

DREAMS AND BLUEPRINTS

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ISBN 978 – 0 – 557 – 2176 – 0

# [DREAMS AND BLUEPRINTS]

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[LIVING OUT GOD'S PLAN FOR  
YOUR LIFE]

**MATTHEW EDMUNDS**

**[MARCH 14, 2010]**

# DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my wife, Melisa Edmunds. Thanks for being my partner. In our first twelve wonderful years of marriage to each other my love for you has grown deeper every day. I look forward to spending the rest of my life with you. I love you forever and a day. You are my precious gift from God.

# Acknowledgments

This book would have never been written if it had not been for the encouragement, prayers and support of my beautiful wife, Melisa Edmunds. It is ironic as she is the one with the exhaustive vocabulary and gifting of words. Melisa has stood by my side through everything that we have been through. She is my life partner, best friend, and loving wife. As Dr. James Dobson and his wife say to each other... S. H. M. I. L. Y. (See How Much I Love You)

Thanks to my mother and father whose words of wisdom and actions of love, have deeply influenced the way that I express love to my children and the way that I teach them.

Thanks to my children who bring a warm smile to my face. I am richly blessed by their tenderness and love.

A special thanks to Violet Burch – A.K.A. Mamaw. A woman who has great courage, determination, and the love that only grandma's understands. She often tells stories about how the grandchildren come to sleep with her at night. She covers them up and snuggles up next to them. Though they are several

hundreds of miles away their hearts are a pillow's length away.

Thank you mamaw for all of the love that you have demonstrated...I love you Mamaw.

Thanks to Granddad and Sue Edmunds for being an example of stability, warmth, and love.

Thanks Jim and Jill Barton and my new Church family at Rush for responding to the call of God on their lives. I look forward to partnering with you to reach change this world for Jesus. If one can put a thousand to flight and 2 can put ten-thousand, then our congregation can reach the world.

Thanks to my spiritual parents, Dr. Mike and Pastor Joann Pangio. You have been such a huge blessing in my life. I have learned much under your ministry.

Most of all, thanks to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Without His unfailing love and faithfulness, I would not even exist. Thank you Father for loving me and birthing the desire inside of me to do your work. Thank you for never leaving or forsaking me. This book is designed for your Glory and Purpose. Thank you for giving me an opportunity to be a vessel in Your Kingdom.

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## PREFACE

So many people are searching for meaning and purpose. With each new day, we try solve the mysteries of our significance and self worth. We look to our job, financial status, marriage, children, as measuring tools to judge our success. We continue to search for the magical key that unlocks the door to greatness and importance. Our focus is on our physical and social status. Even as Christians, we often unintentionally try to strip Christ of His authority by purchasing prayer cloths or giving all that we have into another man's ministry. As we listen to men and women of God preaching from various forms of media, quoting scripture and declaring that if we give to their cause, then they will send out a "special" prayer that will touch Heaven and God, Himself, will shower us with blessings. Often we ask God to bless our plans rather than asking us to live out His. In this book, I hope and pray that you discover the basic fundamentals for living out the plans that God has for your life. There are no secret ingredients or magic formulas. There is simply God, His word, and you. Preparation for tomorrow begins today. Capture each moment. Take advantage of each new day

that God has given you. Study His commandments, and allow His light to guide you on your journey to fulfillment. Life is an adventure full of mystery, revelation, and action. The only thing that remains constant is Christ. Set your spiritual compass to His heading. As you navigate towards Him, He will set His sail towards you. James 4:8- *“Come close to God, and God will come close to you.”*

## Chapter 1 – Preparation



It was July, 1991, and I was on a plane headed for Marine Corps boot camp. I graduated from high school only one month prior to enlistment. I was up by 4am and headed to the airport. I boarded the plane around 6am, I watched from the air as my hometown of Tulsa Oklahoma became more distant. I arrived in San Diego California at around 9am and from the moment I stepped off the plane; there were three men in uniform waiting for me, waiting to begin my training. They began screaming orders at me. “GET IN LINE! STAND UP STRAIGHT! LOOK AT ME! WHY ARE YOU HERE? POLICE THIS AREA! GET ON THE BUS! When we arrived at the San Diego United States Marine Corps Recruiting Depot, it was about 11am and I was immediately, shoved into the processing line. There were about a one hundred boys, including me, all sitting on the floor with no idea what was going to happen next. No schedule was given, no orientation, no instructions other than the orders

screamed at me to do this and do that, don't do this, answer me, don't speak, sound off, etc. I was so confused, and disoriented. At that moment everything about what I thought I knew about life changed. I was completely dependent upon the drill instructors for guidance. I was a slave to the military. Bought and paid for, an empty little vessel, ready to be molded into whatever they said I should be. The first order of business was a haircut; next I was issued uniforms, boots, underwear, t-shirts, and socks. Either none of it fit or I wasn't wearing it right. I was issued a gun that seemed too heavy to carry, an eighty pound sea bag which I could barely pick up, and suddenly I am now holding all these things and standing in a line getting ready to neatly stack all of my new belongings in an orderly fashion on the sidewalk. Now I am waiting in yet, another line getting ready to fill out all the necessary forms and personal information about my new identity. When I looked around I noticed that all of those boys sitting on the floor, now with shaved heads and new clothing they all looked the same. We were one unit with one goal, one plan, and one mission. Of course none of us knew what that was yet. Everything changed! We were shown how to

watch, listen, speak, walk, eat, and even sleep. Everything was different and yet we all did everything the same. Fast-forward it is now about 2 am: the day after my arrival and we are finally finished with the first phase of processing. I have been up for almost 48 hours; exhausted, broken, completely drained and not sure of anything. We were awakened bright and early at 5 am. Wow, three whole hours of sleep! I want to express something to you that may be different than what you have read in the past. It does matter where you grew up, where you came from, what environment you grew up in, and even the kind of person you are. These things are important because these are your life experiences and these are the very things that will help you. Before you can change something, you have to know what it is you want to change. If you go through life uncertain of what you're trying to accomplish you will most likely never accomplish it. Imagine looking for something around the house that is lost, but you don't know what it is. You are sure something in the house is lost, so you're going to just start looking for it. You will probably never discover what it is that you are not sure you're looking for. This sounds ridiculous, but many people are

approaching change in their life from this method of madness. When I was in boot camp the Marine Corps knew what they were going to change about me. There was a plan of action. Before we can change anything about ourselves, we need to prepare a plan of action. We need be specific about what we want to accomplish. Here are three significant elements in preparing for change.

### **Purpose**

The first element in preparation is Purpose. God has a blueprint for His creation. Each of us has a significant part in His plan. He has equipped each of us with unique talents and gifts that we will use in order to complete His model design for His people. I mentioned earlier that before you can prepare to change, you have to know what it is that you want to change. God has already identified those changes for us, so all we have to do is trust in Him. However, as we live out His plan for our life, we must identify our purpose and what it is that is preventing us from fulfilling it. So let's get started. Purpose is defined according to Webster's Dictionary as "an aim or goal, an intention"

God purpose is absolute. It will happen. His aim is always on target and He never misses, and His goal is clear. As followers of Christ we are instructed to change our behavior patterns. Ephesians 4:24 says *“and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.”* When we develop an antipathy for our sinful nature, and we surrender to the cross, God births inside of us a new identity. We no longer walk in the direction of the world. Paul gives us a basic outline of “the new man” experience in Ephesians 4:17-23.

*“This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who being past feeling have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your*

*former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind.”*

Our thoughts and actions are antithetical from our former conduct. Holiness is dedication to Christ and living righteously. Paul used this verse to compare a Christian’s life to stripping off the dirty clothes of a sinful past and putting on the new pure white robe of Christ’s righteousness. As I stated earlier it does matter where you came from, because that is part of your testimony, and who you are, but the purpose for your life does not lie in your past, but in your present. The future is God’s personal gift to us that we might use each new day to grow and form into the person that He has ordained us to be. Ephesians also outlines some other specific purposes for our lives. Chapter 5 talks about waking in love, walking in light, and walking in wisdom. The clear purpose for all Christians is to simply become more Christ-like. The Bible is God’s written word, our reference manual, and our guide to change. We may not know how Gods plan for our life will play out, but if we place our complete faith and trust in Him, He will show you the path. Psalm 23 is a psalm of trust; David writes about the Lord being

our Shepherd (vs.1), in vs. 3 he writes, *“He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.”* Just like my experience in the Marine Corps; I knew my purpose was to become a Marine, I just didn’t know how it was going to happen. I had to place my complete trust the military system. Once I stepped foot into the training program, I couldn’t go back, and I couldn’t do it on my own, I had no choice, but to trust the Marine’s. When we aim to serve God, we can’t go back, and we can’t do it on our own, so we have no choice, but to trust in Him. Obedience is the result of trust. In 1 John 2:4-6, the Bible says, *“He who says, (I know Him), and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.”* Our disobedience reflects a lack of personal knowledge of Christ. We cannot claim to know Jesus if we disobey His word. Not only is this lifestyle a lie, it also reveals that His truth is not the controlling influence in our lives.

## Direction

The next element in preparing for change is direction.

The Marine Corps kept pointing me in the direction that they instructed me to go. I never once thought about looking back on where I had just been. It was all I could do to keep up with the current pace of boot camp. There seemed to be an art of balancing between never looking back, focusing on the present, and anticipating just far enough into the future to stay in rhythm with the Marine's. The secret to doing this is first, you have to let the past stay in the past, you can learn from the past, but you can't dwell or live in it. Next you have to maintain constant focus on what's going on around you. You have to develop the art of observation. You must listen intently, pay attention to preparatory commands, act out the commands, and never hesitate. Finally, you must learn how to adapt and overcome. You have to anticipate obstacles and quickly develop strategies for completing the objective. During the navigation portion of Marine Corps training, I was issued a compass, a map, a ruler, and a flashlight. We had to locate our position, determine where we needed to go, plot our checkpoints, and draw straight lines

to each new position. We then took our compass and took a degree reading and then we set out on our course. We were constantly shooting a back reading to make sure we were on target. The flashlight was used during night operations, not to see just where we were, but to also see the map. Psalm 119:105, *“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”* God is our spiritual flashlight. He is our lamp, our course, and our vision.

When we are following God’s map for our lives, we need to acknowledge the tools that He has given us. First let’s look at the Bible. This is our map and our compass. The Bible shows us where we are and provides the necessary information on where we need to go. Each book of the Bible has a unique purpose. It provides clear direction for our lives and teaches us how to reach our destination. In order to stay the course, we must constantly review God’s written word, examine our walk with Him and determine where we are on His map, and finally we need to remain focused and walk the straight and narrow path. The Bible is also our flashlight; providing light to the darkness. Without God’s map, we won’t have a direction for our life or we

will be heading in the wrong direction and we will not be able to fulfill His purpose for our lives. Are you using your map? Are you checking your course? What direction do you feel God is leading you in and do you trust Him to bring you there? There isn't any secret formula to figuring out your direction, it is simply about how much trust you have in your Creator. I didn't always know what was waiting for me at the objective points and sometimes it still doesn't make sense even after I arrived, but I trusted enough in the Marines to stay the course. If I can put that much trust in a military organization, I can certainly place my complete trust in Him. What things are you putting your trust in? Can't you put your trust in the One who made you? Knowing your direction is part of the equation. The third element is decision; you must decide to walk in it.

## Decision

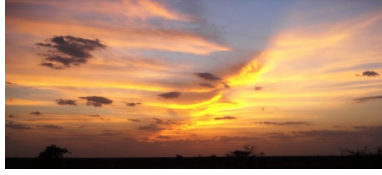
It may not seem like I had many choices once I stepped inside the gates of Marine Corps Basic Training, but I did. I watched boys cry, whine, complain, whimper, and even try to escape. Some were scared, others tried to act tough, and some looked like lost sheep. I made a few decisions once I arrived at basic. I would be an altruistic and intrepid recruit. I quickly developed fraternal feelings for my new brothers. I needed to reflect Christ throughout the various trials that boot camp would produce. I needed to be patient and astute. (James 1:2-4) *“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”* I would not cry, or whine, as I viewed these as weaknesses, I would not complain because this represented rebellion, and I would not try to escape because this reflected weak character. I would endure what I committed to. I saw every moment as an opportunity to become more adroit. I purposed to achieve my own personal goal and choose the direction of becoming a United States Marine. Fortunately for me, I shared

these common goals with the drill instructors. I decided to submit to the authority over me and to learn all I could from these great leaders. Leadership is a gift. Not all of us were designed for it. To be a great leader, one must first become a great follower. My strength was in God. Psalm 105:4, "Seek the Lord and His strength."

Christ told Peter and Andrew to follow Him. He would make Peter and Andrew a fisher of men. (Matthew 4:18-20) Peter and Andrew followed Christ. They became a student of His teachings and works. Peter and Andrew had a choice to either follow Christ or to continue in a different direction and follow what they knew to be safe and secure. Jesus taught them how to put their complete trust in Him. Peter challenged the laws of gravity when he walked on the water. Like Peter we must choose to put down our earthly desires, those things which provide a false sense of safety and security, and we must not look back on the past, but press towards the future, placing our complete trust in Christ and making the decision to follow Him.

What has God called you to put down lately? Have you decided to be an aficionado of Him or continue down your own path? He has given you purpose and direction, now it is time to make a decision. Trusting God is a choice. There will be days that you miss the mark and your eyes may become distracted for a moment; like Peter on the water, he took his eyes off of Jesus, and he began to fall into the water. He called out to Christ, and he rescued Him. Peter did allow a glance of fear to keep him from quickly re-focusing on Christ and being scooped up into the rescuing arms of the Father. When you fall short, repent of your sins, and allow God to safely position you back on course.

## Chapter 2 – Development



After about 4 weeks of basic training, I was exhausted physically, mentally, and emotionally. In short, I was completely broken. The Marine Corps had successfully stripped the old clothes of life off of me. Everything in life that I had done prior to boot camp was nothing more than a faded memory. It felt like a lifetime ago since I had graduated from high school. In just a few short weeks, my life had radically changed courses. Now that I was completely naked, completely exposed and empty, my training was about to begin. The first 4 weeks of basic is called phase 1. Phase 1 consists of processing and indoctrination, packing and storing civvies, moving in, rifle issue, uniform issue, medical exam, dental exam, shots, going to the recruit exchange, mess hall orientation, basic classes, and finally classification. Our daily activities included exercise, weapons maintenance, rifle drills, the obstacle and circuit course, bayonet training, rifle classes, and marching drills. All of

these things were necessary in order to prepare us for the next phase of training.

