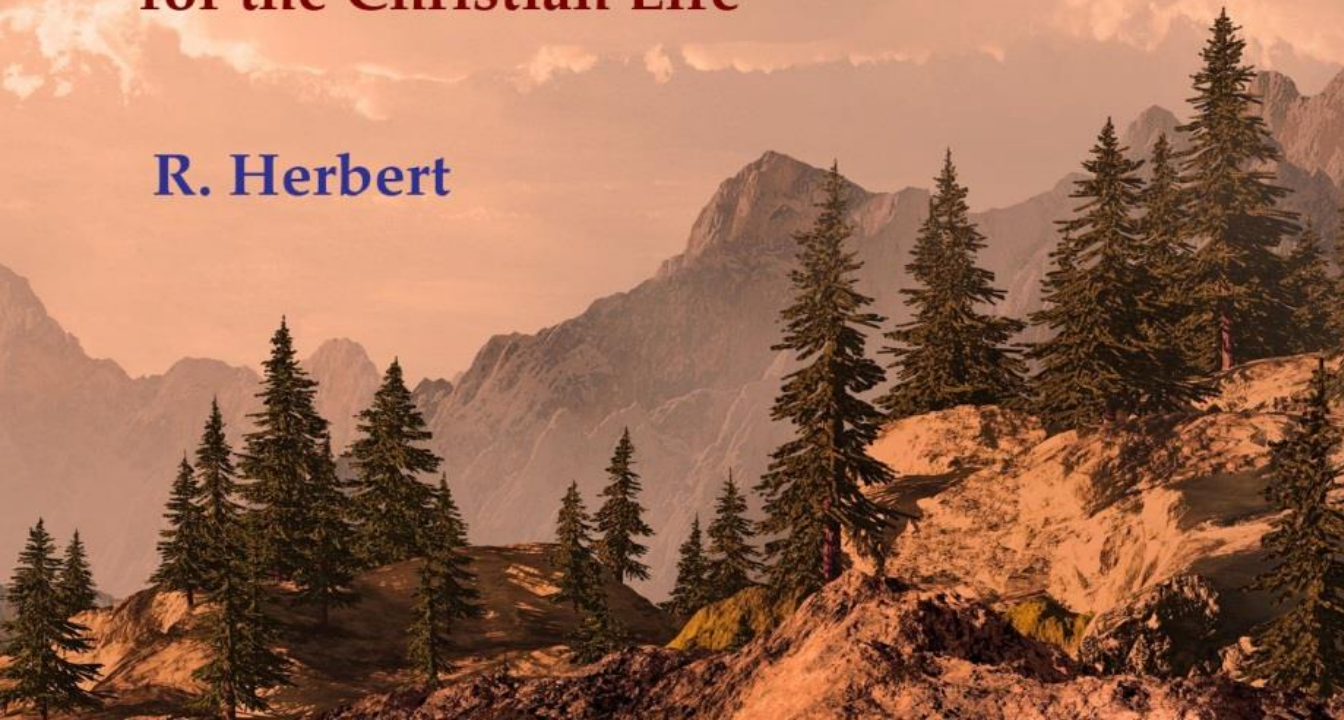


# Some Days We Soar



Words of Encouragement  
for the Christian Life

R. Herbert



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for the Christian Life**

By R. Herbert

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# INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the Christian life – like life in general – some days we soar, and some days we don't. To stretch the eagle-flight analogy a little further, some days it just seems hard to “get off the ground” or, perhaps worse, we start out “flying high” and end up in an ignominious crash-landing. Those are the days we all appreciate encouragement if there is any around. Like a cool drink on a hot day – it doesn't make the problem go away, but it helps us deal with it. But some days, encouragement isn't easy to find. That's too bad for several reasons – not only because it's a commodity we know we could use in our own lives occasionally, but also because it means people don't tend to naturally give out encouragement, despite the fact that it's free.

For the Christian, it's a particularly important issue because walking the walk of faith, despite its blessings and benefits, also brings additional challenges; and anyone who hasn't found that is not walking fast enough. In fact, the Bible speaks to this situation directly. Encouragement is a Christian virtue just like faith, hope and love – it just doesn't get all the press some of those other virtues get. But did you realize that the Bible actually contains more direct commands to encourage one another than it does to be patient, or to care for others, or a host of other good things? In fact, the Bible has almost as many direct commands to “encourage one another” as it has direct commands to “love one another.” Love wins the statistics game overall when other wordings are considered, but the message is still clear. Christians are supposed to encourage each other as well as anyone else who needs encouragement.

Nevertheless, although there are a good number of inspirational volumes available to help the Christian focus on the encouraging aspects of our faith, there are not a lot of books that directly address

the nitty-gritty issues of how to encourage others and how to be encouraged oneself – and that is the reason for the book you are reading now. *Some Days We Soar* is a collection of short essays – some of them originating as blog posts on our websites, others written specifically for this volume – aimed at providing not only reasons for the Christian to be encouraged and to encourage others, but also some thoughts and guidance on how to accomplish those goals.

Taking Isaiah 40:31 as our theme: “... those who hope in the Lord ... will soar on wings like eagles ...,” we have divided the book into three sections corresponding with the three areas in which we perhaps most frequently need encouragement and wish to encourage others: surviving trials and difficulties, personal growth, and serving others. Each of these three aspects of Christian life carries its own challenges and rewards and is an area that we can profitably think about.

**Part One: Encouragement in Enduring** deals with what is probably the primary need for Christian encouragement: accepting, coping with, surviving and overcoming – all with God’s help – the problems and trials that life seems to throw at us (Romans 15:4). Sometimes these may be catastrophic events that suddenly confront us; other times they may be much smaller repetitive problems that still wear us down if not handled effectively. There are no easy answers to all life’s problems, of course, but we know that “...suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...” (Romans 5:3-4). It is our goal that these chapters will provide some encouragement in dealing with the things we do endure.

**Part Two: Encouragement in Growing** looks at some of the ways in which we can be encouraged as we go through the “growing pains” of Christian life. The new Christian quickly finds that spiritual growth is not automatic. In order to even begin the process of being

conformed to the likeness of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18), we have to strive for spiritual growth. This has nothing to do with our laboriously seeking salvation through works, but simply wanting to follow the biblical injunction to “grow in grace and knowledge” (2 Peter 3:18). As Christians we are privileged to both accept the righteousness of Christ (Philippians 3:9) and still try to walk obediently to the best of our ability (Romans 6:15). That was what C.S. Lewis meant when he wrote in *Mere Christianity*: “... handing everything over to Christ does not, of course, mean that you stop trying. To trust Him means ... trying to do all that He says...” That’s where we need encouragement to stay positive and to help others do the same in living out our lives with true peace and joy, while understanding that personal spiritual growth does not usually come quickly or easily.

**Part Three: Encouragement in Service** is about those times we are not dealing with personal trials or issues regarding spiritual growth, but when we are trying to serve and encourage others (1 Peter 4:10). In our interactions with others of our faith, we find a need for two kinds of encouragement – encouragement that we strive to give to others and, if we are honest, encouragement that we sometimes need ourselves as we strive to serve but suffer occasional doubts about our capabilities, about whether what we are doing is making a difference, or other issues. Serving isn’t always easy, and encouragement is sometimes needed in that area (see, for example, Ephesians 6:7), just as much as in dealing with trials or growth.

Ultimately, as Christians, the greatest encouragement we can find is one we should already be aware of – that in working with us, our Father is a God of encouragement (Romans 15:5 ESV). He encourages us, if we allow him, just as much as he urges us to encourage others. But that encouragement may come to us in many different ways. We hope that this small book might be one of them.



**PART ONE:**

**ENCOURAGEMENT IN ENDURING**

## **1. DAYS WE SOAR ... AND DAYS WE DON'T**

*“... those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”* (Isaiah 40:31)

Isaiah's wonderful lines regarding the renewing of our strength carry an even more encouraging message than we might immediately recognize. First, Isaiah compares our strengthening to the flight of eagles. Eagles have very large wings in relation to their body size – which doesn't make them better “flappers” for flying; it makes them able to soar on air currents that carry them long distances and to great heights.

They are wonderfully designed for this kind of soaring flight and often spend only a couple of minutes out of any given hour actually flying on their own strength. In fact, without the air currents that lift and speed the eagle, the bird is actually not an impressive flyer. A great amount of energy is required to flap those massive wings and lift the large body, but it is as the eagle utilizes the power available to it from air currents that it soars and its strength is literally renewed and multiplied.

The analogy for those “who hope in the Lord” is obvious. We may be able to accomplish a certain amount on our own strength, but if we choose to accept the power of “the wind” (Acts 2:2), our strength is renewed and expanded and we can rise to much greater heights. But Isaiah doesn't stop there. After comparing God's strengthening of us to the flight of the eagle, he speaks about the strengthening of those who run and those who walk. These are clearly descending levels of strength and apparent accomplishment. Soaring is better than running, running better than walking.

We all have days when we feel that we spiritually soar with God's help, others when we feel we are not that high, but are running steadily along at a good pace, and yet other days when we feel we are just plodding pilgrims slowly putting one foot in front of another. Some days, pain, worry, fatigue or failure take their toll on us, and we just don't seem as spiritually energized. But that's doubtless Isaiah's point in the descending order of soaring, running and walking – God promises to strengthen us however our day is going.

In his excellent book *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*, John Ortberg makes the point that it is natural and not wrong that we have such widely different days. Jesus knew what it was to receive God's strength to do his work on soaring days – days of healings and other miracles. He also must have experienced slower days when he had to cope with doubting and unbelieving friends and deal with the hostility of enemies. Finally, Christ knew what it was like to need the strength even to walk – as he carried the heavy stake on which he was to be crucified.

