

HEAVEN'S UNEMPLOYED

WAITING FOR YOUR MINISTRY

THE QUEST FOR FULFILLMENT

By Grantley Morris

CHAPTER 1: THE QUEST FOR FULFILLMENT

You are destined for greatness, but live in obscurity. You are on this planet for a purpose, yet your life seems a perpetual groping in the dark.

This book has touched busy pastors' hearts. That's bizarre. Obvious achievers on the church's payroll are nowhere near my target audience. By some strange twist I've ended up with a book almost everyone enjoys. Nevertheless, this book is *especially* for you if . . .

☆ You've sung your greatest songs, thundered your finest speeches and touched the largest audience, while having a bath.

☆ You use a toothbrush with three bristles to prolong the most exciting part of your day.

☆ The last time you blessed someone was when you left early.

☆ After gallantly offering heaven your services, a postman sprouting angel wings appears.

Trembling with excitement, you read the urgent dispatch:

'Don't call us; we'll call you.'

☆ Having finally left the shelf, you are now out in the cold, sitting on ice on the back seat, contemplating an exciting move to the back burner, where you will remain off the boil until your pet snail has kittens.

I know the hurts, frustrations and bewilderment of barren years seemingly devoid of any worthwhile contribution to heaven or humanity. Perhaps you are more blessed, but know the disappointment, even the devastation, of a life's work which is less than you had hoped. Then read on.

Destiny

Suppress it, pervert it, do what you like with it, you were born to excel.

A new-born kangaroo, blind and hideously undeveloped, inches its way on its critical journey to its mother's pouch, spurred by some primeval instinct. An inner compulsion lures a moth to a light. Something within a bird stirs it to migrate half-way around the world with astounding

precision. We, too, have an inborn urge. It's goading us to accomplish something of outstanding significance.

Philosopher John Dewey identified 'the desire to be important' as the deepest drive within us. I'm told even Freud, despite his preoccupation with sex, identified the desire for greatness as a significant human motivator.¹ It surely represents one of our most fundamental needs.

Seeking a cure for cancer, smashing an Olympic record, and defacing a building are instances of the countless, often twisted, manifestations of a hunger divinely lodged within us.

When the light of Christ shines in our lives and divine life is sparked within us, a transformation is triggered, as dynamic and extensive as the one initiated when sperm meet ova. Fuddled minds are sensitized to the Spirit. Divine truths explode within us. Vague urges begin to mature. We arouse to the realization that the craving we were born with is actually a yearning to serve our Maker; a drive to reach our full potential; a yen to materialize our reason for coming to this planet. In short, pulsing within you is a yearning for ministry.

Word Games

By 'ministry,' I mean a calling; a divinely ordained area of service that thrills the heart of God and touches needy humanity. It might not be full-time pastoral or missionary work, but from heaven's perspective, it is of equal stature. Whether full-time, part-time, or spare-time, a 'ministry' is sacred, fulfilling, and of immense significance. Irrespective of how recognized it is on earth, it will be forever honored by heaven.

I refer not just to serving God, but doing so to our highest capacity. It is far from easy. It stretches us to the limit. But for each of us it is the one type of service that gives Almighty God the greatest praise and us the greatest satisfaction. As a missionary can be in the will of God before becoming a missionary, so we can be in the will of God before entering our ministry. Our life consists of more than ministry, just as a plumber's life consists of more than plumbing. Nevertheless, it is one of the thrilling aspects of Christian life.

Though it would be valid to call all obedient service 'ministry', I use the term in a narrower sense. Let me illustrate. With Christ-like grace and dignity, Joseph served God in Egypt as slave and prisoner, yet he could not, and should not, have viewed that as his destiny. Lodged within his heart, fired by a dream, was a divine restlessness which he dare not quench. Not all godly service, but his ultimate vocation, the earthly culmination of his yearnings, is the type of service on which this book focuses.

It's not the task that makes the difference, but the call of God. Had Joseph a different calling, slavery might have been the 'something more' he craved from his youth, the assignment he was born for. If so, it would have been the one activity through which he could find completion. Though worldly voices shout that slaving is always inferior, when still and receptive to the Spirit's whispers, Joseph would know if God had endowed him with the rare ability to elevate slavery to a holy vocation.

Preaching with pens, the apostle Paul, John on Patmos and John Bunyan turned prisons into pulpits from which they shook the world. Likewise, Saint Ignatius, Madame Guyon and Dietrich Bonhoeffer penned while penned, inking their names into history's pages. And the crucified Christ turned being treated like the lowest criminal into the highest ministry. So in theory, suffering unjust imprisonment could have been the ultimate for Joseph, carrying with it as much eternal acclamation as being Pharaoh's right-hand man. To urge Joseph down that path, however, would be the devil's work, seducing him to abandon his dream of becoming a ruler. His faith in dreams was critical. It was dream interpretation, you may recall, that secured his release and allowed him to fulfill his destiny.^a

Perhaps, like Joseph in prison, you are already serving God, but it somehow feels hollow, as though you're still in the 'waiting' stage of your life. Fellow workers know they have arrived and they may try to comfort you, urging you to regard this as your destination, too. But though their motives are honorable and they may be reciting divine pronouncements about their own mission, they could be enticing you to miss your unique call.

Now you see my dilemma. One person's destiny is another's detour. The vocation of one is the temptation another of another. How can one book address people with such diverse calls? And if

^a Genesis 41:9 ff

ministries differ, so do roadblocks to ministry. Some of us have cold feet, others a hot head, others a lukewarm spirit. A few, like baby bear's porridge, are just right. Some of us have never neared our vocation, while others, equally needy and promising, agonies over having seized a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and blown it.

Addressing such a diverse audience makes it inevitable that tensions run through this book, threatening to tear it apart. Yet to write separate books is even more hazardous. What if the wrong one reached you?

Thank God, there's an answer. I rely heavily upon the Spirit of God, trusting him to spotlight those truths you specifically need. If you join your prayers with mine, God will use this book to speak to you.

Heaven's Welfare Bum Exposed

This book saved my life.

It's a solemn fact that my only reason for living is to glorify God, and until my calling became reality, I felt devastatingly convinced that my attempts to reach that goal were infinitesimal. My drive to glorify God was so stupendous I am amazed it didn't kill me. It came close. Since childhood it kept building and building and mostly its fulfillment consistently seemed impossible.

The torment I will soon gloss over dragged on for decades and the pain and soul-withering shame of being single and living with my mother lasted so ridiculously long that it was I my mid-fifties before I ever married. I am still, to put it mildly, socially awkward, and still haunted by inexplicable health restrictions that make me feel a lazy freak. I have, however, come to treasure trials. I wouldn't swap them for the most stupendous mountain-top experiences anyone has ever had.

You would not believe how dependent I was on reading and re-reading this book day after day, year after year after year. It's as though God wrote it for me, rather than the other way around.

I was 43 when the Lord finally began to end my frustration and give me the ministry I had unknowingly been preparing for from birth. The moment these opportunities arrived – back in 1995 – I stopped adding to this book. So, except for these few words in italics and the tiniest changes such as removing references to outdated technology, the entire book was written during my dark days. I feel that makes it more authentic.

A nagging issue that kept me from publishing this book is that I could never feel at peace about charging for something that I believe many people need. I kept being told that almost everyone will instinctively dismiss a free book as being of low quality, and I had no idea how to distribute it without the services of a normal publisher anyhow. Finally the Internet arrived, in which distribution is a breeze and it is common for written material to be provided without charge (except for advertisements, which I refuse but the absence isn't seem particularly noticeable). Suddenly the whole world opened to me. Now, every day, people with all sorts of problems e-mail me. I have written literally hundreds of new webpages but in my reply I often just paste a few appropriate quotes from this book and people write back detailing how God powerfully used the quotes to touch them.

The Lord has given me a tenderness I simply wouldn't have, had my road been easy. The number of suicidal people who have written amazes me. The fact that I have been there myself gives me the edge. I am now so grateful for my every trial and the seemingly endless preparation.

I can add my wobbly testimony to Scripture's authoritative declaration that God has answers. Nevertheless, I dare not exalt myself as an example that these principles really work. When all is revealed on Judgment Day there will be so many shocks and surprises that before that cataclysmic Day it is dangerous to guess who is truly spiritually successful and who is fake or self-deceived. So I beg you to do something are more thrilling and fulfilling than to look to a man: seek the heart of God as to whether truths in this book are of him.

Back to the original text:

The problem with rags to riches stories is that I can identify only with the rags. And I have this nagging suspicion that someone experiencing dazzling success soon forgets what wheezing in the smog of despair is really like.

This book is different. I'm not trying to imagine or remember what it's like to have problems. I'm thrashing about in them.

THE QUEST FOR FULFILMENT

You have a right to know my sob story, but I don't want your tears getting my book soggy. As we frolic through the gloom in a few paragraphs, laugh with me in celebration of trials heaven intends us to rejoice in, and before you know it, we'll be in the Son shine. Though in his genius he may hide the surprise twist until the last scene, our Lord specializes in ecstatically happy endings. When we let him write the script we can always chuckle.

When it comes to feeling useless, I'm an expert. In second year high school, my class of forty students had a popularity poll. You already know who came bottom.

It took the first eighteen years of my life to muster the courage to ask a girl – any girl – out. She refused, of course. Once, to my amazement, someone agreed. Instead of being overjoyed, I belly flopped into a pool of pity for her, appalled that anyone could be so lonely as to consider a date with me.

That was my proud, carefree youth. I've come down many a notch since then. Depending on the country you're from, you would call me a dole bludger, a welfare bum, a beggar, or a parasite – of the heavenly variety. I live off heaven's hand-outs and do nothing in return.

I realize no one can earn their keep spiritually. We could never repay God for the blessings received on the worst day of our life. But you'd think I could at least do a few odd jobs around the place. For excitement I take off my shoes and watch my toenails grow. Every time I call heaven to offer my services the line goes dead. I'm not sure what happens. If only I could hear some celestial music I'd at least know I've been put on hold.

Some people collect stamps. I collect dust. My greatest achievements are outstanding – outstanding in the rain. If you've seen the old television series *Some Mothers Do Have 'Em*, you'll recognize me as the Frank Spencer of the spiritual world.

Things started off so well – born to Christian parents, born again at age eight, sold-out to God, faithfully growing in spiritual knowledge, then four productive years at university in preparation for ministry. (Don't be put off by my education: the good thing about my IQ is that my only hope of being highbrow is a receding hairline.) University was followed by a year's missionary work in Asia, after which came Bible college, enhanced by six months with another missionary group, then –

Nothing. Years and years of nothing. Books written which no one reads. Teaching cassettes made which nobody hears. Failure in every conceivable color. If you're tired of success stories, you'd find my life refreshingly different.

After years without even secular employment, I finally got a job. Hour after hour, I balanced on a step-ladder, alone in a dust-clogged shed feeding a hungry machine. Five lonely years battling the din and dust of a shredder, filling its deadly jaws with armfuls of paper peppered with broken glass, rotten food and sometimes filth too repulsive to mention. Think of me as a full-time trashman on a part-time wage.

It's outside working hours that many of us find fulfillment, gleefully chasing challenges. In my case, I'm usually flat out, up to my ears in blankets. Physical limitations confine me to lights out, up to eleven hours a night. When it comes to pursuing dreams I'm in a world of my own. I bring a whole new meaning to the term lay person as I bull-doze through problems, catnap through crises, and hibernate through triumphs. If Christian activists faced the death penalty, my greatest threat would be the electric blanket. With the drive of a V-8 and the fuel tank of a Tinker Toy.[®] I must be the world's laziest workaholic, fast becoming the Kingdom's Rip Van Wrinkle (and that's no spelling error).

Marriage and family help soothe the gnawing ache, or so I assume. You guessed it. Never married. They say I'm quite a catch. (Not that that's necessarily bad – most good offers have a catch.) I can't understand it. I reckon I look better than Casanova. He's *dead*. With a few weeks' exception here and there, ever since childhood I've been convinced that no sane woman would want me and/or I'd be such an inadequate husband that I dare not spoil someone's life. But I'm still vain enough to think I've made a lot of women happy – everyone who has married someone else.

I see the achievements of people I grew up with and I cringe. At church a stranger introduces himself. I steel myself for the inevitable 'And what do you do for a living?' At the door stands a pastor who knows how little I do. I slink out another way. I drive home alone. And agonize.

Envy me if you must, but drop pity. Though the truth keeps hiding from me, with God writing the punch lines, trials are hilarious. I often wish he preferred one-liners, but everything God does is b-i-g. Year after year he keeps building the tension until all of heaven explodes in rapturous laughter, rejoicing in God's stunning resolution of the problem. Let's slip in a few giggles before the big one.

Anyone can miss the boat. I've missed the ocean. I'm lucky I found the *planet*.

I have a passion for a teaching ministry. The only word I've ever received from the Lord about it is, 'Let not many of you become teachers.'^a I offered myself to the Lord for full-time service more than three decades ago. My ever-growing longing for it has been as productive as a desert in a drought.

Then, after most of this book was written, I turned a corner. And hit a wall. I was thrust into a new job, making my former 'purgatory' seem like paradise. Previously, my body was enslaved in degrading work, but my mind was almost free. Now they've got my mind as well. My ability to write has been mauled. Though writing to a non-existent audience is more therapy than ministry it seemed the one twig in my hand buoying my head above the fierce, grey waves of utter despair.

A young woman, attractive and popular, lit a match and plunged into lifelong darkness. Gas had been seeping into the room. The explosion ripped through her, searing and pulverizing a once-normal body. It hurt to see her plight. My greatest battle, however, was not fighting tears of compassion, but envy. Had I suffered like her I would probably receive a small pension and so, despite enormous restrictions, I might have more time to write.

I get a little negative at times. I once applied for a job at a local Psychiatric Hospital. The interviewers wanted someone with the ability to relate well with depressed, psychotic patients. As they showed me the door they mumbled something about me being over-qualified . . .

Then, while swirling in the vat of squashed hopes and crushed dreams, it slowly dawned that I'm not floating with the scum of humanity, but with its cream. I peeked at heaven's unemployment records. You wouldn't believe the big names they've had on their files. Scripture and the tomes of church history bulge with stories of spectacularly successful people who spent years languishing in heaven's job line. I've uncovered facts that affirm the light at the end of my tunnel isn't a freight train – it's sparkling success, glorious fulfillment. After years of prayerful seeking I've received answers with the power to revolutionize both your life and mine.

God is making a smart cookie. If I'm covered with spilt milk, that's marvelous. If there's egg on my face, it's a bonus. If I'm mixed up, I'm delighted. If I'm beaten, I'm making progress. If the heat is on, I'll warm to my task. If I'm half-baked, something good is cooking. When I feel I could crumble, I'm nearing perfection. Everything is going my way.

I haven't been feeling myself lately. Everyone's noticed the improvement. If the secrets I'll share fill me with joyous expectancy, imagine what they'll do for someone as normal as you.

Book Map

As you slip through this book, various themes will rise and fall. Like waves on the sea shore, thoughts will recede, then reappear. I pray this rhythmical ebb and flow will prove as therapeutic to you as it has to me. Rather than lull you into a hypnotic sleep, however, these waves are breakers designed to jolt you awake.

Ezekiel feared his words were like a lullaby when his listeners needed a trumpet blast.^b Unlike Ezekiel, who brought accusation to the hardened, I bring comfort to the hurting, yet even I fear lullabies. Electrifying truths that lilt by without charging you with hope is my nightmare. My mission is to soothe down-trodden and confused souls and then see them to soar, not sleep. So I write staccato and use cymbals as well as violins. Instead of bridges tempting you to hurry on, I sometimes leave chasms, enticing you to pause and assimilate. My aim is to lift you, not for a month, but forever. For this to happen truths must hit with new force. The clash of rapidly changing subject matter should help. And when a vital truth is in danger of fading from your consciousness you need it to splash over you again. At least that's my excuse for a book that reads like divine revelation filtered through a scrambled brain. As you ride its waves you will lurch and lunge like a tiny boat on a wild sea. That should keep you awake.

You'll find the humor comes in waves, too. In fact, it's about to wave good-bye and duck out of sight for quite a while. It will rear its cheeky head again. (There was humor on every page until someone corrected my spelling.)

^a James 3:1

^b Ezekiel 33:31-33

THE QUEST FOR FULFILMENT

The book is peppered with Scripture references. These are an incentive to consult a book superior to mine. Occasionally, I will introduce a thought you would like to pursue a little deeper. That's your clue to check out a footnote. Another of my eccentricities is that since my creativity stops short of inventing facts, I believe your right to truth includes the right to know my source (someone must take the blame). Perhaps only one reader will benefit from some references, but I beg your indulgence. I long to serve that reader.

I have a nose for a good story (I'm told you could write most of *War and Peace* on it). So to add interest and substance, I cite the stories of nearly three hundred women and men. Each person was selected because a facet of their lives exemplifies a valuable principle. It is not an endorsement of their ministries or doctrine. Some are not even Christians. I take my lead from God's book, crammed with accounts of idolaters and shabby saints. The Holy Book invites us to feast on Solomon's wisdom without partaking of his folly; to see divine power and mercy in the story of Jonah, the cold-hearted wimp; to be proud of David the giant-killer and ashamed of David the adulterer.

It is imperative that this book be life-changing, but my love-gift to you and the Lord is the pain and prayer joyfully dedicated to making the book entertaining and a delight to read. When God does something it's not just functional, but beautiful; not arid necessity but brimming with unexpected joys. He made the sun, for instance, not just an essential power-house but a warm bath of pleasure, delighting and inspiring all humanity. That divinely fashioned orb is more than a time-piece. Its rays don't just illuminate, they sparkle and dance, they paint rainbows and the ever-changing splendor of endless sunsets, splashing color through all the earth with unrestrained exuberance. Everything God does displays his inexhaustible creativity and generosity.

How I long to be more like Father!

CHAPTER 2: THE ULTIMATE LOVE AFFAIR

The greatest good anyone can do for humanity begins with a dynamic encounter with the living God. I refer to a spiritual transformation so revolutionary that it is aptly termed being ‘born again’, though overuse has sapped this term of its power.

You could walk down church aisles all your life without ever marrying. Everyone knows that. Yet, tragically, countless thousands have walked down a church aisle and falsely assumed that made them born again. Like marriage, it is a relationship, not a ritual that counts. Spiritual rebirth results from a life-changing union between two persons. You can mumble the sinner’s prayer, the saints’ prayer, any prayer you like; you can join the best church, get wet, slurp communion, look more godly than an archangel, and have not a throb of spiritual life. Your act can be so convincing that you even fool yourself, and remain unaware that your life has missed an entire dimension.

In style and content, this chapter is quite different from the rest of the book. So if you are certain you enjoy daily intimacy with God, you may prefer to go straight to the heart of the book by skipping this chapter and return here later. I don’t want you losing interest by dwelling on matters you are already familiar with. For the rest of us, however, this chapter is essential. The remainder of the book will help only if you put this chapter to work. The quest for fulfillment starts here.

Dare to Dream

We crave love. It is an essential ingredient of a meaningful life. Yet it is a risky, potentially agonizing experience. Death or disagreement can so easily rob us of the one we love. Though we kiss with our eyes closed, relationships are frighteningly fragile. Beauty sags. People change. The deeper our love the deeper our insecurity.

Reality is cold, but dreams are too hot to hold. Our passions seem so insatiable that we shrink from them, yet still they haunt us. Just for a moment, release the iron grip that keeps your longings suppressed in the dungeons of your mind. Let your longings waft free before your gaze, no matter how unattainable they seem. Dare to see what they reveal.

You burn for unwaning intimacy; a companion who will never fail you; a carer who will always be there, no matter what the circumstance or hour; someone whose love never ceases to astound you; someone whose charms and beauty and powers will not fade with the passing years.

Too often you are misunderstood. You crave a friend who can slip inside your mind; ideally, someone who has not only heard of your every trauma and triumph from birth, but experienced them with you. You need to unburden yourself with a confidant who knows your blackest secrets, yet delights in you with unswerving devotion.

When life’s blows send you reeling, you ache for an admirer who not only passionately longs to meet your deepest needs, but is always able to. You need a partner so capable that when crisis swallows crisis you can trust your friend to comfort, protect and power you to success. Yet you don’t want to be smothered. On the contrary, you want someone who will nerve you to reach the heights you were born for.

You pine for someone changeless, yet exciting; someone who fits your needs so exactly it feels you were made for each other; someone you will be forever proud of; someone whose love for you is so vast that it always satisfies; someone faithful, genuine, open and warm, yet so resistant to the ravages of aging, sickness and tragedy as to seem immortal.

No human fits the bill, yet the craving remains. A few dreamers keep chasing the elusive high of starry-eyed love, forever groping for the perfect relationship. Most of us give up. A person would have to be God to meet our criteria! And how could he help? We're flesh and blood; God, if he exists, is some nebulous, unapproachable Spirit. The notion of a friendship with God is preposterous.

Or is it? Within the realms of the unknown almost anything could dwell – even a God poised to shatter our insensibility to him. If there really is an Intelligence behind creation, why were we made with cravings that could never be satisfied? Is God a sadist, or were those yearnings for the ideal companion planted within because he longs to fulfill them by being your closest friend?^a Could it be that God seems impersonal only because you're not on close terms with him? If God were impersonal, that would make us superior to our Creator. That's absurd. If we can speak, feel and love, our Maker can do all that and more.^b God is warm.

This exciting Person, whose never-ending companionship and limitless power are able to fill the unfillable hole within us, is the perfect partner we ache for. Yet his very perfection makes him unapproachable. The Almighty is awesomely holy; incomparably virtuous. We are not.

The Joy of Being Wrong

We come hurtling back to reality. Life's a bed of roses. The beauty is enticing and the aroma alluring but the thorns are cruel. There's a solution, but to appreciate the grandeur of that solution, we must dwell for a couple of pages on the magnitude of the problem. This is so distasteful that we instinctively recoil from it, longing to deny its existence. Our reaction proves the truth of Jesus' assertion that people love darkness (ignorance and wrongdoing) rather than light (truth and purity).^c

We'll expose facts that challenge the limits of our ability to grapple with reality. Yet facing them is the most liberating experience a human can know. Let me illustrate.

I'm stumbling up a perilous trail, far from civilization. Angry blisters jostle on the pain-scale with bruises and open wounds. The blazing sun sucks my throat and mocks my exhausted supplies. If I don't get there soon . . . Panic rips down my spine, gets trapped in my stomach, and thrashes in wide-eyed terror. I stagger on, virtually insensible to the weird sound overhead.

The trail twists and to my amazed surprise a helicopter stands before me. A pilot approaches, claims to be part of a search party, and tells me I've been tramping for days in the wrong direction.

'Do you take me for an idiot?' I fume. My bush skills . . .'

Patiently, he takes out a map and dismantles my every argument. My spirit wilts. I could never survive the distance to even the nearest waterhole. Then the pilot offers to fly me to the exquisite oasis I had been looking for. My worries vaporize. The sooner I admit my need of help, the quicker I can get out of here. In such circumstances, even I can handle being told I'm wrong.

