

STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY

“BE STRONG...THAT YOU MAY BE SUCCESSFUL WHEREVER YOU GO.”

—Joshua 1:6–7

Kids have a wonderful way of colorfully depicting the realities of life. I remember the day that our little Matt came running in from the backyard, flopped breathless and exhausted on the couch, and exclaimed, “I’ve lost all my power!”

We’ve all felt that way spiritually. Many times the journey feels long and is fraught with bumps and turns, steep climbs and valleys. We weary of that same old temptation that keeps battering our will. Insecurities drain our souls of courage and confidence. And unsuspected surprises in relationships, finances, and health threaten to exhaust our will to win.

But for determined followers of Jesus, there is an always-available source of strength and renewal. Tapping into it empowers us to keep Jesus first, where He belongs and blesses. When we live in the safety of His strength things like money, relationships, dreams, and desires submit more readily to His perfect will. And gladly; fear, anxiety, and doubt are rendered weak by the courage and peace that only the strong enjoy.

Strength for the journey is drawn from a daily connection to the fullness of God. His presence and power are available for every moment of our day as He waits to meet us with the strength that we need. Actively casting all your care on Him and checking for wisdom and direction at every turn provide a constant reminder that you are not a lonely stranger.

Though Joshua led Israel through the toughest of times, he found his strength by tapping into the reality of his God. As God promised, “No one will be able to stand up against you. . . . I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous. . . . obey all the law . . . that you may be successful wherever you go” (Joshua 1:5–7).

Strength comes to those who instinctively ask, “What is there about God’s presence in my life that will give me strength and confidence now? What is there in His Word that turns the lights on in this situation? How should I pray for His wisdom, grace, and strength to move forward in His will?”

Be strong! Plan to consciously tap into the power at every turn in the road today!

TOOLS OF DEVOTION

“ASK AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU; SEEK AND YOU WILL FIND; KNOCK AND THE DOOR WILL BE OPENED TO YOU.”

—Matthew 7:7

I finally got organized and set up a workroom in my basement. It's amazing how much more I get done now that I know where all my tools are. Here are some tools to help you get organized in a daily encounter with the living God. I have found them to be helpful.

Select a slot on your schedule and a corner of your world, and claim it for God. For some, the morning may be best. “In the morning my prayer comes before you” (Psalm 88:13). Others prefer the evening and agree with David's prayer: “May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice” (Psalm 141:2). Others prefer many encounters during the day. The psalmist did: “Evening, morning and noon I cry out” (Psalm 55:17).

How much time should you take? My advice is to value the quality of the encounter over the length of the meeting. I suggest that your quiet time last long enough for you to say what you want and for God to say what He wants.

Read prayerfully. God speaks to you through His Word. Ask God to help you understand the Bible. “The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you” (John 14:26 NASB). Before reading the Bible, speak with the author. Don't go to Scripture looking for your idea; go searching for His.

Read the Bible expectantly. Jesus told us, “Seek and you will find” (Matthew 7:7). God commends those who “chew on Scripture day and night” (Psalm 1:2 THE MESSAGE). The Bible is not a newspaper to be skimmed but a mine to be quarried. Look in His Word for wisdom the way you would search a mine for silver; and if you read for understanding as you would hunt for hidden treasure, you will find it (Proverbs 2:4–5). God is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Take time for Him. He is there . . . waiting.

AMAZING LOVE . . . HOW CAN IT BE

WHO LOVED ME AND GAVE HIMSELF FOR ME.

—Galatians 2:20

Life thrives on the crest of good relationships. Particularly relationships that are essential—our relationships to parents, spouses, our children, friends, and other significant people in our lives. I suppose there are some people who could care less about relationships, but they are few and far between.

