-15
 Proverbs 19:24-25

Friday, July 24

Memorizing

... in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Colossians 2:3

Spurgeon's devotional, *Morning and Evening*, says: "Although able to reveal fresh truth, He [Jesus] preferred to expound the old . . . He showed us that the surest road to wisdom is not speculation, reasoning, or reading human books, but meditation upon the Word of God. The readiest way to be spiritually rich in heavenly knowledge is to dig in this mine of diamonds, to gather pearls from this heavenly sea" (page 37).

Oswald Chambers said, "The Bible does not thrill, the Bible nourishes. Give time to the reading of the Bible and the recreating effect is as real as that of fresh air physically" (*Disciples Indeed* – 387R).

"Mine of diamonds," "pearls from this heavenly sea", "fresh air": these words express what God's Word is to me. Rend Collective's song, "Yah-weh," comes to mind. It starts with these words:

*You're my oxygen, my very breath
 And source of life, the source of rest
 Oh I need You*

*You're the wind that fills these fragile sails
 You carry me, through crashing waves*

I spent nine months last year memorizing, reading, and meditating upon Colossians. The thing I liked most about memorizing God's Word was falling in love with it. God's Word became my oxygen, my source of life. I spent time in God's Word not for what I could apply or use in my life, though that did happen, but for the joy of it. It was in God's Word that I found God, again and again. God's Word has been fused in me. Quoting Colossians has encouraged not only my heart but others as well. Memorizing and quoting God's Word has become my song of worship to God.

Have you memorized God's Word recently? Watch out: it's addicting.

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Chronicles 11:1-13:22
 Romans 8:26-39
 Psalm 18:37-50
 Proverbs 19:27-29

An Eternal Perspective

When the days were approaching for His ascension, He was determined to go to Jerusalem. Luke 9:51 NASB

Did you notice what this verse says was approaching? This is the portion in Luke 9 where Jesus sets His face to go to Jerusalem. And we all know what that meant: betrayal, arrest, a mockery of a trial, brutal flogging, crucifixion . . . That is why it was such a surprise to see the word "ascension." This was not describing the 40 days of His post-resurrection appearances.

So what this verse shows is how Jesus' focus was beyond the crucifixion—and even beyond the resurrection—all through His earthly ministry. He was driven by His upcoming ascension and the thought of once again being with His Father in heaven! In these coronavirus days, there is a lesson here for us as well.

We are instructed in Hebrews 12:2 to have a similar focus: "Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and **has sat down** at the right hand of the throne of God." Jesus, after going through unimaginable suffering, has sat down, having fulfilled His purpose. He did it by keeping His eyes fixed on His Father and the prospect of being reunited with Him in heaven. In like manner, we are to fix our eyes on Jesus. He is our perfect example and the Perfecter of our faith. When we do this, we can also endure as He did, and look forward to our certain eternal future with the Father!

What a challenge, and yet what an encouragement!

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Chronicles 14:1-16:14

Romans 9:1-24

Psalm 19:1-14

Proverbs 20:1

Short Prayers

Remember, me, O God, for good. Nehemiah 13:31 ESV

Today I read another of Nehemiah's very short prayers in his book. I like short prayers! The first I note is in chapter 2 when the king of Persia asks Nehemiah, "What are you requesting?" (verse 4). "So I prayed to the God of heaven," Nehemiah says. "And I said to the king . . . (verses 4-5). This prayer appears to have taken five to ten seconds. It was probably something like, "Here we go, God!"

But Nehemiah's very short prayer referred back to chapter 1 where Nehemiah "sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven" (1:4 ESV). Then Nehemiah prays a long confessional prayer for himself and his people, identifying their sin, but also reminding God of His promise to bring back repentant Israelites to their own land. Finally, he petitions God to give him success in an appeal to the Persian king! (I love the understatement in verse 11, the last short sentence in chapter 1: "Now I was cupbearer to the king.")

A period of prolonged prayer was the back-story to a prayer that took mere seconds.