Magnify that tale and transfer it from fantasy to reality and you glimpse what this chapter is about. Discovering we are wrong can be the most thrilling moment of our lives. Confronting the truth of the next few paragraphs can usher you into a new world of joyous freedom, fulfillment, challenge and excitement.

When Frederick the Great visited Potsdam Prison, every convict he spoke to professed innocence. Finally he encountered a thief under sentence of death. 'Your Majesty,' he said, 'I am guilty and richly deserving of punishment.'

'Release this scoundrel,' commanded the king, 'before he corrupts all the noble innocent people here.'¹

A similar surprise awaits everyone who dares admit the truth.

I make no claim to powers of mind and pen sufficient to portray the wonder and majesty of the world's greatest love story. Nor can I highlight each facet of the unassailable wisdom, justice and moral perfections that opened the possibility of a transformation of human nature so radical that it defies comprehension. My hope is to whisk you to its benefits, not expound its intricacies. So if any

^a It is more than coincidence that old-fashioned romance, bearing lightly the scars of reality, was laced with religious expressions like 'she adores/idolizes him', 'you're divine/heavenly', 'he worships the ground she walks on', 'a marriage made in heaven'. From another source comes the term 'sex goddess'.

^b Even in cases where no drugs were administered, many people who have been revived after clinical death have reported a sensation of floating away from their bodies toward a bright light. Their experience was too fleeting to know whether they would be considered worthy to remain forever in the presence of that light, but for our purposes, the notable thing is that although 'bright light' sounds impersonal, they commonly report telepathic communication and intense love emanating from that Being.

^c John 3:19

of the following seems unconvincing, limitations of space and skill may be the problem. I warn, however, that in these critical issues, the real cause of blind-spots usually turns out to be psychological or spiritual. The door to spiritual understanding is not human explanation, but supernatural enlightenment – divine revelation. And that door swings not on mind games but on a willingness to surrender our stubborn will to One who knows better than us.^a Already our defenses are on red alert. I ask you to face this issue because it leads not to shame, but to the exhilaration of a cleansed conscience. It leads not to oppressive restrictions, but to utter freedom.

Our Dilemma – God’s Deliverance

If we burst into a hospital and chanced upon a doctor sterilized for surgery, he could not touch us. We may seem immaculate, but not by his standards.

We are like that in the presence of the holy Lord. We may be as good as the next guy, but by the unassailable perfection of God’s lofty standards we are moral lepers. God must keep his distance.

That seems an over-reaction. Being surrounded by imperfection all our lives has jaded our ability to see ourselves objectively. Deep down we suspect the worst but we flee from it like people refusing cancer checks even though early diagnosis brings life, not death.

A favorite, rarely conscious, technique to silence our suppressed but nagging conscience is to concoct a doctored moral code that lets us entertain the delusion that we are morally superior to some people. What drives us to despise certain people or to gossip is not unkindness or snobbishness so much as a desperate attempt to drown the shrieks of our own conscience. We feel less guilt if we can convince ourselves that there are others who are morally worse. Our self-deception is so individual that I am unlikely to guess the reader’s blind-spot, let alone find my own. The following are just three of countless possibilities.

☆ A man might detest wife-bashers, while he cheats on his own wife, thus loading her dice in the deadly AIDS game. He toys, not with the possibility of injuring her, but with the possibility of killing her. He does this not to her face, but in cowardly deceit. And he is certain he soars at moral heights far above anyone who would slap a woman.

☆ Or we might label rape a hideous crime, but call the seduction of a married person ‘love’. Seduction ravishes its victims at the deepest level, debauching them so completely as to make them willing partners in immorality. Even the grave offence of rape leaves its unconsenting victims morally chaste.

☆ Or we might feel superior to criminals when what differentiates us is not morality but cowardice (fear of getting caught, of incurring the disapproval of others, etc.) or lack of opportunity (not knowing how to commit the perfect crime, or not holding a gun at our weakest moment).

Each of us is infected by one of hypocrisy’s innumerable strains. And the most dangerously afflicted are those oblivious to it. That’s why Jesus said blatant sinners are more likely to find God than are the self-righteous.^b We are driven to all lengths – even to accusing God of injustice – to try to ease our guilt. We spurn God’s laws, hurt each other, and then have the audacity to blame God for the mess.

‘Why do the innocent suffer?’ we sneer, conveniently forgetting the times our anger, greed and lies have hurt the innocent.^c For some suspicious reason, there is a degree of hurt we deem excusable, and the hurt we have inflicted happens to compare favorably with the standard we have arbitrarily set. With every atom of pride within me shrieking in protest, I am forced to the shattering conclusion that the moral gap between a sadistic murderer and myself is invisible, relative to the yawning chasm separating me from the flawless virtue of Almighty God.

The Holy One loathes evil but if he enslaved the human will, squelching evil by forcibly preventing all of us from indulging in pet sins, we’d be the first to shake our fists.

^a John 7:17; 2 Corinthians 3:14-16; 4:3-4; 1 Corinthians 2:4-16; 4:20; Luke 10:21

^b Matthew 21:31

^c Ultimately, only one Innocent ever suffered – Jesus. Though for our sakes he became man, the eternal Son of God had life independent of human ancestry. The rest of us owe our very existence to wrong-doing. If, for instance, we could trace our family tree back far enough, we would likely find a direct ancestor who was the product of rape or unlawful incest. In other words, were it not for gross wickedness we would not exist. And in our genes – our basic essence – we have our father’s eyes, our grand-father’s walk, our mother’s temper, our ancestors’ sin. Far from being innocent, we were born a product of wickedness and confirmed our guilt the first opportunity we had.

If God is a God of love, why does he allow the evil that's rampant in this world? For anyone not entranced by his/her own double-standards, the reason is obvious. God longs to destroy all evil, and the time is fast approaching when he *will*.^a But how, without unprincipled favoritism, could he do this without destroying you and me?

(I warned this horror story would take you to the edge of your tolerance. Rich rewards, however, await those with the courage to face facts we inwardly know to be true. When approaching a God who can make us more beautiful than we dare dream, we have no need to act like burns patients smashing mirrors.)

Should we reform and never so much as think another wrong thought, it wouldn't help. If water is contaminated, adding pure water doesn't help – the water is still contaminated. There's corruption in our past and we cannot change the past.

Some things God cannot do without violating his integrity. Consider a man in court found guilty of dangerous driving. The judge happens to be a close friend of the defendant. Would it be right for the judge to declare his guilty friend innocent? Or could he fine the offender less because he is his friend? Only a corrupt judge could condone law-breaking or display favoritism.^b

And God is our Judge, because there is no such monstrosity as a self-made person. None of us decided to come into existence, or can even design our offspring's fingerprints. God formed the brain cells we think with. We owe him everything. The Lord is maker – and therefore owner – of every molecule and organism we have ever used or abused. Like it or loathe it, that makes us accountable to God for our every action.^c Our selfishness has hurt people. It would be an outrage for the Supreme Judge to ignore our offences. We're the ones who bellow at God when we see wrongdoing go unpunished. Though his devotion to you defies explanation, he cannot do other than declare you guilty. And justice demands the penalty be paid.

That leaves just two alternatives. Either you pay the penalty, or someone pays it for you.

It would be sheer conceit for me to consider taking your punishment. I have my own wickedness to answer for. But the Son of God, two thousand years ago, left his celestial judgment seat and came to earth. He became the sole human who has lived a perfect life. In the brilliance of his purity, our highest moral achievements look like mud. So when Christ voluntarily endured the pain and shame of a criminal's death, something of cataclysmic significance was happening. The timeless Son was taking upon himself full blame for *your* sin.^d

Physical torment choked in a sea of spiritual agony. On the cross the only person who has enjoyed eternal oneness with God cried, 'My God, why have you forsaken me?'^e Father God was compelled to desert his beloved Son, treating him as the vilest sinner, until the horrific penalty was paid in full. After absorbing the full consequences of our depravity, Christ broke through to life again, blasting a path for us to follow.

You are the focal point of this heart-stopping display of love, the greatest love the universe has known. Will you continue to spurn it?

Our Response

Christ has provided a legal way whereby anyone, though guilty, can go scot-free. But that does not make forgiveness automatic.

To be intimate with the Lord of the galaxies; to have divine power flowing through your veins; to reach the peaks you were made for, requires a response on your part. To explain, let's return to the reckless driver.

A judge would have to fine his friend for breaking the law. It is quite legal, however, to offer a friend money to pay the fine. It is then up to the offender whether he accepts the judge's gift.

It would break Jesus' heart if you slight his offer to suffer for you. The only alternative is for you to bear the penalty. That's the last thing he wants. God is anxious to save you from the horrors of hell and grant you a fulfilling, life-changing partnership with him.^f But you must accept the gift. That involves admitting that you need the gift – that only Jesus' sacrifice can absolve your guilt.

^a 2 Peter 3:9-13

^b Romans 2:11

^c Acts 17:31

^d 1 Peter 3:18

^e Matthew 27:46

^f 2 Peter 3:9

There is one more consideration. If our lead-footed friend intends perpetuating the same offences, he is a danger to the community. It would be wrong to pardon someone who plans to continue flouting the law.

Similarly, it would be wrong for God to forgive us until our attitude to sin has changed.

I reel at the thought of the hordes who have tragically missed this point. A second analogy will confirm its centrality.

You are trapped in a sea of sin. Bottomless waters lap towering cliffs. No one can tread water forever. The murky depths terrify you, except for one spot. You've found a place where the deadly waters seem beautiful and the sensual waves exquisite. How can anyone take seriously your cries for help if you're splashing around enjoying yourself? And what's the point of saving someone who is hell-bent on plunging back after every rescue attempt? No one with a suicidal commitment to a sin can be saved.

This doesn't mean you must initiate a sinless life to enjoy forgiveness. We're in sin's death grip. Only Jesus can break it. But do you want him to? Do you want to be rid forever of your favorite sin?

The Almighty gives us dignity by respecting our wishes. If we don't want him to be our God – i.e. in total control of our lives – it grieves and appalls him, but in his gentleness he will permit us to go our own way. No one has suffered the pain of rejected love like God.

You can never be forced to love someone. Nor can you be forced to desire purity of heart. The Giver has done all he can. It's over to you.

To ignore our Creator is the height of selfishness. He is the Source of every good thing we ever enjoyed. (Even sin's fizzle of pleasure, that slippery shadow of the real thing seized while defying him, is possible only because of our God-given ability to experience pleasure.) Every wonderful thing we take for granted comes from him. He even holds our atoms together. He protects and nurtures even those who ignore him, providing abundant opportunity for them to respond to his astounding love. They don't want God to interfere, but he does anyhow – showering them with a myriad soft, warm, beautiful, delicious, refreshing, thrilling and inspiring gifts. At death, however, those who on earth wanted to be independent of God are finally granted their wish. That's the ultimate horror. To be eternally severed from the Source of all love, beauty, fulfillment and joy is a prospect too terrifying to contemplate.

With a repentant attitude towards ungodly 'pleasures', however, and a reliance upon the pardoning power of Jesus' sacrifice, you give God free rein to do what he longs to do – pay your debt to justice and credit to your account the moral perfection of Christ. That makes you so pure in his eyes that you need no longer be isolated from him. You can then commence an endless communion with the greatest Person in the universe.

The Contract

What God desires is like a perfect marriage. He wants life-long devotion, fully committed intimacy, not a superficial fling.

Believing in the opposite sex does not make one married. Neither does believing a creed give us the right to live with God.^a True marriage involves total commitment of all that you have and all that you are. It is believing in someone so completely that you entrust your entire being to that person for life. The Lord is eager to be that devoted to you, but for marriage to work, the commitment must be mutual.

If a street kid married a millionaire, she would get his riches and he would get her debts. He would be tarred with her shame and she would gain his honor. For this to happen, she must turn from rival relationships and bind herself and her meager possessions to this man in marriage. Everything he owns would become hers, provided she lets everything of hers become his.

Similarly, if we entrust to God everything we have – our time, abilities, relationships and possessions – he will reciprocate, embracing us with divine extravagance. We hand our depravity to Jesus, relinquishing even our fondest sin. It becomes his. That's what killed him. In return, Jesus' sinless perfection envelops us,^b enabling us to be on intimate terms with the Holy God. The culmination of this divine exchange of holiness for depravity will be seen when all evil is finally

^a James 2:17-19

^b 2 Corinthians 5:21

THE ULTIMATE LOVE AFFAIR

wiped off this planet – we will be spared and no one can accuse God of injustice or favoritism. He has borne the penalty himself.

In entering this love pact, we give God the right to do whatever he likes with our assets, but the Owner of the universe makes his riches available to us.^a We trade our talents, for his omnipotence; our attempts to run our lives, for his unlimited wisdom. We give him our time on earth and he gives us eternity.

In every way we benefit from this proposal and God gets the raw end. But God is love. He wants this holy union more than we can imagine. Don't break his heart by holding back.

The following prayer corresponds to wedding vows in which you promise to love, honor and obey the Lord, thus making him your God. In turn, the King of kings makes you worthy of spiritual fusion with him and pledges to devote himself unreservedly to you. If the following accurately describes your feelings, you can make it your prayer by reading it to God.

Wonderful Lord,

It hurts to admit how bad I've been. I have caused you grief, yet you sent your Son who gave his life and defeated death to secure my pardon.^b

You have given yourself totally for me and I long to reciprocate. I respond to your overwhelming love, by dedicating all I have to loving you. I yield to your loving protection and guidance. I surrender my sins to you, renouncing even those things that entice me. And in exchange I receive your pardon and purity and your empowerment to live a life worthy of you.

Thank you that we have now commenced a union that not even death can break.

The Lord of heaven and earth knows your secret thoughts.^c If you prayed the entire prayer honestly, you have entered a new spiritual realm. That's hard to believe. Everything seems the same. But not from heaven's perspective. The spiritual contract is sealed.

The proof lies not in your feelings (such as whether you feel guilty or happy), but in the integrity of the Holy One. He has given his word (in the Bible) that whoever turns from sin and looks to Jesus for cleansing, has a radically new destiny.^d God is no liar!

If this is the first time you have genuinely offered such a prayer, you must be bursting with questions. Unfortunately, space forbids extending this outline into something that anticipates your every question. To overcome this shortcoming, I have written a book especially for you. Please write, requesting a copy. If this proves inadequate, I invite you to put your queries directly to me in writing. Since there is nothing more important than spiritual rebirth, all letters on this vital matter will be answered, though I may not be able to give this guarantee for other correspondence.

Wind-Up

You've had enough of empty living. At last, you are free to soar above a mundane existence to uncharted heights of excellence. You have commenced the life of fulfillment you were created for.

^a Philippians 4:19

^b Romans 4:25; 6:4-5; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8,14,17; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 1:3

^c Hebrews 4:13

^d John 3:36; 6:37; 14:6; Acts 4:12; Romans 6:11-18; Philippians 3:8,9; Colossians 1:22.

CHAPTER 3: A MINISTRY GUARANTEED

Most of us, ably supported by Satan, are unnecessarily harsh on ourselves. This self-inflicted, satanically-enhanced torture can wound deeply. We may presently be so hurt and agitated that we can't be sufficiently still to hear God's call, or are too despondent to amass the faith to embrace his challenge. In this and the next three chapters, we will look to the Lord for healing and inspiration. With our hurts healed and the pressure eased, we can maximize the benefits of the remainder of the book and be equipped to enter the fulfillment we were created for.

Portions of this book are devoted specifically to readers who feel they had their chance at ministry and have lost it forever, but we will start with more general considerations. Before we do, however, why not, for at least a few moments, passionately ask your Healer to touch you as you read these pages? From him alone flows everything you need.

Feeling Useless

Scripture's silence implies Jesus spent most of his time on earth doing almost nothing worth mentioning. This impression is amplified by the shock registered in his old acquaintances at the thirty-year-old's miracles. More astounding still is that even his teaching and wisdom surprised people who had heard him all his life.^a Thirty years! That's over ninety per cent of his earthly life.

Dare we say that during this time the Sovereign Lord of Glory was useless, or a failure? The very thought is blasphemous! You know God's Son is of infinite worth because of who he is, not for what he does.

Well, remember that you, too, are God's child. You have already attained the highest status.

Real significance and fulfillment can only be found in your union with Christ. To seek them through what you do is to chase a vapor. For starters, it's a perversion akin to parents looking to their children for things that should only be found in their marriage partner. Secondly, earthly service is temporal. Will you suddenly decline in value when age forces retirement upon you? You were created for the security that only God can offer.

To look to anything other than Christ for our sense of worth is like a commoner made royalty by her marriage to the king, hoping her trinkets will make her important.

Performers often gauge their success by how much people pay to hear them. The King of glory paid the highest conceivable price – the staggering cost of his Son's life – just to be close to you. That's how precious you are. Furthermore, he has made you heir to heaven's riches, destined to reign with eternal honor. As God's heir, you are of such mind-boggling importance that nothing – not even the greatest achievement – could increase your significance.

Limitless Potential

If we seem to be achieving nothing, it is usual to feel like second-hand chewing gum. No matter how real the feeling, however, to give credence to the illusion is to throw one's brains away. It is human to suffer irrational feelings but only the hopelessly insane are compelled to *believe* those feelings. Only people living in a land of fairies and goblins have the right to surrender to feelings of

^a Mark 6:1-3; Luke 4:22

inferiority. Though you feel as cherished as a lump of soap at a boys' camp, to God you are priceless. You may seem as useful as an inflatable anchor, but with God, no one is useless.

Our mighty Lord can use anything for any purpose. Look at the tiny book of Jonah. God used a storm, heathen sailors, a sea-creature, a plant and a grub, as well as moody, heartless, rebellious Jonah.^a Centuries later, the Lord even made a Messianic prophet out of the man who sentenced Jesus to death.^b

One of the things that transformed the great evangelist D. L. Moody was the sudden realization that 'It was not [the famous preacher, Charles Haddon] Spurgeon who was doing that work: it was God. And if God could use Spurgeon, why should he not use me?'¹

Was that same God who mightily worked in Spurgeon and then in Moody suddenly incapacitated when he took up residence in you? Dare you claim that your weakness could weaken God?

If the Lord could work only through people of a certain caliber, the Most High would be impotent and dependent upon human abilities. That's unthinkable. Either God can move the world through you or he isn't God.^c Incompetence melts in the presence of omnipotence.

So if the Lord appears not to be using you, it cannot be because you lack ability. In fact, God delights in displaying his majesty by employing those who seem hopelessly inadequate.^d

And I hope you know enough about God to realize that it cannot be because he does not love you! What more could the One who died for you do to prove his love? Let's not slander the Holy One by imagining infinite love is so fickle that it fluctuates according to a person's physical attractiveness, popularity or talent.

By making you feel as if God loves you less than certain other Christians, it seems as if Satan is attacking your self-esteem, but he isn't. He is attacking the integrity of God. He is hissing that God's love is so inadequate that it is only people who have certain qualities whom God can love or be gracious to. That's a lie! God's love toward you is perfect. GOD IS FOR YOU. He's cheering you on. He's on your side!

In this world, success is often relative – the closer the relative, the higher you go. Don't decry the system: remember who *you* call Father.

Christian, you are the focus of divine love; filled with the majesty of Almighty God; spiritually enthroned with Christ in his heavenly palace; granted the highest level of access to the greatest Person and the holiest place.^e You are the work of divine hands, made perfect in Christ Jesus. And enshrined within your being resides the infinite power of the sovereign Lord.^f How dare you think you're useless!

Top fashion model Claudia Schiffer has been nominated the most beautiful woman in the world. Yet as a teenager, she concluded from her lack of popularity at school that she was not beautiful. We make a similar mistake in assuming that if we are not popular with people, we lack what it takes to make it in a big way with God.

In 1943 five missionaries tried to establish links with an unreached tribe in Bolivia. Not only did they fail, it cost them their lives. It took the wisdom and perseverance of Joe Moreno, using an entirely different tack, to achieve what the five could not do. Joe was a sixth-grade drop-out; a middle-aged farm laborer with three children who had been abandoned by his wife. He considered himself unworthy of the title 'missionary' yet he achieved more than those he revered.² The lower you are, the stronger God's urge to lift you high.^g

If you have so far achieved little, it says nothing of God's plans for you, nor of his evaluation of your worth. Prized silverware is reserved for special occasions. The fact that it is rarely used hardly means it is of little value. A craftsman will use some tools more than others, simply because they have different functions. Frequency of use in no way indicates quality, nor the craftsman's pride in the tool. No one in a right relationship with God has a sane reason for feeling inferior to people who are used often.

^a Jonah 1:4,12,15,17; 2:10; 4:6 ff

^b John 11:49-51

^c For example, 2 Chronicles 14:11; Isaiah 40:29

^d For example, 1 Corinthians 1:26-29; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

^e Ephesians 2:6; Hebrews 10:19-22

^f 1 Corinthians 6:19; Ephesians 3:20

^g Job 5:11; Psalm 113:7-9; Isaiah 40:4; Ezekiel 17:24; 21:26; Luke 1:52-3; 1 Corinthians 1:26-29

Reprogramming Our Minds

Unfortunately, intellectual assent is easier than feeling inwardly convinced.

One has simply to consider the plight of skinny girls who see themselves as fat to realize that a wrong mental image of ourselves can be so powerful as to resist all logic. Anorexia can so grip its victims as to defy what their eyes tell them, what the scales tell them, what other people tell them. Such a mindset can kill. Spiritually, the forces of deception arrayed against us are no less intense and the stakes can be eternal.

Throughout our lives we are subjected to the brain-washing of a godless world that values even its own not for who they are but for what they do. It is vital that we counter-attack, constantly expanding our minds with God's estimation of our worth; persistently rejecting the human vantage point.^a Diligent attention to reprogramming our minds will slowly loosen the strangle-grip of those deceptive feelings of worthlessness.^b

We need more than this, however.

While some mental patients have delusions of grandeur, we suffer the opposite psychosis. Relative to who we are, God's children – even those with dangerously inflated egos – have delusions of insignificance.

The instant we were born-again, our status and potential rocketed out of this world, leaving our self-image floundering somewhere between earth and reality. The gulf between who we really are and who we think we are is so serious and so beyond our normal comprehension^c that we literally need divine psychiatric help.^d A major task of the Holy Spirit is to help us grasp the enormity of what has happened to us.^e It is vital that we keep probing the Scriptures^f and pleading for spiritual revelation. We are like paupers ecstatic because we think we have inherited \$10,000, when we've actually received \$1 billion. We live chronically impoverished lives and the less we know of our spiritual inheritance, the greater the tragedy.

So to mental discipline add the spiritual therapies of faith, prayer, study, revelation, and submission to the Holy Counselor. By drawing on these vast resources, banish every thought that having a ministry could boost your personal worth. Drown the doubts, insecurities and guilt feelings. Cling to the emphatic Word of God which affirms that God's estimation of you is far too immense for human fame or shame to budge it.^g Whether the high point of your Sundays is counting the souls you have won or counting the specks on the your pew, the King delights in you.

