



Sweet Potatoes in My Coffee

30 Day Devotional

Chris Surber

For those seeking the sacred
in simplicity. For those
responding to grace in faith,
desiring daily growth!

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ISBN: 978-1-68418-027-1

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Fellow Follower of Jesus,

While speaking of the splendor of salvation in Jesus, Charles Spurgeon wrote, "Grace is the first and last moving cause of salvation; and faith, essential as it is, is only an important part of the machinery which grace employs. We are saved 'through faith,' but salvation is 'by grace.' Sound forth those words as with the archangel's trumpet: 'By grace are ye saved.' What glad tidings for the undeserving!"

These devotions are a collection of some of my favorite stories, thoughts, and Scriptural meditations to encourage and challenge you for 30 days. Like a splash of sweet potatoes in your coffee, these devotions and prayers are intended to be heartening and substantive. It is my prayer that they sweeten your day and give an extra dose of spiritual nourishment!

Many Blessings in Christ and...

In the Grip of His Grace,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Pastor Chris". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the text "In the Grip of His Grace,".

Rev.Dr. Chris Surber, D.Min.
First Congregational Church of Naples

Day One—A Simple Message

When I met Bill Ellerman, I was a ten-foot tall, bullet-proof Marine Sergeant. He was a retired preacher who'd agreed to mentor me. The central part of his mentorship was delivering weekly sermons at retirement communities. I was excited to preach my first *real* sermon

Like a good Marine, I figured I needed a preaching manual. I headed to the bookstore and bought a collection of Charles Spurgeon's sermons. I spent every free minute that week pouring over those sermons while mimicking his lofty style. I sat my wife Christina down and began to read it to her.

I watched in horror as her expression faded from joy to confusion and ultimately to absolute bewilderment; that is when I realized I had written something useless. After she could stand hearing that sermon no longer, she stopped me mid-sentence and said, "You know the way you talk to people when they ask you about the Bible or God? Why don't you just prepare a sermon that sounds like that?"

She was right! The message of the Cross is simple. "He personally carried our sins in His body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By His wounds you are healed" (1 Peter 2:24). In this complicated world, one thing is sure and straightforward: there is healing at the Cross.

Prayer: God of all mystery and grace, instill deep in my soul a sense of the simplicity of Your love for me. Grant me the grace not to over think Your love. Amen.

Day Two—Who is at Your Gate?

“At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores” (Luke 16:20). Helping the poor is always hard. As my family lived and worked in the poverty-stricken conditions of Haiti, it was particularly difficult. For weeks, the Haitian children knocked on my gate and begged for food. Other missionaries told me to be cautious about ministering at the gate, but I knew these kids were *truly* poor.

One day they knocked just as our two-hundred-pound, slobbery mastiff ate my children’s scraps after a meal. I could no longer follow the suggested “best practices.”

I broke. I wept. I started a near daily feeding program for a bunch of shoeless, impoverished children at our front gate. It was very difficult to manage, and we eventually found a way to help the neighborhood family rebuild their home and relocate the feeding program off our front porch.

There are people all around us whom God is calling us to help in Jesus’ name. It can be uncomfortable and come at great personal cost. However, God is calling us to do it. That experience taught me to be more cautious in how we help, but it also taught me that God is calling us to a kind of recklessness in our obedience to share the love of Christ with “Lazarus” when he shows up at our gate.

Prayer: Gracious God, open my eyes to the “Lazarus” at my gate. Soften my heart to help him. Press your people beyond passive benevolence to passionate generosity. Amen.

Day Three—A Changing World

We live in an ever-changing world. I'll never forget one woman from my early nursing home ministry days. Back then I conducted a chapel service almost every week at Emerald Springs Retirement Village in Yuma, Arizona. There was one feisty, five-foot-tall, 90-something-year-young woman who told me the same story every time I saw her.

“Preacher!” She called, “I grew up on a farm in Southern Arizona riding a horse and buggy and now we have put a man on the moon! I remember when we used an outhouse and now, they have bathrooms on airplanes, and you can fly anywhere on the planet in a day!”

Her experience of this ever-changing world was immense. From 1910 to today, the world has gone through dramatic changes. While the world is always changing, God's Word and the message of the Cross never change.

Romans 12:2 says, “Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.” There will always be new trends in society, new fads in the Church, and new ways of thinking in the world but we aren't *of* the world. God has rescued us out of the darkness of the world to walk in and reflect the light of Christ.