A praying life is the background of other quick prayers of Nehemiah's: "Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people" (6:19). This is a good prayer for a father or mother of few *or* many children, or a pastor, or a ministry leader! And don't forget: "But now, O God, strengthen my hands" (6:9). Nehemiah asked for power not to be discouraged by enemies attempting to weaken him. So can we.

Nehemiah ends his book, not surprisingly, with a short prayer, referring all things, all efforts back to God: "Remember, me, O God, for good" (13:31 ESV). May his humble request for blessing be ours as well.

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Chronicles 17:1-18:34

Romans 9:25-10:13

Psalm 20:1-9

Proverbs 20:2-3

Monday, July 27

Rhemas

The Name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.

Proverbs 18:10 NKJV

God is good and faithful. Have you ever received a *rhema*—a promise—from God as you were reading your Bible? In times of trials, stress, and anxiety pray to your Heavenly Father and ask Him to give you a *rhema* or promise from His word that will settle your soul. Here is one such *rhema* God gave me years ago.

In 1981 I was attending Ohio State University and Jean and David (age one) were visiting family in North Dakota. David became deathly sick—he even stopped breathing, so that Jean had to revive him with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He promptly landed in the ICU, diagnosed with Reye's Syndrome. When I got the call, Jean told me he was not expected to live through the night.

Alone in our Columbus apartment, I got down on my knees and prayed that God would heal David. After some time, I opened my Bible and came to this passage: "The LORD will preserve him and keep him alive, and he will be blessed on the earth . . . The LORD will strengthen him on his bed of illness; You will sustain him on his sickbed" (Psalm 41:2-3).

It was like those words were in bold, underlined, and neon bright. God was giving me a *rhema*—a promise. I shared it with Jean, and we clung to it. The next day I flew to North Dakota. Six days later David was discharged, healed. The doctors said they'd never seen an infant boy come to the hospital in a condition like his and leave as David did. It was a miracle.

When you face trials and stresses beyond your strength, ask God for a *rhema*. Then read His Word and wait: you'll know when He gives you His promise! Tomorrow: another *rhema*.

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Chronicles 19:1-20:37

Romans 10:14-11:12

Psalm 21:1-13

Proverbs 20:4-6

Tuesday, July 28

Flood Refugees – 2

The Name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.

Proverbs 18:10 NKJV

God is good and faithful. A *rhema* is a promise He gives as you read His Word. Here is another one I received in 1997, after a "500-year event" made my family "flood refugees."

When the waters receded, our house was a mess. We knew it would take months to clean and repair and make it livable again. Jean and the kids—and I on weekends—were staying with her mom 120 miles away, but we all wanted to be under one roof in Grand Forks as the rebuilding progressed. However, housing was at a real shortage. What to do? We prayed that God would provide a place for us. Then we waited.

One evening during the week, while I was in Grand Forks, I pulled into a gas station and again desperately asked God to provide a place. At that moment I received this promise from Him: "In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence, and His children will have a place of refuge" (Proverbs 14:26).

The next Monday I was at my satellite clinic 60 miles from Grand Forks. A young family, originally from that area, but living in Grand Forks, came in. They planned to live out of a camper for the summer as the dad did custom combining—working his way up from Oklahoma to North Dakota by the end of the summer. So—they didn't need their condo and offered to rent it to us! This was God's promise come true for us! We rented the condo—the timing couldn't have been better—and moved back to our restored home in August, just as they were returning to North Dakota.

When God gives a *rhema*, it's almost like the verse lights up like a neon sign at night. Tomorrow, one more, but with a different perspective.

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Chronicles 21:1-23:21

Romans 11:13-36

Psalm 22:1-18

Proverbs 20:7

Like A Neon Sign at Night – 3

The Name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.
Proverbs 18:10 NKJV

God is good and faithful. For the previous devotionals, I shared how God gave me a *rhema* or promise when our firstborn, David, at age one was deathly sick (Psalm 41:2-3) and also when we needed housing after the flood of 1997 (Proverbs 14:26).

