



Life Lessons

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Dear Graduate,

Congratulations on your graduation! It is something to be proud of because it takes an awful lot of time and energy to get to that point. I remember it like it was just yesterday, the thrills of the achievement combined with the excitement and blurriness of the future.

I remember thinking that I was grounded like concrete in my faith, yet I was naïve to many of the trends and dangers being perpetuated in the church and various Christian ministries. Just being a nice guy and wanting to not make a big deal out of doctrinal differences for the sake of fellowship is a slippery slope. The attacks from the secular world are more straightforward. Either God created the world or we came from monkeys. Either drugs are healthy or they are harmful. These things are not too convoluted, but people make the Bible say all kinds of things. That gets very confusing. What is essential is to be able to not just define what you believe but to also be able to defend it. You won't always have all the answers, but you will always have the source of all the answers in God's Word. Don't become dependent upon anything or anyone no matter their status or pedigree, but be confident in Christ.

The best advice I can give you is to have a realistic view of the world, of people, of sin, and of the depraved heart. Satan is real, and life is far more of a warzone than it is fairytale. Be

ready to be attacked, be ready to wield the sword of the Spirit which is the Bible, and be ready to be a part of a very small minority that preaches an uncompromised gospel. People will disappoint you, and role models will fail you. But Jesus Christ never will. Draw near to Him and He will draw near to you, in the valleys and on the mountain peaks of life. He will protect you from both despair and pride, enabling you to glory in Him alone in whatever circumstance you find yourself. He delivers and provides for His own. Never forget that or give up hope because God is good.

I have written for you a summary of all the things that I wish I had known when I was your age. I had to learn them all the hard way. Perhaps this can give you a head start and also be an anchoring point when the fog of deception attempts to close in. Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. That is a command from God to us, and what I have written is my best effort at helping you as you seek His strength.

Life will fast move past Christian clichés and comfortable routines, and it is time to hold the Bible tightly, engage others with the gospel, and start making Satan flee. Expect God to fight for you and to do beyond what you could ask or imagine. Just stand firm in both innocence and confidence, for Jesus alone is more than enough.

Some people get blown about by every wind of doctrine, while others are anchored and firmly planted in the truth. I pray for your roots to grow deep, for you to drink of the

Living Water, and for you to bear abundant fruit. Life will start moving fast now, but it will be an adventure. Enjoy the process and make the most of each day.

Your brother in Christ,

Brent

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Summary Outline

Life Lessons On...

...God

The Bible and Jesus are not insufficient or incomplete (2 Corinthians 9:8, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Peter 1:3), and those who would have us believe otherwise work for the wrong team (John 10:10).

God always stands with arms wide open eager to forgive (Luke 15:20), and it is this kindness of His, proven once for all on the cross (Hebrews 7:27), that leads us to keep repenting (Romans 2:4).

God always opens doors at the proper time (1 Corinthians 16:9), and, when He closes doors, it is so that we don't miss what is kindest, wisest, and best (Psalm 139:5, Romans 8:28).

...The Gospel

There is no greater story and no more significant event than the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and its reality must never be taken lightly or be removed from the centrality of our purpose on this earth (2 Corinthians 11:3).

Truth without love and grace is not reflective of the gospel (John 1:14, Colossians 4:6), but neither is it loving to fail to speak the truth (2 Timothy 4:1-2).

The longer one pretends not to be a Christian or is at least silent about being one, the harder it is and the less believable it is to speak for Christ later (2 Corinthians 6:14, 17; James 4:4).

...Friends

Bad company does corrupt good morals (1 Corinthians 15:33), but even the darkest of the dark need to see the Light (Mark 2:16-17).

Do not follow after unbelievers who scoff and mock at Christ (Psalm 1:1), and beware of professing believers who come to doubt His goodness, His power, and His unwavering commitment to do exceedingly, abundantly, beyond all that we could ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

The only infallible Being is Jesus Himself (2 Corinthians 5:21), but finding others along the way who love Him deeply despite their imperfections is a great gift (Philippians 2:20).

...Self

Being naïve about truth and knowledge is dangerous (Hosea 4:6, Proverbs 9:10), but being innocent of sin and evil is wise and healthy (Matthew 10:16, Romans 16:19).

Fulfillment and ultimate satisfaction come only by the indwelling Christ (Psalm 16:11), and they are maintained and even increase as He conforms us to Himself (Romans 12:1-2, Psalm 17:15).

Hiding sin in one's heart is the fastest way to lose hope and to lose one's way (Psalm 32:3-4, Psalm 66:18), whereas God's will is clear and without confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33) for those who seek His wisdom without doubting (James 1:5-8).

...Being Different

Christlike love is a foreign concept to those who have not experienced the saving grace of God, but it is a distinguishing mark of the believer (John 13:34-35, 15:13).

More often than not, the crowds get it wrong (Matthew 7:13), just as they did with Jesus (John 6:66), but those who know the truth are willing to take the road less travelled (2 Timothy 1:15).

There is no real leadership without servanthood (Mark 9:35), there is no real success without humility (1 Peter 5:6), and there is no real prosperity without generosity (Matthew 10:8, 1 John 3:17).

...The Future

Finding a godly wife is a good thing (Proverbs 18:22), and, even though it is a task that may seem impossible for us,

such things are what God enjoys making possible (Luke 18:27).

Life can be a lot harder than we would expect (2 Corinthians 1:8), but God's mercies are new every morning because His faithfulness is great (Lamentations 3:22-23).

Whatever God calls us to do in this life, whether it is what we had expected or not, if we do it to His glory, we will have lived a full life (Colossians 3:17, 23).

...Perseverance

The soul will starve without feasting on the daily bread of God's Word (Deuteronomy 8:3) and the food of doing His will (John 4:34).

In study and in life, God wants us to be honest and persistent inquirers (2 Timothy 2:15), diligently searching out the truth (Matthew 7:7, Acts 17:11).

Eyes must be kept on the prize of heaven (Philippians 3:14) as we run to win by winning as many as we can to Christ (1 Corinthians 9:22-24).

Chapter 1: Life Lessons on God

1. The Bible and Jesus are not insufficient or incomplete, and those who would have us believe otherwise work for the wrong team.