Destined for Ministry: A Scriptural Certainty

Nevertheless, as an eagle is made to soar, and a yacht to sail, you were made for ministry. As every father worthy of the name has a dream for his children, God has a dream for you. A powerful ministry has been God's plan for you^h since before the creation of the world.ⁱ And Christ came to release you into all you were born for. As surely as the Son of God died to give you eternal life, he died to give you a vital ministry.^j It is as certain as your salvation that you will contribute to the glory of the majestic Lord of lords.^k

We are often harassed by the fear that our lives will be unproductive. So let's pamper ourselves, piling reason upon liberating reason why such fears are groundless.

Through Christ, God has gloriously equipped us to meet all his requirements, the greatest of which is that we love. Yet love is a useless frustration if we cannot express it by genuinely helping people.^l So we can be sure that Christ, who wants us to love, will empower us to contribute significantly to the good of others and of God himself.

^a 2 Corinthians 5:16-17

^b Romans 12:2

^c Ephesians 3:19-20; 1 John 3:1-2

^d Ephesians 1:16-19; Colossians 1:9; Philemon 6. The psychiatric definition of a delusion is a false notion that cannot be altered by reasoning or by demonstration of the facts.

^e John 16:14; 1 Corinthians 2:9-15; 1 John 4:13; Ephesians 3:3-5; John 14:26; 16:13

^f 2 Corinthians 4:6-7

^g For example, Galatians 2:6; Ephesians 6:9; Job 34:19

^h John 15:16

ⁱ Jeremiah 1:5; Ephesians 1:4

^j Romans 7:4; Ephesians 2:8-10; Titus 2:14

^k John 17:10; Romans 8:32; 9:23; Ephesians 1:11-12; Philippians 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24; 2 Thessalonians 1:10-12; 1 Peter 5:10

^l Compare Proverbs 27:5; James 2:16; 1 John 3:18

A MINISTRY GUARANTEED

God has invested too highly in your ministry to let it fizzle. The invincible Lord has surrounded you with spiritual helps, not to mollycoddle, but to mound you into a key person in the advance of the Kingdom. God has given you a Bible, for instance, because he wants to train you for service.^a And this is why he has appointed pastors, teachers, and the like. Your Father established these positions not to do all the ministry but to equip *you* for ministry.^b If the church is an army, the clergy are, at most, tacticians and instructors. I don't know of many successful armies in which the tacticians go to war, and everyone else stays in bed. Each individual in Christ's army has a vital contribution in the intricately complex and glorious purposes of God.^c

Paul expressed the heart of God in a divinely-inspired prayer that his readers be 'fruitful in every good work.'^d This is the will of God for you;^e the passion of the One for whom nothing is too hard.

Though the Lord is utterly unselfish,^f for a moment we'll look past this irrefutable fact to glimpse another truth. Even if it were somehow possible for the Giver of every good gift to be selfish, he would still give you a fruitful ministry because it exalts him. 'Herein is my Father glorified,' said Jesus, 'that you bear much fruit.'^g

Every law of physics depends on the integrity of God. The fabric of the entire universe is held together by his word.^h Nonetheless, you could distrust his intractable commitment to keeping his word and still have no excuse for doubting that he longs to make your life productive. Your fruitfulness glorifies God. If he did not employ you for his honor, he would be hurting himself.

Paint in your mind a single father who so loves his retarded child that he invests his life into that child, doing everything in his power to encourage, train and bring that child up perfectly. See people ridiculing the father for wasting his time on the child. See others criticizing his methods. The more that child succeeds, the more the father is vindicated and honored, right? And the more you succeed, the more the God who brought you into this world, nurtured and trained you, is honored.

If even a pip, buried in muck and forgotten, can produce a bountiful harvest, your life will definitely be fruitful. The Lord who ladens the vine with fruit that delights the eater, will ensure you bear fruit that refreshes the world.

It's not my purpose to get into heavy Bible expositions. (Even in the last few paragraphs, the best parts are in the footnotes.) Just bear with me for a page while we get our facts straight. We can then stride forward in confidence.

We'll start with the most complex.

'Unto every one of us is given grace . . .'ⁱ This is the sort of verse you could walk past a thousand times and never find the hidden treasure. Secreted within that curious word 'grace' is something momentous.

Paul had used the term just moments earlier.^j A retreat to these occurrences is most illuminating.

'I was *made a minister*, according to the *grace* of God given to me by the effectual working of his power. To me . . . is this *grace* given, *that I should preach* . . .'^k

Can you see it? In this context, 'grace' is a calling and empowering for ministry.^l

Adding our new understanding of 'grace' to our text unlocks what Paul was saying:³ every one of us is given a supernatural calling and empowering for ministry. Moreover, the verse continues, the equipping for ministry each believer receives is distributed, not according to our worthiness (thank God), or our abilities, but 'according to the measure of the gift of Christ'.^m

^a 2 Timothy 3:16-17

^b Ephesians 4:12

^c Romans 12:4-6; 1 Corinthians 12:7, 21-27

^d Colossians 1:10

^e 2 Corinthians 9:8; 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17; 2 Timothy 2:21; Hebrews 13:21; 2 Peter 1:8

^f Romans 8:32; James 1:5

^g John 15:8

^h Hebrews 1:3

ⁱ Ephesians 4:7

^j Ephesians 3:2, 7, 8

^k Ephesians 3:7, 8 – italics mine

^l For further confirmation, see Ephesians 3:2; Acts 14:26; Romans 1:5; 12:6, 3; 15:15-16; 1 Corinthians 3:10; 15:10; 2 Corinthians 9:8

^m Ephesians 4:7

I think you'll agree that there is nothing stingy about Christ! If for you he did not withhold even his last drop of blood, can there be anything he would keep from you?^a Furthermore, his riches are inexhaustible.^b What measure, then, do you think God used when he infused you with his power for ministry?

I dare conclude you must be extravagantly outfitted for exploits worthy of the Lord of hosts.^c Your invisible union with the Godhead has opened a floodgate. To underestimate the consequences is an insult to the eternal Fountain of all love, power, wisdom, ability and splendor.

If Paul has scrambled your brain, try Peter for mind-blowing simplicity:

'As every person has received a gift, minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.'^d

Wow! That's worth reading a second time.

To leave us in no doubt, a third epistle pounds the point, affirming that resident within each believer is a ministerial gift.^e Moreover, it is not God's intention that we fill our grave with this enormous potential still dormant. *Romans*, like *1 Peter*, commands each of us to use our gift in ministry. That's electrifying! We each have a gift, the source of which is the omnipotent Lord of glory, and he expects us to employ that holy gift in divinely significant service. Seeded within you is a divine endowment for ministry; a time-bomb set to shower everyone near you with the glory of God.

God's opinion of our abilities far exceeds what most of us would dare imagine. Through you, the sovereign Lord wants to express his divinity, reveal his splendor and rescue a needy world – through your hands, your words, your personality. He longs to release you into all you were born for – Creator and creature working in union to accomplish the impossible. If within you there is any inadequacy, anything obstructing you from illustrious service, any genuine reason for feeling inferior, it was not put there by the Omnipotent One and he longs to brush it aside so that you can display his beauty. With your Lord insurmountable barriers dissolve into spider's webs.

You may feel incapable of significantly contributing to the body of Christ; doomed to eke out a bleak existence on heaven's unemployment line. But you now have sound scriptural authority for rejecting these notions as simply unpleasant, deceptive feelings.

Subjective Assurance

A yearning for ministry can be tortuously manipulated by Satan. It can frustrate us and leave us feeling painfully unfulfilled. Nonetheless, its existence is yet another proof that God has a ministry lined up for us.

The Lord has written a blank check for his children: 'Keep asking,^f and you shall receive . . .'^g That's his holy vow to you – the unbreakable promise of the unchangeable Lord. Our sole requirement is to keep asking. The only way our Savior could constrain us without desecrating his sacred oath would be by curbing our desires so that we don't keep asking. The mere existence of a strong desire indicates that its fulfillment is inevitable, if it drives us to persist in relentless faith and prayer.

Our loving Father is not in the business of frustrating his children. He not only delights in granting our hearts' desires,^h he probably gave us those desires in the first place.

Not every whim is from God. (I might not end up a millionaire after all.) However, the longer our lives have been surrendered to God, the greater the certainty that our incessant yearnings are not self-generated, but of divine origin.

As we yield to him, our Maker and Savior molds our passions to fit, with increasing snugness, the ministry we were born for.ⁱ And if he has placed the longing within us, he will bring it to fruition.

^a Romans 8:32

^b A few verses earlier, Paul linked grace with the 'unsearchable riches of Christ.' (Ephesians 3:8)

^c See for example, Colossians 1:29; Ephesians 3:20

^d 1 Peter 4:10

^e Romans 12:5-8

^f ' . . . present tense, which indicates continuous, persistent prayer.' – France, p 144, confirmed by Hendriksen, p 362, Gaebelien, p 186, Amplified Bible, etc. Proof that this is exactly what Jesus meant is found in the context in which it appears in Luke (Luke 11:5-10) and further supported by his parable in Luke 18:1-8.

^g Matthew 7:7

^h Psalm 37:4; 145:19; John 16:24

ⁱ Compare 1 Kings 8:57-58; Ezra 1:5; 7:27; Psalm 141:4; Proverbs 21:1

A MINISTRY GUARANTEED

In the words of Paul, ‘God . . . works in you, both to will and to work of his good pleasure.’^a God activates his work by the detonation of a desire divinely planted within you (a ‘will’) and it culminates in a supernatural empowering to attain that desire (a ‘work’). The Spirit imbeds in your desires his blueprint for your life, then slowly, powerfully builds it into the concrete of your life.

Says John Haggai, ‘If God has put a desire in your heart, accept the presence of the desire as his oath that it can be realized . . .’⁴

Pure motives – not seeking ministry to gain prestige or an easier life – provide confirmation that God is behind our longings. Many people would be elated if offered a good wage to spend forty hours a week worshipping, praying, enjoying Christian music and receiving Bible teaching. Yet give them an iphone and a trucking job where they can do these things while driving . . . The romance vanishes – along with the queue wanting the job.

Are we itching to serve, only because we have barely scratched the surface in assessing the personal cost?

I refer often in this book to success and fulfillment, not to pander an addiction to smug feelings but because, for genuine Christians, success and fulfillment are inseparably linked with the exaltation of God. They are therefore worth enormous sacrifice.

‘When God uses you,’ warned Bob Mumford, you’ll feel used.’

Jacob labored seven hard years for the woman of his dreams, only to find at the end of his stint that if he still wanted her, as many arduous years of labor lay ahead of him as he thought he faced at the very beginning. Reeling under that sickening blow, he could easily have yielded to despair or fury. But cruelly tricked or not, he reckoned his dream worthy of the cost.^b

We should long for a ministry as a woman longs for a child, knowing it will involve anguish and intense commitment as well as joy and satisfaction. If you think Bible heroes had a ball, you are right, but you’ll never win the spelling bee. They had a bawl so often they needed waterproof ink to write the Bible. Remember Jeremiah, the town crier? If he wasn’t filling buckets over his nation’s plight, he was howling over the ministry heaven had landed him with.^c If Jeremiah was a real stick-in-the-mud in the bottom of a hole,^d Paul – going to sleep a stone’s throw from death^e – had rocks in his head. He made many a hasty exit and some people genuinely missed him. Others were more accurate. From the outset he knew persecution would shadow his ministry.^f Tears and trials were his constant companions.^g Isaiah, from the moment of his call, knew his generation would reject his message.^h Abraham had to endure the agony of almost killing his own flesh and blood. Jeremiah was not allowed a wife, let alone children.ⁱ Ezekiel was not permitted to mourn the death of his darling.^j Hosea was condemned to heart-break, commanded by heaven to marry an adulteress.^k Like Gideon, many faced such danger that it took all they had not to cower in terror. Isaiah had to strip and wander in public with his body exposed year after year.^l Many had to suffer not just constant humiliation, but physical torment and a horrible death. Not surprisingly, in the prime of their ministries, suicide seemed attractive to not only Job, but to Moses, Elijah, Jonah and Jeremiah.^m Hoping for the milk of human kindness, all they got was stiff cheese. Yet each soldiered on, so proving the purity of their motives.

If their resolve mirrors your urge to serve, you’re on target.

I once heard a beautiful man of God ably expound how love for people must be our motivation for ministry. He was wrong. Though love for others towers above selfish desires, it is still inferior motivation.

How would you like Isaiah’s call?

‘Go, tell this people, Hear indeed, but understand not; and see indeed, but perceive not.

^a Philippians 2:13

^b Genesis 29:18-27

^c E.g. Jeremiah 9:1,10; 15:10,15,18; 20:7-10,18

^d Jeremiah 38:6

^e Acts 14:19

^f Acts 9:15-16

^g Acts 20:19 ff

^h Isaiah 6:9-10

ⁱ Jeremiah 16:2

^j Ezekiel 24:16-18

^k Hosea 1:2; 3:1-3

^l Isaiah 20:2-4

^m Job 3; Numbers 11:15; 1 Kings 19:4; Jeremiah 20:7-10,14-18; Jonah 4:8

Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they . . . convert and be healed.^a

Love for God must be our obsession.

Additional confirmation of our hopes often comes from people recognizing that God has given us gifts appropriate for what we suspect is our calling. By itself this test is not infallible. We'll meet people in this book who achieved though no one saw their potential, and we'll discover that God is not beyond by-passing a talent. Nevertheless, the presence or absence of a gift discernible to other people is often a useful clue.

Bringing it Together

If you have abandoned control of your life, casting it upon Christ, you are being divinely groomed for missions of eternal significance as Almighty God's co-worker. The specifics may be hazy, but as you look to God, a future, fulfilling ministry is guaranteed.

'Yea, and soya milk comes from Chinese cows,' I almost hear you say. My words are like gems – hard to swallow. The more you need this book the less believable it will seem. Our thoughts have flowed in the one direction for so long that changing them takes enormous commitment. Let's review the reasons for making bold statements about your future service.

Your Maker will give you a ministry for eight irrefutable reasons:

☆ His Word declares it.^b

☆ It is in his best interest.^c

☆ You were created and redeemed for it.^d God has staked his Son's life on your success.

☆ The church needs it.^e

☆ The primary function of his Word and his ministers is to endow you for it.^f

☆ He has bound himself to granting your heart's desire.^g

☆ He loves you and longs to bless you in every conceivable way.^h

☆ He has commanded you to minister.ⁱ

So powerful are these reasons that any one of them is sufficient to make ministry certain.

Why Are You Anxious About Ministry?

Consider the vines of the vineyard,

How they grow;

They neither toil nor strive,

Yet, I tell you,

Even man with all his technology

Cannot produce fruit like one of these.

If God so fruits the vine,

Which today is alive

And tomorrow is cast into the fire,

Will he not more surely

Produce fruit in your life,

O you of little faith?

So do not fret, saying:

'How shall I achieve something worthwhile?'

Or, 'How shall I leave my mark on this world?'

For after such fulfillment the heathen crave,

And your heavenly Father knows your need of it.

^a Isaiah 6:9-10

^b 1 Peter 4:10

^c John 15:8

^d John 15:16, Romans 7:4; Ephesians 2:8-10; Titus 2:14

^e 1 Corinthians 12:21-26

^f 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Ephesians 4:12

^g Romans 8:32; Psalm 37:4; Matthew 7:11

^h 1 John 3:16; 4:10; Ephesians 1:3; Romans 8:35-39

ⁱ Romans 12:5-8; 1 Peter 4:10

Who among you,
When your son asks if he can help,
Would always spurn his offers?
Or, if he wants to achieve something worthwhile,
Would you let him waste his life,
Rather than help him succeed?
If you then, being evil,
Know how to love your children,
How much more shall your Father in heaven
Give a ministry to those who seek it.

‘Abide in Me . . .
And you shall bear much fruit . . .
And My Father shall be glorified.’^a

The Exception

I know what you’re thinking. There must be exceptions. All right, have your way. Create in your mind someone incapable of ministry. Make him unable to read, write or speak.

‘What about sign language?’ you ask. Okay, rule that out too. Just to be sure, we’ll imagine he is blind and suffers severe mental retardation. If you insist, we’ll say he’s had these limitations since birth.

You want to pile on even more disabilities? This is ridiculous. How about making him spastic – so handicapped he can’t even wriggle out of bed by himself? Maybe he could use his hands. We had better make him incapable of even holding a spoon.

By now we have surely blocked every possibility. He can’t read, write, talk, sign or see; unable even to think straight or move properly. We have created in our imagination a hideously handicapped person utterly incapable of ministry, right? Hogwash. I’ve been describing Leslie Lemke, a man so powerfully used of God that you have probably heard of him. Steve Bergelin – who has worked with Bob Hope, Robert Schuller, Paul Harvey and many others – claims to have seen no one touch an audience the way Leslie does.⁵

After sixteen years with not a glint of the most rudimentary potential for any ministry, Leslie was suddenly empowered to play the piano. Using fingers incapable of the simplest task, he played intricate pieces like a professional. Later, years before he could speak, he began to sing. He need only hear a piece once before he can reproduce it flawlessly, with skillful embellishments. He’s now world-famous and has been instrumental in leading many to the Lord.

Robert Reed’s speech is slurred. He has twisted hands and useless feet. By himself he cannot bathe, eat, brush teeth, comb his hair or put on his underwear.

He is a missionary in Portugal.

Bob Byers, besides being tormented by total blindness and poor hearing, was so paralyzed that not only was he completely immobilized below the neck, his front teeth had to be extracted to force liquefied food past his locked jaw. He could not read, write, see or move. You could fill a chapter detailing fundamental things this man could not do, but you could fill a book with things this founder of *Mission to the Blind Overseas* achieved for the glory of God.⁶

Ministry is for everyone. Don’t ever let Satan call you an exception.

A mental asylum inmate grabbed a canvas and painted some flowers. In his saner days he had attempted theological studies and missionary work. He apparently failed at both. Added to this was the torment of repeated failures at romantic love. Now he was attempting to paint. He seemed to like the result. But who could appreciate the product of a twisted mind? Can a tortured soul produce beauty?

^a John 15:5,8

A MINISTRY GUARANTEED

In 1987 a canvas changed hands. It fetched \$US 53.9 million – a world record for any painting. The previous record belonged to another painting by that same impoverished man. A third work of his changed hands for \$US 20.2 million.

Obviously, the artist is now famous. But do not let van Gogh's present-day fame blind you to the fact that those treasured works of art are by a mental patient who died in obscurity; a luckless madman who suicided after living only half his life.

From humanity's sludge comes the finest gold.

It would take quite a library to detail the achievements of spiritual giants like Catherine Booth, Frances Havergal, Charlotte Elliott, David Livingstone and Amy Carmichael weighed down by chronic health problems; of Christians like Alexander Cruden and William Cowper afflicted by bouts of insanity; and of the legions like Gladys Aylward^a who with God soared above their intellectual limitations.

Or are you too ordinary? That's another myth we'll sink before this book ends.

Every physical and mental barrier to ministry crumbles at the name of Jesus.

^a It is speculated that Miss Aylward had 'a profound learning disability' – Tucker (1), p 249

CHAPTER 4: NOT THE FAILURE YOU THOUGHT

Many of our hurts and frustrations can be traced to three misconceptions:

1. Unless we have a ministry, we are of little value
2. A fulfilling ministry may forever elude us
3. Only a few types of service are of real worth.

Having exploded the first two myths, it's time for number three. It has been left until last because it could lull us into mediocrity unless we realize that a craving for a particular ministry is probably of divine origin. We must grasp the new truth without loosening our grip on the others. I don't want you settling for less than the best. The problem is, worldly views are so bewitching that we may not even recognize the best. After facing this critical issue we will be ready to plunge into another major section of the book: grappling with reasons why ministries get delayed.

The Stick-Holding Ministry

Come with me to Rephidim. Join a rabble of run-away slaves trudging through the scorched terrain. The Israelites have just escaped Pharaoh's sword. Sinai still lies ahead. They are barely organized and not yet hardened to desert conditions. Some are nearing exhaustion. Dazed by arid bleakness, they plod in eerie silence.

Suddenly, from the rear a blood-curdling shriek splits the desert stillness. Still reeling, your ears are hit by an escalating babble of anguished cries, bleating sheep, shouted orders and pounding hooves. Swords glisten through the swirling dust. Arrows darken the skies. Blood stains the ground.

The fierce Amalekites have attacked.

With agonizing slowness, Israel's fighting men try to regroup. The fate of the nation rests with them. Or so it seems.

An elderly man clambers up a near-by hill, a staff in his hands. Reaching the summit, he holds his staff aloft. You know the story. The key to Israel's survival was that little old man on the hill, right? Wrong.

The octogenarian quickly tired. The staff began to lower. Immediately, the Amalekites gained the advantage. Israel was staring defeat in the face. Someone hastily found a rock for Moses to sit on and ushered him to it. Instantly, the battle turned. An usher had saved the day.

If that's the first time God used an usher, he was merely setting a precedent. It's been repeated times without number.^a

Before long, however, Moses' arms began to tire. The battle had barely started. Israel was doomed. Then someone had a brainwave – hardly einsteinian, but on it hung the new nation's very existence. Why not support the old man's arms? This they did. It was they, as much as big-shot Moses and muscle-bound Joshua who saved Israel. An entire nation was indebted to two men helping an old man hold a stick.^b

'Anyone could do that!' you object. 'Who'd applaud such a lightweight act?' How distorted our thinking is. We, not heaven, are the ones who exalt trivia. Do seraphim turn cartwheels when the latest sports sensation kicks or hits a piece of leather? Do angels drool when a shapely distribution of body fat saunters by, or sigh in envy at a billionaire's greed?

^a James 2:2-13 hints at the importance of this under-rated ministry.

^b Exodus 17:8-13; Deuteronomy 25:17-18

NOT THE FAILURE YOU THOUGHT

Neither is God awed by the nature of the gift he has given us – it's his anyway. Whether our ability is rare or common is of no consequence to God's evaluation of our worth.

With the Almighty pulsing within you, a stunning victory, an earth-shaking sermon, the sweetest music, are no more beyond your grasp than polishing the church floor. All that matters is what particular privilege the Lord gives you. (And all service is a privilege.)

Without God, nothing is significant; with him, nothing is insignificant.^a

A Cup of Water?

Now for some free verse – no one would pay for it.

I can't evangelize or speak;
Can't even wash people's feet.
I sing like a sea-sick crow.
When I arrive, people go.
As a shepherd I'd lose the sheep.
When I pray, heaven falls asleep.
No one could be
So useless as me.
I can do nothing at all.
Life for me is so sinister -
(Pardon while I answer this call.)

Yes, Mr. President – er – Prime Minister.
Have you read any more of the Bible?
Yes, I'll pray for revival.
The prince wants to see me on Sunday,
I could squeeze you in on Monday . . .

What was I saying before that call?
O now I remember it all!
No one could be
So useless as me.
I can do nothing at all.

You're sure you're achieving nothing, but I wonder if heaven finds your lamentations a bigger joke than my poetry. There are no angelic chuckles over your pain – heaven weeps – but how laughable is your logic? (Jesus said nothing about having the *brains* of a mustard seed.) How oblivious are you to your triumphs? There are a thousand important ways of serving besides the few that at present get all the attention.