The truth is, if we seek God and stay close to him, we can often soar – but we can't always soar. Some days we soar and some days we just feel sore. As Ortberg perceptively concludes, sometimes it is just important that we keep going despite our weakness. In the last analysis, sometimes it takes more character to walk than it does to soar. In those situations, Ortberg reminds us, maybe God prizes our walking even more than our running or soaring.

## **2. CHARLIE MIKE!**

Sometimes military missions go wrong. It may be just a small mishap, or it may be a major problem that endangers the success of the mission and the lives of those involved. At other times the mission may be faced with the need for ongoing exertion that leads to a level of exhaustion almost at the limits of endurance. At such times, the response from officers and from encouraging comrades alike is often “Charlie Mike!” – military speak for “C” “M” – the acronym for “Continue Mission!”

Every Christian knows that things can go wrong in the Christian life and in Christian missions, too. It’s not all a bed of blessings and roses as some might try to make it out to be. Sometimes the Christian fighter can also be exhausted to the extreme, just in different ways from what may be experienced in many military ops. It’s a slower, psychological exhaustion that can come from fighting the odds in an ongoing situation that doesn’t seem to let up.

Maybe that’s why the word of God exhorts us repeatedly to continue in the mission we have been given. Notice what the great ancient military commander Joshua told those fighting with him: “Be very strong and continue obeying all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, so that you do not turn from it to the right or left” (Joshua 23:6 HCSB). King Solomon put it another way: “Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the Lord all the day” (Proverbs 23:17 ESV). Notice the common theme: “Continue obeying,” “Continue in the fear of the Lord” – “Continue Mission.”

Sometimes the encouragement to continue is something we need to ask for – especially when things go wrong. When Peter and John and the early Christians came under persecution, help to continue the mission is precisely what they asked for: “And now, Lord, look upon

their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness” (Acts 4:29 ESV).

The Bible makes it clear that that is exactly the attitude God wants to see in us. Solomon, at the height of his wisdom, before his own downfall (1 Kings 11:11), recognized that God is with us to the degree that we continue: “... there is no God like you in heaven or on earth—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way” (2 Chronicles 6:14).

It is a central fact about walking with God and striving to complete his mission for us that we must not forget. God will continue to equip us to persevere, but we have to discard any and all thoughts of discouragement and exercise faith in the One who sets the mission parameters and who empowers those he calls to the mission. Ultimately it is continuing that defines the true warrior as opposed to the short-term soldier or follower who falls by the way. We have that on the authority of the greatest Commander in Chief, who said specifically: “If you continue in My word, you really are My disciples” (John 8:31 HCSB). That’s the goal and encouragement we all need to focus on.

That’s the ultimate “Charlie Mike!”

### **3. AN UNEXPECTED STORM**

*Sometimes it's not the storm we are expecting that hits us; but whatever the storm, we can learn from it.*

It was the weekend he said the tropical storm was supposed to hit his Gulf Coast hometown. His email said they were preparing for a big storm, a dangerous storm. That storm never hit, but a couple of days later his young son was hit by a car while riding his bicycle to school. With his son hospitalized in serious condition, an unexpected storm – my friend's own personal storm - had arrived.

It seems that life is often like that. Sometimes the storm doesn't hit when it's expected; sometimes it's not the expected storm that hits. Sometimes it's not that which we fear that comes upon us, it's that which comes out of left field, seemingly out of nowhere. It's not the disease we fear because of family history, but a different one that we contract. It's not the illness we are checked for, but another one that shows up in the testing. Whatever the case, no storm feels “perfect” when it hits. Yet we learn things in storms we do not learn otherwise.

The Book of Job is always instructive in this regard. Job's ultimate life storm was certainly unexpected and terrible, but “the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm” (Job 38:1, 40:6) nonetheless. It's a truth that we learn through our storms, through the things we suffer, as even Christ himself did (Hebrews 5:8), and that surely is the message of Romans 8:28 – that all things work together for good. This doesn't mean that the destruction caused by storms is good or that suffering is ever trivial or easily discounted, but that good can come out of the storm and that faith is formed and deepened in these times.

It's hard to think about storms without remembering the story recorded in the Gospels of how a great storm came up while Jesus and his disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8:23-30). Despite the storm, Jesus was sleeping peacefully on the boat until he was wakened by his fearful disciples asking him to save them.

“He replied, ‘You of little faith, why are you so afraid?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, ‘What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!’” (vss. 26-27).

The disciples learned something from this experience about the Son of God and how God can control the outcome of storms in our lives.

No storm that causes injury, loss of life, or physical damage is good to those affected by it. Katrina, Hugo, Sandy and many others brought great suffering, as future storms will also. The storms in our personal lives are no different. But once they happen, every life storm is an opportunity for God to work something within us that might not have been there otherwise. Believing good can be brought out of the storm does not mean the storm is good, but we can trust in the One who allows the storms of life to touch us and teach us and who has the power, when he is asked, to calm the storms both around and within us.

## 4. HE'S ALREADY THERE

*“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”  
(Psalm 23:4)*

From the soldier on patrol in an active war zone to the timid individual “afraid of his own shadow,” we all face dark valleys in some parts of our lives – even if they are only in our memories. King David’s words in Psalm 23 have been a help to those going into the dark valleys for thousands of years, but we can sometimes miss their point.

If you have ever seen devotionals or other religious writings urging us to “take God with you into the valley,” you will perhaps know what I mean. Well intentioned as this approach is, it can have the unintended consequence of reducing God in our minds to a kind of spiritual good luck charm – a token we feel we must have with us for the sake of survival. But the truth is, of course, we don’t need to take God into the dark valley – the One who is everywhere is already there. We see this in other words of David:

“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you”  
(Psalm 139:7-12).



These verses from Psalm 139 dovetail perfectly with those from Psalm 23. David is not saying “Where can I hide from your spirit?” He is asking, rhetorically, “Where can I possibly go where you are not already there?” In the same way, “Surely the darkness will hide me” does not mean “I can hide from you in darkness,” but an honest admitting of anxiety in the form of “What if God does not see me in the dark valley?”

David knew the answers to these rhetorical questions. He had been in the dark valley – numerous times. He had cried out from the darkness around him enough times that he knew he would be heard. We can learn that same trust, too. We needn’t ever feel we are trying to contact a distant God – like someone radioing desperately for backup or calling from a signal-dead spot. God is there in the dark valley as much as anywhere. Notice David’s words again: “In my alarm I said, ‘I am cut off from your sight!’ Yet you heard my cry for mercy when I called to you for help” (Psalm 31:22). All we have to do to establish contact is to speak to him, and if we do, he will respond, because he is already there.

So we need not think that we have to take God with us into the dark valleys of our lives. The good news is, he is waiting to hear from us there, waiting to be with us there just as much as he is anywhere. And, as David wrote, there is no valley dark enough to hide us from him, no valley dark enough to block him from helping us. We need not feel we must somehow take him into the valley – he is already there.

## 5. WHAT THE CAVEMEN LEARNED

I'm not talking about Neanderthal or Cro-Magnon "cavemen" here – I'm actually thinking of two men of God who at different times in biblical history both learned important lessons in the back of a cave.

These men were both successful in their own fields – one a warrior and one a man of religion. Both were used to life around palaces and nice homes, but both men lost everything they had and fled in depression and fear for their lives – to the back of a cave.

The first man was, of course, David. 1 Samuel 22 tells us how when the jealous Saul stepped up his campaign to kill the young shepherd warrior, David finally fled to a mountain cave where he holed up in depression, frustration and fear. The other man was Elijah, and in 1 Kings 19 we see that when the wicked Jezebel threatened his life, Elijah also "caved" under the pressure and ran for many miles, to the back of a cave on Mt. Horheb – where he stayed, tormented by fear, frustration and anger.

There are times in our lives when psychologically we find ourselves in the back of a cave, too. We understand that some depression is physically caused and must be treated as such, but sometimes we find ourselves in the dark cave of depression or despair due to discouragement and difficulties, because fleeing to the inner parts of our minds is a very human reaction and sometimes seems like the only way to survive. Unfortunately, it becomes easy to stay there. It's not that we are comfortable in the cave of depression, but the longer we stay there the harder it becomes to leave. That's why in both biblical stories of God's servants who fled to physical caves, the first thing we see in the way God turned these situations around was that he commanded both men to leave the cave they were in.

In David's case, God sent a prophet to David to specifically tell him he had spent enough time in the cave and that it was time to leave. "... The prophet Gad said to David, 'Do not stay in the [cave] stronghold'" (1 Samuel 22:5), so, uncomfortable as it was to do, at God's command David left the cave. We see exactly the same with Elijah. "The Lord said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord ...'" (1 Kings 19:11). God patiently listens to the reasons Elijah gives for his depression, anger and fear, but he nevertheless firmly tells him to come out of the cave. It doubtless wasn't psychologically easy, but both men obeyed in faith. They may not have seen a reason to leave the cave, yet once they realized it was God's will, they obeyed.

So, clearly, God understands when we sometimes flee to the cave, but he is just as clear in telling us we must not stay there. And God doesn't just tell us to leave the cave we find ourselves in. He goes a step further – as the wise Physician he is, he prescribes what we need in order to stay out of the cave. In both the story of David and of Elijah, God prescribes exactly the same spiritual medicine. When he instructed David to leave the cave, we see the next thing he does is to tell David to go help the Keilahites who were being attacked by the Philistines: "Go, attack the Philistines and save Keilah" (1 Samuel 23:1-2). And when Elijah obediently stepped out of the cave, God immediately told him: "Go ... to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat ..." (1 Kings 19:15-16).