Colossians 1:28 says, "We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ." Being complete in Christ means that we have all that we need in Christ for living a full and holy life. 2 Peter 1:3 says, "Seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence." Christ is always enough, and once He indwells our hearts, we don't need to keep looking for something more to satisfy us, to complete us, or to fulfill us. He is our all in all and our everything, and, when we approach life, relationships, career, and every other challenge from the perspective of completeness in Christ, we are in a position of real health, ultimate wealth, and eternal prosperity. 2 Corinthians 9:8 says, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed." *When God calls us to do something, He will supply us with all that we need and then some in order to be able to do it.* When we obey Him and delight in Him above all else, He will fill us and empower us for effective service and a life that

brings us and Him abundant joy. John 15:5 says, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing." We abide in Christ by loving Him and keeping His commands as a result of our love for Him and the inner work that He is doing in our hearts. Then, we are guaranteed a life that will bear abundant fruit to His glory.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." When God inspired His written Word and assured its safe transmission to us today, He did so without leaving anything out, and He did so without wasting His words. All of the Bible is inspired of God and profitable for our learning, for our training, and for our sanctifying so that we will be adequate, having all that we need to know in order to be able to live as God would have us. God has given us all that we need in His Word to grow in Him and to be used of Him. We are not dependent on the Bible plus some other worldly resource in order to be sanctified. True Christianity is never Christ plus something, for Christ plus nothing is everything. *Grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, and Scripture alone are the pillars of true Christian faith*, and it is only the evil one himself who seeks to add to those things by attempting to subtract from the fullness of Christ and the completeness of His Word.

John 10:10 says, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it

abundantly." If the devil wants to get a hold of us through deception, he must first get us to disbelieve, doubt, compromise, or be confused about Christ and His Word. Therefore, we must purpose to know it better than others, even those who would seek to be our teachers, so that no one, even the devil himself, can lead us astray by moving us away from the truth. Psalm 119:99 says, "I have more insight than all my teachers, For Your testimonies are my meditation." The best investment we can make is to expend ourselves in the humble study of God's Word by submitting to the sufficient work of Christ in our hearts.

2. God always stands with arms wide open in eagerness to forgive, and it is this kindness of His, proven once for all on the cross, that leads us to keep repenting.

Luke 15:20 says, speaking of the prodigal son in Christ's parable, "So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." Once we have received Christ as our Savior, we can be sure that Christ's desire to fellowship with us will never end (Galatians 4:6). He will always be ready to receive us with gracious arms wide open no matter what mistakes we have made because we wear the robe of righteousness found in Christ (Isaiah 61:10). He is our advocate and intercessor, and He is the reason we are part of God's family (Hebrews 7:25). Nothing can ever change that. Sometimes we will struggle and stumble, for all Christians have rough patches (James 3:2). But what is important is that we remember just how

much our Father loves us. He even gave up His Son for us to save us when we could not save ourselves (Romans 5:8). He adores His sons and daughters, and He does not treat them with conditional love or as a God ready to condemn His own. This is because Christ has borne His wrath upon the cross, and we are alive in Christ and seated in the heavenly places with Him (Ephesians 2:6). The Father will discipline us as children whom He loves so that we will grow in righteousness, and this is only further evidence of His grace and compassion, not of harshness, cruelty, vindictiveness, or distance (Hebrews 12:6, 10).

Our God is near to us, tender, gentle, and kind. Once we realize just how much our God is for us and how much He adores us as His own, we will begin to understand just how wasteful, useless, trivial, stupid, and illogical sinful behaviors are. Sin can never satisfy, but, at best, it brings a temporary, passing sensation of happiness that is soon begging for more to fill its renewed emptiness. Set in contrast to the joy of God, sin seems so futile, just as the prodigal son realized how much better he had it back at home rather than rolling around in the mud with the pigs. We can eat as the pigs eat, or we can eat as a son at our Father's table. It makes no sense to run from this reality, for it is kindness, kindness, and more kindness. Romans 2:4 says, "Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" *It is not a fear of God's wrath that leads us to love Him more and obey Him more fervently. Rather, it is a fuller*

understanding of the profound depth of His love and mercy for His own. Once we understand just how good God is to us, it makes us want to love Him more, obey Him more, and worship Him more. If we harbor any inclination of God being standoffish with us or waiting to see how we perform before deciding how kind He will be to us, we are setting ourselves up for spiritual failure, disappointment, and dissatisfaction. We belong at His table, but we must believe that He wants us there and that His love is more than enough.

3. God always opens doors at the proper time, and, when He closes doors, it is so that we don't miss what is kindest, wisest, and best.

Given that God is sovereign over all things, it is tempting at times to project things upon the character and nature of God that simply are not true. When a relationship fails or a job offer falls through, for example, it can be tempting to think that God is not kind. But God is always kind, and He always acts in kindness to us. The piece of the puzzle that we miss is that God sees the whole picture, while we only see a part. He knows if there is something better that He has in store for us, but we may have to be taken to a place where we don't want to go in order to find it. He knows if we are not ready for something, and He is righteous and wise and kind to keep us from doing something we would later regret. When God closes doors, it is never in cruelty or because He lacks the power or because we lack the faith to move God. *Faith is never about us moving God but about having enough faith to believe that God can move us. It is not about making God's*

will align with ours, but it is about conforming our desires and ambitions to His. Given that He is always right and that we are prone to error, no other way makes any sense. When God does open a door, we can be sure that it is of Him because it will be something only God could have done. 1 Corinthians 16:9 says, "For a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries." Paul was well aware that an opportunity had been given to Him by God and not by his craftiness or mere chance. He also knew that the devil would oppose the opportunity, which we would expect if we are doing what God wants. God opens doors and He closes doors, all with perfect wisdom and kind intention.

Some people hold to the false view that, if we are doing God's will, then no harm can befall us. The truth is that God does allow trials into our lives, and sometimes we will go through dark places. But our Protector is there with us. As Psalm 23:4 says, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." God may not take away the source of our fear, but He will make us able to obey and to be strong despite our fear. Knowing that He is with us makes all the difference. It is so easy to assume that God has abandoned us if things get difficult, but we must understand and recall to mind that He goes through the valleys with us. In addition, it is only His grace that enables us to proceed onward from the valleys and ascend to the mountaintops of spiritual victory. It is always about His work in and through

us to His glory, for we are one with Christ (Galatians 2:20). Our life is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3). This connectedness with God in our hearts is the ultimate expression of His kindness to us, and knowing that will help us trust Him when doors close and to praise Him when He opens doors.