Prayer: Giver of all life and light, grant that I may have the grace and strength in Christ to avoid the trap of conceit and the pit of envy that I may walk with Christ. Amen.

Day Four—Wrong Test

Have you ever done something so silly that you almost couldn't believe it? For one of my final exams in seminary, we were required to write a series of brief essays on several Christian doctrines. Well, I worked feverishly on the project. I really wanted to get a high grade on it, as it was a theological class.

When I submitted the project, I was sure to get an "A." When I received the graded paper, I was shocked! The paper wore a big, bold "F" like a piece of rotten jewelry. My heart sank. There had to be a mistake. I flipped over the paper and there in big red letters were just four words, "Great job. Wrong test."

I had misread the instructions. Instead of writing a series of short essays I had chosen just one of the subjects and developed a full-blown thesis! Thankfully, the professor was kind enough to let me redo the project. However, when it comes to the tests of this life there will be no second chances.

Hebrews 9:27 tells us, "Just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment." When we pass from this life to the next, we will stand before our Lord and hear Him say, "Nice boat, great car, wonderful reputation." Followed by the words, "Great job. Wrong test." The test of this life is obedience to our Lord. We are saved by grace into a life of *reflecting grace*, not gaining stuff.

Prayer: Supplier of all our needs, open our eyes to the true beauty that is found in serving others just as Jesus Christ died for the Church, rather than living only for ourselves. Amen.

Day Five—Faith-Filled Doers

Realism is the philosophy of the “do-nothing.” The realist, in his constant pursuit to see things for what they are, seldom sees them for what they can become. Pure optimism, on the other hand, is the fanciful flight of denial; it is finding comfort in the fact that one will soon plant his feet solidly on firm ground, even while falling from a twenty-story building. This kind of optimism has sent many a man to the bottom of the sea, all the while proclaiming that his ship is unsinkable. Realism and optimism speak little into the life of the believer.

In James 1:22, the Scripture reads “But don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.” Here, the author presents us with a much more solid resource for hope-filled Christianity. We are not to be merely hearers of God’s word, but doers of God’s word.

Staunch realism tells us only how the world is currently; pure optimism is fanciful, seldom taking facts into account. Following Christ, listening and doing the word of God is a means of seeing the world for what it is, seeing it for what it can become, and changing it.

Where realism fails in its cynicism and where optimism fails in its denial of reality, following Christ is a means of changing the world, one pilgrim’s step at a time.

Prayer: God of the journey, allow me not to become killed with cruel cynicism which has no gift for possibility, or give in to fanciful optimism which has no power to change circumstances. Make me a doer of Your Word by faith. Amen.

Day Six—Every Moment

Our journey through this world is essentially a series of moments strung together. We often lose perspective and get “out of sorts” because we forget to trust God moment by moment, situation by situation. When something bad happens, rather than living in that moment in trust, we imagine the worst-case scenario of how bad it could get.

In Matthew 6:31-34 Jesus said, “So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and He will give you everything you need. "So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today.”

The way to escape worry about the future is to trust God in the current moment. It has been well said that worry is interest paid on a debt not yet owed. And when we are honest with ourselves, we know that most of what we worry about never happens anyway!

The long path *out* of worry is the short path of trusting God in this moment, and now in this moment, and now in this moment ... All we ever really have control over is the present moment that we are in. Trust matters *right now*.

Prayer: God of eternity, Creator of time, in this very moment plant in me the seed of trust that I may know You in the present

tense of my life, and trust you with the future through constant faith. Amen.

Day Seven—Sin in Me

We don't have to work to become sinners. We are born with not only a proclivity toward sin, but a preference for it. Psalms 51:5 says, "For I was born a sinner—yes, from the moment my mother conceived me."

Sin is not primarily a problem of the hands which commit the acts, it is first and foremost a problem of the heart. It's not just mistakes we make in ignorance or because of circumstances. We have a character of sin. We don't just do wrong things; our hearts are bent toward sin from birth, and we spend all our lives ensnared in sin and its consequences.

How does a worm get inside an apple? Perhaps you think the worm burrows in from the outside. No. Scientists have discovered that the worm comes from the inside. But how does he get in there? Simple. An insect lays an egg in the apple blossom. Sometime later, the worm hatches in the heart of the apple, then eats his way out.

Sin, like the worm, begins in the heart and works out through the person's thoughts, words, and actions. You see, we don't just need to develop new habits or make fewer mistakes. We need a total transformation of our intentions—which come from the heart. If we're going to get free from sin and its entanglements, change must start on the inside.

