



Pure Growth

A Study of Spiritual Seasons



Susan W. Lawrence

About the Author:

Susan Lawrence is passionate about encouraging and equipping women. She has coordinated women’s ministries for many years and has worked as a consultant with several international women’s ministries and denominations, creating resources, providing training, and encouraging leaders. She’s thrilled when she gets to connect with and pour into women at conferences, retreats and other events.



When she’s not writing and speaking, Susan enjoys life in central Illinois, taking long walks on country roads and baking dozens of chocolate chip cookies and homemade breads. She and her husband have been married over twenty years and have raised two wonderful daughters.

Be sure to connect with Susan personally. She’d love to hear your story!



PurePurpose.org



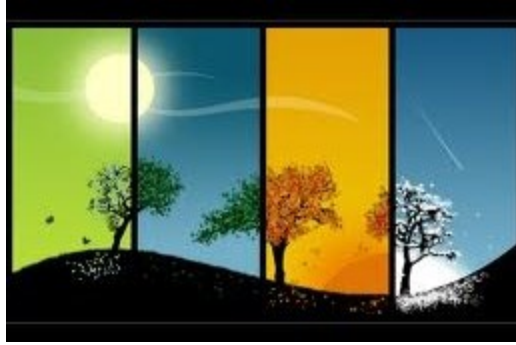
Facebook.com/PurePurpose



Twitter.com/susanhlawrence

©2012 Susan H. Lawrence

Scripture taken from the New Century Version. Copyright © 2005 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.



Week One: Every Season

There is a time for everything, and everything on earth has its special season. (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

God's Word declares every season is set apart. It is marked by particular events, challenges, necessities, lessons, and purpose. Every season combines with other seasons to complete a person's life and purpose on earth. Individual seasons cannot stand alone in isolation. Seasons are dependent on each other for context of meaning. Growth is only possible because of the combination of seasons.

We could identify broad terms in an effort to capture the essence of each season: spring=renewal, summer=beauty, fall=productivity, and winter=dreariness. Yet single words don't begin to portray the full scope of each season. Different parts of the world experience natural seasons in a variety of ways. Different people experience spiritual seasons in a variety of ways. How one person responds to a situation in a spiritual winter differs from another person's response to a similar situation. How one person celebrates during a spiritual summer differs from another's celebration. Productivity differs. Renewal differs. There's variation in spiritual seasons, yet there is also consistency.

- Seasons change, assuring us nothing is permanent.
- Seasons change without our control.
- Seasons require adaptation.
- Seasons don't always make sense.
- Seasons invite awe and appreciation.

How have you specifically experienced one or more of these facts of seasons?

God will use every spiritual season of your life. He wastes nothing. If it's in your life, it can and will be used by God.

- You can choose to appreciate the beauty of what God is placing in front of you – or not.
- You can choose to be thankful for what God is providing you – or not.
- You can choose to learn the lessons God teaches you – or not.
- You can choose to adapt to changes around you – or not.
- You can choose to trust God through challenges – or not.
- You can choose to seek God's perspective on each situation – or not.
- You can choose God – or not.

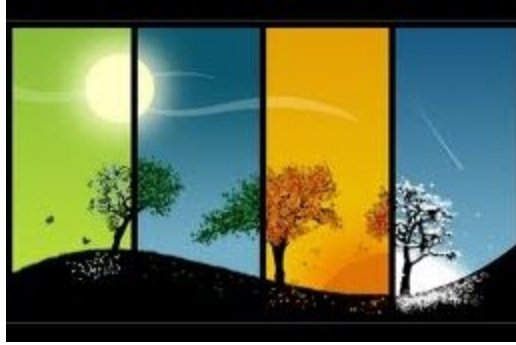
Every season is not enjoyable. Every season is not comfortable. Every season is not desirable. We want to avoid the uncomfortable and settle into seasons of comfort. We pull the covers over our heads and try to pass time as the challenges swirl around us, then tightly grab onto the celebrations, unwillingly to unclench our fists in hopes the moment will stay. We want to know what we can do to grow pleasant fruit in our lives as quickly as possible. We don't like the waiting process. We don't like not being able to see the connection between what we're doing today and what happens in our lives tomorrow. We want life to make sense, but we have limited information, understanding, and perspective.

God has every detail. He knows each growing season of every area of each life – yours, mine, and every single person he's ever created to live on earth. His purpose for us is driven with the passion of establishing an ever-deepening relationship with each and every individual. He uses what we experience as both good and bad to benefit us in a way that ultimately glorifies him. Each season places demands on us – expectations to rely on God, respond in obedience, and welcome results. We experience similarities across some seasons and situations, but others seem foreign to us. We get disoriented, discontent, and disappointed.

Every season requires sacrifice. In order to fully experience God's purpose, we must yield to him as the one who guides and provides. He should be the only one we trust, because he is the only one who has perfect perspective. We think we can handle our experiences – past, present, and future – but we are vastly limited. Every season holds blessings for us. In order to fully experience each blessing, we must choose to set aside what we think and want, inviting God to consume us.

You might have a favorite natural season, but you cannot live in it every day of your life. The same is truth for spiritual seasons. Regardless of where you'd prefer to be, you will not be there every moment of your life. You can choose to sit and pout about it, or you can use the time given to you, learning the lessons and growing the way God purposes so that every season that follows is nourished by the preceding seasons.

We're digging into a Bible study of spiritual seasons, so we can choose pure growth, the purpose God intends for us. We'll determine to embrace every time and every season, because we'll grow in seeing and living life by God's perspective. As we close the first day of study, let's get to know each other.



When Our Spiritual Seasons Don't Match Our Expectations

"I say this because I know what I am planning for you," says the Lord. "I have good plans for you, not plans to hurt you. I will give you hope and a good future. Then you will call my name. You will come to me and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will search for me. And when you search for me with all your heart, you will find me!"

Jeremiah 29:11-13

What's your immediate response when you read these verses?

I'm not asking you for the "Sunday School answer," the one you think you're supposed to give because it's what's expected. The one that "if my faith was as I wish it was, this is how I'd answer." The one that "so-and-so, that person who has immense faith I know," would answer. God knows your initial response. He knows your struggles. He wants you to be honest with him – and with yourself.

For many, these verses spur confusion, regret, fear, anger, frustration, because...

- How could God say he doesn't have plans to hurt me when I've been hurt?
- Is God not big enough handle the details of my life?
- Does God simply not care?
- Am I doing something wrong?
- Why do I struggle with knowing or understanding God's plan? It just doesn't make sense to me.

Life doesn't make sense, but it's not because God can't make sense of it. It makes perfect sense to him. He knows. He understands. We don't. We're limited in what we can know and understand. We make all sorts of assumptions about what's going on in our lives within our limited knowledge and understanding, and those assumptions lead to some of the above questions. We can

easily get stuck in the muck of limited perspective even though that's not God's intention at all. Our limited perspective is a blessing. We can't handle what he knows and understands. We weren't created to be little gods. We were created by THE God to be his creation. We're created in his image. We're not carbon copies.

Let's commit to setting aside our needs for more of what we want and letting God consume us with what he wants and what he knows we need through each season of our lives. Life changes just as the seasons change. We can be warmed by the sun one day and bone-chilling cold the next. We gather beautiful bouquets of colorful flowers one day and dig into frozen ground to find any remnant of a sign of life the next. It's not just about what's going on around us; seasons occur deep within us. Our lives are marked with spiritual seasons – and they aren't as predictable as the beginning of seasons on the calendar. A season can be short or long, expected or unpredictable, welcomed or ignored. We won't understand or appreciate every spiritual season of our lives. We likely won't even acknowledge some, while we try to bask too long in others.

What you're currently experiencing as winter might be a spiritual spring to which you simply haven't been awakened yet. The chill you feel in the air in the middle of what you believe to be summer might be an early onset of spiritual fall. God – and your spiritual growth – isn't ruled by a calendar. You have your own calendar with God. Your calendar is unique and cannot be compared to any other. Jeremiah 29 includes no words that indicate if *you* plan and do well enough, you will prosper. Prospering in God is drastically different than prospering by the world's standards. You will prosper through *his* plan. Because he created you and knows you more intimately than you know yourself, he knows where to guide you and how to use your experiences of living in this imperfect world. You can trust him for his perfect plan or try it on your own. I've tried it both ways, and as difficult as it is to yield myself to him and give up my own needs and wants, the bottom line is that God takes care of my needs and wants much more completely when I yield them to melt into his.

So how can you not only live with but thrive in the promises of Jeremiah 29:11-13? We'll dig into these verses in more depth in tomorrow's post, but for now, let's consider and share:

What's a word or phrase that best describes what you believe your needs to be in this spiritual season of your life?



As The World Turns...God Thinks

“I say this because I know what I am planning for you,” says the Lord. “I have good plans for you, not plans to hurt you. I will give you hope and a good future. Then you will call my name. You will come to me and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will search for me. And when you search for me with all your heart, you will find me!

Jeremiah 29:11-13

Let’s look at these same verses in several translations.

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. (King James Version)

This is God’s Word on the subject: “I know what I’m doing. I have it all planned out—plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for. When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I’ll listen. When you come looking for me, you’ll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I’ll make sure you won’t be disappointed.” (The Message)

For I know the thoughts and plans that I have for you, says the Lord, thoughts and plans for welfare and peace and not for evil, to give you hope in your final outcome. Then you will call upon Me, and you will come and pray to Me, and I will hear and heed you. Then you will seek Me, inquire for, and require Me [as a vital necessity] and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. (Amplified Bible)

I love digging into God’s Word, discovering the meaning, frequency, and context of words. One of my favorite tools to use is the *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible*, which gives original Hebrew and Greek words and their meanings. However, you can dig into the meaning of words for yourself

by comparing words choices across translations. Biblegateway.com allows you to choose several different translations to view a verse on the same screen.

What stands out to you as you compare these verses?

The King James version uses the word “thought” in place of “plan.” *Thought* can also mean purpose or intention. God plans for us. And he thinks about us. Isn’t that comforting to know? God didn’t simply create you and leave you to fend for yourself. He’s invested in you on an ongoing basis. He knows you, thinks about you, and plans for you. Constantly. Can you say that about anyone else in your life?

God is dependable. Look through the verses again.

What do you see that speaks to the dependability of God?

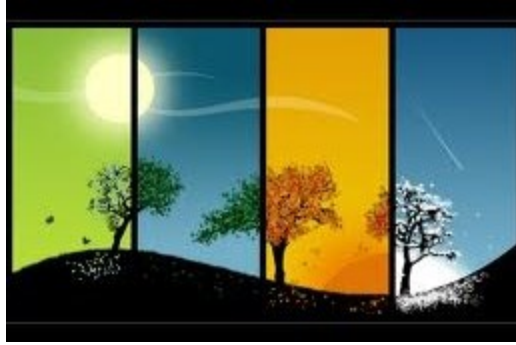
I think there are times when we don’t want to depend on God. There are times throughout our spiritual seasons of life that we (1) don’t want to give up what we have to yield ourselves and our lives fully to him, (2) don’t think he can handle our lives as well as we can, (3) don’t believe that he cares enough...and the list of excuses goes on. The truth is God is dependable. If we don’t depend on him, it’s not his fault. He’s waiting. It’s our choice whether or not to respond.

What does God say about timing in these verses? What do words such as *then* and *when* promise?

We’re involved in God’s plan. We don’t change God by what we do. His character and existence isn’t dependent on how we respond through spiritual seasons. However, we’re not puppets or pawns either. He wants our involvement, and he gives us *if*, *then*, and *when* to indicate promises, consequences, and possibilities.

I love the verb tenses in these verses. Take a look. You might need a grammar refresher lesson, but to keep it’s simple, let’s just say these verses are future tense. Your present season might not seem so great, but there’s hope for the future! God has the biggest, longest, and most grand view of the future possible.

What does God’s plan for the future hold for you? You likely don’t know the specifics, but you can be certain it’s great, whether here on earth or in eternity. Settle into where you are this very moment and savor what God intends for you to experience. By living in your current spiritual season, you’re growing toward the future God has planned specifically for you.



Sunrise, Sunset

Evening passed, and morning came. This was the third day.

Then God said, "Let there be lights in the sky to separate day from night. These lights will be used for signs, seasons, days, and years. They will be in the sky to give light to the earth." And it happened. Genesis 1:13-15

Life is full of transitions. I've watched many sunrises and sunsets, marveling at their beauty and majesty. I would miss it all if the transition between night and day was simply a flip of a switch, similar to what I experience when I walk in or out of a room in my house and turn a light on or off. I would miss vibrant colors that cannot be seen any other time of the day except during the transitions of sunrises and sunsets. I'd miss the anticipation of a new day as I begin in the dark but see a hint of light in the eastern sky. I'd miss the reminder of the pending darkness near the end of the day, when I know I must finish an outside task before I need a flashlight.

Despite being a morning person, I remember some mornings I wasn't excited to see the sun rise. I also remember many days I didn't want the sun to set. The transition period was almost painful, because I wasn't particularly thrilled with what was coming next. Perhaps it would have been easier to have the lights come on or off all at once. No, I don't think so. Temporary blindness doesn't sound appealing either. The transition between light and dark allows for adjustment.

Transition also invites choice:

- To be sad something is passing.
- To be anticipatory something is coming.
- To celebrate the completion of progress of something.
- To dread something is coming.

God created seasons, and each season has benefits. Each season involves potential for growth. Each season also includes potential for decline and decay – which can eventually be used for growth.

When have you experienced a death or loss that you later saw an area of growth spring forth?

How can a loss of innocence lead to growth?

Loss of a favorite hobby?

Loss of a relationship?

Loss of material possessions?

Loss of pride?

Loss of satisfaction?

Loss of doubt?

Loss of fear?

Loss of faith?

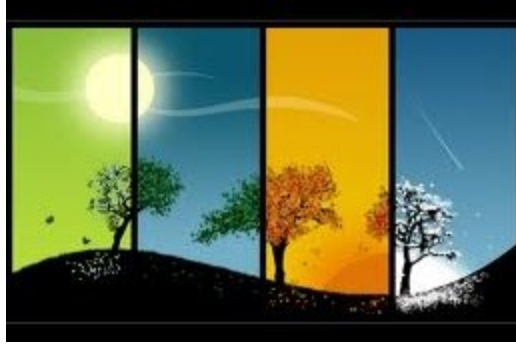
Loss of control?

Growing up on a farm, I had many pets. I experienced loss numerous times. Sometimes the deaths were sudden. Some were expected. Several were tragic and traumatic. I felt each one with a sharpness, a cold sting of reality. As I've experienced other losses throughout my life, the pain is still present and often raw, but I look back on my experiences of life and death on the family farm, and I know they prepared me in some ways to deal with the inevitability of death. Some of the deaths of people in my life have been sudden, some expected, some tragic and traumatic. My earlier experiences on the farm paved the way for an appreciation for life. I rarely take life for granted. I know people can fight long battles of excruciating cancer or lose life in an instant because of a drunk driver. I also know death is yet another sunset, yielding another season that will last for eternity. In fact, life here on earth, comprised of many spiritual seasons of life, is really just one season in preparation for another.

As we work through the spiritual seasons of our lives, may we always widen our vision to take in as much of God's perspective as we can. That's why we study God's Word. That's why we

seek his will. That's why we yield in obedience. God understands the sunrises and sunsets of our lives. Even in the midst of our experiences and our longings to understand, our comprehension will be limited. When we strive to understand our seasons outside of the context of God's plan, we try to put together pieces of puzzle with no box as a reference point. Putting together the puzzle is difficult anyway, but without studying and regularly glimpsing at what the big picture is, we will be less effective and more distracted.

As challenging as it is, let's savor what God has for us.



Does Your Life Have Good Lighting?

Evening passed, and morning came. This was the third day.

Then God said, "Let there be lights in the sky to separate day from night. These lights will be used for signs, seasons, days, and years. They will be in the sky to give light to the earth." And it happened. Genesis 1:13-15

While we each experience seasons differently because of where we live, consider the four seasons of the year. What's your favorite and why?

According to Genesis, seasons are inextricably linked with the lights that separate the night from the day. Isn't that what often seems to separate our spiritual seasons as well? Consider it from an experiential perspective. Winter is seen as the most depressing and depraved season. There's a lack of direct sunlight as well as less sunlit hours through the day. Our spiritual winters feel dark. The clouds seem oppressive. The damp cold chills us. We long for direct sunlight to part the skies and shine directly on us for warmth and refreshment. Knowing the depressing effects of shortened days and lengthened darkness through the winter months, some people opt for light therapy or strategic vacations to help them sustain a balance of mental and emotional health.

On the other hand, summer's extended daylight hours and direct sunshine invite us into increased energy and opportunities to stay active through outside work and play. Bleakness is shoved aside by illumination. Chill is blown away by breezes warmed by sunlight. We fully experience life, taking our hats off to feel the sun's warmth and digging our bare toes into soft grass and sparkling sand.

We'll dig more into the specifics of winter and summer as we continue our *Pure Growth* study series, but consider for a moment the importance of balancing the extremes of our experiences of spiritual seasons.

How would you experience a spiritual winter without the experience of the summer or a spiritual summer without the context of the winter?

Just as we long for light through the natural season of winter, we also long for light during the spiritual winters of our lives. We don't have to trust artificial lights for our strength. We can seek God's light in the middle of our consuming darkness. We can seek God's light in our slightly damp and overcast moments. We can seek God's light anytime. When our lives are well lit and things are going well, we often won't intentionally seek God's light. We can become accustomed to finding our way on our own or along the same paths God has previously guided us. We can become lackadaisical and unappreciative of the warmth and brightness of God's light. When our lives aren't well lit, we can curl under the comfort of a cozy blanket and feed ourselves comfort food, allowing the time to slip away. As we settle into comfort, we let our spiritual – and physical – fitness slip away. We forget or ignore we have a choice to find light in the darkness. Light is available.

How do the following verses speak to you?

God's lamp shined on my head, and I walked through darkness by his light. Job 29:3

Lord, you give light to my lamp. My God brightens the darkness around me. Psalm 18:28

The Lord is my light and the one who saves me. So why should I fear anyone? The Lord protects my life. So why should I be afraid? Psalm 27:1

The sun will no longer be your light during the day nor will the brightness from the moon be your light, because the Lord will be your light forever, and your God will be your glory. Isaiah 60:19

Here is the message we have heard from Christ and now announce to you: God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. So if we say we have fellowship with God, but we continue living in darkness, we are liars and do not follow the truth. But if we live in the light, as God is in the light, we can share fellowship with each other. Then the blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses us from every sin. 1 John 1:5-7

Let's take a look at several of the first mentions of light in Scripture.

Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, so he divided the light from the darkness. God named the light "day" and the darkness "night." Evening passed, and morning came. This was the first day. Then God said, "Let there be lights in the sky to separate day from night. These lights will be used for signs, seasons, days, and years. They will be in the sky to give light to the earth. And it happened. So God made the two large lights. He made the brighter light to rule the day and made the smaller light to rule the night. He

also made the stars. God put all these in the sky to shine on the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. God saw that all these things were good. Genesis 1:3-5, 14-18

The light was called day. All night was dark until God gave it its own light: the moon. The truth is the moon is not a light source on its own. I was reminded of the intricacies of God's lighting system on an early morning drive.

While the sun rises and sets every day, I take it for granted. I've seen breathtaking sunrises and sunsets, and I imagine you have, too. It's easy to say "yeah, another beautiful sunrise...breathtaking in the moment, but soon forgotten."

Not this one. I hope to never forget this sunrise – just like I hope to never forget the sunset I witnessed on a flight from the West Coast several years ago. They share something – a stunning, stark transition from dark to light, or light to dark.

When you think of transitions in your life from dark to light, or light to dark, what comes to mind? I'm not referring to literal sunrises and sunsets. What about the figurative sunrises and sunsets, when you've experienced an overwhelming oppression of darkness or an intense illumination with light?

Continue to let God remind you of the spiritual sunrises and sunsets of your life throughout the day. I'll share more of my experience tomorrow.



Life Changes in the Blink of an Eye

Evening passed, and morning came. This was the third day.

Then God said, "Let there be lights in the sky to separate day from night. These lights will be used for signs, seasons, days, and years. They will be in the sky to give light to the earth." And it happened. Genesis 1:13-15

I have felt swallowed by darkness, and I have felt exposed and warmed by light. The morning I witnessed a brilliant sunrise, I remembered both. I began an early morning drive and watched the radiant moon, nearly full, contrasted against the darkness. There was no hint of daylight...except the reflected light of the moon. Of course, the moon by itself is dark. I looked at the darkness around the moon and the darkness around me. It was a stark contrast to the brightly glowing moon. As I turned and began to travel southward, I could see to the east no hint of light. I looked to the west and marveled at the moon, which would have been swallowed in the darkness like everything else around me except that the sun was somewhere, out of my sight, sharing its powerful light. The moon itself? No light. There has to be a source of light. And the moon has to be positioned to reflect it.

What is your source of light? Are you positioned to reflect it?

I thought of the brilliance of the nearly full moon. It wouldn't have radiated as much light if it wasn't as full as it was. The moon itself doesn't grow and diminish in size. It's the same dark mass all the time, but there are cycles of reflecting more or less light because of its position and the position of "obstacles" blocking the light source.

I can become disheartened when I'm less illuminating than I want to be. I feel less significant. I question my worth. Sometimes it has to do with my own position, and sometimes it has

to do with various situations around me. But the source of my light doesn't change, and the basis of who I am doesn't change.

How have you experienced cycles of illumination in your life?

I saw a hint of light on the horizon. The sun wasn't visible, but evidence of it was. In fact, evidence of the sun had already been visible because of its reflection of light on the moon. As I looked at the thin but vibrant line of light, I was captured by its appearance of warmth. I couldn't feel its warmth. I was inside the car – plus, it was a cold morning. But seeing the light was warming. There was something about this sunrise, looking at the moon on my right and the emerging sun on my left. I kept looking back and forth. But as with any sunrise, change can happen in the blink of an eye.

When have you looked away from something for what seemed like a brief moment and looked back to find significant change? When has life changed in the blink of an eye?

As I glanced again, I still couldn't see the sun, but I saw splashes of color bleeding upward. It was similar to a sunset, but it wasn't splattered across the sky or horizon – and I saw something I hadn't seen before. There was a bold beam of light, reaching from beyond my perspective of the ground high into the sky. It widened as it shot upward, just as a sunbeam widens as it reaches the ground through a break in the clouds.

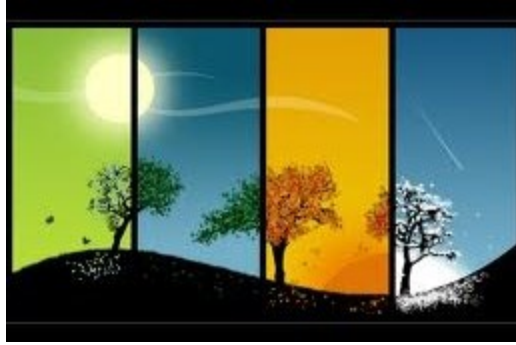
It was brilliant.

The emerging sunrise on my left. The vibrant moon on my right. Light and dark – but all connected to the light. I was right in the middle. As I drove, my view changed with each passing mile.

My view changes on a daily basis. With new experiences, struggles, and relationships come new perspectives. I move through cycles of light and darkness, but the source of my light remains the same, regardless of my experience of it. There is hope and brilliance in everything – even the darkest dark – because God is the source of all life and light.

Regardless of your perspective, God is still God. He is present. He is loving. He is truth.

Look around you and experience the full presence of God.



Week Two: The Tithe of Your Life

No one is to come before me without a gift. You must work for six days, but on the seventh day you must rest—even during the planting season and the harvest season. Celebrate the Feast of Weeks when you gather the first grain of the wheat harvest. And celebrate the Feast of Shelters in the fall. Exodus 34:20-22

What stands out to you about these verses from Exodus?

It's difficult to take a few verses out of this Old Testament book without distorting the lessons within the context of its culture or assuming application for us today. Yet I'm confident we can do it! Let's begin by considering gifts and how we tithe what God has given us.

We often think of the gifts as those God has given us. Those are important, but they're not the gifts referred to in Exodus 34, at least not in a direct sense. In reality, however, any gift we give God is merely a re-gifting of something he has given us. He provides, we receive, and we steward what he's given us by using what we have wisely, sharing with others, and giving a portion back to him. It's not that God needs the actual gift, but he wants our hearts. He wants our willingness to sacrifice our pride, materialism, and neediness. He desires we set ourselves and our priorities aside to yield to him and his priorities.

We often think of this "giving back" as our tithe. And we consider tithe as giving 10% of our income to the local church or other charitable organizations. Let's take a deeper look at this presumption.

Throughout the first mentions of tithing in the Old Testament, income in the form of money is rarely mentioned. The Hebrew people worked and lived off the land, so the fruits of the land and the land itself was tithed. The Hebrew meaning of the word "tithe" meant the destruction of something, which meant clearing a portion of the land of crops. Because "income" included the land itself, and a portion of the land couldn't be dug up and somehow given to God, it was

sacrificed by making sure it could not be used for material gain. By faithfully sacrificing something that could otherwise provide for themselves and their families, Hebrews who tithed placed their trust in God through the very act of tithing.

You might find it difficult to write a check for 10% of your income with each paycheck and place it in the offering plate as it passes you each weekend, but ask yourself a few tough questions in the context of what God might be teaching us through the Hebrews.

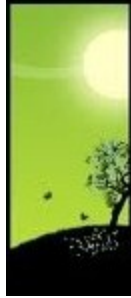
Do you tithe on your net or gross pay? What is your reasoning and do you believe God agrees?

How can you tithe (sacrificially give back to God) your home and property?

Walk around your house. How can you tithe your electronics, food, home décor and other items?

Listen to yourself as you rationalize through the whys and hows of tithing. Are you consistent with God's guidelines and plans?

Also, as we settle into the belief that tithing is “giving back” and requires a specific percentage, we can consequently set aside the act of obedience. We can settle into the act of dividing by ten and writing a check and forget the root or result of the sacrifice. In fact, tithing can develop into something that lacks resemblance of sacrifice, which makes it no longer tithing in the biblical sense. God provides guidelines for us, but the guidelines are intended to draw us into relationship with him. When the guidelines get in the way of relationship, we need to be convicted, challenged, and often admonished. God wants us to seek him. He wants us to trust him. He wants us to listen and be obedient. And he gives us choices every step of the way.



A Time for More

If you carefully obey the commands I am giving you today and love the Lord your God and serve him with your whole being, then he will send rain on your land at the right time, in the fall and spring, and you will be able to gather your grain, new wine, and oil. He will put grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will have plenty to eat.

Deuteronomy 11:13-15

What do you love most about spring?

Living in a region marked by very different seasons, spring is a welcome relief from winter. The sun feels a bit warmer. Color returns to the earth. Birds and other animals begin moving about and singing.

I grew up on a farm, and spring was anxiously anticipated. The ground was turned over and small seeds were placed within the dirt in plans for a later harvest that would provide income for our family. Baby animals were born, growing and renewing the population. Spring gave the opportunity to get many outside jobs done that couldn't have been done earlier. As a young girl, being outside more didn't have quite as much to do with work as play. I loved exploring, and spring ushered in the invitation to find new adventures. I could make up a story just about anywhere I was, transforming an area of woods into an imaginary world or pretending a stroll up and down hills and around a pond was an around-the-world trek. Spring gave the promise of something more: more time outside, more income, more animals, more options, more color, more warmth. Spring promised provision.

Of course, what we expected in spring was not always exactly what we received. But my dad had been farming for years, and he knew what needed to get done. He was faithful and hard-working. He did his part. He had an important part in preparing for results of farming, but he was never in complete control of the results.

We have an important part in our relationship with God. We obey, love, and serve.

How are you currently obeying God?

Obeying God isn't as simple as responding as a dog does to his owner. Obeying God is doing God's will in God's way to God's glory. All three braid together to create a strong cord of faith and commitment to God. For example, we can do God's will but not in God's way. We can become caught up in the legalism of technically not doing what God's Word says not to do or doing what it says to do but failing to trust God's timing. We can do things on our own instead of in community. We can treat God's will as a checklist, satisfied to place checkmarks in boxes. God wants more from and for us.

We can also do God's will in the way he desires but stop short of glorifying him. When we experience the benefits of obedience, and a situation turns out well, we can stop short of glorifying him, taking credit for ourselves even though we relied on God through the process. We can even become proud in our faithfulness. Glorifying God comes with much more authentic accolades than we could ever give ourselves. Our cheers are empty unless they are filled with praise for God.

We can do things to God's glory and in the way he prescribes without it being his will. We have to trust him in directing us how and when we're to respond. We can expend a lot of effort doing very good things and be outside God's will. We can see someone doing something worthwhile and emulate, but if it isn't how God wants us to spend our time, energy, and resources, it's not what we should be doing. We can do things in God's name without checking with him first, assuming "Surely, he'd approve, because I'm being so helpful and giving." Good isn't good enough. God wants our best, and the only way we can truly glorify God is establishing and maintaining a close relationship with him so that we respond in obedience in his will, way, and glory.

How are you currently loving God?

You might want to consider another related question: What or who are you putting first in your life. In Matthew 22:37-39, *Jesus answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind." This is the first and most important command. And the second command is like the first: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."*

The Greek word for love here is *agapao* which means to totally give yourself to something, being totally consumed with and committed to it. Whatever you put first in your life is what you *agapao*. It can be something good or something bad. It can be someone on earth or God.

So, are you loving God in the way intended by Jesus' words in Matthew 22?

God wants more of you.

One more: How are you currently serving God?

Perhaps you should also establish how you define serving God. Is serving God as simple as attending a weekly service or reading a morning devotional? Is it being involved in one or more ministry teams or service projects? Is it giving a tenth of your income? Is it being available to give whatever God requires in whatever timing and situation even if it doesn't make perfect sense to you – simply because he says so? Being aware of your personal definition of service will help you understand your answer of how you're currently serving God. However, your personal definition of service might not be biblical. You might be justifying what is most comfortable to you.

While it might seem like an obvious statement: Serving God is more about God and less about us. We try to define God's service on our own, and we try to do God's service on our own. Neither is possible. Serving God must involve receiving from God, because he is the source of all service. He is the source of all that is good.

Anyone who speaks should speak words from God. Anyone who serves should serve with the strength God gives so that in everything God will be praised through Jesus Christ. Power and glory belong to him forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:11)

God wants more for you. He's given you the promise of something more. Are you fully enjoying the spring of faith?



Extreme Heat

When I kept things to myself, I felt weak deep inside me. I moaned all day long. Day and night you punished me. My strength was gone as in the summer heat. Then I confessed my sins to you and didn't hide my guilt. I said, "I will confess my sins to the Lord," and you forgave my guilt. Psalm 32:3-5

Summer has so many benefits. There seems to be more opportunity to spend time outside with family and friends. We make special memories throughout the summer. We take advantage of many opportunities. But summer has some challenges as well. Heat can be oppressive. As I write this, much of the country is under an excessive heat advisory. Wildfires are raging in Colorado and other western states, and there are fire condition warnings throughout the Midwest. I'm sitting outside in the shade in the morning hours, but before long, I'll retreat inside for the bulk of the day. There are many people who won't have the option of retreating inside. Construction workers, firefighters, and others will do what they can to endure the heat. They'll drink lots of water, wear protective clothes, and listen to their bodies to avoid overheating.