Psalm 139:5 says, "You have enclosed me behind and before, And laid Your hand upon me." *The bottom line is that God is in total control, and He can and must be trusted.* He allows into our lives only what He believes is for our best, and He promises to cause all things to work for our good. Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." He will never stop working to sanctify us, even ordaining circumstances to accomplish exactly that. Satan can do nothing to us unless God permits it, and He will only permit it when He knows it is something that He will cause to work for our good in the end. A lifelong journey of open doors and closed doors will always point back to the goodness and mercy of God, and we would be wise to be those who are led by the Spirit (Romans 8:14) down the straight and narrow path (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Chapter 2: Life Lessons on the Gospel

1. There is no greater story and no more significant event than the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and its reality must never be taken lightly or be removed from the centrality of our purpose on this earth.

When Christ came to earth, He said that He came to bring a sword which would divide based upon those who would believe in Him and those who would not (Matthew 10:34). Yet it is also true that only the gospel has the power to truly unify and bring people together. This is why we must never compromise or water down the gospel message which was handed down to us by the apostles. Paul says in Galatians 1:9 that any who preach an altered gospel from the one that he preached is to be accursed. Paul's gospel was simple and straightforward: the Messiah, Who is Jesus, God in human flesh, was crucified for our sins, buried, and raised again from the grave, thus proving His Deity and power over sin and death (1 Corinthians 15:1-3). This is the message we must preach unwaveringly because it is only the gospel received by faith that can save souls. Though we were alienated from God and were deserving of His wrath because of our sin, God Himself sent a perfect sacrifice in His Son to bear the wrath that should have been ours and to open a doorway into heaven for those who respond to His love in faith as they

turn from their sin. It is a beautiful message of epic proportions and maximum significance. We must get it right.

The great commission is not a political movement or a social mandate. While it is good to work against social ills and to take moral stands politically, we can never forget that the only ultimate answer is Jesus and His gospel because only He can actually change hearts. Christ must remain first and foremost in all that we do and say (Colossians 1:18), not just in a religious or ceremonial sense but according to the truth of the gospel. Too often professing believers are content to modify the gospel to make it less offensive, or they choose to leave out the most controversial parts such as sin, hell, and repentance. The reality is that the devil would like nothing more than for us to deviate from the basic truths of the gospel and yet still think that we are conforming to it. He loves it when the deceived deceive others, but this is not what God desires. 2 Corinthians 11:3 says, "But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ." What tends to happen is that people seek to broaden the gospel because they don't like the doctrine of hell, or they let other ambitions usurp the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. The gospel must stand as it was given, and we must be willing to preach it in season and out regardless of what divisions it causes, knowing that it is the only hope for those who believe. If it wasn't true, we would be of all people the dumbest (1

Corinthians 15:19), but, since it is true, the dumbest thing is to ignore it, change it, or compromise it.

2. Truth without love and grace is not reflective of the gospel, but neither is it loving to fail to speak the truth.

John 1:14 says, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." If we want to imitate Christ, we need to seek to be full of grace and truth. *Being full of truth without compassion does not communicate the love of Christ.* The gospel is a loving message because it provides good news to a bad predicament. Our proclamation of truth should be motivated by our love for Christ, first and foremost, and by our love for others. Our love compels us to tell the truth of the gospel, but it also impacts how we tell it. With the humble and broken, even the worst of sinners, Christ was gentle and compassionate while still being honest and bold. It was only with the arrogant Pharisee types that He took a harsh, condemning tone. The Pharisees couldn't see their need for grace, and thus they stood condemned. The grace that Jesus needed to show them was to tell them about just how condemned they were. But those who were crushed in spirit and devastated by the effects of sin needed the grace of knowing that they could be forgiven, received, and accepted by God. Christ was moved with compassion for the masses, those like sheep with no shepherd. So, too, must we care about people, not viewing them as numbers to be added, but rather we should see them as individual lost souls who

desperately need to hear the good news. If there was but one lost sheep, Christ would go and find it. Our perspective and fervency for one lost soul should mirror His (Luke 15:4-7).

The most loving thing we can do is tell people the truth and give them the answer for eternal life, but it should be flavored with grace rather than condemnation or superiority. They stand condemned already, and it is our mission to save them through the message preached (John 3:17-18). Colossians 4:6 says, "Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person." A tender spirit allows people to open themselves up and say what they really think, thus opening the door to giving a response tailored to their individual needs. Those who just go through a presentation but who have no grace for the hearer tend to make people close up and shut down. We are not peddlers of a product or clever marketers but rather messengers of a life-changing hope through which we ourselves have been changed. As we identify with their condition as having been a sinner also, we lift up Christ and therefore the power of the message rather than the messenger. Gospel preachers who portray love and grace in their person and presentation all the while speaking the truth boldly are a rare breed, but it is those who follow in the footsteps of Christ.

3. The longer one pretends not to be a Christian or is at least silent about being one, the harder it is and the less believable it is to speak for Christ later.

Some glory in the fact that they have been able to succeed at being undercover Christians. Now there is a time to be shrewd as serpents and be able to identify the proper times and opportunities to speak out, but people around us should never be surprised to discover that we claim to know Christ. Our lifestyles should make it obvious, and how we treat them should be consistent with Christ. How can we ever be ashamed for having shared the gospel if we truly did it out of love and compassion even if it was out of season (2 Timothy 4:1-2)? People may not like hearing about the gospel from us as it is convicting and divisive, but they need to hear it whether they like it or not. We cannot judge whether we are being faithful to Christ based upon the response of the hearer; rather, our faithfulness is dependent upon whether or not we are faithful to preach. The fact is that the longer we are silent and the more we pass on opportunities to distinguish ourselves even in casual conversation as topics of church, religion, and morality come up, the harder it will be to speak up later. When we do, the less credibility we will have. Furthermore, it is very difficult to remain neutral, for if we do not take stands when the spirit tells us to take stands then it is only natural to begin to conform to the crowd. 2 Corinthians 6:14 says, "Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?" James 4:4 says, "You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." Never is it acceptable to be friends with the

evil ways of the world, and in trying to be friends with the unsaved, we must not fail to distinguish ourselves as saved. There must never be a question about who we are and where we stand, for it should be more than evident just how different light is from darkness.

Chapter 3: Life Lessons on Friends

1. Bad company does corrupt good morals, but even the darkest of the dark need to see the Light.

1 Corinthians 15:33 says, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company corrupts good morals.'" It is easy to be deceived into thinking that we are strong enough not to be swayed by the influence of evil people. Without even realizing how we are being influenced and changed by being around certain people who talk certain ways and portray certain attitudes, we start to copy them and learn their ways of behavior. This is why for Christians it is so important to be around those who live out their faith in authenticity and purity and why it matters to sit under teaching that is right. We have got to choose our friends and associates wisely because we will start to become like them the more we are around them.