God doesn't just tell us to pull ourselves together and leave the cave of depression. He commands us to leave – and to go help someone who needs help. Finding ourselves in a "cave" is something that even some of the greatest of God's servants have experienced, but the way out was the same for them as it is for us. We overcome this problem only when we realize God doesn't want us to live in the cave

and that his prescription for cave fever is often to go help someone. It's as though God shows us that the only way to effectively stay out of the cave is not just to get busy, but to get busy helping others. That is how God helps us get our focus off our own problems – by getting us to focus on and help others whose problems are so often so much worse than our own.

## 6. WEEDS AND SINS

*“A weed is just a plant in the wrong place at the wrong time.”*

Whoever wrote that didn't have a garden. After spending way too much of my day wrestling with crabgrass, dandelions and other assorted non-cultivars today, I almost titled these thoughts “Weeds Are Sins.” That may seem extreme, but after several hours of weeding I might be able to make a case for it.

At the very least, we can say weeds are connected to sin - as the Book of Genesis clearly shows. When Adam failed his first job as a gardener and ate from the wrong plant in the Garden of Eden, he was told clearly: “Cursed is the ground because of you ... It will produce thorns and thistles for you” (Genesis 3:17-18).

Since then, weeds have been with us and we humans have found little good to say about them. Do you remember what the final words of Job were as he ended his defense as recorded in the Book of Job? He expressed his frustration and misery with the most discouraging words he could think of (and he thought of quite a few): “... let thorns grow instead of wheat, and foul weeds instead of barley” (Job 31:39-40). Then there is Jesus' Parable of the Weeds and Wheat found in Matthew 13, of course. It was a parable that he knew would make a point in a hand-powered farm-to-fork agrarian society.

But why do I think weeds are like sin? Well, back to my garden. If your yard is anything like mine, you know weeding takes a lot of time. I sometimes put down weed killer (don't worry, I buy the earth-friendly kind), but the weeds still show up. They not only show up, but they also seem to always find the hardest places to dig them out. But if I don't dig them out, they not only thrive, they multiply (ever wonder why weeds seem to produce so many more offspring than the

plants you want?), and as they multiply they spread – even (and I must say this quietly) into my neighbor’s yard.

The parallels with sin are all too obvious. Even with frequent use of God’s sin-weed killer, the Bible, sins still show up – often in the most unexpected areas of life. And you know what happens if we don’t dig them out as soon as we become aware of them. Neither the “I’ll get the weeds next week” nor the “I’ll quit this sin soon” plans ever seem to work out very well.

What’s the answer? There doesn’t seem to be an easy one in either case. Pulling out weeds and tearing out sins are both exhausting work. They both seem to be never-ending jobs. But you know what? When I see how much better things really are with the latest outgrowths of crabgrass, envy, dandelions, gossip, and other weeds and sins cut back, I realize it really is worth the constant effort.

That way, we can get back to the job of growing the good plants – the faith and good works that God wants to see in our lives – as Isaiah says: “For as the earth brings forth her bud, and as the garden causes the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth...” (Isaiah 61:11).

After all, that’s what the gardens, and people, of God are supposed to be like: “Like palm groves that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that the Lord has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters” (Numbers 24:6) - and as you see, there is no mention of weeds.

## **7. HOT-BUTTON ISSUES**

All societies have their hot-button issues. Here in the U.S. it might be immigration, minimum wage, health care or a number of other things. Whatever the topic, however, these hot-button issues share the commonality that they are not usually brought up in casual conversation with people we do not know well. People learn that society functions more smoothly when we don't discuss one of these issues in the process of going for a dental checkup or picking up our dry cleaning.

Nevertheless, because these issues are often not discussed openly and widely and may not affect everyone, they often fester under the surface - breeding resentment and frustration for many. Nationally, it often seems as though there is little we can do to change this situation. One encouraging fact, however, is that since the economy has worsened to the degree it has and affected so many people, we now find it a widespread enough problem that we can easily discuss this topic with relative strangers - with individuals voicing what they feel might help without offense or anger.

All marriages have their hot button issues. They might be finances, children, in-laws or several other topics, but married people all too often learn that things go more smoothly when we don't discuss finances over the breakfast table or the in-laws as we drive off on vacation. But because these topics may cause arguments, then be swept under the rug as acknowledged hot-button issues, they may linger at the back of our minds and bring resentment and frustration.

The answer, however, is always to talk these things through. The time and place need to be chosen carefully, and ground rules should always be agreed upon before the discussion begins. We especially need to be able to agree that mutual respect trumps any individual

issue, and we need to be able to agree to disagree, to find compromise, to work together as much as possible. Unlike national hot-button issues which may only affect certain groups or be championed by them, family hot-buttons affect everyone in the family and need bilateral, husband and wife cooperation.

The good news is that even though our national economic problems are far from solved, we have learned to talk about them and in many cases to focus on what can be done about those concerns in areas where improvement might be possible. For marriages, this principle is even more encouraging. By acknowledging the problems and talking about them, we have hope of improvement. The essential point is that we need to learn to talk about and work to defuse our family hot-buttons rather than ignoring them or pressing them. That's not only how bomb disposal works, but also how marriages grow.



## **8. WE ARE SAILING**

Being under the power of sail (whether sailboat, sailboard, iceboat or whatever) can be a lot of fun, but, just like life itself, it can have both exhilarating and difficult times.

When we have a “following wind” and the going seems effortless – the wind moving us along almost without work, just like those “good days” in life – things seem good indeed. On the other hand, when we have to fight into the wind – like those other days we all experience – it’s not so easy. But it still works. If you have ever been sailing, you know that we can make progress sailing into the wind just as we can with the wind behind us.

Sailing into a wind, of course, we have to tack the boat – zigzagging back and forth in a way that never seems like we are going in the right direction, yet we get where we are going eventually. In the Christian life, God takes us on many tacks; although we may often not see where we are going or understand the point of some of the detours we might seem to have to take, he sets the course and gets us to our destination (Philippians 1:6).

An encouraging fact about tacking is that no matter whether we make small zigzags (to put it in non-nautical language) or large ones, the actual distance travelled is actually the same; and we still get where we are going. Sometimes life’s detours can seem to be long ones, but if we have turned over the helm of our life to the One who is the sure Pilot, we will get there.

Nevertheless, those times when we are facing the wind or going through stormy waters may seem tough and we may wish for calm seas, but that’s actually what all sailors fear most when under sail – being becalmed. Throughout the history of sail when winds dropped and movement stopped, sailors eventually ran out of food and water

and became extremely sick or sometimes perished. When we enter what may seem to be a pleasant, calm stretch of life, we need to remember that being becalmed often leads to a false sense of security, to apathy and eventual loss of close contact with the One who is the bread and the water of life (John 6:35, John 4:14).

We may also think sometimes that living under our own control - like ships with engines that do not have to rely on external power - would be great in that we could go anywhere: picking our own directions, making our own moves; but left to our own direction in life we know we really drift aimlessly and no direction has any meaning. When we are relying on the power of the wind, we work with a power beyond our control, and that is how God chooses to propel us in his direction. Once we understand it, we see that the Christian life, like sailing, is not really giving up our freedom of direction; it's accepting a freedom to participate in the most challenging, exhilarating and meaningful sailing possible. It reminds me of the lyrics of the old song made famous by Rod Stewart: "I Am Sailing," which ends:

"We are sailing, we are sailing,  
home again 'cross the sea.  
We are sailing stormy waters,  
to be near you, to be free.  
Oh Lord, to be near you, to be free ..."

## **9. AN ETERNAL FORECLOSURE RECOVERY PLAN**

A great many unfortunate people have been affected by foreclosure on their homes in recent years as a result of the worldwide economic downturn. Millions of people have been forced out of their houses in this situation – from tiny homes to great mansions – and moving beyond foreclosure is not easy. The process of recovery can be grueling and take years.

The first recorded home foreclosure may have occurred far earlier than you suspect. That first foreclosure was not due to failure to pay a high interest loan, however – or any kind of loan, in fact. The third chapter of Genesis describes the foreclosure in detail and shows that the first homeowners/tenants were evicted not for failure to pay, but as the price they paid for disregarding God’s clear tenancy instructions (Genesis 3:22-24).

Heartbreaking as modern home foreclosure may be, it is nowhere near as tragic as that first foreclosure in which the human family not only lost their “perfect home,” but also their relationship with the One who was the perfect builder and landlord combined. Many homeowner and renter contracts are extremely complex, but according to the Garden of Eden story the first couple had a very straightforward contract which they understood fully: “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die’” (Genesis 3:2-3). The last few words quoted there show that foreclosure on their home was only the first – and not the worst – part of the penalty the first homeowners faced.

Fortunately for the human family, God realized that this chain of events would occur – that spiritual foreclosure was likely to happen –

and as a result he set in motion a plan for recovery. We all know the basis of the plan: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). But that is really just the first part of the plan. Jesus himself spoke of the second step for foreclosure recovery in a new home: “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places ... If I go away and prepare a place for you, I will come back and receive you to Myself, so that where I am you may be also” (John 14:2-3 HCSB). But we have to develop a new relationship with God in order to move past the old, voided contract and take advantage of the new one. Put simply, God wants totally remade tenants, remade homeowners for the new home he offers to those who want an eternally secure home with no foreclosure possible.

Physical home foreclosure can be a matter of great anguish, but whether we experience it physically or not, it can illustrate an important lesson about human life. We should be lastingly thankful for the ultimate foreclosure recovery plan that God has instituted for all who return to him to claim it.

## **10. IF WE THINK OF GOD, DOES HAPPINESS COME TO MIND?**

What is our perception of God? Can the God who constantly beholds the sin, sorrow and problems of humanity possibly be happy? Can the God who compassionately shares not only our problems, but also those of untold millions be joyful?