Take hospitality. Though Scripture exalts this prized ministry, we downgrade it.^b It has been both received,^c and engaged in, by such glorious beings as angels^d and even Christ himself.^e A cup of water offered in love? We might despise it. Heaven doesn't.^f

Of all the people Elijah could have gone to during the famine, he sought the ministry of a hopelessly impoverished widow – and a Gentile one at that. Her ministry of hospitality was so precious to the Lord that he turned it into a spectacular miracle.^g

Of course, we're too spiritual to regard dressmaking as a beautiful ministry. We're more spiritual than God! Read the touching story of the raising to life of Dorcas.^h We are left with the impression that her needlework warmed the heart of God. Sewing can be a chore, a chance to boast,

^a Job 36:5; John 15:5

^b For example, 2 Kings 4:8-17; Job 31:32; Isaiah 58:6-7; Acts 16:15; Romans 12:13; 16:23; 1 Timothy 5:10; 1 Peter 4:9-10; 3 John 5-8; and many others

^c Genesis 18:1-8; 19:1-3; Luke 7:44-46; 24:29-31; Hebrews 13:2

^d 1 Kings 19:5-8

^e John 13:4-5; 21:9-13

^f Matthew 10:40-42

^g 1 Kings 17:10-24; Luke 4:25-26

^h Acts 9:36,39

or an opportunity to bless. You know this lady's choice. The world may miss it, but whenever God sees a twentieth century Dorcas, beauty is in the eye of a needle.

Amid the throng that flocked to Jesus was a select band. Early in Luke's Gospel we read of them. There was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and many others, who materially supported Jesus and his disciples.^a Luke had already drawn attention to Jesus' mother, whose incessant labors for her son must have been as immense as those of most of mothers. Their ranks swelled to include Martha, her sister, and probably many more. One of them wove his seamless robe. Another perfumed his feet. Some cooked his meals. Others gave from their purse. Precious ministries. When things got so tough that even Christ's most loyal followers fell away, the world beheld these women's glory and the majesty of their seemingly mundane ministry. They were with their Master to the last, comforting and supporting him. They prepared his body and visited his grave; serving when everyone else had given up. No wonder it was to them that the risen Lord first appeared.

Even today there are treasured saints who cook Christ's meals, wash his clothes and nurse him through sickness. They take the homeless into their homes. They clothe derelicts. They hug AIDS patients. 'Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it to me.'^b

We are forever overlooking the joys of apparently menial tasks. When Jesus turned water into wine, the master of ceremonies was oblivious to the miracle. He didn't even know it had once been water. 'But the servants who had drawn the water knew.'^c

Heaven is as moved by Miss Nameless cleaning vomit from a drunk, as by Rev. Bigstar preaching the greatest sermon ever heard.

'How do you do manage to do the work of two men?' David Livingstone asked C. H. Spurgeon.

'You have forgotten there are two of us,' replied the preacher, thinking of his wife, '*and the one you see the least of often does the most work.*'^d

This rule extends far beyond the Spurgeons.

I expect the upper echelons of heaven to be dominated by women. Though things are slowly changing, historically it has been women who are the great servers, the kingdom's unseen, unthanked power. The last shall be first.^e

Sacred Service Agents

When the church appointed its first deacons, they were looking for people to distribute welfare. Nothing about the task was essentially spiritual. In theory, trustworthy pagans could have done it. Yet the early church carefully selected Christians of outstanding caliber. Each was of high character, 'full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom'.^f One of them, Stephen, was further eulogized as being filled with faith, grace and power. He had a 'signs and wonders ministry', and under the Spirit's anointing was such a persuasive speaker that the church's enemies regarded him, rather than any of the apostles, as their greatest threat.^g Not only was he martyred (an honor I have graciously offered to defer), he attained this glory before any of the others. Another welfare distributor, Philip, was a powerful evangelist with a miracle ministry. He pioneered work in Samaria, turning the whole city right side up.^h Such were the men chosen to oversee the material needs of widows. So the divinely authorized history of the early church inspires us to esteem seemingly unspiritual administrative work as exalted service. How easy it is to underestimate a ministry.

I fear lest I fail to extol the most trivial act. Since doing the little we can to cheer hurting Christians is equivalent to cheering Christ himself,ⁱ to down-play such acts is to slight the King of kings. Moreover, a large part of Jesus' earthly ministry was that of a servant.^j So in this sense, too, to regard a servant's ministry as inferior, is to insult our Lord. Of course, the risen Christ left his

^a Luke 8:1-3

^b Matthew 25:40

^c John 2:9

^d Matthew 20:16; Mark 9:35; 10:43-44

^e Acts 6:3

^f Acts 6:5,8,10 ff

^g Acts 8:5-13

^h Matthew 10:40-42; 25:35-40

ⁱ Matthew 20:28; Luke 22:27; John 13:4-5

servant duties behind with his grave clothes. Or did he? As John's gospel closes we catch our final glimpse of the triumphant Lord of glory, and what is he doing? Cooking the disciples' breakfast.^a

In fact, Jesus taught that the supposedly lowly ministry of a servant is the route, not to obscurity, but to undying greatness.^b

Levites were the tabernacle's cleaners, laborers, caretakers and door-keepers. Their tasks were the type people queue up to avoid. Yet not even prophets were recipients of holy tithes, like the Levites.^c Priests, whose duties were even more sacred, surrendered their lives to the odious drudgery of butchering livestock – beast after beast after beast. Even kings, on pain of death, were barred from priestly duties. It is almost as if the tasks we are inclined to disregard are the ones God chooses to exalt.^d

Put bluntly, the main reason we undervalue many important ministries is worldliness. The world looks for human recognition.^e We do lip service, for example, to the power of prayer, yet view an evangelist basking in the limelight more favorably than the prayer-wrestler hidden in the back room. We exalt the virile missionary and sneer at the withered old lady whose paltry dollars God multiplied to carry that missionary to the field. If we're blinded by carnality, heaven isn't. To measure success in terms of human acclaim is to serve man, not God.

The most powerful ministry is probably intercession. And the world's greatest intercessor could be the 'no-body' sitting next to you in church last Sunday. Only the spirit-realm comprehends what Christ's sacred service agents accomplish behind closed doors and behind enemy lines.

Satan's Slander

At church, it's usually the car-park attendants who most inspire me. Most of us would make faithful preachers. We'd be prayerful, punctual and well-prepared if called to flaunt our talent in a flashy ministry. But how many of us would have the humility and strength of character to be faithful church parking attendants? Their task makes flossing your teeth high adventure. I'd feel like a second-hand Kleenex.^f With a face so long it gets caught in my belt, I'd be the constant brunt of Satan's malicious whisperings that this service is just too degrading and embarrassing; that I must be the scum of the church. Could I successfully resist such slander? How I admire those saints, those Christ-like overcomers, every Sunday.

We are all subject to the Deceiver's relentless barrage. If he fails to intoxicate us with pride, he'll do all he can to induce a downer – maligning our ministry, telling us we are contributing nothing to the kingdom. Either way, surrendering to his persuasive lies will impair God's work.

Imagine the consequences if in the midst of the battle Moses' helpers had said, 'I can't fight like Joshua. I can't lead like Moses. I can't sing like Miriam, or engrave like Bezaleel. I'm just a run-away slave. Whoever heard of a stick-holding ministry! Life's passed me by. Forget that stupid stick, I'm going back to my tent!'

Don't conclude that God doesn't have more spectacular things in store for you. What you are doing right now, however, is probably far more valuable and potentially more satisfying than you realize. You may be the only Christian presence in your work place, the only mother that precious child will ever have, the only one praying for that forgotten man, or the only one willing to encourage that person of unknown potential.

Lost in prayer, David Brainerd did not see the reared rattlesnake poised to strike his face. Watching wide-eyed with glee, were hate-crazed savages who had snuck up to the tent for the express purpose of murdering him. Unexpectedly, the snake suddenly veered and slid away. The Red Indians also silently retreated, awed by the snake's reaction and intent upon spreading the word about this pale-face who so clearly had the Great Spirit's protection. Oblivious to the entire episode, David broke camp and continued his journey.² Yes, that was unusually dramatic, but are you any less ignorant of what takes place in the unseen spirit-world and within the sealed vault of people's minds as you go about your normal affairs with the touch of God upon your life?

^a John 21:9-13

^b Matthew 20:27; Luke 22:26; John 13:12-17

^c Numbers 18:21-23

^d Luke 16:15

^e Compare Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18; 23:2-12, 27-18; Luke 6:22-26

^f Registered trademark

What was the greatest event in human history? Jesus' death. Yet in a sense, it was nothing. People wanted him killed; he let them. It was no epic of human endurance. He even failed to drag his cross the required distance. There was no display of artistic skill. Other religions find it offensive. Intellectuals ridicule it.^a Yet, in God, it is of incalculable worth.

Since we are sufficiently enlightened to view Jesus' ministry as God sees it, let's endeavor to be equally enlightened about our own service.

The church has a million unsung heroes. Their exploits, unknown on earth, are the talk of heaven. These resolute, Christ-like conquerors cannot be bought. They refuse to trade eternal acclaim for temporal applause. Heaven's megastars may be so inconspicuous, you'd think they're in training for the Pew Warmer of the Year Award. No one would guess the shock-waves they send through Satan's camp when these spiritual gladiators plunder his kingdom. Everyone scrambles to be in the limelight, except these saints: they *are* light – the light of the world.

The 'full-Time Ministry' Myth

We tend to think that for a ministry to be of real value it must be full-time. As every praise-loving Pharisee knows, full-time positions are the status symbols of today's church. Yet not even the apostle Paul had a full-time ministry.^b I can conceive of no greater ministry than that of this tent-maker. I imagine that in his era, financial independence would have demanded particularly long hours, but that's the path he chose. Scripture records his conviction that a part-time (i.e. self-supporting) ministry is, if anything, superior to a full-time one.^c

In fact, it was not apostolic work, but tent-making that was Paul's special love-gift to God. He seemed to regard his manual labor as his sole triumph, his only free-will offering to God and the church. Supporting himself, unlike his lengthy prayers, study, sermons, visitations, hardships, beatings, and so on, was his one opportunity to toil beyond the call of duty, the one thing particularly worthy of praise and eternal reward.^d If that seems overstated, listen to the man himself. Read 1 Corinthians 9:14-18. You may well conclude that I have toned down the significance Paul attached to being self-supporting.

Not all attempts to earn a living reach these lofty peaks. It applied to Paul because he had both the opportunity and right not to support himself. Nevertheless, it scuttles the assumption that full-time ministry is the pinnacle of Christian service.

If I end up in full-time Christian work, it will probably be due to weakness – my inability to keep two things going – rather than a mark of achievement. Full-time ministry is usually valid and scriptural, but it is a serious mistake to regard part-time as inferior. Perhaps a stout case could even be made for the superiority of part-time ministry, but I question whether it is God-like to indulge in such comparisons. It is worth noting, however, that those who give their services without charge, have a second ministry – the important ministry of giving.^e This second ministry was so important to Paul that to attain it he even forfeited his right to a wife and family.^f

We have missed something significant if we imagine Scripture views the financing of one's ministry as unusual. We cannot be sure whether the financial arrangements of Paul and his companion apostles placed them in a minority *amongst apostles*.^g For most Christians, however, Paul considered his approach to be the norm. Indeed, one of his stated reasons for supporting himself was to establish a pattern that he expected his converts to emulate.^h He even expected church leaders to

^a 1 Corinthians 1:23

^b Acts 18:3-4; 2 Corinthians 12:14-15

^c 1 Corinthians 9:11-18

^d Compare Luke 17:10

^e Romans 12:6-8

^f In 1 Corinthians 9:5, Paul speaks of remaining single in the context of not being a financial burden to the church. Had the church given him an average wage, he could have supported a family, given his children lots of attention, and still have more time for apostolic work than his part-time work allowed. To financially support a family himself, however, he would have had to double or treble his tent-making hours.

^g When raising this matter in *Corinthians*, Paul wrote not just of himself but 'we' (1 Corinthians 9:11-12), a term which presumably included at least Barnabas (1 Corinthians 9:6). Probably most or all of Paul's subsequent missionary companions did the same (and some of these apparently gained the title of apostle – Acts 14:4,14; 1 Thessalonians 2:6, note also Romans 16:7). After Pentecost, most of the original twelve apostles quickly fade from Scripture. So we know little about the financial affairs of the apostles who did not accompany Paul. We do know, however, that for Jewish rabbis to provide for themselves by means of a trade was an established theoretical ideal (Edersheim, p 189-190; Barclay (3) p 88).

^h 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9

follow his financial example.^a ‘Make it your ambition,’ wrote Paul on another occasion, ‘. . . to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that . . . you will not be dependent upon anybody.’^b Over and over again, Paul’s instructions abound with such exhortations.^c

The Lost Weapon

A Christian leader flew from America to Calcutta to put an extraordinary proposition to missionary Mark Buntain. Mark, who was approaching his sixties, was offered what his daughter called a ‘fantastic’ salary *for life* plus an expensive house in the United States. In return, he would be asked to devote the rest of his life to prayer.³

Let that haunt you for a moment and join me in *1 Timothy*.

I used to be perplexed by Paul’s guidelines for the selection of widows financially supported by the church.^d In general, Paul favored widows remarrying.^e So why, for these widows, was remarriage regarded as a broken vow?^f Why was as much scrutiny given to their character and past service as to their material need?^g The requirements read like the selection criteria for deaconesses, not welfare cases. And why were the ‘real’ widows those who pray night and day?^h After years of bewilderment, the pieces suddenly fitted: these elderly ladies were more than charity recipients, they were the church’s paid staff, devoted – like Anna in the templeⁱ – to the ministry of prayer, with perhaps other duties as well. That’s why such high standards were expected. That’s why marriage would interfere.

Intercession is no frolic through the daisies. In parts of the globe wars rage to determine whether multitudes will be dominated by Islam. I shudder. I would rather be killed than kill. Yet, as I contemplate the horrors soldiers endure in order to kill, I wonder what I should be willing to suffer, battling in prayer for the liberation of souls. That’s the gutsy ministry entrusted to women we might have thought had past their usefulness. The very class who today are perhaps most tempted to view themselves as worthless, formed the early church’s prized power-house.

If I remain diligent, I, too, will have a full-time ministry when I retire. Like widows with children,^j I probably won’t receive my finance from the church, but that makes it no less a valid, full-time ministry. While everyone else has one foot in the grave and the other caught in the hearse’s door, I could be mightily used of God. They could be my most productive years. Or does God only use widows?

‘Full-Time’ Missionaries and Other Fables

Many of us have highly romanticized views of full-time service.

Until foiled by ill-health, I was briefly engaged in supposedly full-time Christian work with a missionary organization. The position was available only to select Bible college graduates. Like most of the permanent staff, my duties consisted entirely of clerical and store work. The only thing differentiating me from a secular worker was my almost non-existent pay-pocket. (Don’t tell the unions.) Theoretically, I could have taken a normal well-paid job and financially supported a non-Christian to do my ‘missionary’ work. The result would have been identical.

Even front-line missionaries often can reside in foreign countries only by working as full-time nurses, school teachers, agricultural advisers, and the like. Their time for evangelism, prayer or Bible teaching is severely curtailed.

The ‘part-time’ nature of missionary enterprise was evident long before visa restrictions. As Livingstone trudged across Africa on his great explorations, he obviously had little time for church work. His goal was to open the way for other missionaries. Prior to this, however, he had established

^a Acts 20:34-35

^b 1 Thessalonians 4:11, NIV

^c 2 Corinthians 9:10-11; Ephesians 4:28; 1 Thessalonians 5:14. The strongly worded passage in 2 Thessalonians 3: 6-14 is particularly worthy of study.

^d 1 Timothy 5:3-16

^e 1 Timothy 5:14

^f 1 Timothy 5:11-12

^g 1 Timothy 5:7,9

^h 1 Timothy 5:5-7

ⁱ Luke 2:36-38

^j 1 Timothy 5:4,8,16

a mission station and spent several years there. David described a typical busy day during this phase of his life ‘to let you know a cause of sorrow I have that so little of my time is devoted to real missionary work’.⁴

From 1732, Moravian mission stations were established in the Virgin Islands, Greenland, North America, Lapland, South America and Africa in the space of just four years. In two decades they sent out more missionaries than all of Protestantism had produced in the two entire centuries prior to their involvement. (You may recall that Moravian missionaries profoundly influenced the still-unregenerate John and Charles Wesley.) One in sixty Moravians was a missionary. One in five thousand is the Protestant norm. A master key to this phenomenal achievement was that Moravian missionaries were self-supporting lay people. They believed that monetary donations could never adequately fund world evangelism. Their crafts and business pursuits not only released them into the mission field, but tended to upgrade the economy of their adopted country.⁵

Dr. Gutzlaff, a gifted man of considerable wealth and influence, pioneered the evangelization of remote parts of China. This he did, not as a revered emissary borne on coolies’ shoulders, but working on a Chinese junk as a cook or a sailor.⁶

For much of his time in India, William Carey supported not only himself, but other missionaries through secular work.

Dr. Paul Brand’s most valuable contribution to suffering humanity is unquestionably his leprosy research. Yet though he was a full-time medical missionary, this research, especially during the critical early period, had to be restricted to his almost non-existent spare time, forcing him to work till near exhaustion.⁷

Missionaries are devoted Christians who speak the local language worse than a six-year-old. They stand out from the crowd because they look funny. Other than that, if we share their zeal and sacrificial dedication, their lives often differ little from our own.

Let’s move closer to home.

The following revelation has not been officially cleared by the CIA but I think I can safely leak a few details. I was a spy using electronic surveillance. Almost. Because I’m a lay person (I spend most of my life in bed) they wouldn’t let me attend a pastor’s conference, but I got my hot hands on a tape. I was staggered by what that tape revealed. Would you believe many pastors long for retirement when they can finally get involved in ‘real’ ministry?

Pastor Bigwig works seventy hours a week. With travelling time, administrative duties, and so on deducted, we find that only about thirty hours are given to essentially ‘spiritual’ tasks. Miss Smallfry, on the other hand, in addition to her secular work, devotes hours to prayer, Bible study, church attendance, helping various church departments, witnessing at work and to neighbors and friends. In fact, if she added it up it would sometimes total thirty hours a week. The difference between these people is ninety per cent illusion.

I clash swords not with those who praise Bigwig, but with those who fail to praise Smallfry. In my view, Miss Smallfry emerges from her prayer-closet as Supersaint. Cleverly disguised as a mild-mannered reporter, bank-teller or whatever, she’s more powerful than a hoard of demons, able to move tall mountains with a single prayer. For her Lord she talks faster than a locomotive, bends hardened souls with her bare faith, in a never-ending fight for Truth – Jesus, the only Way.

Sacred or Secular?

There is a further possibility, and it is so foreign to me that I give it less attention than it deserves. For some chosen individuals, seemingly secular work is full-time ministry.

What differentiates the sacred from the secular is not the task but the call. Perhaps you cannot fully appreciate this because you have a different destiny. Beware, however, lest you belittle a divine call on someone else’s life. To degrade a call is to degrade the Caller.

For me, writing is often pure worship. With a heart fused to Christ, I pour my life into this book in a flood of adoration to the One who means everything to me. Yet try as I may, I have failed to hoist my full-time job a fraction above the status of infuriating distraction. Had God fashioned me differently, however, I could express my devotion differently. It might, for instance, be in factory work that I feel impelled to vent my love, seeking to exalt my Lord in the quality of the labor I joyously offer to him.

NOT THE FAILURE YOU THOUGHT

It is not organ music, stained glass or living off other people's money that makes a task sacred. The sacred is no less and no more than that labor instigated by the Lord of lords, produced in union with his Spirit, and offered to him in joyful submission, faith, love and purity. That's why Scripture fails to denigrate even the sweat of a slave, when offered to God by a heart redeemed by Christ. A slave sold to a heathen tyrant could be engaged in inspiring full-time ministry, serving Christ with holy devotion and fulfillment while toiling for a cruel and godless man. Like other ministries, however, it would necessitate a special call and a miraculous work of Christ to reach these heights.

CHAPTER 5: GOD'S RADICAL VIEWS

It is common in our society to refer to one's leaders as 'superiors'. No wonder we fall for the lie that some vocations are superior. This delusion has so fogged our thinking that it would seem to require thousands of words to clear our minds. Yet just one sentence from Andrew Carnegie's epitaph almost does it. This man started working for two cents an hour and ended up giving away \$365 million. His leadership ability was the key. Before he died he ensured his tombstone read:

'Here lies one who knew how to gather around him men who were cleverer than himself.'¹

When referring to the leaders and big names of the Jerusalem church, Paul wrote:

'... those who seem to be something – whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man -'^a

Let the truth overwhelm you: Paul was writing about the so-called pillars of the church, including Peter, James and John.^b He had in mind the most intimate friends of Jesus when divinely moved to declare that God has no favorites.

Try the Amplified Bible:

'... those who were reputed to be something, though what was their individual position and whether they really were of importance or not makes no difference to me; God is not impressed with the positions that men hold and he is not partial and recognizes no external distinctions.'

One more time, remembering that Paul was referring to apostles ranked with the greatest and most spiritually gifted leaders the church has ever known:

'... as far as their reputed leaders were concerned (I neither know nor care what their exact position was: God is not impressed with a man's office) ...'²

And what of the great apostle himself? Paul reminded the Corinthians that he preached Jesus as Lord and himself, not merely as *Christ's* servant but as *their* slave/servant.^c Burn that into your brain.

Prominence in the church – even God-ordained prominence – does not imply prominence in the heart of God. Not even apostleship breaks this immutable rule.

Except perhaps for a malfunctioning part of our body, our hair usually receives more attention than any other physical part of us, even though it is the least important. This paradox, insisted Paul, is typical of the way God deliberately arranges honor, prominence and attention among the members of his church.^d

Leadership is valuable, but there are a multitude of ministries of equal significance.

It is our carnal side that covets leadership. Few of us display the spirit of Francis of Assisi. When his followers had swollen to thousands they began to abandon his principles. He returned from Egypt to find that the men he had left in charge were forbidding the eating of meat and allowing the ownership of goods. His response to those wanting to usurp his authority was to humbly relinquish leadership of the order he had founded. The Friars selected another leader, to whom Francis submitted as a common brother. Even on his death-bed, some eight years later, Francis bowed to his 'superior's' directive that he stop singing and face death in a more 'dignified' manner.³

^a Galatians 2:6, NKJV

^b Galatians 2:9

^c 2 Corinthians 4:5 – note also 1 Corinthians 3:4-7

^d 1 Corinthians 12:23-25

Centuries later, George Whitefield, declared, 'I know my place . . . even to be servant of all.'⁴ Whitefield was the powerful founder of the Methodist movement. Today he is rarely credited with this honor. To foster love and unity between his followers and Wesley's he abandoned his leadership rights and turned the entire ministry over to Wesley. To his horrified supporters he said, 'Let my name be forgotten, let me be trodden under the feet of all men, if Jesus may thereby be glorified . . .'⁵

Not everything that passes as leadership in the Christian church corresponds to Christ-likeness.

Dr Big-Un

'Fame, said Emerson, 'is proof that people are gullible.' Not the full harvest, perhaps, but those words are heavy with truth.