Mark 2:16-17 says, "When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to His disciples, 'Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?' And hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'" This passage cannot and must not be used as a rationale for doing what evil people do and for participating in their evil deeds. By being a friend of sinners, Jesus didn't compromise Himself or put Himself in positions where He

could have been easily led astray or given His Father a bad name. What distinguished Christ's evangelism from those who just want an excuse to do sinful things and go to sinful places while using evangelism as a rationale is that Jesus made it clear that He was going to them as a doctor, so to speak, to cure their illness. He was not going to them as one of the gang but as a physician to a hospital filled with sick people. His mission was clear, His purpose stated, and His identity clearly revealed. If the unsaved didn't want to hear about truth and righteousness, then they wouldn't have kept hearing Him out. In other words, Jesus was not trying to get anything selfish out of His evangelism efforts, and He wasn't trying to conform or belong. Actually, He was setting Himself up as a target by unbelievers who hated Him, particularly the self-righteous religious leaders who hated sinners. We do the gospel no good if we don't love sinners enough to speak to them and be seen with them. However, we do Christ no good if we go to be with sinners to enjoy their sin and show them how "normal" we are and how much we are like them. Rather, we must be clear and obvious that we are going to them as a spiritual doctor to cure them of their eternal sickness of sin. There is nothing wrong with that kind of friendship with sinners, for preaching the gospel never corrupted anybody.

2. Do not follow after unbelievers who scoff and mock at Christ, and beware of professing believers who come to doubt His goodness, His power, and His unwavering

commitment to do exceedingly, abundantly, beyond all that we could ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

Psalm 1:1 says, "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!" Those who mock Christ, truth, eternal judgment, consequences for sin, and all that is good, right, and pure have a lot of followers. As Christians, we have no part with these, but rather we are to be firmly planted in the truth of loving God's Word and delighting in His ways. This is fairly obvious, but what is less obvious is that it can also be toxic to be around those who profess Christ and yet who flaunt the grace of God as license to sin. There are also those who profess Christ who do so simply because they are trying to make business contacts within the church or because they enjoy influencing other people. Others profess Christ and yet go to church only to make themselves feel good with preaching that is nothing more than a fleshly pep talk to try harder or to get God to give them more stuff. Others know the truth and yet have given up on God doing something amazing, powerful, wonderful, and even beyond what we could ask or imagine. They have settled in their walk with Christ in terms of what they will accept as what defines the church of Jesus Christ and as far as what constitutes faithful evangelism. They have lost sight of Ephesians 3:20 which says, "Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us." Some claim to seek after this verse by becoming miracle chasers and looking

for manifestations of the supernatural. They have forgotten that a life changed by the gospel and even a life that believes the gospel enough to preach it are themselves miracles of God. They have lost sight that the Bible is itself a miraculous revelation from God. God is at work in us and in the world around us today conforming people to His image and changing hearts and lives through the power of the shed blood of Christ. Nothing saps our joy more than being around those who name Christ and yet see no real life change and don't care that there is little to show for their faith. There should be a passion and an excitement for truth and for the gospel.

Those who have to come up with certain additives to make church and Christ more exciting only reveal that they have lost hope that the gospel's power is itself wonderful enough. We serve a God Who constantly overwhelms us with His goodness and His deliverance even if we only see it after the fact. But what counts is what we believe about Him in the present even if we can't seem to see His goodness in a certain moment. His power is unending, His wisdom is eternal, and His goodness is perfect. When we come before God and His Word in true humility to be shaped and changed, we start on a journey that is the wildest adventure possible. It is so far from normal and so far off the beaten path that it is difficult to sustain, but it is worth the effort and the cost.

3. The only infallible Being is Jesus Himself, but finding others along the way who love Him deeply despite their imperfections is a great gift.

2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Sometimes people will let us down and do wrong by us, but Christ will never fail us. Thus, He is our only ultimate failsafe. However, He gives us people in life who love Him dearly and who can be a great encouragement to us. Sure, they will make mistakes at times, but so will we. Yet our hope is that we all have a Savior who never makes mistakes and Who is ready and willing to forgive us when we do. It is this shared hope in Christ that can truly bind two spirits together on earth in deep fellowship. Paul says of Timothy in Philippians 2:20 says, "For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare." Paul had the opportunity to fellowship with other men of faith throughout his life, and he enjoyed their support as he went on various missionary journeys. Barnabas was known for his encouragement, and Silas sang praises with him while they were imprisoned together. Timothy was a kindred spirit of Paul's because he had full confidence that Timothy would care for the believers just as Paul would if he was there. He knew Timothy's heart, and he was confident that Timothy's genuine concern for his fellow Christians would be exactly what they needed.

Paul didn't have a naïve view of the world as though he was the only faithful person alive on the planet. He knew there were others, albeit a small minority of others, who shared a devoted faith in Christ, and these were a great encouragement to him throughout his life. They could support one another in prayer, they could partner together in ministry, and they could count on one another to do what they would have done if they themselves could be in two places at once. This kindred spirit is Christ in each of them motivating them to the same goals, same purposes, same ambitions, same desires, and same unity. As Philippians 2:1-2 says, "Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose." True unity and real kindred spirits are possible only because of the same Holy Spirit in the hearts of our brothers and sisters in Christ Who is very able to help us learn affection, show compassion, hold to sound doctrine, love, and focus on the same things that define our purpose on earth. Only Christ is perfect, but we can sure be encouraged by friends Who rejoice in Christ and who walk in His ways just as we also seek to do. A kindred spirit forms the basis of the deepest and most encouraging relationships this side of heaven.