Many of us unconsciously share to some extent the common perception of God that portrays him as a brooding figure focusing on whether we are obeying his laws or not. It's hardly a joyful image and is reflected in countless pictures of Jesus as the suffering servant weighed down with the cares and sins of humanity. As I thought about this fact recently, three encouraging scriptures came to mind which show God in a very different light and which I plan to focus on a little more from now on.

First, in 1 Timothy 1:11 and 6:15, Paul speaks of "the blessed God;" and the word "blessed" is actually from the Greek word *makariou/makarios* meaning "happy" – "the happy God" – which really says it plainly, although the meaning is blurred in many translations.

The next scripture that comes to mind is Luke 15:7: "... I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Joy in heaven doesn't mean with the angels but not with God. Saying joy in Heaven is like saying dinner at the White House. The President will be participating. When we say joy in heaven we have to remember it is God's house, it's his party, and we need to see this as a reflection of the personality of God. Joy in heaven is synonymous with the joy and happiness of God.

The final scripture that comes to mind is Matthew 25:14-30 – the Parable of the Talents or Pounds. This is an interesting parable at many levels, but it's only recently that I noticed a detail I had not thought about before. The master goes away, leaving talents (a measure of gold or silver) in the care of his servants. At his eventual return the servant given five talents shows how he has doubled them through his work. The master then says to that servant: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

Notice the master does not say "You have done well, so come and take on some of my heavy responsibility of checking on people," but rather, "Come and share your master's happiness!" All translations have it that way. There is nothing that lets us get away from this simple meaning.

We could probably add dozens of scriptures from the Psalms and elsewhere showing that those who walk in God's ways are happy, and that must, of course, apply to God also. Despite his compassion and care for those who hurt now, God sees the big picture. He knows what he has planned and that ultimately all the hurt and sadness of physical existence will be wiped away (Isaiah 25:8, Revelation 21:4) and that it will have been worth the pain (Romans 8:18). So God is a joyful God who looks beyond the present pain – just as he tells us to do.

So when we keep this in mind, it seems to me that in our own lives and in our portrayal of God to others we should actively work to combat the common perception of God that leaves out the obvious happiness and joy that is part of his nature. The lesson for us is that if God can be joyful because he is able to look to the end result – with God's help, so can we.

**PART TWO:**

**ENCOURAGEMENT IN GROWING**

## **11. ONE FEATHER AT A TIME**

Eagles are magnificent birds. It is easy to see why they are called the “King of the Birds” and, as a result, why various myths have grown up around them. One of the most commonly heard myths is that after a number of years of life, eagles fly to remote mountain areas where they pluck out all their feathers (and in some versions of the story, even their talons before breaking off their beak) in order to grow new ones over a few months before rising as renewed creatures.

It may be an inspiring image, but it really has nothing to do with reality. If eagles lost all their feathers at one time – or even just their large wing pinions – they would be unable to fly, and as raptors they would not survive while the supposed process of transformation took place. Ornithologists know that eagles do not lose all their feathers at once and become transformed in such a short space of time. In fact, the story really tells us nothing about eagles, but it does tell us a lot about human psychology.

The process of transformation is not easy. It’s a painful and tiring one that most humans dislike and would gladly avoid if it were possible. Hence there is appeal in the stories of eagles that are completely renewed in a few months, mythical Phoenix birds that rise, transformed, overnight from their ashes, and so on. They are great stories, but they mainly show how much humans would like transformation to be quick and easy. We want to fast-track the process, skip to the end of the story, and avoid the pain of the slowness of actual change.

So how are eagles transformed? The answer is simple: one feather at a time. Feathers do become worn over time, but eagles and other raptors generally do not pluck them out. Like all other birds, they go through a slow, ongoing process called a molt in which each feather is replaced, one or two at a time. And that is really how we change, too.



And change we must. Christian change or “transformation” is not seeking salvation in works, but seeking to please and honor God in our lives.

The apostle Paul wrote: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2), and: “... we all ... are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord ...” (2 Corinthians 3:18). Being changed to reflect the nature and character of Christ is one of the great goals that every Christian aims for, but we must be realistic about it. It is a process of transformation that takes time. Notice that in 2 Corinthians 3:18, above, the ongoing, “ever-increasing” nature of the change is made clear.

It’s easy to become discouraged when we don’t see change occurring quickly in our spiritual lives, but although we don’t always see it happening before our eyes, that is the nature of all real change. The part of our nature we seek to replace is worn away slowly like a stone in a stream – but it is gradually worn away. The part of our nature that is growing to what we want to be is growing like the seed in the earth – we don’t see the growth, but it is happening nonetheless (Mark 4:26-29). We may know this intellectually, but it is a great key to encouragement to realize at the end of each day, no matter how discouragingly slow our growth may seem, as long as we are continuing to fight against what we have rejected and to work for what we believe – the stone is being worn away, the seed is growing.

We know that according to the plan of God, eventually, “We shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Corinthians 15:51-52 and Philippians 3:21). That is something to which every Christian looks forward. But for now, until we get to that point, transformation comes slowly, with patience: one feather – one small change – at a time.

## **12. DON'T LOOK BACK!**

For the ancient Romans, being “two faced” was not a negative thing suggesting hypocrisy as in our culture. The pagan Romans had their two-faced god Janus who presided over beginnings and transitions, endings and time. Janus was particularly associated with beginnings such as the new year (though there is indication the month of January was not named after him, as popularly believed, but rather after the goddess Juno).

Janus’ two faces looked back and forward – both over what had happened in the past as well as toward what lay ahead. It seems that there is something in human nature that tends to do this – to look back whenever we need to look forward.

After all, what we will be and what we will do are so often the product of what we have been and have done. Yet this is the very attitude that the apostle Paul argues against in telling us “... I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of [salvation]. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead ...” (Philippians 3:13). There is physical evidence that this is a good idea. Take the beginning of every new year as an example. Despite the fact that many regard New Year’s as a time of celebration and partying, it is also, tragically, a time of many suicides each year. The reason for a great many of those suicides – where it is known – is usually not because of fear of the future, but because of discouragement and sorrow over the past.

There is certainly nothing wrong with remembering lessons learned in the past and in reminiscing on times with loved ones and good things such as blessings we have received. However, both the Bible and modern psychology make it clear that there is nothing to be gained by staring at the negatives of our past, and this is true at any time of year. Focusing two ways – looking as much backward as

forward – is just another way of being “double minded,” which we know the Bible tells us not to be (James 1:8).

We know the old clichés: “Focusing on the past is like driving your car with your eyes on the rearview mirror,” “If the past calls, don’t answer – it has nothing new to say,” and so on; but they really are true. While Christians, hopefully, are not at as high a risk of situational depression as many less fortunate individuals, remembering the problems of our past – all the way up to yesterday – can distract us from where we should be going. Those old Janus statues illustrate this. The face that looks back cannot see the future, and the face that looks forward cannot see the past. It’s a useful analogy to remember as we go into a new year, and into every new day.

## **13. THE GROWTH WE DON'T SEE**

Have you ever had a friend thank you for something that you perhaps were not even aware you did? Sometimes I think spiritual life can be like that, too. It's easy to be aware of our failures and the many areas in which we want to grow and to miss the fact that growth is taking place. God does work changes in those who desire and ask for transformation (Psalms 51:10, Ephesians 4:22-24), and perhaps if we walked with Him much more closely, growth would be more obvious, but that doesn't mean growth is not taking place because we do not always see it.

Think about the disciples for a minute. By the time of the last evening of Christ's life, probably every one of the disciples had exhibited enough human faults, failures, fumbles and foibles to indicate to them all that perhaps they hadn't learned that much from their teacher. We might think of Peter's many mistakes, but others even wanted to bring down fire from heaven (Luke 9:54), and it looks like they were all arguing about who was the "greatest" among them on that last evening (Luke 22:24). Additionally, Jesus probably knew that they would soon sleep as he agonized in Gethsemane, that they would all soon desert him, and that even the most dedicated among them would deny knowing him.

Yet despite their track record of failures and little apparent growth, Luke records Jesus as making an amazing statement regarding the disciples at that last Passover meal: "You are those who have stayed with me in my trials" (Luke 22:28). It seems that Christ did not judge the disciples on their failures to date – or even those he knew were coming up soon – but on the right things they had done, on the areas where growth had taken place. He saw it in them even if they perhaps did not see it themselves.

It's like the Parable of the Growing Seed that Jesus had given earlier in his ministry:

“This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come” (Mark 4: 26-29).

This is a time-lapse parable like the time-lapse videos that speed up time to show plants growing and other slow-changing things happening before our eyes. But the good news is that just as the farmer in the parable does not see or comprehend it, the slow-growing plant is growing nonetheless; and that, Jesus said, is how the kingdom of God grows.

Once we come to understand this we can be encouraged that growth is growth no matter how small it may seem right now. And that helps us to focus on the value of every small – even seemingly insignificant – advance we make. Each right decision, each right choice, adds up, no matter how small it may be. As C.S. Lewis wisely wrote years ago in *Mere Christianity*:

“Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of.”

## 14. IN A HURRY TO BE PATIENT

Is patience a gene? I have always been impatient. Overcoming this failing is part of my personal climb. I have read the biblical verses relating to this subject many times over and some have been helpful, but trying to be patient when you're feeling impatient is a bit like trying to be well when you are feeling sick. It's a nice try, but it usually doesn't go far, and I know I still have a ways to go.

Patience is a fruit of the Spirit of God, of course, but that doesn't mean that God makes us instantly patient if we ask for his help with it. As someone wryly observed, if you ask God for patience, don't expect a quick reply. But seriously, we have to develop patience with the help we are given. That's why I was particularly happy with something I was reading in the Book of Ephesians recently. As I read in the New International Version, I saw something I hadn't noticed before. Paul writes:

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4: 1-2).