For instance, few Christians actually write the books they are credited with. Miss Hardwork could write a biography about Dr Big-un and be the acknowledged author. Instead, Big-un might ask Hardwork to change the pronouns from he/him to I/me and call the book *The Big-un Story by Dr Big-un*. It would not be unusual for Hardwork's name to appear no-where in the book, not even in the section where Prof. Swellhead is thanked for scratching his nose and Sister Jane for feeding the cat. And somehow most of the royalties end up in Big-un's bank account. That's fair. He has so many more expenses. Simple things like clothing cost a fortune when ten thousand eyes are on you. No one sees Miss Hardwork, so her five-year-old dress and shabby shoes are quite adequate.

I'll repent of my cynicism by pointing out that many conservative scholars believe the Bible has its share of ghost-writers – almost nameless people who, under an apostle's direction and the Spirit's anointing, used their own words to express the apostle's heart.⁶ It's not for us to judge Big-un. But there is a Judge, and in the end everything will pan out. Meanwhile, let's try not to let some people shrink to nothing in our estimation while a few Big-uns fill the entire screen of our mind.

Nicky Cruz kindly insisted that Jamie Buckingham's name appear on the book Jamie wrote for him. By the time the publisher was finished, the author's name was not only smaller than Nicky's, but smaller than that of Billy Graham who merely 'wrote' the foreword. (Actually, the foreword was written by Lee Fisher, Billy's ghost-writer.) Jamie was peeved about that cover until humbled by the realization that God's name appeared no-where on the cover. After that, he decided to become a holy ghost-writer. His next book was called *God Can Do It Again by Kathryn Kuhlman*. (I always thought she wrote that.) Jamie had his wish: God's name was on the cover.⁷

As Jamie discovered, relative to our Savior, we don't get such a raw deal. If torrential rain on foolishly deforested land causes a flood, it is 'an act of God'. If the weather is perfect, who needs God? If someone smashes his thumb with a hammer, whose name gets cursed? If the hammer is on target – don't talk to me about God, I've got work to do.

Following our Savior may take us into the shadows, but the time will come when we'll shine like the sun.^b

Infinity

Another fallacy I'd like to pulverize is the notion that for a ministry to be important it must touch many lives.

Bible translators Des and Jenny Oatridge were so sure that God cares not just for the thousands but for the ones and twos that they resolved to bypass large language groups that needed the Bible and find a language known only by a tiny minority. They got their wish when they heard of a language on the verge of extinction in Papua New Guinea. It was spoken by just 111 people. To sacrificially spend one's life for so few would be remarkable if that tiny population were stable, but their numbers were plummeting at a phenomenal rate. Moreover, relative to hundreds of language groups, their need was minor; the tribe already had a strong Christian witness in languages they half knew. Nonetheless, the Oatridges devoted more than a quarter of a century to the herculean task of putting God's Word into the mother tongue of this dying tribe. The heart of God and the hope that a few primitives might more fully comprehend the Gospel spurred them year after year.⁸

^a For example, 1 Peter 5:12;

^b Matthew 10:25-26; 13:43

Many of us would feel failures if our sole ministry were to a few retarded people. Yet we would think we had 'arrived' if our ministry were to three millionaires. What twisted minds we've got.

Let's push aside petty human concepts and rise to the challenge of thinking like God.

The Savior shed as much blood for a derelict as he did for the entire world. In the combined angelic and human hosts there might be a trillion objects of God's love, yet our amazing Lord loves an individual, not with a trillionth of his love, but with *all* his love. Moreover, his love for that person is infinite. You can't exceed 'all', nor can you beat infinity. That makes it impossible for God's collective love for a million, or a trillion, to exceed his love for one solitary person. That's perfect love.

So, as staggering as it seems, if you alone can reach a particular individual, your contribution is as vital to God as that of someone who can reach a million.

Moreover, people who on earth enjoy popularity are already receiving a portion of their reward. Other things being equal, if your labors are unrecognized, you are more blessed than the person made famous by the obvious success of reaching a million. Instead of receiving your reward now, you're accumulating eternal wealth. That's great news because heaven's interest rates are out of this world.^a

Forget the multitudes; you are blessed if, by being true to your call, you touch just one person.

In fact you can do seemingly even less and still accomplish much. Consider Scott and his team, who struggled to the South Pole only to discover their honor of being the first to reach the Pole was lost forever. Amundsen had beaten them by about a month. To add to the futility, they endured further blizzards, illness, frostbite and starvation only to perish; the last three dying just a few kilometers from safety. Yet today their miserable defeat ending with death in frozen isolation, witnessed by not a living soul, is hailed as one of the greatest ever epics of human exploration and endurance.

Every fiber of my being is convinced that their glory is just a shadow of what you can achieve. Though you suffer in isolation and apparent futility, the depths of your trial known to no one on earth, your name could be blazed in heaven's lights, honored forever by heaven's throngs for your epic struggle with illness, bereavement, or whatever. The day is coming when what is endured in secret will be shouted from the housetops. Look at Job: bewildered, maligned, misunderstood; battling not some heroic foe but essentially common things – a financial reversal, bereavement, illness; – not cheered on by screaming fans, just booed by some one-time friends. If even on this crazy planet Job is honored today, I can't imagine the acclaim awaiting you when all is revealed. Your battle with life's miseries can be as daring as David's encounter with Goliath. Don't worry that others don't understand this at present. One day they will.

No Call?

A further reason why some of us undervalue our ministry is because we have not received a call of the thunder and lightning variety. God's call is his selecting and empowering an individual for a specific task. The response he expects is not necessarily to do anything new. You've asked for God's guidance haven't you? Don't you think God just might be smart enough to have maneuvered events so that your divine assignment is right in front of you? If so, he simply expects you to plunge into what you are already doing. Don't conclude you have a second-rate ministry just because you have no need for angels in luminescent nighties to boom something stirring like, 'You should be doing something else, O great and mighty blockhead.' There are Christians like Thomas who believe only because of a divine visitation. Yet, contrary to the way we often feel, Jesus affirmed that the people to be envied are those who believe without such displays.^b

So long have I been tinkering with this book that it was years after penning the above that I sank into perhaps the blackest time of my spiritual life. It lasted for over a year and it was largely because I forgot the truth of the above paragraph.

I craved greater intimacy with God and more spiritual power. My one passion – my one reason for living – was to know Jesus and bring him glory. To allow more time for seeking the Lord I stopped my habitual revising of the book. I knew that my brain needed continual refilling with the

^a Luke 14:12-14; 12:33; 1 Corinthians 9:18

^b John 20:29

words of this book or its truths would slowly seep from my mind, but I hoped the resulting frustration and lowered faith levels would merely intensify my drive to seek God. Heaven's steely silence was devastating. Nearly every day I seemed to slump deeper until I was forced to re-read the book for my own survival. It worked. Meditating on the book revealed that my search for a spiritual breakthrough had degenerated into an excuse for unbelief. I had been edging closer and closer to refusing to believe God has great plans for me or even that he loves me unless he gave me an undeniably supernatural experience on which to hang my faith. How could I be so stupid? (Don't answer that.) I was on dangerous ground. The omnipotent Lord, whose word is impossible to break, has gone to the extreme of putting his promises in writing. How dare I imply that even that is not enough!

Do I need a flock of angels on my roof, or an all-expense paid trip to heaven and back before I will accept that God thinks I am important to him? Christ's shed blood proves God's pledge of total commitment to me. Am I to pronounce that sacrifice inadequate and demand additional proof? Must God send a bolt of spiritual electricity through me before I'll believe he wants to powerfully use me?

In his grace God might do something extra for me, as he has done for thousands, but to so focus on this possibility as to not believe unless he does it, is the height of impertinence.

If every non-Christian on this planet had amazing (though phony) spiritual encounters and every Christian received divine visitations every day, and I alone in all humanity experienced nothing, it could never diminish the infinitude of God's devotion to me. If in his wisdom God decides to cut me off from such experiences in order to toughen my faith – that essential ingredient of spiritual life, more valuable than earth's treasures – it is yet another demonstration of his love.

Faith in the unchangeable character of God is the only bedrock upon which a person's ministry call can be founded. We have no need for God to write in the sky because he has written in a book. And Jesus taught that people who fail to believe the Bible would not believe even if they experienced the ultimate miracle of someone they knew returning from the dead and warning them.^a

I dare not slacken my quest for a deeper spiritual experience. I will welcome any manifestation of the Spirit of God in my life and not proudly assume I don't need it, but if God decides not to use such means to prop up my spiritual life, it merely proves the depth of his confidence in me. He obviously believes I have the grit to tough it out by raw faith.

Our call needs not spectacular confirmation but spectacular commitment.

A Lowly Ministry?

The gifts of the Spirit arm us for active duty. The Spirit fits us out with that particular mix that suits our individual call. Yet we usually eye such gifts as evangelism, prophecy, teaching, miracles, and ignore the other half – helping others, administration, showing mercy, giving, serving. You may even feel compelled to check the Bible before believing they belong alongside the attention-grabbing charismata.^b

The way we revere a few gifts and denigrate the rest, you'd think the ideal body of Christ consisted of a giant set of flapping gums, a fingernail emitting divine bolts of power, and a few emaciated odds and sods.

Is there really such a thing as a lowly ministry? Might it not be that the only thing that can make a ministry mediocre is a mediocre effort? In the context of ministry, Paul speaks of 'striving to excel'.^c The pursuit of excellence is a challenge from the throne of God to every Bible-believing Christian.

'Do small things as if they were great, because of the majesty of Christ,' counseled Hudson Taylor. He said we should even 'hang up clothes, wash, dress and comb our hair in a way to use to the full measure of ability which God has given us to the glory of his holy name.'⁹ I was so impressed I chose a likely spot on the floor, rummaged through two dirty shirts, assorted books, three socks and a shoe, finally found a pen, blew off the fluff and recorded the quote. (My special gift is the ability to encourage – people come to me thinking they are the world's worst and leave greatly encouraged.)

If you are called to be a cleaner then rise to that challenge with the grace of Strauss, the flair of Michelangelo, the persistence of Edison and the dedication of Jessie Owens. Polish with the love

^a Luke 16:27-31

^b Romans 12:7-8; 1 Corinthians 12:28

^c 1 Corinthians 14:12 – Amplified Bible – many versions are similar

of a mother, the care of surgeon, and the joy of a lover. Pour your soul into your work till it gleams with heavenly glory; till God can look at your floors and see his face in them; till all of heaven exalts you as an example of what a cleaner should be.

Hopelessly idealistic? You need a concrete example. (That's a cue to grab your nerve tablets. As spelt out earlier, I feel no obligation to limit illustrations to Christian or non-controversial figures.)

Long before he was known to television viewers, Mr. T wanted to become a body guard. So he resolved to become the world's best. A few paragraphs could never do justice to his dedication to that goal.

Two hours every day of every week he scourged his flesh with a grueling physical work-out, emphasizing both speed and endurance. He purchased books about police work and wrote to security organizations for further information. He went to seminars, workshops, law enforcement schools. He studied other bodyguards and observed special security personnel guarding heads of state. For increased experience, he did security jobs for free. Nearly everyone in the business said first aid knowledge was unnecessary. Mr. T thought otherwise, so he became a security guard in a city hospital. He was promoted, then signed up with the National Guard Military Police for further training. So fierce was his determination that out of six thousand men he was nominated top trainee.

One of his clients was world boxing champion Leon Spinks. Mr. T spent two days before Spinks' arrival ensuring the hotel was secure. The limo was already parked in a guarded garage nearby. He placed ten traps around it for additional security and still took time out to ensure no one had approached the car. Twice in one night he examined it. The other night he slept in it so no one could time his security checks. This was only a facet of his labors those two days, typifying his meticulous devotion to protecting his clients.

Everything down to his dress and deportment was immaculate. Here was a man who respected his client's confidentiality, a man who could not be bought or distracted, a man of solid integrity. On assignment he would transmute into a machine scanning every source of danger, a computer out-foxing the most cunning assailant, a human shield.

'I'll give my life protecting yours,' he guaranteed his every client. 'If there's a bullet, my body would take it. If there's a knife, it would plunge through me.'¹⁰

How does your dedication compare?

The standard and status of nursing rocketed because Florence Nightingale brought a sense of God's call to a job that had been regarded as little better than prostitution.¹¹ Edith Schaeffer, wife of Francis and hostess of the Christian chalet L'Abri, believed table settings could be elevated to an art form.¹² The world has yet to see how you can transform the task before you.

The world marvels at the work of a genius. It is even moved by someone who overcomes severe handicap to do something a normal person could do. But though the world misses it, ordinary people are just as capable of heroics.

Paul White – later to become renowned through his *Jungle Doctor* books – wanted to become a medical missionary. His financial predicament made it essential that he obtain a scholarship to pay for his medical studies. This necessitated being ranked in the top two hundred students in the final year high school exams in his home state of New South Wales, Australia. He came one hundred and ninety-eighth. To add to the drama, to attain the mark that barely enabled him to scrape in, he had not only studied feverishly, he had repeated his entire final year at high school. His grades the first year were too poor. Now to turn this into a thriller, read the conditions of the scholarship: it would terminate the moment he failed just one examination, or part thereof, in any of the six years ahead of him. In his third year, over half of the students failed. With a pass mark set at fifty, he scored fifty, fifty, and fifty-one. He had pushed himself to the limit and he still had three more years to go.

Paul White might have had unremarkable ability but, to me, his graduation is a wonder equal to an armless woman using her mouth and feet to change her baby's clothes; as sensational as a man walking on Mars.

Rarely in life do we have the precise measures of achievement that students have, but like White, we can grasp the hand of Jesus and teeter on the edge of our ability with the daring of a tight-rope walker, to the hushed delight of angelic throngs.¹³

God's Favorite People

'God must love ordinary people because he made so many of them.' We laugh. But the truth is profound.

From tongue-tied Moses (to *er* is human) to cave-mouth Peter; from down-in-the-mouth Jonah to high-as-a-kite Noah;^a from Job in his trouble-bath to Mordecai having the last laugh, the Bible bristles with ordinary folk who achieved extraordinary things for God. And you were born to continue this tradition.

If to the world you seem insignificant, it merely intensifies God's longing to raise you high.^b

Recall the Messiah's birth. The leaders, the teachers, the theologians, and the priests, were oblivious to it. Heaven shared the news with shepherds at work; with old, temple-bound Anna;^c and with 'wise men from the east'. The latter presumably weren't even Jews.

It was the common people who heard this Man gladly.^d And it was from their ranks that he handpicked the ones to fire the world with his glory. He chose hotheads with provincial accents, a tax man – a small-time turncoat any self-respecting citizen would spit on – and logheads with the stench of fish on their callused hands.

Christ was continually aware of the invisible people, whether it was a despised tax collector peering through the leaves, or an unclean woman pressing through the throng; a wild-eyed madman in the Decapolis back-blocks, or a luckless loner at the pool; a sightless misfit, or a stinking leper; a cripple, or a mute.^e To a tired and hungry Jesus, befriending a spurned woman – giving hope to a Samaritan living in shame – was more important than food. Society's rejects warmed his heart.

It seemed wherever there was a paltry act of kindness you'd find religious people simmering with contempt, and Jesus glowing with admiration. A pauper slipping a pittance into the offering,^f a street woman's pathetic washing of his feet,^g a boy's fish sandwiches,^h thrilled him. Mary just sat on the floor in rapt attention. That was enough to fill him with praise.ⁱ

Jesus was forever shocking his observers by selecting non-entities for special attention. Society saw a dirty beggar, a nauseating blotch on the neighborhood, a curiosity for theological debate (is it right to heal on the Sabbath? who sinned, he or his parents?). Jesus saw a worthy recipient of his powerful love; a precious work of God brimming with beauty, dignity and heart-wrenching need; someone to die for. While crowds turned up their noses, he poured out his heart. The masses tried to silence blind Bartimeus, the loud-mouthed groveler.^j They sneered at Zacchaeus, the money-grubbing runt who soon towered over them by displaying exceptional generosity.^k His followers wanted to push aside snotty children.^l They opposed the Canaanite bitch whose incessant nagging was driving them to distraction.^m No one could guess who Jesus would next honor. It was sure to be some faceless loser they had not even noticed, or an embarrassing nuisance they wished would skulk away.

Jesus came to show us the Father.ⁿ Today, the religious world still looks at the big names, while God treasures the 'unknowns'. He delights to endow with eternal grandeur their simple acts of service.

From the time Mary, 'just a housewife', mothered the Son of God, and the world's greatest Teacher spent five or six times longer as a carpenter than as a teacher, humanity has had living proof that the mundane can be holy.

^a Noah embarrassed himself by getting drunk (Genesis 9:21)

^b This common theme in Scripture is worthy of close examination: Job 5:11; Psalm 113:7-9; Isaiah 40:4; Ezekiel 17:24; 21:26; Luke 1:52-3; 1 Corinthians 1:26-29

^c Luke 2:8-18; 36-38

^d Mark 12:37 b

^e Luke 19:2-9; 8:43-48; 7:11-15; 21:1-4, 8:27 ff; John 5:2 ff

^f Mark 12:41-44

^g Luke 7:36-50

^h John 6:9-11

ⁱ Luke 10:39-42

^j Mark 10:46-52

^k Luke 19:2-8

^l Mark 10:13-16

^m Matthew 15:23

ⁿ John 14:9

GOD'S RADICAL VIEWS

The world is filled with God's undercover agents – ministers of the gospel who have successfully infiltrated enemy territory using all sorts of ingenious covers – housewife, plumber, bus driver . . .

One of the most powerful influences in evangelist D. L. Moody's life was the now-famous statement, 'Moody, the world has yet to see what God can do with and for and through and in a man who is fully and wholly consecrated to him.' The words that moved the man who moved the multitudes was uttered by a butcher.¹⁴

In Argentina, around-the-clock pray-ers do battle in what is possibly one of the most powerful centers of prayer earth has seen. Some independent observers have concluded that it is bolts from this continual prayer storm that fuel the massive Argentine revival and spill over to the rest of the world. The participants are 2,000 prisoners.

Brother Andrew, 'God's Smuggler', tells of a girl who became a Christian because he obeyed the Spirit's prompting *not* to share the Gospel with her. He was in the ideal position to witness, but his Spirit-led refusal to exploit it, seized the girl with fear that she was becoming past hope. This moved her, like nothing else could, to give her life to the Lord.¹⁵

The journalist who found Livingstone and was converted by him, initially grabbed headlines and published a book about his adventure. It is not this that interests me, however, but a letter Stanley wrote some years later. According to a modern appraisal of missionary history, this solitary letter, published in a newspaper, did more for the cause of missions than many missionaries have achieved in a lifetime.¹⁶

Try not to underestimate God's ability to use for his glory, even the most trivial things you do. (I'd like to say *never* underestimate it, but that's a tall order when living within you is the One whose power surpasses our wildest hopes.^a)

^a Ephesians 3:20

CHAPTER 6: I'VE GOTTA BE ME

Heaven's honor roll reads like a Who's Who of bungling. And I love it!

I must have slammed into so many closed doors in my spiritual job search that my whole head is a dead end. Of my legendary brain malfunctions, you'll squeeze just one example from me. Divulge more, and I'd be sentenced to wearing a paper bag over my head for the rest of my natural life – and that's a prospect I don't relish, no matter how much you think it improves my looks.

I was about to go home when a manager said he couldn't start his car. Some idiot had left the headlights on. Suddenly my nerves thought I'd caught malaria. That morning I had tested the lights of our entire vehicle fleet. 'That's funny,' added another manager, 'I can't start my car either – battery's dead.' (It was definitely malaria, maybe yellow fever as well.) Up walked another manager – and was that another one behind him?

I've got a mechanical mind; it's just that the gears have jammed.

When I have mistake and onions it's neither rare nor well done. And just when I've had my fill I'm forced to eat my words. And that's only the entrée. Somehow I always end up in the soup and have to pay for it. Humble pie follows with a generous serve of raspberries and I scream.

I make more slips than a lingerie company. As my mind lurches from one goof-up to the next, I fill with despair. Then I limp to the Bible and find comfort. I bump into Isaac, who blessed the wrong twin;^a and Jacob, the scheming mummy's boy, who had to marry his sister-in-law to patch up his first mistake.^b I hear Job clawing for words to recount the tragedy that marred his childhood – he was born alive.^c I see Saul hiding amongst the baggage;^d David squabbling with his brothers;^e Jonah bewailing the death of a weed;^f Thomas poking holes in Jesus' side.^g I don't know that they had pogo sticks back then, but if they did, they played under the table for too long. Hard-boiled? These egg-heads were always in hot water. Whenever they had a brainwave heaven ducked for cover. Of course, Solomon had a good head on his shoulders – a cute brunette one night, a redhead the next. I think he ended up counting his wives and kissing his money.

Jesus hand-picked the quiet, intelligent type. When they were quiet, they were intelligent. They spent the rest of their time turning howlers into an art form. Their business cards must have read *Bloopers for Every Occasion*. There were the sons of blunder, James and John, armed with tongues programmed to shoot first and ask questions at the inquest. Those thunder-heads even though the Prince of Peace was into star wars.^h Then there was Peter, whose mouth went into spasms whenever his brain died. He always spoke with his mouth full, and still found room for the other foot. (Any normal sized mouth would have had corns.) You were sure to find this crying shame somewhere between boo-boo and boo-hoo. And while our silver tongued, lead brained hero was doing what came naturally, everyone else was scrambling to prove they had the IQ of a doughnut hole. Who could forget that ridiculous prayer-meeting when the maid left Peter locked out in the cold, the pray-ers thought the maid had gone around the twist for being so stupid as to think their

^a Genesis 27:21-35

^b Genesis 29:20-28

^c Job 3:1-19

^d 1 Samuel 10:22

^e 1 Samuel 17:28-29

^f Jonah 4:7-9

^g John 20:24-25

^h Luke 9:54

prayers had been answered, and they finally made the brilliant deduction that the guy, who looks and sounds like Peter bashing on the door, must be Peter's angel?^a They believed in keeping their brains in 'as new' condition. Remember the dozer with the window seat who fell three floors to sleep during Paul's sermon?^b They make that drop-out look like a genius. Paul wasn't kidding when he said that by normal standards few of the Corinthian Christians were wise.^c If they were anything like the rest, you could pool their intellects and not have enough to power a headache.

I could put my feet up with folks like that. And what fires me is that these scatter-brains are God's sort of people – the type through whom he changes the world.

Christians squabble over whether tongues have ceased, but no one doubts that signs and blunders are with us still. The centuries have made Christians no brighter, nor any less treasured by heaven. My favorite is Dwight Moody. He hated his first name,¹ pronounced Jerusalem in two syllables,² and wrote without a speck of punctuation. Can you guess the words he was attempting to spell in the following: sucksead, beleave, shure, clurks, bead, hav, don, bimb bi, peter?^d 'I am getting over the difficulty,' said middle-aged Moody about his spelling, 'I am always sure of the first letter and the last . . .' Such shortcomings are endearing. To scorn them is to act like a thirteen year old despising childish behavior in his little sister – behavior that more mature people find adorable. Had we a massive intellect and love approaching that of our great King, we would not only discern the frailty of the even greatest earthly minds, we would probably feel as warmly about their foibles as we do about those of the cutest child.