Phase 2 – Development. Now that we had learned the basics of becoming a Marine, it was time to put our mind, body, and soul to the test. We started with the rifle school range; we learned how to build rifle targets, and about holding and squeezing the trigger of a rifle. After a couple of weeks of continued weapons training and more intense exercise, we tackled a mountain known as the “Grim Reaper”. This was a 12 mile march / run fully loaded with packs and weapons. The “Reaper” was a gradual to steep climb for six miles. Once we reached the top, we celebrated and then went back down; another six miles. I became so thirsty that I would sip the sweat off of my brow and head, my eyes stung from the sweat in my eyes, my uniform was soaked, my shoulders, back, and neck were on fire. My legs were stiff and my feet had developed blisters on top of blisters. The utility belt was digging into my side and the band in my helmet was gripping tighter around my temples. This was a test of endurance, suffering, and perseverance. Nothing in life thus far has been any harder, more challenging, or simply

tougher than what I was experiencing on this day. The reward after the completion of the “Grim Reaper” was equally more satisfying than any other accomplishment up to this point. I felt invincible. If you had asked me how far I could run, I would have said “forever” and meant it. There was success in the atmosphere and we all felt great. There were many who did not complete the test and they were recycled back to the beginning of phase 2. Escape was not an option, there were no waivers, and everyone must complete the event. If you fail, you will simply start over and try it again until you do complete it. The final weeks of phase 2 consisted of more field training and finally a rifle qualification. Before we completed phase 2 there was one final task that all of us had to participate in. We were either sent to mess or maintenance duty for one week.

Now that we were well on our way to becoming Marine’s, we had to learn how to serve those over and under us. It didn’t matter who came into the mess hall or whose grass we were cutting, everyone was treated with honor and respect.

Before we can be used by God, we must allow Him to grind us down to nothing, so that He can begin to work in us.

Isaiah 64:6-8 says *“But we are all like an unclean thing. And all our righteousness’s are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away. And there is no one who calls on Your name, Who stirs himself up to take hold of You; For You have hidden Your face from us, and have consumed us because of our iniquities. But O Lord, You are our Father, We are the clay, and You our potter; And all we are the work of Your hand.”* How far are we willing to go? Will we allow Him to take us through the “Grim Reaper” experience? Will we let Him train us into the person of Christ that He has called us to be? Are we willing to endure trials to a point of suffering, pain, and agony? Not everyone has the same experiences, but we all have various trials and temptations that come our way. The key to surviving phase 2 had very little to do with my size, or physical limitations. It was all mental. I could not even allow the imagination of my heart to think of failure or quitting. It was much deeper than pure physical ability. No one can complete the course without first, going through the proper training. One thing I observed about those who failed initially is that from the beginning, they never put forth the effort that was necessary to

build them up. They were just going through the motions. In order to be a Marine, you must sell out 100 percent to being a Marine. Marines do not ever back down or quit! God has called us to something that requires selling out 100 percent to Him. His plan, His way. Even Christ prayed before He took up His cross, *“not my will, but yours be done.”* (Luke 22:42)

Before we can do all that God has for us, we need to be trainable. Unlike the Marine Corps, the thing that God has designed for each of us cannot be fulfilled by our own strength no matter how strong our mind, body, or soul is. This requires super natural strength that we can only access through Jesus Christ. He is our strength, He is our hiding place during times of suffering, He is our source of hope and encouragement, He is our protection, and He intercedes on our behalf. He isn't just a place where we can run to, He is in us, and through Him we can do all things. *“But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last Your care for me has flourished again; though You surely did care, but You lacked opportunity: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to*

*suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*" (Philippians 4:10-13). In all circumstances, we as Christians are to rejoice. Our joy is not determined by our circumstance, but rather our relationship to Christ. The Marine's were training me according to their agenda and purpose. They didn't just train me to reflect the character of a Marine, I became a Marine. God has a new identity for each of us. He has commanded us to be imitators of Christ, and even though we are not to become Christ, we are to become Christ-like, and all of us are called His children. Before we can reach our full potential in Christ, He must develop our character. As God begins to work on our character development He will teach us how to walk according to His will. The Marines taught me how to use my weapon. I knew everything about it.

The most important thing about firing your gun is trigger control. You can have the best aim, a steady hand, but if you anticipate the shot and jerk the trigger you will miss the target every time. If you do not squeeze the trigger, the weapon will shift and the slightest change in position will alter the course of direction. The key to being a great marksman is learning the art of trigger

control; a nice smooth squeeze of the trigger, good aim, and a steady hand will put you on target every time. It is only when we compromise some part of the firing process that we miss. God wants us to learn how to operate the spiritual weapons He has equipped us with. He has given us a list of these weapons in Ephesians 6:11. A key characteristic that we must allow God to develop in us is how to be patient, and wait on Him, not with anticipation, but hope and trust. If you trust in the design of your weapon instead of the model of impatience, if you squeeze the trigger that God has placed in your hands, and set your aim on His target, and if you steady yourself on His path; then you will stay the course that God has set your feet upon. In the book of James in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter beginning in vs. 7, the author writes, “Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.” Nelson’s NKJV study Bible explains that, “*James urges believers to maintain an attitude of patience while suffering injustices. Though every effort should be made to*

*improve conditions and achieve justice, believers must keep a spirit of patient endurance, even in the midst of cruel treatment.”*

Are you willing to do what it takes for God to develop your character? Are you willing to go through all that is necessary to becoming more Christ-like? Even when you're not sure why life has taken you in a certain direction, are you willing to stay the course, endure through suffering and pain, and allow God to transform you into the person He needs you to be? Are you willing to be patient and trusting? Will you place your faith in Him and Him alone? As you soak in His presence, become still and simply wait on the Lord, the reward and result will leave you feeling confident in Christ and complete. You will rest assured knowing that God is in control of your life and you are marching in step with His plan for your life.

The development process has many different areas. Because we are constantly being developed and fine tuned the process really never stops, but there is progression beyond development. I have been discussing character development so far in this second chapter. I want to switch directions for a moment and zoom in on another part of character development.

When God begins to birth His design inside of you, often times there are periods of time that you may feel like you are experiencing labor pains. You have this dream inside of you and for many of us the dream gets pushed aside as we get caught up in doing all that we can just to survive financially. Although money does not produce happiness it certainly seems to help. Without money we cannot survive. We need money to function in this world. Money is the currency that is used to provide the needs for our survival in this world. I certainly believed this and so do most of you.

Like the boot camp experience, once I was introduced to the Marine Corps training, everything I thought I knew about life changed. So here we go. Let's change some things that we believed to be true about living in this culture.

Faith is Heavens currency. Hebrews faith is the element necessary to function in the realm of God. Without faith we can't accomplish anything that God has for us. *"Faith without works is dead."* (James 2:20) We need faith to survive in God's kingdom. Without faith the healing crusades would have never happened, Bible colleges would not have been built, missionaries would not

exist, and food pantries would not have been established. The church you attend may not have existed without faith. Faith is what God has commanded us to operate in. Hebrews 11:1-3; 7-10 says *“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained good testimony. By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible. By faith Noah being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelt in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise, for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”* Through faith we can trust God to birth our dream into action. Regardless of your current situation or circumstance, if you exercise your faith and patiently wait on

Him, God will birth your dream in you and through you. His timing is flawless and never over due. We need to develop a holy ambition. We need to ride out those storms of suffering. Before a child is born the labor pain increase and contractions become closer and closer together. This is our signal that a baby is getting ready to be born. There is a painful price to pay for having a child but the result is priceless. God has birthed a dream inside of you and although there may be a painful price to pay your dream is worth it.

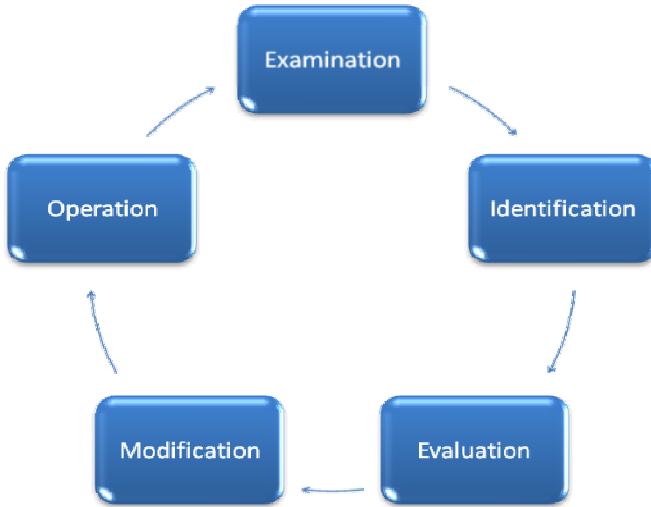
Perhaps there are some areas in your life that you feel have interrupted the plans of God. Maybe you have committed some sins in your life that you do not feel God has forgiven you for or maybe you feel like God has forgiven you, but He is punishing you for your actions. Do you feel like the plan that God has for your life is dead because of past behavior or previous decisions that you have made? God's plan does not change just because we mess up. When a child misbehaves, we do not think differently about the child or wish something bad upon the child. We as parents do not change our thoughts towards the child. God does not change His mind about you. His

plan remains, He is just waiting for you to repent and ask forgiveness. God cannot forgive sins if we do not truly repent. It is time for you to truly repent, allow God to work on your character, and birth that dream.

Development is a perpetual part of growth, but it is necessary to climb the pyramid of progression. We all have a part in God's perfect plan. He has given all of us a unique dream that fits perfectly according to His plans. All we need some holy ambition.

We need to learn how to operate using Heavens currency. As we continue to grow; we will develop into a more complete person of God. The path will become brighter and clearer. Our direction and target will be in focus and we will be able to set our sights on His course. With a steady hand, a squeeze of the trigger and an accurate aim, we will hit the target and we will be in the center of God's plan for our life.

I have concluded that there are several areas of development; however, there are only five levels to the complete and mature development process.



The first level of developing your character is

**Examination.** (Psalm 26:2) My first week of boot camp consisted of an examination. The Marines wanted to make sure that I was in good health and physically fit for basic training. Following the medical examination, there was a physical fitness test. The Marines needed to examine our limitations and potential. As Christians, we need to examine our current condition. How is our walk with Christ? What obstacles or limitations are we challenged with? What is our potential? We must pray that God would examine our hearts and minds. We need to be open and honest with God concerning the integrity of our character. We need God's direction and He needs our

commitment. An examination is nothing more than an inspection or test. Before a recruit graduates from boot camp and earns the title of Marine, they must complete a final inspection.

Your uniform must be pressed, polished, and worn properly. Your hat must be tilted to the appropriate angle. The rank on your collar must be perfectly measured, the buttons on your uniform must be polished, there shall be no loose or hanging threads anywhere on the uniform, the ribbons must be aligned and in proper order, the rank insignia must be properly centered on the sleeves, your belt must be clean and the buckle must be polished, the trousers must have a perfect crease down the center of each leg, and the shoes must be shined to a mirror gloss. Every detail is closely inspected and you are graded on your effort. Your weapon will be immaculate! No exceptions or excuses. Your weapon is considered a direct reflection of your personal character. The condition of your weapon defines your effectiveness during combat. Your weapon should never leave your sight. Your weapon should be viewed as an extension of your body. If your weapon fails inspection, so do you. Your uniform is an outward display of attention to detail, but your

weapon is an inward expression of your personal commitment to excellence. As we petition God to examine our lives, He will show us the condition of our spiritual uniform and the imperfections on our weapon. Just as a recruit cannot become a Marine without going through the difficult and challenging phases of training, A Christian cannot reach their full potential in Christ without being willing to go through the various trials and temptations that life throws at us. As we continue to grow and mature in Jesus, God will always be there to guide us. He has equipped us with His word, He has given us His spirit to live inside of us, and He sacrificed His son, so that we could have eternal life through Him. Examination of character is an essential element in identifying the necessary changes to help us mature in Christ. Lamentations 3:40 says, *“Let us search out and examine our ways And turn back to the Lord.”*

Now that we have completed an examination, it is time to identify the areas in our life that we need God to operate on. The examination shows us the “what” portion of our character. What are our strengths, what are our weakness, what areas do we excel in, what areas need improvement, what are our gifts,

what are our talents, etc. The **Identification** is the sum of the examination.

When I completed the physical fitness test in basic training I scored a 265 out of a possible 300 points. The result of my examination was that I was identified as a level 3 recruit. Level 1 was any score between 0 to 100, level 2 was any score between 100 and 200, and level 3 was any score between 200 and 300. It is usually during the examination portion of a person's life that they begin to make choices that will change the course of their life. Romans 3:21-26; *“ But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, became in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and*

*the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” At some point in our lives we were examined by God and through His grace He showed us that we need Jesus. In Christ, we have a new identity. We are dead to sin, and alive to God.*

*“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we how died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”*

Romans 6:1-4.

The **Evaluation** process is the level of development that determines your faith, conduct, and consistency. Consistency is hard. It requires constant focus. The first 4 books of the New Testament are focus in on the character of Christ. In Matthew 5:13-16 we are instructed to be salt and light; in vs. 27 we learn about adultery in the heart; vs. 31 speaks on marriage, vs. 33 illustrates Jesus forbids oaths, vs.38 teaches on behavior towards an evil person, in vs. 43 we are instructed to love our

enemies, and in the beginning of chapter 6 we are instructed to do good to please God. Each of the four books tells a different story, but when all of them are combined they paint a complete picture of Christ. We need to learn how to know Him. As we gain momentum in abiding in Him, we will gain confidence in our character. At the end of each phase of boot camp, there was an evaluation. I took another physical fitness test, and my uniform and weapon were re-inspected. My consistency was being evaluated. Was I still meeting the required standards? Had I slacked off or given up? What areas needed to be modified? What areas in our walk with the Lord need to be modified? Are we doing all that is required? Has the newness worn off? Are we still pressing on even though it may have become tough? What modifications to we need to make to our character?

**Modification** is simply an adjustment. When I would fire my weapon in the wind, I had a wind knob that was used to adjust my sights during shots fired in the wind. If I missed my target, I didn't aim left or right, I simply adjusted my sights. During the windy storms of life, it is important that we do not adjust our aim, but rather our sites. God remains the same. He

doesn't change. Circumstance and life may change, but God does not. The target doesn't move, the wind is simply blowing. We do not aim in a different direction; we just need to make some modifications to account for the wind. Once we are back on target, we need to continue to operate in the things of God. Once I became a Marine, I now lived the life of a Marine. I was in full **Operation**.

I was expected to conduct myself not like a Marine, but as a Marine. We need to operate not like Christ, but Christ-like. Now that we are operating in Him, we need to develop a rhythm cycle. The rhythm cycle is a routine maintenance program. It consists of three out of the five levels of development.

**Evaluation, Modification, and Operation.** I performed regular weapons maintenance on my rifle. I would punch the chamber, lubricate the trigger assembly, oil the magazine, and scrub the outer parts. Every nut and bolt was disassembled and attention was given to them. It became so familiar to me that I could break down an M16 and put it back together again in 2 minutes. I knew the weight, length, max range, max effective range, and even how many shots could be fired before the barrel would

start to glow. I knew what it was capable of doing. I put my weapon to the test time and time again. I pushed it to perform to its limit, but no matter how many times I cleaned it or how often I fired it, my rifle would never perform beyond a certain point. God knows our limits and He knows how much we can take before we start to glow.