Prayer: God of authority, impart to me the courage to look beyond blaming others for my sin and problems, instead, help me look into my own heart under the light of Your eternal grace. Amen.

Day Eight—Teardrops

Two little teardrops were floating down the river of life. One said to the other, "Who are you?" It replied, "I am a teardrop from a girl who loved a man and lost him. Who are you?" The first responded, "I am a teardrop from the girl who got him!"

Life is like that. We cry over things we can't have. With a little more information, we would probably cry more if we had received them. Paul poured out the wisdom of God for us when he wrote, "Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have" (Philippians 4:11).

The first girl had knowledge of her loss, but the second girl gained wisdom from her pain. Information is good but we need *godly wisdom* much more than more information. We'll never be able to know all the possibilities of life. We'll never know what pitfalls God saved us from, but wisdom teaches us to trust God with the outcome of every situation because we know God's knowledge is perfect and His intentions for us are pure.

God's desire for us is to be perfected inwardly. For that to happen we will endure trials outwardly. No matter what we go through, not even one of our teardrops is ever wasted. Our Heavenly Father's purposes for us are *eternal* and His love is *present* in every pain.

Prayer: God of comfort and wisdom, grant that Your children may have the measure of faith necessary to trust You in our trials and depend upon Your wisdom when ours fails. Amen.

Day Nine—Preferring Shackles

Galatians 5:1 says, “So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law.” If we are going to learn to live with any kind of meaningful freedom from sin, we have to open our hearts to the grace of God.

The price of our freedom has been paid. Jesus' sacrifice has made our freedom available. We must enter it and allow the grace of God to enter us. If we have accepted Christ by faith according to God's unending grace but don't know daily freedom, we are like prisoners who've grown to prefer chains.

Here we are wearing shackles and chains that have been unlocked! We've been set free for eternity but aren't enjoying freedom today. People who spend much of their lives incarcerated become institutionalized. In my teens, I knew a middle-aged man who had been in prison much of his life. I remember him telling me how he had become so accustomed to the regiment of prison that when set free, he actually missed prison. It sounds odd but we aren't that different.

Rather than living free in the liberty of grace, many of us wear unlocked shackles of guilt, continued sin, unbelief, and all manner of worldliness. Stop putting on chains like pearls to decorate yourself each day! Live free in Christ.

Prayer: Mighty Savior, do not allow me to find comfort in my shackles. Open my eyes to the chains in which I've grown accustomed to no longer even feel their weight and let them fall. Amen.

Day Ten—Controlled by Fear

There is no such thing as a fearless person. Everyone, faced with danger, fears. The difference between those who run into the battle and those who don't is very often the degree to which they have embraced the importance of the cause.

A soldier who puts himself between enemy fire and an innocent child caught up in the battle values the cause of the innocent. In battle, a lead soldier will put his life on the line courageously because he believes his men and the objective are worthy his life's sacrifice.

The difference between the courageous and cowardly is not the absence of fear. It is the ability to not be *controlled* by it. The cowardly Christian stands still on the spiritual battlefield of life, gripped with fear. If he does move, he runs from the battle and hides, seeking only to save his life.

Meanwhile, the woman running into the spiritual battle isn't fearless. She is simply not *controlled* by fear. She knows the battle is the worth the sacrifice. She has fully experienced the love of God and that fuels her courage!

“Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced His perfect love.” –1 John 4:18

Prayer: Everlasting God of strength and might, be mighty in my weakness. Flood my soul with knowledge of Your love that I might have the courage to trust You more than I fear. Amen.

Day Eleven—Sitting on the Job

I've only ever been fired from one job. I was fourteen years old and loved the idea of construction work. It looked like so much fun! I assumed it would be rewarding work. I imagined eating my lunch from a metal box and drinking coffee from a thermos as I wiped the sweat from my brow.

It turned out there was a *lot* of hard work involved! Who knew? I had gotten all decked out with leather gloves, plaid shirts, and workbooks for a summer job of demolition and remodel work. I barely lasted a week.

I learned that construction foremen frown upon laborers randomly deciding when to take their breaks. The real work of construction was far less romantic than I imagined. When the boss caught me sitting down on the job for the fourth time, he demanded an account, an explanation. Then he fired me.