Recently my dad said that he thought I was doing a good job at Moody. I'm fifty-seven years old and still thrill at the approving statements of my parents. Martie tells me that I am her favorite preacher. And our grown children call on us for counsel. No amount of money or material gain can measure against the rewards that are only found in relationships. As good as the rewards are, the real joy in a relationship is the pleasure of making someone you love the object of your service and adoration. Nothing makes me happier than to serve Martie in ways that make her happy.

Relationships are the backbone of life when you realize the worst day at the office is not that bad, because there is a friend or a family member who believes in you—who, in effect, reminds you that there are things in life more important than the drudgery of unrewarding daily routines that go south.

It is for this reason that I am taken by the way God approaches the matter of connecting with us. It is profound enough that God would even want to connect; but that He desires to connect in the context of a loving relationship is an overwhelming thought. Among the world's great religions, Christianity alone is defined by the reality that the relationship between God and His people is driven and defined by a deep exchange of love. Other religions call their adherents with no thought of love to enter ritualistic contracts of sacrificial performance of duties and oft-repeated rites.

If you ask me, I am delighted to be a follower of Jesus. What amazing grace that He loves us and desires our love in return!

“Amazing love! how can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me.”

KNOWING YOU, JESUS

THAT I MAY KNOW HIM.

—Philippians 3:10 KJV

*W*e all know who Jesus is.

We preach about His will and His ways, tell His stories by heart, celebrate Him in worship, and serve Him with enthusiasm. But there is a gnawing sense that there should be more to this relationship. Why is it that He often feels so far away? So historical? So Other? So church related?

The distance between knowing about Him and knowing Him is vast. The space between these two experiences separates the spectators from intimate participants.

It's a pretty safe bet that if you are reading this devotional you probably can recite stories of intrigue from His life and perhaps even spin a few theological paradigms about the nature of His existence. But the unfortunate reality is that most of us stop there. Seemingly satisfied with knowing *about* Him, we have no conception of the deep richness waiting for those who *experience* Him. And so we live our Christianity all dressed up with nowhere to go, keeping all the rules, exchanging clichés of “Bible-speak,” and passing the theological tests of orthodoxy—yet never really *knowing* Him.

If that's your story, get ready. The best is yet to come. He intends for you to experience the pleasure and reassuring peace of His presence in our lives. He didn't die for us to simply strike a deal guaranteeing heaven. He died for us to make us His own and to give us the privilege of experiencing Him personally. He lives to connect with the entire you. In fact, He sent us the Holy Spirit to make the total connection possible and He gave us His Word to show us the way. And you can know the pleasure.

The words of my grandmother's favorite hymn capture the privilege: “He walks with me, and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own, and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.” Knowing my grandmother, I have the feeling that she had tapped the secret of getting past knowing about Him for the joy of experiencing Him.

Read Philippians 3:7–10.

EXPERIENCING JESUS

THAT I MAY KNOW HIM, AND THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION, AND THE FELLOWSHIP OF HIS SUFFERINGS, BEING CONFORMED TO HIS DEATH.

—Philippians 3:10

Most of us who have grown up in “church world,” particularly of the evangelical kind, tend to want God to come in neat packages that are clearly defined and identifiable. He seems safer that way. Don’t misunderstand. God is both definable and identifiable. It’s just that He is more than that. There is a mystery about God that escapes the limited definitions of our finite minds and an experiencing of Him that often escapes our capacity to describe. If you are longing for more of Him, then you must be willing to seek Him in places where He can be found, . . . beyond the boundaries of definitions and dogma.

Paul, at the end of his life, declared that it was his passion to know Christ. Interestingly, he used the word that means to know by experience, which is noteworthy, since no one has ever experienced Jesus more intimately than Paul. He had a personal encounter of the Jesus kind on the road to Damascus and then spent an extended season in the “third heaven” (2 Corinthians 12:2) with Jesus. Yet he longed for more. Which only proves that you can’t get enough of Jesus.