Hot Gossip

Who would have guessed that a religion stressing lofty morals would cram into its holiest book the slimy details of King 'Peeping Tom' David, 'lover-boy' Solomon, fish-breath Jonah, sleazy Jacob, and two-faced Judah,^e to mention just a few of the seething swarm of con-men, backstabbers, rapists, murderers and whores that fill the Word of God?

Few Christian biographies are as fiercely honest as Scripture. If there were more books that gently peel the plastic off famous Christians, it would be easier for us to realize that we belong in the big league. For instance, John Wesley's godly parents had a marriage so stormy it still puts the wind up people. His own string of abortive romances continued until finally he married, at age forty-seven. 'The marriage started poorly and went downhill from there,' wrote Petersen. 'Perennial mutual resentment' was how another writer described the union that spluttered and flared for twenty torturous years until ending in permanent separation.³

Dwight Moody's Christian graces have rightly been extolled, but have you heard of his temper? In public he once pushed someone with such violence that the man was sent reeling down the stairs. 'This meeting is killed,' gasped a friend of Moody, 'The large number who have seen the whole thing will hardly be in a condition to be influenced by anything more Mr Moody may say tonight.'⁴

Martin Luther wrote things about Jews that, to say the least, are highly regrettable.⁵ And many of our early Protestant heroes in Europe, Britain and America, favored killing their theological opponents at the stake or gallows.⁶

It takes a special life to win the devotion of natives the way David Livingstone did. Stanley glued himself to Livingstone day and night, week after week, and the experience melted his hard journalist's heart. Four months of intense scrutiny led him to praise Livingstone's piety, gentleness and zeal. 'I never found a fault in him,' he marveled. Yet though we could dwell long on the virtues that gilded Livingstone's soul, slag touched the gold. It is said that throughout his life serious personality defects dogged his service.⁷

John Sung has been called rude, stubborn, a poor family man, and China's greatest evangelist.⁸

Bob Pierce, founder of World Vision had one driving passion: 'Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.' An experienced biographer and researcher lauded him, declaring that 'few people in history' have 'demonstrated greater compassion for suffering humanity than Bob

^a Acts 12:12-16

^b Acts 20:9

^c 1 Corinthians 2:26-27

^d Succeed, believe, sure, clerks, bed, have, done, 'by 'n by', better: Pollock (1), p 20-36.

^e Genesis 38:11-26

Pierce.' Yet just sentences later we read that 'the love that he gave so freely' to others 'was given so sparingly to the ones who needed it most – his wife and his daughters.'⁹

If you knew C. T. Studd personally you would probably be offended by his authoritarianism, his sledge-hammer bluntness, his harsh ultimatums. Like his own mission committee, you might worry about his use of morphine and want to suppress his book *Don't Care a Damn*. In common with those who knew and loved him most – even close family members – you may feel compelled to withdraw from this great missionary.¹⁰

We cannot idolize our heroes without falling into heresy, such as the satanic lie that being used by God is a reward for living an exemplary life. Service – like salvation, holiness and every other spiritual gift – is always an undeserved gift received by childlike faith.^a God broke into Paul's life and assigned to him his enormous ministry, not after he had proved himself, but when the man was fuming with murderous rage against Christ; while he was still – as he later confessed – the 'chief' of sinners, torturing Christians in the hope of making them blaspheme.^b Though it was years before he was released into its fullness, the timing of that original call is both illuminating and liberating. May the implications ricochet within our heads until our dying day.

Yes, our character flaws grieve and defame the Holy One. Yes, we must move heaven and earth to root out our shame. And yes, as impossible as it sounds, God's holy power can trickle through flawed, sin-stained channels to a thirsty world.

God does not use synthetic saints petrified in stained glass or mummified in strained biographies. If the paper people squashed between book covers or exhibited in special Sunday services seem real to you, you'll love the Easter Bunny. If you were thinking of cornering the market on your brand of inadequacy, forget it; heaven's databanks bulge with the triumphs of people with quirks like yours. Heaven's heroes are people with pimples and stringy hair; people with wrinkles and pug noses. If you'd like to see a real saint-in-training, a cheeky Master's apprentice poised to gelignite Hell's gates, someone on the brink of eternal acclaim, go to your mirror.

Wrong Shoes

Some of us live life in the fast lane. I'd be happy to get out of the parking lot.

I was reading about John Wesley. The more I read, the more inadequate I felt. Like Luther and several other famous Christians, Wesley seemed to have the abilities and do the work of ten men. I'll quarantine further details lest I spread my gloom. Yet as I groped through the fog I began to query my suppositions. Is God so short of workers that he particularly needs someone to do the work of ten? Could not you and I be among the ten or even a thousand who together could equal a Luther or a Wesley? Are God's gifts so puny that they must be concentrated in the hands of a few before they are of value? Is the need of the hour for more Wesleys or for ordinary Christians to overpower discouragement and start pulling their weight?

Let's be content to fulfill our God-appointed task. It alone, delights the Father's heart and brings the joyous satisfaction we were born for. The pressure to fill someone else's shoes is not from God. It leads only to corns!

The One-Talent Man

In Jesus' powerful story, three servants were given money. One received five talents, another two, and the other one.^c Feel sorry for the one who received so little? I used to. It seems grossly unfair, though I'm forced to admit it's true to life. God has distributed his gifts unequally. Moreover, relative to others, I'm that one-talent man.

After years of feeling hard done by, a light flashed that should forever banish my self-pity. In the currency of the day, a talent was worth 6,000 denarii.¹¹ Still mystified? Well, according to another parable, the going casual rate for an eleven-or-twelve-hour day was just one denarius.^d My mind splutters into action. Multiply your daily wage by 6,000 and see if you despise the figure. You could immediately go on holiday for twenty or thirty years,^e or, in Jesus' day, you could invest in many

^a Galatians 3:2-5

^b Acts 26:9-11, 15-18; 22:4-8, 10, 14-16

^c Matthew 25:15

^d Matthew 20:1, 2, 8

^e The lower figure if you usually work seventy hours a week, the higher if you work a forty-hour week. At that rate, a

slaves (who each would earn far beyond their minimal keep) and spend the rest of your life in idle luxury.

A talent was worth three-quarters of a million widow's mites.¹² At that time it would cover a full year's rent on fifty houses,¹³ or buy quarter of a million sparrows^{14 a} (with bulk discount you could probably buy every sparrow on the planet!). Judas sold his Savior for just two per cent of this sum.¹⁵ With these riches you could gain full access to Rome's magnificent public baths all day every day for a hundred years¹⁶ and have enough in reserve to buy a liter of wheat, or three of barley, every day for two life-times.¹⁷

I can pity no longer that 'unfortunate' who received the least. He was rich. And he had the potential to double his wealth.^b

Your Father, in the divine extravagance of infinite love, showers his riches upon other people. Yet that cannot diminish the magnitude of your own gift. And your investment potential is phenomenal.

Who can complain when the wisest Person in the universe does what he wants with his own wealth? Instead of resenting God for his kindness to others, or cringing before those who seem to have more, you have every reason to delight in the enormity of your own gift. In joyful thanksgiving to God, stretch that precious talent so that when the king returns you can lay at his feet a gift that has doubled in value.

There is another side to this matter. Did you know . . .

☆ Most actors wanting the role of Long John Silver are hopelessly inadequate? They have too many legs.

☆ Most people look like ridiculously overdressed, non-Japanese, anorexic sumo wrestlers?

☆ When I was younger I could run faster than Carl Lewis? Over the years my superiority gradually waned, especially after baby Carl learned to walk.

I know what you're thinking: I've finally blown a fuse upstairs. It was all a misunderstanding. They said success was just around the corner, so I went around the bend. Before you start sending get-well cards, however, let me assure you I'm as sane as anyone else here in the psychiatric ward. My point is this: whether you see yourself as gifted or queer, indispensable or inadequate, depends entirely on the frame of reference you choose. From God's frame of reference – the life's work he has chosen for you – no one is as perfectly endowed as you.

If that seems like soppy idealism, you have not thought it through. Do so, and it will become a treasured source of strength and comfort. You could choose any individual and fill volumes with what he or she cannot do or is hopeless at, but that's of no more concern than the fact that a cell phone cannot fly, wash dishes, quench thirst, tie shoelaces, and prevent tooth decay. Besides the endless list of things a cell phone cannot do, many of the things it *can* do, it does poorly. It's an inferior paperweight, straightedge, and bookend. You could use it as a fly-swatter – once. Such lists miss the critical point: anything skillfully designed is ideally equipped – and usually solely equipped – for the specific and commendable purpose for which it was made.

Did you hear about the man who inherited an old violin and an oil painting? Excitedly, he took it to a dealer for evaluation and to his amazement discovered he was the proud owner of a Stradivarius and a Rembrandt. Unfortunately, Stradivarius was an atrocious painter and Rembrandt's violin was worthless.

An exceptionally attractive woman heard wedding bells whenever she thought of a brilliant composer. 'With your brains and my looks,' she told him, 'what wonderful children we would have!'

Replied the composer, 'Have you considered a child with my looks and your brains?'

laborer toiling forty hours a week with no holidays, somehow spending nothing on food, clothing, shelter or anything else, would take more than thirty years to amass one talent. Moreover, if you commenced at age ten, working long hours as a weaver's apprentice and had the misfortune to continue on that allowance, you would be approaching only the half-way mark on your fiftieth birthday.

^a Luke 12:6

^b In Luke's version of the parable (Luke 19:12-27), the servants were allocated equal portions. Perhaps Luke's version reveals the heart of God and the other (preserved in Matthew 25:16-17) describes the strategy of God. The Lord loves his children without favoritism. Or perhaps Jesus told this story once from heaven's perspective (equal portions) and once from our human perspective. In our eyes, ministry gifts seem to vary in significance, but I don't think God sees it that way.

Of course you cannot do everything – that was never your Designer's intention – but to imagine that your Creator and Savior will not fashion you *with perfection* for your reason for existence, is to accuse your Maker of impotence and incompetence. Face facts: everything God does is impressive. For the exact role that he created you, you are superbly endowed.

A Normal Ministry?

If you think you are called to a 'normal' ministry, think again.

Our Leader's behavior shocked the religious establishment. Christ partied with crooks, drunks and sluts.^a A prostitute kissed his feet. He did things on the Sabbath he wasn't supposed to. He insulted dignitaries, calling them vipers, blind fools, whitewashed tombs and other endearing names.^b Those closest to him usually had no idea what he was talking about – he's warning them about the Pharisees and they think he's complaining about leaving the bread behind^c – but to those outside his inner circle, Christ wasn't nearly so intelligible. 'Eat my flesh and drink my blood,' he demanded. Multitudes left in disgust.^d He was hailed by demons and spurned by theologians. He spoke to a fever, a tree, even a storm.^e He fed 5,000 people and almost starved in the desert. Before long, Jesus' sanity was called into question and at one stage his family came to take charge of him.^f He was forever messing up funerals, wrecking beggars' only source of income – their infirmities – and outraging religious leaders. He made goo with spit and smeared it on a beggar's eyes.^g He stuck his fingers in a man's ears, spat, and grabbed the man's tongue.^h How many churches would tolerate such ludicrous behavior? He took a short-cut across the lake – without a boat.ⁱ He sent two thousand swine hurtling to their death.^j He physically assaulted temple workers.^k No one – whether friends, family, admirers; devout, legalistic or lax – could agree with him for long.

Are you sure you want to be Christ-like?

Being the embodiment of divine perfection made our Savior such an oddity that no one knew what to do with him. Yet our fallibility will not pave an easier road. Christ pledged us his Spirit and if we dare follow his orders we can expect to be regularly jarring people's sense of propriety and intelligence, just as he did. That's the way it has always been.

Sunday after Sunday, the works and lives of Scripture's heroes are reverently read in pulpits across the land. But if the Bible's motley crew revisited this planet, would they be honored in our churches? Even the Pharisees revered dead prophets. It's the live ones that make us squirm. There's Jesus, who drank, and the Nazarites who abstained even from grapes.^l Solomon wore extravagant finery. Equally holy men wore rags. Paul's dress would get even an apostle blacklisted in most churches. (Well, if it wasn't exactly a dress that he wore, what was it? A *nightie*?) Some lived in palaces and some in caves. Some were free-thinkers in the realm of personal hygiene. Many were in public disgrace, some were even outlaws, yet they refused to conform. Whether they had ice in their veins or permafrost in their brains, you can decide, but they established new frontiers in outlandish behavior.

If you want to stand out like iridescent acne, have the spirit of an Old Testament prophet. Zany publicity stunts were their specialty. You'd think Ezekiel was vying for the weirdest entry in the Guinness Book of Records, lying on just one side for more than a year, fuelling his fire with dung to cook needlessly-rationed food. (God wanted him to use human feces, but Ezekiel was too straight for that.^m) He dug through a wall, built make-believe siegeworks against a brick he called 'Jerusalem', and attacked shavings of his hair.ⁿ Isaiah sauntered around nearly nude for three years.^o

^a Luke 5:29-30; 7:37-39

^b Matthew 15:12-14; 23:1-7, 13-33

^c Matthew 16:6-12

^d John 6:53, 60, 66

^e Mark 4:39; 11:14; Luke 4:39

^f Mark 3:21

^g John 9:6, note also Mark 8:23

^h Mark 7:33

ⁱ John 6:19

^j Mark 5:12-13

^k John 2:15

^l Numbers 6:4

^m Ezekiel 4:4-15

ⁿ Ezekiel 4:1-3; 5:1-4; 12:5

^o Isaiah 20:2-4

Hosea got involved with a woman. Pious eyebrows must have shot through the roof. Yet these were not the hare-brained schemes of religious nuts. Men of God were obeying the holy leadings of the Almighty.

See Samson, flat on his face – tripped over his hair again. Nearby is a Nazarite, desperately trying to suppress his laughter (laugh at Samson and you laugh all the way to hospital). Under divine direction, the Nazarite has shaved his entire head.^a Here we have two men led of the Spirit. One we'd reject because his hair has never seen a razor, the other because his hair has seen a razor. Everyone knows saints must conform to our standards.

I could prattle on forever about the mad-cap antics of clowns like Samson, the long-haired lout who brought the house down – on top of himself;^b Jacob, who had an angel in a headlock;^c Daniel, who ended up on the lion's menu, not because he prayed but because he insisted on praying on his knees with the windows wide open.^d I could lampoon whole armies – like the one that snuck off to battle insisting that the choir go first,^e or Joshua's troops who waddled around in circles to the (short-lived) amusement of Jericho's inhabitants.^f (How embarrassing to be in that dizzy army. The locals must have died laughing.) Or I could slip out of the Bible covers and tell of Luther, who threw an ink pot at the devil; of Wesley, who prayed for his horse's leg; of Finney who brought jesting factory girls to their knees by merely looking at them;¹⁸ of the nineteenth century 'funeral' procession where a Bible-thumper burst out of the coffin and launched a verbal assault on startled on-lookers. I'm telling you, you and I are the first sane Christians that have ever lived!

But honestly, has God stopped prompting people to break with convention, or have we stopped heeding his prompting? Has God exhausted his creativity, or are we exhausting his patience?

If we were more open to the Spirit's leading would the church have fewer Sunday School teachers and more clowns, cartoonists and puppeteers; fewer choir members and more yodelers, mime artists and totally new forms of music; fewer preachers and more entertainers, movie producers and computer whizzes?

I am being neither radical nor dogmatic. I'm simply pleading for an army of Christ-centered saints, dedicated to allowing the Spirit of God express himself in the way he chooses, rather than the way our tomato brains think he should move. If your ministry seems bland, that's fine, provided it's a calling, not a cop-out.

Ministers or Mimics?

We seem to have thousands too many people queuing for nineteenth-century-style ministries like preaching, while the devil almost monopolizes modern methods of communication, and virtually no one seeks the Lord of all knowledge for truly innovative ways of portraying the nature and message of God. I am not taking about gimmicks, but of being channels of God's splendor, free, like the prophets of old, from the straight-jacket of human tradition; willing to carry obedience to the extreme of appearing the greatest oddball since John penned *Revelation*. (John, by the way, was locked up before he wrote his bizarre book. In our era, he'd be put away *after* he wrote it. It was non-Christians who had him put away. Today it would be – no, I won't say it.)

If we're less than ten years behind the world we're considered worldly. If we're a century behind, we're 'model Christians'. But if we're bound to the Timeless One, why aren't we *ahead* of the world?

One of my university lecturers in psychology compared humans with various subhuman species. It's a sign of unintelligence, he concluded, to always act the one way in roughly identical situations. Let's not insult the inexhaustible fountain of creative genius, *the* Creator, by implying he reigns from a rut instead of a throne. He doesn't even make two fingerprints the same.

Part of us recoils from a God so superior that his acts take us by surprise. It's unsettling to have a God so vibrant, so bursting with life and creativity and personality that in comparison the most dynamic of us seem listless and boring. We'd much prefer God to be a machine; as coldly

^a Numbers 6:9, 18-19

^b Judges 16:30

^c Genesis 32:24 ff

^d Daniel 6:10

^e 2 Chronicles 20:21

^f Joshua 6:3

predictable as a lump of metal trapped by a simple law of physics. There's something reassuring about an idol. Within us lurks a desire to fashion a god in the image of a cuddly teddy bear that says 'I love you' when we press the right button and never disturbs us by doing or asking the unexpected.

From cover to cover the Bible demonstrates that God's character is wonderfully predictable and his methods wondrously *unpredictable*. When Jesus healed, for instance, you could never be sure whether he would visit, heal from a distance, or initially ignore the person. You would never know whether he would address demons or the illness, speak of sin or faith, bless, ask questions, spit, lay hands, or tell the person to wash or stretch or pick up a bed or see a priest. Lest we try limiting God to the vast array of Jesus' earthly methods, the rest of Scripture shows the Most High healing by the use of shadows, handkerchiefs, oil, fig paste, a dead prophet's bones, an image of a snake, lying on the afflicted, dipping in the Jordan – and if you want a full list you have still missed the point.^a For every impossibility the Almighty has unlimited possibilities.

So let's not think that service must conform to our petty notions before it can sparkle with divine greatness. Let's cut the ropes and let God express his boundless creativity through us.

We are so tradition-bound as to confuse ministry with mimicry. Unless we are called to a musty, second-hand vocation we conclude we're not called at all. Don't be a buzzard circling the corpse of a worn-out ministry when you could be an eagle soaring with the Spirit to fresh expressions of the grandeur of God.

I feel like the preacher who after a moving sermon about sin was asked how he knew so much about the subject. Narrow-minded? I blunt my comb whenever I part my hair. Fleas shuffle single file across my cranium.

Every human mind is chained to established practice and custom. All that distinguishes any of us is the length of our leash. The implications haunt me.

Had his devout father succeeded, David Livingstone might never have left his indelible mark on human history. His father, believing books on travel and natural science to be incompatible with Christian service, tried to prevent David from reading almost anything other than theological works. For the rest of his life, this famous missionary was dogged by Christians who wanted to shackle him to a more conventional vocation.¹⁹ He was forced to declare, 'So powerfully convinced am I that it is the will of the Lord . . . , [that] I will go no matter who opposes . . .'²⁰

When William Wilberforce teetered on the edge of conversion he assumed he should abandon politics and become a clergyman. He would have made a great preacher, but his childhood hero and father-figure, John Newton, talked him out of it. And millions have benefited. The abolition of the slave trade was just one of the accomplishments of this devout politician whom John Pollock labeled 'the moral leader of the Western World'.²¹

After Cliff Richard became a Christian, he felt he should quit show business and become a full-time teacher of religious education. Someone had the insight to show him that he could more effectively minister to this needy world as a pop star. Does that curdle your brain? It makes sense to me. In heaven's sight, a truly Spirit-led entertainer could be as much an ordained minister (i.e. divinely ordained to minister) as any pastor, bishop or missionary bearing impressive church credentials.

Moral Dilemma

I'm going too far. I see you warming to this book as it burns in your fire. Nonetheless, I'll step over the edge because I ache for the tiny minority whose sacred mission clashes with our sense of decency.

To underline the reality of this problem, I cite specific examples, though I do not claim to have the mind of God on them. I have enough difficulty discerning my own direction. Instead, employing the wisdom of Gamaliel, I refuse to hurl stones whilst a doubt remains, lest I be found opposing a work of God.^b

What would you think of a man who felt divinely commissioned to spend countless hours viewing hard porn? Dr James Dobson is such a man, even though he is thoroughly convinced of the evil of pornography.^c Do you question Florence Nightingale's call to nursing? You might in her day,

^a Acts 5:15; 19:12; James 5:14; Isaiah 38:21; Numbers 21:9; 2 Kings 4:34; 5:10

^b Acts 5:34-39

^c In his fight against pornography, Dobson has seen more and worse porn than many porn addicts.

when nursing was renowned for gross immorality and drunkenness. Simon Peter had to fight his conscience to preach to Cornelius. Fellow Christians were aghast.^a

'Ill-natured, wicked, mistaken – deserves punishment . . .' wrote the West Indian press about James Ramsay, a sensitive Christian who had inflamed public decency to intolerable levels. He was guilty of the 'absurdest prejudice,' roared men in England. Ramsay had published a book suggesting that the slave trade was wrong. Earlier this parson had had the gall to insert into the service a prayer for the conversion of blacks. The church was outraged. Some stalked out. The Churchwarden presented a formal protest against Ramsay's 'neglect of the parish'.²²

Not everyone assuming the 'higher moral ground' should be trusted.

In a move as bold and glorious as his original creation of the music, Handel took a composition which might have merely given goose bumps to fat Christians and turned it into a channel to flood the lost with the warm love of Christ. Yet even this involved a moral risk.

The first performance of Handel's *Messiah* secured the release of 142 people from debtor's prison. Subsequent performances authorized by Handel achieved so much in aiding the poor that one biographer wrote, 'Perhaps the works of no other composer have so largely contributed to the relief of human suffering.' What's more, this composition – thought by some to have done more to convince multitudes of the reality of God 'than all the theological books ever written' – was bringing potent Scriptures in a powerful manner to the unchurched. I'd hail this use of his work as a magnificent achievement, but I lack the discernment of Handel's Christian contemporaries. The church castigated him for not restricting performances to the hallowed confines of its buildings. For John Newton – of *Amazing Grace* fame – Handel's 'secular' use of his *Messiah* was such a scandal that he is said to have preached 'every Sunday for over a year' against it.²³

Like the Pharisees of old, we can be horrified at the actions of our spiritual forebears – adamant that we could not possibly be so blinded by religious prejudice as to oppose a work of God – and yet make grave misjudgments of the same magnitude that God-fearing people have been making for millennia.

I make no plea for blind tolerance. That's one of the fad heresies of our age and even the bigoted Pharisees wrongly tolerated temple money-changers. But whether they erred on the side of acceptance or rejection, the Pharisees' error was always the same: they let the accepted norms of their group ring so loud in their ears that they couldn't hear the heartbeat of God. Like us, they were sure they would never make such a mistake. So though I don't preach mindless acceptance, I urge caution – especially since God's primary concern is to enlighten me concerning his leading for *my* life, not his personal leading for everyone else.