Now I just happened to look at these verses again in the King James version and noticed something different in the last part of the verse: “...with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.”

The difference is small, but it triggered a thought in my mind: The semicolon used in the NIV directly before “be patient” makes it look like there are two separate thoughts (being humble and gentle on the one hand and patient and bearing with people on the other), whereas the series of commas in the KJV looks more like a continuous,

connected thought. The original Greek of the New Testament doesn't have punctuation, of course; but as I looked at it, it seemed to me that the sense of the verse really is one continuous subject and thought – with humility, gentleness, and patience seeming to be grouped together as related qualities.

Then when I looked at what Paul says in Colossians 3:12-13, I saw the same pattern: "... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another..." Here we have compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience grouped together – the same qualities we see in Ephesians 4 with a couple more added.

What struck me about these verses is that the qualities Paul is talking about can indeed be interrelated, and this has a practical application which I found I was able to put into action. Instead of thinking about patience as an abstract goal when I'm feeling impatient with someone, I found that if I work on one of the more concrete qualities in the group Paul brings together, it helps with the impatience at the same time. For example, thinking about and working on being humble when I'm feeling impatient really makes a difference. After all, when I remind myself I'm not the center of the universe, what does it matter that someone is late to meet with me? If I think about what it means to be compassionate, I can better empathize with the overwhelmed driver in front of me who is holding up all the traffic, and so on. If I focus on the other qualities on Paul's list, I don't even have to think about patience directly in order to better apply it.

Anyway, I think this small tactic is helping me grow in this area. Perhaps not as quickly as I would like, but I have to be patient.

## 15. BUILT TO LAST

We don't hear the expression "built to last" very often any more. It's used of old castles and some classic and vintage cars, but not much else. In fact, with modern "planned obsolescence" being as widespread as it is, we don't hear the term used very often at all.

Why is this? Doubtless because "built to last" requires both planning and hard work on the part of the builder, and neither of those concepts is popular in a world that increasingly promotes instant consumer gratification and fast producer profits wherever possible. The result, of course, is that most things aren't built to last any more, and that's a principle and an attitude that all too easily affects other areas of our lives.

The apostle Paul has something to say about how we build things in relation to our spiritual lives. Notice what he told the Corinthians:

"... no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved – even though only as one escaping through the flames." (1 Corinthians 3:11-15)

First, Paul presumes that we will be building on the foundation God has provided. When we look at the differences between the various building materials that Paul lists, most noticeable is the diminishing value of the materials themselves: "gold, silver, stone,



wood, hay, straw.” But these construction materials are also different in their permanence. In both cases they are listed in decreasing order. Paul makes the point that value is tied to lastingness in his analogy – value is limited when things we produce do not last.

In stressing this, Paul is looking at things from God’s perspective – and clearly, God has a better perspective on time than we have. He knows that nothing physical that is human-built is really lasting – the only thing we can build that will ultimately survive is his character in us and what we accomplish for him. It is our service to God and to others that cannot be destroyed through wear, rust or the destructive elements. This is clearly what Paul had in mind when he urges us to consider the works we are doing, whether what we are making is truly “built to last.”

This concept goes hand in hand with what we have been talking about in the last few chapters – the principle of slow but certain growth. As we said above, one of the big reasons people don’t build to last these days is that it takes time. So next time you feel you are only slowly seeing change occurring in your life, be encouraged to keep at it. Things of lasting value really do take time to build, and things built well are built to last.

## **16. A LITTLE LIGHT GOES A LONG WAY**

Most of us are used to lights ... bright lights. They are all around most city dwellers to the extent that a candle or small lamp might seem insignificant indeed. Even from space, city and village lights on earth are clearly visible, while at ground level in many areas it's hard to see the stars anymore because of the brightness of the ambient light.

As Christians we are all aware of Jesus' instruction to "let our light shine" (Matthew 5:16), but even though we realize our light is "reflected from Christ," it can still be a little daunting, especially for those new to the faith, to think of ourselves as "lights." We read the biblical stories of great men and women of God, we see some of the things accomplished through those luminaries of faith and others in our own age, and it seems clear that personally we are still at the one or two candlepower stage.

But if we do feel any lack of confidence in this regard, we should remember just what an effect even a single candle can have. For one thing, the light of an average wax candle can be seen at amazing distances – and I'm talking about miles, not yards! Because the earth's surface curves below the line of sight at 3.1 miles, or 5 kilometers, you can see a candle in clear dark conditions at 3.1 miles at ground level. But from an elevated position you can actually see a candle much further – on a dark night, in fact, the human eye is able to see a single candle flickering up to 30 miles (48 kilometers) away.

The only reason we are not aware of the amazing reach of a tiny light such as a candle is because of the bright lights that are often around us – the same reason city dwellers often can't see many stars, as we mentioned above. Brightness seems relative to surroundings – if you are on a floodlit stage, your candle or mine may seem not very bright at all. But where most of us live our daily lives – away from the

spiritual floodlights – even a small candle can make a huge difference in the surrounding darkness.

The point of this analogy is just that if we allow Christ to work in our lives and to “shine” in us, we need never be concerned that our light is not bright enough, that we are not knowledgeable enough, good enough, spiritual enough. He supplies the light, not us, and even the smallest amount of light can be seen.

What Jesus said about the fact that a city on a hill can't be hidden (Matthew 5:14) also applies to our lowly candles. We don't have to shine like a city – we don't even have to shine particularly brightly to accomplish some good. Physics teaches us that a little light can go a long way. Especially when there is no other light around, a little spiritual light can make a huge difference.

## **17. WHY SETTLE FOR SECOND PLACE?**

As the twelve tribes of ancient Israel neared the land they had been promised, two and a half tribes – Gad, Reuben and the half-tribe of Manasseh – looked at the land where they were on the eastern side of the Jordan River and compared it to the wilderness they had come through (Numbers 32).

Viewed from their standpoint just outside the Promised Land, the eastern side of the Jordan looked good. Perhaps it wasn't exactly flowing with milk and honey, but it certainly was better than the desert through which they had come. Moses tried to dissuade the two and a half tribes, but they insisted that it was what they wanted, so he allowed them to stay on the edge of the Promised Land, except for fulfilling their responsibility to help the other tribes in the conquest.

So under Joshua's leadership, the men of the "Transjordan" tribes had to leave their wives and families and go with the other tribes to fight the inhabitants of Canaan (Joshua 1:12-16). When the dust settled, the men of the two and a half tribes were able to return to their homes, but they had seen firsthand the choice areas they could have inherited had they not chosen second best. Ironically, they still had to fight, even though they had relinquished any part of the "first place" prize. But worse than that, the second place area they accepted was not as well protected and was on the border of several of Israel's enemies, the Ammonites, Edomites and Moabites. Their prize just wasn't as good as it could have been.

In what areas of our lives do we accept "second place" without pushing for the best prize? In school or college we accept less than what we could accomplish in assignments or grades if we decline to just push a little harder. As young adults we may accept second best if we marry the first person who comes along. As spouses and parents

we take second in one of life's most important areas if we stop trying to develop our relationships with our mates and children. And as older people we take second best if we presume we are past doing anything much productive with our lives. We can be unconsciously accepting second best in any area of our physical lives if we accept what is "OK" but not great.

Just as importantly, in our relationship with God do we settle for second place in being content with where we feel we are in our development at any particular point, just keeping up a comfortable routine? Or do we keep looking for ways we can keep growing, helping, pushing to accomplish more of what really matters?

Every runner knows that as a race progresses, if you stop pushing harder, you start falling back. Perhaps that analogy is worth keeping in mind. In the ancient Olympics and other athletic games and contests, there were no "second place winners" – only the first place finisher for each event was considered a victor. The names of those achieving second and third place were not even recorded.

This is why the apostle Paul wrote: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:24). We should run our Christian lives as though there were only a first place prize; we should live as though we will not settle for less.

Like the ancient two and a half tribes of Israel, we will still have to keep fighting if we do settle for less. So if we are going to have to run anyway for second place, why not run that bit harder, as Paul urges us, for first? And remember, in the Christian race we are really only competing against ourselves. So why settle for second place when everyone can win?

## 18. SEEING SMALL MIRACLES

*“We don’t see the grass around our feet when we look only for the towering trees.”*

1 Kings 17 tells the story of how the prophet Elijah fled to the region of Sidon on the Palestinian coast during a great drought and famine in Israel. Elijah was led to the home of a poor widow and her son, and when Elijah asked for a little water and a small piece of bread, the woman replied: “As surely as the Lord your God lives ... I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die” (1 Kings 17:12).

Elijah told the woman that the God of Israel had promised that if she did as he asked, “The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land” (1 Kings 17:14). The woman complied and sure enough, after that meal and others, there was still food every day for the woman and her son as well as Elijah, “For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah” (1 Kings 17:16).

This situation must have continued for a while because the Bible reports, “Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. She said to Elijah, ‘What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?’” (1 Kings 17:17). Elijah prayed over the young man and God restored the youth’s life. It is only then that the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth” (1 Kings 17:24).

Are we like the Sidonian woman in so often missing the continuing everyday miracles of our lives and losing faith – despite those small miracles – when severe problems come upon us? We read the story and wonder, “How could she not have noticed the ongoing miracle of the lasting flour and oil – especially when Elijah told her it would be so?” But would the woman read the story of our lives and wonder, in the same way, why we did not notice the things that were worked out for us and that we saw working out for others around us?