Getting overheated is an awful feeling. In extreme situations, people die from heat exhaustion. Many more people experience symptoms such as dizziness, fatigue, nausea, rapid heart rate, and headaches. They become overwhelmed by heat.

Read through the above verses in Psalm 32 and consider the symptoms similar to heat exhaustion.

Even under what we believe to be good conditions as we enjoy summer weather and opportunities, there are dangers. And even under what we believe are good conditions in our lives, we are susceptible to sin. Dealing with sin can become like pushing through a hot summer day with no relief. We imagine we can push a bit further without water, walk a bit further without a break, or stay on the beach a bit longer without sunscreen.

Many years ago, my husband and I took our young girls to the beach. I had fairly strict rules about beach time. We'd go out in the morning with sunscreen applied. We retreated to our room for lunch, games and rest time through the heat of the day, usually between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Then we'd slather the sunscreen on again and return to the beach for several hours. It was enough for the girls. It was enough for me. But Tim wanted more. He wasn't getting much of a tan, with which he wanted to return from vacation. He decided to take his own approach one day. He didn't go out with us in the morning. He waited until we came inside for our midday break, then he ventured out with the lightest spf sunscreen we brought with us. He stayed outside until mid-afternoon, and it wasn't long before he became Lobster Boy. He felt sick and had chills. The only place he could get any comfort at all that night was sitting still on the couch. He was in agony. The lesson he learned lasted many years.

We think we can handle more exposure than we were ever expected to have. If we're enjoying a good thing, we think we can have more of it. We think we can let our guard down. This phenomena happens even in the most unexpected places. Perhaps you regularly attend worship services. You get in the habit of a weekly service, and you're consistent. Being consistent in worship is a good thing, right? But what happens when you start to take for granted that you have a safe place where you feel you belong? Do you begin to accept everything taught without filtering it through God's Word? Are you shocked when newcomers don't know the unwritten rules of where to sit and how to speak and behave? Do you find yourself nitpicking the smallest details of ministries, programs, and people? In the middle of a well-lit situation, you can forget to put on the protection, the armor of God, and slip into situations in which you're no longer basking in the benefits of the light. You're taking matters into your own hands, and the results will likely not be pretty. The same can happen in areas such as Bible study, prayer, and fellowship.

What are the dangers of becoming too comfortable in disciplines intended to draw you closer to God?

Summer is a fantastic spiritual season. You're growing. Life is filled with color. Beautiful sounds and scents surround you. But it's not a season of all fun and games. You still need to be on guard. You need to know the dangers around you. There's danger in overexposure. There are insects carrying toxins. There are dangers in the activities you can enjoy only during the summer season. Even in the flourishing spiritual summer seasons, you must be attentive to God's leading. He wants you to grow, but he wants you to do so in his timing and protection so that you can fully experience

what he has planned for you, and in the process, your life will be what others around you need to see and experience.



Inked on the Calendar

You must celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the way I commanded you. For seven days you must eat bread that is made without yeast at the set time during the month of Abib, the month when you came out of Egypt. No one is to come to worship me without bringing an offering. “You must celebrate the Feast of Weeks. Offer to God the first things you harvest from the crops you planted in your fields. You must celebrate the Feast of Shelters in the fall, when you gather all the crops from your fields. So three times during every year all your males must come to worship the Lord God.” Exodus 23:15-17

Sometimes we seem to float in and out of seasons, and other times there’s a marked time for something specific within a season. Let’s take a look at the feasts referred to in Exodus 23.

The Feast of the Unleavened Bread marks God’s deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt and set them apart as God’s holy people. It is a seven day feast that falls somewhere in the months of March/April, and it begins immediately following Passover. In addition to daily offerings, eating anything with yeast is forbidden. (Yeast symbolizes sin.)

The Feast of Weeks occurs in May or June and is 50 days following the Feast of Firstfruits (which falls on the day after the first Sabbath following Passover, so you can see how it relates to the Feast of the Unleavened Bread). It marks the giving of the law, or Mosaic covenant, 50 days after crossing the Red Sea. God is thanked for his blessings by the giving of firstfruits of the wheat harvest.

The Feast of Shelters is an eight-day feast in September or October, marking God’s provision of the tabernacle as well as provision through the land. Families build a temporary tent to live in during the feast and celebrate the harvest of fruits such as grapes and olives, which typically coincides with the Feast of Shelters.

Two of these feasts are clearly related to New Testament events and continued celebrations among Christians. The Feast of Unleavened is related to the Last Supper and Jesus' crucifixion, and the Feast of Weeks is related to Pentecost.

Each of these feasts has a designated time, and each requires specific response.

What are nonnegotiable events on your calendar around the year?

Think beyond church-related commitments. What is inked into your calendar versus penciled into your calendar?

God wants us to be flexible, sensitive to his leading. He doesn't want us to get so regimented that our schedules run our lives. He also doesn't want us personally running our calendars. He wants to keep our calendars in his care.

I was a paper-based calendar girl for a long time. It made me a bit nervous to keep it all on my phone (which was actually a bit funny, because I generally like to try new things). I was also a pencil girl. I wanted everything written in pencil in case I needed to make adjustments. I used the phrase "I'll ink you in" when I was committing to something with no question of backing out, but I didn't actually ink anything into my book. I finally realized how ridiculous it was that I was carrying around a book at all times – even if it was small – when I could still "pencil" things into my phone (it's called editing), and even if I lost my phone, I'd have my calendar, because I keep it synced.

When I look at my calendar online, I often notice the "share" option. I can share my calendar with others and assign rights, such as "view only," "limited edit," or "administrative," which means the person with this permission can do anything with my calendar that I can do.

I want God to have administrative rights to my calendar. In fact, it would be better if he had all administrative rights, and I had limited editing rights so that I couldn't delete some of the things he wants me to do that I would really prefer to avoid!

When we trust God with appointed times, we're trusting him to create rich seasons in our lives. He knows the best time for each relationship, conflict, struggle, and celebration. He knows when we need a little more and when we need a little less. He knows where we're going to flounder and flail, and he knows when we're going to feel as if we're in a sweet spot. He knows the impact each person in our life is going to have on us and the impact we have on others.

We struggle through our appointments, because we try to define them according to how we experience them. We only know the limited context, so the decisions we make in our own strength and insight don't take into account the complete overview of our life. Only God has that perspective.

What has God inked on your calendar lately, and how did you respond?

What does God have inked on your calendar for the immediate future?

You might not know for sure, but you can be sensitive to his plans. Most important, you can set your own priorities aside – unless your priority is to give and trust God with administrative rights to your calendar.



Rest Assured

Then God said to Noah, “You and your wife, your sons, and their wives should go out of the boat. Bring every animal out of the boat with you—the birds, animals, and everything that crawls on the earth. Let them have many young ones so that they might grow in number.”

So Noah went out with his sons, his wife, and his sons’ wives. Every animal, everything that crawls on the earth, and every bird went out of the boat by families. Then Noah built an altar to the Lord. He took some of all the clean birds and animals, and he burned them on the altar as offerings to God. The Lord was pleased with these sacrifices and said to himself, “I will never again curse the ground because of human beings. Their thoughts are evil even when they are young, but I will never again destroy every living thing on the earth as I did this time. As long as the earth continues, planting and harvest, cold and hot, summer and winter, day and night will not stop.” Genesis 8:15-22

We can be certain about uncertainty. Noah didn’t know the details of what would happen when God told him to build an ark. He simply knew he needed to respond to what God was telling him at the time. Our lives are the same. God might tell us to step in a certain direction, pursue a particular opportunity, or sacrificially serve. We can be certain we need to step out in obedience. We can be certain God will continue to guide and provide. We can also be certain we will not be aware of every detail of the process. We can be certain God has a better perspective than we do, works through the details, and can be trusted. We can know God’s promises, but we likely won’t know the details of the fulfillment of the promises.

Because we don’t know every detail, we can also travel through uncertainty even though our faith is certain. We can be completely secure in our faith, including not knowing the details, but uncertainty can begin to weigh on us, especially when it seems as long and bleak as winter months. Consider Noah and his family on the ark. Imagine the rock of the ark. Imagine the smell. Imagine

the work of taking care of the animals. Imagine the sounds. Imagine looking out and seeing no land. There was no GPS, so without landmarks, Noah would not have been able to assess where he was.

Keep in mind Noah wasn't a young man when he built the ark. He didn't have his sons Shem, Ham, and Japeth until he was over 500 years old, and he was 601 years old when he was on the ark. Noah had been told it was going to rain 40 days and 40 nights, but he hadn't been told the details of what would happen during that time or immediately afterward. God told him to load the ark seven days before the rains started, and while the rains stopped after 40 days, water covered the earth for 150 days (Genesis 7). The massive amount of rain lifted the ark 20 feet above the top of the mountains. After the ark rested on a mountain top, nearly another 100 days passed before God instructed Noah to exit. Noah and his family were on the ark for a long time.

How do you expect you would have responded through Noah's experience?

Noah's name means "rest" in Hebrew. Building an ark certainly doesn't seem like much rest. Yet it is restful, because relying on and trusting God is rest. It's resting in God's presence. It's a kind of rest that is active. It takes decision, commitment, and action to remain in God's will. It doesn't come naturally. The more we develop our spiritual muscles, the more readily we respond to God's voice and instruction, but growing toward God, being intimate with him, takes effort, and it takes practice over time. And at any point along the way, as we take our eyes off God and let distractions draw our attention away from him, our habits of following God can erode so that we slow down, turn away, or reject God's will for us.

How are you actively resting in God's presence today, listening to his instruction and responding in obedience?

Noah was certain in his faith even when he was surrounded by uncertain circumstances. God doesn't limit this type of faith to Noah or to those who experienced him throughout the times the Old and New Testaments were written. You – living exactly when and where you are – can have the same certainty in faith. Another word for such certainty is assurance.

What do you learn about assurance from the following quotes and verses?

"The opposite of sight and feeling is faith. Now it is the soulish person who gains assurance by grasping the things which can be seen and felt; but the person who follows the spirit lives by faith, not by sight." (Watchman Nee)

"Assurance is the fruit that grows out of the root of faith." (Stephen Charnock)

"To be assured of our salvation is no arrogant stoutness. It is faith. It is devotion. It is not presumption. It is God's promise." (Augustine)

“If any man is not sure that he is in Christ, he ought not to be easy one moment until he is sure. Dear friend, without the fullest confidence as to your saved condition, you have no right to be at ease, and I pray you may never be so. This is a matter too important to be left undecided.” (Charles Spurgeon)

But you must continue to believe this truth and stand firmly in it. Don't drift away from the assurance you received when you heard the Good News. (Colossians 1:23)

Christ lives in you. This gives you assurance of sharing his glory. (Colossians 1:27)

Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see. (Hebrews 11:1)

Know that you can be assured in your faith. You might feel as if you're in a long winter of uncertainty. You're blinded by swirling snow or pouring rain. You're chilled to the bone and can't get comfortable. You're faced with long days and nights of the stench and sounds of strange animals. Little seems familiar.

Yet you can rest amidst the uncertainty, because you can be certain of God's presence. You can be certain of his provision. He cares for you and the details of your life, and he doesn't forget you. He never will. Rest assured.



Re-Gifting God's Gifts

No one is to come before me without a gift. You must work for six days, but on the seventh day you must rest—even during the planting season and the harvest season. Celebrate the Feast of Weeks when you gather the first grain of the wheat harvest. And celebrate the Feast of Shelters in the fall. Exodus 34:20-22

One of my favorite quotes from VeggieTales® comes from *A Snoodles Tale*:

"...but Sir...if you made this great land, can't you make Snoodles obey your command?"

"...A gift that's demanded is no gift at all."

God gives us gifts. He provides for us, and he is generously merciful and gracious, which means he gives us what we need but also a surplus of what we don't need but will enjoy. It's not that we're all materialistically wealthy. God isn't a god of materialism. We're more important than mere stuff. He gifts us with relationships, opportunities, emotions, personalities, and much more.

Thinking outside the prettily-wrapped gift box, what does God give you?

Consider people in your life:

Consider emotions that enhance your life:

Consider personality traits:

Consider opportunities you've been given:

Imagine each of the words and phrases you've considered in response to the above questions, each placed in a beautifully-wrapped gift box.

Have you fully unwrapped the gifts God has presented to you? Have you torn apart each package and thoroughly explored the contents of the gift like a young child on Christmas morning? Have you barely peeked inside? Have you set the gift aside, thinking you'll get to it someday or saving it until you really need it?

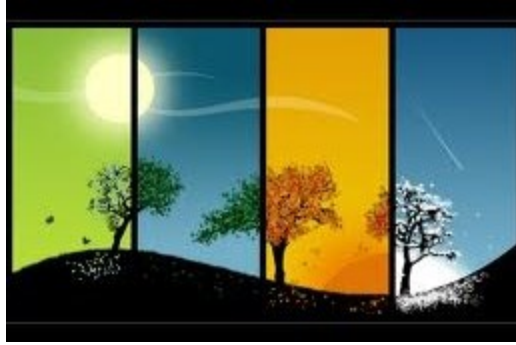
God doesn't give you display models of gifts. He doesn't intend for you to fill a china cabinet of untouchables and unusable gifts. He's given you gifts for faith-building reasons. The first

reason is to accept the gift and acknowledge the giver. The second is to use the gift to its fullest potential – not the potential you believe it has, but the potential God *says* it has. The third reason is to give the gift back to God.

Re-gifting to God isn't the same as slyly re-gifting a gift Aunt Gladys gave you because you don't like it. Re-gifting to God isn't about getting rid of something you don't want. Re-gifting to God is sacrificially offering his gifts back to him by fully using them for his glory. It's about not taking personal ownership of the gifts but instead recognizing the source of and reason for the gifts. God gives the gifts, and he wants you to fully use them in obedience to him. In the process, he gets all the glory, and you get all the growth.

God's gifts exponentially multiply. It would make sense that in order to gift something back to God, you have to divide it, keeping only a portion. And that is often our heartitude and limited understanding of tithing. That was true for the material possessions of the Hebrews, and it's a good starting point for us as we begin to develop a habitual lifestyle of tithing. However, let's not stop there. When God places a gift of relationship, opportunity, or characteristics in our hands, we can unwrap it, fully embrace it and offer it back to God, and we end up with just as much, if not more, of what God originally gave us. Plus, our God-given gifts ripple throughout the lives of others as we use them to glorify him. When we choose to use God-given gifts for self-focused purposes, the gifts will shrink. They might look full-blown, but they're filled with temporary puffs of selfish air. When we choose to use God-given gifts for God-focused purposes, the gifts grow, filling with life-producing nourishment. God's work is kingdom work. He's a builder. Oh, he destroys some things: anything full of human self – not because he's a proud God who wants to be the center of everything, but because he is a trustworthy and true God who *is* the center of everything. He knows that in order for us to grow into our full God-ordained potential, we must die to our selves, so he's willing to destroy our selves as we yield to him. As we yield to him, the construction process thrives. It's wonderful to have the architect of our lives also serve as the best general contractor, carpenter, electrician, and interior designer.

You've likely only caught a glimpse of the beauty and grandeur of the dwelling place he's creating for you. What do you know about it so far?



Week Three: Go, Go, Go. Do, Do, Do.

No one is to come before me without a gift. You must work for six days, but on the seventh day you must rest—even during the planting season and the harvest season. Celebrate the Feast of Weeks when you gather the first grain of the wheat harvest. And celebrate the Feast of Shelters in the fall. Exodus 34:20-22

Our verses from Exodus 34 include something beyond the sacrificial offerings we consistently give God. We're also reminded to rest and to celebrate. Living in God's seasons of life means living by his schedule and timing, and God is adamant about the balance of life. We often excuse our own schedules and timelines, because we think we can keep things in balance. I love organization, and I often make to-do lists. Lists of things to pick up at the store, lists of tasks that must be done this week, lists of people to call or email, lists of jobs needing to be done around the house. The list of lists could go on and on.

Here's a challenge for you: On a sticky note, write a list of three things that need to get done in the next couple hours. Take the time to actually write them; writing them makes the plan for your next hour more deliberate.

Once you have your list completed (yes, that means you have to go back and actually write your list), read the following sentence out loud;

For the next hour, I have decided the following three things are what I most need to be doing: (then read your list).

Now turn your note over. Spend the next minute talking with God about your list. Ask him what he wants on your list. Ask him how he wants you to spend the next hour. Open your heart to his will.

On the blank side of the note, write three things you know are important to God and consider how you are going to use the next hour, the hour he has given you, to do the work

he has planned for you. Be sure to place your note in your appointment book or some other prominent place as a reminder to put God first on every list you make.

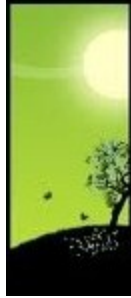
Depend on the Lord in whatever you do, and your plans will succeed. Proverbs 16:3

God didn't create you to go, go, go and do, do, do. He created you to be. His plan is the best. It seems I have to learn that lesson over and over again. Sometimes I'm certain I have something completely figured out. I'm certain my way is the best, and in many cases, it works pretty well. Yet over time, the chinks in the wall I've built begin to crumble, and I realize I've done my own mortaring instead of letting God design, guide and provide. So, we do some clearing together and get back to the firm foundation and begin to build.

Yes, Lord, you're way is best.

That includes rest. It's in rest that we recuperate. It's in rest that God restores us. It's in rest that we have checks and balances, so instead of forging ahead and building the wall ourselves or creating and completing our own to-do lists, we're quiet long enough to inquire, "Yes, Lord?" And when he answers, we can confidently proceed with "Yes, Lord!"

He equips us for his to-do list in his timing. His gifts are for us but in his will and purpose. God's gifts are ready for you to receive and use according to his will.



Refreshing Rain

People listened to me carefully and waited quietly for my advice. After I finished speaking, they spoke no more. My words fell very gently on their ears. They waited for me as they would for rain and drank in my words like spring rain. I smiled at them when they doubted, and my approval was important to them. I chose the way for them and was their leader. I lived like a king among his army, like a person who comforts sad people. Job 29:21-26

Lest you jump to a conclusion that Job's words are rooted in conceit, keep in mind Job is celebrating after a time of intense trials, perhaps unrivaled by anyone else in the Old Testament. He is reestablishing his faith and hope for a long and productive life. After a very long, dark season, he sees a future of prosperity. Just as he mentions "they waited for me as they would for rain and drank in my words like spring rain," Job himself has done the same. He waited on God through the intense frustrations and pain of winter. His life was bleak, but he has now emerged into the warmth of spring sunshine and the refreshment of cleansing spring rain.

When have you – literally or figuratively – felt the refreshment of rain, especially after an extremely dry or cold season?

I love the feeling of refreshing rain. It's not just about feeling the rain on my face; I enjoy splashing in puddles. I don't mind getting soaked (as long as I'm not getting ready to go somewhere). And the smell of rain falling on a dry ground is cleansing. My favorite spring smell is freshly-turned dirt in farmers' fields. My second spring smell is the rain falling on those fields. (Keep in mind growing seasons are not the same everywhere, so not everyone has the same experience with spring rain. In fact, the growing season often referred to in the Bible is quite different. What we might consider as spring rains were actually unusual. However, they were welcome and especially refreshing for that reason.)

Regardless of when rain comes, it nourishes the ground. In Scripture, rain is sometimes given as an analogy to the refreshment of Jesus' coming. Jesus' presence is refreshing and nourishing. Jesus is life-sustaining. Without a relationship with Jesus, acknowledging his life, death and resurrection, without accepting him as God's son, there is no hope beyond this short life on earth. Jesus is not only refreshing and nourishing; Jesus is essential.

When have you experienced Jesus as essential to your life? Perhaps you haven't. In that case, when have you struggled with the need for Jesus and his presence in your life?

God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son so that whoever believes in him may not be lost, but have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world guilty, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17)

I didn't always know Jesus. When I was growing up, I learned *about* Jesus. I could answer the basic questions, but the information I had was simply head knowledge, which isn't enough. I needed heart knowledge. Once I personally encountered the reality of who God is and what Jesus did for me, my life shifted. Oh, I was the same person in many ways. God had created me and had been present and working in my life for years. I just didn't acknowledge him. Once I started following Jesus, I questioned a lot of things. After all, how could I have been so inattentive? What did I miss out on? How would I ever "catch up" with all I need to know in order to be who God wanted me to be? How could I live in a way so everyone around me would want to know more about Jesus? I felt as if I'd been through the most refreshing rain shower of my life – a downpouring of God's presence. I was ready to grow, thrive and live!

Well, let's just say I couldn't do everything at once. And it wouldn't help for me to punish myself for what I had or hadn't done in the past. I couldn't make up lost time, but I could fully use what God was currently giving me. I could soak in his nourishment. And I couldn't be all things to all people in my own strength. I could only be who he created me to be in his strength, and he would have to work out the timing of who would be impacted, how, and when.

I thought the refreshing downpour experience would last forever. However, sometimes the refreshment of rain is short-lived. The sun can come out and intensify oppressive humidity. Steam comes off the ground. Or the rain can cause flooding or at least messes that get in the way of what needs to get done. Rain can certainly be inconvenient.

Just as rain can have negative impact that lasts, its positive impact lasts as well. Even after the rain is soaked from the ground we see, it's seeping into underground springs and wells. Even as

the sun seems to bake away the moisture, drawing it back into the atmosphere, it's being prepared to fall again as it gathers in the clouds.

What I didn't realize when I encountered Jesus and felt overwhelmingly refreshed was that there would continue to be seasons in my life. He would use the rains of life to nourish and benefit me even when I couldn't see the benefits. He would use the sunlight of life to nourish and benefit me even when I couldn't see the benefits.

Experiencing Jesus as the spring (season) of life is acknowledging him as the spring (constant source) of my life. I want to soak in his presence on a constant basis.



Work with a Purpose

Go watch the ants, you lazy person. Watch what they do and be wise. Ants have no commander, no leader or ruler, but they store up food in the summer and gather their supplies at harvest. How long will you lie there, you lazy person? When will you get up from sleeping? You sleep a little; you take a nap. You fold your hands and lie down to rest. So you will be as poor as if you had been robbed; you will have as little as if you had been held up. Proverbs 6:6-11

How do you struggle between relaxing and being lazy?

How do you struggle between being busy and being productive?

Summer can be a busy time, particularly because people's schedules seem to be unusual. I didn't say schedules seem to be light. Summer can actually be a very busy season because there's a lot of extra activity. We try to fit in as much as possible, even if what we're trying to fit in is rest and relaxation. Resting and relaxing aren't bad things. We need to rest in God's presence:

The Lord replied, "I will personally go with you, Moses, and I will give you rest—everything will be fine for you." (Exodus 33:14, NLT)

Let's look at the same verse in a couple other translations. **What do you learn?**

God said, "My presence will go with you. I'll see the journey to the end." (The Message)

The Lord answered, "I myself will go with you, and I will give you victory." (NCV)

The "rest" to which God was promising Moses (and the Israelites) wasn't an extended vacation in a five-star hotel. God's rest is not an easy road of peace and tranquility with freedom from all risk of enemies. Physically, the rest God was promising Moses was the promised land of Canaan. Spiritually, the rest God was promising was a way to eternal life with him. Remember, Jesus came to earth through the Israelite lineage. Even though the Israelites were under the old covenant when this promise was given, God could refer to the new covenant, which he knew would be coming.

The difference between rest and laziness is that laziness is not productive; rest is. Rest is given and blessed by God. It draws us closer to God, because when we rest in his presence and will, we're relying on him. We're submitting to him as our authority. We're humble in his provision. When we're lazy, we're deciding what's best for us. We're "resting" in our own presence. We're withdrawing from everything around us, including God. Our priority is ourselves over relationship with God.

When I consider what rest God has for me, I think of three meanings of the word that keep me on track with what God intends :

- peace of mind or spirit
- something used for support
- to remain

God's rest is a peace of mind or spirit regardless of the situation. Moses and the Israelites were not where they wanted to be. They didn't completely understand God's plan and timing – although he was pretty clear about what was happening – but he still had intentions of giving them rest, not only in the future when they reached the promised land but also through the process with his continued provision. Because of God's presence, he is giving us constant, reliable support. His rest isn't always easy to accept, but it is always supportive. God always knows what we need when we need it even when we feel uncomfortable where he has us. Finally, God's rest remains. God's provision of rest is not a stopping point; it's a door that ushers us into the best he has for us. When God promised the Israelites rest in the form of their promised land, he was expanding their borders beyond what they could imagine. We can think of "the rest" of something as the leftovers, but that's not the case when God promises us rest. He is reserving the best for us. All we have to do is remain in his presence, trusting him for the journey, and what "rest" we reach is beyond our comprehension. The rest God promises us under the new covenant is eternal life with him in heaven. All we have to do is live this life in a relationship with his Son, Jesus. All we have to do is trust God's promise and provision.

God's rest is productive, so when we rest in him, we are productive as well. Productivity doesn't equal busyness.

When have you been productive through a time you wouldn't equate with busyness?

When have you been busy but not very productive?

Productivity isn't defined by the world's standards. Productivity is defined by God. The instruction given in Proverbs 6 indicates the way to ward off laziness is to work with wisdom. In other words, rely on God for guidance. Do what he says you're supposed to do. Live as he says you're supposed to live.

Perhaps you struggle to know exactly what living the life God intends looks like for you right now. God doesn't always get specific in his instruction (although he does sometimes), but the Bible is filled with instruction. Plus, God gives his followers the Holy Spirit to guide them. The problem is most of us whine about not knowing what we should do and we either get frozen in inaction or we decide we have to at least do something, so we take charge of the situation. Either way, when we respond without God, we're developing habits of not responding with God. We might not know the specifics, but the only way we're going to be guided by God and be assured he's the one guiding us is by knowing him. Don't wait until the moment of decision when you need to hear from him. Communicate with him regularly. Get familiar with his Word. Build godly relationships with people who will encourage, challenge, and hold you accountable.

Even the best planted fields will not flourish if ignored through the summer. Be attentive through every season. If you're not in close relationship with God, no matter how much you're enjoying the benefits of your season, you will not be fully reaping the benefits of what you've done in the previous seasons, and you won't be accomplishing what needs to be done for future seasons.



What You Need

If you carefully obey the commands I am giving you today and love the Lord your God and serve him with your whole being, then he will send rain on your land at the right time, in the fall and spring, and you will be able to gather your grain, new wine, and oil. He will put grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will have plenty to eat.

Deuteronomy 11:13-15

How much is “plenty”?

We define plenty in different terms. Our definitions typically differ across different times in our lives.

**Consider what you thought was plenty when you were a young child. Teenager?
Young adult? Midlife? Retirement age?**

Our definitions might even differ whether we’re talking about ourselves or someone else.

Is “plenty” for someone living in an isolated African village the same as someone living in an upscale neighborhood in an American city?

God gives us what we need. In fact, he promises those who are obedient to his commands, loving and serving him with everything they have, “plenty.” However, we’re often not satisfied with the plenty God has for us.

How have you been dissatisfied with your plenty?

How have you assumed your provision was affected by your obedience (or disobedience)?

God is not a gumball machine. We don’t put in our obedience and get out what we want. God gives us what we need. One time, you might get a single purple gumball, another time you might get no gumball, yet another time you might get multiple, multi-flavored gumballs. You will

never be able to make sense of what God gives you in response to what you give him. It all makes sense to God but the connections weaving his instruction, our obedience, his mercy, our humility, his discipline, our faith, and his provision together are complicated to say the least.

You cannot compare ourselves to the person next door, across the country, or around the world. You are not called to her life, and she is not called to yours. You cannot live her life – though you can impact it – and she cannot live yours – though she can impact it.

At this time you have plenty. What you have can help others who are in need. Then later, when they have plenty, they can help you when you are in need, and all will be equal. (2 Corinthians 8:14)

By definition, plenty, when used in Scripture, does not simply indicate enough. Plenty indicates an abundance. One Bible dictionary defines it as “adequate to every purpose; full supply.”

When God supplies plenty, we must respond in continued obedience by stewarding what he’s given us. That might mean using the daily provision he’s given us instead of hoarding it in fear he won’t provide again. Like providing manna to the Israelites before they reached the promised land, what God provided each day had to be consumed that day or it would rot. They could not selfishly store and hoard. God wanted to teach his people to rely on him consistently for provision.

At other times, God entrusts us with a harvest that must last one or more seasons. After Joseph interpreted the king’s two dreams, and the king appointed Joseph to manage the land in Egypt, *the seven years of good crops came to an end in the land of Egypt. Then the seven years of hunger began, just as Joseph had said. In all the lands people had nothing to eat, but in Egypt there was food. The time of hunger became terrible in all of Egypt, and the people cried to the king for food. He said to all the Egyptians, “Go to Joseph and do whatever he tells you.” The hunger was everywhere in that part of the world. And Joseph opened the storehouses and sold grain to the people of Egypt, because the time of hunger became terrible in Egypt. And all the people in that part of the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain because the hunger was terrible everywhere in that part of the world. (Genesis 41:53-57)*

Either situation – having enough for one day or enough for seven years (with enough to share as well) – requires discipline. So, we respond in obedience and God gives us our plenty. With that plenty, we must respond in obedience. God gives abundantly, and he wants us to respond abundantly. God is not dependent on us as we are on him, but our relationship is certainly interactive. He wants our involvement.

How will you be actively involved in God’s plan and provision for you today?



God's Favorite Season

Both the day and the night are yours; you made the sun and the moon. You set all the limits on the earth; you created summer and winter. Psalm 74:16-17

God doesn't have a favorite season. Winter isn't too dreary to him. Summer isn't too hot for him. He sees relief in the days ahead of a long, oppressive summer. He sees beneath the frozen ground of winter to the possibilities lying dormant beneath. He knows what was left behind from the previous harvest and is rotting below the surface to nourish the soil and prepare it for the next planting.

Joseph gives us a great example of a dormant dream. God was working every step of the way even though it seemed his dream was dead. We have the benefit of seeing the entire story, but Joseph was living it. All he could see was what was right in front of him and what was behind him. He chose to trust God for what was ahead.

Joseph was one of many brothers. He was favored by his father, Jacob, because Joseph's mother, Rachel, was the love of Jacob's life. Joseph had a dream and shared it with his brothers, who didn't appreciate it.

"Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."

His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.

Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, “What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?” His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind. (Genesis 37:6-11)

The seed was planted. For Joseph, the dream was a vision of the future. For his dad, Joseph’s dream was puzzling but worth remembering. For his brothers, Joseph’s dream was infuriating. And they couldn’t let go of it.

When have you had a dream that didn’t come true?

Consider the difference between your dreams and God’s dreams.