He is familiar with every part of us and knows our max and our max effective range. My weapon is only a tool. It does not have a soul, heart, mind, or spirit. It only fires when I pull the trigger. God did not design us this way, but we can learn from this principal. We ought to operate as God instructs us, being sensitive to the Holy Spirit, and trusting God with squeezing our trigger until we glow. When we glow, we grow! God wants to reveal to us all of the excellence that He has put inside of us. As children of God, we need to learn to march in the rhythm of the Holy Spirit. We need to consistently evaluate, modify, and operate in godly character. We had a diagram drawn out on a cloth for each part of our M16. We would place the parts on them as we broke it down. If we forgot the order to put a piece back together, the diagram would show us. The Bible is our

diagram. We need it to reference and guide us daily. God's word serves as a visible diagram to help keep our lives in order. Ephesians 2:14 teaches that Christ is our peace, and in chapter 5 the writer indicates how we should walk. Ephesians 5:1-7 gives us guidance for walking in love; 5:8-14 instruct us to walk in light; in chapter 5:15-21 we are encouraged to walk in wisdom. God has clearly given us His word for our spiritual guidance and development.

### Chapter 3 – Focus



As I laid in the prone position, my left eye was closed and my right eye was looking through the rear sight as I aligned my front side post directly in the center of the target which was 500 meters away; my hand was wrapped snug around the pistol grip, my wind knob calculated to perfection, and the butt of my weapon was firmly secured in my shoulder pocket. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, exhaled, and then re-opened my eyes. I had a established a natural point of aim. I shifted slightly to re-align my body so that my sights were back on target, I took another deep breath, closed my eyes again, exhaled, re-opened my eyes and bingo! I was on target. My natural point of aim was perfect, my position was excellent, my aim was flawless, and my wind and sights were right on the money. It was all up to me now, one thing left to do; as I squeezed the trigger, I waited patiently for the shot to be fired. As the bullet left the chamber I

knew I was going to have success. When the spotter marked my target, he revealed that I had hit another bull's eye. I hit 9 out of 10 perfect bull's eyes; all nine rounds were in a nice tight group the size of a silver dollar. The first round I missed due to the wind factor. It was to be expected. I can always tell when I fire off a good shot because when the weapon fires, it is always a surprise. The surprise was a personal indication that I did not anticipate the shot. A great marksman remains constantly focused. If even one of the elements mentioned above is compromised, then you may miss the target.

I believe that practical tools are helpful in character building; however, tools are not enough. We need to be focused. When I would fire my weapon, I didn't simply lie on the ground, move my body around and look at the wind. I was completely focused on the entire shooting process. Sometimes we go through the motions of walking with Christ, but we are not really focused. James 1:22-25 tells us; *"But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in the mirror, for observes himself,*

*goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.*" Our aim is on God, but we are not really focused on Him. We may skip a day or several days from Bible reading, or we may rush through our prayer time. How many sermons have we sat through without a clue as to what the message is about? Living out the dream God has for your life requires consistent focus. I want to give you some specific practices for maintain focus. First, we need to be deeply connected with God.

We need to get the word in us, we need to pray and talk with Him on a daily basis, we need to take some timeout moments and just spend time meditating on Christ. (Psalm 119) I didn't want to be a good rifleman; I wanted to be a great one. I don't want to be a good Christian, I want to be great. Greatness demands focus. When we are connected to God we gain a sense of usefulness. God wants to use us. In combat, a missed opportunity can greatly increase the risk for defeat. If you are not completely focused, any number of things can go wrong. A

sniper, a mine, an ambush. These are all tactics of the enemy. Satan will often allow a person to get complacent in their walk, and then fire a spiritual sniper shot at them. They didn't see it coming. They were not focused. Sometimes he will try to ambush us; throwing multiple attacks at us. Did you ever feel like nothing was going right? The bills are piling up, the children are sick, you just got laid off from work, - etc. these are all circumstances of life. Satan is always trying to disrupt the plans of God, but often at times life gets in the way. The waves and storms come crashing and thundering in on us. If we allow the circumstances around us to distract us from what God has for us then we will always be distracted. You will experience the emotional roller coaster of life. You will live in the rhythm of always going up and down. When I was on the firing range, I did not allow the circumstances around me distract me from my target. I made adjustments to my weapon, and my body alignment, but my sights remained on the center of the target. As we ride out the storms of life, we need to learn how to make adjustments without compromising the dream and plan for our life. Again it is all about focus. Reading the word, praying, and

faith. Colossians 2:6-7 says; *“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.”* So how do we consistently stay focused? No matter how many great sermons are preached, no matter how many awesome worship songs are written, and no matter how many great books you buy, no matter how many times you read the Bible, these things cannot manipulate a person to change their life. Consistency is challenging, being a Christian takes effort, and more importantly living your life the way God intended you to demands focus. It is up to you, through Him. Your faith needs to be established, and your trust and obedience must be in Him. All of the materials and resources mentioned are helpful, but it is how you respond to God and your walk in Him that will create the birthing experience to live out your dream. *“Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you; God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of Heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed*

*anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him though He is not far from each one of us; For in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said For we are also His offspring. Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Devine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."*

Acts 17:23-31.

When I was in the military, we traveled to many places. Japan, Hawaii, California, etc. I always had my watch set to the time zone in which I lived in. I was stationed in Hawaii, so my watch was always set to Hawaii. I operated in the time zone that

I lived in. I had to make adjustments to my sleeping habits and training times while I was in a different time zone, but I always kept my watch in sync with where I lived. As you live the dream that God has birthed inside of you, keep your watch set to the Lords time. Proverbs 3:5-6; *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.”*

In His timing, all things will come together for His glory and purpose. Wherever you are at this current moment, be consistent. Get into the habit of consistently being consistent. I heard a story once told by a minister on the radio. The story was about a man who always seemed to have his lunch in his hand whenever the whistle blew. An employee asked the man how he was always ready at the precise moment the whistle blew and the man answered by saying “I like to stay ready to keep from getting ready.” We need to always be ready so that when God says, “move”, we are ready for action. 1 Peter 1:13-16 says, *“Therefore gird up the loins of you mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming*

*yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written (Be holy , for I am holy)."* When I was in the Marines we were instructed to always be prepared. I was always ready in a moment's notice to do what needed to be done; no hesitation, no second thoughts, not even an ounce of doubt; 100 percent dedication and commitment. My focus was always on being a Marine first, regardless of whether or not I was on or off duty. We need to act like Marines in God's military. The Marines had a list of 12 general orders that each Marine was expected to know by heart. God gives the Christian a list of general orders outlined in 1 Cor. 13:4-13. We as Christians are to consistently walk in love. The impact of living a consistent life in Christ will provide confidence, fulfillment, and effectiveness. The military has a variety of weapons; pistols, semi-automatic rifles, machine guns, heavy artillery, etc. It doesn't matter which gun you are using, if you are too far from the target or your aim is slightly off, the effectiveness of the impact is compromised. The impact that we make in this life is dependent upon us hitting the target with accuracy and enough power to penetrate what

we are aiming at. If we are too far from where God desires us to be, then our impact will be weakened. Our witness and testimony will be less effective if we do not act in obedience to Christ. We need to focus on our pattern of conduct. As we look at the examples that Jesus set, we need to pattern our lives after Him. We ought to take the right stand and invest in becoming a student of excellence. Some of us need to learn how to stand.

My parents had told me for 18 years to stand up and not slump, look people in the eye, to chew my food with my mouth closed, and to sit up straight. It took the military 4 hours to implement this with success. The difference was in the impact that these qualities would have in my life. My parents were not going to punish me if I did not do these things. There wasn't any significant consequence for not doing these things. I didn't even give it much thought, but now there was new meaning to these actions. There was purpose and a responsibility to do these things and if didn't there was a nice exercise waiting with my name on it. I immediately began to focus on these new essentials. In 4 hours I knew how to stand. There was no doubt

in my mind what I was standing for...because the drill instructor said so! In our lives we need to learn how to take a stand for Jesus and focus on all that He has commanded us to do. We need to know without a doubt what we are standing for...because God said so! Focus produces power; power is the ability to cause change. There is power in the Cross. Through the Cross our God paid the price for our sins. He changed the condition of our position. We were separated from God because of our sins, but now we are united with God through Christ Jesus. The power of the Cross caused change. There is power in the word of God. His word causes change in our lives. His word changes circumstances, and situations. The storms will continue to come, the wind will blow, the trials and the testing of our faith will not cease, but in Christ, we may stand. Ephesians 6:10-20; *“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the Heavenly places. Therefore take up the*

*whole armor of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints and for me that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.”* The storms will pass, the wind will calm, and God will be with us giving us strength and patience to overcome the trials and testing of our faith. We will overcome through Him. God has given us power over the enemy. When we focus on God, and plug into His power, we can begin to experience the adventures of life with confidence in our God that He can change the condition of our position. As we continue to grow in the character of Christ, staying focused on the consistency of Godly things, and taking the right stand for Jesus, we will have an

effective and powerful impact in this life. Sometimes the wind is blowing strong and often seems powerful. Our focus can shift towards the emotional and physical stress as the breeze of attack hammers down on us. The waves come in multiple sets and it appears as though there is no hope in the near future. We feel as though we are on a ship about to sink. As quickly as we are using the buckets of our resources to empty out the water that is weighing heavily in our boat, we are not sure if we are going to make it without some significant loss; maybe a house or a car; perhaps the utilities have been shut off. We feel as though we simply do not make enough money; in fact no matter how much money we receive in a bonus check or commission, it won't be enough to cover even the basic expenses. We feel drained, tired, and exhausted. We hit the snooze button on the alarm clock and often wish we could hit the snooze button in life. How can we possibly walk out the dream that God has for us? We do not have the resources to start anything, we don't feel as though we have any strength, we feel beat up and bullied by life and all of its demands. In the heat of the moment when every area of your life seems to be a struggle and you are trying to

come up with creative solutions to solve the problems that you are facing, in the midst of the storm, when you find hard to focus on anything other than the fear that creeps up and strangles your mind, it is these very trials that we need to take our eyes off of our position, focus on God and trust that He can change the condition of our position. God longs for you to pray and ask Him for help. He is interested in you. He wants you to become so intimate and personal with Him, because He desires to be your Daddy. He wants you to pray for even the small things that are important to you. As you focus completely on Him, He will give you the desires of your heart. Maybe you're a mommy and all you want is to give your children a life without worry. You want them to grow up without knowing the lack that your are experiencing. All your little boy wants is a puppy, so you set a goal. By the beginning of next year you will buy a black and white puppy just like the one your little boy described he wants. How much more does God want to do in your life? You are His child; His little boy or girl. He wants to help. As we remain focused on Christ, He will help us through all of the various storms that life throws at us. The dream that God has birthed

inside of you will come to pass, as long as our focus is consistently on Him. No matter what you are facing, you can start now, by setting your sights on Him. As you zoom in and focus on God, He will show you with clarity His purpose and plan for your life.

On one fall afternoon I received a phone call from my wife. She told me the electricity had been shut off. We didn't have the funds to have it reconnected. I immediately became anxious and did not consider patience or faith. I took matters into my own hands and without even allowing God the chance to move. I had just mailed the rent check and I knew that if I paid the electric bill then there would be insufficient funds in the account. Nevertheless, I called the electric company and paid the bill. The electric company told me that the power would be turned back on the following day. I could not wait that long. I got home, cut the clip, removed the plastic sleeves from the connectors and turned the power on myself. The next day I replaced the plastic sleeves, and tried to make it look like I had not tampered with the power box. Around 5:30pm the electrician came by, put a padlock and a new clip on the meter and left a

notice stating that we would have to pay an additional fee due to the power box being tampered with before service could be restored. I bowed my head in shame and said, “honey, I am sorry. I should not have done that.” My wife replied, “it’s ok, I know why you did it.”

I told her that there were plenty of reasons to justify my actions, but none of them represented integrity, trust or Christ-like character. In the book of Matthew 4:1-11, Satan tempts Jesus. First he told Jesus to turn stones into bread. If Christ had done this, then He would have put more trust in Himself than in God. Sound familiar? I think I have fallen short in this department. Next Satan tells Jesus to throw Himself off the pinnacle of the temple. If Jesus had performed this task, then the crowds would see this and believe that He was the Savior rather than to live out the righteous life and message. There would have been no reason to die on the cross because everyone would have believed, thus our sins would not have been paid for. I know that I thought I had a better plan for restoring the electricity other than trusting in the plans of God, but if I had simply waited on the Lord, my witness and character would not have been

compromised. The third temptation was that Christ should worship Satan rather than God. In exchange He would gain earthly possessions. Christ knew that the rewards of this life were temporary. All that Satan could offer was mortal. The enemy's rewards will only bring temporary pleasure and ultimately will leave you feeling emptier and more dependent on the hand of the enemy. The word of God makes it clear that we are either a slave to righteousness or a slave to sin. You cannot serve two masters. As I discovered through my electricity being shut off, my way was not the right way. Trusting God requires constant focus. We need to be consistent in the word and in prayer. We need to be focused on walking in obedience and trusting in God completely. Our actions are the reflection of our focus. I had the opportunity to fire an AT-4 (anti-tank rocket) when I was in the military. It had two large sights that I looked through and several 9mm bullets referred to as "spotter rounds"; the weapon had 1 rocket and could only be fired once. Each gunner had an assistant. The assistant would inform the shooter on the necessary adjustments needed to accurately hit the target. The purpose of the spotter rounds was to get the shooter

on target. Once I was on target I was given the fire command. The Bible is our spotter round for life. It helps us to stay on target. Acts 15:8 proclaims that God has given us His Holy Spirit as a guide to let us know when we are on and off target. We only have one shot in life, but through His grace, our “spotter round” are surrendered at the cross. Our focus on God is similar to firing an AT-4. He has equipped us with the proper sights (our conscience), we have a spotter (the Holy Spirit), and we have the Command (God). As our conscience influences our moral rights and wrongs, the Holy Spirit is there to lead us as we follow the plans and dreams that God has for our life. He is the great Commander, the one in whom we place our faith and trust. We are simply the vessel (AT-4) that He uses to accomplish what He has purposed. As we walk out the dreams that God has impregnated within us, we must remain consistently focused on Him.

## Chapter 4 – Growth



*“But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew. And they were in dread of the children of Israel.”* (Exodus 1:12 – 13) The Egyptians tried to break the Israelites’ by using abusing them, but as the intensity of their harsh treatment increased, the more the Hebrews flourished.

I had taken a job as an inside sales rep for a steel company. As I was studying the various types of metals, services, and pricing of our products, I was fascinated to learn of two strength tests that material’s are subject to. During the testing process there is a tensile and yield test. There are three areas of strength in the yield resistance test. **Yield strength** is related to the stress at which a material’s strain changes from elastic deformation to plastic deformation. In other words, how much stress can the material take before it is permanently

deformed? Ultimate strength is the maximum stress a material can withstand when compressed, sheared, or from tension. Breaking strength is when the material reaches the point of rupture. **Tensile strength** is the amount of stretching a material can withstand.