Perhaps this is part of what the prophet Isaiah referred to when he spoke the words quoted by Jesus: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving” (Isaiah 6:9, Matthew 13:14). Certainly the “hearing” refers to hearing the word of God and not understanding it, but the “seeing and never perceiving” must surely refer to things we witness but simply do not grasp or see the significance they have for us.

Perhaps we should remind ourselves of the story of the woman of Sidon when we next face a difficult situation. Rather than fearing the lack of some large needed miracle when we need help, perhaps the way of faith is that we should remind ourselves of all the small miracles that brought us to the point where we are now. But it’s a question we can all ask ourselves at any time: what are the ongoing “flour and oil” in our lives – what are the small miracles that we are not seeing? The answer is often encouraging.

## 19. CHANGING OUR POINT OF VIEW

*“When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.”*

The apostle Paul would certainly have agreed with that little saying. As someone who went from being one of the greatest persecutors of Christianity to one of its greatest servants, Paul knew, perhaps more than most of us, what a difference “changing the way you look at things” can make.

Paul came to see very clearly how conversion and coming to faith entirely changes the way we view things. Notice what he wrote to the Christians in Corinth regarding this change: “So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer” (2 Corinthians 5:16). Here, Paul shows how we begin to see not only God, but also one another in a different light, to see with love rather than lust, jealousy, resentment, hatred and all the other ways in which our human nature, left to itself, can twist our view of the people around us.

But changing our viewpoint doesn't just stop at initial conversion. It is an ongoing process. There are many times in the ongoing path of growth and transformation that we begin to feel that perhaps we should change in some way or do something we have not been doing. It is as if we feel a continuing pull to make the change, but we are not entirely convinced in our own minds that we want to do so. Perhaps we are not sure we want to give up something, or we are unsure of what the repercussions will be if we make some important change.

It's at times like these that we need to remember that often we have to change before we see why we needed to change or realize that the changed situation is in fact better. There is nothing mystical in



this – it just means that we need to step out and act, and then we begin to see the situation differently once we do. That’s where “When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change” comes in to play. Once we begin to turn from something we are coming to see is wrong, the more we stop wanting whatever it was. Once we begin to view a person we had disliked with an attitude of love, it’s surprising how often they seem to change for the better. And once we try doing something we may have feared or not wanted to have to do, we may find ourselves very happy that we did.

The important thing is to remember that spiritually we cannot wait until we see things differently – we must change, and then the different view develops naturally. It’s very much like the situation Mark Twain described when he wrote: “When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.” When we change, we change the way we see things – and it really is amazing and encouraging how those things then may change.

## **20. HOW'S THAT GOOD RESOLUTION DOING?**

*“Character is the ability to carry out a good resolution long after the excitement of the moment has passed.” - Cavett Robert*

“How’s the resolution doing – you know, the one you made in January?” That’s a question many of us might cringe at, but it’s good to remind ourselves of Cavett Robert’s old truism. The character we build in following through on resolutions is often just as important as the resolution itself.

The Bible shows that God’s servants often made resolutions, and in each case these resolutions were faithfully carried out. Notice just two examples from the Old Testament and New Testament, Daniel and Paul: “But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine...” (Daniel 1:8); “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2).

In fact, the Bible shows that God himself makes resolutions. Notice in the Book of Zechariah, where God says: “So I have resolved again in these days to do what is good to Jerusalem and the house of Judah...” (Zechariah 8:15 HCSB). Not only does God make resolutions that we can all be thankful he keeps, but also he reminds us of the responsibility to make and keep good resolutions: “If you do not listen, and if you do not resolve to honor my name,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘I will send a curse on you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not resolved to honor me” (Malachi 2:2).

While this statement may sound negative out of context, God simply points out that we need to be firm in our resolve to do what we need to do. He knows that when we do not, we lose his blessings and, as a loving parent, he warns us against that outcome. That is why God's word frequently stresses the need to give our full resolve to doing what we come to understand we need to do. That guidance can energize and inspire us to follow through.

While some minor physical resolutions may not have widespread effects in our lives, our major resolutions can have major effects on us, our marriages, our families and our relationship with God. So let's remember the resolutions we do make and maintain them. The fact is, the more we follow through with our resolutions, the easier it will become to keep them.

God is certainly aware of what we resolve to do in regard to the way of life that he reveals to us, and he will help us follow through if we are serious and ask for his help. That is why the Psalmist could write, as confidently as he did: "I am resolved to obey Your statutes to the very end" (Psalm 119:112 HCSB).

**PART THREE:**

**ENCOURAGEMENT IN SERVICE**

## 21. FLIGHT SCHOOL

*“Like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft.”*  
(Deuteronomy 32:11)

A good deal of “urban legend” has grown up around this verse from Deuteronomy. Many who have not had the opportunity to observe eagles have thought that the verse talks of parent eagles teaching their offspring to fly by either dropping them and catching them up on their backs or wings before the young hit the ground, or just carrying them through the sky to “teach” them the mechanics of flight.

In reality, eagles don’t do either of these things, and the verse doesn’t really say they do. It seems to refer to the parent eagle using its wings to keep the eaglets away from the edge of the nest when they are still very small. “Carries them aloft” is better translated “bearing them on its pinion [feathers]” (as in the ESV and other translations), and the whole verse is simply talking about the eagle protecting its young in the nest.

But interestingly, this is not to say that the adult eagles do not help their young in learning to fly. The help the parent eagles give is not of the hand- (wing-) holding type, but of encouragement. Once the young eaglets have grown flight feathers and are getting ready to fly, the young birds usually begin to jump up and down in the nest, flapping their wings in “baby steps.” The adult birds encourage the young to leave the nest and to begin flight in various ways. They often stop feeding the young, or cut down feeding, to give the young incentive to find food themselves. They will also fly around the nest

repeatedly, again encouraging the young, and even sometimes visibly carrying food in their talons. It is this ongoing encouragement that helps the young eagle learn to fly.

So if there is an analogy for Christian life to be found in eagle flight school, it is simply the lesson of encouragement. Eaglets, like children, and like those new in the faith, profit from encouragement; and it is certainly a part of Christian responsibility and opportunity to help those who are only beginning to come into the truth. The essays on the following pages look at some of the ways we can “encourage the young” – and encourage one another at any stage in our growth (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

There is both a positive and a negative aspect to this encouragement. If you will permit one more detail of life in the eagle’s nest, it is this. Adult eagles, while feeding and caring for their young in the nest, often ball their feet to prevent the young from being skewered by the older birds’ talons. So it is with us. Encouraging others can take the form of treating them with concern instead of unwarranted criticism and can also take the form of positive encouragement by what we say and do that helps them along the way. Think of it as flight school – it’s certainly an important part of Christian living.

## **22. ARE YOU A “SON” OF ENCOURAGEMENT?**

Some people are upbeat and encouraging by nature. Acts 4:36 mentions Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas - or “son of encouragement.” We aren’t given further details, but if you know a man or woman like Barnabas, you know what a difference such an individual can make in our daily lives. Romans 12:8 shows that some people, like Barnabas, have this trait in large measure: “[If your gift is] to encourage, then give encouragement;” but it is something we all can, and should, develop.

We see this in the example of the apostle Paul – someone who perhaps understood the value of encouragement as much as anyone. Paul had been through it all (2 Corinthians 11:24-26), and encouragement was a big part of the message that he preached. Acts 20:2 tells us, for example, that “Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said goodbye and set out for Macedonia. He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people.” And when Paul could not be with the churches he pastored, he sent others with precisely this task: “ I am sending him [Tychicus] to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you” (Ephesians 6:22).

Incredibly, even when Paul was a prisoner facing almost certain death, he wrote some of the most encouraging and inspiring words to be found in the Scriptures. Read the Book of Philippians to see this lifestyle of encouragement in action – even in the worst of circumstances. That is the background to the commands to “encourage one another” found in Paul’s writings (2 Corinthians 13:11, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, etc.). But do we see these statements as actual

commands, or as just pleasant sentiments? It seems clear what the apostle intended them to be.

There is something we have to understand before we can help others in this way, however. Encouragement is like wealth – you can't spread it if you don't have it! We need to learn to be encouraged – to see the encouragement God offers us, not only in his word, but also in everyday life – in order to be truly uplifting to those around us. As might be expected, Paul provides an example here. Acts records that when he was on his way to Rome and facing a wholly uncertain future, believers in the area travelled to meet Paul: “At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged” (Acts 28:15). And notice what Paul wrote to Philemon, “Your love has given me great joy and encouragement” (Philemon 1:7).

Like Paul, we need to be actively looking at the good things in our lives – both when things are going well and when they are not. Even when things are going well, we still need to be open to the effects of encouragement. Acts 9:31 says, “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.” So encouragement is a function of God's Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 13:4-7) and a vital part of growth in good times.

In bad times, encouragement plays an even more obvious role. The Book of Psalms is a great resource for seeing the encouraged mindset in action. You need only read a few of David's psalms to see both the anguish and the joy of his life. But David knew that things always worked out in the end. When he wrote, “You, Lord, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry” (Psalms 10:17), he was writing from a lot of experience. It was with real knowledge that he wrote “weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning” (Psalms 30:5). We have to be looking for the



things that work out, conscious of them and appreciating them, to be able to offer encouragement like that.

Remember, too, that these dual points of encouraging and being encouraged go hand in hand. When we encourage others, we are often encouraged ourselves. And if we focus on the things that encourage us in life, we are better able to help others do the same. Who better to summarize this situation than Paul himself: “By all this we are encouraged. In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you” (2 Corinthians 7:13). These servants of God knew that we all need to be encouraged and to encourage one another. So even if you are privileged to know someone like Barnabas in your church or circle of friends, remember that the position is still open – you, too, can be a “son” or “daughter” of encouragement.