He tells us his secret. First, he puts all of self away so that his heart is clear to see Jesus (Philippians 3:4–11). Then he tips us off that he meets Jesus in three specific places: in resurrection power, in other words, in victory over sin; in shared experiences with the sufferings of Jesus; and in the surrender that does whatever Jesus asks us to do, regardless. And here is the mystery. As we seek Him to deliver us from evil and feel His pain as we experience our own, and fully surrender . . . Jesus meets us. Not all of us feel it the same way or can describe it precisely. Yet His presence is manifest in ways that whet our appetite for more.

As Graham Kendrick wrote, “Knowing you Jesus, knowing you, there is no greater thing. You’re my all, you’re the best, you’re my joy my righteousness and I love you Lord.”

Meet Him as He delivers you from evil, in seasons of suffering, and in the Gethsemane of surrender.

CHOOSING JESUS

THE SURPASSING VALUE OF KNOWING CHRIST JESUS MY LORD.

—Philippians 3:8 NASB

“Daddy are we famous?” Libby was only six when she asked the question. I was pastoring a church in a small town in the Midwest at the time, and it didn’t take me long to respond. “No” was the only legitimate answer. She paused thoughtfully and then replied with confidence and a touch of consternation, “Well, we would be if more people knew about us.”

Poor Libby, just six and already concerned with what people thought about us. Wondering where we registered on the Richter scale of people’s opinions.

It is something that Libby will wrestle with the rest of her life. All of us end up being caught in the web of self-intrigue. Since earliest childhood we have been aware of and concerned about ourselves. We mastered words like *my* and *mine* long before we knew the word for *friend* or *share*. Growing up doesn’t help. What do people think of me? Have I been sufficiently recognized for my accomplishments? How am I being treated? Does anyone care about me? These questions still haunt us.

Books about knowing and understanding who we really are consistently make the best-seller list. Obscene amounts of money go to therapists who offer to guide you on a journey through your inner self. Actually, I can’t think of a more unsettling thought: to spend money for an inner journey through me. More important, it is a dreadfully unbiblical thought. If you are in the process of becoming a follower of Christ, life is not about a journey to get to know yourself but an adventure in getting to know Jesus.

Paul knew you can’t have it both ways. Your life will either be about self-absorption or about a Savior who is adored. We will either live for the applause of men or the applause of heaven. No wonder that Paul, after listing his stellar accomplishments, would exclaim, “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3:8 NASB).

Refocus. Concentrate on getting to know Jesus, and living to know yourself will seem insignificant and shallow by comparison.

PSALM 1

*Oh, the joys of those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or stand around with sinners,
or join in with scoffers.*

*But they delight in doing everything the LORD wants;
day and night they think about his law.*

*They are like trees planted along the riverbank,
bearing fruit each season without fail.*

*Their leaves never wither,
and in all they do, they prosper.*

But this is not true of the wicked.

They are like worthless chaff, scattered by the wind.

They will be condemned at the time of judgment.

Sinners will have no place among the godly.

*For the LORD watches over the path of the godly,
but the path of the wicked leads to destruction.*

ALL THAT WE NEED

JESUS ANSWERED HER, “IF YOU KNEW THE GIFT OF GOD AND WHO IT IS THAT ASKS YOU FOR A DRINK, YOU WOULD HAVE ASKED HIM AND HE WOULD HAVE GIVEN YOU LIVING WATER.”

—John 4:10

*W*eed something from Jesus today? If you are like most of us, there are some items on your “unanswered prayer” list that you think He’s forgotten. In fact, there are times when we feel spiritually abandoned, when He seems to care more about the needs of those who give stunning testimonies of answered prayer—or whose prayers about finding parking places in crowded mall parking lots always get answered.

While traveling through Samaria, Jesus met a village woman at the local well. He asked her for a drink of water. When she answered His request, Jesus said, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water” (John 4:10).

Days before, a group of Jews asked Christ to give them a sign to verify His claim to be God. Jesus responded, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” Confused, the Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” (John 2:19–20).