In 1 Samuel 1:11-18 we read about Hannah's vow. She prayed that God would give her a son. As we read the passage of scripture there is a process that Hannah went through. She wept in anguish, she was emphatic in her approach to God; next she made a vow to God that she would give back to Him what He might give to her. Hannah's character was chivalrous. When she was questioned by Eli (1 Sam 1:12-16) Hanna had experienced God's peace and when Eli realized that she was sober, he approved of her. Even though her hope was in her spirit and had not yet been birthed inside of her physically, Hanna's prayer gave her hope that the Lord would give her a child. Through her prayer, God gave her peace. (Philippians 4:6-7) *"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made know to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all*

*understanding will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”* Hannah’s prayer for her dream was finally birthed.

Hannah poured out her soul before the Lord. Hanna had desired with holy ambition to give birth to a child. As we desire with holy ambition to grow and birth into action our hopes and dreams, we will begin to experience God’s peace even through the labor pains of that birthing experience. God has placed inside each of us a hope and a dream. Prayer gives hope to our dream. We need the same kind of desire that Hannah had to pursue God with a holy ambition.

The yield and tensile strength of our character will be tested and tried, but like the Israelite’s our sufferings will cause us to grow and flourish. James 1:1-8 teaches us about profiting from trials. The growing process can be a tiresome, yet a rewarding journey.

Pregnancy can only happen when two people come together in unison and intimacy. God desires that we come to him intimately, allowing Him to release inside of us the plans and dreams that He has for our life. When we exercise our spiritual development, God will cause growth within us. There

will be a sense of inward expansion to our spiritual being, and the evidence of our growth will be visible by our thoughts and actions through Christ Jesus. Mark 4:30-32; *“Then He said, to what we shall liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it? It is like a mustard seed which when it is sown on the ground is smaller than all the seeds on earth, but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade.”* No matter how small and insignificant you think your dream is, if you plant your dreams in the soil of Christ, He will fertilize it with His rich anointing and in God’s timing it will mature in growth for His glory and purpose.

I could hear the rhythm of my breathing. In, in, out; in, in, out. I could feel the stretch of my stride, my hands were loosely formed fists, my arms bent at a 90 degree angle, my head was up, and I was living in the moment. Nothing else mattered except me and the 10 miles of open road. The air was light, the sun was shining, I could smell the salt from the ocean. It was a fresh new day, one that had not yet been polluted with daily agendas. My pace was steady, and my mind was clear. I was

well rested and ready for the challenges of the day. When I finished the run I would always smile and inwardly celebrate the reward of completion. When I first started running I didn't know anything about breathing, stride, or pace. It was hard, and I hated it. There was no prize at the end of the run, no trophy, just the reward of the accomplishment. I had only run 1 mile. I didn't feel like celebrating my so-called victory. I wanted to go home, get a shower, and forget about running. The next day I would have the privilege of doing it all over again. With each new attempt I was able to run a little further. As time passed I learned how breathe and pace myself. I had worked up to the point of running 3 miles a day. It was still work, I still hated it, and I still did not see the value in the reward. It wasn't until I began to develop my stride and rhythm that something changed. My pace was the same; however my stride caused me to finish the run in less time, and even though I would run the same distance, I wasn't as tired. Something else happened too. I began to like it. I started to focus on other things rather than simply moving my legs back and forth. I quit concentrating on my lack of breath and allowed the natural rhythm of my

breathing to kick in. I suddenly found myself running longer distances and the satisfaction of each new mile was worth celebrating. I was stronger and faster. My endurance level was high and I had a strong desire to go further. Then one day it happened. I was so caught up in the thrill of the run that I lost track of the miles. I glanced at my watch and noticed that I had been running for a little over 2 hours. I knew that I could keep a six minute mile pace, so I calculated that I had run about 20 miles. I was suddenly overcome with a strong sense of fatigue. I could not run another mile. I needed to stop. I walked back to base camp, bought a bottle of water on the way and celebrated the victory. This reward belonged to me. There was no one else to celebrate with me because no one else had been on the journey. It was just God and me.

As God causes us to grow, we may not always enjoy it. Psalm 17:3-5 *“You have tested my heart; You have visited me in the night; You have tried me and have found nothing; I have purposed that my mouth shall not transgress. Concerning the works of men, By the Word of Your lips, I have kept away from the paths of the destroyer. Uphold my steps in Your paths, that*

*my footsteps may not slip.” He knows our max tensile and yield strength. He will not allow us to experience anything that is beyond our breaking point. 1 Corinthians 10:13; “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.”* Life is a marathon, not a sprint. We cannot expect to run at a fast pace for a short period of time and hope that God blesses us for the limited faith that we have placed in Him. It isn't about our pace. God isn't interested in how quick we are. He wants our enduring obedience. As you develop your stride, your pace will appear to increase. It is much easier to distant the legs from each other than it is to make your legs go faster. If your pace is too fast then you will burn out quickly. How many of life's activities have you tried to take on at one time? If you bite off more than you can chew you are either going to choke or you will have to spit out the pieces that don't fit. Growth is a necessary part of our development, but it must be done in His timing. I have watched many sprinters as they blast from the starting block only to pull a

hamstring. God's growth is perfectly balanced for each individual. He is the great physician. He will supply you with what you need in order to maximize your growth potential. Growth matures in its appropriate season. Ecclesiastes 3:1 "*To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under Heaven*": All events are in the hand of God, and He makes them happen as He decides the time. We are to live our life in relationship with God. The dream that God has given you has an anointing on it and is rich in quality. If you pick a fruit before it is ripened it won't taste good. Its purpose cannot reach its full potential because it has been picked prematurely. In His perfect timing all things will grow according to His plan and purpose. The idea or desire to fulfill your dream is spiritual. It is inside of you. It is maturing in God's garden. In His garden all things lie patiently in the soil of Christ, waiting for their season of birth. When it is time, God will call that dream into existence. We often say "I'm waiting on the Lord for my blessing" or "I'm waiting on God to show me my calling". How many times have we said "I'm waiting on the Lord to..." God is our Father, our Creator, He is our plan and He is our purpose. He gives us our hopes, dreams,

and desires. It is through Him that all things come together for His glory. It isn't us waiting on Him, but rather it is Him waiting on us. He gives us free will to decide whom we will serve. Who are we submitting to? Where does our help come from? Who do we place our trust in? Who does our faith rest in? Is God truly the center of our life or do we have an alternative master whenever He doesn't move according to our pace? Do we look to ourselves and snatch the apple from the tree or do we place our full confidence in Him alone? Growth is about reaching a level of maturity necessary to accomplish the plan that God has for your life. In track it is common for a runner to create a false start by taking off before the starting signal. The whistle blows and the runners have to reposition themselves. How many false starts have we had in life? God's timing is precise and accurate. We must be patient enough to wait for the signal. When He feels it is time, our dream will be birthed into action and we will begin live out our dream. From the moment I was born, I represented my family as an active member. As a child my behavior and attitude would be viewed as "the Edmunds son". When I became an adult, the Edmunds name was attached to

me as an individual representation of that name. As Christians, it doesn't matter where we are on the growth cycle; we are still associated with Jesus Christ.

All of us have an individual responsibility to reflect the image of God through our attitude and behavior. Each of us has a significant role in the Father's family. We are His children and He has a specific plan and purpose for our life. Be patient and allow God to grow you into the person that He needs you to become so that your dream will be fulfilled.

Throughout my Marine Corps experience, I was consistently being introduced to new challenges and opportunities. When I was a private, the majority of my enlistment consisted of learning about the history and traditions of the Corps. When I was promoted to private first class I had graduated from all of my schooling and was sent to my first active duty assignment. After I was promoted to lance corporal, I was well invested in the daily life and conduct of a Marine. The next level of promotion to follow would be corporal. This was the first position held by a Marine known as a non-commissioned officer rank. There were several things that a Marine must

complete before earning this rank. I was scared to death of becoming a corporal. I did not understand this level of leadership and responsibility. I had passed all the necessary tests, I had trained for a year preparing for the promotion; however, I never made it. My fear of the position kept me from advancing any further in rank. I had all the knowledge, experience, and physical ability. My scores were actually high enough to be a sergeant, but fear was my mountain and so; I remained a good Marine, but I was not the best Marine that I could have been. I actually held the position of a sergeant and occasionally even that of a platoon commander. I knew how to do all that was required of me, but I was afraid of shifting into position.

Often in life, we have completed all that is required of us to advance in the ranks of God. We as Christians have often attended church, pray, read our Bibles, and many are active in a ministry at church, but we are afraid of what God has called us to do. We are scared of the position. We do not feel adequately prepared, or we think that our limited resources will prevent us from accomplishing the dream that God has for us. If we refuse

to grow and mature, the dreams and plans that God has for our life may be interrupted, and we will not experience our full potential in Christ. Hebrews 13:20-21; *“Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”* Do not allow your past to keep you from stepping into the fulfillment of your future; repent of your sins, and allow God to shift your position so that you can mature and grow. In the next chapter, we will be reviewing the attitudes of a godly person. Our attitude is an essential element in our spiritual growth and a necessity for birthing the dreams that God has placed inside of us. In Ecclesiastes 1:18, Solomon claims that the very process of learning is an expansion of our awareness of our own ignorance. When we seek only wisdom there may be an increase of pain. In earlier verses Solomon is referencing that everything on earth is meaningless and without purpose, because it will all fade. It almost appears as though there is a

negative outlook on life's meaning and purpose. What he is actually saying is that life without God is meaningless. Without God life is lived in vain. Wisdom does create a growth of learning, however, It through Christ that our learning and actions produce substance and purpose. God provides meaning to our life. As we grow and advance through the rankings of life, it is only through Jesus that we will find meaning to life; it is only through Christ that we will discover all that He has called us to be, and it is only by the hand of God that births our dreams into action.

## CHAPTER 5 – ATTITUDE



Attitude is a state of mind. It also refers to the position of an object in relation to a plane surface. What is our position in relation to God? How are we thinking? Our thoughts should be centered on Christ. (Proverbs 16:3) Do we have an attitude of praise and worship? Do we have an attitude of victory and achievement? Is our attitude refreshing and pleasant? Do we have an attitude of excitement? Do we promote an atmosphere of peace and unity? Do we have an attitude of accomplishment and growth? Do we have an attitude of patience and joy? Do we have an attitude of sacrifice and obedience? Are all things concerning our attitude positioned towards God? Is our attitude positive? Do we have an attitude to follow Christ? What is our attitude of the moment? Are we providing hope and encouragement with our attitude? Do we have an attitude of interest and desire? Do we desire to seek the Lord? (Proverbs 28:5) What are we allowing to influence our attitude? What is

contaminating our thoughts or ideas? What has happened lately that has caused a change in behavior or attitude?

There isn't any secret formula for breeding a good attitude. Attitude is simply a choice. We decide how we are going to react or respond to life. Our attitude towards people, ideas, visions, hopes, dreams, plans, agendas, circumstance, events, media, content, and any other ingredient in life is all a matter of choice. We make the choice to pattern an attitude of Jesus. Psalm 119:30; *"I have chosen the way of truth."*

Our mood is sensitive, and often capricious. In the blink of an eye something can be said or done that greatly changes the mood of our attitude. Someone may have done something that offended you or maybe you overheard someone speaking negatively about you. In the same fashion, you might have heard someone praising you or maybe you received a gift unexpectedly. Our attitude is in balance with our emotions and feelings. It is an outward manifestation of our inward expression. The mood is the tone that you set in various situations. It is directly linked to our response. The tone in the atmosphere is often established by our attitude. Romans 12:9-21 shows us

how our attitude and behavior ought to be; *“Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil, Cling to what is good, Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves but rather give place to wrath, for it is written, Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

Have you ever been told that you need an attitude adjustment? What kind of impact does your attitude have at

work, home, or even at church? What kind of witness are you being with your attitude? Philippians 3:1-3; *“Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe. Beware of the dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! For we are the circumcision who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.”* Is our attitude centered on Christ or do we allow our flesh to determine the tone of our mood? When I play an instrument I listen to the sound it makes. Is it in tune? Does it have the right tone? Is the volume level too loud or too soft? There are many determining factors that create change in an instrument’s sound. If an instrument is dropped or kicked it may need to be tuned. If the volume has been tampered with or the knobs have been played with, the tone will change. Your instrument must be played properly in order for it to produce a good sound. No matter how much care you give to your instrument, it will always need some type of adjustment each time it is played. We are an instrument of God. Has life ever “dropped” you? Have you ever felt “kicked”? Has anyone pressed your buttons or tampered with

your tone, or messed with your “knobs”? Have you ever felt as if your volume was down? Have you ever been so frustrated with a situation that you raised your volume? Has your tone ever felt out of tune? If you are human, then you have answered yes to all of these questions. Life happens, but so does God.

Psalms 145:14; *“The Lord upholds all who fall and raises up all who are bowed down.”* What is your tone towards the hopes, plans, and dreams that God has for your life? We made need an attitude adjustment. Adjustments are a necessary part of life. As we constantly examine our attitude, we may need to make some modifications so that we can operate in tune with God. When I pick up an instrument to play it, it is necessary to tune it. With each new day we need to pull ourselves out, get a hold of God, and allow Him to do a spiritual sound check. Our attitude ought to be Christ-like. As God desires to birth your dream, He may need to make some adjustments before it can be perform. Our attitude towards God and the dreams that He has for our life should be venerable. We often become elated when God gives us a vision or idea; however, after a period of time those ideas become stale and often die. We become skeptical when we

have so many ideas and dreams that for whatever reason seem to be thwarted. Sometimes we even quit dreaming because of the chagrin in our life. We need an attitude of elicitation concerning the plans that God has for us. What failures have you been embarrassed about? When was the last time you were discouraged because your idea didn't produce a single breath? When was the last time you were excited about a dream? What dreams has God given you lately? Have you stopped dreaming? Do you feel as though something is preventing the plans of God from manifesting in your life? Are you hesitant about dreaming? God has big plans and dreams for your life. 1 Peter 1:1-8; *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in Heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trial, that the genuineness of your faith being*

*much more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor and glory at the revelations of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.”* Our salvation is planted in His mercy. He is compassionate towards us in spite of our sinful condition. God has given all believers a new life that enables us to live in His dimension.