Joseph’s brothers decided to do something about the dreams. First, they tried to bury them:

“Here comes that dreamer!” they said to each other. “Come now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams.” (Genesis 37:19-20)

Brothers Reuben and Judah decided killing Joseph and burying the dreams along with him wasn’t a good idea. So the next idea was to sell the dream:

So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt. (Genesis 37:28)

Joseph was headed in a direction away from his home and family. It seemed his dreams were in the past, but this was no simple childhood dream that Joseph had for himself. This was God’s dream for his life. God continued to work even though the dream seemed to be thrown into pits and handed over to other people many times.

- *The Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard. (Genesis 37:36)*
- *Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. (Genesis 39:4)*
- *Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce Joseph, and although it didn’t work, the appearance of indiscretion was enough to place Joseph in prison. (Genesis 39:7-20)*
- *But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him kindness and caused the prison warden to like Joseph. The prison warden chose Joseph to take care of all the prisoners, and he was responsible for whatever was done in the prison. (Genesis 39:21-22)*
- *Joseph interpreted dreams of fellow prisoners, the king’s cupbearer and baker (Genesis 40), and although the cupbearer was released only a few days later, Joseph sat in jail two more*

years. The cupbearer finally remembered Joseph when the king had a dream that needed to be interpreted. Because God was with Joseph and he interpreted the king's dream well, he was appointed as the ruler over Egypt. He would manage seven years of good crops in preparation for seven years of famine, consistent with the king's dream (Genesis 41).

- Once the famine surged across the land, Joseph's brothers reentered his life because they needed to find provision for the family. Through many twists and turns, Joseph revealed himself to his family:

So Joseph said to them, "Come close to me." When the brothers came close to him, he said to them, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold as a slave to go to Egypt. Now don't be worried or angry with yourselves because you sold me here. God sent me here ahead of you to save people's lives. No food has grown on the land for two years now, and there will be five more years without planting or harvest. So God sent me here ahead of you to make sure you have some descendants left on earth and to keep you alive in an amazing way. So it was not you who sent me here, but God. God has made me the highest officer of the king of Egypt. I am in charge of his palace, and I am the master of all the land of Egypt. So leave quickly and go to my father. Tell him, 'Your son Joseph says: God has made me master over all Egypt. Come down to me quickly. Live in the land of Goshen where you will be near me. Your children, your grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all that you have will also be near me. I will care for you during the next five years of hunger so that you and your family and all that you have will not starve.'" (Genesis 45:4-11)

Consider Joseph's response as his dream came full circle.

Again, we have the benefit of knowing the ending of Joseph's story as we read through his trials. Of course, he did not. There were times his dream seemed buried or sold but definitely not fulfilled. It seemed as if it was buried in the remote, cold wasteland of a dreary winter. But the winter season was sandwiched between a fall and spring. The fall was the preparation for the winter season. The dream began to blossom in spring. And the summer?

Then the king said to Joseph, "Your father and your brothers have come to you, and you may choose any place in Egypt for them to live. Give your father and your brothers the best land; let them live in the land of Goshen. And if any of them are skilled shepherds, put them in charge of my sheep and cattle." Joseph obeyed the king and gave his father and brothers the best land in Egypt, near the city of Rameses. And Joseph gave his father, his brothers, and everyone who lived with them the food they needed. (Genesis 47:5-6, 11-12)

How are you handling your God-given dreams through the seasons of your life?



Are You Worthy?

No one is to come before me without a gift. You must work for six days, but on the seventh day you must rest—even during the planting season and the harvest season. Celebrate the Feast of Weeks when you gather the first grain of the wheat harvest. And celebrate the Feast of Shelters in the fall. Exodus 34:20-22

Do you ever feel unworthy of God's gifts?

During communion one Sunday, I looked at the bread and juice and pondered...am I worthy? It was my opportunity to check my relationship with God.

Am I worthy?

Well...no. But I'm not worthless either.

What do you consider to be your weaknesses?

Your strengths?

I often get weaknesses and strengths mixed up. I'm weak in the way that I question my worth instead of seeing myself as God created me. What I think is a strength, such as trying to be self-sufficient, is weakness. Who am I to decide what is my strength or weakness?

Out of my weakness

And into Your strength

Humbly I come to the cross.

The lyrics of *I Come to the Cross* sank into my marrow as I sat in church.

I am strongest in my humility. I am strongest when I rest completely in Jesus, when I acknowledge my weakness. For a recovering control freak, that's tough to accept.

As I ponder *Am I worthy?*, I realize I'm thinking of my worthiness as a wife, mom, daughter, employee, volunteer. Those relationships and roles, while important, don't define my worth. They

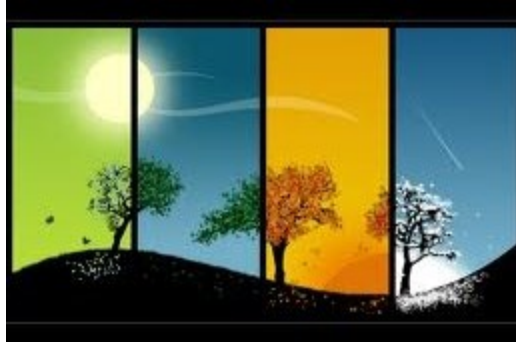
reflect the worth I have in Jesus. When I humbly rely on him in my weakness, for his strength, I am worthy in all areas of my life, because I am reflecting him.

I find my worth in Jesus.

How do you need to adjust your thinking and living so that you find your worth in Jesus?

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. 2

Thessalonians 1:11



Week Four: Climbing in Obedience

If you remember my laws and commands and obey them, I will give you rains at the right season; the land will produce crops, and the trees of the field will produce their fruit. Your threshing will continue until the grape harvest, and your grape harvest will continue until it is time to plant. Then you will have plenty to eat and live safely in your land.

Leviticus 26:3-5

There's something consistent through every spiritual season of life: *obedience*. Obedience impacts our mountaintop experiences and our dumpster-diving experiences. Obedience doesn't magically insure a specific result based on our human expectations and standards. We can't treat obedience as a hoop we'll jump through with a guaranteed reward waiting on the other side. However, obedience will always, without fail, draw us closer to God.

When I spoke at a women's retreat at a center nestled among the Appalachians, I enjoyed several days of breath-taking scenery, including vibrant green trees often skirted in mist. A friend and I trekked to a lookout point one morning, and it was well worth the climb. I immediately decided I'd take another route by myself the next day. I wondered how many miles I could see from a higher vantage point. When the next day arrived, my schedule was hectic, and the time in which I thought I could easily fit in a short hike quickly began to fill with responsibilities. But God was beckoning me to spend some time with him. Because I was expected to soon be encouraging a large group of women, helping them laugh with each other and dance in God's presence, I knew that if I kept on my own course, I'd be zapped of energy and enthusiasm. As a guest, I had been invited to ride into town for a scrumptious treat, but I apologetically said "no" in order to say "yes" to God. And I hiked to the lookout point I longed to visit.

The climb was steep. It reminded me of how being obedient to God isn't easy. Obedience challenges me, and I do better with it when I'm well-equipped. For hiking, my map and water are

musts. For obedience, constant communication with God through his Word, prayer, and worship are musts. As I climbed, I took each step for him. When I stopped to take a drink, I savored God's words to me. When I heard the sounds of the hills, I listened for his voice. When I reached the top and marveled again at the complexity and beauty of his creation, I raised my face to his in worship.

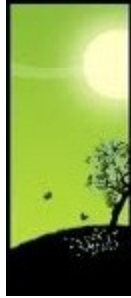
The hike down was just as challenging, both physically and spiritually, God reminded me that I can go too fast sometimes and get caught up in the rush of everyday life. I was walking back to my obligations and daily life but with renewed purpose. Only God knew the challenges waiting for me at the bottom of that mountain top, but I sure am thankful I chose obedience, so he could prepare me in his providential way. Immediately following my mountaintop experience, I was literally dumpster-diving. When I returned to set up the stage and displays, I discovered retreat center staff had mistakenly discarded every box full of my supplies, and placing them in the dumpster. The next two hours were filled with problem-solving. Handling the situation with grace was difficult, but I was certainly thankful for the experience I'd just had with God. I'm glad I chose obedience in preparation for continued obedience through a difficult situation.

Send me your light and truth to guide me. Let them lead me to your holy mountain, to where you live. Psalm 43:3

Just because I was obedient through one situation didn't assure the next situation would go smoothly. Just because you follow God's directions, doesn't mean you'll enter an expressway with no distractions, obstacles and detours. Obedience insures you're in God's will, but life continues to be messy because it's life on earth, not life in heaven. We can expect life to be perfect on earth, but it's not going to be. We can expect life to be predictable on earth, but it's not going to be. We can expect life to fit into the structure we've created by our assumptions, dreams, and limited understanding, but it's not going to fit. However, there *is* consistency. God has all understanding of each of our lives, including intricacies and details we can't even imagine. At the same time, he has complete understanding of how all of those details fit together into the grand view of his creation and how everything will work together in a kingdom-focused, purposeful way.

How are you challenged and encouraged by God's consistency?

What experiences of obedience (or lack of obedience) have taught you about the character of God?



Responding in Relationship

An angry king can put someone to death, so a wise person will try to make him happy. A smiling king can give people life; his kindness is like a spring shower. It is better to get wisdom than gold, and to choose understanding rather than silver! Proverbs 16:14-16

Proverbs can sometimes seem like riddles, but let's not make today's lesson more difficult than it has to be.

When have you tried to influence someone you know would be making a decision directly impacting you?

The writer of Proverbs is not suggesting anything illegal or unethical. He's not saying you should bribe people or build unauthentic relationships simply to reap benefits of the connections you have. Let's simply use some wisdom in our relationships. There are better times than others to approach someone and request something or share news. What is a good time for one person differs for another. It's wise to be familiar with people in order to benefit, not yourself, but the relationship itself.

For example, I know my husband easily gets "locked into" something he's doing. He focuses on what he's doing – whether it's reading, paying bills, watching tv, or working in the yard. I could ask him a question without warning, but I wouldn't have his attention, and I'd likely have to ask the question again. If I'm sharing something important to me, I could feel as if he isn't paying attention to me and that he sees whatever he's doing as more important than me. And I've had both those responses! But why is engaging in conversation or getting a project done or whatever it is that I'm approaching him with (and this goes both ways) dependent on him meeting my timing, my need, my priority? Just as I want him to respect what I have to share, I need to do the same for him.

Respecting him – and the relationship – involves knowing how to best approach him so that neither of us gets frustrated through the interaction.

A relationship is never just about you. It involves (at least) two people. Be aware of the person with whom you're interacting. While you don't need to yield to every whim and wish of someone (after all, the relationship goes both ways, and you should both be fostering an atmosphere of respect), you need to be aware of habits, personality, and baggage so that you can communicate and grow in healthy ways.

Moving on in these verses of Proverbs, when have you responded to someone based on your mood rather than the reality of the situation?

When have you responded in anger to someone when it's actually another person or situation with which you're angry or frustrated? When have you let someone's behavior or comment slide past you because you were in too good of a mood or too tired to deal with it even though you actually needed to confront the situation because it was going to get worse after receiving a stamp of approval?

The king in Proverbs is – like most of us – characterized by responding out of moods instead of reality. I struggle with this one. I certainly hope I'm getting better, but I have a long way to go. Many years ago, my daughters pointed out some inconsistencies in how I was responding to them and others in a variety of situations. I struggled with the reality of what they brought to my attention. I wanted to rationalize their points away, justifying my behavior, but the truth was, I needed to be more mindful of how and why I was responding to people.

It sometimes takes time to work through something, so after a frustrating day, it's difficult not to let it overflow onto the evening. Words are powerful, though, and just acknowledging your feelings of anger and frustration and asking for those around you to call you out if you start displacing it onto them can help immensely. There's nothing like some accountability to keep you in check and on track.

Kindness is paralleled to a spring rain, emphasizing its refreshment and nourishment. Keep in mind a spring rain is not always convenient. Even when we appreciate it, we don't always welcome its timing, length, or strength. Kindness is not always welcome either.

When have you extended kindness with no return of appreciation? When have you received kindness but not responded with appreciation?

We cannot control someone else's response, but we can certainly control our own. Commit to extending appreciation, kindness, influence, and investment in your relationships today. Seek and respond in wisdom and understanding.



Wise Expectations

It shouldn't snow in summer or rain at harvest. Neither should a foolish person ever be honored. Curses will not harm someone who is innocent; they are like sparrows or swallows that fly around and never land. Whips are for horses, and harnesses are for donkeys, so paddles are good for fools. Don't answer fools when they speak foolishly, or you will be just like them. Answer fools when they speak foolishly, or they will think they are really wise. Proverbs 26:1-5

Foolishness: the world seems full of it. I can understand why there isn't consistent godly wisdom being lived out, because not everyone embraces the truth and guidance of God. To be honest, not even those who do, including me, live his wisdom out loud on a daily basis. Foolishness is the absence of wisdom. Some people make foolish decisions intentionally; in fact, in most situations that immediately come to mind, they truly believe the decisions they're making are wise. And then there are the decisions made based on a lack of common sense.

Look around you. What makes you exclaim, "Really?!"

Hal Urban writes about wisdom shared by people of many beliefs in *10 Commandments of Common Sense*.

1. Don't be seduced by popular culture. It prevents you from thinking for yourself.
2. Don't fall in love with money and possessions. It will make you greedy and shallow.
3. Don't use destructive language. It will destroy yourself and others.
4. Don't judge others. It's better to work on your own faults.
5. Don't let anger out of control. It will wreck relationships and ruin lives.
6. Keep a positive outlook on life. It's the first step toward joy.
7. Bring out the best in other people. It's better to build up than tear down.
8. Have impeccable integrity. It brings peace of mind and a reputation of honor.

9. Help those in need. It really is better to give than to receive.
10. Do everything in love. It's the only way to find true peace and fulfillment.

However, these aren't common sense. I can already hear excuses people will make:

- Don't judge others? But what if what they're doing impacts me?
- Keep a positive outlook on life? That's easy for you to say. You're not living my life!
- Help those in need? Once I have enough to share, I might consider it.
- Do everything in love? That's fine, as long as I get to define what love should be.

Of course, taken in the context of Scripture and realizing all of the principles work together (such as, we shouldn't judge others unfairly, but of course, if someone is doing something destructive, out of love, you help them), we might be able to expect these to be reflected by some people in some circumstances, but can we actually expect everyone to live by and respond in the standards?

We need to have realistic expectations. Even the wisest of people can be foolish when it comes to their expectations of others. Just because we've come to specific conclusions about faith and we've experienced everyday confirmation of the truthfulness of principles, it is foolish to assume everyone else will accept such truths, let alone live them out as common sense. While the same standards – God's standards – exist for everyone, we can't expect everyone to respond the same way to them. People are in different places in their faith journeys, and to try to convince someone about a biblical principle by quoting Scripture when the person doesn't believe the Bible to be true might not be as effective as we'd like it to be. (I'm not saying we should never attempt that approach. God is powerful, and his Word is powerful.) While we shouldn't expect failure, we also shouldn't assume everyone will respond according to our expectations.

Foolishness is expecting snow in the summer. Compared to others, you might feel as if your faith is in a spiritual summer. You're flourishing, and you come across someone who seems to have a dead, or at least dormant, faith. Yet when you talk to them, you expect the two seasons to perfectly combine and snow to fall in summer. It's not going to happen, and expecting such is foolishness. That's not to say the person's life won't be impacted by your sharing. You should live your faith out loud in both actions and words. But you should also see things through God's perspective, accepting

his timing is not your timing. The season you're in is not the season everyone is in. The season you're in is not the season you've always been in or will always be in.

What other instruction does Proverbs 26 give you?

Do you find it just a bit confusing to receive instruction to “answer fools” and “don’t answer fools” back to back? Take a look at a couple more translations.

Do not answer a fool according to his folly, Or you will also be like him.

Answer a fool as his folly deserves, That he not be wise in his own eyes. (NASB)

Answer not a [self-confident] fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him.

Answer a [self-confident] fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes and conceit. (Amplified)

If someone is going to pull us into a situation in which our faith will suffer, perhaps by resorting to foolish methods of argument of the fool instead of arguing by God’s standards, we need to refrain from the argument. Just because someone is foolish in beliefs doesn’t mean they are not smart in argumentation, and you might get unexpectedly backed into a corner not because what you’re saying is faulty but because the priority for the other person might be to win an argument, not to seek and reach truth.

On the other hand, being silent can give an impression that the person is right in his beliefs. Uncontested comments might grow and have a more extensive impact on not only the person spouting them but also those he comes in contact with in the future. While you cannot monitor everyone at all times, it might be wise to refute someone on his false principles. In the process, you might be a small part of the destruction of faulty conclusions or the destruction of self-righteousness.

One of the biggest lessons we can learn from these passages is that we have to trust God for guidance. He never contradicts himself, but he requires slightly different responses from us in different situations. We must set aside our own expectations and expect only what God promises: his presence and provision in all situations.

How will you set aside your personal expectations today?



The Fear of Harvest

Wild animals, don't be afraid, because the open pastures have grown grass. The trees have given fruit; the fig trees and the grapevines have grown much fruit. So be happy, people of Jerusalem; be joyful in the Lord your God. Because he does what is right, he has brought you rain; he has sent the fall rain and the spring rain for you, as before. And the threshing floors will be full of grain; the barrels will overflow with new wine and olive oil. Joel 2:22-24

Anticipation and anxiety often co-exist.

When has your experienced anticipation and anxiety at the same time?

Anticipation is looking forward, usually in a positive way.

Anxiety is apprehensive or fearful concern.

We can anticipate a harvest in our life with anxiety.

We want to see the fruit of previous seasons. We look forward to being beyond where we are and growing into a season we can enjoy. God is ready to see us reach a fruitful season, but he knows the perfect timing. He also knows the unrealistic expectations of seasons we have for our lives. There isn't a single season that is all about harvest in the sense that we get to lie back and enjoy the fruit of our labors with no effort, because even harvest itself takes effort. Preparing fruit to be enjoyed requires work. Spiritual growth demands engagement and effort no matter what the season. Involvement is a requirement to growing closer to God.

Harvest isn't just about God providing something for us. It's about him extending something to us only he can give: his mercy. We might view a fruitful time as simply receiving a basket full of fruit. He is actually filling us with his gracious, abundant mercy.

The book of Joel laments over drought and locust plague, calls for repentance among the people of Israel, and declares the promises of God's provision. God will provide, because he says he'll provide. He waits on us to respond in obedience, because he wants to be gracious and

generous. He's ready. We think we're ready but there are many times we haven't fully experienced what we need to experience in order to come to God in repentance. Our attitudes and heartitudes aren't exactly where they need to be. We need to take one step closer to God, humble ourselves before him, and open our hands and hearts to him in assured expectation. We often step only to where we think we should have to go and open our hands in expectation without having emptied our hands and our hearts of ourselves and our personal dreams and desires.

We anticipate God's mercy, but we're anxious about what it will involve. God loves and pursues us unconditionally, but to receive his mercy, we must come to him willing to receive what he has to give. We have to trust his vision, purpose, and timing. God will always be merciful when we are obedient. But he will not be placed into a box of expectation. We cannot have a god small enough for us to understand but large enough to impact and change our lives. We often want the two to co-exist. God will impact and change our lives, but we will not always understand.

So, what can we anticipate?

- God's mercies.
- God's great and wondrous works.
- God's abundant power.
- God's love for his creation.
- God's goodness.
- God's grace.
- God's promises to always be fulfilled.

Perhaps we pair anticipation with anxiety at times because even when we trust God to come through on his promises, we're not positive what his timing will be. What if we don't make it to see the fulfillment of his promises? Well, that's not possible in faith, but it's certainly possible we won't see what we expect to see within this life. However, a relationship with Jesus assures us of eternal life for him. God doesn't say every promise will be fulfilled here on earth.

What do you learn about God's promises from the following verses?

So when you give to the poor, don't let anyone know what you are doing. Your giving should be done in secret. Your Father can see what is done in secret, and he will reward you. When you pray, you should go into your room and close the door and pray to your Father who cannot be seen. Your Father can see what is done in secret, and he will reward you.

And when you pray, don't be like those people who don't know God. They continue saying things that mean nothing, thinking that God will hear them because of their many words. Don't be like them, because your Father knows the things you need before you ask him. So when you pray, you should pray like this:

“Our Father in heaven, may your name always be kept holy. May your kingdom come and what you want be done, here on earth as it is in heaven. Give us the food we need for each day. Forgive us for our sins, just as we have forgiven those who sinned against us. And do not cause us to be tempted, but save us from the Evil One.” (The kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours forever. Amen.)

When you fast, don't put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They make their faces look sad to show people they are fasting. I tell you the truth, those hypocrites already have their full reward. So when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then people will not know that you are fasting, but your Father, whom you cannot see, will see you. Your Father sees what is done in secret, and he will reward you. (Matthew 6:3-4,6-13,16-18)

God promises us we will be rewarded for our faithfulness, lived out through such practices as fasting, praying, and service. He doesn't provide a timing of reward. We assume the reward will immediately follow what we do. That's how the world generally works. We pay for something, and we receive it. We bake something, and we can eat it. We build something, and we can use it.

Compare the verb tenses of the words indicating the timing of what we do and when God promises to reward us.

God *will* reward us. He decides the timing, and his options aren't limited to our lives on earth. He handles all rewards in heaven as well.

We can take a lot of anxiety out of our anticipation if we fully place our trust in God and his timing. We can know there will be a harvest without needing to know when and how much. We can know there will be rewards without needing to know when and how much. When we trust God for his promises and provision, we let him do the promising and providing. Our role is trust. Our role is faith.



The Doorways of Winter

I hear my lover's voice. Here he comes jumping across the mountains, skipping over the hills. My lover is like a gazelle or a young deer. Look, he stands behind our wall peeking through the windows, looking through the blinds. My lover spoke and said to me, "Get up, my darling; let's go away, my beautiful one. Look, the winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Blossoms appear through all the land. The time has come to sing; the cooing of doves is heard in our land. There are young figs on the fig trees, and the blossoms on the vines smell sweet. Get up, my darling; let's go away, my beautiful one." Song of Solomon 2:8-13

There are things that happen in winter that can't happen in any other season.

Consider factors of winter that only happen because of the preparation work done ahead of it in fall.

Consider factors of winter that are prerequisites for spring.

Seasons have doorways on either side of them, requiring movement from one season into another. Similar to benchmarks in school subjects, until one skill or task is accomplished, the next one cannot be tackled. It's not as if a complete grade level needs to be completed before moving on, because we all know people learn in different ways at different paces. One child might move from the third to the fourth grade with a high proficiency in math, adequate ability in language, and minimal achievement in the arts. Another might be adequate in all three areas but not excellence in any specific one. Yet another might need to be tutored or attend summer classes for one subject but be doing fine in others. All three will step through the doorway from one season of learning to another, but their learning processes are different. Likewise, you might be in the winter season alongside someone but be experiencing a similar situation in a very different way. Your preceding fall season might be significantly different and the resulting spring likely differs as well.

We cannot compare our seasons with anyone else's. We also cannot expect each season of life to be tied up in a neat bow with everything resolved before we move on to another season. Each season pours into the next. We tend to compare seasons by saying one is more painful, fun, beautiful, or overwhelming than another, but seasons were never meant to be compared by experiential standards. Seasons are intended to be viewed together as they meld together into an entire life instead of being pulled apart to be measured against each other. While comparisons have benefit in learning to appreciate the uniqueness and importance of each season, comparisons leading to favoritism only results in dread, regret and discontentedness.

It's like compiling a list of "traits to avoid" as you date people. You get annoyed by one person and say, "The next person I'll date will be someone who never..." When you find a fault with the next date, you add another annoying trait to the list. The list grows, and before you know it, you walk around attentive for what you don't want more than what you do. You look at what's wrong more than what's right. Of course, avoiding some behaviors and traits is important, but it's more important to flip the trait so that you're actually looking for the positive aspect. Instead of looking for someone who "is never rude," you look for a person who "is polite and considerate." Instead of looking for someone who "isn't scared of commitment," you look for someone who "perseveres to maintain relationships." Throughout the seasons of your life, strive to look for what can possibly be happening that's beneficial to the bigger picture of your faith instead of what's uncomfortable and preferably avoidable.

How can shifting your perspective from what to avoid to what to learn help you through your current season?

In the verses of Song of Solomon, a love can bloom among the lovers because winter and the rains are over. Love can blossom because something has paved the way. Planting and nourishing has happened along the way. The seed has died in its first form in order to burst forth and grow. Leaves and other material has rotted and broken down to prepare the soil, essential for the growth of the roots and stem pushing through the dirt. Rain has poured down, leaving the clouds to pelt the ground, seeping into the soil, evaporating around the growing plant to soak just the amount of nourishment it needs. Specific conditions had to occur in order for the plant to bloom.

You need to endure some conditions in order to grow. You need to be patient to be able to bloom. You need to experience small deaths to experience full life. You must experience winter to experience spring and summer.

Reflect on the cause and effect principles reflected in the following verses. Let them soak into you, nourishing and challenging you to grow.

Do not be fooled: You cannot cheat God. People harvest only what they plant. (Galatians 6:7)

Give, and you will receive. You will be given much. Pressed down, shaken together, and running over, it will spill into your lap. The way you give to others is the way God will give to you. (Luke 6:38)

Do to others what you want them to do to you. This is the meaning of the law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets. (Matthew 7:12)



The (In)Accuracies of Assumptions

If you remember my laws and commands and obey them, I will give you rains at the right season; the land will produce crops, and the trees of the field will produce their fruit. Your threshing will continue until the grape harvest, and your grape harvest will continue until it is time to plant. Then you will have plenty to eat and live safely in your land.

Leviticus 26:3-5

Consider all the assumptions you draw from these verses.

Sometimes we make assumptions about promises in Scripture that might not be accurate. For example, when God says, “I will give you rains at the right season, the land will produce crops, and the trees of the field will produce their fruit,” we can conclude, “Everything is going to work out.” That’s a true assumption. It’s what God promises. However, our meaning of “everything is going to work out” is likely different than God’s. He sees the big picture and has eternal purposes in mind. We’re usually more short-sighted. When we begin to struggle because we’re going through a drought or otherwise unproductive season, we jump to one of two conclusions: (1) we must not have been obedient when we thought we were or (2) God must not be fulfilling his promise.

The first could possibly be true. The second cannot be true because of God’s character. A third option is most likely creating the confusion: we’ve made a false assumption. After all, God doesn’t say the land will produce crops without interruption or the trees will produce fruit without failure. God will provide and everything will work out as we’re obedient to him, but not without struggles. Perhaps the most important phrase in this verse is “at the right season.” And guess what? The right season isn’t what we get to decide the right season is. The definition of *right* belongs to God. God is omniscient (all-knowing) and omnipotent (all-powerful). Combine that with his omnipresence (present everywhere), and God is in the perfect and only position to determine value judgments such as right, wrong, fair, complete and true.

When you consider the character of God, what comes to mind? Consider each area of thoughts, doubts, beliefs and questions. If you're keeping notes throughout the *Pure Growth* study, you'll find your notes of the following will help with the next step.

God's omniscience (all-knowing).

God's omnipotence (all-powerful).

God's omnipresence (presence everywhere).

Now let's look at several Scriptures. Consider what each reveals about God's character.

Our Lord is great and very powerful. There is no limit to what he knows. Psalm 147:5

If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I lie down in the grave, you are there. Psalm 139:8

The Lord's eyes see everything; he watches both evil and good people. Proverbs 15:3

Oh, Lord God, you made the skies and the earth with your very great power. There is nothing too hard for you to do. Jeremiah 32:17

"I am a God who is near," says the Lord. "I am also a God who is far away. No one can hide where I cannot see him," says the Lord. "I fill all of heaven and earth," says the Lord. Jeremiah 23:23-24

Yes, God's riches are very great, and his wisdom and knowledge have no end! No one can explain the things God decides or understand his ways. Romans 11:33

God can do anything! Luke 1:37

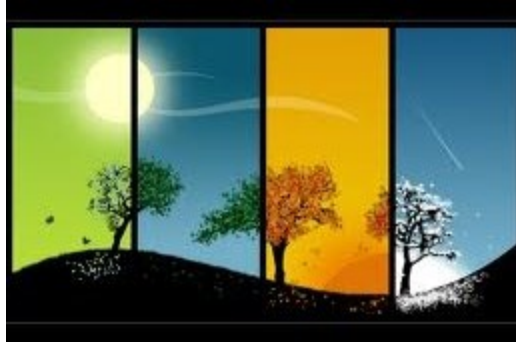
But, God, can you really live here on the earth? The sky and the highest place in heaven cannot contain you. Surely this house which I have built cannot contain you. 1 Kings 8:27

Who has known the mind of the Lord or been able to give him advice? Whom did he ask for help? Who taught him the right way? Who taught him knowledge and showed him the way to understanding? Isaiah 40:13-14

He was given authority, glory, and the strength of a king. People of every tribe, nation, and language will serve him. His rule will last forever, and his kingdom will never be destroyed. Daniel 7:14

When has the timing of life not been what you would have preferred or chosen?

(I'll share one of my stories in *Pure Growth's* next session.)



Week Five: Delays of Life

If you remember my laws and commands and obey them, I will give you rains at the right season; the land will produce crops, and the trees of the field will produce their fruit. Your threshing will continue until the grape harvest, and your grape harvest will continue until it is time to plant. Then you will have plenty to eat and live safely in your land.

Leviticus 26:3-5

At the end of the last post, I asked *When has the timing of life not been what you would have preferred or chosen?* and promised to share a story.

I was flying from St. Louis to San Diego through Chicago, connecting with a friend in Chicago for the second leg of the flight. I don't allow much extra time when arriving at my 'home' airport in St. Louis but soon found I'd have plenty of time, because my first flight was delayed because of fog in Chicago. I decided to make the best of it. I had a book to review, so I grabbed a Starbucks and settled in.

My phone buzzed. Lisa was delayed as well. Her turnaround time in Chicago would be quick, so she looked into a later flight to San Diego "just in case." When my flight continued to be delayed, she encouraged me to do the same. However, I was assured by the gate agent that the plane I'd be taking from Chicago was also delayed, so we'd "definitely arrive in time."

My flight eventually departed, and as we approached Chicago, I heard my next departure gate information. I'd have at least 30 minutes to transition to the next terminal considering the time the gate agent estimated as our updated departure time. No problem. We had another delay as we were pulling into our gate, but I was excited to hear our arrival gate matched my departure gate. I'd have time to get something to eat.

I got off the plane and looked at the gate's board to check the departure time. This gate said La Guardia, not San Diego. I rushed to a departure screen, hoping I wouldn't have to go far to my

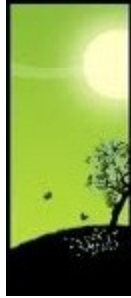
new gate, but my flight wasn't listed. Assuming my original flight had already left, I checked the next flight the San Diego and headed to the departure gate to solve the issue. At least yet another delay also meant time to eat.