Cristina, claimed a Christian monthly, beams the light of Christ into darkness so oppressive it's shunned by nearly every Christian. She's a regular act at a strip club. No, she doesn't remove her clothes – she repeats her act before children at circuses. As Australia's leading contortionist, she takes her audience's breath by twisting her body, not her morals. At what she is convinced is God's command, Cristina teeters on the precipice of hell, plucking souls from Satan's fangs.

When I saw the impressive write-up in a leading Christian magazine, I assumed Cristina's daring exploits, spiritual power and soul-winning success had made her a celebrity in Christian circles. After months of feeling an unusual prayer-burden for her, I finally yielded to the urge to contact her. I was shocked when Cristina confided that she felt rejected by 98% of Christians and couldn't find one church where she felt accepted. The godly treat her like a Samaritan, though she alone is neighbor to the man wallowing in the gutter. Strategically placed in Satan's heartland, Cristina loves drug-addicts, prays for strippers, witnesses to transvestites, and gives back-sliding Christians a fright. Yet few uphold her in prayer. God uses preachers, singers, maybe even nurses, but a *contortionist*? In a *strip joint*? Next you'll be saying God could anoint the skills of a butterfly collector, save souls through scuba diving, be glorified by doll restoration, heal the sick with a handkerchief,^b feed a throng from a boy's lunch box, become a Man denounced by religious leaders for his 'low' morals . . .^c

For years Cristina battled with what seemed the call of God burning within and buckets of water thrown by well-meaning Christians. Being endowed with a rare skill nurtured from the age of

^a Acts 11:2-3

^b Acts 19:12

^c Luke 7:34,39; 11:15,38; 13:14

four was not proof God wanted her to continue. Jesus called fishermen to forsake abilities burnished by years of experience.

The moral tangle is daunting. I couldn't enter Cristina's work place without grieving God. Scripture teaches, however, that a few issues are not settled by an immutable law but by an individual's purity of motives, conscience, and personal leading from the Most High.^a This applies only to breaking rules of human origin – though, like pharisaical laws, such rules could be designed by well-meaning Christians to put a protective hedge around God's law. The fearfully holy Lord would never break his written word or smudge his awesome purity by calling Dobson to lust, Miss Nightingale to drunkenness, or Cristina to immorality, though flocks of halo-studded angels in psychedelic jumpsuits herald the call. Neither would God assign them such precarious tasks unless they were exceptionally resistant to the type of temptation they would face.

We are often so conscious of sin being like leaven that we forget Jesus' teaching that the kingdom of God is also like leaven, which starts as a speck and transforms everything it touches.^b A potent Christian on a mission from God is a far greater threat to the Enemy than the Enemy is a threat to the Spirit-led Christian. It is quite another matter, however, when a Christian wanders aimlessly or sinfully onto enemy turf.

So, though it will always be rare and subject to stringent conditions, God's leading could challenge a man-made moral code, even one that has protected millions of Christians. I have faced a moral dilemma in even raising the matter. Someone might twist it to their own destruction to excuse sin, yet if I stay silent others might quash God's leading by considering themselves holier than God.

We must bow before the Holy One whose ways are not our ways. All our joy is to be found in the perfection of his will, no matter how it clashes with human tradition.

Divinely Ordained Diversity

We all know that humanity's first ministry was nude gardening.^c It worked. It had God's blessing. Yet – I hope – we feel no compulsion to emulate their approach to ministry. Nor do I see many people trying to organize their own crucifixion to replicate the most powerful ministry earth has seen. So why try to steal *anyone's* ministry style? We would end up looking as ridiculous as skinny David clunking an erratic course in Saul's ponderous armor.^d

You're a unique work of God. Only a fool would vandalize Leonardo da Vinci's priceless works by trying to turn them all into *Mona Lisas*.

God is most elevated, not by a hundred imitations of Billy Graham (or Cliff Richard), but by a hundred common folk each being true to their unique calling. The result will much more accurately reflect the multi-faceted character of God. Our great God is a humorist as well as a judge; a musician as well as an orator; a servant and a king. Just look at creation: God is an artist, an engineer, an inventor, a gardener. He's a bio-chemist, a mid-wife, a philosopher, a laborer, an architect – does the list ever end?

In the vastness of God's nature there must be a tiny element that you can portray better than anyone else ever has – if you accept the challenge of a truly Spirit-led ministry, instead of a pale imitation of someone else.

Just as the life-styles of Jesus and John the Baptist differed enormously,^e there should be a rich diversity within the body of Christ. Unfortunately, a warped view of holiness and/or submission often leads to drab conformity. In reality, this is carnality – the inability to love or appreciate anyone different from ourselves. Deodorized saints are the order of the day. Real saints get up hypocrites' noses.

To reach the many different people groups he encountered, Paul became 'all things to all men'.^f If Paul as an individual could contemplate this, imagine the breadth that should be evident within the body as a whole. This is possible only if we allow the Spirit to nurture our individuality. Christians wishing they had the abilities of others are nightingales coveting a peacock's beauty or

^a Romans 14:1-23

^b Matthew 13:33

^c Genesis 2:15, 25

^d 1 Samuel 17:38-39

^e Matthew 3:4; 11:18-19

^f 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

soaring eagles envying the powerful legs of an ostrich. Yet don't we all feel like this at times? (The embarrassing thing about our brain-waives is the spelling.)

Don't despise the unique blend of abilities bestowed on you by the keenest Mind in the universe. Stop envying the ministry of others and start clarifying your own call. If, to your thinking, that call seems insignificant, the thing to be ashamed of is not your calling but your thinking!

Secrets

This book is sprinkled with illustrations that even the dull, worldly mind recognizes as success stories. The goal is to be inspired by the obvious fact of success, without being intoxicated by the nature of that success. Achievement, glory and reward constitute the common destination of every Spirit-led pilgrimage. The divinely charted path to that goal, however, is unique to every individual. For a few of us, the path meanders through success so blatant that it is even acknowledged on earth. More commonly, recognition of our achievements requires such spiritual discernment that most onlookers miss it.

The book of Acts is crammed with stories about Paul, and Bibles bulge with his letters, but about the activities of most of the apostles after Pentecost, Scripture says nothing. Did Thomas take the gospel as far as India? We know little about even those who received considerable press. Is it true that upon his martyrdom Peter asked to be crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to die in a manner similar to Christ?²⁴ Did he go to Rome? How fruitful was Barnabas's missionary efforts after he split from Paul?^a Did Paul regain his freedom after the closing of *Acts* and fulfill his dream of reaching Spain?^b

What we are permitted to know is tantalizingly selective. Scripture preserves the things that are most instructive, not necessarily the things that achieved the most. It is dangerously short-sighted to assume that events and people God chooses not to publicize down here are of little consequence.

'The Lord will let others be honored and put forward,' wrote famous missionary Hudson Taylor, 'and keep you hidden away in obscurity, because he wants some choice fragrant fruit for his coming glory which can only be produced in the shade.'²⁵

In modern warfare there are heroes known to the whole world and there are others engaged in missions so vital that their heroism must remain secret until after the war.

Whatever role our Commander assigns us, we can still be spurred by the few stories that make the headlines, without imagining that our triumphs must take the same form. In Christ's army, public recognition may be deferred, but the day will come when all is revealed.

And that day will never end.

Summing Up

We have exposed three wounding lies of the Deceiver. We can now counter-attack with three thrilling truths:

1. God in Christ has raised us so high that the presence or absence of a ministry cannot touch our infinite worth and significance. God's smile beams upon us. Like the proudest parent, he's thrilled with us, irrespective of whether we're going to the mission field or going moldy.
2. We were made for ministry. We are so loved and our Father is so powerful that if we allow him full sway, nothing will prevent us from achievements that will last forever.
3. Our evaluation of a ministry often differs wildly from God's. Over and over, Scripture exalts ministries and people that most of us disregard. We tend to prize leadership, a dramatic call, fame, conformity to expected norms, natural talent, and use such measures as the number of people reached or whether a person lives off church funds. We carnally exalt some people and denigrate others. Just as the enemy wants saints to feel unforgiven, he wants Christians with thriving ministries to feel failures. Vast numbers of us are more successful than we dare imagine.

Truth heals, delivering us from the distressing accusations the devil hurls at us. In the wilderness, Jesus' only defense against the Liar's onslaught was the truth of God's Word.^c We are

^a Acts 15:39

^b Romans 15:28

^c Matthew 4:3-11

I'VE GOTTA BE ME

amassing an armory of divine truths to fight despair. Without them, even the strongest saint is vulnerable.

Stilling the storm within will take more than the truths so far uncovered. There is more to come, and several of the issues already raised will be further pursued. Moreover, how much the Lord writes into your life the truths in this book depends on how often you close the book and pray. Nonetheless, we have taken three giant steps on the path to peace.

I urge you to study prayerfully the Scriptures cited, especially in chapter three, until they become a part of you. It is helpful to memories as many as you can. Thus armed, we will triumph over depression and lethargy, surging forward to the challenging future lovingly planned by our Maker. We're on the road to success.

You were made for ministry,
And saved for service.
Created with this destiny
Redeemed for this purpose.
No wonder you want it!
Your spirit longs for it,
God's Spirit yearns for it;
Spirit and spirit cry out for it.

If ever a dolphin wanted to swim,
Or a possum to climb,
Or a falcon to fly,
You will long to minister.
If ever a dolphin will swim,
Or a possum climb,
Or a falcon fly,
You will minister.

CHAPTER 7: DON'T PANIC – GOD AT WORK

He looked serious. 'Grantley, can I be frank?'

'I guess you can be Frank. Can I be Harry?'

He was not amused. 'So I'm charged with divine power, eh? Ready to explode into ministry, eh?'

'You've got it!' I replied.

'Well, I must have the world's longest fuse! I've been shelved for so long if I were allergic to dust I'd have sneezed to death!' The last time I blessed anyone was two years ago – '

'I remember that,' I interrupted. 'You lost your voice at choir practice.'

'Why didn't someone say something! All they did was mutter about my height when they kept pushing me to the back away from the microphone. And are you sure my little accident last month has nothing to do with my name disappearing from the communion roster?'

'I haven't heard. I know that cleaning incident -'

'Aw, you're not bringing that up again? It was just a slip of the broom. She was only in hospital overnight.'

'Could have happened to anyone,' I replied. 'And who'd have guessed that at your very first attempt at counseling -'

'It's been settled out of court.' He was almost smiling. 'Only a matter of time and we'll be on speaking terms again.'

'That's the spirit!'

'But don't tell me "Rome wasn't burnt in a day," Grantley.' Face it, no matter what Scripture says, we could both write our achievements on the same postage stamp and have room left over for the Lord's prayer, the twenty-third Psalm and the entire book of Revelation.'¹

He's right. And we're in excellent company.

Having surmounted enormous obstacles and years of preparation, Adoniram Judson arrived on the mission field. Seven hard years followed. All he had to show for it was one convert. It was about time he moved on to something more beneficial – peddling hair curlers at a *Bald is Beautiful* convention, developing waterproof pianos for people who sing in the shower, fitting parachutes to birds that are afraid of heights – anything but trying to win souls in Burma.

One day a man came to his house looking for work and instead found Jesus, his Savior. Another pin prick. But this one burst the balloon. The new convert became a powerful evangelist. Dozens, then hundreds, then thousands turned to the Lord. Within a century, over a quarter of a million Christians directly or indirectly owed their spiritual lives to Adoniram Judson.²

But that's eternity's view. Years after that key conversion, Adoniram's life still seemed a waste. He was thrown into a death prison and chained to a granite block. Every night guards, ex-criminals themselves, hoisted his ankle fetters high above his head so that only his head and shoulders touched the ground. As he lay in appalling filth, almost every thought produced a new reason for despair. There were then only eighteen converts. Surely most, perhaps all, would fall away or be killed under the new outbreak of persecution. Years of struggle had produced a lone manuscript of a Burmese New Testament and his wife had smuggled it into prison. Any moment it could be discovered and destroyed. His relations with fellow missionaries had been marred by hurtful clashes. He had buried his only child. His own life hung by a thread. He feared for his darling, pregnant wife.

‘I came to bring life,’ he moaned, ‘and have brought nothing but death.’

After a year and a half of cruelty he was finally released. A brief reunion with his precious wife ended with him having to wrench himself from her to assist in political negotiations. Weeks turned to months. Before he could return to his wife, she was dead. Months later, death tore from him his only remaining child, the baby he had battled so hard to save. After two more years of mental deterioration, still numb with guilt over being absent when his wife most needed him, he dug a grave and lingered by it for days on end, his mind churning with morbid thoughts. ‘God is to me the Great Unknown,’ he concluded. ‘I believe in him, but I find him not.’

The mighty Lord hauled him up. He became one of the most admired missionaries of all time.³

Sadly, not everyone slogs through the tough ground-breaking years. David Flood’s solitary convert was just a child. When David’s wife died, discouragement won. Leaving his baby daughter, Aggie, with a missionary couple, young David left Africa – and the Lord. After the collapse of his second marriage he took in a mistress. Alcohol, poverty, illness and degradation tightened their deadly strangle-hold.

As his abandoned daughter grew, married and served the Lord, she often thought of the father she had never known. He was 77 when Aggie finally stood at his grimy bedside, ignored the stench, and hugged him. Her love and Christ’s power brought David back to the One who had moved him to ‘waste’ his life in Africa. Aggie also brought startling news. That little convert he had left in Africa had built on the foundation David and his wife had laid and the entire tribe of 600 people had come to Christ.⁴

It’s not only missionaries who are allowed to have lean years.

Hounded by defeat,
Immersed in gloom.
Confounded by a curse,
Scorned and spurned.
Haunted by despair,
Mocked by words of doom.
My eyes may fill with tears,
But not with dread or fear.

This grub, wings will sprout.
This down-trodden worm will soar;
Transformed by redemptive power,
Set free by the Lord of all.
No one sees it yet:
The secret’s heaven-kept.
They mock and jeer
They do not know;
Success is slow, but it is sure;
Though it tarry, it will come.
All Father touches turns to gold.
It matters not what others say,
The winning’s done;
Like Father, like son!

Founded on his Word;
Embalmed by love.
Surrounded by his arms;
Washed and warmed.
Granted all I need,
Buoyed by thoughts above:
From fear I find release,
Becalmed by heaven’s peace.

The shadow of his affliction fell across his life like a black and bottomless chasm. Reeling under hellish torment, bereft of all his children, cruelly stripped of his reputation, all of his possessions gone, Job coveted death. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing ahead but pain, accusations and despair. Job had nothing to live for.^a Or so everyone thought.

Before him lay joy and honor, a long and fruitful life, double his past prosperity and the fathering of a superb new family.^b Job had everything to live for.

Like vine branches, we are not continually laden with fruit. That would be unnatural.^c For a significant portion of its life, a grapevine is nothing but a dry, twisted stick; fruitless, useless for shade, worthless as timber; to all appearances fit only to be ripped from the ground and reduced to ashes. Yet those barren times are as vital in the life of the vine, as the seasons of fruit.

If spring could tip-toe past nature without stirring it from its winter slumber; if the sun could slip through the sky without dispelling the night; if rain could fall to the ground without bringing life to the desert – only then should you fear dry times, dark times, lean times. Though you feel as useless as a fur coat in a heat-wave, the time will come when your warmth is treasured. For everything there is a season.

We could stock a library with stories of spectacularly unsuccessful men and women who eventually sparked massive moves of God. Many closed their eyes in death without seeing the fruit their labors finally produced.

No matter what we think of his views, it is staggering to realize that Søren Kierkegaard's writings slept for almost a century after his death until translated into English and suddenly stunning the world.^d And consider the Jim Elliots of this world whose apparently untimely deaths have inspired countless thousands to take up the baton and run in their stead. Though they died seemingly at the very outset of their life's work, the final result was beyond what a dozen lifetimes could achieve. Still more tantalizing are heaven's best-kept secrets – triumphs by people we have never heard of, or achievements our slow minds cannot adequately appreciate.

Nonetheless, God established the pattern millennia ago: Sarah knew nothing but barrenness for ninety distressing years, yet became the ancestress of multiplied millions.

At this very moment, the Lord could be replaying in someone's mind heaven's recording of a conversation you had with that person years ago. You've forgotten the incident, but God is still using it. What you thought were normal words were Spirit-powered. You don't feel the warm glow that would be yours if you knew those words were still echoing through the chambers of someone's mind, but face it: results mean more to you than elusive feelings.

Apprenticeship

Clearly, the crucial issue is not what God has so far accomplished in our lives. God took twice as long preparing Moses as he did in using him.^e Joshua's experience was similar.^f For the Messiah – and perhaps his Baptist forerunner – it was about thirty years' preparation for three years ministry. In fact, much of Christ's ministry was packed into the last few days.^g Samson accomplished more in his last seconds than in all the rest of his life.^h

Wine has a longer shelf life than prune juice.

Even for the Christian, life can seem a sadistic joke. In reality, our circumstances are determined by infinite love met by infinite wisdom empowered by infinite might. (Lose sight of that and life's a muesli bar – all mixed up and nutty.)

We need not flinch from hardship. In a mollusk's slimy gut a speck becomes a pearl. In the bowels of the earth oppressive conditions turn blobs into diamonds.

If our ministries are at present less than outstanding, there is a reason for it. A good reason. The possibilities are numerous, but usually surprisingly simple. Rarely are God's ways so beyond us that we cannot, at least in hindsight, marvel at his wisdom. Discovering the reasons for your plight should flood your life with light, liberating you into the joyful expectancy, confidence and trust your

^a Job 3:1-26; 6:9, 11

^b Job 42:11-17; compare Job 1:2-3

^c Ecclesiastes 3:1

^d Deuteronomy 2:7; 34:7

^e Numbers 14:30, 34; Joshua 1:1-2; 24:29

^f For example, John 12:1 ff; Mark 11:1 ff

^g Judges 16:30

Lord wants you to enjoy. Let's explore the possibilities. I think you'll find that jigsaw piece you've been missing.

Since any blockage will stop the flow, we won't attempt to rank them in any particular order.

Glorious Failure

Moses was in 'the backside of the desert', says the King James Bible.^a I'd steer clear of that expression, but there might have been times when Moses was tempted to use it. The desert drop-out stood before the burning bush a broken man, haunted by his inadequacy.^b He was so long in the tooth, ivory hunters must have started asking after his health. And excuses! When God called him, this word-masher's comeback was packed with more 'buts' than a church pew on Easter morning. As he tried to stammer home his point, he even had the audacity to imply that his deficiencies were bigger than God. What's a stutter to the One who fashions mouths? What's a mental block to the Maker of minds?

Poor old tongue-twister – one foot in the grave, and the other in his mouth. Yet it was Moses the word-slurping geriatric, not Moses the headstrong royal, who was on the brink of greatness.

Forty years earlier, fresh from his Egyptian education, strong in body, high in status and political pull, he was keen to help God's people. But heaven had no use for a budding superstar. Heaven was waiting for a bumbling sheep-minder.

Viewed from the final side of the grave, everything tackled in one's own strength fizzles.^c Only through God could Moses' splash in time ripple for all eternity. Perhaps it took the full forty years for this realization to become an unshakeable conviction, but it was worth the wait. It became the secret of Moses' strength, ridding him of the arrogant independence that would otherwise have fouled his service. He was the meekest man on earth.^d This precious quality is adorned with exquisite promises.

'The meek will he guide . . .

The meek will he teach his way.'^e

'The meek will increase their joy in the Lord.'^f

'The meek will inherit the earth.'^g

Humility – joyous dependence upon the Lord – is the road to honor.^h The glitter at the end of other roads is a mirage.ⁱ

There was a young man with rashes;

All that he touched turned to ashes.

Yet marigolds, azaleas,

Lily bulbs, and dahlias,

All grew in those wonderful ashes.

(If you wrote poetry like this, you'd be humble, too.)

The issue of pride and humility is a deathtrap strewn with confusion and false concepts. Let's clear this minefield before anyone else is hurt. We'll begin with the analogy of a lamb in Bible times.

There's a pride that says, 'I can find better pasture than the Shepherd. I'll always find water. I can handle bears, and lions are probably a myth invented by the Shepherd so he can dominate me.'

Few of us are in danger of such stupidity. Our danger is the independent spirit that says, 'I adore my wonderful Shepherd, but that grass over the rise looks particularly juicy. I'll just wander over. I'm growing up. I've been out of sight before and everything went fine. If a lion comes I'm sure I can bleat loud enough and the Shepherd can run fast enough . . .'

There's an attitude masquerading as humility that beats itself miserable. 'I'm dumb. I'm ugly. I'm hopeless.' Give no room to this imposter. But there's a humility that rejoices in the certainty that

^a Exodus 3:1

^b Exodus 4:10-14

^c Compare John 15:5

^d Numbers 12:3 ff

^e Psalm 25:9

^f Isaiah 29:19

^g Matthew 5:5

^h Proverbs 15:33 b; James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:6-7

ⁱ Luke 14:11; Proverbs 16:25

the Shepherd knows best. Having abandoned faith in itself or in luck, it puts all its hope in the Shepherd, believing that to leave him out of sight for a second is to flirt with disaster. This virtue hugs the Shepherd, delighting in his every whisper, feasting on his goodness. Sometimes humility is led over rocky terrain but ultimately it enjoys the best pasture and the highest security. Not only is it not mauled by predators, it produces the best wool and the best offspring. It sometimes staggers up hills to stay with its Shepherd but it frolics in the warmth of the Shepherd's love.

Even in Christian circles we hear so much about positive self-image that we seem to believe in the power of self rather than humility. 'Negative' confession seems to have done little harm to the following people.

☆ 'There comes one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose' – John the Baptist.^a

☆ 'I am not worthy that you should come under my roof' – the centurion commended for his faith.^b

☆ 'I can of myself do nothing' – the Lord Jesus.^c

☆ '... Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.'^d

'I am the least of the apostles, and am not fit to be called an apostle.'^e

'[I] am less than the least of all saints [i.e. believers] ...'^f – the apostle Paul.

☆ 'I write to you concerning righteousness, not because I take anything upon myself ... For neither I, nor any such one, can come up to the wisdom of the blessed and glorified Paul' – Polycarp, revered Bishop of Smyrna, martyred c 166 AD.⁶

☆ 'I, Patrick, a sinner, the rudest and least of all the faithful, and most contemptible to very many ...' wrote the fifth-century Christian who risked death to return to the godless country from which he had fled slavery. Before he died he is said to have baptized over one hundred thousand Irish, established more than three hundred churches and changed the course of history.⁷

☆ '[I am called] to be a new kind of simpleton' – Francis of Assisi.⁸

☆ 'I am a mere nothing' – Madame Guyon.⁹

☆ 'Oh, that I may ... desire to be nothing and to think it my highest privilege to be an assistant to all, but the head of none' – George Whitefield.¹⁰

☆ '... though I am of little use, I feel a pleasure in doing the little I can do,' wrote one of Christendom's most obvious achievers, William Carey. 'When I am gone,' he said twelve years later, 'say nothing about Carey. Speak instead of Carey's Savior.'¹¹

☆ '[I'm] the most overestimated man in America' – D. L. Moody.¹²

☆ 'I have often found that the place where I have seen most of my own insignificance, baseness, unbelief and depravity has been the place where I have got a blessing ...' – Charles Spurgeon.¹³

☆ Having been introduced as 'our illustrious guest', Hudson Taylor replied, 'Dear friends, I am the little servant of an illustrious master.'¹⁴

☆ 'It isn't Mary Slessor doing anything, but Something outside of her altogether uses her as her small ability allows.'