Chapter 4: Life Lessons on Self

1. Being naïve about truth and knowledge is dangerous, but being innocent of sin and evil is wise and healthy.

Choosing to rebel against God is never a good thing, and it always has consequences because sin always creates harm. But Christians can also be harmed as they are led away and deceived by Satan as he exploits blind spots in their minds and hearts. Hosea 4:6a says, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." If we are naïve of the truth and of knowledge according to the Scripture, the devil can deceive our hearts and harm us according to our weak spots. Not being taught certain passages of the Bible can leave us open to being tricked into thinking that they say something that they don't actually say. We can be deceived into joining a cause that doesn't actually edify anybody. It is imperative that we know what we believe and why and how to defend it according to the Bible. People will try to take our money, our innocence, our time, our energy, and our purity because they see that we are not strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might because we don't really have a mature Biblical framework of knowledge. There needs to be a confidence and authority behind our thinking, our beliefs, our habits, our choices, and our desires. Hebrews 10:35 says, "Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward." Our confidence is not in the flesh, for if we boast in the flesh,

we have a major, glaring weakness called pride. Our confidence is not in our human intelligence or the size of our muscles or bank accounts, but our confidence is in the Lord because of our position in Christ and because of His sufficiency. He is our confidence, and we must not let anybody take that confidence away. We should not become more dependent on the words from any person's mouth rather than the words that proceed from the mouth of God. We are a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), and we have the right to boldly approach the throne of grace confidently for wisdom and help as we need it (Hebrews 4:16). God wants us to do that, and we must be bold and do it. *We need to get to the place where we don't need to have somebody tell us what we think or what we are supposed to believe or what our church stands for.* We need to own it, and the only way we can get to that point is to fervently and relentlessly figure out what we believe, why we believe it, and how to defend it against attacks from all sides. There must be an urgency, and it will come when we feel a dependency upon Christ that we never knew we had. Our increased sense of frailty and fallibility and insufficiency gets replaced with confidence, boldness, and certainty in His strength, infallibility, and sufficiency. We must determine what we actually think and believe, not because somebody told us to, but because it is what defines us.

Matthew 10:16 says, "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves." Being innocent of evil means that we don't have to

become acquainted with sin in order to know that it is bad. We should be willingly aloof when it comes to immorality, but we should also be shrewd as serpents knowing that ravenous wolves seek to devour us with false teaching, trickery, and deception. Shrewd means that we know the Bible and that we are confident enough in our understanding of it to discern truth from error and to know when we are being told that we need something that we don't really need. It is to be so in tune with wanting what God wants and having good, right desires that we won't dare let somebody or something get in the way of our chance at experiencing the good and gracious gifts of God in this life. Romans 16:19 says, "For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil." *We don't need to know all of the ins and outs of evil, but we do need to be experts in what is good.* When we enjoy the goodness of God and are confident in His goodness to us, why should we allow ourselves to be swayed?

2. Fulfillment and ultimate satisfaction come only by the indwelling Christ, and they are maintained and even increase as He conforms us to Himself.

Just as we don't need to add anything to the gospel for salvation or anything to Christ to be able to live in godliness, we don't need anything beyond Christ in order to be happy. Psalm 16:11 says, "You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever." Fullness of joy is found in deep

fellowship with Christ. Some seek to go beyond what they already have in Christ as if it is not enough, and they try other things like eastern meditation, mantras, more Christian service, more fasting, etc. The reality is that while Christian service is good and while fasting has its place and purpose, we cannot force faith to increase in our hearts. The indwelling presence of God must be enough, for faith is strengthened by resting upon the finished work of our faithful Savior. Psalm 17:15 says, "As for me, I shall behold Your face in righteousness; I will be satisfied with Your likeness when I awake." Our confidence can be in the fact that Christ will work ceaselessly to mold and shape our hearts and minds into His likeness. The more He makes us like Himself, the more we will be able to experience His joy because selfish desires will be pushed aside and any wasteful ambitions will be rejected. He purifies our desires so that we come to delight more fully in Him and to desire what He desires. This enables us to trust in Him totally, to not lean on our own understanding, to acknowledge Him by crediting Him for all that He does in our hearts and lives, and then to expect the result of Him directing our paths by giving us wisdom each and every day to make the most of the opportunities He gives us. Every day we can look forward to our eternity where there will be wonder after wonder to behold and pleasure after pleasure to enjoy. Too many think that God gives holiness while Satan gives pleasure. The reality is that holiness leads to pleasure because pleasure is found in Christ. In heaven, we will learn about all of His ways and wonders, and it will be incredible to behold. Even now,

He gives us glimpses and tastes of His goodness as we see how obedience opens doors to great joy and pleasure on the earth as we do things God's way and according to His design.

3. Hiding sin in one's heart is the fastest way to lose hope and to lose one's way, whereas God's will is clear and without confusion for those who seek His wisdom without doubting.

Though a Christian can never be un-adopted from God's family or have His relationship with God lost, it is possible to lose out on intimate fellowship with God due to sin. Whatever is not from faith is sin (Romans 14:23), so doubting God and His faithfulness and goodness amounts to the same thing. Rebelling from God will certainly make it seem that God is far away. Psalm 66:18 says, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, The Lord will not hear." Answered prayer is a privileged part of the abundant life in Christ, but it requires that we keep His commandments to us concerning our love for God and others (John 15:7). Sin also saps our spiritual energy and can even affect our physical and emotional health. Psalm 32:3-4 says, "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away Through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was drained away *as with the fever heat of summer.*"

A lack of faith that God is still working and that He still cares can be just as damaging as choosing to do something wrong or not doing something that we know we should do. It all affects our fellowship with God negatively, but thankfully it

can never affect the fact that we are part of His family. As His kindness moves us to repent and to believe, we can regain our hope, our way, and our ability to follow His will as He leads us. 1 Corinthians 14:33 says, "For God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints." God may allow us to remain in a state where we lack clarity on a decision for great lengths of time, but it doesn't mean that He is keeping His wisdom from us. Sometimes we just have to wait until the choice becomes clear. James 1:5-8 says, "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." We must ask expectantly from the Lord, having total confidence that He will give us the insight to make a decision when He knows we need to make it. Life in Christ is no simple formula, but it is a life of faith. Walking by faith rather than by sight is more difficult, at least until we finally come to believe that God has better eyesight than we do. When our minds try to find reasons to doubt, we must remember that God is our on side, and He never does anything to harm us or hurt us but only to help us and spiritually prosper us in the end (Jeremiah 29:11).

Chapter 5: Life Lessons on Being Different

1. Christlike love is a foreign concept to those who have not experienced the saving grace of God, but it is a distinguishing mark of the believer.