My phone buzzed. Lisa made it onto our original flight and wanted to know if I was on board. What? That meant she was still on the ground! I looked at another departure board and saw the flashing words: FINAL BOARDING! After a moment of directional confusion, I ran to my gate, and the airline agent closed the door behind me. Whew!

How do you handle delays? (Do you focus on the end result in anticipation for the end of the delay? Can you rest in the delay? Be productive in the delay? Grow through the delay? Do you become complacent in the delay?)

When has God worked in a delay of your life, and how will you allow him to work in future delays?

I wait for the Lord to help me, and I trust his word. Psalm 130:5



Out of Focus

But the people of Judah are stubborn and have turned against me. They have turned aside and gone away from me. They do not say to themselves, "We should fear the Lord our God, who gives us autumn and spring rains in their seasons, who makes sure we have the harvest at the right time." But your evil has kept away both rain and harvest. Your sins have kept you from enjoying good things. Jeremiah 5:23-25

We can receive blessings but not enjoy them thoroughly, because we're focused on the wrong things. Even in beautiful seasons of our lives, our perspective might be clouded. Our cups might overflow, but instead of being thankful, we complain about the spillage. We ask for rain and complain when we get "too much." We ask for sunshine and complain when it's "too hot." We ask for growing plants to harvest and complain because of the care they require. We ask for a place to live and complain because of the repairs needed. We ask for a job and complain about the pay or lack of benefits.

Do you ever wonder if God just sighs and says, "Really?!"

Sometimes all that's required to change our perspective is a simple attitude adjustment. Other times, something needs to be weeded out of our lives in order for us to see something from God's perspective. When we're in the middle of sin, our view is clouded. Much of the time, we rationalize or compartmentalize what we're doing. We might think we're only affecting ourselves and perhaps even just a small portion of our lives, but the stench of sin is invasive.

At the Celestial Seasonings factory in Boulder, Colorado, a heavy door separates the peppermint room from all others. Peppermint is an invasive smell. If there wasn't a dividing wall, the peppermint would invade other areas of the factory, affecting the taste of many other teas.

We can't store sin in a neat box separate from the rest of our life. If our life has sin in it, that sin affects all areas of our life. I know this firsthand. For years, I tried to compartmentalize some

bad choices, rationalizing I could keep it from affecting all areas of my life, including my faith and relationships. However, when bacteria is kept in the dark, it grows. It gets moldy and musty and is simply nasty. There's no use sugar-coating it. Sin is ugly, and until it is brought out into the light, it will contaminate everything around it. You might not see the contamination, most likely because you don't want to see the contamination, but not recognizing it doesn't make it not exist.

The great thing is that bringing sin into the light – God's truth – immediately zaps it of its power. It might not be gone immediately, because there are often long-term ramifications to sin. There might be a remnant of stench but the power to grow ceases to exist (unless it is pushed back into the dark once again). Sin invades everything in your life like the scent and taste of peppermint, but unlike peppermint, the only way to deal with it is to get rid of it. Celestial Seasonings wants peppermint in its factory, because many people want peppermint tea in their houses and on their taste buds! If a substandard shipment of peppermint with a sour or bitter taste arrived at the factory, endangering the contamination of not only the peppermint tea but many other tea leaves it would invade, they would remove the shipment far from the factory. We must ask God to do the same with our sin.

How do the following verses speak to you?

John said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

He has taken our sins away from us as far as the east is from west. (Psalm 103:12)

But if we confess our sins, he will forgive our sins, because we can trust God to do what is right. He will cleanse us from all the wrongs we have done. (1 John 1:9)

There's another room that stays contained at Celestial Seasonings. It's where the black tea is stored. It's in a separate room for a different reason. It doesn't invade all other scents and tastes. Black tea comes from the *Camelia Sinensis* tea plant, which easily *absorbs* scents and tastes of other ingredients. If we're not attentive, our faith can do the same. Of course, we can't close our faith off to every influence. We can't compartmentalize it even in our own lives. We're to be the salt and light of the world (Matthew 5), which means we live in the world to have an impact for God. We can't close the door tightly behind us and become spiritual hermits. Scripture tells us to go into the world and make disciples (Matthew 28). However, when we're in the world making disciples, the flow of influence doesn't go one way. Just as we try to impact others' lives, our lives are impacted as well – and if we're not wearing the armor of God (Ephesians 6), we can absorb the world in ways that taint our faith.

We must live our lives as God intends. That means we see as God sees. It's the only way we can (1) glorify him in all things, (2) recognize and appreciate the blessings he's giving us, (3) meet challenges with grace and strength, and (4) impact others' lives positively for God. It's time to get your life in focus and look through God's perspective!



Snapshots in Motion

He was too old to have children, and Sarah could not have children. It was by faith that Abraham was made able to become a father, because he trusted God to do what he had promised. This man was so old he was almost dead, but from him came as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. Like the sand on the seashore, they could not be counted. All these great people died in faith. They did not get the things that God promised his people, but they saw them coming far in the future and were glad. They said they were like visitors and strangers on earth. (Hebrews 11:11-13)

God's promises are certain. In Genesis 12, God establishes a covenant with Abraham:

The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you, and I will place a curse on those who harm you. And all the people on earth will be blessed through you." (verses 1-3)

Abraham (God changed his name from Abram) lived a long life before seeing the fruit of a great nation. In fact, while he had children, he didn't live long enough to experience the full breadth of what God had planned. We're still living within those plans. None of us will live to see the full legacy we leave behind unless Jesus comes to earth before we die and we personally experience the end of all life here on earth. While we experience many of God's promises, there are countless more in the process of being fulfilled. They are too vast for us to count, like grains of sand on a seashore.

One of my favorite places in the world to be is on a beach. I love to feel my toes dig into the sand. I enjoy the lapping of water against my ankles. I often meander along the shoreline, watching the water meet the sand, then soaking deep into the sand, carrying some sand away, bringing treasured shells and other items to the shore. The shoreline is constantly moving. To count the

number of grains of sand is impossible. I imagine taking a small bucket, filling it with sand, and counting what grains it contains, and the possible number and consumed time overwhelms me. Considering the constant change of the shoreline and the sand under and within the water, the task of counting all the sand grains is numbing.

Yet God knows exactly how many grains of sand there are. He knows exactly where each grain of sand is. He knows where it came from and whether it will cling to someone's foot, shift deep underneath millions of other grains of sand, or make a cross ocean journey. He knows the details of your life just as intimately.

How do you respond to God knowing the details of your life intimately?

On the last day of a vacation to the beach with my husband, we found a quiet place along the shore and soaked up as much of the atmosphere as we possibly could before leaving for the airport. We listened to and watched the waves. We felt the sand. We saw shadows dancing on the water and sand underneath passing clouds. We felt the fresh breeze. Every breath in such a beautiful place was a treasure. Tim decided to walk along the shoreline. I sat and watched as large waves crashed against the sand and rocks. I watched Tim's footsteps in the sand disappear behind him as the water rushed up the shore.

He asked me to take a few photos to put into perspective how large the waves were. I only had the camera on my phone with me, and it's difficult to catch the perfect moment of a wave, so I simply started snapping photos, one immediately after another, as quickly as my phone would allow. I hoped to capture at least a couple decent photos in the process.

When I later looked through the photos, it was as if I was browsing a slideshow. Each captured moment led into the next. Each was a moment of its own, but each was part of the overall story. None could tell the entire story by itself.

Our lives are like those snapshots. We mark moments in our lives, situations and seasons that most impact us. We often pull something out of context. Even when it remains in context, we don't see all the snapshots. God does. We might think we're hitting pause for a moment, but in reality, the waves keep lapping the seashore. The sand grains continue to shift. Our lives continue to grow, being impacted and having an impact. God sees how it all fits together.

You cannot see the complete motion picture of your life because human perspective is limited. But we can trust God for his promises. *We know that in everything God works for the good of those*

who love him. They are the people he called, because that was his plan. (Romans 8:28) Just as God kept his promise to Abraham, he will keep his promise to you.

Are you following God? Are you loving God? Are you trusting God?



Uphill Water

Happy are those whose strength comes from you, who want to travel to Jerusalem. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it like a spring. The autumn rains fill it with pools of water. The people get stronger as they go, and everyone meets with God in Jerusalem. Psalm 84:5-7

As I prepared to travel to Israel, I noticed the biblical references to travelling “up” to Jerusalem.

It was almost time for the Passover Feast. Many from the country went up to Jerusalem before the Passover to do the special things to make themselves pure. (John 11:55)

They were now on the way up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. The disciples were filled with awe, and the people following behind were overwhelmed with fear. Taking the twelve disciples aside, Jesus once more began to describe everything that was about to happen to him. (Mark 10:32, NLT)

When he landed at Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch. (Acts 18:22, NIV)

The journey to Jerusalem always involves going up, because it is about 2500 feet above sea level on Mount Zion, on higher ground than all that surrounded it. If you journeyed to the holy city for one of the annual festivals, you’d travel with many others, and as you did, you’d sing Psalms 120-134, which are known as Psalms of Ascent because of the journey upward.

Even though I didn’t always notice the incline as I walked to the Old City many times during my trip to Israel, I noticed the change in elevation across the surrounding areas. There was another location in Israel that stands out to me more than Jerusalem when it comes to height: Masada. However, it’s located at a mere 190 feet above sea level. It’s towering height is directly compared to the Dead Sea, which is 1388 feet below sea level. When I read Scriptures like Psalm 84 referring to travelling to Jerusalem and consider travelling *up* to the city, I consider the climb up Masada.

I didn't climb Masada by walking even though there is a path and I saw people on it. While I would have considered attempting it if I'd been by myself, I knew I'd miss the entire tour at the top if I tried it while my group was taking the cable car. Plus, the hike would certainly result in me being a puddle of smelly sweat by the time I defeated it. Masada looks like one huge towering mass of rock with a flat top. It ascends quickly, and the path is unprotected from the scorching sun. Walking around on the top to explore the remnants of the people who lived there was hot enough for me. Psalm 84:5 says, *"Happy are those whose strength comes from you, who want to travel to Jerusalem."* While I know the uphill climb to Jerusalem was more gradual than Masada, I also imagine the trek was long and arduous for many. They would need strength, and the best source of strength would come from God.

What have you needed strength during an uphill journey in life?

Travelling uphill takes effort. If you imagine being in a car on a steep hill facing the top of the hill, perhaps somewhere like San Francisco, you would easily coast backward to the bottom of the hill without having to do anything. With no effort, you'd descend. To stay in one place, you have to exert effort to at the very least put on the brake. In order to reach the top, you have to exert effort and rely on help from the car's engine and other mechanics by pressing on the accelerator.

The way to spiritually ascend a hill and reach the top is being willing to exert effort, and even more important, relying on God for the strength and "how to" of ascending.

When you reach the top with God's help, you will be renewed even when the process has been difficult. Psalm 84 refers to the happy people accessing God's strength and nourishing refreshment of water. When people arrived in Jerusalem, they'd be spiritually refreshed and nourished. They might be physically exhausted. They might be in pain. They might be mourning someone who died along the way. They might be hungry. But there would be nourishing refreshment to mark the accomplishment of arriving where God wanted them to be.

God can refresh wherever he wants. Water doesn't usually flow uphill. In fact, because water naturally flows downhill, the tops of unprotected and highly elevated locations are often quite dry. Such is the case with Masada. It is a parched land. There are water sources not far from Masada's base, but to retrieve water on a regular basis would be exhausting. As a better option, Herod built a water navigation system to transport water from nearby wadis to two large cisterns at the top of Masada. This made Masada a powerful fortress for Jewish zealots years later.

God makes a way when there seems to be no way. God nourishes and refreshes in unexpected ways. We might hesitate to begin a journey because it doesn't make sense to us. We can't

imagine it being for our benefit. We can't imagine God would ask us to take such an arduous journey. We don't know what's waiting for us at the top. That's often when God will have us take the first step of ascent.

Consider what currently looks like an uphill journey to you. Are you willing to rely on God through the journey in spite of your apprehension?

Take the first step. Or if you've begun the ascent but are getting exhausted, trust God for strength to continue. You can rely on him to refresh you with a spring that nourishes from within.



Seasonal Gifts

How terrible it will be for the land beyond the rivers of Cush. It is filled with the sound of wings. That land sends messengers across the sea; they go on the water in boats made of reeds. Go, quick messengers, to a people who are tall and smooth-skinned, who are feared everywhere. They are a powerful nation that defeats other nations. Their land is divided by rivers.

All you people of the world, look! Everyone who lives in the world, look! You will see a banner raised on a mountain. You will hear a trumpet sound. The Lord said to me, "I will quietly watch from where I live, like heat in the sunshine, like the dew in the heat of harvest time. The time will come, after the flowers have bloomed and before the harvest, when new grapes will be budding and growing. The enemy will cut the plants with knives; he will cut down the vines and take them away. They will be left for the birds of the mountains and for the wild animals. Birds will feed on them all summer, and wild animals will eat them that winter. At that time a gift will be brought to the Lord All-Powerful from the people who are tall and smooth-skinned, who are feared everywhere. They are a powerful nation that defeats other nations. Their land is divided by rivers. These gifts will be brought to the place of the Lord All-Powerful, to Mount Zion." Isaiah 18

When do you give gifts?

These verses in Isaiah refer to a time indicated not by a specific date but marked by a series of events, one leading to another. The time guidelines are given so the hearer will know when the appropriate time will be to present a gift to the Lord. In order to mark the specific time, the hearer will need to pay attention. God is intentional about calling us to attention because he wants us to pay attention to him with intention. He knows that our relationship with him will greatly prosper when we're actively engaged with his will and provision.

Marking the calendar with a specific day a gift is supposed to be presented would be much easier. We'd know exactly what to do and why. Many of the feasts of the Old Testament fall into

this category. Christmas and Easter are probably the closest we have as New Testament believers, but if we're honest, God didn't direct us to organize special services, plays, and programs for these holidays. We don't really know the specific date to celebrate Jesus' birth. The date of Easter, on the other hand, changes each year, yet it's more consistent with the reality of Jesus' resurrection. Early church leaders determined to keep the observance of Easter in relation to the Jewish Passover, because Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection occurred after Passover. The Jewish holiday calendar is based on solar and lunar cycles, so observed feast dates shift from one year to another.

Let's consider what God's Word says about gifts, specifically in the New Testament.

When the wise men saw the star, they were filled with joy. They came to the house where the child was and saw him with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. They opened their gifts and gave him treasures of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (Matthew 2:10-11)

There are different kinds of gifts, but they are all from the same Spirit. There are different ways to serve but the same Lord to serve. And there are different ways that God works through people but the same God. God works in all of us in everything we do. Something from the Spirit can be seen in each person, for the common good. The Spirit gives one person the ability to speak with wisdom, and the same Spirit gives another the ability to speak with knowledge. The same Spirit gives faith to one person. And, to another, that one Spirit gives gifts of healing. The Spirit gives to another person the power to do miracles, to another the ability to prophesy. And he gives to another the ability to know the difference between good and evil spirits. The Spirit gives one person the ability to speak in different kinds of languages and to another the ability to interpret those languages. One Spirit, the same Spirit, does all these things, and the Spirit decides what to give each person. (1 Corinthians 12:4-11)

Christ gave those gifts to prepare God's holy people for the work of serving, to make the body of Christ stronger. This work must continue until we are all joined together in the same faith and in the same knowledge of the Son of God. We must become like a mature person, growing until we become like Christ and have his perfection. (Ephesians 4:12-13)

Gifts aren't seasonal. We can give and receive gifts any time. Perhaps one of your love languages is gift-giving. You find any excuse possible to give a gift, because it is how you pour into people in your life. But gift-giving isn't everyone's default setting. In fact, some people feel as if gifts are silly, a waste of time and money. From God's perspective, gifts are an expression of his love. He pours gifts into us because he loves us. His love is instructive. He wants us to pour out his love onto others, which is why his gifts equip us to work in the purpose he has created for each of us. Our gifts are not to be kept to ourselves. We're to share the enjoyment of them. Our gifts are for our benefit but only in the context of our relationship with God and the relationships we have with

others. Our gifts are to be used to glorify God, including working and living together in a biblical community with people around us and around the world.

Receiving, using, and sharing the gifts God gives us aren't defined by time but by a lifetime of live-out-loud faith. Our hands and hearts need to be open to receiving what God wants to gift us – whenever that might be. Our hands and hearts need to be open to giving what God wants to gift others – whenever that might be. Gift-giving isn't seasonal...unless you consider an entire life of faith a season!

How will you give God's gifts today?



Brevity of Life

I wait for the Lord to help me, and I trust his word. Psalm 130:5

Sometimes it's not about the wait. It's about abrupt timing. For example, my life has been rocked more than once by news of a sudden death. A friend's young daughter killed in an auto accident, a teen extended family member who died in an amusement park accident, more than one friend and family killed by drunk drivers. We get the news and nearly stop breathing. Our lives are on hold as we mourn. We recognize the brevity of life...briefly.

I wonder if it only has a brief effect because we don't fully understand the brevity of life as God intends. Brevity of life shocks us; we talk about lives cut short, potential unrealized, and dreams unfulfilled. We appreciate life, but do we realize the brevity of life? The purpose of realizing the brevity of life, according to Moses, the author of Psalm 90, is wisdom. When we gain wisdom, we grow in our knowledge of God:

I have not stopped giving thanks to God for you. I always remember you in my prayers, asking the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, to give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you will know him better. Ephesians 1:16-17

When we seek understanding, are we seeking understanding of our situation, or are we seeking understanding of God? The difference might appear subtle.

If you had to choose, would you rather...

- know how many days are left in your life, or know the purpose in each day of your life?**
- know the details of all remaining employment (and unemployment) situations, or be assured all your needs will be met?**

- **know how to resolve a conflict with a family member or friend, or be assured of your family member or friend's eternal life?**

God's wisdom and knowledge isn't the same as human wisdom and knowledge. *There is no wisdom, understanding, or advice that can succeed against the Lord.* (Proverbs 21:30). God wants us to realize the brevity of life because we grow in (God's) wisdom. When we grow in God's wisdom, we grow in our understanding of his character. When we know God's character, we can differentiate between our earthly understanding and his plan and purpose for us.

Realizing the brevity of life isn't about walking through a tragedy. It's about drawing closer to God, acknowledging him as the source of all life, knowledge and wisdom. We need our days to be filled with discernment between his wisdom and understanding and our own wisdom and understanding. We need to seek the heart of God so intensely we grow to know God's heart more than our own. We need to pursue him. He's already pursuing us.

Teach us how short our lives really are so that we may be wise. Psalm 90:12

Let's take another look at a part of Leviticus 26:3-5 and the assumptions we might incorrectly make:

If you remember my laws and commands and obey them...Then you will have plenty to eat and live safely in your land. Leviticus 26:3-5

What is *safely*?

I learned about safety growing up on the farm, but I also had a lot of adventures. I had a blast playing around the farm and in the woods. I didn't have a lot of fear. Looking back, I think of "what could have happened" and shudder.

I wasn't supposed to be outside without shoes. Generally, the rule was only enforced beyond the yard. I could understand that. There were all kinds of sharp objects around the barns and other buildings. My sister had stepped on a pitchfork once. I preferred bare feet and still do. One day, I was playing in the yard, and a barn cat ran under the old porch. I *needed* to rescue him. One rusty nail and a tetanus shot later, I still hadn't caught the cat.

I could have stayed in the house. It would have been a safe zone – or at least safe from rusty nails.

We often stay in the safe zone. What if we don't take any risks? What if we're not bold? We want the people we love to be safe. There's security in safety. Even those who thrive on adventure would prefer to be safe at the end of the adventure. We often want a thrill, but it's a time-limited

experience. We don't live on the constant high of a thrill. We want an underlying, dependable foundation of security.

Where do you fall on the safety/adventure scale? Which do you prefer?

What unsettles you about the opposite end of the spectrum?

Living the life God intends isn't safe. Read the Bible. He's not a safe God. He's a God of refuge. He's a God of trust. He's a God of dependability. But he's not safe. Look around you. Life isn't black and white. "Good guys" die young. "Bad guys" get away with some things. Or so it seems. We need to broaden our perspective. Even when we broaden our perspective, we can't broaden it enough to see life from God's perspective, but we can know him better, and by knowing him better, even when we don't understand, we trust.

We trust God enough that when we're bold, we know we're safe. Not the kind of safety we prefer perhaps but safe in knowing who God is, the guidance he gives us to live the life he intends, and the provision he's given us to live eternally with him because of our personal relationship with Jesus. If we choose it.

When we choose to play it safe, we'll miss out on some opportunities God gives us to be bold in his name. When we're bold for God, we're safe in the security of his plan. I'd rather be bold in obedience to God and not be safe by the world's standards than shrink from the person he wants me to be. Listen to God's guidance. Live by his rules. He'll allow room for adventures. Enjoy the thrill!

How does the following verse speak to you?

And this is the boldness we have in God's presence: that if we ask God for anything that agrees with what he wants, he hears us. 1 John 5:14

Obedience seems like such a simple thing. You either obey or not. You have a choice to say "yes" or "no." Yet, when have you struggled with obedience?

It's a "when" and not an "if." I'm assuming you, like me, have disobeyed. I'd even venture to guess you've disobeyed knowingly, not because you didn't know of a rule or guideline. After all, we're human. We mess up...even when we have the best of intentions.

But what do we do once we mess up and realize it? Rationalize. Excuse. Reason. Ignore. Oh...and sometimes, apologize. We live in a society which generally encourages our rationalizations. Right or wrong appears relative, so no matter what our stance, we can find someone to support us.

When have you said "yes" when you should have said "no"?

When have you said "no" when you should have said "yes"?

The football coach of my high school team used to say, “Should’ve, would’ve and could’ve means you didn’t.” It’s time to stop the excuses and take responsibility.

Joyful are people of integrity, who follow the instructions of the Lord.

Joyful are those who obey his laws and search for him with all their hearts.

They do not compromise with evil, and they walk only in his paths.

You have charged us to keep your commandments carefully.

Oh, that my actions would consistently reflect your decrees!

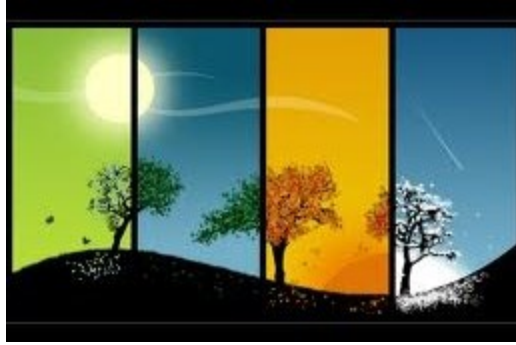
Then I will not be ashamed when I compare my life with your commands.

As I learn your righteous regulations, I will thank you by living as I should!

I will obey your decrees. Please don’t give up on me! Psalm 119: 1-8

Obedience isn’t just about you. It’s about God.

Everything God made is waiting with excitement for God to show his children’s glory completely. Romans 8:19



Week Six: When There's No Quick Fix

Then the whole group answered Ezra with a loud voice, "Ezra, you're right! We must do what you say. But there are many people here, and it's the rainy season. We can't stand outside, and this problem can't be solved in a day or two, because we have sinned badly. Let our officers make a decision for the whole group. Then let everyone in our towns who has married a non-Jewish woman meet with the elders and judges of each town at a planned time, until the hot anger of our God turns away from us." Ezra 10:12-14

When have you experienced a problem that can't be solved in a day or two?

When have you experienced a problem that didn't just involve you but needed a small (or large) group of people to solve (as well as to create) the problem?

At first glance, the people speaking to Ezra seem to be whining, making excuses and shirking responsibility. I wonder if that's our response because we often make excuses and shirk responsibility, especially when we're surrounded by tough problems that can't be solved right away. But the people weren't complaining. They were looking to leadership. Ezra 10:4 says, "Get up, Ezra. You are in charge, and we will support you. Have courage and do it." Ezra has proven himself to be a good leader, and people are ready to be led. There's more baggage here than what you might assume, because the people Ezra led were captives. Coming out of captivity can lead to a couple responses: (1) following any leader, good or bad, because they don't know how to do things on their own; (2) responding in protest to any leader, good or bad, because of past experiences.

Problem-solving isn't done in isolation. God created us to live in biblical community, and there is no area of life immune to life in community. We certainly don't share everything with everyone, but we're intended to share our experiences, struggles, and triumphs in order to encourage others and be encouraged. Our culture treasures independence in many ways, so we're told to problem-solve for ourselves. Learning to assess a situation and find feasible solutions is a good skill

to have, but doing so in isolation is simply not biblical. Whether we take the lead in reaching a solution or follow another's lead, we need to be learning from others and our own experiences in order to grow. The people following Ezra were aware of the need for community. Ezra was aware of the need for community. It was their combined efforts that would help them solve the problems at hand, meet the challenges and grow in faith and community.

Problem-solving takes patience, humility, and discernment.

Problems rarely get solved overnight. We want to snap our fingers and get things “back to normal” as quickly as possible, when the truth is, change and adjustments are typically more normal than smooth, non-winding roads with no detours. Sometimes we get impatient with the situation, and sometimes we're mostly impatient with the people involved.

Do you tend to be more impatient with people or situations?

Situations always involve people. We often blame people for situations. We could entwine the two so much that we get stuck in the process of evaluating root causes. Knowing root causes can be good in some situations, because they can help us move forward in resolution, but if we become too focused on causes, looking exclusively in the rearview mirror instead of keeping our eyes forward and only looking backward as a safety precaution and perspective check, we can end up crashing into something because of our negligence or getting lost. In order to get to where we're supposed to be, we need to know where we've been and where we are...but also look on the horizon to drive as straight as possible to where we're going.

When we begin to play the blame game, we get stuck. We get stuck in anger, shame, guilt, anxiety and frustration. We feel victimized, mistreated, or overlooked. The truth is we might be all of those things, but we don't have to get stuck in the situations. We can acknowledge the truth of our lives and experiences but know that we're not the sum of our experiences. We are who God says we are, and people around us are who God says they are – not who we want them to be, believe them to be, or expect them to be.

Problem-solving includes humility. It involves humility with others, acknowledging that we don't have all the answers. Humility is being who we are in God. That means that when God wants us to stand up, we stand up. When God wants us to sit down, we sit down. When God wants us to speak up, we speak up. When God wants us to shut up, we shut up. We don't personally decide what is best for each situation. We let God decide. We're humble in his presence because he knows what is best for us. His will becomes our will because what we want most is whatever God wants. Without humility, we will attempt to take charge – among people as well as with God – and might

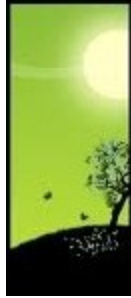
get a false sense of success at times but will be out of the will of God in our jaded self-sufficiency. Humility – setting ourselves aside – is one of the most difficult but best lessons we can learn.

Problem-solving involves discernment. No matter what your role in coming to a solution, you must discern God's will. You can't figure it out all by yourself. You also shouldn't believe you're not capable of figuring anything out. God made you in his image, so you are a thinking, rational person. Relying too much on the intellect he's given you or setting it aside and ignoring it isn't his intention. Both are self-centered. Discernment cannot be self-centered or self-serving in its very nature. It is yielding to the Holy Spirit for guidance. It is letting God decide and consequently pour into you, equipping you to hear, follow, and complete his path. You were created to discern because of the relationship you can have with God. Ignoring him isn't discernment. Setting him aside isn't discernment. Only listening and yielding, giving yourself to his will and ways, is discernment.

Patience, humility and discernment are all needed in solving problems in community. You might or might not have been part of the problem, but you are likely part of the solution. You might be the formal leader of a group solving a problem. Whether or not you are, you will have influence on others, so choose your reactions and actions wisely. Reflect God in all you say and do. When you are leading, lead well. When you are following, follow well. In most cases, you will be leading and following simultaneously. You will be listening and taking in information, sharing ownership, and stepping out in faith. Ezra stepped out in faith, and so did those following him.

Trust God. He will always guide.

Are you currently faced with a problem that needs to be solved? Without betraying confidences, feel free to share how you're being challenged in patience, humility or discernment through the situation.



The Promise of Restoration

Come, let's go back to the Lord. He has hurt us, but he will heal us. He has wounded us, but he will bandage our wounds. In two days he will put new life in us; on the third day he will raise us up so that we may live in his presence and know him. Let's try to learn about the Lord; he will come to us as surely as the dawn comes. He will come to us like rain, like the spring rain that waters the ground.

The Lord says, "Israel, what should I do with you? Judah, what should I do with you? Your faithfulness is like a morning mist, like the dew that goes away early in the day. I have warned you by my prophets that I will kill you and destroy you. My justice comes out like bright light. I want faithful love more than I want animal sacrifices. I want people to know me more than I want burnt offerings. But they have broken the agreement as Adam did; they have been unfaithful to me. Gilead is a city of people who do evil; their footprints are bloody. The priests are like robbers waiting to attack people; they murder people on the road to Shechem and do wicked things. I have seen horrible things in Israel. Look at Israel's prostitution; Israel has become unclean. Judah, I have set a harvest time for you when I will make the lives of my people good again." Hosea 6

Let's dig into the context of Hosea 6. Throughout the book of Hosea, mentions of curses, blessings, and agreement (or covenant) refer to the Mosaic (or Sinai) covenant, which is found in the first five books of the Old Testament. (Deuteronomy 28 is an excellent place to gather an overview of many of the blessings and curses.) It is the agreement between God and Israel. It is what Christians refer to as the old covenant. As with any covenant God makes, it is binding. If the Israelites obey, God will bless them. If the Israelites disobey, God will curse them. Both God and the Israelites are bound to the terms of the agreement. In this way, the covenant is conditional. However, God's promise of Israel as his chosen people is unconditional. The Mosaic Covenant promised God would bless the world with his Word and Son, Jesus, through the nation of Israel.

Given this context, what do you notice about Hosea 6?

The first several verses focus on hope. Reconciliation with God is always possible. Let's fast forward to the New Testament and new covenant. It wasn't "new" to God. He knew exactly what would happen. He didn't make a mistake through the old covenant and have to create a "do over." That's not possible with God. He knew there would be a perfect time for his Son to come to earth and sacrifice himself for the sin of all people, including you and me. We don't completely understand how God is outside of time and present in all time at the same time, because we're bound by earthly time and human understanding. The point isn't about whether or not we understand God's timing. The point is whether or not we accept his redemption.

The new covenant is first mentioned in Jeremiah:

"Look, the time is coming," says the Lord, "when I will make a new agreement with the people of Israel and the people of Judah. It will not be like the agreement I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt. I was a husband to them, but they broke that agreement," says the Lord. "This is the agreement I will make with the people of Israel at that time," says the Lord: "I will put my teachings in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. People will no longer have to teach their neighbors and relatives to know the Lord, because all people will know me, from the least to the most important," says the Lord. "I will forgive them for the wicked things they did, and I will not remember their sins anymore."
(Jeremiah 31:31-34)

We now live under the new covenant. We are promised hope, and it comes with a choice. Soak in Romans 8. Choose wisely and firmly.