He has given us a living hope that extends into all eternity. You are a significant part of His purpose. As we place our confidence in Him, He will guide us. When we fulfill the dreams that God has for us it will produce stature for His kingdom and glory. Romans 8:28, *“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”* “As children of God, we do not always know what to pray for or how best to pray, but we can know the purpose of God which the Holy Spirit desires to accomplish.” (Nelsons NKJV study Bible)

In July of 1995 I walked out of the Marine Corps Air Station in Kaneohe Bay, HI. I left behind the life of a marine. Four years of dedicated service was now complete. So what now? What shall I set out to tackle next? I had hopes of living an affluent lifestyle; I was dogmatic, but also exuberant about the new challenges and opportunities that were ahead of me. I was neither a procrastinator nor a time-waster. My long-term goal of living the wealthy and prosperous lifestyle would take hard-work, commitment, and time. I was not a materialistic person. I measured wealth and prosperity based on my fulfillment and contribution to God's kingdom. What was God's purpose for my life? What hopes and dreams did I have? If I could do anything, what would I do? I decided early in life to dedicate my life to Jesus. I wasn't clear on how to balance a career and ministry, so I developed an attitude of patience. Psalms 37:7 says "*Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him; Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, Because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass. Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; Do not fret – it only causes harm.*" I began my new adventures in retail management. Within a year I was promoted to the store

manager position. One morning I was preparing a list of things that needed to be done in the store, and a beautiful woman walked in. She moved to Tulsa from Cleveland to attend Bible College. She said she was interested in a part-time position. She was hired and shortly thereafter we fell in love. We married in March of 1998. My company moved me to Fayetteville AR. In the following year the company went out of business. We moved back to Tulsa, and I took a job at the Men's Wearhouse. I loved my job and I was good at it. I had a unique way of being candid, but amiable. I was funny and energetic. I contribute a lot of my understanding of people to my Men's Wearhouse experience. I learned how to relate to various personality types; I was knowledgeable in distinguishing between rational and emotional behavior, I learned how to ask the right questions rather than random ones. I applied what I learned about selling, to relationships and development. I was confident in my ability to relate to people. Our journey and travels landed us in Boardman, OH. We began attending Abundant Harvest Fellowship. Pastor Joann and Dr. Mike Pangio poured themselves into us. They ministered to us in several areas

concerning our character and judgment. Their ministry kept our dreams alive; our marriage is more valuable today because of their help. It is rich in substance and our walk with Jesus is stronger because of their commitment and interest in us. Like my Men's Wearhouse experience, I am currently having an Abundant Harvest experience. Through their ministry, I learned more about the call of God on my life. I learned how to truly love my wife and how to bleach out the stains in my character. Their ministry has helped form and shape my attitude towards the things of God. Through much prayer and counseling, Pastor Joann and Dr. Mike have helped Melisa and me to continue to focus on God's direction in our lives. This little church in Austintown, Ohio has the anointing of David and the strength of Sampson; I have conquered many giants in my life and they have become pillars that stand in our life. It is in Christ that I find my strength in comfort; it is in Him that I rest and it is through Him that enables me to have power and authority over the enemy.

God has given us spiritual parents who have invested so much into us. We remained in Boardman and are currently serving

under their leadership. Our pastor's have displayed a consistent attitude of compassion and interest towards our growth in God.

2Peter 1:5-11; *"But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is short sighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from old sins. Therefore brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."*

I am so thankful for all that God has blessed me with, and I know that as I maintain an attitude of trust, and wait patiently on Him, He will lead me. Psalm 31:3, *"For you are my rock and my fortress; Therefore, for Your name's sake, Lead me and guide me, for you are my strength."*

We need to consistently maintain an attitude of Christ, so that we can grow and develop as God leads us down the path that He has placed our feet

upon. My wife and I recently decided to leave our spiritual parents at Abundant Harvest, and we have now began a new season of change in our lives as God has directed to a new place. We have planted ourselves in a newly established church. “Rush” with Pastors Jim and Jill Barton. Rush is defined as to move with urgent haste. This newly developed church is in a rush to reach the lost for Christ. We need to embrace an attitude of “now”. Take advantage of the moment. Captivate each opportunity as it presents itself, and above all else, maintain a consistent attitude of Christ. Reflect on Him daily and be sensitive as God directs your path and season. For every action there is a reaction; for every attitude there is a response. Charles Swindoll wrote this about attitude:

*“The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of **ATTITUDE** on life. **ATTITUDE** to me is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than success, than what other people think, say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company...a church...a home. The remarkable thing is that we have a choice everyday regarding the **ATTITUDE** we will embrace for that day. We cannot change the fact that people will act a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play the one string we have. And that is our **ATTITUDE**...I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me, and 90% how I react.”* **Charles Swindoll**

We need to develop an attitude of importance. Imagine if the entire world walked in the fullness of their calling; if we all responded to the plan that God has for each of us individually. If we all placed our faith and complete confidence in Christ; Imagine what the world would be like if we considered all things concerning God important. What kind of systems would be in place? What level of truth and we operate in? What kind of shape would our economy be in? Imagine the atmosphere and the mood of society. Think about the ocean and all of its contents. Fish, sand, plants, etc. The ocean doesn't care what kind of boat floats in it or what kind of person swims in it; it remains open and available. Its salt doesn't lose its impact or flavor. The waves and the calmness do hesitate or wait, but in all of the oceans activity, it is only obedient to God. It remains consistent and available. Who is like the ocean? Does anyone remain constant other than God? Is our focus on the consistency of Christ or the unpredictable changes in life? What is important to us, and how do we respond to the work that God has called us to do? Imagine the most important person that you can think of in this world; maybe it's a movie star or a singer;

your favorite author or pastor. What effect would they have on you if they acknowledged you as an important part of their life? What if the person that you hold in the highest respect or admiration needed your help with something or they just came to visit you because they wanted to spend time with you; how important would you feel? How much more important is God than all of these people? How much more is God depending on you to help Him accomplish His plan? He has good thoughts about you. You are important. Psalms 40:1-8; *“I waited patiently for the Lord; And He inclined to me, And heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, Out of the miry clay, And set my feet upon a rock, And established my steps. He has put a new song in my mouth-Praise to Our God; Many will see it and fear, And will trust in the Lord. And does not respect the proud, nor such as turn aside to lies. Many, O Lord my God, are Your wonderful works Which You have done; And Your thoughts toward us Cannot be recounted to You in order; If I would declare and speak of them, They are more than can be numbered.”*

I have changed the names in this story to protect the identity of the individuals. One day Jim came to deliver the FedEx shipment. He had a partner with him today. My wife, Melisa, asked if his partner was in training; He said no, in fact he didn't even work for FedEx. Jim introduced him to Melisa. This is my brother, Paul. He took a day off from work to drive down and visit me. Melisa asked surprisingly, "Jim your brother came all the way down here to visit you and you put him to work?" He simply smiled and said "yeah." The following day Jim returned to work without his brother. He explained that his brother has always taken an active interest in his life. He loved his brother so much, and Paul has always been an important influence in his life, but Jim could not understand why or how his brother could love him so much. He explained that Paul called him the night before to say that he wanted to spend the day with Jim. Paul told him that he would meet him at Jims work. The next morning, Paul was so excited about seeing his brother, that he beat him to the FedEx hub. All that Paul wanted to do was take some time to spend with his brother. He didn't care about the condition or circumstance; he just wanted to meet with him.

This story touched my heart and my wife's. How much more important are we to God? How much more does God desire to fellowship with us? He will meet us right where we are, because we are important to Him and He loves us. Christ has chosen us. Ephesians 1:3; *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He **chose** us in Him before the foundation of the world."* 1 John 4:17-19; *"Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment, because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us."* Paul reached out to Jim in love, and he responded with an attitude of embracement. The love that his brother showed Jim first, had a direct impact on the love Jim had for Paul. God loved us first. How important is God to us? Do we value His love? Do we have an attitude of commitment and excellence towards the things of God? Attitude is about how we respond and react. It is influenced by perception and thought. If we desire to live out the plans that God has for us, we need to

develop an attitude of love for Christ Jesus. We need to tone our mood and tune our attitude so that we may walk in love and fulfill His purpose for His plan for our life.

## CHAPTER 6 – DISCIPLINE



The light came on at 4:30am. “Everyone up! Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go! Get out of your racks Marines! Be on the road for chow in five minutes! We have a full day leathernecks!” At 4:35am, we were standing in line at the mess hall. By 5am we were done eating and getting ready for our morning hike/run. We put on our packs, grabbed our weapons, and by 5:05am we headed out at a slow, easy pace to the training center 5 miles away. We arrived at the center at 6am. “Let’s move gentlemen, no time for rest, get some water and go! We have training to do! Drop those packs! I want them in military order! 4 columns with 3 rows! Let’s move Marines! Why are we taking our time? You are a United States Marine! What do you think that means? You will not give undisciplined meaning to my Corps! We are the best...so act like it!” Marines are the epitome of discipline. We

do not make mistakes. We do not grow weary in war. We have mastered the art of serving our country with altruism. We are willing to pay the price for freedom with our blood, guts, and glory. We will win the war. America will keep her freedom! She can rest at night knowing that we don't. We are disciplined in and out of season, and we never stop training. War doesn't wait for someone to catch his breath in the heat of battle; war is not concerned with how thirsty and hungry you are; war does not care if you are sleepy; war does not stop because you are too cold or too hot; war does not end because you are tired of fighting; the only thing that can stop a war is victory and defeat.

*“After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, (I thirst!) Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there, and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on hyssop, and put it to His mouth. So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, (It is finished!) And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.”* John 19:28-30. The cost of freedom was paid with the price of the cross. Jesus defeated sin and death and rose again on the third day. (John 20:11-17) Our victory is in Christ. 1 Corinthians

15:56-59; *“The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”* Discipline is the driving force behind your effort. Without it, nothing will ever be accomplished. It takes discipline to sacrifice your time for His purpose.

There is something significant about the early morning hours of a new day. Your mind is rested and your body is refreshed. It takes discipline to rise early. God isn't interested in the hour that you come to Him, but it just so happens that there is a peaceful relaxation that the early morning brings. The morning presents opportunity that you will not get at any other part of the day. In the morning all is still. You can meditate on the things of God; in the morning all is quiet there isn't any agenda. You control how the time is spent. There are no phone calls, demands, or pressures in the early hours of the morning. All are sleeping. All of those but the disciplined. The successful businessman rises early and lies down late. He or she

understands the value of time. I wake up every morning between 4:00 and 4:30 am. Life begins at 6:30am in my home so I have 2 hours of free time in the morning. If I sleep in I have wasted my “warm up” period. I need that time in the morning to pray, read the Bible, and write. I have my coffee, and I relax in what I am doing, because there isn’t any demand. I am free from life in those moments. Of course, the price of freedom in the morning is discipline, but the price is well worth it. If you are disciplined with your time it is amazing how the tone of your entire day changes. There is something about those “free time” moments in the morning that can influence your attitude for the day. David understood the importance of early morning discipline. Psalm 88:13; *“But you I have cried out, O Lord, And in the morning my prayer comes before You.”* Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 gives us a complete detail of the value of time. We need to become more disciplined in the way we manage our time, however, it is in His time that we fulfill the purpose for our lives.

When you hear the testimony of someone walking in the fullness of their calling, do you ever wonder where your ticket is to God’s plan for your life? Do you find yourself wondering when

you will be able to get on the odyssey ride to spiritual destiny? Do you wonder if the plans that God has for your life will ever manifest? I can remember listening to various radio interviews and listening to sermons about stepping out and unlocking your full potential in Christ. These great men and women of God were so zealous in their success. Some would recap the mountains they had to climb over in order to achieve their dreams. They would offer encouragement and hope to the weary. I would listen intently with a burning desire in my heart to augment my understanding of how to unlock the greatness inside of me. I was tired of waiting for my turn. As I pursued my dreams, I was wondering when God would extricate me from the financial challenges and obstacles that seemed to stand in the way of opportunity. The more I read my Bible and prayed, the more dejected I would become. I just wanted so bad to do what God had called me to do. I couldn't wrap my head around it. Why wasn't I playing out the song that God placed in my heart? Over time I began to become more disciplined in my staunchness to seek God. I began to wake up early in the morning to seek after the Lord. Psalm 63:1-5; "*O God, You are*

*my God; Early will I seek you; My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land Where there is no water. So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory. Because Your loving-kindness is better than life, My lips shall praise You. Thus I will bless You while I live; I will lift up my hands In Your name. My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips.”*

I became more focused and passionate about His plans. I began to keep a notebook by my side; I would write down any thought or idea that would come to me. Slowly the wheels began to turn. With each new day, I was drawing closer to Him; I was to one step closer to running in the field of dreams that God placed in my heart. I would pretend that I was already published, and Dr. James Dobson was interviewing me. I would answer questions about my success and philosophy in Christ. As I would answer the questions I would say something that I thought was pretty good, and I would write it down. On several occasions I would call my wife and say “honey do you have a pencil and paper, I need to you to write this thought down for

me; she would reply, are you being interviewed by Dr. Dobson again? “Yes.” I would tune in to every sermon or message on the radio that was relevant to a topic I was writing about. I would hang on to the words of Dr. David Jeremiah, Chip Ingram, and Chuck Swindoll. I would listen at church for any relevant phrase that I could reflect on. Have you ever bought a car and then noticed all the other cars on the road like yours? It was as if they were highlighted. It always seems as though it’s a freakish coincidence when you consistently pull up to a car that looks like yours. That is how I became with the ideas that God placed inside of me. I would focus on every word spoken from every available source; it was like noticing the cars. I was disciplined in my thoughts and actions. I would search for relevance and understanding. I would sleep and breathe the necessary course of action in order to live out the dream inside of me. I was careful, however, to never let what God placed inside of me become a god to me. We need to be willing to surrender our dreams back to Him, although I do like to dream about the dream. I would meditate on the gargantuan dreams that God impregnated me with. I was in awe about the fact that He loves

me and desired to do something big through me, in me, through Him. I could hardly wait until I could tell my story about the breakthroughs that God has brought about in me. I discovered that it isn't what is said or taught that matters, but rather how it is interpreted. Interpretation will cause reaction if the revelation of what is being said is caught. You can have all the preparation, development, focus, and even attitude that is required to accomplish God's call on your life, but if you lack the discipline to put birth your dreams into action then you will most likely feel as though you are standing in line, waiting for your turn. *“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”* 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Habits are something you do, because you are told to do it. A behavior is something you do, because you believe in it. When we were young children, we brushed our teeth, because mom and dad told us to; as we become adults we brush them, because we understand the value in doing so. The strength of your actions rests in the discipline of your habits and behaviors. For ten years my wife told me that I should write down the things that God has spoken to my heart. She encouraged me to keep a journal, but I never got into the habit of writing in one. I did not see the value of a journal. I didn't get it at first. Most of my life was spent living in the spontaneity of the moment, and I didn't care about reading something that I had already experienced. I now realize that the thoughts that God gives you are precious, and His thoughts towards you are good. Psalm 40:5; *Many, O Lord my God, are Your wonderful works Which You have done; And Your thoughts Toward us Cannot be recounted to You in order, If I would declare and speak of them, They are more than can be numbered,*" If God, the creator, knew that value of keeping a journal (a.k.a. the Bible) then there must be something to it. The recorded words of a mind are

priceless. Now that God has placed my feet on the path of publishing a book, I suddenly discovered a change in my behavior. I know understand the value or writing things down. I don't keep a formal journal, but I usually have a pen and paper nearby. It is challenging both physically and mentally to discipline yourself to form new habits. In boot camp, we always sat with our legs crossed. We stood in line for everything, and we shined our boots every night. We practiced breaking down our weapons and putting them back together again; we marched for hours until we executed every step with perfection. It wasn't until after I graduated from boot camp that I began to understand the disciplines that the drill instructors enforced in us. Our seating position was the way that we sat when we fired a weapon; we stood in line to practice the art of patience. I came up with my own conclusion about shining our boots. When we first got them, they were lightly coated with a semi glossy finish. They looked nice, but there was no depth to the shine. We stripped all of the polish off and began to reshine. Each new coat of polish gave the boots a longer lasting shine. You easily spot the difference between a new pair of boots and the ones

that had been worked with. When we discipline our thoughts and actions towards Christ, He will shine in us with depth and substance. *“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.”* Colossians 3:1-4. We don't always see the complete picture, but we can rest in knowing that the few pieces of the puzzle that we do have will fit perfectly in place for His glory and purpose.