## 23. STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

The title of Robert A. Heinlein's 1961 science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* is reportedly an allusion to Exodus 2:22 where Moses says "... I have been a stranger in a strange land." It's a concept that also applies to the Christian walk. Once a person's outlook and way of life changes to God's way, two significant things happen.

First, if we are new to the faith and have not come to the knowledge through family or friends, we often become a "stranger" to those who may have known us for a long time. For some people, this change is dramatic. As the apostle Peter wrote, "... they think it strange that you run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you" (1 Peter 4:4 KJV). But even for most of us, our friends notice (or should notice) changes in our lives, and it becomes clear that we're not the same person they knew before. This doesn't mean that we need reject or turn from our old friends. As long as they are not trying to get us to return to our old ways, we can perhaps become better friends to them - and, if possible, a "light" in their worlds. Very often, however, our old friends may feel they have lost what they had in common with us and turn away.

The other thing that often occurs is that as we grow in God's way, our old way of living seems increasingly alien and our old lives and world seem like a "strange land" to us - a land from which we feel increasingly distant.

So, the changes that happen to us can make for a disconnected feeling both for us and for others. But we can be encouraged. It has always been that way for those whom God calls. After listing many great servants of God, the Book of Hebrews tells us: "All these people ... [admitted] that they were foreigners and strangers on earth" (Hebrews 11:13).

But the apostle Paul also reminds us that we now have a new citizenship through Christ: “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household” (Ephesians 2:18-19). Simply put, God makes us citizens in a kingdom in which we are not strangers any more, along with making us part of a new family. Although we still keep our old citizenship and family, of course, we gain new friends and new family on a spiritual level. So if you don’t already have fellowship with those of like mind, be sure to seek it out where possible. We are called not to lead our lives in isolation, but to be “fellow citizens” so we can encourage and help each other.

If we do already have fellowship with others in the Way, we should appreciate the fact that we are no longer strangers in a strange land; but we have a responsibility here, also. God’s word gave clear instructions for the acceptance and treatment of strangers and sojourners in ancient Israel. Strangers were to be accepted into the congregation and treated exactly as anyone else, both legally and religiously (for examples, see Exodus 12:48-49, Leviticus 17:8). Surely, the same principles apply to spiritual Israel, and we should be careful to accept newcomers despite their differences. Strangers are, almost by definition, different from us. We may not recognize their clothing styles, accents, or even some of their behavior patterns because they are from a different background. Yet we can, and should, accept and encourage them and bear with them as they go through the process of acculturation to their new “congregation.”

There is one biblical verse which seems to say it all in this respect. Deuteronomy 10: 19 tells us: “You shall love the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt.” It would be hard to be clearer on this point. Not only did many of us once feel like strangers after conversion, but also we should now love and help those who are beginning to make the transition to a new “land.” As for how we treat those new to the faith, Paul shows us that we should welcome them

fully: “Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers” (Romans 12:13). The Book of Hebrews also notes: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Hebrews 13:2). Angels or not, the spiritual newcomer qualifies as a stranger among us. Deuteronomy says we should do everything within our power to “love the stranger” and recognize him or her as someone just like all of us who were also once strangers in a strange land.

## 24. HOW MANY TIMES?

*“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times’” (Matthew 18:22).*

The words of Jesus concerning how many times we must forgive others – “seventy-seven times” – are words every Christian knows and tries to keep in mind, but do we apply this principle in other, more positive areas?

Consider the story of Joshua. We remember Joshua as the great military leader who oversaw the conquest of the Promised Land, yet Joshua does not seem to have started out as a fearless leader. We see that in instructing him, Moses told Joshua twice to “be strong and courageous” (Deuteronomy 31:6-7), and when God formally commissioned him, he told Joshua to “be strong and courageous” (Deuteronomy 31:23). Then again, in the opening chapter of the Book of Joshua, God tells him three times to “be strong and courageous” (Joshua 1:6, 7, 9), and even the people of Israel encourage Joshua to “be strong and courageous” (Joshua 1:18). So the man who became a great leader was encouraged on at least seven occasions to have the strength and courage he needed; then the statement doesn’t appear again. Eventually, in fact, once he grew in confidence, we find Joshua using exactly these same words to encourage the Israelites (Joshua 10:25)! Just as God, Moses and the people continued to encourage Joshua until he had gained experience and confidence, it is only as we persevere with encouragement and help that people come to where they don’t need it to the same degree.

When we look elsewhere in the Bible we see many other examples of this willingness to help others in an ongoing manner, to do good to them as many times as it might take. In the New Testament, the story of the Good Samaritan is an excellent example. The Samaritan did not just give some first-aid to the man in the ditch and go on his way – he worked through the problem step by step, with repeated actions:

“He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have’” (Luke 10:34-35).

In the same way, Paul tells us: “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak...” (Romans 15:1 ESV), and the plural “failings” does not just mean at one time, but through time – as long as there is a need. This is why Paul also tells us: “Let us not become weary in doing good” (Galatians 6:9), because the needs of others are often ongoing and at no time do we reach a point where we have “done enough” if a need still exists.

If we can embrace the concept of forgiving others “seventy-seven times,” perhaps we should remember to continue to help and encourage those who need it, keeping this same attitude in mind.

## **25. ENCOURAGE THE YOUNG**

*“Encourage the young men to be self-controlled” (Titus 2:5-7).*

An excellent recent article on the website AllProDad.com caught my attention. It was called “5 Ways to Teach Children Self-Discipline” (no author given), and I’d like to comment on a couple of its points from a biblical perspective.

The article’s first point was Structured Routine. Most children need structure in their lives and all can profit from it. When we look at the biblical record, we see that God made abundant use of structure in setting up the world for us – his children. We tend to take it for granted, but time was structured not only in terms of day and night, but the weekly and seasonal cycles throughout which the festivals and rituals were organized (Genesis 1:14). God told ancient Israel not only what to do, but also when to do it.

In dealing with our own human children, we also need to organize their lives around structured time. The author of the AllProDad article gives the example that by setting a designated time for homework to be completed each day, the routine will become a natural habit. But this is not just to ensure that the task is completed. By gradually letting a child take responsibility for “reminding” him- or herself of the time and starting the task at the proper point, we allow – and encourage – the child to develop self-discipline.

A related point is the need to Enforce Consequences. God certainly does that in relation to his laws because it is not in human nature to want to follow instruction – especially if it conflicts with what we would rather do! It’s the rare child who will do things that are not desirable without some kind of consequence being part of the

equation. If chores, homework or other responsibilities are not completed, there has to be some kind of consequence both for the preservation of parental authority and, again, for the child to develop self-control. Rather than “punishments,” it is often more effective to curtail rewards where possible. This is classic “negative encouragement.” For example, if children don’t get ready for bed when asked, then no bedtime stories. If the child does not clean up his/her room by one hour before bedtime, bedtime comes then. The main thing is that these “game rules” must be clearly explained in advance.

Another point related to the last one is Praise and Reward. Character – including self-control – is rarely developed in the absence of encouragement and positive feedback. Praise and reward are just as necessary as the realization of consequences. Remember how, when God led the ancient Israelites into the Promised Land, he carefully mapped out before them the blessings as well as the curses that would be the result of their behavior (Deuteronomy 28:1-68). While physical rewards are often useful in helping children learn positive behavior – especially at young ages – children love to receive praise, as the AllProDad.com article stresses. I would go even further and stress the principle outlined in another excellent recent article, “Raising a Moral Child,” this one in the *New York Times*, which showed the importance of praising a child’s character, not their actions. A related principle is also important: to make our children feel guilt, not shame, for infractions.

A final point, not mentioned in the articles cited above, is that we should not make the process of learning self-control harder than it already is for our children. Every parent knows how exasperating children can be at times, but child-rearing is an art that none of us has mastered perfectly, and we can sometimes frustrate and even anger our children when we do not deal with them as wisely as we should. The apostle Paul spoke to this fact: “Fathers [and of course, mothers],



do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4).

Children and especially teenagers have a harder time than we do in controlling their emotions. If we are to help them build self-control, it is imperative that we do not produce unwanted and unhelpful emotions by the ways we deal with them. No child likes to be corrected or restricted in her or his behavior, but it is our responsibility as parents to correct or guide our children with love, gently and with kindness, and to work with them positively through encouragement to help minimize their emotional reactions to parental controls.

The AllProDad article we talked about above begins with a quote by Theodore Roosevelt: “With self-discipline most anything is possible.” I’m not sure I would go that far, but it’s certainly true that without self-control very little is possible. No wonder the apostle Paul urges us, “Encourage the young ... to be self-controlled.”

## **26. LET YOUR SMILE SO SHINE**

*“When I smiled at them, they scarcely believed it; the light of my face was precious to them.” (Job 29:24)*

You probably know that studies have found that smiling is good for you. Carefully controlled psychological experiments have proven that we are happy because we smile just as much as we smile because we are happy. Smiling – even forced smiling – has been found to relieve stress, and a 2010 study published in *Psychological Science* even showed that smile intensity in photographs predicted longevity.

But did you know that at least one study has found that the single most effective thing a person can usually do to enhance his or her relationships with other people is ... to smile more often? So in the title to this chapter I do not mean to be flippant in paraphrasing the biblical injunction “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16, KJV). Letting our “light” shine is clearly more than just smiling, it involves our “good works” – the whole range of our behavior and interactions with others – yet if smiling is such an important component of our relationships with others, shouldn’t we indeed smile more often?

We may not be able to find biblical verses saying “Jesus smiled,” but in his classic work *The Humor of Christ*, Elton Trueblood lists thirty passages showing the humor of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. There are many other examples in the Bible of things being said with evident humor that suggest smiles were often present on the faces of God’s servants (for example, 1 Kings 18:27); and verses like “Our

mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy” (Psalm 126:2) had to involve smiling.