So now, those who are in Christ Jesus are not judged guilty. Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit that brings life made you free from the law that brings sin and death. The law was without power, because the law was made weak by our sinful selves. But God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son to earth with the same human life that others use for sin. By sending his Son to be an offering for sin, God used a human life to destroy sin. He did this so that we could be the kind of people the law correctly wants us to be. Now we do not live following our sinful selves, but we live following the Spirit.

Those who live following their sinful selves think only about things that their sinful selves want. But those who live following the Spirit are thinking about the things the Spirit wants them to do. If people's thinking is controlled by the sinful self, there is death. But if their thinking is controlled by the Spirit, there is life and peace. When people's thinking is controlled by the sinful self, they are against God, because they refuse to obey God's law and really are not even able to obey God's law. Those people who are ruled by their sinful selves cannot please God.

But you are not ruled by your sinful selves. You are ruled by the Spirit, if that Spirit of God really lives in you. But the person who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Christ. Your body will always be dead

because of sin. But if Christ is in you, then the Spirit gives you life, because Christ made you right with God. God raised Jesus from the dead, and if God's Spirit is living in you, he will also give life to your bodies that die. God is the One who raised Christ from the dead, and he will give life through his Spirit that lives in you.

So, my brothers and sisters, we must not be ruled by our sinful selves or live the way our sinful selves want. If you use your lives to do the wrong things your sinful selves want, you will die spiritually. But if you use the Spirit's help to stop doing the wrong things you do with your body, you will have true life.

The true children of God are those who let God's Spirit lead them. The Spirit we received does not make us slaves again to fear; it makes us children of God. With that Spirit we cry out, "Father." And the Spirit himself joins with our spirits to say we are God's children. If we are God's children, we will receive blessings from God together with Christ. But we must suffer as Christ suffered so that we will have glory as Christ has glory. The sufferings we have now are nothing compared to the great glory that will be shown to us. (Romans 8:1-18)

How will you respond?



Timed Training

You are struggling against sin, but your struggles have not yet caused you to be killed. You have forgotten the encouraging words that call you his children: “My child, don’t think the Lord’s discipline is worth nothing, and don’t stop trying when he corrects you. The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as his child.” So hold on through your sufferings, because they are like a father’s discipline. God is treating you as children. All children are disciplined by their fathers. If you are never disciplined (and every child must be disciplined), you are not true children. We have all had fathers here on earth who disciplined us, and we respected them. So it is even more important that we accept discipline from the Father of our spirits so we will have life. Our fathers on earth disciplined us for a short time in the way they thought was best. But God disciplines us to help us, so we can become holy as he is. We do not enjoy being disciplined. It is painful at the time, but later, after we have learned from it, we have peace, because we start living in the right way. (Hebrews 11:4-11)

Discipline is paramount in faith. In order for discipline to have maximize effect, there must be a relationship.

How is the discipline you experience from God dependent on your relationship with him?

How is the discipline you’ve experienced with people in your life, whether on the giving or receiving end, dependent on your relationships?

We had our dog Jip for 17 years and missed him when he was gone. We knew we wanted another dog at some point, but we wanted to think through the best timing. We weren’t ready the spring after Jip died, but we thought spring would be the best time, since it would give us many months outside before the harsh months of winter. Our next dog would be an outside dog, like Jip was, and we wanted as much time as possible to teach and train him and build a relationship with

him. The two go hand-in-hand. If I walk up to a dog at the park, he will likely not respond to me as promptly as to his owner. I could also build a relationship with a dog and not teach or train him. He wouldn't be disciplined, and in the process, would frustrate me at times and be frustrated about expectations and boundaries. In many ways, Jip was undisciplined. He was a good dog, but it was a good thing he was low maintenance. Because the girls were young when we got Jip, I didn't have the time or energy to train a dog. I had my hands full with two daughters. Truth be told, I could have trained Jip, but it wasn't a priority for me at the time. I loved him with care, but I didn't love him with discipline.

We picked up Della in the spring when she was only eight weeks old. We had the entire summer ahead of us. She settled into her new home quickly. She seemed comfortable with us, and we loved spending time with her. We began the discipline process right away. In fact, her previous owners had already started teaching her a few things, so Della had a head start with us. We wove establishing a relationship and discipline tightly together, so she knew what to expect from us, and we could depend on her to respond. Of course, the discipline process isn't without speed bumps along the way. If we relax a boundary, she quickly begins to develop a bad habit. Sometimes we have to take a step back and repeat a lesson in order to move forward and learn more.

God teaches us in the same way. Our relationship with him and the discipline we experience are intricately tied.

What if we only experienced God's discipline without an established relationship?

What if our relationship with God was void of discipline?

We are blessed to not have to experience either of these situations. God wants a relationship with us. As Creator, he already has a relationship with us. When we accept him as Lord and Savior, the relationship deepens. Not only do we have a relationship with God, but God is love (1 John 4:8). He cannot separate himself from love, because it's who he is. And God's love isn't the touchy-feeling middle school love kind of love. It's more than we can imagine.

What does Ephesians 3 reveal to you about God's love?

I pray that Christ will live in your hearts by faith and that your life will be strong in love and be built on love. And I pray that you and all God's holy people will have the power to understand the greatness of Christ's love—how wide and how long and how high and how deep that love is. Christ's love is greater than anyone can ever know,

but I pray that you will be able to know that love. Then you can be filled with the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:17-19)

God wants us to be filled with his love. He wants us to live out the love he gives us. He wants us to be vessels of his love. Living by faith means living in community with others, loving one another with God's love, which means we need to (1) establish and invest in relationships and (2) love with truth and correction. We need to live in discipline with each other.

Who is currently in your life who personally disciplines you, challenging you to grow in your relationship with God?

Who is currently in your life whom you discipline, challenging her or him to grow in relationship with God?

As iron sharpens iron, so people can improve each other. (Proverbs 27:17)



Sin No More?

But the people of Judah are stubborn and have turned against me. They have turned aside and gone away from me. They do not say to themselves, "We should fear the Lord our God, who gives us autumn and spring rains in their seasons, who makes sure we have the harvest at the right time." But your evil has kept away both rain and harvest. Your sins have kept you from enjoying good things. Jeremiah 5:23-25

Sin isn't widely accepted in today's world – at least not the acknowledgement of it. Emphasis seems to be on freedom: the freedom to do, support, and tolerate whatever someone wants. (The irony is that one freedom seems to be left out: the freedom to judge or condemn. Not that we need to personally judge or condemn someone by assuming God's role as judge, but we can and should certainly discern between God's right and wrong and encourage others to live by God's standards in order to fulfill the purpose God has for each of us.)

As with so many areas of life, we have redefined God's meaning of a concept.

We have freedom now, because Christ made us free. So stand strong. Do not change and go back into the slavery of the law. (Galatians 5:1)

My brothers and sisters, God called you to be free, but do not use your freedom as an excuse to do what pleases your sinful self. Serve each other with love. (Galatians 5:13)

Let's highlight what God is telling us.

- Our freedom comes from Christ.
- Christ makes us strong.
- We should choose freedom over slavery.
- God plans for us to be free in him.
- Freedom cannot be used as an excuse for sin.

- Freedom requires service.
- Service should be accompanied with love.

How does what God’s Word says about freedom and the world says about freedom differ?

Freedom from God is not a burden. We leave the burden behind when we replace slavery with freedom.

Has freedom in God ever felt like a burden to you? How?

Living life for God isn’t always easy. We can feel as if we’re under a weight of pressure, wanting to insure we do everything as God intends. God certainly has high expectations of his children, but God doesn’t intend for us to feel the same pressure felt by a child of parents with extremely high expectations when one slight slip might mar the child’s possibilities and the parents’ favor for a lifetime.

But God had special plans for me and set me apart for his work even before I was born. He called me through his grace. (Galatians 1:15)

What do the following verses reveal about God’s expectations of you?

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Glory be to him now and forever! Amen. (2 Peter 3:18)

Jesus has the power of God, by which he has given us everything we need to live and to serve God. We have these things because we know him. Jesus called us by his glory and goodness. (2 Peter 1:3)

I do not mean that I am already as God wants me to be. I have not yet reached that goal, but I continue trying to reach it and to make it mine. Christ wants me to do that, which is the reason he made me his. Brothers and sisters, I know that I have not yet reached that goal, but there is one thing I always do. Forgetting the past and straining toward what is ahead, I keep trying to reach the goal and get the prize for which God called me through Christ to the life above. (Philippians 3:12-14)

God has high expectations and intends for you to live a purposeful life for him, but his purpose includes a process of spiritual growth. God’s plan involves both purpose and process. Both the purpose for and process of our lives in Jesus include freedom. God’s gift of freedom comes with the release of burden and the commitment to set aside sin.

We cannot allow sin in our lives because of the freedom God gives us. Of course, that doesn't mean we're perfect here on earth. Remember, spiritual growth is a process. However, just because God meets us where we are, forgives our sins, and extends his grace is not an excuse to continue doing something we know is wrong. Define "wrong" by God's standards, not the world's. Wrong is anything that pulls you away from God. It's anything that isn't right on target with God's will. It's missing the mark of what you're supposed to do and who you're supposed to be, which is the same thing as...sin.

Refusing to excuse sin because of the freedom God gives us means we don't say it's easier to ask forgiveness than permission. If we know we're doing something that might require asking for forgiveness, we probably need to deal with it before moving forward. Refusing to excuse sin because of the freedom God gives us also means we don't compare ourselves to others, justifying "at least we're not doing what *that* person is doing" or, phrased in a positive way, "at least I'm generally a good person." Being good isn't good enough. We can't be good enough for God, because that means we're relying on our own works, not his grace. That's not to say we don't work our best for him, but our work comes out of his grace. Our work is the fruit of our faith. We do good works because we want to honor God, not because we're trying to earn our way to heaven. There's only one way to do that:

If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and if you believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, you will be saved. We believe with our hearts, and so we are made right with God. And we declare with our mouths that we believe, and so we are saved. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be disappointed." That Scripture says "anyone" because there is no difference between those who are Jews and those who are not. The same Lord is the Lord of all and gives many blessings to all who trust in him, as the Scripture says, "Anyone who calls on the Lord will be saved." But before people can ask the Lord for help, they must believe in him; and before they can believe in him, they must hear about him; and for them to hear about the Lord, someone must tell them. (Romans 10:9-14)



Death for Life

Today's reading is a long one, but it's rich with details, lessons, and promises. In order to soak it in, read it aloud. Hearing and speaking the Word increases the impact it will have. You will increasingly claim God's Word as you become more familiar with it.

As Jesus left the Temple and was walking away, his followers came up to show him the Temple's buildings. Jesus asked, "Do you see all these buildings? I tell you the truth, not one stone will be left on another. Every stone will be thrown down to the ground."

Later, as Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, his followers came to be alone with him. They said, "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that it is time for you to come again and for this age to end?"

Jesus answered, "Be careful that no one fools you. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will fool many people. You will hear about wars and stories of wars that are coming, but don't be afraid. These things must happen before the end comes. Nations will fight against other nations; kingdoms will fight against other kingdoms. There will be times when there is no food for people to eat, and there will be earthquakes in different places. These things are like the first pains when something new is about to be born."

"Then people will arrest you, hand you over to be hurt, and kill you. They will hate you because you believe in me. At that time, many will lose their faith, and they will turn against each other and hate each other. Many false prophets will come and cause many people to believe lies. There will be more and more evil in the world, so most people will stop showing their love for each other. But those people who keep their faith until the end will be saved. The Good News about God's kingdom will be preached in all the world, to every nation. Then the end will come."

"Daniel the prophet spoke about 'a blasphemous object that brings destruction.' You will see this standing in the holy place." (You who read this should understand what it means.) "At that time, the people in Judea should run

away to the mountains. If people are on the roofs of their houses, they must not go down to get anything out of their houses. If people are in the fields, they must not go back to get their coats. At that time, how terrible it will be for women who are pregnant or have nursing babies! Pray that it will not be winter or a Sabbath day when these things happen and you have to run away, because at that time there will be much trouble. There will be more trouble than there has ever been since the beginning of the world until now, and nothing as bad will ever happen again. God has decided to make that terrible time short. Otherwise, no one would go on living. But God will make that time short to help the people he has chosen. At that time, someone might say to you, 'Look, there is the Christ!' Or another person might say, 'There he is!' But don't believe them. False Christs and false prophets will come and perform great wonders and miracles. They will try to fool even the people God has chosen, if that is possible. Now I have warned you about this before it happens."

"If people tell you, 'The Christ is in the desert,' don't go there. If they say, 'The Christ is in the inner room,' don't believe it. When the Son of Man comes, he will be seen by everyone, like lightning flashing from the east to the west. Wherever the dead body is, there the vultures will gather. Soon after the trouble of those days, 'the sun will grow dark, and the moon will not give its light. The stars will fall from the sky. And the powers of the heavens will be shaken.' At that time, the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky. Then all the peoples of the world will cry. They will see the Son of Man coming on clouds in the sky with great power and glory. He will use a loud trumpet to send his angels all around the earth, and they will gather his chosen people from every part of the world."

"Learn a lesson from the fig tree: When its branches become green and soft and new leaves appear, you know summer is near. In the same way, when you see all these things happening, you will know that the time is near, ready to come. I tell you the truth, all these things will happen while the people of this time are still living. Earth and sky will be destroyed, but the words I have said will never be destroyed." Matthew 24

What stands out to you from Matthew 24?

Let's focus on the last several verses, keeping them in the context of the entire chapter. Even when celebrating the beauty of summer and the fulfillment of possible growth and blooming, it's important to keep such beauty in the context of the seasons surrounding it. After all, the season of spring with its planting and growth led into summer, and the decline and chill of fall will follow. Many aspects of nature deteriorate in fall in order to break down and benefit the earth through the quiet dormancy of winter...in preparation for spring and summer again. The cycle repeats itself over and over.

Jesus knows what is coming in the future, and he wants everyone to know the signs of what's to come. He uses the illustration of the familiar fig tree to place a mark on the spiritual

calendar. Even though the fig tree will be in the middle of a healthy growth process, death will follow. Destruction is necessary before growth. To be more specific, destruction is necessary for your personal growth.

Jesus uses another illustration when he's talking about his own death:

Jesus said to them, "The time has come for the Son of Man to receive his glory. I tell you the truth, a grain of wheat must fall to the ground and die to make many seeds. But if it never dies, it remains only a single seed. Those who love their lives will lose them, but those who hate their lives in this world will keep true life forever. Whoever serves me must follow me. Then my servant will be with me everywhere I am. My Father will honor anyone who serves me."

(John 12:23-26)

In order to live, we must die. We get to live with God for eternity, but we must die to ourselves as we live on earth. It's a concept that is hard to understand, accept and act upon. We like to see things from our own perspective. We think we can understand more when we're in control. But the truth is we're not in control anyway. We have choices, but whether we choose to accept him or not, God is God. He Creator; we're created.

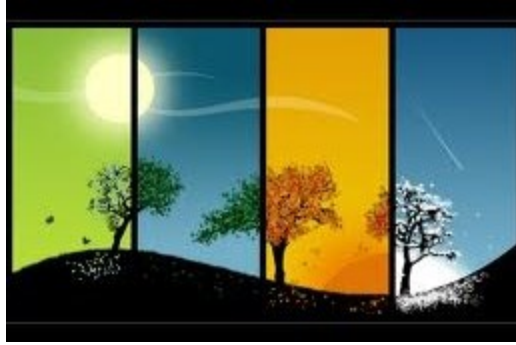
It's not about us. It's not about you. We live in a narcissistic culture that says, "Put yourself first. Protect yourself. You have rights, and you need to claim them with everything you have. You're entitled." Even Christians jump on the entitlement bandwagon. Have you ever heard someone say, "We stopped going to that church because our needs weren't being met?" or "When _____ happened, no one said anything to us or stopped by to ask us how we were doing. They don't care, so why should we?"

Starting with our own standards and expectations is not only narcissistic but also against God's Word. We don't follow Jesus to get our needs met. We follow Jesus to serve others – just as Jesus set as an example for us.

Jesus called all the followers together and said, "You know that the rulers of the non-Jewish people love to show their power over the people. And their important leaders love to use all their authority. But it should not be that way among you. Whoever wants to become great among you must serve the rest of you like a servant. Whoever wants to become first among you must serve the rest of you like a slave. In the same way, the Son of Man did not come to be served. He came to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many people." (Matthew 20:25-28)

Serving requires a sacrifice of self. Faith requires a death of self.

Let God reveal to you what needs to be destroyed within yourself in order to fully yield to God. He wants to grow you through each season of life, including the decay of self in order to nourish the unfolding beauty of the Spirit in you.



Answered Prayers

Then Job answered: "I wish my suffering could be weighed and my misery put on scales. My sadness would be heavier than the sand of the seas. No wonder my words seem careless. The arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks in their poison; God's terrors are gathered against me. A wild donkey does not bray when it has grass to eat, and an ox is quiet when it has feed. Tasteless food is not eaten without salt, and there is no flavor in the white of an egg. I refuse to touch it; such food makes me sick."

"How I wish that I might have what I ask for and that God would give me what I hope for. How I wish God would crush me and reach out his hand to destroy me. Then I would have this comfort and be glad even in this unending pain, because I would know I did not reject the words of the Holy One. I do not have the strength to wait. There is nothing to hope for, so why should I be patient? I do not have the strength of stone; my flesh is not bronze. I have no power to help myself, because success has been taken away from me."

"They say, 'A person's friends should be kind to him when he is in trouble, even if he stops fearing the Almighty.' But my brothers cannot be counted on. They are like streams that do not always flow, streams that sometimes run over. They are made dark by melting ice and rise with melting snow. But they stop flowing in the dry season; they disappear when it is hot. Travelers turn away from their paths and go into the desert and die. The groups of travelers from Tema look for water, and the traders of Sheba look hopefully. They are upset because they had been sure; when they arrive, they are disappointed. You also have been no help. You see something terrible, and you are afraid."

"I have never said, 'Give me a gift. Use your wealth to pay my debt. Save me from the enemy's power. Buy me back from the clutches of cruel people.' Teach me, and I will be quiet. Show me where I have been wrong. Honest words are painful, but your arguments prove nothing. Do you mean to correct what I say? Will you treat the words of a troubled man as if they were only wind? You would even gamble for orphans and would trade away your friend."

“But now please look at me. I would not lie to your face. Change your mind; do not be unfair; think again, because my innocence is being questioned. What I am saying is not wicked; I can tell the difference between right and wrong.” Job 6

What stands out to you about Job’s words?

If anyone could say he was going through a winter of life, it would be Job. Literally, life was dying and drastically changing around him. Death and bleakness surrounded him. But who did he call out to in his bleakness? God!

Job’s conversations with God didn’t cease. He wasn’t thrilled with his situation. He was discouraged, frustrated, and even desperate. But he relies on God. *How I wish that I might have what I ask for and that God would give me what I hope for. How I wish God would crush me and reach out his hand to destroy me* (verses 8-9). He knows God can give him what he most wants (at the time) even if what he wants is self-destruction. Of course, just because Job wants something doesn’t mean he’ll get it, because God balances his will and what is best for us in the long run with what we think is best for us in the short term. God understands how all things work together. He knows our passing frustrations and our deep-seated needs. He’s aware of the length, depth, and breadth of our needs and desires, and he knows the purity and impurity of our reliance on him through every step of the way.

When have you asked God for something you truly wanted at the time but are thankful he didn’t give you?

There was a popular song years ago called *Unanswered Prayers* by Garth Brooks about thankfulness about the prayers that didn’t get answered. It was a beautiful song. I could relate to many of the “unanswered prayer” situations listed in the song. Yet I knew it wasn’t prayers God hadn’t answered that I was most thankful for, because God doesn’t neglect to answer our prayers. It’s just that we don’t get the answer for which we were most looking. We think God will give us exactly what we want because of isolated verses such as

So I tell you to believe that you have received the things you ask for in prayer, and God will give them to you.
(Mark 11:24)

If you remain in me and follow my teachings, you can ask anything you want, and it will be given to you.
(John 15:7)

I tell you the truth, my Father will give you anything you ask for in my name. (John 16:23)

When we read or hear these verses but don't get what we ask, we think God isn't holding up his end of the promise, but let's keep what God says in context of his character. He doesn't ever break a promise. It's not possible, because it's not who he is. He is consistent and reliable without exception. So, let's reconsider the above verses within the context of verses surrounding them. Particularly look for commands God is directing toward you and all his people through these words as well as conditional words such as "if" and "when."

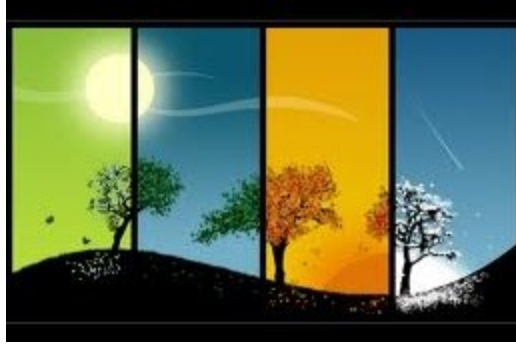
Jesus answered, "Have faith in God. I tell you the truth, you can say to this mountain, 'Go, fall into the sea.' And if you have no doubts in your mind and believe that what you say will happen, God will do it for you. So I tell you to believe that you have received the things you ask for in prayer, and God will give them to you. When you are praying, if you are angry with someone, forgive him so that your Father in heaven will also forgive your sins. But if you don't forgive other people, then your Father in heaven will not forgive your sins." (Mark 11:22-25)

If any do not remain in me, they are like a branch that is thrown away and then dies. People pick up dead branches, throw them into the fire, and burn them. If you remain in me and follow my teachings, you can ask anything you want, and it will be given to you. You should produce much fruit and show that you are my followers, which brings glory to my Father. I loved you as the Father loved me. Now remain in my love. I have obeyed my Father's commands, and I remain in his love. In the same way, if you obey my commands, you will remain in my love. I have told you these things so that you can have the same joy I have and so that your joy will be the fullest possible joy. This is my command: Love each other as I have loved you. (John 15:6-12)

I tell you the truth, you will cry and be sad, but the world will be happy. You will be sad, but your sadness will become joy. When a woman gives birth to a baby, she has pain, because her time has come. But when her baby is born, she forgets the pain, because she is so happy that a child has been born into the world. It is the same with you. Now you are sad, but I will see you again and you will be happy, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will not ask me for anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you anything you ask for in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy will be the fullest possible joy. (John 16:20-24)

How do these extended verses challenge you?

Just as we must keep God's Word in context, we must keep the lives he has for us in context. The season in which you're living right now will not last forever. In fact, the life in which you're living right now will not live forever. You have eternal life. This life in and of itself is a season. Let God speak his perspective into your season today.



Week Seven: Winds Blow and Waters Rush

Happy are those who don't listen to the wicked, who don't go where sinners go, who don't do what evil people do. They love the Lord's teachings, and they think about those teachings day and night. They are strong, like a tree planted by a river. The tree produces fruit in season, and its leaves don't die. Everything they do will succeed. But wicked people are not like that. They are like chaff that the wind blows away. So the wicked will not escape God's punishment. Sinners will not worship with God's people. This is because the Lord takes care of his people, but the wicked will be destroyed.

Psalm 1

Strength and resilience takes time to develop. Consider the plants alongside a river bank. The small shoots are quickly washed away when the water rises and rushes along the banks. Only the strong or protected survive. Waters recede and roots grow deeper. Seedlings eventually – through trials, nourishment, and time – develop into towering trees. By appearance, they might seem to be precariously perched on the waters' edge, ready to fall with a swift breeze, but the roots have dug deep. The tree survives because the roots have dug into unseen places of security. The roots provide the stability for the tree. Much of the tree is still exposed to the harsh elements of sun, wind, and water – elements that are also essential for nourishment, growth, and reproduction. What's exposed and what's hidden work together, providing for each other. One cannot flourish without the other.

Consider your life. Is it beautiful by the world's standards but with little foundation underneath, precariously perched, awaiting disaster at the slightest trial?

Is it firmly rooted but battered from the world's harsh treatment?

Is its growth stunted, desperately wanting growth but not able to get a firm hold in order to weather the elements and dig deep to find a firm hold of something solid? Is it longing for relief from too much sun, too much wind, or too much water – it's just *too much?*

Life sometimes seems “too much.” The trials and situations are exhausting. We get soaked and exhausted by the rushing water. We are parched by the scorching heat. It is in those “too much” moments that the roots we’ve established are our only means of survival. When our roots have dug deeply, they provide stability. When our roots have dug deep, they provide a means for nourishment.

Psalms 1 refers to the difference between God’s people and wicked people. To clarify, it’s not what we do that determines that we’re godly or wicked. It’s our roots. God’s people will make bad decisions. God’s people aren’t perfect. God’s people are not always good. However, God’s people have roots in God’s presence. They look to God’s Word for guidance. They trust God for provision even in the bleakest situations. They realize they aren’t stable without the stability of God. They’re only courageous because God is courageous. They’re strong because God is strong. Their identity is firmly founded in God as Creator. Wicked people are also created by God. They’re not inherently in a worse situation. They weren’t simply given a bad life, full of insurmountable problems. The thing that categorizes them as wicked people is something that can be easily changed. It’s up to them. Wicked people do not look to God for purpose and sustenance. They either choose to ignore him or choose to disobey him. Either way, there is a choice, just as godly people make a choice to acknowledge and obey God.

Who are you choosing: God or yourself?

If you’re not choosing God, no matter what alternative you think you’re choosing, you’re choosing yourself. To choose God is to deny self. To choose anything other than God is to promote self.

Perhaps you gave the obvious “Sunday school answer” to the above question: *Of course, you choose God.* After all, if you’re a Christian, to admit anything else is simply wrong. Take a deep breath and let God challenge you. Perhaps you’ve chosen God for your life in general, but let’s get specific. Each of us has opportunities to grow every day.

In what areas do you most struggle with allowing God to have complete control?

Admitting your areas of weakness isn’t weak. It’s humble. Humility takes strength: God’s strength. Until you admit you have a tight grip on something in your life and pause to pry open your fingers long enough, God will not mercifully lift it from your hand. We often hold onto things in the dark that he wants to draw into his light so we can see his perspective and grow us through the realities of the situation.

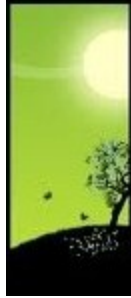
God intends for us to be the salt and light of this world.

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its salty taste, it cannot be made salty again. It is good for nothing, except to be thrown out and walked on. You are the light that gives light to the world. A city that is built on a hill cannot be hidden. And people don’t hide a light under a bowl. They put it on a lampstand so the light shines for all the people in the house. In the same way, you should be a light for other people. Live so that they will see the good things you do and will praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16)

Psalm 1 says God’s people “*don’t listen to the wicked, don’t go where sinners go, don’t do what evil people do.*” How is that possible? How can we be in the world but not of it?

When have you struggled with being the salt and light of the world yet not negatively influenced by it?

The key is discernment. God wants you to rely on him. He wants your attention and obedience. Where he will lead one person to be his salt and light, he will not lead another. He knows exactly what is needed for each person in each situation. It doesn’t mean you will never struggle. It doesn’t mean you will not be negatively impacted when you know you are supposed to be the salt and light in an ugly situation and you end up being pulled into the wickedness of it. We don’t have one simple choice as we stand at the crossroads that then determines everything else in our lives. We have a series of crossroads. We have immeasurable choices. We can be certain of a decision at one crossroads, then let our discernment muscles atrophy so that the next decision leads us straight into wickedness. We can then easily rationalize that “God led me here” looking back at the previous crossroads. God doesn’t insure smooth sailing after a single act of obedience. He requires continued obedience. In fact, growing in faith – developing discernment muscles – usually means more difficult decisions are ahead. Trusting God doesn’t make life easy. Trusting God highlights purpose in life, purpose beyond our understanding but within our grasp of joy. Trusting God means you can face things that are out of control without behaving in out of control ways.



Appreciation in Context

Wild animals, don't be afraid, because the open pastures have grown grass. The trees have given fruit; the fig trees and the grapevines have grown much fruit. So be happy, people of Jerusalem; be joyful in the Lord your God. Because he does what is right, he has brought you rain; he has sent the fall rain and the spring rain for you, as before. And the threshing floors will be full of grain; the barrels will overflow with new wine and olive oil. Joel 2:22-24

God's promises give real answers to the prayers of faith. So much about the spring highlights the consistency of God's promises. With the renewal of the earth, there is a renewal of spirit. Seeing the buds of earth brings out blossoms of faith. Out of the bleakness of winter comes the color of spring. Out of the enclosed, stale air of winter comes the outdoor fresh air. Out of the bone-chilling cold comes the sun-kissed warmth. We lift our eyes to the heavens and praise God for the relief. We are renewed in ways we couldn't imagine. We are overwhelmed with gratitude.

If you happen to live in a region in which season change isn't drastic, you might be tempted to overlook the benefits of marked seasons. However, all of us have experienced spiritual season. We tend to dislike spiritual winters. We're surrounded by bleakness, chill, and unproductivity. We simply don't see growth, so we can't imagine it happening. Growth might not be obvious, but there are important things that happen in spiritual winters that must occur in preparation for the spring. Without the winter, we couldn't have spring. If we lived only on the mountain top, we would certainly not appreciate it as much as ascending to the mountain top from the depths of the valley.

We appreciate the spring because of its comparison to the winter – and other seasons. Our appreciation comes in the context of the big picture.

Have you ever looked for hidden objects in books such as *I Spy* or *Where's Waldo?* Or perhaps you've looked for words in a search-and-find word puzzle book. Experiencing a spiritual

spring is like having someone highlight the object in *I Spy* or *Where's Waldo* or the words in the puzzle book before you open the page. What you most need stands out to you.

When have you struggled to find God's presence?

When have you experienced God's presence in an abundant manner?

Because of God's promises, we don't have to be afraid, we can be joyful, we can trust God to do what is right, and we can trust God for provision. Joel 2 emphasizes all of these truths. Because of God's promises, no matter how long and bleak our spiritual winter is, we can be certain spring is coming. God will not leave us in winter when we are fully seeking and relying on him.

If you're currently in a spiritual winter, what do you most need to anticipate from God in a pending spiritual spring?

If you're currently in a spiritual spring, what are you most celebrating about God's presence?

If you're currently in another spiritual season, reflect on what spiritual springs in your past experiences have been like.

The following verses speak to the promise of joy. Soak in and claim God's promises today.

I have told you these things so that you can have the same joy I have and so that your joy will be the fullest possible joy. (John 15:11)

Be joyful because you have hope. Be patient when trouble comes, and pray at all times. (Romans 12:12)

Be full of joy in the Lord always. I will say again, be full of joy. (Philippians 4:4)

My brothers and sisters, when you have many kinds of troubles, you should be full of joy, because you know that these troubles test your faith, and this will give you patience. (James 1:2-3)

You have not seen Christ, but still you love him. You cannot see him now, but you believe in him. So you are filled with a joy that cannot be explained, a joy full of glory. (1 Peter 1:8)

Your hope is in God, not the messiness of this world. God is strong and can help you not to fall. He can bring you before his glory without any wrong in you and can give you great joy. (Jude 1:24)



Progress on Display

Faith means being sure of the things we hope for and knowing that something is real even if we do not see it. Faith is the reason we remember great people who lived in the past. It is by faith we understand that the whole world was made by God's command so what we see was made by something that cannot be seen. (Hebrews 11:1-3)

I was in 4-H when I was young. 4-H is a youth organization that focuses on developing citizenship, leadership, responsibility and life skills. When it began, its focus was primarily agriculture. It has expanded greatly over the years. When I was in 4-H, most the kids were involved in farming in some way (but then again, most the people in my community were involved in farming in some way).