## CHAPTER – 7 HEART BAKER



The recipe book lay opened to the cake section. I placed all of the ingredients on the kitchen counter by the sink. They were all lined up in an orderly fashion. I double checked the list to make sure that I wasn't missing anything. I am always cautious not to do anything without reading each line of instruction first. I want to execute each command precisely. I turned the oven on to preheat it, and then I heard Matthew, (a.k.a. Scooter) my 6 year old calling my name. "Dad, can you get me some green juice?" (Green juice is actually Hi-C fruit punch with green flavoring.) He was diagnosed with a mild case of autism. He is the most wonderful little 6 year old boy in the world; filled with cuteness. I poured some juice and went into the living room to give it him. As I went back into the kitchen to

check the oven, my daughter called from outside. “Dad! Can you make me and Mikal a snack?” Mirella is my 10 year old daughter who was diagnosed with ADD and Mikal is my 7 year old who was diagnosed with diabetes. Mirella is the most beautiful girl in the world, and she is in love with her daddy. I love my little girl. Mikal is the most incredible little 7 year old boy. Intelligent and full of cream filling. I called Mikal inside to check his blood sugar, and then sent him back out with the snacks. Now that everyone was satisfied, I went back to my baking. The oven was heated to the proper temperature, so I placed the batter in the oven. I set the timer and then attempted to clean up the kitchen. I turned on the water in the sink, placed the stopper in the drain, poured the dish soap in the water, and then the phone rang. It was Mason, my sixteen year old. “Dad, can you come pick me up from practice?” I turned off the water, checked the timer, gathered the children, drove over to retrieve my son, got home, got everyone situated, the timer went off, I removed the cake, and turned off the oven. I placed the dishes in the sink, and began to wash them just as Scooter called out “dad, can you clean the DVD?” I cleaned the disc, placed it in

the player, and all was quiet on the western front. I went back to doing the dishes. After the dishes, I put a load of laundry in the washer, and then vacuumed the downstairs. After I had finished cleaning, I checked the cake. It was ready to be frosted. With great care as to not tear the cake, I exercised delicate moments with the spatula; “it’s all in the wrist.” After the cake was completed, I served 4 slices to the children along with 4 small glasses of cold milk. In a matter of minutes the cake was devoured, leaving the children begging for more, and the milk, barely sipped.

“But be very careful to obey all the commands and the instructions that Moses gave to you. Love the Lord your God, walk in all His ways, obey His commands, hold firmly to Him, and serve Him with all your heart and all your soul.” Joshua 22:5. God has given us His “recipe book” for how to live our life for Him. All of the ingredients are listed in His word. Many times we go through the day without ever opening the cookbook of Christian living. We get caught up in our own agenda and the distractions of life pull us away from marinating in His sauce. I have made blueberry muffins for 20 years, but I still read the

instructions on the back of the package. I know that I could make them without looking at the directions, but I am concerned about the one thing that I might forget, but if I forgot it, I wouldn't know that I forgot it, and if I didn't know that I forgot it, I wouldn't know what was missing, and when I would taste the muffin, it may not taste right, and I wouldn't know why. I would have to eventually refer back to the instructions to see what I missed.

There are a lot of good muffins in the world, but many are missing something that is necessary in order to make them complete and taste properly. We can look and smell like Christ, but how do we taste? Are we applying the ingredients that He has supplied us with? Are we allowing God to preheat our ovens? Are we trying to put the frosting on before we have cooled? What is the condition of our heart? Are we baking in the oven of God? As our spiritual batter cooks at His temperature, and we rise and develop, God will take us out and frost us in His timing. Psalm 62:8; *"O my people, trust in Him at all times. Pour out your heart to Him, for God is our refuge."* When we bake in His oven, He will create a safe condition and He will shelter us from danger or trouble. My cake was sheltered while in the

oven. It was in an environment of perfect temperature, and time. As long as it remained without premature removal, it would bake to perfection. After the children each had a piece of cake, the remainder was placed on top of the stove, loosely covered with aluminum foil. A certain little 6 year old boy came into the kitchen, walked up to the cake, peeled the foil back and ran his fingers through the icing. I could tell by the mark that was left whose hand had been in it, but the evidence rested in the stains on his cheek. As we seek God concerning our hopes and dreams, do we run our fingers through the frosting of Christ? We need to develop an appetite that is healthy and complete. We cannot be made complete in Christ if we don't condition our hearts towards God. *"Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do His work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be*

*tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of His body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.”* Ephesians 4:11-16.

What is keeping you from achieving all that God has for you? Are you reading the instructions that He has written in His word? What ingredients are you missing from the recipe? Are you patiently waiting on God’s timer to go off? Are you resting in His oven?

In life, there are many things around us that cause distraction. My children were a distraction from my baking, but they are not a bad distraction. The demands in life are not necessarily bad; they simply pull you away from spending time with God. We have to go to work, attend school, be parents, attend seminars, meetings, school functions, etc. we have to sleep, eat, bathe, get dressed, drive, etc.- Life isn’t about

balance, it is about rhythm. We need to flow in the rhythm of time. We need to condition our hearts so that God is first. We may need to get up early in the morning, to get that quality time in before we rush around doing all that is needed to get done. We need to operate in the rhythm of Jesus. In music, there are many chord changes, but the timing is consistent. You can play in and out of various keys, but the rhythm doesn't change. As we react to life, we need to maintain a constant rhythm. Don't worry about an unexpected interruption or distraction that pops up; just flow in the rhythm. There is a rhythm to baking. You read, you mix, you pour, and you bake. The song never changes. Read, mix, pour, bake. No matter what you are baking, you have to read the instructions, mix the ingredients, pour them into the pan, and bake. There is a rhythm to God. Read His word, pray, praise Him and worship Him, thank Him, meditate on Him, live a life that reflects Him. Our reflection of Christ is tested in our reaction to life. How do you react to the situations in life? Where does your help come from? *Psalm 121;* *"I look up to the mountains- does my help come from there? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will*

*not let you stumble; the one who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Israel never slumbers or sleeps. The Lord himself watches over you! The Lord stands beside you as your protective shade. The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon at night. The Lord keeps you from all harm and watches over your life. The Lord keeps watch over you as you come and go, both now and forever.”* As we bake our hearts in His oven, He will cause us to rise, and we will be made perfect as we are made from His ingredients. He has mixed in our spiritual batter the desires and dreams for our lives.

Years ago I struggled in my walk with God. I had just finished reading my Bible and praying when all of the sudden, I was filled with lust. My mind began to race and entertain thoughts that I knew were perverted, and my spirit was shouting trying to get my hearts attention, but it was too late. I was drowning in the sea of sin. I knew the way to safety, but I couldn't shake the grip that lust had around my throat. I wrestled with my flesh and spirit; I saw the light of hope, but lust was blocking the way. I read all the books about spiritual victory and breakthroughs. I read about generational curses, and placing my complete faith

and trust in God; I went to counseling, but nothing seemed to work. My marriage was even unstable. What is going on? Is this the kind of man I desire to be? Is this the kind of husband I want to imitate? Is this the kind of fatherly example I want to set for my children? Why can't I break this? But I wasn't searching for truth; I was looking for that magic ingredient that would fix me without much effort on my part.

The stains of my sins seemed to leave a permanent residue on my heart. I had told God that I was sorry, and I truly was, however, I couldn't seem to break the lustful addiction. My inner thoughts and imagination were filled with sinful desires. On several occasions, Melisa found evidence that I had been looking at sinful material. The guilt rested heavily on my heart. The weight of condemnation seated itself in the center of my spirit. I was embarrassed and ashamed. The chagrin that I felt left me feeling empty and hopeless. As I contended against lust, my confidence was shattered. I remember listening to a sermon once, and the Pastor said, "In life there are many strikes, but by God's grace we always have one more swing." He encouraged men to keep swinging. That little bit of encouragement rang in

my soul. I had given up on hope. I didn't know what else to do except to keep swinging. I recalled the story of Babe Ruth. He struck out more times than any other baseball player, but he also hit more home runs than any other ball player; so I purposed in my heart to keep swinging. With each new day, I found myself hitting more times than striking out. The truth is that there isn't any secret ingredient to victorious living. It is strictly dependent upon our relationship with God. Each of us must be willing to activate the reserve status of our own heart through prayer and the reading of His Word. Prayer is our way of communicating with God, and His Word is His way of communicating with us. As our relationship begins to grow our hearts are stirred and we desire to do His will. It is up to each of us to renew the condition of our heart, through His strength, and it is through His son that we can enter into that relationship with God. It is through God that you find your help in troubled waters. Psalm 16:7-11; *"I will bless the Lord who guides me; even at night my heart instructs me. I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me. No wonder my heart is glad, and I rejoice. My body rests in safety. For you will not leave my soul among the dead*

*or allow your holy one to rot in the grave. You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever.”* As I began to experience the victory in my freedom from sin, I didn’t feel free. I knew that God had amazing plans for my life, and that He wanted to birth my dreams into existence, but something seemed to be preventing it from happening. I realized that I felt like a prisoner recently released from prison; or like a veteran who has nightmares of being called back to active service for war. I was always looking over my shoulder, waiting for the next defeat. I felt like a yoyo with a long string; the enemy would send me on a downward spiral until I hit the bottom; then he would slowly wind me back up and start the process all over again. My life seemed to be filled with nothing but mountains, deserts, and valleys. I was skeptical in my walk with Christ. I desperately wanted to live a life of freedom in Jesus, but I was focused on the fear of failure. Romans 2:15; *“They demonstrate that God’s law is written in their hearts, for their own conscience and thoughts either accuse them or tell them they are doing right, and this is the message I proclaim-that the day is coming when*

*God, through Christ Jesus, will judge everyone's secret life."* I realized that I wasn't exercising faith and trust; I needed to rest in the confidence of God, not in my own ability or effort; I needed to surrender my whole heart to Him. When you're baking a cake, you can have the entire ingredients laid out; you read the instructions, and even get out the pan, but that cake will never be made until you begin to mix the ingredients in the bowl. There is a stirring that takes place within the bowl as you blend everything together in order to prepare it to be poured into the pan. Before anything can be poured, it has to be mixed. It is up to you through Him, to blend God into your mix. You have to stir in His word, and obey His instructions, so that He can pour you into His bowl of salvation, and begin the baking process. I hated the sin that was in my life and I desperately wanted to be made clean. When I decided to place my complete trust in God, I repented of my sins, and began a new restored relationship with Christ. God created in me a clean heart, He renewed my spirit, and I began to apply the recipe that God instructed through His Word. Psalm 51:8-12; *"Oh, give me back my joy again; you have broken me-now let me rejoice. Don't keep*

*looking at my sins. Remove the stain of my guilt. Create in me a clean heart, O God, Renew a loyal spirit within me. Don't banish me from your presence, and don't take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of my salvation, and make me willing to obey you."* (n.l.t.)

What good is a cake if its contents have never been removed from the box? God has placed in all of the necessary ingredients to fulfill His plan, but it is up to us through Him to bake our heart in His oven. The enemy will throw a lot of curve balls and fast pitches, but as long as we place our faith in Jesus, we can have confidence in Him that we will have a perfect batting average. Through the power of the cross, Christ went to bat for us, and He struck out the devil. In Christ I stand, and in God I rest, and by His spirit I walk in the victory of righteousness and holiness; in Him, I have been baked to completion. Hebrews 13:20-21; *"Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen*

## CHAPTER 8 – FAITH



*“And so dear brothers and sisters, we can boldly enter heaven’s Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. By His death, Jesus opened a new and life-giving way through the curtain into the Most Holy Place. And since we have a great High Priest who rules over God’s house. Let us go right into the presence of God with sincere hearts fully trusting Him. For our guilty consciences have been sprinkled with Christ’s blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water. Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep His promise. Let us think of ways to motivate one another to act of love and good works, And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but*

*encourage one another especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.” Hebrews 10:19-25*

It was 11:30 pm on Dec.24, 1979. I was wide awake. The anticipation that Santa Claus was coming was more than I could bear. I was told by everyone that no child has ever seen him! My sister told me that if I tried to sneak down the hall to look at him he might leave. I laid in my bed contemplating rather or not I should try to sneak in on him. Suddenly something happened! I heard the sound of a drumbeat! Santa is here and he's playing the drums! I couldn't stand it any longer, I had to go see him. As I crept down the hall, to my surprise it wasn't Santa; it was my dad. As I stared in awe and disbelief my mind was racing with thoughts. First I thought that my mother lied to me about Santa Claus. I thought maybe Santa had already left and my dad was digging through the toys. Ideas surfaced that my dad can play the drums and Santa can play the drums thus, my dad is Santa. I had so many thoughts zipping around in my head; I couldn't sort them all out. None of this made any sense. Upon my discovery of the identity of Santa on that Christmas Eve in 1979, I had solved the mystery of Santa...I think.

As a child I was pretty truthful. I didn't want the burden of carrying around the weight that lies produced. Truth is a word that offers no excuse. It doesn't matter what you think or feel. It is what it is, black and white, right or wrong. As I learn to walk in truth, it is by faith that I imitate the Father of creation. My search for the identity of God rests in the blood of His son, Christ Jesus. In Him the truth will make me complete in understanding, and although I may not be able to solve all of the mysteries of God, I can rest in faith. My trust and confidence is in the Lord, and if I hear Him playing the drums in the middle of the night, I hope he identifies Himself quickly.