The Jewish people thought He was going to rebuild the temple; instead, in three days He rose from the dead to conquer death and hell. The Samaritan woman talked of water from the well; Jesus offered her living water. What Jesus gave people wasn’t necessarily what they asked for, expected or, thankfully, what they deserved. Consistently, He had better things in mind.

God gives each of us exactly what we need. And in case you think He has not done much for you lately, think again. With abounding generosity, God has graced us with forgiveness, love, acceptance, security, and substantial healing from the curse of sin . . . and heaven. If He never does anything more for us, He has given us enough to be gratefully praising Him for the rest of our lives—even if we can’t find that parking spot!

What specific gifts has He given you to meet your needs today? Resolve to live today with gratitude in your heart for all He has done.

RUNNING TO WIN

LET US RUN WITH PERSEVERANCE THE RACE MARKED OUT FOR US.

—Hebrews 12:1

Even in the coldest weather, a good runner knows better than to run with a heavy layer of clothing. I can't imagine that in the Olympic games the team from Alaska would run its race in bulging fur-lined parkas.

Running the race for Christ requires that we lay aside every hindering weight and the sin that so easily besets us (Hebrews 12:1). Running for Christ means stripping down to the bare minimum and racing with pure hearts and lives unburdened with willful sin.

Not only do we need to be free to run well, but His race requires perseverance. *Perseverance* literally means to “remain under,” to stay under the strain without seeking ways to escape the pressure. Races are flat-out stressful. Don't expect it to be a cakewalk. The ill winds of life get in our faces. The seductions of life at a more leisurely and self-gratifying pace constantly threaten to distract us. We may even get mud kicked in our face by the runner in front of us.

But this race is not run for our own self-satisfaction. It is not even run for our own glory. *We run for Him*—for Christ's glory and for the honor of His name. We run for the advancement of His kingdom, the rescuing of lost souls, the rearing of godly families, and His visibility through our lives on the job.

And so, with eyes fixed on the finish line, we vow to keep a steady, unhindered, undaunted pace. And when we look to see if Jesus is in the stands, we find that He is always there, “the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2 KJV), lifting a nail-scarred hand to cheer us on to the end.

As I shed the weights, it crosses my mind, *If He could run all the way to the cross for me, then surely no cost is too great to run my race for Him.*

Are you on the track? What's that “weight” on your back?

BEYOND 911

ENTER INTO HIS GATES WITH THANKSGIVING AND HIS COURTS WITH PRAISE.
GIVE THANKS TO HIM, BLESS HIS NAME. FOR THE LORD IS GOOD.

—Psalm 100:4–5 NASB

Prayer is far more than asking God for what we want or need. Prayer is the way we open our soul for Him to see and hear our heartfelt adoration and gratitude. And, as you no doubt have found, He takes the opportunity to commune with us as well. There have been many times that I have gone to prayer only for Him to remind me of Scripture, His character, and His will. In fact, when I go to Him in prayer with undealt-with sin in my life, He always wants to deal with that before I can go on. Any satisfying relationship needs communication: honest, open, and two-way. Can you think of a relationship that is growing where there is no communication, or worse yet, the only time you talk is when you are asking for something for yourself?

Sadly, many Christians have made prayer a toll-free request line to God. Although it is true that often we “have not, because [we] ask not” (James 4:2 KJV), we are more prone to “worship not because we ask a lot.”

When all we do is ask, we stifle our relationship with God. Even self-sufficient secularists turn to God in prayer when they want or need something badly enough. Does that make them friends of God? Of course not.

So just what is it that makes a Christian’s prayer unique and effective? There is a simple acronym you can use as a reminder: ACTS. It stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Notice that *asking* comes last.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that we should be afraid to approach God with our requests. D. L. Moody said it well: “Spread out your petition before God and then say, ‘Thy will, not mine, be done . . .’”

It is easier to ask in the context of His will when we have spent time telling Him how grateful we are for the goodness of His character and the pleasure of His loving grace.

Pray through the ACTS plan. Make it a habit!