Summer was a time of field work, county fairs, and 4-H work. Whatever projects we'd chosen for the year were put on display at the county fair. In many cases, it was crop samples. There was also sewing, food, photography, crafts, and much more. A lot of time usually went into the 4-H projects. There was often a lot of frustration, too. I chose dog care one year. All of our dogs ran around the farm with little discipline. They were great dogs but not obedience school stars if you get the idea. I took my beagle to 4-H-sponsored obedience classes, and we both survived, but I'm not sure either of us learned much.

Weeks passed, and I had to take him to the dog show to be judged. He was supposed to not only show discipline but good grooming and care as well. Our dogs were always well cared for in terms of lots of exercise and love, but grooming? Well, that wasn't exactly a priority on the farm. The day before the dog show, I gave my "project" a bath. He was looking pretty good. The problem was our dogs ran free on the farm, which meant my clean dog was anything but clean the following day as the time drew near for the dog show. He had decided to take what I could only guess was an

extensive midnight run in the woods, and he showed up at the house covered in dirt, burrs, and ticks. My project didn't exactly turned out as pristine as I had hoped!

Sometimes the results of our efforts aren't exactly what we prefer. But when the time comes, our results are on display. 4-H displays came only once a year, and we could prepare for them. Displays of our faith are on display at all times. People see evidence of our faith in our daily lives.

What evidence of faith are people around you seeing today?

We're not always going to get a "superior" rating or a blue ribbon. In fact, let's hope we don't! We want to excel for God, but we need to do so in authenticity, not in performance only. We want to see others' authentic progress and even learn from their mistakes because seeing the reality of struggles and triumphs gives us hope. On the other hand, we tend to want to disguise and hide our own mistakes and struggles. We only want to show the positive progress of our faith. It's not all uphill, and we might as well accept it and do life side-by-side in ways that we can learn from each other through the messes of life.

4-H was organized into clubs that met on a monthly basis. We shared what we were doing by scheduling talks and demonstrations. Our meetings invited accountability and relationship-building. We also worked on service projects with each other and had a lot of fun throughout the year. I wouldn't have learned nearly as much in 4-H had I tried to do it on my own.

It's the same with your faith. God has no intention of you living a life of faith on your own. Commit to community, where you can share the ups and downs of the progress of your faith.

Let us come near to God with a sincere heart and a sure faith, because we have been made free from a guilty conscience, and our bodies have been washed with pure water. Let us hold firmly to the hope that we have confessed, because we can trust God to do what he promised. Let us think about each other and help each other to show love and do good deeds. You should not stay away from the church meetings, as some are doing, but you should meet together and encourage each other. Do this even more as you see the day coming. (Hebrews 10:22-25)



Praying for Patience

Brothers and sisters, be patient until the Lord comes again. A farmer patiently waits for his valuable crop to grow from the earth and for it to receive the autumn and spring rains. You too, must be patient. Do not give up hope, because the Lord is coming soon. Brothers and sisters, do not complain against each other or you will be judged guilty. And the Judge is ready to come! Brothers and sisters, follow the example of the prophets who spoke for the Lord. They suffered many hard things, but they were patient. We say they are happy because they did not give up. You have heard about Job's patience, and you know the Lord's purpose for him in the end. You know the Lord is full of mercy and is kind. James 5:7-10

Patience – the dreaded word, and an even more dreaded concept. We all want more of it, but we joke about not praying for it, perhaps because we're a bit hesitant of what we'll have to endure to grow in patience.

Patience is a fruit of the Spirit: *But the Spirit produces the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. There is no law that says these things are wrong.* (Galatians 5:22-23)

Patience is developed through the Spirit. Patience isn't just a quality or skill we have. It's a process of growth.

In what areas have you struggled with patience?

The word *patient* is scattered throughout the first few verses James 5:7-10, and it means what you'd likely guess: forbearing, long-suffering, to wait patiently, to endure. In the last verse, you see the phrase "did not give up." In the NASB, this is expressed as "endurance." In the NIV, "persevere" is used. There's a tight connection between patience and perseverance. In fact, the two words used in these passages, *makrothumia* for patience and *hupomeno* for perseverance, are synonyms. The Greek word for patience is typically used in the context of people, and the word for perseverance is used in the context of circumstances.

We need to be patient with people, but we must persevere through circumstances. We often entwine the two so tightly that the confusion we create becomes a frustration in and of itself. We can't separate a person from a circumstance. We can't separate a circumstance from a person – or at least we think we can't. But when I respond to my husband out of frustration because he stops listening to me in the middle of a conversation, it's not really patience with him that I'm struggling with; it's the circumstance of not being heard. When I misapply the source of my frustration, my response most definitely doesn't reflect God. When I keep it in context and realize it's the circumstance I'm most frustrated with, I'm (more) able to step back and approach the situation with perseverance.

The more we authentically look at our emotional responses and take responsibility for them, the less we'll blame others or rationalize how others impact us. We'll see our responses in the context of specific – and patterns of – circumstances, and as God reveals the truth to us, we can persevere through the circumstances.

What does the world tell you about perseverance?

Hypomeno comes from two words, *hupo* (under) and *meno* (to remain). The world might tell us to persevere in our own power, but God tells us otherwise. In order to persevere, or have patience through circumstances, we must remain under him. This doesn't mean we sit inactive. Life with God isn't inactive. God's perseverance means we endure in following him. We're steadfast in our obedience. Perseverance isn't about taking control; it's about yielding control. What a readjustment for many of us raised in a world focused on independence and individualism!

We need to realign our definitions and applications of godly concepts. We make assumptions of the words and phrases we encounter in the Bible because of the definitions we've learned and assumed based on everyday experiences. Dig in deep, my friend. God wants you to question and explore! He's not intimidated by your questions. He's strong enough to handle them, and he welcomes the discourse. Of course, he requires respect, but we can respectfully question someone. In fact, it's the people we most respect that we need to question, because they're most likely to be authentic with us, challenging our assumptions and guiding us toward growth and truth.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 1 Corinthians 13:6-7 (NIV)

So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. Hebrews 10:35-36 (NIV)

Patience is required through every season and moment of life. Some requirements of patience are much more trying than others. God will teach you through each moment. God will be faithful through each situation. Have hope. You can trust God's promises.

Brothers and sisters, be patient until the Lord comes again. A farmer patiently waits for his valuable crop to grow from the earth and for it to receive the autumn and spring rains. You, too, must be patient. Do not give up hope, because the Lord is coming soon. (James 5:7-8)



Hang on For Dear Life

But the captain and the owner of the ship did not agree with Paul, and the officer believed what the captain and owner of the ship said. Since that harbor was not a good place for the ship to stay for the winter, most of the men decided that the ship should leave. They hoped we could go to Phoenix and stay there for the winter. Phoenix, a city on the island of Crete, had a harbor which faced southwest and northwest. Acts 27:11-12

What happens right before these verses, and why didn't the captain and owner of the ship agree with Paul? The journey of sailing toward Italy was rough. It was plagued by winds, which slowed the ship down so much that sailing became more dangerous because of the typical weather of the season. According to God's guidance, Paul was supposed to go to Rome, but he was met with strong headwinds that seemed to be pushing him away from Rome.

When have you been certain God wanted you to move toward something but experienced significant opposition along the way?

Just because God insures us of a direction doesn't mean the journey will be smooth. When God tells us to sail, we likely won't have a trouble free sail, getting to lounge lazily on the deck enjoying the scenery and taking a mental vacation before disembarking and getting on with the work God intends. What he intends is for us to be engaged throughout the journey, which includes sailing toward the destination as much as the destination itself. In fact, the destination itself is really just one part of the entire journey, because there will be another destination beyond it. We travel through seasons, and God expects us to trust him through each one.

We must keep moving as he directs. We won't stay in one place or one season for long. Even when we are in the same physical location, we will be changing, journeying through spiritual locations. God intends for us to explore, being adventurous in our faith and trusting him every step of the way. When we arrive at a place that seems comfortable to us, it's tempting to want to stay

there even though we know God will keep us moving. We often build a camp or drop an anchor and justify it because God determined it was a destination. If he wanted us to be in that location at some point, and it's comfortable for us, doesn't it make sense that we'd stay there for as long as possible? If we're not careful, we'll end up missing the update on when and where we're going next. We'll miss the boat. By the time we realize it, God will need to reroute us.

An assignment isn't a sentence.

What assignment are you currently in that feels more like a sentence, as if it will never end?

We will suffer for God. We shouldn't be surprised. He's given us warning in his Word:

They are blessed who are persecuted for doing good, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. People will insult you and hurt you. They will lie and say all kinds of evil things about you because you follow me. But when they do, you will be blessed. Rejoice and be glad, because you have a great reward waiting for you in heaven. People did the same evil things to the prophets who lived before you. (Matthew 5:10-12)

We also have joy with our troubles, because we know that these troubles produce patience. And patience produces character, and character produces hope. And this hope will never disappoint us, because God has poured out his love to fill our hearts. He gave us his love through the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to us. (Romans 5:3-5)

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is the Father who is full of mercy and all comfort. He comforts us every time we have trouble, so when others have trouble, we can comfort them with the same comfort God gives us. We share in the many sufferings of Christ. In the same way, much comfort comes to us through Christ. (2 Corinthians 1:3-5)

We don't need to look for opposition. Sailors don't look for the roughest route to take. They wisely choose a route that considers a multitude of factors. God sees all the details in front of us, and he knows the best route – perhaps not the easiest route or even the hardest route, but the best route. He promises we can trust him through any suffering we face because of our faith. Just as sailors must make the best of the wind and other travelling conditions, we must do the same along our faith journey. Despite troubling winds, we must move forward the best we can.

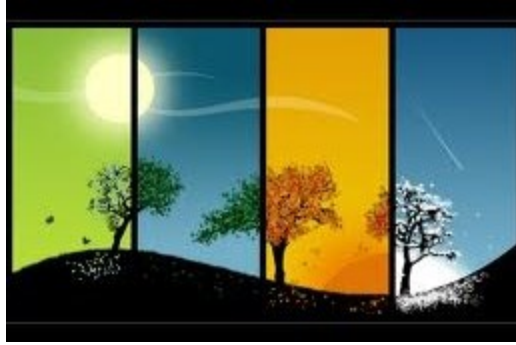
The ship Paul was on experienced more demanding challenges along the journey:

- The ship was tossed by a severe storm.
- Much of the ship's cargo and equipment was thrown overboard.
- People on the ship tried to abandon ship.
- The ship came dangerously close to rocks.

- The ship crashed and was demolished.
- People on the ship survived by clinging to pieces of the boat and swimming.

That's not exactly "smooth sailing." In the middle of the trials, an angel visited Paul and told him lives would be saved. Paul encouraged others and shared hope. Yet just because we can see the story in its entirety and appreciate the trials in the context of the outcome, let's remember that the fact God works everything for our good and his glory doesn't mean every moment of the journey is pleasant. There's destruction and chaos. We simply have to keep focused on God, hang on for dear life when the winds toss us, and persevere with a tenacious hold on God's will for our lives. Sometimes we'll be reduced to swimming in rough waters, but as long as we're moving toward God's goal, we will be progressing.

So we do not give up. Our physical body is becoming older and weaker, but our spirit inside us is made new every day. We have small troubles for a while now, but they are helping us gain an eternal glory that is much greater than the troubles. We set our eyes not on what we see but on what we cannot see. What we see will last only a short time, but what we cannot see will last forever. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18



The Stability of Change

You made the moon to mark the seasons, and the sun always knows when to set. You make it dark, and it becomes night. Then all the wild animals creep around. The lions roar as they attack. They look to God for food. When the sun rises, they leave and go back to their dens to lie down. Then people go to work and work until evening. Lord, you have made many things; with your wisdom you made them all. The earth is full of your riches. Look at the sea, so big and wide, with creatures large and small that cannot be counted. Ships travel over the ocean, and there is the sea monster Leviathan, which you made to play there. All these things depend on you to give them their food at the right time. When you give it to them, they gather it up. When you open your hand, they are filled with good food. When you turn away from them, they become frightened. When you take away their breath, they die and turn to dust. When you breathe on them, they are created, and you make the land new again. May the glory of the Lord be forever. May the Lord enjoy what he has made. He just looks at the earth, and it shakes. He touches the mountains, and they smoke. I will sing to the Lord all my life; I will sing praises to my God as long as I live. May my thoughts please him; I am happy in the Lord. Let sinners be destroyed from the earth, and let the wicked live no longer. My whole being, praise the Lord. Praise the Lord. Psalm 104:19-35

God is dependable. There are no exceptions. God cannot be anything but consistent, because it is who he is. God's consistency does not mean our lives will be unchanging. The stability is in who God is and what his larger vision, all-knowing perspective, and intentional purpose is for our lives. Stability isn't that we can personally know what to expect when, determine what comes next based on our responses, and avoid all unwanted situations. God's stability isn't defined by us. It's defined by him. We can trust him for stability throughout our entire lives if we choose to do so.

Consider any indication of change or timing in the above verses. Look for key words such as *when* and *then*.

Seasons change. We have many “whens”: whens of frustration, whens of exhilaration, whens of pain, whens of loneliness, whens of belonging, whens of celebration.

What is your current “when”?

Consider the “whens” of your past, seasons you’ve experienced. The most dramatic – both negative and positive – will likely come to mind first. Reflect a bit longer and consider additional, more subtle “whens.”

Between each “when” is a “then.” “Then” is transitional. It indicates something came before and is now to be followed by something different. There’s an adjustment, a change, a season. A “when” can last for a very short or excruciatingly long period of time. A “then” is often less noticeable. It usually happens in a blink of an eye or gradual increments. Either way, the focus is typically on where we’ve been or where we’re going, so the “then” gets less notice. However, it’s important, because it’s where the breath of anticipation or relief occurs.

God is always available. He is always working. He is always present. We’re the ones who are inconsistent, not God. God created the heavens and earth. He created you in his image, and he has purpose for your life. He created you just the way he intends for you to be. You will see yourself as less than desirable, less than worthy, less than ideal. You will see your faults. God sees your potential. He placed everything in and around you for a life filled with purpose. Yes, there will be some unpleasant seasons. There will be messes. There will also be seasons which you think are going so well that you let your attention to and reliance on God slip a bit. What you feel is a great season can end up being characterized by erosion of your faith because you don’t feel the pressing need to rely on God through it. We’re not perfect in this life. We weren’t intended to be. However, we *are* intended to reflect the image of God in which we were created. We’re to live out his purpose for us.

In what ways do you struggle with God’s purpose for your life?

You might look back on your life and wonder how God can use something, why he allowed something, or how you can get over something. You might never know the specific reason or “how to” of something in your life, but you can be certain of one thing: just as God knit you together in your mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13), he is also continuing to weave together all circumstances – positive and negative – and every detail of your life to set you up to fulfill God’s specific purpose for you (Jeremiah 29:11).

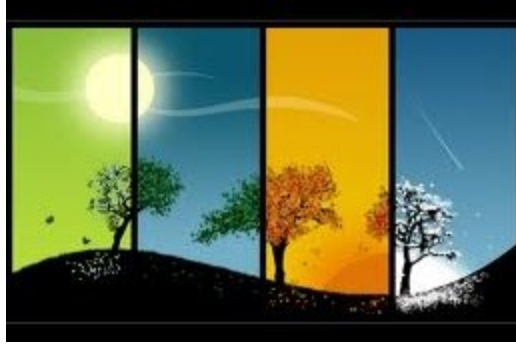
God provides for your purpose. You might not have everything your neighbor has. You might wish you were in a different situation. You might not feel as if God is providing, but look more deeply. He always provides for his purpose. Lack of provision might indicate you expect his

provision to be something different than what he intends for it to be. Or, you're not whole-heartedly seeking and fulfilling God's purpose for you, so what you think he should be providing has nothing to do with his purpose. God will provide what you need for his purpose, but he doesn't promise to provide for what's outside of his promise.

How does the previous statement challenge or encourage you?

Look to God and take the next step – perhaps it's your first – in his purpose for you. You don't have to know all the details. You don't have to have your entire life plan figured out. You simply must be committed to being obedient to God. As you take one step at a time in obedience, you will be fulfilling God's purpose.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of his glory and grace. (*Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus*)



Week Eight: A Time for Everything

There is a time for everything, and everything on earth has its special season. There is a time to be born and a time to die. There is a time to plant and a time to pull up plants. There is a time to kill and a time to heal. There is a time to destroy and a time to build. There is a time to cry and a time to laugh. There is a time to be sad and a time to dance. There is a time to throw away stones and a time to gather them. There is a time to hug and a time not to hug. There is a time to look for something and a time to stop looking for it. There is a time to keep things and a time to throw things away. There is a time to tear apart and a time to sew together. There is a time to be silent and a time to speak. There is a time to love and a time to hate. There is a time for war and a time for peace.

Do people really gain anything from their work? I saw the hard work God has given people to do. God has given them a desire to know the future. He does everything just right and on time, but people can never completely understand what he is doing. So I realize that the best thing for them is to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live. God wants all people to eat and drink and be happy in their work, which are gifts from God. I know that everything God does will continue forever. People cannot add anything to what God has done, and they cannot take anything away from it. God does it this way to make people respect him. What happens now has happened in the past, and what will happen in the future has happened before. God makes the same things happen again and again.

I also saw this here on earth: Where there should have been justice, there was evil; where there should have been right, there was wrong. I said to myself, God has planned a time for every thing and every action, so he will judge both good people and bad. I decided that God leaves it the way it is to test people and to show them they are just like animals. The same thing happens to animals and to people; they both have the same breath, so they both die. People are no better off than the animals, because everything is useless. Both end up the same way; both came from dust and both will go back to dust. Who can be sure that the human spirit goes up to God and that the spirit of an animal goes down into the ground? So I saw that the best thing people can do is to enjoy their work, because that is all they have. No one can help another person see what will happen in the future. Ecclesiastes 3

These are perhaps the most familiar verses concerning the seasons of our lives. Ecclesiastes 3 makes it obvious that there are many seasons in our lives. Granted, there's a bit of discouragement and self-pity in these verses. The author is definitely not in the most motivating frame of mind.

Reflect on moments or seasons in your life you'd consider as...

- a time to be born
- a time to die
- a time to plant
- a time to pull up plants
- a time to kill
- a time to heal
- a time to destroy
- a time to build
- a time to cry
- a time to laugh
- a time to be sad
- a time to dance
- a time to throw away stones
- a time to gather them
- a time to hug
- a time not to hug
- a time to look for something
- a time to stop looking for it
- a time to keep things
- a time to throw things away
- a time to tear apart
- a time to sew together
- a time to be silent
- a time to speak
- a time to love

- a time to hate
- a time for war
- a time for peace

You might have difficulty coming up with an answer to every situation, but reflect on the list a bit longer. What comes to mind when you consider the various times of your life? It's important to occasionally reflect on the past.

First, reflecting on these seasons of life invite you to catch a glimpse of the big picture. Despite what you're going through right now, you'll begin to remember seasons that were different for you, whether you define them as better or worse. You also might realize what you thought about a situation at the time you were going through it has changed as time has passed. You have a different perspective. By realizing the variety of your life and accepting God somehow weaving it together, you become less consumed with the specificity of your current situation – or loosen your tight grip on a past situation – and invite God to move in the transitions of seasons.

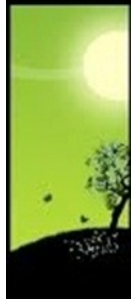
Second, reflecting on these seasons of life invite you to discern the difference between your own perspective and God's. For example, perhaps you identify a time to speak up when, in reality, you're justifying a time you spoke. You thought it was appropriate to speak up, people around you encouraged you to speak up, and you reaped benefits of speaking up. Therefore, in your opinion, it was a good choice to speak up. Perhaps, but not necessarily true. We can easily rationalize what we want to believe is God's will. God doesn't need for you to logically figure out what season he has you in and how you should respond; he wants you to rely on him for definition of and response to each situation. He alone knows the details and how they fit into the changing seasons of your life. He alone knows how one time prepares for another. He alone knows the ebb and flow of the tides that seem powerfully overwhelming or unfairly draining to us.

You identified situations and seasons in the list corresponding to Ecclesiastes 3, and you might be accurate with many of them. However, at least consider how you might be defining a season because it fits more neatly into your perspective instead of the reality of a situation. You might be listening to your own and others' voices and opinions more than God's. Or perhaps as you were experiencing something, you defined it by the overwhelming emotion but now, given time and healing, you realize God's meaning of the season differs from yours.

Consider the list of “times” again – this time from God's perspective.

God will give you a rich myriad of experiences in life. You might see sameness. You might see chronic negativity or put blinders on to issues. Even when you don't understand, God wants you to take a step into his presence and perspective. He wants you to find his peace among chaos and wants you to respond to afflictions based on his compassion.

Accept the last verse of Ecclesiastes 3: *No one can help another person see what will happen in the future.* You cannot know what your future holds, and you cannot know what someone else's future holds. However, when you are in God's presence, you can know you are where you should be. Seasons will change. Your situation will change. Through the changes, you can remain in God's presence and will. He will remain constant.



Clean Dirt

Praises and curses come from the same mouth! My brothers and sisters, this should not happen. Do good and bad water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree make olives, or can a grapevine make figs? No! And a well full of salty water cannot give good water. James 3:10-12

My perception growing up was that farmers seemed to get together throughout the year to chat about all-things-farm-related, but spring was a particular busy time of buzz talking among farmers. They compared field status, progress, and projections for the year. They shared anxieties and swapped stories of yesteryear. Perhaps I noticed the community of farmers more than those isolated farmers I know must have existed simply because my own dad was social, as were most of his friends.

Gathering at the local restaurant was a common occurrence of daily life for my dad, so it was familiar to me. I joined him every now and then. I remember the settled-in grease smell, but as the spring continued, I noticed more of a settled-in dirt smell. Farmers might get a bad rap for being dirty, but the dirt on their clothes is rarely fresh dirt. Many farmers have work clothes, set aside for farm work days, just like any of us have work clothes for our specific job needs. For farmers, and particularly for those who do their laundry, as long as the clothes are clean, the stains aren't a worry. If they're just going to get dirty again, you might as well simply run them through the laundry and not worry about the set in stains. So farmers might look dirty but really aren't. Because they often have a pair of less-often washed coveralls or hats when they run to town for coffee, there's a deeply set-in rich earth smell. Some would call it dirty. Many would call it opportunity for work and income. It was as if the dirt was clean.

It's a contradiction that didn't bother me. It didn't even seem like a contradiction to me. It was just part of life. There were other contradictions I noticed, such as how two farmers could see a

similar circumstance in vastly different ways. One would see an afternoon of rain as a welcome relief to catch up on some machinery maintenance. Another would see it as a nearly unmanageable interruption to a tight schedule. One would see a neighbor's emergency as an opportunity to help. Another would see it as an unwelcome distraction. More than one reaction would come out of a single situation. Responses contradict.

James 3 refers to a contradiction that comes from within. While praises and curses seem to be coming from the same mouth, James points out that when guided by God, the one true source of life, the only option springing from a follower of God will be good. A godly source cannot produce ungodly results. The two cannot coexist.

When has your life included contradictions?

Let's be real. We're human, and we're going to err. Paul, the author of Romans, knew this struggle intimately: *We know that the law is spiritual, but I am not spiritual since sin rules me as if I were its slave. I do not understand the things I do. I do not do what I want to do, and I do the things I hate. And if I do not want to do the hated things I do, that means I agree that the law is good. But I am not really the one who is doing these hated things; it is sin living in me that does them. Yes, I know that nothing good lives in me—I mean nothing good lives in the part of me that is earthly and sinful. I want to do the things that are good, but I do not do them. I do not do the good things I want to do, but I do the bad things I do not want to do. So if I do things I do not want to do, then I am not the one doing them. It is sin living in me that does those things.*

So I have learned this rule: When I want to do good, evil is there with me. In my mind, I am happy with God's law. But I see another law working in my body, which makes war against the law that my mind accepts. That other law working in my body is the law of sin, and it makes me its prisoner. What a miserable man I am! Who will save me from this body that brings me death? I thank God for saving me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So in my mind I am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful self I am a slave to the law of sin. (Romans 7:14-25)

How do you relate to Paul's struggle?

I feel as if I'm wearing clean dirt-stained overalls.



Vacation from God

But I am close to God, and that is good. The Lord God is my protection. I will tell all that you have done. (Psalm 73:28)

We anticipate vacations. We plan for them, deciding where we want to go, where we can realistically go, how we'll get there, how long we'll be gone, what we'll do when we're there (even if it's nothing), and when we'll return home to real life (sigh).

How strategic are you about including God in your vacations?

If we're not intentional about it, we'll take a vacation from God. Well, that's not exactly true. Of course, God is present no matter where we are, but we can easily ignore his presence. Perhaps you mainly run to God during the trials of life. When you take a vacation, you escape the daily reminders of those trials. Your need for God slips from your mind as well. Or perhaps you have solid habits of prayer and Bible study. When you take a vacation, you're away from your daily routine, including the prompts to seek and trust God with the details of your life.

I'm not suggesting you spend your entire vacation holed in your resort with your nose in God's Word (although I feel a sense of comfort and longing as I consider the idea). You can vacation in God's presence while enjoying where you are and the people with whom you're travelling. Try these simple ideas:

- *Get out of your routine.* Replace your usual prayer time with a stroll or hike. Press pause on your current Bible study and pick up a new devotional.
- *Start a new routine.* If you struggle with establishing a routine at home, resolve to begin one away from home. Get up a few minutes earlier than everyone else and steal away for a committed time between you and God. Keep it simple, so you're more likely to continue the pattern once you return home, even if you have to make a few modifications.

- *Savor the wonder of your location.* Intentionally look for God in whatever you're doing every day of your vacation. Perhaps you're in a beautiful location. Perhaps you see people enjoying themselves. Perhaps you meet new people. Perhaps you have moments of quiet when everything around you stills. Glorify God in all you do.

What additional ideas do you have?

You know your routine. You know your spiritual needs (but not better than God knows them). Be intentional in planning a vacation with God. He can teach you some astounding lessons and give you clear insight when you seek his presence away from your routine.

When I travelled to Israel, I led a small group of women who would be touring and serving alongside each other. We didn't all know each other, but we were about to experience a trip of a lifetime together. I studied God's Word for nearly a year leading up to the trip, familiarizing myself with the locations where we'd be. (Even with extensive study, nothing compared to actually being on location and learning through personal experience.) I also wanted to maximize our time and focus as a group, so I wrote devotions corresponding to the plans we had for each day. I didn't want it to be just about head knowledge of where we were, what we were doing, and what God's Word has to say about specific locations. I also wanted it to be about a familiarity with who God is and what he wants for and from each one of us.

On the first evening, as we got to know each other, I gave each woman a puzzle-piece band to place around her wrist. My challenge was for each woman to wear the band the entire trip as a reminder to be attentive to God putting pieces of her faith puzzle together and trusting him for the right timing, pieces, and big picture. You can do the same. He won't let you down.

The journey for each woman was specifically individualized. Even though we travelled and served side-by-side, God spoke to each of us in different ways. We were intentionally looking for God, and he didn't let us down.

Perhaps you need more encouragement and a challenge: Plan a vacation *with* God. Plan a time away from your routine with the sole purpose of connecting with God and savoring his presence. It doesn't have to be an expensive, week-long vacation. It can be an afternoon at the park. You don't have to be physically still. You can walk, boat, or bike. You can write. You can read and speak God's Word. Be spiritually still. When you intentionally seek God, you will find him. He will rain peace on you. He will challenge you to action. He will give you just what you need. But you must run to him. He's ready.



Twice Dead

Also remember the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and the other towns around them. In the same way they were full of sexual sin and people who desired sexual relations that God does not allow. They suffer the punishment of eternal fire, as an example for all to see. It is the same with these people who have entered your group. They are guided by dreams and make themselves filthy with sin. They reject God's authority and speak against the angels. Not even the archangel Michael, when he argued with the devil about who would have the body of Moses, dared to judge the devil guilty. Instead, he said, "The Lord punish you." But these people speak against things they do not understand. And what they do know, by feeling, as dumb animals know things, are the very things that destroy them. It will be terrible for them. They have followed the way of Cain, and for money they have given themselves to doing the wrong that Balaam did. They have fought against God as Korah did, and like Korah, they surely will be destroyed. They are like dirty spots in your special Christian meals you share. They eat with you and have no fear, caring only for themselves. They are clouds without rain, which the wind blows around. They are autumn trees without fruit that are pulled out of the ground. So they are twice dead. They are like wild waves of the sea, tossing up their own shameful actions like foam. They are like stars that wander in the sky. A place in the blackest darkness has been kept for them forever. Jude 1:7-13

Who are these people referred to in Jude? Specifically, Jude draws a parallel between the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, who were destroyed because of their propensity for sexual relations, and "these people who have entered your group" who are "filthy with sin." How are they filthy with sin? They reject God's authority. Jude declares they are twice dead, likening them to "autumn trees without fruit that are pulled out of the ground." They're dead because they do not have fruit and dead because they're pulled up from the ground. They not only didn't produce what they were intended to produce but they also will not produce in the future.

In other words, these people who have rejected God's authority have died spiritually (didn't produce what they were intended to produce) and, as a result, died a natural death as a result of their decisions to reject God. They first didn't choose to allow God to work in their lives during what would have been the opportunities for growth and were then uprooted because of their persistence to completely reject God. These are people we don't want to follow.

It seems obvious. Why would we ever follow someone who doesn't trust God? Our choice seems easy when we're speaking hypothetically, but when we're faced with one small decision at a time, we can be less guarded and end up in a pit of sin we never imagined ourselves being in. No matter where you might be in that process – deep in the darkness of the pit or standing on solid ground with perhaps no idea there is a pit waiting three steps ahead of you – know that you can grow from wherever you currently are. There is always hope. We can learn lessons from others, including the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and the people to whom Jude refers.

False teachers defile the soul. They're spiritually disturbed, refusing to recognize the position or power of God. They believe they've taken life into their own hands, which is never possible. We are to follow men only as they follow Christ.

The phrase "reject God's authority" is expressed as "ungodly people" in the New International Version. The terms godly and, especially, ungodly are rarely used today, which in and of itself is a warning. Not identifying and recognizing the reality of ungodly living is a rejection of the absolute truth and presence of God. The reality is God has no problem using such categories of behavior and people and will do so on the day of judgment. Of course, even the day of judgment is ignored or rejected by many people, because (1) people refuse to believe there is one true God, (2) people refuse to believe there's a need for judgment because a myriad of beliefs about what happens after physical death, or (3) people believe God will extend grace to everyone so judgment would not be necessary. There are likely additional options.