*“Before the way of faith in Christ was available to us, we were placed under guard by the law. We were kept in protective custody, so to speak, until the way of faith was revealed. Let me put it another way. The law was our guardian until Christ came; it protected us until we could be made right with God through faith. And now that the way of faith has come, we no longer need the law as our guardian. For you are all children of God*

*through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For we are all one in Christ Jesus. And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you."*

Galatians 3:23-29. When I was a child, I did what my parents told me to do. I didn't need an explanation. It didn't matter why; I trusted in the decisions that my parents made. I didn't worry about the why's and how's. My understanding of why they told me to do stuff was irrelevant. I believed that it was ok to ask questions, but not to question their authority or judgment. I respected my parents and their choices regardless of whether or not I agreed with them. Our faith in Christ is validated through our attitude towards His word. We need to place our complete trust and confidence in God. If we focus on the why's and how's concerning God's promises and commands; our faith will be hindered. As we pursue the things of God, He desires for us to ask questions, but He also wants us to have faith in Him for the answers. We cannot allow ourselves to get tripped up in the

understanding or explanations of Christ-like living. We just need to be patient and trusting; we need to rest in the absolute of our faith in Jesus. 1 Corinthians 16:13; *“Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong. And do everything with love.”* Faith is the active ingredient that produces movement, however without works, our faith is dormant. James 2:14-17; *“What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has not food or clothing, and you say, ‘Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well’-but then you don’t give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? So you see, faith by itself isn’t enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.”*

Melisa and I woke up one morning, we got dressed, dropped Mason off at school, and we dropped Mirella off at daycare. We went to the Phil-Brook Museum in Tulsa. It was filled with all kinds of paintings and sculptors. The atmosphere was quiet and respectful. My wife and I marveled at the different expressions of art. We looked at Indian culture, space, and

nature. We held hands and whispered little comments about the details about a particular painting or sculptor. Melisa bought me an art book from the gift shop down stairs. As we observed each painting, we noticed that all were different and unique; all of them were marked with the artist's signature. Some signed their names, and others simply initialed their work. Each painting was enclosed in its own unique and sturdy frame; the artists signature was usually somewhere towards the bottom corner. We did not see the artist, but we believed that he or she was in fact the painter or sculptor because of the signature. Faith is like a painting. God wraps His sturdy frame around us and signs His name upon our heart. He gives each of us a blank sheet of paper and a pencil. He allows us to draw our portrait, but he guides the movements. The pencil represents our ideas and dreams. Faith is the confidence that enables us to connect the dots that Christ has given us. When we have finished, it will create an image and then He will provide the ink and color. The ink represents permanence and the color stands for Christ. Jesus gives color and life to our painting. Each of us has a book. In it contains the chapters and contents of our life. God is

the author, but we are the writer. He has the idea that he births inside of us. It is our responsibility to rest in the trust and confidence of Christ. It is our faith in Christ that causes the writing to match the Author's dream. The paper is the evidence and the portrait is the thing that is hoped for; and through faith it will be painted into existence. Hebrews 11:1-3; *"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony. By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things that are visible."* Faith is the physical matter that is concerned about spiritual things. Faith validates the importance of our interest in Him, and the quality of His faithfulness is dependable and steady. His faithfulness illustrates the value He places on our significance to Him. Faith produces the qualities of essential meaning and is the bridge to cross over into reality or fact.

Faith is hard. It is the raw substance in which God operates. It remains constant and stable. Faith doesn't bend or shape itself to fit into a particular lifestyle. Faith demands endurance and strength. It requires complete trust without

skepticism. In order for us to capture a panoramic view of faith, we must continue to increase and grow in our confidence in it. When the storms of life hit, faith is there to offer hope. The cost of faith never goes on sale, and it is never on clearance; the price of faith is revealed through the believer's reaction during the moments of testing. Faith does not change the answers to the test, nor does it grade on a curve. Faith teaches the believer how to paint their portrait with the ink of Jesus. Faith does not bully or intimidate, it is gentle and delicate. It responds to the whisper of our heart, and it only takes the faith of a mustard seed, to move mountains in our lives. *"You don't have enough faith," Jesus told them. "I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, Move from here to there, and it would move. Nothing would be impossible."* Matthew 17:20.

In 1992 I found myself in the middle of the jungle in Okinawa Japan. It was a bitter morning. The air was damp and there was a cool mist blowing over us. The guidelines were outlined in the orientation brief. 12 teams of 4 men would compete in the obstacle course. Everyone was assigned

individual tasks, and each team had a corporate assignment. The goal was clear; upon completion of the course, we would be free to enjoy the weekend. If we failed, we would repeat the course. Our first obstacle was the rope bridge. It was suspended about 200 feet above the stream. There were only two ropes that stretched across to the other side.

We had to secure ourselves to the top rope using a “D” ring while shifting our feet in unison to minimize movement from the ropes. Once we finally crossed over, our next obstacle was the mud pit. It was 3 feet in depth and very thick. It was challenging enough just to get through it, but we also had to carry our heaviest man on a stretcher that we didn’t have; like everything else on this course, we had to improvise. I was intelligent enough to know that with each step, the mud would latch on to our boots, and suck us in to the pit, thus creating more effort on our part to get through it. I volunteered to carry all of the weapons so that the others could focus on carrying our man. “The weapons were only M16’s,” I thought.” Each one only weighs 8.16 pounds.” Of course when you add up 11 weapons that totals 89.76 pounds of extra weight, not to mention where I

was going to put them all. After everyone crossed over they looked back to notice that I had not been as successful. 6 men came back to help. Once we were across the second obstacle I volunteered to not come up with anymore bright ideas. After the mud pit, there was a short ½ mile walk to the underwater tunnel that rested in the cloudy swamp. We had to swim for about 1 minute through the germ infested tunnel that was submerged completely underwater. Upon completion of that exercise, we had just one final task. We had to conquer the 3 mile mud slide run back to base camp. It was a little slippery, but we eventually made it. Our team was the first one back. We celebrated the victory. The reward was about accomplishment. It didn't matter what we went through to complete the course, it didn't matter how many ridiculous M16 ideas that we came up with, or how muddy we were; the only thing that was recorded on our test was that we passed. *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the*

*champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting Him, He endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now He is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. Think of all the hostility He endured from sinful people, then you won't become weary and give up. After all, you have not yet given your lives in your struggle against sin."* Hebrews 12:1-4.

When life throws a 2- strand rope bridge your way or you find yourself swimming in the sea of cloudy water, God knows that it will be a struggle. When you find yourself sliding down the slippery mud hills of life, He knows that we are going to fall down from time to time, but if we stay the course, and press towards the prize, we can rest in the confidence that we will be victorious in Christ. I had many failures throughout the obstacle course, but we didn't give up. Marines never quit! We adapt and overcome any obstacle that presents itself. As we exercise our faith, we can rest in the trust that we have in God; that He will show us the way. The obstacles in our life will be overcome through the faith that we have in Jesus. As a father, I do not desire that my children would ever have to suffer or endure the fires of life. I know that I can't stop life from happening, and that

all of my children need to write their own chapters in life. I love them dearly and I am always available if they need me. My eye is always on them because my eye is always on Him. It breaks my heart to see my little boys and girl having to endure the pressures of school and having to adapt to their medical diagnosis, but each of them is secure in their love from daddy. They know that dad is somehow always protecting them. I would do anything for my children, but I cannot live their life for them. They have to stretch their little wings and fly out into the journey of life. It is necessary for them to go through some obstacles in life, so that they can learn how to develop their faith. As they begin to write their own story, the elements of Christ will always be available them, and I rest in the comfort of knowing that my God will not loosen His grip on my precious little ones. *“My child, don’t make light of the Lord’s discipline, and don’t give up when He corrects you. For the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes each one He accepts as His child. As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as His own Children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father? If God doesn’t discipline you*

*as He does all of His children, it means that you are illegitimate and re not really His children at all. Since we respected our earthly fathers who disciplined us, shouldn't we submit even more to the discipline of the Father of our spirits, and live forever? For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew ho, .But God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in His holiness. No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening – it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way. So take a new grip with your tired hands and strengthen your weak knees. Mark out a straight path for your feet so that those who are weak and lame will not fall but become strong.” Hebrews 12:5-12.*

As we walk down the path of faithfulness, our feet should be anchored with the weight of Christ. Like a tree that is planted, as we grow in faith and confidence in God, He will cause breakthroughs in our spiritual foundations. We will begin to see the manifestation of those things that God has placed inside of us. Our faith in Him will cause a cracking and breaking in the soil of resistance. As our framework is being built and the nails

have been secured, you will begin to live life according to the blueprints of the dreams and plans that God has for your life.

I woke up this morning at 4:15am. I had overslept. I had set aside some prayer and worship time from 4am to 4:30am. I hurried down the stairs to make a cup of morning tea. I grabbed a coffee mug from the cupboard, and filled it with water, and then I placed a tea bag in the cup; as I turned around to place the mug into the microwave, I noticed that the clock said 3:27am. I laughed to myself as I sat down on the floor in the den to pray. After a few moments in prayer I began to worship God. I felt His presence in the room. Of course as a writer, I began to write down my thoughts about the experience of worship. Our church has been fasting for 21 days for a breakthrough to happen. I started my prayer by giving God praise and thanking Him for all that He has done in my life. I felt a moving of the Holy Spirit. I could feel my faith rising. This was not an emotional experience, but pure spiritual. My lips began to overflow with an out pouring of tongues. I began to write down my feelings. I felt the enemy trying to invade my thoughts. I quickly rebuked the thoughts and pressed forward. The enemy will always try to

create doubt and confusion. He wants to disrupt what you are doing.

I could feel the heat of divine inspiration, as my pen seemed to race across the paper. As I was pressing forward I began to pray for healing for my sons and daughter. I felt the Holy Spirit whisper in my heart. All sorts of faith-based ideas seemed to dive off the cliff of my imagination into the river of spiritual currents. As our faith increases, we may do some things that appear to be radically stupid. You may even feel completely silly, but why not? Why not exercise your faith? Why not try something radical? How hungry are you for those dreams in your life? Are you starving for God? How big is your faith? Do you desire for your faith to grow? If you want God's dreams and plans to manifest in your life, then you have to seek Him with all of your heart. You have to have a determination and desire. You have to have an attitude of faith. You need to make yourself available. You have to draw near to Him. James 4:8:10 says *"Come close to God, and God will come close to you. (10) Humble yourself before the Lord, and He will lift you up in honor."* When we step out in faith, we walk through the doors

that God opens. As I continued in my prayer I felt the hand of God on cradling my head like a newborn child. Then He wrapped His strong arms around me and I became still. *“Be still, and know that I am God!”* Psalm 46:10. I began to weep. Then after the stillness of the moment, I began to speak in a holy language. The tongues that we speak breathe life into those things which have died in our spirits. Our holy language is also a faith language. “Then Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in other tongues and prophesied. Tongues are a physical confirmation of God’s presence. It also represents an experience of God’s power. The gift of tongues is purposed for personal growth and the gift of prophecy is designed for corporate growth. *“Let love be your highest goal! But you should also desire the special abilities the Spirit gives-especially the ability to prophesy. For if you have the ability to speak in tongues, you will be talking only to God, since people won’t be able to understand you. You will be speaking by the power of the Spirit, but it will all be mysterious. But one who speaks a word of prophecy strengthens other, encourages them, and comforts them. A person who speaks in tongues is*

*strengthened personally, but one who speaks a word of prophecy strengthens the entire church. I wish you could all speak in tongues, but even more I wish you could all prophesy. For prophecy is greater than speaking in tongues, unless someone interprets what you are saying so that the whole church will be strengthened.” 1 Corinthians 14:1-5.*

The entire morning experience was incredible. I had chartered into an unfamiliar territory. Through faith, I can rest in the confidence of knowing that in my determination to press forward towards God, He presses towards me. Our faith will cause a desperate hunger for more of Him. As we sacrifice our time and offerings to Him, He will fill our appetites with His anointing, and it is through Him that we flow in the rhythm of our calling.

*“Because of Christ and our faith in Him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God’s presence. (16) I pray that from His glorious, unlimited resources He will empower you with inner strength through His spirit. Then Christ will make His home in your hearts as you trust in Him. Your roots will grow down into God’s love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide,*

*how long, how high, and how deep His Love is. May you experience the love of Christ, through it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God". Ephesians 3:12; 16-19.*

## CHAPTER 9 – PRAYER AND FASTING



*“One day as these men were worshipping the Lord, and fasting, The Holy Spirit said, “dedicate Barnabas and Saul for the work which I have called them. So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them, and sent them on their way.”*

*Acts 13:2-3*

I went to the weight room with Aaron. We loaded mass amounts of weight onto the barbell. I positioned myself underneath the bar, took a deep breath and as I exhaled I pressed with all my might. The bar slowly began to lift and as I brought it down gently to my chest, I wasn't able to lift it back up. I called for Aaron to help me. Aaron tried to assist me, but he could not lift it either. I tipped the bar to the right and all of

the weight on the right side slid off the bar and made a loud roaring clank as it hit the floor. The momentum of the sudden weight reduction sent the bar ripping to the left side and all of that weight slid off and produced a duplicate roaring and clanking sound. I got up and looked at Aaron and just shook my head. How much did we have on there? We added up the weight and determined that I was attempting to bench- press 85lbs. Not a bad weight for a 5<sup>th</sup> grader, the only problem was I was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

Well, I needed to establish exactly how much weight I could bench- press, so after many adjustments I was down to about 45lbs...which happened to be the bar. Later that evening I was watching a television show called, "That's Incredible." It was a show about extraordinary people. I was weaker than a nine year old girl who had just bench- pressed 50lbs. I hung my head in shame and disbelief. I had the strength of a nine year old girl. I decided from that day forward to take an active interest in weight training. I joined a gym and began bench- pressing every day for the remainder of the year. I prayed that God would see my determination and bless me with strength. By the start of my

sophomore year I could bench- press 200lbs. I didn't gain any weight, but I did tone up. I was only 5'7" and I weighed a whopping 104 pounds. It was safe to say, however, that I was all muscle. As the years went by I gained an incredible amount of strength for my size, but I never really grew. Upon completion of the Marine Corps, I was benching well over 250lbs. I could run 10 miles in 58 minutes, and I could leg press as much weight as the machine would allow. I could jump almost 3ft off the ground and I felt stronger than a nine year old girl. I became very interested in muscle development and growth. When you lift weights there are several determining factors that will cause strength and growth. Your diet is the largest contributing factor; it will have the greatest influence on how you look. If you want to tone your body, you reduce the amount of weight you're lifting and increase the number of repetitions per set. If you want to add muscle mass then you need to decrease the number of repetitions and increase the weight. But no matter how strong you become, your body will not produce the results you want without the proper diet. Since I barely exceeded the 100 lb mark, diet was not in my vocabulary. I ate what I wanted to with

no limits . I was interested in two things; first, did it fill me up and second did it taste good? I'm convinced that if the forbidden fruit was a vegetable and had been a brussel sprout, Adam wouldn't have sinned. My diet consisted of fast food and junk food. I would slurp down a milkshake, wolf down a cheese burger, and go lift weights. No matter how many times a week I worked out, my body didn't grow or tone. I got stronger, but I did not see the physical manifestations. "Remember your leaders who taught you the Word of God. Think of all the good that has come from their lives, and follow the example of their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. So do not be attracted by strange, new ideas. Your strength comes from God's grace, not from rules about food, which don't help those who follow them." Hebrews 13:7-9. The leaders in this text refer to military, political, and religious leaders. One of the basic responsibilities of the leaders was to teach the Word of God to their communities. The people were instructed to follow their example of faith. Do you have any spiritual leaders in your life that have demonstrated faithful living? What is in their spiritual diet? Do you find yourself consuming more milk than meat? Do you find it

hard when you don't see the immediate results? Do you struggle with the strength and weaknesses of endurance? What dreams have gone from muscle to flab? What have you given up on? What are you desperately trying to accomplish? What dreams have died? Do you feel like you have been working out spiritually, but you are not getting the desired results? Maybe it's time to reexamine our diet.