1 John 4:7-8 says, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love." This does not mean that everybody who does something moral or nice knows God's love and is born again of God. Even unbelievers know how to be nice to their friends, and even evil fathers give good gifts to their own children. Matthew 7:11 says, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" One can still be evil at heart and not have to be a mass murderer or psychopath. *If righteousness is evaluated based upon whether a person loves God with all of their heart, soul, mind, and strength and his neighbor as himself, then all people will clearly fall short. All people need a Savior.* If people have the ability and willingness to reject the need for redemption, they will never be able to show such grace to others because they will have never received it themselves. How can people understand love and have the ability to show true love until they understand and receive the ultimate example of love in Christ's sacrificial death on the

cross? As John 15:13 says, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." Christlike love requires sacrifice, and it has a cost. It is more than doing what is easy and giving only out of excess. It requires a crucifying of selfish agendas and ambitions, and it involves a willingness to care for somebody even when there is no possible selfish advantage in doing so.

John 13:34-35 says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Obviously, Christ believed that truly loving people was so radical and unusual that it would make Christians stand out. When we have been touched by Christ's grace and forgiveness and have received it for ourselves, then, and only then, can we be those who are able to freely give such love and grace to others. Until we freely receive the free gift of salvation, how can we possibly understand how to freely love and truly care for another human being? Matthew 10:8b says, "Freely you received, freely give." In the redeemed way of living and thinking, interpersonal relationships are not to be about selfish agendas or just barely getting along. In Christ, relationships can be so much more than that, empathizing, forgiving, being loyal, being true, and being honest. Where the Spirit is, there is freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17) because He has set us free from slavery to sin and to the advancement of self. We who are in Christ now seek out the welfare of others ahead of our own (Philippians 2:3-4). That certainly

requires a supernatural change from the inside out. Within the family of God, there is no need to perform in order to earn love or to be perfect in order to maintain love. The unconditional nature of Christlike love is something foreign to the world, which has no comprehension of grace. Only in Christ can we be truly accepted, fulfilled, and healed so that we can actually give and receive love from the depths of our souls. *This is why Christianity is so much more than just being nice; anybody can play that game. Love is so much grander, deeper, and profound, and the redeemed know that it is certainly worth living for and even worth dying for.*

2. More often than not, the crowds get it wrong, just as they did with Jesus, but those who know the truth are willing to take the road less travelled.

There is no question based upon the Scripture that most choose the wide road that leads to destruction, while few enter through the narrow gate of the gospel of Christ. Matthew 7:13 says, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it." The fact is that due to the fallen, sinful heart of man, his judgments are off, and mankind naturally gets it wrong about many things, including spiritual matters (Romans 1:22). Thinking that he is wise, he reveals by his actions and philosophies that he is foolish (1 Corinthians 1:20). This is why, even when confronted with Jesus, God in human flesh, right in their midst, humans still thought that His teaching was either too hard, too crazy, or too confusing. The crowds *en masse*

abandoned Jesus and stopped following Him. John 6:66 says, "As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore." This is a similar experience to what Paul faced in 2 Timothy 1:15, which says, "You are aware of the fact that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes." The truth is difficult to accept for the natural man, but it is still the truth nonetheless. Thus, by default, those who accept Jesus and keep His truth will be the vast minority. Most will take a different path in life, rejecting Christ and judging Him to be a liar or a lunatic rather than Lord of all. We must not take any rejection or alienation personally, but, as long as we are holding to the truth, we can recognize our persecution as a blessing and an honor (Matthew 5:10). It can actually encourage us because it shows us that God has counted us worthy to suffer for His name (Acts 5:41). It means that we have stayed on the right path and are going the right way. This is totally opposite of how one normally evaluates success, but using Jesus and Paul as examples, one would have to conclude that few disciples stay the course because few truly believe.

Crowds are subject to groupthink, fads, and trends and for falling victim to whatever the popular figures of the day say. If most people say something is true, few question what they are expected to think and believe. Yet those who have the Bible have a source of authority that trumps whatever the authorities of the world might decree or teach as fact. Thus the Bible is always a challenge to corrupt authority and any

attempts at controlling the masses. The Bible gives all people the chance at wisdom, freedom, and a basis for morality. When the crowds throw it aside as they did Jesus, we must continue on the narrow path since we have recognized the wisdom of the narrow gate already. It should never surprise us that there is not a lot of traffic going our way, but we cannot let that discourage us. The truth doesn't bow to peer pressure or political correctness, and Jesus will reward those who hold to the truth until the end.

3. There is no real leadership without servanthood, there is no real success without humility, and there is no real prosperity without generosity.

Most authorities on leadership define it as one's ability to move and influence people, particularly in a larger scale. Thus, the world's idea of leadership tends to correlate with moving up in the social ranks, making money, and getting media air time. But while influence in and of itself is not a bad thing, what is bad is thinking that it is the end game, particularly if the influence is bad. Mark 9:35 says, "Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, 'If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.'" Too many who aspire to leadership do so because it tends to attract attention, fame, and the respect of people. Jesus says we should not desire to be first among men as if being number one is a healthy ambition. We should not seek out the attention of the masses, but rather we should be content to do what we do faithfully, consistently, humbly, and without fanfare. In fact, it should greatly concern us if

people ever begin to praise us and glory in us rather than in God. If only celebrities spent more time at soup kitchens, hospitals, and orphanages, they probably wouldn't get so much attention. Those sort of places don't make people feel good, and servants don't usually get the spotlight. But if we want to be honored in heaven, we need to try to be the servant of all people, not seeking out the attention and approval of man but seeking only the approval of God Who should have our full attention. *If we want to truly lead, we do it by being a servant and by treating others as better than ourselves.* That brings glory to God because that is unusual and that requires a supernatural explanation that can only point back to Christ.

True success requires that we live lives marked by Christian character and perseverance, modeling the fruit of the Spirit as Christ works those things into our hearts by faith. We might be rich or poor, but we can be successful in God's eyes. We might be prominent or unknown, but if we have Christ in our hearts changing us from the inside out, we can experience spiritual success. Success is certainly not manmade righteousness or a summation of nice behaviors that we might hope would impress God. That attitude reeks of pride because it supposes man can be like God without the sacrificial blood of Christ. 1 Peter 5:6 says, "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time." Christ will reward us in heaven at His judgment seat for our faithfulness, but we will only get to that point if we are humble now. Humility is the

opposite of selfish ambition, for it is not about self but about surrendering to Christ and giving Him free reign and total control in our hearts to do whatever He asks of us no matter the cost. People who seek out money and power above all else will not care for this kind of approach because it values people and requires sacrifice. But we who have been given life in Christ and a promised inheritance in heaven need not store up treasures on earth. Rather we can be those who give generously as God gives to us, caring for the needs of others and being mindful that all that we have is from God. As 1 John 3:17 says, "But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" Generosity that goes unnoticed is God's desire for those who have the ability to help. Matthew 6:2-4 says, "So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." It is not about seeking a label of philanthropist or getting one's name etched in a wall somewhere. It is about God knowing and seeing and that being enough. Anything less forfeits eternal rewards.