The point is, walking in God’s way of life should produce smiles at least a portion of the time. This is particularly true because feelings of care and affection are frequently accompanied by smiles. If we are concerned and caring for others, we will naturally smile even, sometimes, despite our own circumstances. In fact, just as experiments have found we can make ourselves happy by smiling, we can also make others happy by smiling at them. So there are at least two good reasons to be smiling, but it is something many Christians don’t do as often as we might expect. A surprising number of sincere believers live under a cloud of seriousness – at its worst it can be an expression of focusing on spiritual problems rather than the answers, though more often it’s just that we forget what an impact a smile can have. But smiling encourages others, and that always makes it worth doing.

So keep this in mind when you greet the world. As they say, if you see someone without a smile, give them one of yours. It’s not meant as pop-psychology advice to make you feel better; it’s meant as a small reminder that smiling is a part of letting our light shine. It certainly isn’t the most important part, but it may be the first thing that people notice about us and – as Job mentions in the scripture quoted above – it may be one of the things they firmly remember.

## 27. I'D LIKE TO THANK ...

Every year Hollywood, the U.S., and even many around the world turn to the Academy Awards ceremony to see credit being given to leading actors, actresses, directors, producers and a host of others who work behind the scenes in the entertainment industry. Not only are the awards intended to give credit, but those receiving them frequently take a great amount of time, while basking in the spotlight, to thank everyone who supported their work – and if you have ever watched them, you know that sometimes means *everyone*.

This “on-air” giving of credit is all well and good to a point, though it can often seem artificial under the stage lights when we compare how infrequently we tend to give credit to others in real life situations. But there is plenty of biblical precedent for giving appreciative credit to others in our daily lives. A great example is found in 1 Samuel, where David insisted that all who had helped him in a military campaign should receive credit and proper reward. Speaking to his followers who wanted to give credit only to those directly involved in the fighting, we find:

“David replied ‘No, my brothers ... The share of the man who stayed with the supplies is to be the same as that of him who went down to the battle. All will share alike.’ David made this a statute and ordinance for Israel ...” (1 Samuel 30:23-25).

Not only did David credit all who had taken part in the campaign, but also, when he reached Ziklag, he sent some of the captured goods to the elders of Judah in recognition of their support, saying, “Here is a gift for you from the plunder of the Lord’s enemies” (1 Samuel

30:26). Further, Samuel tells us, David sent some of the spoil to a great number of towns in the kingdom recognizing their help and support. The list is long (and almost Oscar-like!) as David gives credit to:

“...those who were in Bethel, Ramoth Negev and Jattir; to those in Aroer, Siphmoth, Eshtemoa and Rakal; to those in the towns of the Jerahmeelites and the Kenites; to those in Hormah, Bor Ashan, Athak and Hebron ...” (1 Samuel 30:30).

Notice that even this long list is not complete, as vs. 31 adds: “and to those in all the other places where he and his men had roamed.”

So David used the opportunity to give credit not only to all who had helped him directly or indirectly in his campaign, but also to all of his friends and supporters who were not even involved – but who had supported him up to that time.

It’s a point worth remembering. David gave credit widely and generously. It was clearly part of his character and something we can remember in our own relationships with the people with whom we live and work. There is also another side to this. Giving credit encourages others and it can encourage us, too, as we focus on the ways we have been helped. If we conscientiously pay attention to giving credit to those who have helped us or worked alongside us in any of life’s endeavors, we will perhaps be more likely to be aware of, and to give credit to, the One who so often helps us behind the scenes and to whom credit is always due!

## **28. TALKING THE TALK**

In Christianity as in so many other areas, the importance of “walking the walk” rather than just “talking the talk” is self-evident. But sometimes we need to remember the value of the talk, too. The Book of Malachi contains a classic reminder of this:

“Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A book of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored his name” (Malachi 3:16).

Here, both walking and talking are shown as important. First we see it was those who “feared the Lord” who were getting God’s attention. Although it is possible to fear God and not obey Him, that is obviously not the situation here. Proper fear of God, as the Bible clearly shows, does not involve cringing fear of punishment, but positive loving obedience – as was the case where the names of these people who honored God’s name were being written in a “scroll of remembrance” (and see Malachi 3:17-18). But beyond the obedience that was clearly involved here, we see that what had caught God’s attention was the fact that these people talked with each other. The context of this verse indicates that this was not just talk regarding some topic of physical interest, but talk regarding aspects of the walk with God in which these people were engaged.

In its broadest sense, the talking with fellow believers mentioned in Malachi means not only talk which relates to biblical issues and principles in the abstract, but also talk which is based on the love of our neighbor – taking an active interest in the members of our spiritual family, finding out about them, getting to know their needs

and encouraging them. We can't encourage others if we don't know where they need encouragement – and that's where talking comes in.

It's a question we can all ask ourselves every time we converse with a brother or sister in the faith: how much am I getting to better know this person and their individual needs, the things they are working on, struggling with, or just hoping to achieve? We can follow that question up with another: how can I encourage this person in their struggles and aspirations? It may feel somewhat artificial at first as we begin to try to include these questions and to make each conversation profitable for others, but it becomes second nature if we persist; and we can find ourselves talking at a whole different level.

That's the kind of talk which shows both love of God and of our neighbor, and if it is regularly a part of our conversation with those with whom we fellowship, we can be confident that we are not just talking, but that we are "talking the talk."

## **29. WHAT HAVE YOU ACCOMPLISHED, CAPTAIN LEWIS?**

The journals of U.S. Army Captain Meriwether Lewis and his second-in-command, William Clark, recording their epic journey of discovery of the American West, are full of amazing details about the hardships they endured and their great accomplishments. The perilous journey lasted from May 1804 to September 1806, and in his August 18, 1805 journal entry Lewis wrote:

“This day I completed my thirty-first year. I reflected that I had as yet done but little, very little indeed, to further the happiness of the human race, or to advance the information of the succeeding generation.... I resolved in future, to redouble my exertions ...”

Lewis wrote this at the point when he, Clark and the expedition members had not only reached the source of the Missouri River, but had also finally crossed the almost impenetrable Rocky Mountains. He and the others with him had immeasurably advanced the knowledge of the American West and had done a great deal toward opening up vast areas which would further human success and happiness on the continent. Yet he felt he had done little, if anything.

The story reminds us of the words of the apostle Paul who, after incredible accomplishments for the work of God, wrote in his letter to the Philippians:

“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has



made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12-14).

This phenomenon is easy to see in our own lives. The more important a task to which we commit ourselves, the less we sometimes feel we are succeeding in it. Yet there is encouragement in this if we realize we often simply do not see, ourselves, what we are accomplishing in the work God gives us to do. This is probably especially true in work which shows no immediate or obvious tangible results. But the success of any spiritual venture is in God’s hands, not ours, if we are doing what we can do. I know of many servants of God who have felt a total lack of success after preaching a sermon or writing something which they felt in retrospect would probably not really help anyone – only to be told by someone that the particular message was of great personal help.

The truth is, like Captain Lewis, we may not fully see the significance of the work we do. Although we may not have accomplished anything like Lewis did, if we continue to rededicate ourselves to the mission we have been given, time will show that we did in fact make a difference.

### 30. GREATER WORKS THAN THESE

*“... whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these ...”* (John 14:12).

The words of Jesus are clear, yet we may wonder how this can be. Jesus performed miraculous deeds seen by many, healed the lame and the blind, raised Lazarus from the dead – how can we do greater works than these?

A key in understanding this verse in John is to realize the difference between the “signs,” “wonders,” and “miracles” as opposed to the “works” performed by Jesus. There is certainly some overlap in the use of these terms, but generally speaking, there is a difference. The Greek words “signs” (*semeion*), “wonders” (*teras*), and “miracles” (*dunamis*) are all frequently used of the miraculous deeds Jesus performed as signs of his Messiahship. Jesus spoke of his followers doing such things, though usually in the context of faith – that if we have enough faith we, too, would be able to accomplish great things with God’s help.

But beyond these miraculous deeds, Jesus also performed many other works of teaching, guiding and helping his disciples and the crowds that followed him. The word “works” (*erga*) used in John 14:12 can include miraculous deeds, but it is more general and signifies other non-wondrous works as well. In fact, *erga* can include ongoing duties, works, business, rather than just individual acts; and the word certainly covers Christ’s ongoing teaching, helping and guidance.

So when we look at the broader and often more ongoing sense covered by *erga*, we can see that Christ’s statement that his followers

would do greater “works” than he had done most likely refers not to miracles, but to his work of preaching the gospel, teaching, helping, guiding, etc. Such deeds were not entirely dependent on faith to accomplish them, and faith is not mentioned in John 14:12, which speaks of believing in Jesus but does not specify having enough faith to accomplish such works. These general works of his followers, Jesus affirmed, would be “greater” than those he had done, and this can mean greater in extent rather than greater in type.

Although Jesus taught large crowds, sometimes of thousands of people, we have only to look at the eventual effects of the printing press and – in our own age – radio, television and the internet when used to spread the Word of God and to explain its teachings to millions of people to see that the extent of the works done through these media has indeed been greater than any individual could have accomplished in the time of Christ.

We should always remember that “no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him” (John 13:16). The greater works that are done by Jesus’ followers today are still done by him through us – but the potential for a greater extent of works of helping and teaching in our age is a real one.

When we look at the area of Christian service, could there be anything more encouraging than the opportunity every one of us has to have a part in fulfilling the potential of “greater works” for the kingdom of God in our own age? Whether through prayer or preaching, evangelism or encouragement, “greater works” are possible and waiting to be done.

## **AFTERWORD**

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