In Romans 14:12 the Bible says, "Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God." A lot of Christians are living today like they won't have to give an account tomorrow. We're taking breaks from Kingdom building whenever we feel like it for as long as we feel like it. If we were getting paid by the hour for our spiritual work, most of us would get fired.

We're all going to give an account one day in the presence of almighty God. Live today like that day matters.

Prayer: Gracious and eternal Lord, pour your Spirit into us that we may pour Your Spirit into our actions in this world that we may be found faithful on that day. Amen.

Day Twelve—Lived Truth

All the televised preaching, radio teaching, and mass marketed Christian books and devotionals will never and can never replace living, visible, flesh-and-blood evidence of Christ in you and me. God calls His Church to be the visible, living, breathing incarnation of Christ in the world today. Our hands become His hands as we bind up the wounds of a hurting world.

Words are just not enough. Preaching, teaching, and inviting people to church are good places to start, but to allow unbelievers to see God's love in you and me is even better. Our authentic walk with Christ and our love for the best of people and the worst of sinners is an invitation in itself.

God's love in us is the Light that guides the world to His grace. We are the reflection of His grace. Christ-like evidence in us and our lives validates our claims about the importance of Christ.

God is calling us to love others so that in our love for them they can find Him, no matter whom they are. Just as we find God in the love we share together, we are being called to let others find God in us. There is an old Christian adage which says, "each one reach one." You don't have to be a great Christian thinker, scholar, theologian, or communicator to do that, you just have to let Christ light shine through you.

Prayer: God, I am as unworthy of Your call to salvation and love as anyone in this world. Empower me with the strength only You can give to be a living reflection of Your grace. Amen.

Day Thirteen—Bleach Water

One of the first residents of the Matthew 25 House—the elderly care home my family started in Haiti—was a feisty lady who was convinced that we were trying to poison her with our “dlo clowox” (bleach water).

You see, the water used for bathing in the Matthew 25 House comes from a well on the property. The water does not come out of the ground clean. It gets passed through a tank on its way to the house where it is treated with a small amount of chlorine to kill potential parasites and infectious microbes.

No matter how many times I explained to this dear, feisty, elderly woman that the bleach water was a better alternative to the parasite water, she refused to listen! Our Haitian staff and I struggled for months to convince her to use the clean water. It was funny yet painful to watch this woman be so unteachable. But we can be just same way, can't we?

“You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my thoughts even when I'm far away” (Psalms 139:2). Often, our thoughts are far away from God. We would rather stay stuck in what we know—even if it's hurting us—than come out of it into the freedom truth brings. We'd rather bathe in lies than do something new and better for us.

What clean water offering are you refusing today?

Prayer: God be merciful to us! We are indeed a stubborn lot. Grant me the power to let go of my stubborn ways so that I may no longer be a hindrance to Your work in me. Amen.

Day Fourteen—Pond Water

Moving water is always in motion, it is alive and changing. There is an ancient proverb which says, “If you stand in a river, you will never stand in the same water twice.” Fresh water is basically only found in two states. It is either moving like in a river or it is still like in a pond.

Still water grows stagnant. A few years ago, my kids and I went to Merchant’s Mill Pond in North Carolina, where we collected vials of water. We placed a few drops on glass slides, then examined them under a microscope. That still, swampy water was packed full of microbial life! Still, stagnant water fills up with junk and becomes bitter and undrinkable. If left long enough, it begins to smell and develop slime.

River water on the other hand, can hold microscopic life but the constant motion of the water has a cleansing effect. The water never stays still long enough for slime and funk to build up. Our lives are just the same way.

We have a choice in our walk with the Lord. We can either allow ourselves to be changed from the inside out as the Holy Spirit flows through our hearts like a river, bringing constant change and growth, or we can be still, unchanging, thinking the same old thoughts and doing the same old things. What is God trying to do fresh in you today? Where is He trying to move and flow?

Prayer: Living ever-moving, ever-active God, don’t allow my stubborn heart to keep me complacent in one place today. Move me into the fresh things you are doing in my life! Amen.

Day Fifteen—Hospitality

When I was a kid growing up in Modesto, California, I rode my bike everywhere. One hot, California, summer day, I had a flat tire halfway to my grandmother’s house—a ten-mile ride. I set out to walk the rest of the way pushing the bike. It was so hot I could barely stand it. I journeyed on, enduring the heat.

Finally, I was so thirsty I decided to get a drink from a stranger’s water hose. I tried to be quiet and stealthy so I could just take a drink and sneak away. I still remember the water tasted terrible! It was tainted with a salty, chemical flavor from the hose.