Chapter 6: Life Lessons on the Future

1. Finding a godly wife is a good thing, and, even though it is a task that may seem impossible for us, such things are what God enjoys making possible.

Some young people don't worry about finding a spouse because they are alright with skipping the whole marriage idea. Others take marriage lightly because, if things don't work out, they consider divorce to be a normal, insignificant life event. The reality is that the marriage relationship is the deepest relationship we will ever have on earth. Because of Christ, we can be united in mind, body, and spirit with our spouse. Thus, the ultimate oneness that marriage can provide requires unity of faith and belief in Christ and in His Word. This kind of marriage is a very good thing, and it pleases God. Proverbs 18:22 says, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing And obtains favor from the LORD." But it is not easy to find a person who believes the Bible is actually true, relevant, and binding. But God is bigger than our inabilities. Luke 18:27 says, "But He said, 'The things that are impossible with people are possible with God.'" Just because somebody goes to church is not enough to know that there is true fellowship, oneness of mind, and a shared purpose. It may seem discouraging to labor to find the right person, but, God is faithful to lead us to the proper person at the proper time if He has indeed given us that desire. We just must not settle for less than God's best. We must not compromise our

doctrine, and we must not change who we are in order to make a relationship work, unless, of course, the change is positive. A godly spouse is truly a good and perfect gift from above (James 1:17), and it is to be a lifelong bond and friendship. If we do this incorrectly, it will cause us countless miseries, but if we do it right by God's grace and by faith, it will bring us countless mercies.

2. Life can be a lot harder than we would expect, but God's mercies are new every morning because His faithfulness is great.

Paul was no stranger to suffering. He says in 2 Corinthians 1:8, "For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life." Each of us will encounter our own various trials, pains, and suffering in this life, some more than others. Some will push us as they did Paul beyond our strength such that we might even despair of life itself. By God's design and gentle providence, He does allow circumstances into our lives that push us beyond our own strength and force us to depend upon the strength that He alone can provide (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). He will never allow Satan to tempt us beyond what we are able by His grace to resist (1 Corinthians 10:13), but, when it comes to trials, we may need to be humbled and broken so that we see our own inability, weakness, and deficiencies apart from Christ's total completeness and sufficiency. When we see that all that we have left to hope in is the miraculous strength of Christ, we

will see that it is precisely all that we need. This is character growth, and it brings with it great hope (Romans 5:3-5).

Jeremiah was also no stranger to suffering. Lamentations 3:22-23 says, "The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness." Jeremiah was called to speak the very words of God to His chosen nation of Israel, but they refused to listen to him and treated him poorly. He endured many unpleasant circumstances, and he didn't get to see much fruit from his labor. Christian service, ministry, and doing the right things for Christ's sake often go unnoticed, without applause, and, to our eyes, in many cases unsuccessfully. Jeremiah can relate, and it wasn't fun. But what he knew and what sustained him was the truth that God is merciful, kind, and gracious, offering up new mercies every morning, new examples of His unfailing faithfulness. Our God is compassionate, He suffers when we suffer, and He feels our pain. His presence, given that He is the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3-4), is comfort in and of itself in any and all circumstances. Nothing can take Jesus away from us or make Him stop loving His own. There is extreme security there, for He is faithful to His own even when we struggle to find faith (2 Timothy 2:13). It may be easy like Job to lose hope after wave upon wave of suffering crashes into our lives, but God is always there, waiting to teach us something and performing a healing, sanctifying surgery on our hearts. His mercy will always be clear in the end as it was for Job, and we will always be able to say later that goodness

and mercy have followed us all of the days of our lives (Psalm 23:6). The challenge is believing it and acting in light of it in the peak of our despair. Being sure of God's love and mercy is what will get us through the dark times of life, and it is what will keep us humble when things are going well.

3. Whatever God calls us to do in this life, whether it is what we had expected or not, if we do it to His glory, we will have lived a full life.

Colossians 3:17, 23 says, "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men." When we are young, we have ideas of what we want to do when we grow up. For some, those things pan out, but for others, we may end up doing things we had never expected, perhaps even things that we don't really want to do or even enjoy doing. We can either become jealous of what others have and embittered at God, or we can do as Joseph did by honoring God as a slave in Egypt and watching God honor and bless his faithfulness as He raised him up as a testimony to His name. There is always great purpose in doing anything that God has called us to do as long as we do it unto His name and for His glory, not trying to make somebody like us and not even trying to make Him like us. He already loves us and adores us as His own, and what He does in and through us here is our pleasant service to Him. We can do whatever we do with all of our hearts, with passion, diligence, and fervor, if we are doing it for God rather than for people. This means that we

do our best and maintain the highest standards rather than what is just enough to get the approval of man. It means that we actually remember and believe that we can honor and worship God by changing diapers or serving hamburgers just as much as we can leading a worldwide mission if we are where God has ordained us to be. *In whatever we do and in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, if we do it for the Lord and with hearts that are thankful to Him, we can have joy and eternal rewards for our labor.* Fruit is not just conversions and discipling others, but it is also character qualities (Galatians 5:22-23). Thus, seeing God continue to change our hearts even in less than desirable circumstances is reaffirming evidence that He still loves us and has a plan for us.

People may judge us or ridicule us based upon the job that we have, but in Christ our identity is not tied up in what we do but in how we do it. As believers, our career or present job does not define who we are, but it may well reveal who we are. However, if we are faithful in the little things, it only makes sense that God will open doors for us to be used in ways that maximize the gifting which He has given us. But our character must be refined first as we learn to give thanks in all things, in all jobs, and in whatever we do. But even if we end up staying in a place where we think we don't belong, we must recognize God's providential hand and seek out His purpose there. The command is to do what we do to God's glory and with thanksgiving, and it is not contingent upon doing certain things versus other things. The command

is that we do whatever we do with all of our hearts as worship to God. Perhaps the harder the challenge and more frustrating the circumstance, the greater our praise can be because the more faith it will require. God is good, and He will use us to bear abundant fruit according to His gifting of us at the proper time and in His perfect way. Of that we can be sure. It just might not look like how we always envisioned it would.