What perspectives on the day of judgment have you experienced?

What questions do you personally have?

Commit to following God, not out of fear but out of a desire to know him and to respond to him in obedience. The day of judgment doesn't need to be the immediate focus. Your relationship with God and ever-increasing intimacy with him will keep you in his will, and you will consequently be well-prepared for judgment. You need to discern one moment at a time.

Using the gift God gave me, I laid the foundation of that house like an expert builder. Others are building on that foundation, but all people should be careful how they build on it. The foundation that has already been laid is

Jesus Christ, and no one can lay down any other foundation. But if people build on that foundation, using gold, silver, jewels, wood, grass, or straw, their work will be clearly seen, because the Day of Judgment will make it visible. That Day will appear with fire, and the fire will test everyone's work to show what sort of work it was. If the building that has been put on the foundation still stands, the builder will get a reward. But if the building is burned up, the builder will suffer loss. The builder will be saved, but it will be as one who escaped from a fire. (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

Living by God's Word invites us to prove dying twice doesn't have to be destructive.

When we die spiritually...

Those who try to hold on to their lives will give up true life. Those who give up their lives for me will hold on to true life. (Matthew 10:39)

...and die naturally...

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will have life even if they die. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:25-26)

...have life with God for eternity.

That's the kind of "twice dead" I want.



Snowbound

I plan to go through Macedonia, so I will come to you after I go through there. Perhaps I will stay with you for a time or even all winter. Then you can help me on my trip, wherever I go. I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to stay a longer time with you if the Lord allows it. But I will stay at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a good opportunity for a great and growing work has been given to me now. And there are many people working against me.

1 Corinthians 16:5-9

Paul is anticipating using his time and opportunities well. He wants to be where God wants him to be. He wants to spend time with whom he needs to spend time with – in this case, it's with supporters, but in many times, Paul settled into spending time with opponents. He even accomplished much of his ministry from prison. In these verses, he seems to be looking forward to the prospect of staying with the people in Corinth “for a long time or even all winter.” Of course, he's only going to stay as long as God allows, but he intends to take full advantage of any time he has.

Are you fully using the current season of your life?

Are you willing to settle into winter and take full advantage of all that it offers?

There are some things that are possible through the winter seasons of life that can't occur in other seasons. It's usually considered the bleak, colorless, cold, restricted, lifeless season, but it's part of the cycle of seasons. What is accomplished in the winter season of your life will impact other seasons.

Right now, it's summer where I am, and insects are swarming. We are accosted by more insects than usual because we had a mild winter. The extended cold of winter kills many of the insects and creates a better balance for the summer, but this year, winter has impacted summer quite differently. Increased insects affect plants, which means harvest is impacted. Other effects of the

mild winter include earlier allergy seasons and an earlier risk of wildfires in many parts of the country. We enjoyed lower utility bills and more options for activities and travel through the warmer winter months, but there was a cost to the mild winter.

The same is true for a mild spiritual winter. You might prefer to experience less cold and dreariness but keep in mind each season impacts the next. If certain things don't occur during one season, results will differ in consequential seasons. We need to use each season well even when we'd prefer to avoid the season altogether.

One of my favorite childhood authors was Laura Ingalls Wilder. I love experiencing the adventures of pioneer life through her words. *The Long Winter* chronicles the Ingalls family and others bravely facing the hard winter of 1880-81 in their little house in the Dakota Territory. Blizzards covered the little town with snow, cutting off all supplies from the outside. Growing up on a farm in central Illinois, there were many times when we'd get snowed in for several days. I enjoyed the adventure of finding things to do in isolation. Options were limited, but my imagination soared. For my parents, the isolation was a bit more challenging. They had to find ways to keep livestock fed and warm. They had to creatively solve complicated problems that would have been simple in mild weather. Their experiences were closer to the Ingalls family than mine, because they were the responsible adults who saw the reality of situations, but even then, being stuck for a few days in a large, sound house with many modern conveniences was nothing like being isolated on the prairie with much fewer options.

Despite the trials pioneers faced, the winter months were productive. There were things they could do because of the slower pace and necessity of being inside for days and weeks, even months. They mended and sewed clothes. They made bedding. They wove hats and knitted mittens. They worked on small woodworking projects and prepared ammunition, knives and other necessities they'd need once the weather began to warm. They used the supplies they'd gathered or grown in the previous months to accomplish important tasks during the winter months. How well they prepared for winter greatly impacted what they could accomplish. For example, because the daylight of winter is limited, and the pioneers had no electricity, they were dependent on candlelight to accomplish anything before dawn or after dusk. If they hadn't taken the time to make candles, their productivity was significantly handicapped.

Consider winter from a spiritual perspective. How do the following quotes from *The Long Winter* challenge you?

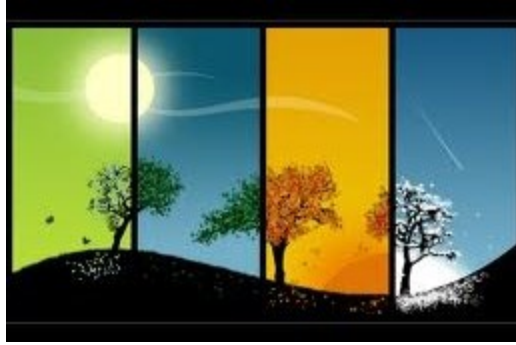
- “Laura felt a warmth inside her. It was very small, but it was strong. It was steady, like a tiny light in the dark, and it burned very low but no winds would make it flicker because it would not give up.”
- “If only I had some grease I could fix some kind of a light,” Ma considered. “We didn't lack for light when I was a girl before this newfangled kerosene was ever heard of.”
“That’s so,” said Pa. “These times are too progressive. Everything has changed too fast. Railroads and telegraph and kerosene and coal stoves—they’re good things to have, but the trouble is, folks get to depend on ‘em.”

Something else the Ingalls family was able to do in their close quarters with one another through long winters is read the Bible. Of course, reading God’s Word wasn’t limited to winter, but there was certainly more opportunity to dig deeper and share more when closed in the house together with less options and distractions. One of Laura’s favorite Scriptures when faced with troubles was Psalm 46. Let God use it to pour into you today.

*God is our protection and our strength. He always helps in times of trouble.
So we will not be afraid even if the earth shakes, or the mountains fall into the sea,
even if the oceans roar and foam, or the mountains shake at the raging sea. Selah
There is a river that brings joy to the city of God, the holy place where God Most High lives.
God is in that city, and so it will not be shaken. God will help her at dawn.
Nations tremble and kingdoms shake. God shouts and the earth crumbles.
The Lord All-Powerful is with us; the God of Jacob is our defender. Selah
Come and see what the Lord has done, the amazing things he has done on the earth.
He stops wars everywhere on the earth. He breaks all bows and spears and burns up the chariots with fire.
God says, “Be still and know that I am God. I will be praised in all the nations; I will be praised
throughout the earth.”*

The Lord All-Powerful is with us; the God of Jacob is our defender. Selah

Every spiritual season, even winter, presents us with opportunities and responsibilities. Are you embracing yours?



He Gives and Takes Away

But the people of Judah are stubborn and have turned against me. They have turned aside and gone away from me. They do not say to themselves, "We should fear the Lord our God, who gives us autumn and spring rains in their seasons, who makes sure we have the harvest at the right time." But your evil has kept away both rain and harvest. Your sins have kept you from enjoying good things. Jeremiah 5:23-25

God is dependable. He does what he says he will do. We hold him to his promises when we can see the benefits, such as his provision of water, food, relationships, and so on. The promises we tend to skim over are the ones that have to do with his discipline. We sometimes expect him to overlook something we've done instead of expecting consequences.

I'm not talking about God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Of course, when we sincerely repent and turn away from the sin in our lives, he forgives us. That's one of his promises, and he's not about to break it. However, there are still consequences to the poor choices we've made. His grace, mercy and forgiveness do not negate all subsequent consequences of our actions.

When God gives an if/then statement, he intends to hold you to it. He holds himself to it, because it's who he is. He cannot be inconsistent. It's like saying there are no absolutes but treating that statement as an absolute. God is consistent, so being inconsistent cannot exist.

Consider the following if/then statements of Scripture. How do you respond to each and to them as a whole?

If you remember my laws and commands and obey them, I will give you rains at the right season; the land will produce crops, and the trees of the field will produce their fruit. (Leviticus 26:3-4)

When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, I did not speak to them and give them commands only about burnt offerings and sacrifices. I also gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Do all that I command so that good things will happen to you. But your ancestors did not listen or pay

attention to me. They were stubborn and did whatever their evil hearts wanted. They went backward, not forward. (Jeremiah 7:22-24)

Then Jacob saw the Lord standing above the ladder, and he said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your grandfather, and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are now sleeping. Your descendants will be as many as the dust of the earth. They will spread west and east, north and south, and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. I am with you and will protect you everywhere you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Genesis 28:13-15)

You were all baptized into Christ, and so you were all clothed with Christ. This means that you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. Christ, there is no difference between Jew and Greek, slave and free person, male and female. You are all the same in Christ Jesus. You belong to Christ, so you are Abraham's descendants. You will inherit all of God's blessings because of the promise God made to Abraham. (Galatians 3:26-19)

This is the agreement I will make with the people of Israel at that time, says the Lord. I will put my teachings in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. (Hebrews 8:10)

Do you hear yourself attempting to rationalize any of these truths?

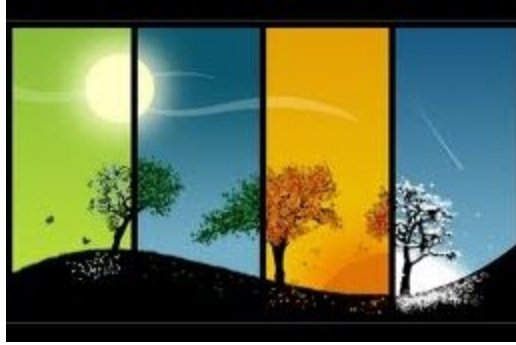
In Jeremiah 5, God's promises for rain and harvest are clear, but neither is enjoyed because of evil. Those who missed out on the blessings of God's rain and harvest could assume God didn't fulfill his promise, but that's not the case at all. Their behavior is what caused the missed blessing. Of course, they can repent at any time, and the relationship between them and God will be restored, but rain and harvest might not be immediate. There are still consequences to the single act or season of sin.

God loves us no matter much. His love for his creation is part of who he is. However, he hates anything that separates us from his presence and will.

How have you personally experienced the popular adage "love the sinner, hate the sin"?

It's definitely a challenge to live out this principle. However, it's a God-given principle. He loves you, but he hates anything that separates you from him. When you run to him with those issues, he will forgive and heal you, but there will still be consequences to the poor choices. At the same time, because you're created in God's image, you're expected to love his people but hate anything that separates people from him. That doesn't mean you hate people. It's a challenge to love

someone while hating what they're choosing to do. When you're in the middle of such a situation, remember you don't have to love with your own limited love in your own strength. God pours his love into you to pour onto others. His love is unconditional, but his acceptance is not. We don't have to be squeaky clean before we come to him. Others don't have to be squeaky clean to be accepted into our lives either (which is a good thing, because none of us are!). Yet we also cannot approve of and support behavior that separates people from God no matter how much we rationalize we love them. When we love with God's love, we challenge people and hold them accountable, yet not every single person in the exact same way, because God leads us into relationships of different depths and purposes through different seasons. We have to trust him for timing and provision in every situation and relationship. One thing is certain: God will never lead us into a codependent situation. Remember, we are created in his image, and he is codependent with no one. He will not play into anything that separates anyone from him. He will not get sucked into unhealthy relationships. And when under his guidance, he will not allow you to either.



Week Nine: What's God Doing?

Daniel said: "Praise God forever and ever, because he has wisdom and power. He changes the times and seasons of the year. He takes away the power of kings and gives their power to new kings. He gives wisdom to those who are wise and knowledge to those who understand. He makes known secrets that are deep and hidden; he knows what is hidden in darkness, and light is all around him." Daniel 2:20-22

What's God doing in your life?

Perhaps you're not positive, but you can be certain he's working. Daniel needed God's guidance as he revealed the meaning of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Daniel was declaring who God is. He was recognizing and praising God, placing himself in submission to God so he would be able to receive the provision God had for him.

How intentionally engaged are you in what God is doing in your life? If you had to rank your involvement with God's will and presence in your life right now, what number from 1 to 10 would you assign your involvement?

We often look for our own explanations. If someone asks what a dream means, what steps they should take next, or how to run a meeting, deal with a conflict, or dig into Scripture more, the knee-jerk response is usually to explain something in a way that personally makes sense. We make sense out of what might not otherwise make sense. We start with the issue, add ourselves into the equation, and respond. We pool our experiences, emotions, and lessons, and we pull together the answers that make the most sense. The problem with that approach is that God's way doesn't always make sense. We're limited in our understanding; he is not. What makes perfect sense to him is not going to make sense to us at times.

Consider Daniel's life. He was one of many taken to Babylon in captivity. He then was asked to interpret the king's dream, which he obviously had a gift of doing, but it still doesn't make much

sense that he, a captive, would be trusted to interpret a king's dream. His friends, Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego, survived a fiery furnace against all odds. Daniel interpreted writing on a wall, had many complex prophetic visions, survived a night in the lions' den. He was commended for his prophetic ability but chastised for his faith. Does Daniel's life – and many separate components of it – make sense? Not really! But it makes sense to God.

Daniel didn't always respond the way that would make sense to you and me. Being asked to do some of the things he did and getting involved in some of the relationships he had doesn't make sense to you and me. Yet Daniel's faith was strong. God honored him. God led him. God provided for and guided him. In order to be used by God, we cannot expect everything to be as we expect. We can only expect for God to keep his promises. In order to trust God for his promises, we have to know his promises. To rely on God means to know God. Familiarity and faith are inseparably braided.

We often don't give credit for what God is doing in our lives. We don't pay attention. We get into habits of repeating what's familiar day to day and forget to recognize where and how God is working – until something goes wrong and we decide we need him. The truth is we need him in every situation at all times.

Consider the past month of your life and look for ways God was working that you didn't easily recognize at the time.

For example, despite the electronics, appliances and vehicles you've had to fix or maintain, consider all the other ones that have continued running. We get frustrated when something doesn't last as long as we expect it to, but do you spend at least equal time being thankful for those things that last longer than you expected or even that the things that didn't last as long as you would have liked lasted as long as they did instead of half the time?

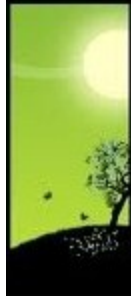
Have you considered the timing of avoiding an accident you didn't even know was a possibility, running into a friend or acquaintance in need or able to meet your need, hearing a consistent message from God through a variety of people, books, and other sources within a concentrated time for emphasis?

We are blessed even when we're not looking for blessings. How much more we will fully experience such blessings when we are attentive! As you watch for God working in your daily life, you'll notice his presence more. As you acknowledge his provision and presence, you'll praise him

more. As you praise him more, you'll watch for him in your life more. As you are attentive, you will attribute more of the details of your life to him guidance, and you'll rely on him with ever-growing confidence. Sadly, the converse is true as well. The less you look for God, the less you will notice and appreciate him. It's not that he is less present in your life. It's that you're less present in your relationship with God. Relationships take effort. No relationship – including your relationship with God – will grow without intentionality.

God longs to pour into and through you. How will you be vulnerable to his leading today?

I went because God showed me I should go. I met with the believers there, and in private I told their leaders the Good News that I preach to the non-Jewish people. I did not want my past work and the work I am now doing to be wasted. (Galatians 2:2)



Hurry Up and Wait

You, too, must be patient. Do not give up hope, because the Lord is coming soon. Brothers and sisters, do not complain against each other or you will be judged guilty. And the Judge is ready to come! Brothers and sisters, follow the example of the prophets who spoke for the Lord. They suffered many hard things, but they were patient. James 5:8-10

I remember the fresh earth smell of spring. As soon as farmers could get in the field, the machinery and the men were out in force. But there was a lot of work that went into preparation long before the actual breaking of the ground. Machines were checked to insure proper operations. Repairs were made. Bearings were oiled. Engines were started. The soil was checked regularly for moisture. Many farmers had more than one field to tend, and all fields needed to be checked, since one held more moisture than another. Seed, fertilizer and chemicals were ordered and stocked. Weather was carefully watched, because much of what needed to be done not only depended on the immediate rain or shine but the pending rain, sunshine and wind. Certain chemicals and fertilizers needed to be applied under specific conditions, or the time, cost, and effort would be in vain.

There always seemed to be pressure to get things done. There didn't seem to be any leisure time. Weather-permitting, machinery was in the field from sun-up to sun-down (and even longer if machinery was equipped with lights and could handle the extended hours). Meals were delivered to the field. All family activities other than farming ceased or were creatively modified for the season. When weather didn't permit field work, there was a long list of catch up tasks to accomplish: minor machinery repair, cleaning, maintenance, as well as many other tasks around the farm that couldn't be overlooked. It was rush, rush, rush to get as much done during the long days.

Even in the midst of rush, there was a lot of patience required: waiting for weather to shift, waiting for a machinery part to be delivered, waiting to see if plants emerged well from the earth. Of

course, there was no sitting around and twiddling of thumbs during the wait. Farming involves too much multi-tasking for a sit-and-wait mindset. Patience, focus, and multi-tasking all had to be juggled within a farmer's mind and schedule.

When have you struggled with patience?

How has being busy (or not) affected your patience?

We hurry up and wait spiritually.

We have seasons of flurry when we don't seem to have time to breathe. The habits we've established before such seasons impact how we respond. If we have healthy habits of worship, study, service, prayer, and fellowship, we will typically maintain at least a modified version of such faith-building focus. Habits stabilize us through the busy times of life. We have familiarity on which to rely. When we start something new during times of great change and stress, we will rarely be successful in establishing something that lasts long and impacts us deeply. The preparation time before the chaos has a more lasting impact.

Busy times don't exclude waiting and patience. Even in the midst of busyness, we have questions and requests for God. We wait on him to guide, provide, and answer. We want to know, but he doesn't want us to stop growing our faith and building our relationship with him simply because everything is not perfectly in place. Yes, he wants us to be still in his presence, but being still is not always physical. God wants us to still ourselves in whatever ways that will help us be in his presence and prepare ourselves to listen. If that means stilling yourself physically, you need to do that for a time in order to hear clearly from him. For most people and situations, being still is more about us stilling ourselves and the many voices around us by which we're influenced. We can still be seeking God and responding to him in other areas of our lives, because we surely don't question him about everything at once.

We can excuse our uninvolvedness as stillness, rationalizing, "I'm going to sit right here and not move until God tells me which way to go" when in reality, he simply wants us to take a step of faith. He has no intention of giving us the plan for the complete journey. He'll reveal step 2 after step 1 and step 3 after step 2. We have to trust him one step at a time.

We can also excuse our flurry of activity as doing "good" for God when we're not listening to him for guidance in the process. What we're doing might be good, but it might not be our calling. It might not be in God's purpose for us. Oh, he'll certainly use everything we offer, but what we offer in obedience to his will is where he wants us to be. We need to ask God for guidance and

move in response instead of moving forward and asking God to bless the steps we've already chosen to take without his permission.

Do you tend to move ahead without God's guidance or sit still while waiting for God to be obvious in his revelation?

God has a purpose for you. You need to get busy and be who and where he intends you to be. It's time to be productive for him. In the meantime, you're going to have to be patient – with yourself, others around you and even with God. You can do it. God has a lot of patience and is great at multi-tasking, and he created you in his image!

God is fair; he will not forget the work you did and the love you showed for him by helping his people. And he will remember that you are still helping them. We want each of you to go on with the same hard work all your lives so you will surely get what you hope for. We do not want you to become lazy. Be like those who through faith and patience will receive what God has promised. (Hebrews 6:10-12)



Playing It Safe

When he saw the crowds, he felt sorry for them because they were hurting and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus said to his followers, “There are many people to harvest but only a few workers to help harvest them. Pray to the Lord, who owns the harvest, that he will send more workers to gather his harvest.” (Matthew 9:36-38)

We need to help. We need to step up and do the work God intends for us.

Are you willing to be where you need to be at all times regardless of questions, concerns, and danger?

We hear and use language about safety often:

- “Be safe.”
- “Safe travels.”
- “Play it safe.”
- “Better to be on the safe side.”

We seek safety. We want the people we love to be safe. There’s security in safety. Even those who thrive on adventure would prefer to be safe at the end of the adventure. We often want a thrill, but it’s a time-limited experience. We don’t live on the constant high of a thrill. We also want an underlying, dependable foundation of security.

When I visited Israel, soldiers were everywhere. We went through many checkpoints while driving throughout Israel. We walked across the checkpoints after visiting Bethlehem, which is Palestinian-controlled. We walked through metal detectors to enter the mall and other large department stores or areas. Even though I’m unaccustomed to seeing so many people walking around with weapons, I never felt threatened. Being the leader of the group, I felt responsible and

was always aware of what was going on around us. So if anyone would have felt threatened, it likely would have been me.

The Ben Gurion (Tel Aviv) airport was the most thorough airport security I've ever experienced. Even through the long lines, lifting my bags up and down on conveyor belts, opening my suitcases and shifting everything in them, emptying every bag of all electronics, and answering a wide array of questions, I didn't feel interrogated or offended. I didn't feel my rights were being infringed upon. I felt a bit more safe – actually, a lot more safe.

One day near the end of our trip, our car approached a checkpoint. As our car slowed without stopping, an officer peeked inside and motioned us onward. I asked our driver what the point of the checkpoint is when, from my experiences, people are rarely stopped. His answer: “You Americans are more sensitive and less secure. We're less sensitive and more secure.”

Travelling through Israel made me think about sensitivity, safety, and security. Security does not equal safety. Security is freedom or protection from fear and anxiety. It doesn't insure no harm comes to you. It's a vigilant position. It's not pulling a “security” blanket over your head and hiding. In that case, “security blanket” is an oxymoron. Security is taking the blanket off, keeping your eyes and ears open and watching for anything out of the ordinary...not just for you but for everyone else. Not to be paranoid but to be attentive.

The ultimate security you can have has nothing to do with your safety. You might be safe here on earth, but are you secure – for eternity? God's the best security blanket you'll ever have. And he never covers his eyes.

It is God who arms me with strength and keeps my way secure. 2 Samuel 22:33

It's time to step up and do the work God calls you to do.



The Journey Here

You must not speak against God or curse a leader of your people. Do not hold back your offering from the first of your harvest and the first wine that you make. Also, you must give me your firstborn sons. You must do the same with your bulls and your sheep. Let the firstborn males stay with their mothers for seven days, and on the eighth day you must give them to me. (Exodus 22:28-30)

Where is “here”? What did it take to get you where you currently are in your life journey?

Joshua 4:1-13 explains the purpose of standing stones:

After all the people had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, “Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe. Tell them to get twelve rocks from the middle of the river, from where the priests stood. Carry the rocks and put them down where you stay tonight.”

So Joshua chose one man from each tribe. Then he called the twelve men together and said to them, “Go out into the river where the Ark of the Lord your God is. Each of you bring back one rock, one for each tribe of Israel, and carry it on your shoulder. They will be a sign among you. In the future your children will ask you, ‘What do these rocks mean?’ Tell them the water stopped flowing in the Jordan when the Ark of the Agreement with the Lord crossed the river. These rocks will always remind the Israelites of this.”

So the Israelites obeyed Joshua and carried twelve rocks from the middle of the Jordan River, one rock for each of the twelve tribes of Israel, just as the Lord had commanded Joshua. They carried the rocks with them and put them down where they made their camp. Joshua also put twelve rocks in the middle of the Jordan River where the priests had stood while carrying the Ark of the Agreement. These rocks are still there today.

The priests carrying the Ark continued standing in the middle of the river until everything was done that the Lord had commanded Joshua to tell the people, just as Moses had told Joshua. The people hurried across the river. After they finished crossing the river, the priests carried the Ark of the Lord to the other side as the people watched. The men from the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and East Manasseh obeyed what Moses had told them. They were dressed for war, and they crossed the river ahead of the other people. About forty thousand soldiers prepared for war passed before the Lord as they marched across the river, going toward the plains of Jericho.

When we place standing stones where God has shown up in our lives, we move on from the area. If we were to camp under the stones, there wouldn't be a need for the stones. Monuments mark an experience so that it can be remembered. There's something significant that happened, and it's important for you or others to remember. If you remain in the location of the memorial, you can tell people the story yourself. The memorial becomes unnecessary.

Placing memorial stones along your journey are a testimony for those who follow you. It's not as much about you leaving a legacy as God leaving a legacy. The memorial stones also encourage you to continue your journey. When there are no markers to remember where God moved in your life, you can easily question your past experiences and God's presence. You might be tempted to revisit experiences – either physically or emotionally – and in the process, you form a revised experience. You might even develop a rut as you trudge back and forth to the past.

On the other hand, when you intentionally place a memorial stone and declare, "God showed up here," and continue your journey, place a stone and declare, "God was faithful here." "God challenged me here." "God provided for me here." "God gave me peace here." You can pause at any time along the journey in any situation and glance back to see a line of standing stones. They stand as a testimony to the reliability of God. You can follow that line of stones to where you stand and know God is present where you are. And he will be present as you continue the journey in faith.

How old are you?

I know, it's not the politically correct question to ask, and you don't have to respond in the comments section, but when someone asked me on my last birthday, I decided to proudly declare, "I'm 44!" It's taken me a lot of effort to get to where I am, and while I don't like every step I've taken, I'm glad to have walked through and survived some trials. I'm thankful to have thrived

through some wonderful experiences. I'm proud to praise God for where I am and, even more so, for where I'm going.

It's easy for us to reflect on the past and have regrets or justify our decisions. We either take on a burden of responsibility (when God wants us to release our burdens to him) or avoid responsibility and blame others (when God wants us to admit where we are with authentic disclosure and trust him through what follows). God wants us to trust him through our experiences, because he wants our faith journey to be exclusively with him. He is always walking with us, no matter how far off his path we are. He knows how to get us to where he intends for us to go. He knows his purpose, and he wants us to fully live it.

It's okay to have baggage. You rarely take a trip without supplies, and your supplies differ based on your destination. Trust God to sift through the baggage you're carrying around or storing. He knows what you need right now, what you need to put away and store for future use, and what you need to get rid of altogether.

Let God determine the location of your memorial stones and the steps you take along the way.

Pause where you are and glance back. What stones are standing in a memorial to God's presence in your life?



Deep Ruts of Life

For six years you are to plant and harvest crops on your land. Then during the seventh year, do not plow or plant your land. If any food grows there, allow the poor people to have it, and let the wild animals eat what is left. You should do the same with your vineyards and your orchards of olive trees. You should work six days a week, but on the seventh day you must rest. This lets your ox and your donkey rest, and it also lets the slave born in your house and the foreigner be refreshed. Be sure to do all that I have said to you. You must not even say the names of other gods; those names must not come out of your mouth. (Exodus 23:10-13)

Choose your path well, because as you repeatedly travel it, you'll soon develop a deep rut. Routines give us stability, but they are meant to help us learn, grow, and improve, not mold us into robots. A faithful life marries consistency with flexibility, celebrating the dependability of God with his mystery. We explore God every moment of every day for our entire lives and still not completely know him. If we allow ourselves to create ruts in our lives, we will have great familiarity in some experiences but miss out on others. If we meander with no intention, we will not create ruts, but we'll have no well-developed habits of discipline.

The verses in Exodus 23 are just one of many examples of God's guidance. They include God's desire for routine and discipline but also demand an intentional break from the norm. Instead of working the land, rest is required every seventh year. Rest is also required on the seventh day. God wants us to step off our normal paths. Sometimes he has to personally intervene to make us consider another route.

How have you experienced God's intervention to take a route other than the one to which you've become accustomed?

The woman in John 4 personally encountered Jesus when she took her daily trek for water. She had taken the path over and over. She walked by herself, because she wasn't welcome by other women in the area. Her sin isolated her, so she walked in the heat of the day, when most people would never be walking in the unprotected heat. Yet she met a man at the well: Jesus. When he asked for water, a conversation followed:

Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

"I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” (John 4:7-26)

Meeting Jesus was a divine appointment. As the conversation began about water, the woman keeps referring to literal water when Jesus quickly shifts to spiritual water. Literal water is all the woman knows. Literal water is the basis of her routine. She goes about her daily routine, walking the familiar path to get reliable water. She dips into the well she believes will sustain her.

What daily routines do you rely on for familiarity and comfort? What sustains you?

We rely on daily wells that we believe will sustain us – wells such as friendships, approval, marriage, intellectualism, strength, past successes, family name, and whatever brings us joy, security, hope, peace and contentment. They’re not necessarily bad things, but they’re not the best thing.

Jesus refers back to spiritual water. He does the same with us, but when we’ve worn a path to and from our daily wells, creating ruts in the road, we are often too preoccupied in *what* we believe is sustaining us to listen to the truth of *who* will sustain us.

Jesus knew just what to say. He asked about the woman’s husband, which was an uncomfortable topic. Jesus knows how to meet us in our rut, then pulls us out by facing us with truth. It’s uncomfortable, because truth doesn’t keep us where we are. Truth itself doesn’t change, but it changes everything and everyone it touches.

You might be comfortable trudging to and from a well that you think nourishes you. You might be exhausted by it, but because you believe it’s what you need, you continue. You believe you’re harvesting something life-sustaining. Pause and listen to God’s truth. Rest in his presence. You might just be relying on a hole in the ground when the living well is standing right in front of you.

Only Jesus can nourish you. We think we know what we can rely on and what works best for us, but that’s God’s job, because he sees the big picture. He created us. He knows you more intimately than you know yourself. When we draw on anything or anyone other than Jesus for contentment, hope, security, peace, and life, our thirst – while perhaps temporarily relieved – will quickly return. Our own solutions and preferences will ultimately leave us spiritually parched.

Is Jesus your living water?



The Comfort of Routine

People may make plans in their minds, but the Lord decides what they will do. (Proverbs 16:9)

Is what you're currently doing keeping you from doing something better for God?

It's easy to get comfortable on the couch. Not an actual couch but anywhere that's a comfortable place for you. It might be a situation in which you're completely relaxed. It's wherever you've become accustomed to and find comfort. It could be a place or position that takes concentration and effort. Perhaps what you're doing is difficult work. Perhaps it's sacrificial. It's likely worthwhile. You might have felt led by God to do what you're doing.

But is it what you're supposed to be doing in this season of your life? While there are often common threads throughout your life, details frequently change, because when we're growing, our lives change. Sometimes there are big changes, and sometimes the changes are more subtle, but change will happen as you grow closer to God, seeking and responding to his will.

Consider how Naaman was unwilling to get outside his comfort zone. He was the commander of an army. He was mighty and brave and had great respect for God. He wanted to be healed of a skin disease.

Elisha sent Naaman a messenger who said, "Go and wash in the Jordan River seven times. Then your skin will be healed, and you will be clean."