As I began to drink, a man came out of the house and asked me what I was doing. I thought he would be angry at my intrusion, but he wasn’t. He told me to have a seat on his front step. He went in his house, and I was convinced he was calling the police! He didn’t, in fact, he returned with a large glass of iced tea. He even helped me with my bike tire.

In Hebrews 13:2 the Bible says, “Don’t forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!” Wow. What a strong command from God. Hospitality is a command for every believer; it’s one way we look like Jesus to the world.

Prayer: Divine and heavenly Father, You Who shows compassion, mercy and grace to lowly sinners, grant that we, Your children, would have the mercy to share with strangers who cross our path just as You have with us. Amen.

Day Sixteen—Inner Turmoil

We see it all the time; people with great wealth and fame—*the good life*—have lives full of trouble because they have abandoned God. We see famous people in the news with everything the world says should make them happy, but their lives are a wreck.

They are in great shape. They have personal trainers. They are beautiful! They have fame and success, big houses, beautiful cars, and more money than they know what to do with. Yet their lives are filled with troubles of every kind. They get into legal trouble and become addicted to drugs.

None of the physical comforts or pleasures of this life will ultimately make us happy or give us joy or peace. That is because happiness is not a physical thing. How can emotion, which emanates from the spiritual condition of man be affected by material things? If I have a leaky sink, laughter won't cure it. If I have a flat tire, my frustration can't fill it up.

Joy can't come from material things because *it* isn't a material thing. Joy is a spiritual condition. It comes from the love of God filling our hearts. Proverbs 15:16 says that is "better to have little, with fear for the LORD, than to have great treasure and inner turmoil." Are you trying to solve spiritual problems with material things?

Prayer: God of everlasting peace and joy, grant that we, Your children, would learn to let go of this world through embracing You and Your will for us; to be light bearers rather than thing hoarders; to give away what possesses us. Amen.

Day Seventeen—Fool's gold

Why are we envious of what other people have? Why do we always seem to think we need more?

In Philippians 4:11-13, the Apostle Paul writes, “Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.”

I have always loved the outdoors. I remember one day when an uncle and I had gone gold panning in the Rocky Mountains of Montana, he showed me how to do it, and then we separated to cover more parts of the stream. After a while of sifting sand through my pan, I showed him all the gold I had collected and placed into a little vial. Much to my dismay, he explained that it was iron pyrite—fool's gold!

Don't be envious of what other people have. Very often, if we knew the troubles or intense labor and trial that accompanied their wealth, we wouldn't want it. Not even a mountain of fool's gold can compare to the true treasure of being content with whatever you have, knowing that if we have Christ, then we have all things of true value or worth.

Prayer: God, grant that I may understand the prosperity of knowing and being known by You. Flood my life not with fool's gold, but with Your holy presence. Amen.

Day Eighteen—Beings of Light

I have always loved the *Star Wars* saga. The first *Star Wars* film released in 1977; the year of my birth. When I was a child, I used to watch them on video cassette repeatedly. One of my favorite lines from all the films came from *The Empire Strikes Back*.

In one scene, Yoda touches the shoulder of Luke Skywalker as he says, “Beings of light are we, not this crude matter.” His point to Luke, while certainly not distinctly biblical, stands true. Luke was focused on the material world and his strength, or lack of it. We do the same thing all the time. We look at this life only through a physical lens.

If we get sick, none of us hesitate to see the doctor. If we are suffering depression or anxiety, most of us wouldn’t think twice about consulting a psychiatrist or psychologist. But when it comes to matters of a spiritual nature, we are far less inclined to seek spiritual council, prayer, or turn in the direction of the sacred things of God’s Church.

Too often we live disconnected spiritually and hyper-focused physically. Our Christian life is little more than a mental affirmation lacking in any real power. Remember the words of Romans 8:6, “So letting your sinful nature control your minds leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.” *Beings of light are we.*

Prayer: Eternal sovereign God, don’t allow me to neglect the eternal perspective, in favor of the things in front of me which are temporary, fleeting, and passing away. Amen.

Day Nineteen—Seeing Each other

How different would church folk treat each other if everyone knew what the pastor knew? Over the years, I have occasionally looked on in horror as I witnessed one sheep bite into another sheep, unaware of the pain and trial they had just shared with me the day or week before.

When we come into the church building for a worship service, choir practice, or a Bible study, we carry the burden of loneliness, the pain of disappointment, the wounds that others have inflicted on us, and the weight of our own mistakes with us. Every one of us is carrying burdens.