In health class I was taught about the 4 basic food groups. Meats, Fruits and Vegetables; Dairy; Breads and Grains. Health class suggested eating a balanced diet every day in order to get all of the nutrients that we need. In today's culture there are all sorts of vitamins and supplements that assist us in maintaining a healthy diet. There aren't any vitamins and supplements to assist us in balancing our diet in God. If we want to grow spiritually, we must eat a complete meal. If we want to experience the fullness of God's plans for our lives, then we must accept the invitation to dine in His Word. In His written Word we learn about the character of Jesus. Through His examples we learn how to love and endure; we learn how to sacrifice and serve; He shows us how to submit and lead; He

demonstrated how to stay focused and consistent; He showed us how to walk in wisdom and exercise our faith; He also taught us the importance of accurately interpreting the scriptures and law. God's Word teaches the importance of applying the whole meal, not just portions of the gospel. The Bible is our instruction Manual for eating a complete meal, and maintaining balanced spiritual diet. As we try to extricate ourselves from the struggles in life, we may find that our circumstance isn't changing because we are weak from lack of nutrition. Ephesians 5:1-2; *"Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are His dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us, and offered Himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasuring aroma to God."* When we begin to walk in the fullness of God, we will see change in our spiritual appearance. When we exercise our faith we will get stronger, and as we bench press the barbell with the weights of love on one side and the weights of hope on the other, we can rest in the confidence that all things will come to pass concerning the blue prints that God has for our life. So what sort of exercise do we need? We need to squat in faith, curl hope and love, and run

on the treadmill of prayer and fasting. Our spiritual conditioning is perpetual. Through faith we can hope and love, and through prayer and fasting we can build our faith.

*“Through Christ you have come to trust in God. And you have placed your faith and hope in God because He raised Christ from the dead and gave Him great glory. You were cleansed from your sins when you obeyed the truth, so now you must show sincere love to each other as brothers and sisters. Love each other deeply with all your heart. For you have been born again, but not to a life that will quickly end. Your new life will last forever because it comes from the eternal, living word of God.” 1 Peter 1:21-24*

*“Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins you will be forgiven. Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a*

*righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. Elijah was human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for three and a half years! Then when he prayed again, the sky sent down rain and the earth began to yield its crops.” James 5:13-18*

What does it mean to press through? What are you desperately seeking after? What is it that your heart desires? What are you chasing? Do you sometimes feel like a dog that chases its tail? Do you find that most days are a struggle? Have you lost hope? Do you find it hard to believe that your circumstance will ever change? What is it that is going create such a dire stirring in your heart that will leave you chasing the footsteps of Christ; such a burning hunger to do what He has called you to do? What pressure are you facing that demands change? What weights do you need lifted off of you? What areas in your life do you feel powerless? Do you need the healing rain of Jesus? God has a plan for you! God has a vision for your life? So how do you corral God’s plan for your life? How do you get a hold of His vision? How do you activate victory in your walk and circumstance? These things will come to pass

through prayer and fasting. When you press something you cause movement. Pressing can cause movement into a position of connection with something by continuing to use physical force. To press means to move in a specific direction. When you press on an orange you apply pressure to it and eventually the weight of your body will cause juice to flow. When a paper press stamps the words onto the paper the pressure creates an indentation mark. A press card is something that a reporter carries with them. It is an official authorization card that will allow them to attend an event. I used manage a store one of the largest chains of men's formalwear. I sold approximately ½ million dollars in suits personally every year. After the alterations were done, I would press the suit to ensure all of the wrinkles were out and I made sure the creases were sharp and crisp. When we allow God to do some spiritual pressing, He will cause the wrinkles to fade. Power is the ability to cause change. Through prayer, we can increase our knowledge and understanding of the power that we have in Christ. Through Jesus, we have the power over the enemy. *"We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay*

*jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves. We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies.”* 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 4:7-10. God’s power in our life will give us the strength in any situation to continue pressing through. Prayer causes a release of His power to shower us in our broken condition. Prayer restores the broken clay, and heals the wounded soldier. Prayer is the request or petition. When we pray we shine light on our darkness. Through prayer our hearts may be known before God. Prayer is our spiritual press card in which we use to communicate to the Father. Fasting is when we actuate our faith as we wait patiently on the Lord.

Fasting produces a constant awareness of what we are seeking. It’s our spiritual reminder note. Through fasting, we grow hungrier for the things of God. The intensity of our starvation creates a deeper pressing. Through prayer and

fasting there is an application of spiritual pressure as God takes over and begins to mold us. As we continue to pray and fast, He will move. The key to unlocking the power that God has given us is to live as Jesus lived. When we read about the life that Christ lived on earth, we discover that He lived a life of perpetual pressing.

*“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. For forty days and forty nights He fasted and became very hungry.”* Matthew 4:1-2.

God had arranged this experience to demonstrate the character of Christ. Jesus was not led by His flesh, but by His spirit. It was through His prayers and fasting that He operated in strength given to Him by God. We can only imitate Jesus as we learn to be led by our spirit. It is by His spirit that is in us which is the influence of Christ. Under His influence we have the power to resist the enemy and walk down the path that God has chosen.

*“Then accompanied by the disciples, Jesus left the upstairs room and went as usual to the Mount of Olives. There He told them, ‘Pray that you will not give in to temptation.’ He walked away, about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed. Father*

*if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me, Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.’ Then an angel from heaven appeared and strengthened Him. He prayed more fervently, and He was in such agony of spirit, that His sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood. At last He stood up again and returned to His disciples, only to find them asleep, exhausted from grief. “Why are you sleeping?” He asked them. “Get up and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation.”*

Luke 22:39-46.

During this time, Jesus had felt all of His emotions of His humanity, to include fear and anxiety. The angel was sent to encourage Him. As we walk in His direction, there will be times that we may feel disquieted. God understands that no human being can have this level of commitment and faith, but through His son we can. As we accept the invitation of His divine influence to be pressed upon our heart, we can experience His great design for our life. There is a pressing that needs to be stirred up in you that drives you to seek His plans for your life. As you walk in faith, praying and fasting, God will give you strength and power to birth your dreams for His purpose.

This chapter is dedicated to George. The first time I heard him speak he ministered on resting and waiting on the Lord. I was encouraged by his willingness to be completely open and honest. As he exposed his own heart he encouraged many to respond to the truth of their condition. As I listened to him peel away at the reality of being human, He spoke with such sincerity and availability. If I were to define a man of integrity, I would think about George. So to my brother in the Lord, I say this to you. A man of integrity never allows his past to prevent him from accomplishing his future. Integrity isn't about always making the best decision, but rather how you react to the decisions that you make. God's thing for you is still His thing for you, He is just writing a new chapter. George, I would like to thank you for being such a faithful man in the Lord and being a man of encouragement.

*“Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart.” Colossians 4:2.”*

## CHAPTER 10 – THE ADVENTURE



At 9pm on a Tuesday, I was alone, searching for my last checkpoint. I saw the numbered box about 50 meters ahead. I put my map in my pocket and proceeded in the direction of my last checkpoint. I was confused, because according to my map I should head north for about another mile, but the box was only about 50 meters to the west. I was within 20 feet of the box when it happened; there was a cliff that went straight down about 200 feet. It extended for about a mile on either side. I had no choice but to turn back north and follow the advice of my map. I turned right, and headed north through the dense jungle of Okinawa. I could not see what was ahead, so I had to trust in my map. When I got within 1/8 of a mile, the jungle cleared and I

was now walking on easy soil. I saw a bridge that stretched over the cliff. I quickly moved towards the bridge and crossed over to the other side. I then headed south back towards the box. Even though I was only a total of about 2 miles away from the checkpoint, the terrain made it challenging to walk through. It was about 10:30pm when I made it to the last box only to discover that it was the wrong one! Now completely frustrated and exhausted, I sat down to rest. I was so angry, and anxious. All I wanted to do was finish this stupid exercise. My emotions began to stir up and I began to unwind my mind through creative verbal expression. I suddenly felt a nervous sense of urgency. I thought, "surely the others are already done, and are probably waiting on me." I reviewed my map; it was fine. I plotted my location on the map; it was accurate. I examined the course from my last point to here, and it checked out. I scratched my head and thought for a moment, and then it hit me; I was distracted when I saw the box initially. My focus had been on getting to that box. I never considered that it was the wrong one. I got back up, turned back north and headed back towards the bridge. I crossed over, and when I did, there was

another box about 25 meters to the east. I was relieved, but kicking myself for not doing what the map said to do. Psalm 78:1-8 encourages us to learn wisdom. *“O my people, listen to my instructions. Open your ears to what I am saying, for I will speak to you in a parable. I will teach you hidden lessons from our past – stories we have heard and known, stories our ancestors handed down to us. We will not hide these truths from our children; we will tell the next generation about the glorious deeds of the Lord. About His power and His mighty wonders. For He issued His laws to Jacob; He gave His instructions to Israel. He commanded our ancestors to teach them to our children. So the next generation might know them – even the children not yet born – and they in turn will teach their own children. So each generation should set its hope anew on God, not forgetting His glorious miracles and obeying His commands. They will not be like their ancestors – stubborn, rebellious, and unfaithful, refusing to give their hearts to God.”* Israel is recited in order for us to gain insight.” In Matthew 13:33-35, Jesus explained why He taught in parables. Jesus also used this illustration: *“The Kingdom of Heaven is like the yeast a woman*

*used in making bread. Even though she put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it permeated every part of the dough.”*

Jesus always used stories and illustrations like these when speaking to the crowds. In fact, He never spoke to them without using such parables. This fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophet: *“I will speak to you in parables I will explain things hidden since the creation of the world.”* God holds each generation responsible for their response. Our response should be faith and hope. God gave Ephraim a special blessing, but the people of Ephraim did not obey God’s promise. *“The warriors of Ephraim, though armed with bows, turned their backs in the day of battle. They did not keep God’s covenant and refused to live by His instructions. They forgot what He had done – the great wonders He has shown them, the miracles He did for their ancestors on the plain of Zoan in the land of Egypt.”* Psalm 78:9-12. Verses 9-25 the focus is on the nation of Israel and God’s power in leading them out of Egypt and how He was with them in the wilderness. The psalmist also writes about God’s abundance, which comes through the doors of Heaven. In verses 26-31 God used His power and met the desires of His

people, but they refused to respond with thankfulness or faith, so God brought His justice on them thus an entire generation died in the dessert. God's compassion for Israel caused it to remain in existence. When the nation began to experience the wrath of God's judgment they repented, but it was not sincere. *"When God began killing them, they finally sought Him. They repented and took God seriously. They remembered that God was their rock, that God Most High was their redeemer. But all they gave him was lip service; they lied to Him with their tongues. Their hearts were not loyal to Him. He did not destroy them all. Many times He held back His anger and did not unleash His fury! For He remembered that they were merely mortal, gone like a breath of wind that never returns."* Psalm 78:34-39. God is not interested in what you say, but where your heart is. He wants to take us on an adventure. The nation of Israel was on an adventure. God removed them from their situation as slaves and delivered them into freedom. As they were in the wilderness, all God wanted was for them to trust Him. He met all of their needs and kept them safe, but they still remained unfocused. They were concerned about what they

were feeling, rather than what God desired. When God gives you the ticket for the ride, do not be like the warriors of Ephraim and turn your back in battle, but remain faithful to Him.

*“But He led his own people like a flock of sheep, guiding them safely through the wilderness. He kept them safe so they were not afraid; but the sea covered their enemies. He brought them to the border of His holy land. To this land of hills he had won for them. He drove out the nations before them; He gave them their inheritance by lot. He settled the tribes of Israel into their homes.”* Psalm 78:53-54. God is love. He is patient and slow to anger. He poured out His wrath on the nation of Israel, because they continued to be disobedient and unwilling to change. This was necessary in order to remove those who are evil so that He can extend His kingdom. *“Trust in the Lord and do good. Then you will live safely in the land and prosper. Take delight in the Lord and He will give you your hearts desires. Commit everything you do to the Lord. Trust Him, and He will help you. He will make your innocence radiate like the dawn, and the justice of your cause will shine like the noonday sun. Be still in the presence of the Lord, and wait patiently for Him to act. Don’t*

*worry about evil people who prosper, or fret about their wicked schemes. Stop being angry! Turn from your rage! Do not lose your temper – it only leads to harm. For the wicked will be destroyed, but those who trust in the Lord will possess the land.”*

Psalm 37:3-9. God will establish His testimony through our reaction to the adventure He is taking us on. If we do not prepare our hearts for the season and allow our mind to be focused on our personal feelings and understanding, then we allow our reasoning to overtake us, we become an enemy of God. Our flesh will reveal our character. *“Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God’s laws, and it never will. That’s why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God. But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. (And remember that those that do not have*

*the Spirit of Christ living in them do not belong to Him at all) And Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God.” Romans 8:5-10. As God reveals your heart, the devil will prove what you’re focus is on. “So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts for you for your loyalty is divided between God and the world. Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up in honor.” James 4:7-10. Whatever your focus, is will be what you draw near to; and things which are close to you, will be the controlling influence in you. As the devil proves your focus, it will be established that you are either a friend of God or an enemy of Him. Your flesh will prove who you are friends with. God’s standard cannot be shaken or moved. He cannot be tempted or moved, but you can move His feelings. You can cause God to feel differently, like a father who is angry with his son, and then*

his son says I am sorry, and the father forgives him and feels love and joy for him, how much more does God feel for us? We can cause movement in Him, because of His love for us. God loves us so much that His anger and wrath poured out on Jesus Christ.

*“For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed His life, shedding His blood. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when He held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, for He was looking ahead and including them in what He would do in this present time. God did this to demonstrate His righteousness, for He, Himself is fair and just, and He declares sinners to be right in His sight when they believe in Jesus.”* Romans 3:25-26. If you want to experience all that God has for you than you have to be willing to do what He tells you to do. You cannot forget what He has put inside of you. Do not focus on your feelings, but instead, focus on what He is feeling. When the trials come to test your faith, do not turn back in the day of battle. Do not try to change His original plan. Do not waste time asking the same question, but instead, search

for answers and direction. Protect what God has spoken to you. Do not allow other to tell you that you can't do it. Keep your focus. God has the blue prints for your life already drawn out; he is simply waiting on you to gather the spiritual materials necessary to build the dream that He impregnated you with. Living out the plan that God has for your life will take a whole - hearted commitment. He paid the price, now it is up to you to travel the adventure that God has placed you on. In order to fully receive what God has for you, it is through your obedience that you will learn how to sacrifice that thing which He has given you. Without obedience your sacrifice is devalued. God honors your faithfulness, not your intentions. *"In the future, when you experience all these blessings and curses I have listed for you, and when you are living among the nations to which the Lord your God has exiled you, take to heart all these instructions. If at that time you and your children return to the Lord, you God, and if you obey with all your heart and all your soul, all the commands I have given you today, then the Lord you God will restore your fortunes, He will have mercy on you and gather you back from tall the nations where He has scattered you."*

Deuteronomy 30:1-3. Obedience is a prerequisite that is necessary to receive God's promises to the land He has chosen for you. If you want to walk in the land that He has set purposed for you to dwell in, then surrender your heart to Jesus, and obey His commands. *"Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from you selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?'"* Matthew 16:24-26. I want to end with one final conclusion. When God examines the depths of your imagination and journeys into the center of your heart, what will He discover about you? Are you a person who is so hungry to do what He wants, that you are willing to do whatever He has called you to do? Do not let that thing that has held you back distract you any longer from creating movement in the construction of His plan for your life.