Naaman became angry and left. He said, "I thought Elisha would surely come out and stand before me and call on the name of the Lord his God. I thought he would wave his hand over the place and heal the disease. The Abana and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, are better than all the waters of Israel. Why can't I wash in them and become clean?" So Naaman went away very angry.

Naaman's servants came near and said to him, 'My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, wouldn't you have done it? Doesn't it make more sense just to do it? After all, he only told you, 'Wash, and you will be clean.' " So Naaman went down and dipped in the Jordan seven times, just as Elisha had said. Then his skin became new again, like the skin of a child. And he was clean. (2 Kings 5:10-14)

Naaman was asked to do something out of the ordinary. God's response wasn't what he expected it to be, and he didn't like it.

How have you expected a particular response from God but was given a different solution or path?

Perhaps you missed the best solution because you were so intent on what you thought the provision or guidance from God would be.

You don't have to be a spiritual superstar to be required to get out of your comfort zone. If you're a Christ-follower, you will be asked – required – to get out of your comfort zone. If you were allowed to stay right where you are, what kind of faith would you develop? Just because you stepped out of your comfort zone once to get to where you are doesn't mean you'll get to stay there forever. God is concerned about your relationship with him, not your comfort level. He wants you to trust him through every curve, turn, detour and shortcut.

How is God prompting you out of your comfort zone in this season of your life?

You might not recognize it right away. You'll need to ask him to soften your heart and sharpen your senses so you can hear and see him more clearly. Know your comfort zones, and consider the following possibilities.

- Walk across the room to talk to someone you would normally ignore.
- Invite your neighbor over for coffee or a meal.
- Take a co-worker to lunch.
- Support a new worship service or small group at church because it reaches people unlike you (which is why you don't like it).
- Respectfully ask your pastor a question about an application of Scripture he teaches when the way it's being applied cautions you.
- Say "no" to yet another year in the same ministry so you can explore another ministry about which you've felt a stirring passion or interest.

- Reduce your hours at work (and make financial adjustments) when prodded to spend more time with your children or aging parents.

God wants you off the spiritual couch. Move. You'll thank him in the long run.



Week Ten: Storms of Life

If clouds are full of rain, they will shower on the earth. A tree can fall to the north or south, but it will stay where it falls. Those who wait for perfect weather will never plant seeds; those who look at every cloud will never harvest crops. You don't know where the wind will blow, and you don't know how a baby grows inside the mother. In the same way, you don't know what God is doing, or how he created everything. (Ecclesiastes 11:3-5)

Weather isn't always exactly the way I prefer. Neither is life. I like some seasons and perspectives better than others. I can even experience a similar circumstance over time and situations and my response differs.

I've watched the wall of rain move across the field toward me when I was growing up on the farm. I've seen looming, dark clouds in front of me as I've driven. I've watched the lightning in the clouds below me as I've flown in planes.

There are many possible perspectives of storms.

Typically, I appreciate the beauty more when I know I'm out of the storm's way. I respect storms more than I fear them, but I have to admit there is more anxiety when I know I'm about to enter a storm and more appreciative once I've come through one. And when I'm in the middle of it? Well, it depends.

Living in central Illinois, there have been many times I've retreated to the basement because of tornado warnings. When a major storm hit while I was driving toward my parents' house, I didn't realize the severity until a large tree limb flew through the air across my path, narrowly missing my vehicle.

Perhaps the scariest storms have been those I've encountered where I'm less familiar with my surroundings. The sky looks different, the storm moves in unexpected directions, and I'm not sure of my options. Yet once the storm passes, there's a sigh of relief. There's sometimes a rainbow of celebration. There's gratitude for survival, nourishing rain, limited damage. The after-the-storm experience differs from the during-the-storm experience, which differs from the before-the-storm experience.

How have you experienced stages of storms in your life?

A friend recently asked for my advice about a situation, and when I told her she needed to be honest in a relationship, she responded with apprehension – even fear – of what might happen as a result. Her mind flew through “what ifs.” She transformed the possibility of a storm into a pending storm warning of epic proportions. I couldn't assure her the worst case scenario wouldn't happen. All I could do is agree it was one possibility but that there were others as well. I shared that the storm usually looks worse when we're looking at it looming on the horizon. But storms don't always respond the way we expect. Sometimes they intensify, but often times, they weaken or change direction.

The point wasn't “what if.” She had no control over the what if. She had control over what is and what should be. The storm wasn't the issue. It was distracting her. The issue was her relationship.

What storm are you anticipating right now?

Is it distracting you from the real issue?

What is your current “what is” and “what should be,” and how will you respond?

When you're in the middle of the storm, your perspective is again clouded, perhaps completely blocked. You might become disoriented. You might need to retreat to a safe place through the crisis, or you might need to risk danger in order to help someone or to get to a better place.

Once the storm passes, your perspective might become distorted again. Sunlight is blinding. You might be so distracted by the brightness of what's going on around you that you neglect to take care of storm clean-up or preparation.

There is always a storm somewhere around you. It might be looming, or you might be in the middle of it. A storm might have just passed. In most cases, more than one will be true at the same time.

How you see the storm uses your limited perspective. Widen your view. God sees all the storms at once and sees your life, relationships, and growth with a majestic wide-angle lens. Consider the context of your storms. You won't be able to fully experience God's perspective, but you can at least respect that your view is limited and God's is not.

You can trust that God knows where the storm is. He has a purpose not only in the storm but in where you are in relation to the storm. He wants you to trust him. He wants you to respond in a way that glorifies him. He is the source of your purpose, and his purpose is pure.

The storm comes from where it was stored; the cold comes with the strong winds. (Job 37:9)



Expectations of Gardening

I have noticed that people who plow evil and plant trouble, harvest it. (Job 4:8)

When our girls were young, we decided to plant a garden. Tim's grandpa was an avid gardener. His garden was so large, I think I'd classify him as a farmer more than a gardener. PaPa and Mother B planted enough seeds to harvest and can enough vegetables to supply their three grown daughters and their families – not to mention PaPa and Mother B themselves – for the upcoming year. By the time I married into the family, PaPa was suffering from arthritis and couldn't garden any longer, but I still reaped the benefits of his work. Those last few pints and quarts were saved for special occasions and every mouthful was savored.

Even though I was raised on a farm, I didn't do much gardening. Our time was spent in the larger fields with the big equipment which speeds up the planting, plowing, weeding, and harvesting processes. However, my grandpa gardened a little after he turned the farm over to my dad and his secondary career of carpentry slowed down. Grandpa had a huge strawberry patch. Strawberries are certainly not the easiest plant to grow. They're a bit temperamental. But I certainly enjoyed the fruit of Grandpa's labor!

When we plant our first garden, Caitlin was old enough to help. Tim used his PaPa's hand plow to break up the soil. Caitlin pushed on the lower bar as Tim did the heavy work from behind her. They planned how many rows they'd have, talked about what would grow best in our soil, what vegetables to place next to each other, when each would be ready for harvest, and many more details. We went to the local garden shop to pick out the seeds. The seeds look nothing like the vegetable it would grow into, but we knew they'd change. We had to start somewhere.

Each seed was planted at the recommended depth and spacing. The ground was watered, and then it was time to wait. We watched the garden and checked for green shoots poking through the ground. As they did, we identified each plant. Again, the plants looked nothing like the fruit they would eventually produce, but we could identify them simply because of the location. Each row was marked by the name of what was planted. It was still a long time before the plants began to resemble something we could easily identify, but we trusted the seeds we planted would produce what they were intended to produce. Corn didn't produce green beans. Green beans didn't produce potatoes. Potatoes didn't produce lettuce. We enjoyed the vegetables we had planned to enjoy.

We reap what we sow. The principle is a familiar one, and Scripture is clear:

God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. (Galatians 6:7-8)

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. (2 Corinthians 9:6)

When we think of reaping and sowing we think we'll be able to identify the fruit of what we're doing right away. But think about the seeds we planted in the garden. We trusted they would grow into what we hoped, but it's possible seeds could have been mixed up in the store. We needed to know how to identify the potential fruit by knowing the seed that corresponds to it. If we simply believe someone as he tells us "Plant this and it will become a tomato," we might end up with a tangle of pumpkin vines consuming our garden. Likewise, we must discern what we're spiritually planting in our lives. Even when an idea sounds good, we need to check it with God's Word. We need to make sure it's the right time and place of planting for us, because what season he calls one person into will not match another person's. His plan is specific, personal, and perfect, so we are wise to follow with attention and intention.

We also think we'll reap what we sow as if it's an instant grow capsule. We expect to drop the seed in warm water and – wa-la! – instant fruit in our lives! But our spiritual lives go through seasons, and the development of fruit in our lives requires the progression of seasons. God gives us glimpses of fruit in our lives here on earth, but we won't see the full blossoming of all fruit until the end of our lives. Eternity reveals our fruit. And just to be clear, I'm not saying if you're a good person and do good things, your fruit will be fully developed when you die. I'm not saying if you've done bad things, there is no hope for a fruitful harvest. God knows our hearts. He knows our

motives. He knows our priorities. Most important, he knows our relationship with him, which is what will ultimately matter. He knows if we've done good things with or without him. He knows how we've relied or avoided him when we've made bad choices. He doesn't guide us through a legalistic life of "do good/avoid bad" requirements. He invites us to draw close to him. As we're intimate with God, we don't need to respond in our own values and priorities. His ways consume our ways, and he gives us the Holy Spirit to help us discern how we're to respond in obedience. He takes care of weaving all the details together.

The following fruit of the Spirit is referred to in Galatians 5:22. Which have you mastered to perfection?

- Love
- Joy
- Peace
- Patience
- Kindness
- Goodness
- Faithfulness
- Gentleness
- Self-control

Continue to invite God to be the gardener of your life. He yields the best results – better than you can imagine!

I am the true vine; my Father is the gardener. (John 15:1)



Invest In Your Legacy

“Here the saying is true, ‘One person plants, and another harvests.’ I sent you to harvest a crop that you did not work on. Others did the work, and you get to finish up their work.” Many of the Samaritans in that town believed in Jesus because of what the woman said: “He told me everything I ever did.” (John 4:37-39)

Bill Gaither wanted a piece of land to build a house in Alexandria, Indiana, the town where he had grown up. He noticed a piece south of town where cattle grazed and learned it belonged to a 92-year-old retired banker named Mr. Yule. Mr. Yule owned a lot of land in the area, but he wasn’t planning to sell any of it. Bill and his wife Gloria decided to personally visit him. Bill shares the story in *I Almost Missed the Sunset.*”

“He looked at us over the top of his bifocals. I introduced myself and told him we were interested in a piece of his land.

“Not selling,” he said pleasantly. “Promised it to a farmer for grazing.” Then he said, “What’d you say your name was?”

“Gaither. Bill Gaither.”

“Hmmm. Any relation to Grover Gaither?”

“Yes, sir. He was my granddad.”

Mr. Yule put down his paper and removed his glasses. “Interesting. Grover Gaither was the best worker I ever had on my farm. Full day’s work for a day’s pay. So honest. What’d you say you wanted?”

I told him again.

“Let me do some thinking on it, then come back and see me.”

I came back within the week, and Mr. Yule sold me the property.

Three decades later I said to my son Benjy, “You’ve had this wonderful place to grow up through nothing that you’ve done, but because of the good name of a great-granddad you never met.”

How did people who came before you prepare the way? Consider more than your biological family.

How are you preparing the way for those who come after you?

My parents grew up in a small farming community in central Illinois. They built relationships because people in the community relied on each other. They trusted each other, watched out for each other, and helped each other. They worked fields side-by-side, lent and borrowed equipment, and lived through trials and tragedies together.

When my parents had been married for 45 years, my sisters and I planned a surprise party. It was a wonderful party. They were thrilled to see so many friends from their decades together. They hadn’t seen some people in years. Others, they lived alongside daily. With each turn, as they looked around the room, they were greeted by another smiling face full of memories.

After the celebration had been going for a couple hours, a friend and I were talking. He and I had been friends since birth, because our parents were friends, as well as our grandparents. The family farms were only a couple miles from each other. We shared weddings, births and funerals. Looking around at the multitude of friends, circles overlapping circles, my friend reflected, “You know the sad thing is, we – our generation - probably will not get to experience this when we’re our parents’ age. We’re too busy to make the depth and extent of friendships they have.”

I’m not saying it’s impossible. In fact, if anyone will have a 45th anniversary celebration with extensive circles of friends, it will be this particular friend, but I completely understand what he was saying. In the hustle and bustle of everyday life, we often skirt around and skim over the importance of long-term relationship-building. Our relationships can use more intention and attention. Our relationships can be bumped up on the scale of priorities.

Who are you investing in, and who are you allowing – even inviting – to invest in you?

It's not just about who you'll call in the best and worst times of life. It's about who you'll call, drive to, sit with and sacrifice for during daily life.

Consider the people surrounding you.

Are you focused more on short-term benefits or long-term investment?

Are the people by your side going to be by your side in 10, 25, 50 years?

Life changes. People move. Interests change. Transitions are part of every person's life. But you might see life as so transitory that you've become comfortable in the transition instead of investing in the long-term possibilities.

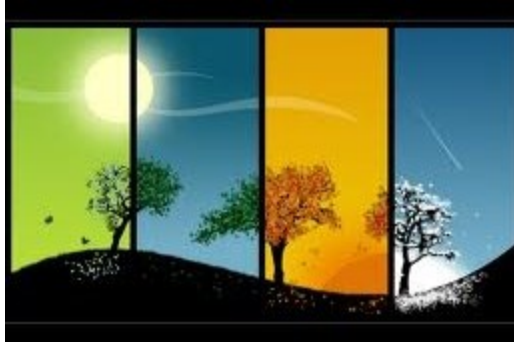
Many people avoid investing money because they're overwhelmed with the amount they'll need. They can't fathom such a sacrifice.

Are you doing the same with relationships?

Investing even the smallest amounts of money will accumulate into a growing investment.

Surely, you have time, energy and resources to invest in growing relationships.

Encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. 1 Thessalonians 5:11



Feasting on Figs

As Jesus and his followers were coming closer to Jerusalem, they came to the towns of Bethphage and Bethany near the Mount of Olives. From there Jesus sent two of his followers and said to them, “Go to the town you can see there. When you enter it, you will quickly find a colt tied, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here to me. If anyone asks you why you are doing this, tell him its Master needs the colt, and he will send it at once.” The followers went into the town, found a colt tied in the street near the door of a house, and untied it. Some people were standing there and asked, “What are you doing? Why are you untying that colt?” The followers answered the way Jesus told them to answer, and the people let them take the colt. They brought the colt to Jesus and put their coats on it, and Jesus sat on it. Many people spread their coats on the road. Others cut branches in the fields and spread them on the road. The people were walking ahead of Jesus and behind him, shouting,

“Praise God! God bless the One who comes in the name of the Lord! God bless the kingdom of our father David! That kingdom is coming! Praise to God in heaven!”

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the Temple. After he had looked at everything, since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve apostles. The next day as Jesus was leaving Bethany, he became hungry. Seeing a fig tree in leaf from far away, he went to see if it had any figs on it. But he found no figs, only leaves, because it was not the right season for figs. So Jesus said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And Jesus’ followers heard him say this.

The next morning as Jesus was passing by with his followers, they saw the fig tree dry and dead, even to the roots. Peter remembered the tree and said to Jesus, “Teacher, look! The fig tree you cursed is dry and dead!” Jesus answered, “Have faith in God. I tell you the truth, you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, fall into the sea.’ And if you have no doubts in your mind and believe that what you say will happen, God will do it for you. So I tell you to believe that you have received the things you ask for in prayer, and God will give them to you. When you are praying, if you

are angry with someone, forgive him so that your Father in heaven will also forgive your sins. (But if you don't forgive other people, then your Father in heaven will not forgive your sins.)" Mark 11

Jesus checked the fig tree for figs, despite figs not being in season, and cursed the fig tree to unproductiveness. Doesn't that seem odd? First, why would Jesus even have to check the fig tree? Surely he already knew there were no figs on the tree. Second, why would he curse something for being unproductive when it wasn't the season for being productive? It might be tempting to look at these verses and assume Jesus is being selfish, because he is hungry and cannot satisfy his hunger with figs, and unreasonable, because he shouldn't have expected the plant to be productive in the current season. But Jesus is neither selfish nor unreasonable.

I've kept the verses about the fig tree within the context of Mark 11 in its entirety for a purpose. It's essential to keep Scripture in the context in which it is found.

Consider the timing of Jesus cursing the fig tree. He had entered Jerusalem to recognition, praise, and fanfare. He then entered to the Temple. Matthew 21 provides more details about what happened:

Jesus went into the Temple and threw out all the people who were buying and selling there. He turned over the tables of those who were exchanging different kinds of money, and he upset the benches of those who were selling doves. Jesus said to all the people there, "It is written in the Scriptures, 'My Temple will be called a house for prayer.' But you are changing it into a hideout for robbers."

The blind and crippled people came to Jesus in the Temple, and he healed them. The leading priests and the teachers of the law saw that Jesus was doing wonderful things and that the children were praising him in the Temple, saying, "Praise to the Son of David." All these things made the priests and the teachers of the law very angry.

They asked Jesus, "Do you hear the things these children are saying?"

Jesus answered, "Yes. Haven't you read in the Scriptures, 'You have taught children and babies to sing praises'?" Then Jesus left and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night. (Matthew 21:12-17)

After the exultation of followers praising Jesus as the Messiah, he encountered people going against his will and disrespecting God's house. Jesus was displeased with people who should have known better and been more faithful to keep God's Word.

The fig tree often represents the nation of Israel in God's Word. The curse for unproductiveness indicates a displeasure in Israel's spiritual state. The nation of Israel as a whole was

not recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. It was not going to produce fruit through a season of unbelief. Therefore, its growth would be stunted.

This came as no surprise to Jesus, of course. Jesus was God in flesh, so he still knew all even when in human form. However, he would still be disappointed to personally encounter wickedness, betrayal, and faithlessness. It wouldn't have been unreasonable for the fig tree to be productive, because from a distance, Jesus saw a fig tree "in leaf." Leaves grow prior to the fruit, and figs are actually a similar color to the leaves until they completely ripen, so it wouldn't have been unreasonable to assume a leafy fig tree would have figs on it. Obviously, this was not the case. Jesus stated the fig tree wasn't in the right season to produce figs. In other words, the nation of Israel will not be productive in this season. Jesus already knew what he would encounter while on earth. He would encounter a nation who would refuse to welcome him and grow in faith. Faith among the state of Israel would be stunted.

With God, there is always hope. When Peter speaks to Jesus about the dead fig tree the following day (a fig tree would typically take longer than one day to be completely "dry and dead"), Jesus in essence says nothing is impossible with God, including healing and productivity. Israel can still become a faithful people. Anyone, despite a rejection of, failure to recognize, or disobedience to God, can be restored to God. Faith, prayer, and forgiveness is all that is required to reestablish healthy, productive, fruit-producing spiritual growth.

What do you need to do to increase spiritual productivity in your life right now?

Matthew 21 and Mark 11 are not the only places in Scripture where figs are mentioned.

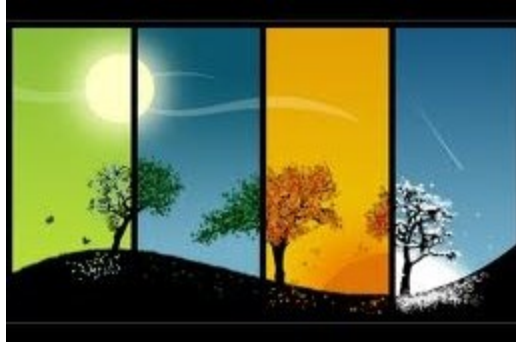
What do you learn from the following verses that mention figs?

Jesus told this story: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for some fruit on the tree, but he found none. So the man said to his gardener, 'I have been looking for fruit on this tree for three years, but I never find any. Cut it down. Why should it waste the ground?' But the servant answered, 'Master, let the tree have one more year to produce fruit. Let me dig up the dirt around it and put on some fertilizer. If the tree produces fruit next year, good. But if not, you can cut it down.'" (Luke 13:6-9)

Then Jesus told this story: "Look at the fig tree and all the other trees. When their leaves appear, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you will know that God's kingdom is near. I tell you the truth, all these things will happen while the people of this time are still living. Earth and sky will be destroyed, but the words I have spoken will never be destroyed." (Luke 21:29-33)

“At that time, the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky. Then all the peoples of the world will cry. They will see the Son of Man coming on clouds in the sky with great power and glory. He will use a loud trumpet to send his angels all around the earth, and they will gather his chosen people from every part of the world. Learn a lesson from the fig tree: When its branches become green and soft and new leaves appear, you know summer is near. In the same way, when you see all these things happening, you will know that the time is near, ready to come. I tell you the truth, all these things will happen while the people of this time are still living. Earth and sky will be destroyed, but the words I have said will never be destroyed.” (Matthew 24:30-35)

Be faithful. Be attentive. Be productive.



But Now You Know

But now you know the true God. Really, it is God who knows you. So why do you turn back to those weak and useless rules you followed before? Do you want to be slaves to those things again? You still follow teachings about special days, months, seasons, and years. I am afraid for you, that my work for you has been wasted. Galatians 4:9-11

But now you know...

These four words seem so simple, but they cause pause. Faith changes things. Knowing God changes perspective, priorities, and behavior. Knowing God realizes God knows you. Knowing God involves moving forward.

In these verses, Paul is warning followers to not turn back.

What is behind you that you need to refuse to return to in order to move forward?

Our pasts brought us to our presents, but we need to fully live our presents in order to get to our futures. The past might be comfortable, because we established habits – and those habits have not always been healthy. We might have even thought they were helpful and productive at the time, but once we assume God’s perspective through our faithful relationship with him, we don’t need the old assumptions, excuses, and habits. We need to invite God to transform our lives.

Paul refers to “special days, months, seasons, and years” because many of the people to whom he was speaking were trying to revert to the old laws and traditions by which they had once adamantly lived. Those laws and traditions served a purpose. In fact, they were biblical. The issue is they were remnants. They had been replaced with the new covenant of a personal relationship with Jesus. It was no longer essential to live under the covenant of the Old Testament, because since Jesus came to earth and died, making the way for the Holy Spirit, helping us with life on earth in preparation for eternal life, the new covenant prevails.

Without intentional effort, we will not grow forward. We will default to what is comfortable to us. We gravitate to what we know. When we begin a relationship with Jesus, even when we want to leave our former lives behind, even when we have a burning desire to continually seek and obey God, we will struggle in at least some areas of life. What we've been taught and have practiced our entire lives up to the point we begin a relationship with God is difficult to reverse or replace.

In what areas do you most struggle to grow spiritually?

Perhaps you can think of people who seem consistent in their faith in many ways, but there's that one area that doesn't seem to fit. You don't understand how they haven't grown in that one area. It's so obvious to you. It's not an area in which you struggle. You likely have your own.

We can easily compare ourselves to others and rationalize that "at least I'm better than _____"! (We can also compare ourselves to others and rationalize that we'll never measure up to someone.) But God doesn't measure you against anyone else. You have a purpose to fulfill in this season of life as well as in life overall, and only you can fulfill the specific purpose he has for you. He brings people into your life not to compare yourself to but to walk alongside you. And everyone will not help you grow. Consider several verses further along in Galatians 4:

Those people are working hard to persuade you, but this is not good for you. They want to persuade you to turn against us and follow only them. It is good for people to show interest in you, but only if their purpose is good. This is always true, not just when I am with you. My little children, again I feel the pain of childbirth for you until you truly become like Christ. (Galatians 4:17-19)

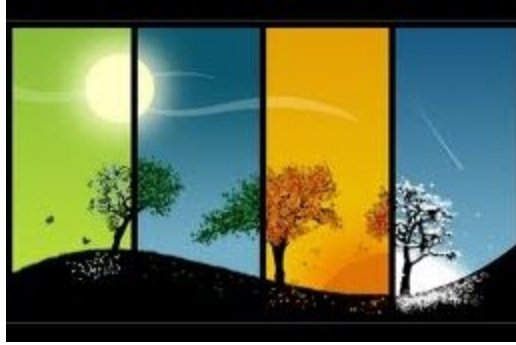
Consider who is in your life who pours into you in ways that pull you away from God. (Keep in mind anyone who is not intentionally helping you grow toward God is pulling you away from God. There is no neutrality.)

Consider who is in your life who pours into you in ways that help you grow toward God.

Who are you pouring into right now, helping her grow toward God?

How might you be pulling someone away from God?

Don't simply skim over these questions. Be honest with yourself. Let God reveal the reality of your relationships. Let God reveal the reality of your priorities. Let God reveal the truth of your faith. He longs for you to long for him in this season – and in every season of your life. Your enthusiasm will ebb and flow, but your commitment to God isn't about feelings. God is passionately pursuing you. Who or what are you passionately pursuing?



Why Are You Standing Here?

Jesus said to them, “The Father is the only One who has the authority to decide dates and times. These things are not for you to know. But when the Holy Spirit comes to you, you will receive power. You will be my witnesses—in Jerusalem, in all of Judea, in Samaria, and in every part of the world.”

After he said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud hid him from their sight. As he was going, they were looking into the sky. Suddenly, two men wearing white clothes stood beside them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing here looking into the sky? Jesus, whom you saw taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you saw him go. (Acts 1:7-11)

It’s easy to get caught up in the moment – or season. God gives us Scripture to reveal himself to us, teach us his principles, and equip us to live in his will. God speaks to us in many ways through his Word.

He gives us facts. *The Father is the only One who has the authority to decide dates and times. These things are not for you to know.* We can try to figure things out for ourselves. We can try to analyze the times and reasons for seasons and situations in our lives, but only God has the authority to decide such details. It’s clear we’re not to know everything that he knows. He gives us what we’re supposed to know. We should always be open to him giving us knowledge and wisdom and readily accept and apply what he gives us. What he doesn’t give us, we’re not supposed to have.

He gives us instruction. *But when the Holy Spirit comes to you, you will receive power. You will be my witnesses—in Jerusalem, in all of Judea, in Samaria, and in every part of the world.* God tells us what we’re supposed to do. He gives us direction in and toward our purpose. God wants our steps to fit into

the ones he has planned for us. He wants us to desire his will so intently that we will look for the way he has prepared and be bold enough to follow regardless of our trepidation or preferences.

He gives us reassurance. *After he said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud hid him from their sight. As he was going, they were looking into the sky.* We're not perfect, and God knows we need his reassurance in our humanness. He provided many accounts of people who have been deeply devoted to him but not always responded in model ways. The apostles knew Jesus personally as a flesh-and-blood man. Jesus looked into their eyes, touched their shoulders, and taught them with his words and actions. He told them multiple times what would happen to him, yet their focus wasn't on what he had just directed them to do. Their focus was on the immediate. We can relate. We want to see and touch proof. We don't want to feel isolated. God knew we'd need reassurance.

He gives us conviction. *Suddenly, two men wearing white clothes stood beside them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here looking into the sky?"* God knows we need him to speak authority into our lives. Left to ourselves, we might think we can come to the right conclusions, but we'll usually get off track, stay in one place, or run in circles. When God speaks through his Word, angels, visions, teaching, and prayers, he always speaks with authority. The Holy Spirit shares God's truth with us. He speaks to us internally, so we don't have to rely on external influences. He challenges us through difficult questions that help us realize where we are spiritually and what we need to do to grow into a better place. We can ignore the God's voice, but we can never avoid his presence.

He gives us promise. *Jesus, whom you saw taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you saw him go.* We can have hope because of God's promises. We never need to doubt what God says will happen, because he doesn't contradict what he says and what he does. God's promises might not be fulfilled in exactly the way or time we expect and want, but our expectations don't change God's promises. God will do what he says he will do – every word and every detail. When we are faithful, we will see the fulfillment of God's promises, either on earth or in eternity.

As we complete the *Pure Growth* study, let's commit to inviting God to invade our lives with his facts, instruction, reassurance, conviction, and promise.

Consider and share your hopes to grow in one or more of these areas.

We need God to accept the spiritual seasons in our lives. Only God has the perspective to give us exactly what we need when we need it. Only God knows how our past season has prepared us for this one. Only God knows what's necessary in our present season to prepare us for the next one. Only God knows the details of people's lives who prepared a legacy for us and those for whom

we're preparing a legacy. Only God knows how the details we know of and those we don't are weaving together for his purpose.

There's much that only God can do and be, but there's much expected of us as well. We must seek him. We must trust him. We must know him. We must accept his guidance. We must wisely use his provision. We must love as he loves. We must serve as he models. We must become less so he can become more in our lives. We must accept that our lives here on earth are brief, and they are pointless without a relationship with him.

It has been an honor to share this season of life with you. May you continue to recognize and accept your journey of God's pure purpose. Jesus prayed for his followers before he was arrested and crucified for you and me. Let his words soak into you today. Let his words challenge you to live today giving all glory to God.

After Jesus said these things, he looked toward heaven and prayed, "Father, the time has come. Give glory to your Son so that the Son can give glory to you. You gave the Son power over all people so that the Son could give eternal life to all those you gave him. And this is eternal life: that people know you, the only true God, and that they know Jesus Christ, the One you sent. Having finished the work you gave me to do, I brought you glory on earth. And now, Father, give me glory with you; give me the glory I had with you before the world was made.

I showed what you are like to those you gave me from the world. They belonged to you, and you gave them to me, and they have obeyed your teaching. Now they know that everything you gave me comes from you. I gave them the teachings you gave me, and they accepted them. They knew that I truly came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I am praying for them. I am not praying for people in the world but for those you gave me, because they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And my glory is shown through them. I am coming to you; I will not stay in the world any longer. But they are still in the world. Holy Father, keep them safe by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they will be one, just as you and I are one. While I was with them, I kept them safe by the power of your name, the name you gave me. I protected them, and only one of them, the one worthy of destruction, was lost so that the Scripture would come true.

I am coming to you now. But I pray these things while I am still in the world so that these followers can have all of my joy in them. I have given them your teaching. And the world has hated them, because they don't belong to the world, just as I don't belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world but to keep them safe from the Evil One. They don't belong to the world, just as I don't belong to the world. Make them ready for your service through your truth; your teaching is truth. I have sent them into the world, just as you sent me into the world. For their sake, I am making myself ready to serve so that they can be ready for their service of the truth.

I pray for these followers, but I am also praying for all those who will believe in me because of their teaching. Father, I pray that they can be one. As you are in me and I am in you, I pray that they can also be one in us. Then the world will believe that you sent me. I have given these people the glory that you gave me so that they can be one, just as you and I are one. I will be in them and you will be in me so that they will be completely one. Then the world will know that you sent me and that you loved them just as much as you loved me.

Father, I want these people that you gave me to be with me where I am. I want them to see my glory, which you gave me because you loved me before the world was made. Father, you are the One who is good. The world does not know you, but I know you, and these people know you sent me. I showed them what you are like, and I will show them again. Then they will have the same love that you have for me, and I will live in them.” (John 17)