God's call on our lives as fellow followers of Jesus is not that of spiritual judge and jury. He's calling us to see each other as we see ourselves. We know we need help. We know we struggle. The local church is more like the old TV show, *M.A.S.H.* (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) and the 4077 hospital unit. We all wear the invisible scars of life. The church is a holy hospital for sinners. It isn't a place for self-righteousness to reign.

God is calling us to "Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ. If you think you are too important to help someone, you are only fooling yourself. You are not that important" (Galatians 6:2-3). How do you see other believers? As fellow, broken sinners or targets for judgment?

Prayer: Great God of healing and life, grant that we, Your children, may have the clear vision and clean hearts; that we may see others as valuable and worthy of grace. Amen.

Day Twenty—Life Together

When Christina and I first took our family to live and minister in Haiti, we didn't know exactly what life would look like. We learned the most valuable lesson any Christian can learn. We got busy working for God and He led us into His plan for us!

When we moved there, I hired a humble Haitian man named Gary to be my gardener and daytime security guard. Little did I know that God was making him my brother. He accidentally taught my youngest son Hansel Creole as they worked in the garden together every morning. He was there for my family like a true and honest friend when I was in a car accident. He started out as my employee and today he is my brother. He is also the Director of our ministry in Haiti.

The Christian life is not life in isolation. Everything God does in and through us, He does in community and through relationship. Who has God put in your life to whom you need to reflect His image? Who is currently a living witness to God's goodness in your life?

Whenever I think of Gary, Proverbs 18:24 comes to mind. "There are 'friends' who destroy each other, but a real friend sticks closer than a brother." The Christian life is *life together*. The Christian with even one true and godly friend has a great treasure from God!

Prayer: Great and Mighty God, show me Your might as You open my eyes to the people You've put and are placing in my life; through whom Your strength will come. Amen.

Day Twenty-One—Making Sense

Let's face it. The life of faith doesn't always make a lot of sense. But if faith made sense in our earthly way of thinking, then it wouldn't really *be* faith. Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see (Hebrews 11:1-3). Through their faith, the people in these verses earned a good reputation. By faith we understand that the entire universe was formed at God's command, and that what we see did not come from anything physical.

Faith is like a looking glass through which we see the world as God's creation, and our lives as God's ongoing creative work. It requires faith to know God. It requires knowing God for faith to begin to make sense. That is precisely why so many have rejected the notion of faith. It doesn't fit in well with their perception of self-sufficiency.

Faith in God is only foolish to those who have not yet experienced the power of God's mercy and love in their own lives. Faith is a lot like the wind; it's hard to describe, unless you have felt it blow across your own face and have seen with your own eyes the effect it has on the things it touches.

Faith is by nature mysterious. It doesn't always make sense to trust in what you can't see. But it doesn't have to make sense. It is the door to the invisible God that demonstrates His power and mercy visibly in our lives.

Prayer: Wondrous Lord of salvation, grant me the courage to trust in You for strength to do my work for Your glory. Amen.

Day Twenty-Two—Burdens Laid Down

One Sunday morning, I ran home a little before the church service. I returned just in time to watch as people were slowly filing into the church building. Sure, I had seen people go in and out of church lots of times, but that morning there was something very different. God allowed me to visualize the various burdens we carry with us all week long. He wanted me to know just how heavy and cumbersome those burdens can be. In my mind's eye, people were carrying massive trunks and boxes strapped to their backs and shoulders—filled with the burdens of the past week, months, and years.

Some people were carrying the burden of guilt for past sins. Some people were carrying the weight of sins committed by others that wounded them. Still others carried empty sacks they longed to fill with hope and meaning. Countless others carried the load of present failures and disappointments. I imagined them wondering if they were worthy of God's love, or even the love of people.

We all carry burdens we don't have to bear. We hang on to some of them for so long they become a part of our identity, and we think we need them. Who would we be without our control issues? Who would we be without these wounds? "Give all your worries and cares to God, for He cares about you" (1Peter 5:7). Those weights aren't yours to bear. They are holding you back. Give them to God in prayer.

Prayer: Everlasting, loving, powerful God; be mighty in our wounds and pain; grant us the strength to be weak. Amen.