But not every situation has an immediate happy conclusion to it—or the result for which we have prayed. There have been many godly parents and grandparents who prayed for healing for one of their children or grandchildren and it didn't happen. There have been many people who prayed for specific jobs and didn't land them. What then?

God will still give a *rhema* for those situations. While He might not give a promise for healing or a desired outcome, He will, nonetheless, give a verse of comfort and eternal hope and perspective that will calm the soul.

Years ago I officiated at a funeral for a stillborn child. The verse that God gave me was Psalm 61:2: *"From the end of the earth I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the Rock that is higher than I."*

That verse was a help to me and became a help and comfort to the grieving parents as it pointed us to Jesus. It was a *rhema* during a tragic loss—just as much as Psalm 41 was a *rhema* that promised healing.

No matter what you are going through, God has a promise—a *rhema*—to which you can cling and which will strengthen your soul. Pray and ask God for His promise. The verse He gives will seemingly light up like a neon sign at night and be life-giving and life-sustaining—even though it may be in the midst of loss.

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Chronicles 24:1-25:28
Romans 12:1-21
Psalm 22:19-31
Proverbs 20:8-10

Friday, July 31

The Righteousness of God

Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God? John 11:40

I have struggled with believing, at times in my life, that God has mistreated me. At the core of that belief is a denial of God's righteousness. The result in my soul is a distrust of God and a loss of joy in God.

What I have learned is that I must humble myself by beginning my response to trials and pain with faith that God is righteous . . . that He is dealing with me according to who He has revealed Himself to be in the Scriptures and in His Son, Jesus. God has revealed Himself to be patient, forbearing, and kind (Romans 2:4), and so He is, even if my circumstances seem to deny it. God has revealed Himself to be utterly faithful to fulfill all His promises to His people (Joshua 23:14), and so He is, even if my circumstances seem to deny it for the moment. God has revealed Himself to be utterly faithful to His people (Hebrews 13:5-6), and so He is, even if my circumstances seem to deny it. God has revealed Himself to be so good, so powerful and so wise that He will always turn everything to good in the lives of His people (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28), and so He does, even if I cannot see that good in the moment. God has revealed that He perfectly loves and has totally forgiven all who turn from their sin to trust in Jesus and His death in our place for salvation from sin's penalty and dominion (Romans 5:1-11), and so He does, even if I do not feel that love and that forgiveness in the moment.

If we will humble ourselves and believe that God is righteous—true to all He has revealed about Himself and His work to save us through Jesus—then we will one day understand and see how all those revealed characteristics of God and all His promises were proving true in the midst of our pain (John 11:40). In that faith we can find joy and peace in God, even when our circumstances weigh heavily upon us (Romans 15:13).

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Chronicles 29:1-36
Romans 14:1-23
Psalm 24:1-10
Proverbs 20:1

Your Deliverer Draws Nigh

Yet he saved them for his name's sake, to make his mighty power known. He rebuked the Red Sea, and it dried up; he led them through the depths as through a desert. He saved them from the hand of the foe; from the hand of the enemy he redeemed them. The waters covered their adversaries; not one of them survived. Then they believed his promises and sang his praise. Psalm 106:8-12 NIV

The psalmist recalls the stunning deliverance of God's people as they fled the bondage of Pharaoh's wicked rule.

Do you think you have a trial or circumstance that God can't handle? Do you believe that God can't deliver you from the deadly peril, the piercing trial you face?

Then just remember you are His. Because you have been purchased with the precious blood of His Son, He cannot forsake you! It cannot happen! It will never happen!

You have been redeemed for His glory and purpose and that settles the issue. Now claim this promise and sing His praise!

Behold your Deliverer draws nigh, behold He rides on the clouds—your deliverance is upon you; now stand firm and let nothing shake you except the power of His presence!

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One-Year Bible Reading

2 Chronicles 26:1-28:27
Romans 13:1-14
Psalm 23:1-6
Proverbs 20:11