Chapter 7: Life Lessons on Perseverance

1. The soul will starve without feasting on the daily bread of God's Word and the food of doing His will.

Deuteronomy 8:3 says, "He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD." *The fact is simply that without taking in God's Word and meditating on it, we will get weakened and famished spiritually.* Bread feeds the stomach and brings energy and strength to the body, but it is the Bible that energizes the soul, that teaches us which way to go, and that equips us with strength for whatever the journey ahead of us entails. If we lose our attentiveness to the Word of God, we will soon lose our way and start wandering and wasting our lives instead of being wise stewards of our time and energy (Ephesians 5:15-16). The Bible allows us to be able to look around us and see everything through the grid of truth and according to the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). It allows us to make sense of our existence and to explain things and actually know how to help people and fix things. It gives us a right perspective, valuing eternal things so highly that it impacts our daily decision-making on earth. There is no wisdom in the world, no matter how many degrees one has

and how many papers one has written. The Bible gives wisdom, for in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3). As we approach the world with Christ in our hearts and with the Bible as our guide, others will think we are stupid and foolish for the decisions that we make and the paths that we take. But we will have the assurance that what we are doing is right, true, and God-honoring, even if the world fails to recognize it.

John 4:34 says, "Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.'" The body gets hungry and tired after doing hard work, but *spiritually we actually get fed and strengthened as we do God's will and work*. We should be hungry and thirsty for righteousness and for the great commission (Matthew 5:6). As we see God use us and open doors for us, it encourages us and motivates us toward further good works. Being around other true, Bible-believing Christians is a stimulant for kingdom service (Hebrews 10:24-25). If we cut ourselves off from doing what we know God wants us to do and from hearing from Him by reading what He has said to us in His Word, we will be famished of heart and soul. God has created us and designed us with good works to do from even before we were conceived. Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." As we fulfill God's design for our lives and continue in His Word, we will be filled to the point of satisfaction in our inner man.

2. In study and in life, God wants us to be honest and persistent inquirers, diligently searching out the truth.

2 Timothy 2:15 says, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth." It is one thing to be familiar with the Bible or to have a lot of Bible knowledge, and it is another thing to be able to accurately teach and dissect the contents of Scripture. It is one thing to be a theological scholar, and it is another thing to be able to wisely interpret and apply the Word of God. It is one thing to be a master of Bible trivia, and it is another to recognize the value of even the most unfamiliar passages. False teaching or teaching that is incomplete and therefore misleading is something that we should be ashamed of because it is not evidence of rightly handling the truth. We must properly and rightly open up the Bible and interpret and apply it to our lives accurately. Many people use a verse taken from here or there to fit a position that they had already established as "fact." The humble Bible student will make the Bible itself his starting point and axiom, and every conclusion will be deduced from there. The more times we read through the Bible, the easier it will be to see when people take things out of context or misapply certain passages by neglecting other relevant passages. The great commission involves teaching everything that Christ commanded (Matthew 28:19-20), and we are told to be mature in Christ as we journey through the full counsel of God (Ephesians 4:14-15). This takes hard work and labor, but there is nothing more valuable and more

worthwhile in terms of time spent than reading through the Bible. It is good to take a little bit here and a little bit there, but there is also a time to be a workman and take the whole thing in one big bite. This is really important for being able to see the big picture, and it is much easier to go from the big picture to the small and difficult pieces of the puzzle than from the inside of the puzzle out.

Matthew 7:7 says, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." In sanctification, as in salvation, we are to seek out the truth concerning Christ. Our lives in Christ on this earth will involve continued growth and learning until the day we die. We will be prone to forget, to relapse, and to lose track of the main things unless we are in the Word and seeking and hoping to learn more. We should beware when we get to a point where we think we have it all figured out, and we should beware when we sit under teaching that makes us feel complacent rather than that which motivates us to keep digging. The Bible has something to say concerning all aspects of life if we are willing to search it out. There is no field where God's wisdom doesn't influence behavior, strategy, and ethical guidelines. In fact, the challenges we encounter should make us want to go back to the Bible with an eye for something that we might not have been looking for before. God's Word will never run out of thrills to give us as God teaches us new and wonderful things which we hadn't yet known.

Acts 17:11 says, “Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.” The Bible is the final authority, and God is the only One Who has never made a mistake. Thus, we must always eagerly take in truth given to us, but, at the same time, we must always filter out any impurities, fallacies, or incompleteness by way of searching out the Scriptures. The Bible is how we know the real from the fake, the valuable from the worthless, the wise from the fool, right from wrong, and truth from error. Life is much easier when there is a roadmap (Psalm 119:105), and we would be wise to become well-acquainted with it.

3. Eyes must be kept on the prize of heaven as we run to win by winning as many as we can to Christ.

Philippians 3:14 says, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Paul knew that he wasn’t perfect, but by faith he wanted to keep working out his salvation in fear and trembling, knowing that God would have no problem molding a humble, pliable vessel into His image over time (Philippians 2:12-13). He valued eternity, the weight of the coming glory (2 Corinthians 4:17), and the importance of heaven and eternal rewards (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). There were many things on earth clamoring for his attention to distract, delay, or discourage him, but he purposed to keep his eye on the prize so that he could run to win. 1 Corinthians 9:22-24 says, “To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all

things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it. Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win." It makes no sense to be in a race and then not run toward the finish line or to be a boxer and throw punches at the air. To hit the ball out of the park takes practice, discipline, and focus, keeping one's eye on the ball. Christians must remember the main things in order to run the race to win. Getting to heaven is a guarantee with Christ in our hearts, and one day meeting Him in the air is a blessed hope. But we should also want to bring a return on His investment, for we should have fruit to show for our labors. This will happen if we regularly assess the state of our hearts, if we forgive when others sin against us, if we ask for forgiveness when we sin against others, and if we don't cower away in fear. Bold witnesses for Christ usually will be viewed as radical, but that is a compliment for the true Christian. Jesus' words got Him killed, so we should expect resistance and persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). But this cannot stop us from testifying to what we know is true and to what we know others need to hear. They can either pay for their sins themselves in hell, or they can let Jesus pay for their sins for them. The good news of the gospel is just as relevant and needed today as it was in the past, and it is just as applicable and necessary as it will be until Jesus returns. *The gospel is the main message, our main purpose, our main hope, and our main vision.* The prize of heaven awaits every believer, but

running to win means trying to get as many as possible to join us there.