Day Twenty-Three—The Brick Method

When I was a young Marine Sergeant, stationed in Yuma Arizona, I worked for a “mountain of muscle” with Warrant Officer Bars on his collar. At the time, I had just started back to college and I was in my first year of undergraduate coursework. I was taking an introductory business class and was telling him about what I was learning.

I was learning about interoffice communication systems. I recounted to him what I was learning about causes of communication breakdowns in the workplace, and strategies to counteract them and foster a positive atmosphere of communication. He pretended he was interested and said that would be a good idea. Once he grew weary of my excited ramblings, he said, “I took a class like that once. Have you ever heard about the brick method?”

I very seriously said that I had not, and asked, “What is the brick method?”

To which he replied, “It’s simple, when somebody doesn’t listen to what I tell them, I hit them upside the head with a brick!” I smiled and removed myself.

Proverbs 18:21 says, “The tongue can bring death or life; those who love to talk will reap the consequences.” Be careful of your words today. We must learn to be careful that in our love for talking, we aren’t hitting people upside the head with metaphorical bricks. How we talk matters. It is the power of life and death.

Prayer: God of grace, may my words reflect the love and mercy found in Christ that my words may edify others. Amen.

Day Twenty-Four—Yes You Can

One of my favorite songs in the world is “Yes You Can,” by Marvin Sapp. It is a most encouraging, God-centered message sung with conviction. Here are a few of the words:

“They thought that I’d be weak
But you made me strong.
They thought that I would crumble
But they were so wrong.
You held my hand and encouraged me to stand.
When they said I couldn’t do it
I heard you say, “Yes you can.”

I don’t know what you’re going through today, the struggle you had on the way out the door, what fight you had with your spouse last night, what pressures you’re under and I don’t know why or where it hurts. But I know it *does*, and sometimes it’s hard to imagine you can get through, but He says, “*Yes, you can!*”

“For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength” –Philippians 4:13

Prayer: God of all power and majesty and beauty and wonder, fill me with courage to accomplish Your will in me. Amen.

Day Twenty-Five—Worry Cure

One day when Sebastian was just a little guy, I had taken him to a local park to play. I picked him up as I often did. I reached low with my hands under his arms and kind of threw him up to my chest level and caught him. He liked it so much, I did it again. Sebastian was completely relaxed and having a great time; he laughed and laughed every time I caught him.

On this particular day, there was a young woman watching me play with Sebastian. She asked me, “Can you explain why he’s so relaxed, even when he’s out of control? If it were me, I would be worried stiff!”

I replied, “Well, I’ve never really thought about it, but I guess it’s pretty simple. We’ve played this game before, and I’ve never dropped him. We have a history together.”

Sebastian had full confidence that I would not let him fall. Consequently, he placed his full and complete confidence in me. It’s the same with God. Why can some people trust Him so deeply, even when things seem out of control? It’s simple. They have a history together. Even at times when we aren’t sure how, our Heavenly Father is always waiting to catch us. He who holds the future in His hands holds us too.

“Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD will personally go ahead of you. He will be with you; He will neither fail you nor abandon you.” –Deuteronomy 31:8

Prayer: Mighty Father, grant me the grace to trust in You. Keep the memory of Your care ever present in my heart. Amen.

Day Twenty-Six—Simply Pray

Bring your burdens to God in prayer. That's what we say, but how do you do it? *Just bring them.* I'm increasingly convinced that simplicity is the defining characteristic of all genuine prayer. What possible eloquence can be mustered by a human being that can impress the God who created them? What possible beauty of speech and skillful tongue can speak praise to the Voice that spoke everything into existence?

Nothing pleases God more than straightforward, uncomplicated, honest sincerity in prayer. Look at the life Jesus lived and what He taught us concerning prayer. Jesus was God in flesh, capable of all brilliance and masterful language, yet His was an offering of uncomplicated love.

What is it that God desires from His people? Don't rely too much upon your intellect, or upon the subtlety or depth of your way of thinking. Spiritual connection to God should be informed by rigorous study of God's Word so that we may know to Whom we pray, but prayer rides atop the wave of study and at the crest of knowledge, where our spirits commune directly with His.

Psalms 51:17, (ESV) says, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart; O God, you will not despise." How do you pray? Simply. Directly. Don't worry too much about how, just make sure that you do.

Prayer: God, I am in need of Your love and a touch of grace in my life. Thank You for taking me as I am. Amen.

Day Twenty-Seven—My Fortress

“The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my savior; my God is my rock, in whom I find protection. He is my shield, the power that saves me, and my place of safety.” –Psalms 18:2

The memories of Marine Corps basic training are still fresh in my mind. I remember the sound of the Drill Instructor’s clicking heels as he hunted for a recruit who was standing at less than perfect attention. I remember the smell of newly issued uniforms yet to be worn, and the feeling of new boots being broken in while marching proudly.

Most of all, I remember the comfort I received as I spoke each night to my Heavenly Father. The days were long and difficult, but the nights were sweet. Through it all, the presence of God calmed and encouraged my weary spirit. My bunkmate often overheard my prayers at night.

One evening, he asked me where the peace he sensed in me came from. I explained to him that my trust was not in my own strength or abilities, but in the power of God to strengthen and care for me. In times of uncertainty, we have two choices: we can be filled with fear as we depend on our own strength, or we can cast our fears on God, who has promised to never leave us or forsake us! Whatever we are going through, we do not travel this road alone!

Prayer: Divine Father, Giver and Sustainer of all life, fill me with Your empowering life that I may have the courage to face the trials of today. You are my safe refuge and my hope. Strengthen me with Your eternal strength. Amen.

Day Twenty-Eight—Reflections

“In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.”

–Matthew 5:16

When I was a kid growing up in Northern California, one of my favorite places to visit was Mirror Lake in Yosemite Valley. Mirror Lake gets its name because from the right perspective during the right time of year, it proudly displays a spectacular reflection of Mt. Watkins.

The mountain is flawlessly reflected in the lake! In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus admonishes us to let the light of God’s love—which is inside us—shine so that others will see it and give glory to God. The light inside of us is the love which Jesus expressed at the cross. As we draw near to the cross, let us consider the breadth of God’s love and mercy.

God’s love shouts to us from the cross, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). God’s love shouts through us to a world in need of mercy and grace as we allow our lives to reflect the love of God that was demonstrated at the cross—just as Mirror Lake reflects the mountain!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, teach me how to love others more fully so that I might reflect Your love to those around me more fully. Teach me to reflect the mercy of the Cross in my life. Use me to spread the Good News of Your love. Amen.

Day Twenty-Nine—The Journey

“Mark out a straight path for your feet so that those who are weak and lame will not fall, but become strong.” –Hebrews 12:13

Years ago, when Christina and I lived in Cheboygan Michigan, we enjoyed evening walks together. Before you get the wrong impression—filling your thoughts with images of a cheery couple strolling arm in arm down warmly sunlit city streets with their cuddly fluffy dog—consider that even in those days, the happy couple was not alone.

On our evening journeys, we were accompanied by a very outgoing two-year-old boy, and a giant Saint Bernard named “Happy.” Not only was Happy a gargantuan beast who dragged me behind her, she was also incredibly lazy. Occasionally, when we walked beyond her limit, she would decide she was not interested in walking and lay down. At that point, I would become the one doing the dragging!

As we walk along our journey through the streets of life, we all have pressures which are pulling on us and weights that drag us down. Only through the power of Christ dwelling within us are we filled with the strength needed for this life. Just as Jesus did not grow weary during His journey to the cross, He fills us with the strength we need to be His light in this world as we take our journey of faith!

Prayer: Mighty God, flood my soul with strength that only You can give so that I may endure the journey. When I am weak, pull me upright me with your strength so I may continue. Amen.

Day Thirty—Being Rebuilt

I remember watching one particular dilapidated little shack of a house being demolished in Haiti. This old house was made from a little wood and mud brick. The roof was very leaky, and it wasn't a good house. It was a place to dwell, but it was simply falling apart and unsafe.

Normally, I wouldn't enjoy watching a house being destroyed. That was someone's home! It's where they lived! But I enjoyed watching this home being destroyed—for one reason. It was a necessary part of building a new and better house for that family to live in. The same is true of us. After God saves us, we have the Holy Spirit living inside us. He begins to work on us. He begins to change us from the inside out. He begins to destroy the old things and make things new.

Before the Lord can build a new heart within us, He must crush us. Pride, self-reliance, self-assurance; these are the old stones that made up our former life. God is calling us into a new life, but for that to become a lasting reality, we must let the old life be destroyed. "This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (II Corinthians 5:17).

So often we hang onto old things, old ways, and our old life. For the new to be built, the old must be destroyed. What are you hanging onto today? What needs to be demolished?

Prayer: Lord of life and love, I repent that so often I hang onto the very things You've set me free from. Forgive me for preferring my old shackles to the freedom of Christ. Amen.

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