'I am ... nothing more and none other than the unworthy, unprofitable – but most willing – servant of the King of kings.'

^a Mark 1:7

^b Matthew 8:8

^c John 5:30

^d 1 Timothy 1:15

^e 1 Corinthians 15:9

^f Ephesians 3:8

'I know what it is to pray for long years and never get an answer . . .'

'I don't live up to half the ideal of missionary life. . . . We are very human and not goody-goody at all.' – Mary Slessor, outstanding missionary to Africa.¹⁵

☆ Amy Carmichael's personality and powers of leadership were such that, according to one biographer, she could easily have become a cult figure, had she so chosen. Instead, when her name appeared on the Royal Birthday Honors List she begged to have her name withdrawn, insisting she had done nothing worthy of the honor. It is said that whenever there was a task no one else wanted to do, people would say, 'Ask Amy.'¹⁶

☆ Until her dying day, even after becoming a world-wide celebrity and receiving more acclaim than any single female missionary in modern history, Gladys Aylward believed she could not possibly have been God's first choice for the ministry he gave her. God's preference, she confided to a friend, must surely have been someone better educated and of the other sex.¹⁷

Such self-depreciation is so characteristic of truly great Christians that finding the above quotations was nearly as easy as finding noses in a group portrait. That so many people could accomplish so much while having such a mind-set is an enigma to the gurus of positive thinking. It boils down to this: succeeding in situations where others would succumb, necessitates defiant faith in either yourself or in God – and which of the two you spend your faith on determines whether your achievement will be temporal or eternal. You might build an empire by believing in yourself, but you can build in God's kingdom only by abandoning faith in self.

In terms of mass impact, I suspect positive mania has been gaining momentum and creeping the globe only in the last few generations and the modern move seems to have gravitated particularly to America. A world-wide survey of mathematical ability in thirteen-year-olds was most revealing. Of the six countries studied, America came dead last, yet 68% of the Americans rated themselves 'good at mathematics', while a mere 23% from the top-scoring country (Korea) rated themselves so highly. The American youngsters had a wonderfully positive attitude as they limped home last.¹⁸

In God, native ability and confidence in self amount to nothing. A frail old lady with child-like faith in Christ can make a muscle-bound, positive-confession-crazed he-man look like a cringing weakling. She could turn an intellectual giant into a fool.

A radio's usefulness rests entirely on which frequency it is tuned to. Anyone trying to tune into a point somewhere between faith in God and faith in one's self, will produce little more than static, no matter what the volume of its output. When the tuning slips slightly off God, positive thinking becomes humanism. Faith in one's self is so intoxicating and the two types of faith are so easily confused or amalgamated, that we are unlikely to see the error of our ways while our misdirected faith seems to be producing results. That's why total failure is often a necessary preliminary to outstanding success.

Sweet Smell of Defeat

The secret of an earth-shaking ministry is to by-pass our limitations and tap directly into the power of the One who holds the stars. We're in union with the Creator of sapphires and seraphim, molecules and galaxies. In him is all power, all wisdom, all love. Why, then, do we act like those who have no God? Empowered by him, our accomplishments should excel anything godless humanity could contemplate. Yet the more content we are to draw solely upon human resources, the more 'God's work' is riddled with human frailty.

Love and good intentions are never enough. It was love for Jesus that caused Peter to blurt out words that had such the opposite effect to Peter's wishes that Jesus retorted, 'Get behind me Satan.'^a Job's counselors seemed to have been motivated by deep concern for Job and genuine love for God when they unwittingly became Job's tormenters and sinned against the God they thought they were defending.^b

We could be like little children redecorating the house for Daddy without waiting for instructions or help. Daddy might not even want the television painted. Sadly, our loving,

^a Mark 9:31-33

^b Job 2:11-13; 4:17; 5:8-16; 8:3,20-22; 42:7-8

enthusiastic efforts could prove worse than nothing. Oh, we may think we have done a marvelous job – until we meet Father face to face.

A disastrous failure could therefore be a great blessing. There is nothing like it for excising the tendency to draw upon human, rather than divine resources. If allowed to spread, that cancer would destroy an otherwise healthy ministry.

Any hurt that causes me to cling more firmly to Christ is a hurt for which I will be forever thankful. Any 'defeat' that has this result is a victory. What seems an obstacle to service ends up an essential stepping stone. Brought to God, a string of failures becomes a rainbow, at the end of which lies golden success.^a

If the following lines mirror your feelings, you're headed for glory.

I need the Lord, my Maker,
As rivers need to flow;
As flowers need the sunlight;
And seedlings need to grow;
As marksmen need a target,
And arrows need a bow.
I've feigned my independence,
But failed to improvise.
I need the One I'm made for,
As eagles need the skies.
You're my breath and my light,
My food and my wine.
I'm the brush, you're the artist,
I'm the string and you're the harpist.
Tune me for your glory.

I need the Lord, my Maker,
As falcons need to see;
As the clay needs a sculptor,
And a lock needs a key.
As a ship needs a rudder;
And coral needs the sea.
I'm done with empty living;
Success that's make-believe.
I need the One I'm made for,
As creatures need to breathe.
You're my strength and my hope,
My peace and my shield.
I'm the hands, you're the healer,
I'm the sword and you're the victor.
Wield me for your glory.

I need the Lord, my Maker,
As an arm needs a hand;
As a babe needs its mother;
And a dove needs to land;
As a car needs a driver
And a glove needs a hand.
I'm tired of 'great achievements',
Of life that's just a game.
I need the One I'm made for,
As deserts need the rain.
You're my life and my joy,
My truth and my guide.
I'm the song, you're the Singer,

^a Psalm 37:23-24; Proverbs 24:16; Micah 7:8; Romans 8:28

I'm a well and you're the water.
Fill me for your glory.

Blessed are they who know their labors have failed, for they shall learn to serve God his way. But woe to them who vainly imagine God approves of their labors. They have their reward already. False confidence leads to chaos.^a

He Turns Your Rust Into Gold

The horror of unemployment is that it can corrode competent, dynamic people into sloppy, dithering wrecks. Unless we willfully resist the Lord, however, such decay is either an illusion or reversible.

I've been turned down so often, I look like a concertina. For years my motivation and confidence have seemed to be plummeting. Closer examination, however, reveals the opposite.

Deny yourself food and at a certain point beyond your normal mealtime, your appetite may briefly wane. Eventually, however, desiring food for its sensory enjoyment is replaced by a craving for its life-giving attributes. Motives are purged and, finally, intensified.

We often fail to appreciate things until deprived of them. Aspects of service that would once have seemed mundane, perhaps even arduous, have rocketed in my estimation to a wondrous privilege. My potential joy in service is actually growing. What was dwindling was selfish motivation. I'm no longer expecting ego boosts.

Even my battered self-confidence has taken an unexpected turn. Until commencing this book, I was certain I could never compose the simplest poem. Then I was asked to help write a musical. I nearly refused, convinced I could not possibly contribute. Nonetheless, I wrote the lyrics. So sure am I that God had surpassed my native abilities that I now find it absurd to maintain I could not be used of God to do equally impossible things.

After years on heaven's dole, confidence in my ability had dived. It can drown, for all I care. What has risen from the depths is not self-confidence, but a heightened awareness of the lengths the Lord of glory will go to share his infinite abilities with me. And this is no longer a theoretical concept. I can now point to those lyrics as concrete proof. Had my self-esteem not been so mangled by slammed doors, I might have interpreted such achievements as the product of my own ability. If so, instead of the lyrics being a spring-board to new heights in God, I would have remained floundering at the level of my own mediocrity, grounded by thinking my abilities set the ceiling on any vocation I could have.

For the person who understands God's ways, brokenness holds no terror. Being reduced to insignificance in our own eyes is a sure way of wooing divine attention. 'You may easily be too big for God to use,' remarked Dwight Moody, 'but you can never be too small.'¹⁹ Peter Sumner has distilled an amazing truth from the way Christ fed the multitudes: whatever God breaks, he blesses; whatever he blesses, he uses; whatever he uses, he multiplies.^b For Sumner, this is truth pounded out on the steel anvil of life. He was permanently blinded in a freak accident while giving up his vacation to help renovate a building for Christian use. From this broken life grew the *Christian Foundation for the Blind*.²⁰

Don't be too hasty in despising what you imagine to be your flaws and weaknesses.

The Mocker glares at you. 'Cracked pot!' he snarls. You shrink inside, unable to hear the adoration of people in the age to come. 'Exquisite vessel, perfectly formed to touch our lives!' they cry to you. 'Through that crack God's oil flowed out to us.'

We seem the object of ridicule, yet we're the focus of infinite love. We're fruit growing sweeter, wine gaining value; not milk going sour. We're not cardboard caving, colors fading, under the weight of time; we're concrete drying stronger, trees growing higher, dawn glowing brighter.

If your life is on 'hold', the hands holding you bear love-prints and they're nestling you close to the Father's heart.

Glorious things are ahead.

^a Compare Proverbs 3:5,7; 28:26

^b Matthew 14:17-20; 15:34-37

CHAPTER 8: BASKING IN INFINITE LOVE

God's kingdom, said Jesus, is like a seed that starts small and grows huge.^a It is hardly surprising, then, that ministries belonging to that kingdom start small, buried, unnoticed. In fact, just about everything our Creator does starts small. Even the Savior of the world began his earthly visit as an embryo hidden in a woman.

Having established the normality of unspectacular beginnings, we began investigating the reasons you may have not yet experienced the ministry success divinely planned for you. The first possibility we examined is that the Lord could be working to break that natural tendency to spread your trust between various human agencies and God himself. Those stray faith-tentacles still clinging to the finite must be wrenched off and set firmly in the infinite where the rest of your faith is fixed. You can't blast off into the unknown while clinging to the known.

That might be what is holding you back, but there are other possibilities.

Anyone who feels slightly worthy of divine love has had no more than a superficial brush with the majestic and holy Lord of heaven and earth. If you are not overawed by the thought that a perfect God could love you, then you are either so jaded to the truth or so infatuated with your self-importance, so blinded to reality, that your need for spiritual revelation is desperate.

Heaven sometimes withholds ministry opportunities so we may learn it is not our labors or our diligence or our usefulness that makes us precious to God. If your child fell ill and could no longer do her chores, would your love for her diminish? Well, don't imagine this speck of human love exceeds the love of the Almighty.

Would you attempt pushing a jumbo jet to help it fly across the Atlantic? That would be wiser than trying to do your bit to help Christ secure your salvation or breach the infinite gulf between who you are and what a person would have to be to merit God's smile. Anyone foolish enough to keep trying will be left on the runway when departure time arrives. In love, the Lord will not take us far in ministry until this issue is sorted out.^b

We often get the salvation part fairly right, yet still imagine we must earn God's smile by serving him. It's hard to believe the King of glory would treasure our friendship. Though we keep pushing it down, bobbing close to the surface of our consciousness is the thought, 'The Lord saved me because of the things I can do for him.'

The false notion that service could buy God's approval might heighten motivation, but heaven will not exploit it. Nothing is more important to God than our spiritual well-being.

They had just brought in the washing when there was a knock on the door. 'Oh no! The house is in a mess! And just look at me . . .!' exclaimed Martha.

'I'll get it,' called Mary. She opened the door and her heart skipped a beat. There was Jesus and all his disciples.

'Come in!' she gushed excitedly. 'Martha! It's Jesus!'

Martha was in a panic. How was she going to feed them all? If only she'd had more warning. She had wanted everything to be so nice for Jesus. 'Where's Mary? She's taking her time!'

^a Matthew 13:31-32

^b Romans 3:19-24; 9:30-33; Galatians 3:1-14; Philippians 3:3-10

She ran next door to borrow some food. Still no Mary. She stoked the oven and got out the plates. Still no Mary. She peered out and there was Mary sitting at Jesus' feet with not a care in the world! Martha exploded. Yet it was Mary that the Savior defended.

I don't question Martha's love, but her sister was more perceptive. Mary had discerned that Jesus' yearning was not primarily to be served. He craved intimacy. Cakes could never taste so good that Jesus considered it worth being robbed of Martha's presence.

Love's Rest

Basking in the love of Jesus seems self-indulgent. We feel compelled to slip out of his embrace and whip ourselves into running errands for him. To sit with the King in the drawing room might be acceptable for royalty, but not for the class of people we see ourselves as. Slaving in the kitchen seems more appropriate.

God, however, is a giver not a taker. If the Lord of hosts wanted slaves he could compel the entire human race to serve him. He yearns for love, not labor. An hour spent luxuriating in the King's presence means more to him than a life-time of fear-motivated service. If it's a genuine expression of love, sweat is beautiful. But service as an expression of a slave-mentality grieves him. God longs to lift us from viewing ourselves as heaven's second-class citizens. He has made us royalty and he wants us to know it.

Whether it is this particular revelation, or some other message he wants to share, sometimes the only way our Lord can get our attention is to block all ministry opportunities. Otherwise, we'd be in too much of a frenzy to hear him. We can only give to others what we have first received from above. Resting in God's presence enables us to receive.

Locked doors are infuriating. I rant. I rave. I kick the door. But when at last I see more clearly, I realize enforced rests are a precious manifestation of God's love. How I thank God for not letting me smash down the door. What tragedies he saves us from! Father calls 'time out' and I'm given the opportunity to commune with the Lord of creation and receive whatever it is I need.

We look to the day, however, when our Savior need no longer resort to compulsion before we 'come aside . . . and rest awhile.'^a We are nearing graduation when we have learnt to sit daily at Jesus' feet.

Ministry is being granted the honor of an assignment worthy of God himself. It is God doing us a favor, not the other way around.

The Proof of Love

'What's your most important mission?' a missionary was once asked.

'Submission,' came the telling reply.

The key to being mightily used of God tomorrow is to be submitted to him today. Sometimes this can even mean the shelving of ministry aspirations.

Having stretched his faith, God finally gave Abraham a son. Then came the test. When Abraham was rapt in the joys and duties of parenthood, was the Lord still his first love? Achievements, no matter how magnificent, can never compensate for a decline in spiritual intimacy.^b Was God still his God, or just a figure-head? Obedience is always better than 'service'.^c

The Lord asked of Abraham what he has asked of countless people – to relinquish a precious, God-given gift. It always seems a reckless waste, but Father knows best.

We have discovered that the omnipotent Lord does not need our labor. He can use stones to sing his praises^d and an ass as his spokesman.^e He longs for something stones and beasts cannot give – your love. And that means delighting in him more than in ministry.

Abraham's 'ministry' of fatherhood began before the test. But the order can be reversed. For Peter, Jesus' probing question, 'Lovest thou me more than these?' preceded his command to serve: 'Feed my sheep.'^f

^a Mark 6:31

^b Compare Matthew 22:37-38 1 Corinthians 13:1-3: Revelation 2:2-5

^c 1 Samuel 15:22

^d Luke 19:40

^e Numbers 22:28-33

^f John 21:15

‘Lovest thou me more than these?’ God wants and deserves no rivals in our affections.

We can convince ourselves that we crave fruit for the glory of God and yet subconsciously want fruit so we suck it for moisture, rather than going direct to God, our Fountain, to slake our thirst. Our lives will be degraded whenever we turn to a substitute to fill a need that God wants to fill by his very presence. Perhaps we are nervous about such closeness to God, or lack assurance that he is big enough or tangible enough to forever satisfy our thirst for love and significance. Whatever our reason for turning from the ultimate to something inferior, our Lord does not want us missing out.

‘Lovest thou Me more than these?’ The One who wants us to have the best may decide to withhold ministry until this matter is correctly resolved.

We often focus on the fact that the moment he put his son on the altar, Abraham received him back again. Actually, Abraham’s agony was more prolonged than that. In his mind, Isaac was dead from the time he started his journey to the place of sacrifice, three days earlier. It must have seemed an eternity. Nevertheless, it was not long. Many of us presume from this that after surrendering our vocation it will be speedily returned. But though Abraham had to wait many years for his son’s conception, on this occasion he got off lightly. Our wait may be long.

We also often imagine that after the initial struggle, obedient sacrifice will flood us with joy and peace. Again, this is not always true.

A young insurance clerk loved the Lord and loved to sing. Every weekday, he would rise at 5:30 to sing on the local radio station. Evenings were devoted to practice. Then came his big break: a regular spot on national radio at twice his clerk’s wage. Next he learnt he must sometimes sing such words as ‘to hell with Burgundy’. Joy froze. Rather than compromise he refused the offer. With disappointment hanging like a millstone collar, he sank into cold despair. Month after month, depression kept him down.¹

Did God honor his sacrifice, or did he remain as blue as a red-blooded white man on a Greenland ice floe? The older generation need only hear his name. In fact, millions need only hear a single note from one of his recordings to know I’m referring to Billy Graham’s famous soloist, George Beverly Shea.

Dream Buster

Half a millennium ago, the story goes,² two budding artists were in a quandary. They yearned to develop their talents but neither could afford it. Then they hatched a plan. One would get a job to pay the other’s way. They would afterwards reverse their roles so that finally both would gain the tuition they craved. At his friend’s urging, Albrecht Durer, an admirer of reformers Luther and Melancthon, was the first to develop his skill. Even today, he is revered by the art world. But not the other. Years of manual labor with which he had supported his friend had damaged his hands, making it impossible to pursue his artistic aspirations.

A tragedy? A warning against selfless service? No. You’ve seen those clumsy hands. They’re the famous ‘Praying Hands’, lovingly depicted by Albrecht and reproduced literally millions of times. Those gnarled hands are perhaps the most famous hands the world has seen. For five hundred years they have called generation after generation to prayer and consecration, like no other hands have ever done.

Assuming he was born-again, this would-be artist lost nothing. He had hoped to use his hands to inspire humanity visually. He succeeded – powerfully. He has the whole of eternity in which to be creative but he will share eternity with throngs whose earthly lives were touched by his hands.

Would you be willing to follow his path, allowing your ministry dream to be crushed to release a fragrance that more wondrously magnifies your Lord? If not, you have ripped my carefully spun argument that a precious ministry awaits you. Wrong attitudes smudge God’s blueprints.

It is most rare for God to let a ministry dream die, never to rise again, but it must be rarer still for anyone to continually succeed in ministry without a willingness to slay that dream for the greater glory of God. More than your labor and more than your sacrifice, the Lord wants your heart.

Though I don’t believe it would happen, consider this scenario: what if you could have an exciting vocation with God’s blessing, but it would thrill him even more if you chose not to accept it? Would you forfeit your right to ministry to give your Lord slightly more pleasure? Or has an admirable desire for service the potential to become a hideous idol? You are loved too much for God to passively let you ruin your life.

Throughout history, God has elected to see his precious name blackened rather than lose first place in the hearts of his loved ones.

Missionary organization YWAM felt moved by God to buy a ship. In 1973, through the generosity of a businessman, they paid the \$72,000 deposit. The religious and local press blazed the story of daring Christians who believed God who would complete the deal. Money poured in. A skilled crew miraculously came together. The interior decorator of the luxury liner *Queen Elizabeth II* offered his services without charge. The hand of God was beginning to materialize before the very eyes of a skeptical world. Then YWAM's leader, Loren Cunningham, had a vision. He saw YWAM cheering the ship. Away in the shadows was Jesus, no longer their focus.

The mission repented and sought God, but they lost the ship, the entire deposit, thousands of hours of labor, and a lot of credibility. Climb inside the seething vat of Loren's body as he breaks the news to the businessman whose \$72,000 donation was unrecoverable. Tune in to the spirit world. See the demons party. Hear angels weep. Like a devastating flood, news of the disaster splashed round the world. But the Lord regained his rightful place in the affections of his people.³

The immensity of God's love fuels an awesome jealousy.

Jesus chided the Pharisees for using service as an excuse for neglecting family responsibilities.^a Though sacrificial giving is a magnificent vocation,^b it becomes a grotesque perversion when it leaves one's family in need.^c To deny oneself is commendable, but to thrust impoverishment upon unwilling family members is to leave God's blessing behind. A love of good works must not eclipse a love for people. Labor without love, is a torch without light; a fire without warmth.

The principle is further demonstrated by Scripture's directive to marriage partners. A zeal for prayer and self-denial, it implies, must not be allowed to overshadow marital obligations.^d Even prayer can become a monster.

People's heads are not paving stones on the road to my destiny. Nor are people objects upon which to expel my pent-up desire to minister. Unless sweetened by love, all service turns sour.^e

It's disturbingly easy to become so engrossed in 'ministry' as to lose sight of weightier matters. Christians sliding down this path forfeit their birth-right to ministry.

Gentle Wrath

There are times when the most tangible proof of God's love is his punishment. Like the wise parent he is, God lovingly disciplines all his children.^f

Look up at the stars. Are they shaken from their place if you sin? Is the Lord of heaven and earth frantically dependent upon you doing what is right?^g Why should he care what you do? Remove God's love and you would remove a major reason for his anger at sin.^h

Obviously, many delays have *nothing* to do with sin. God's punishment is rarer than some of us think. But simple disobedience delayed Jonah's ministry,ⁱ and the sin of unbelief postponed for forty years the Israelites administering God's judgment to the depraved Canaanites.^j

If we have sinned, we should neither whitewash it, nor flog ourselves with condemnation. If after seeking God, he confirms he is disciplining us, we need to confess to him our sin,^k admit he is right in disciplining us^l and quit our sin.^m

This might not induce an instant return to ministry. It did in Jonah's case. He wasn't weeping and whaling for long. His repentance turned disaster into a mere hiccup. And what a hiccup! One

^a Matthew 15:3-5

^b For example, Romans 12:6,8; 2 Corinthians 9:12-13; Philippians 4:17-18; Hebrews 13:16

^c 1 Timothy 5:8

^d 1 Corinthians 7:5

^e 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

^f Job 5:17-18; Psalm 94:12; 119:67; Proverbs 3:11-12; 1 Corinthians 11:31-32; Hebrews 12:5-11; Revelation 3:19

^g Job 22:2-3; 35:5-8

^h For example, Exodus 22:21-24; Deuteronomy 24:14-15; Psalm 10:14-18; 54:4-5; 72:4; 94:1-6; 2 Thessalonians 1:6; Revelation 6:10; 16:5-7; 18:20

ⁱ Jonah 1:1-3:1

^j Numbers 14

^k Proverbs 28:13

^l Psalm 51:4

^m Revelation 3:19

moment he was down in the mouth blubbling, next he was gone with the wind. Belched onto the beach, he picked himself up and rejoined heaven's work force.

Not so the wandering Jews. Though they repented at the beginning of their forty-year sentence, it did not short-circuit God's discipline. Some lessons must be thoroughly learned.^a

Peter wept bitterly.^b Samson and King David suffered greatly for their sin.^c Yet all finished their earthly service on a high note. For those who stay with him, God's wrath will pass; his grace is forever. We dare not abuse that grace, as King Saul and Solomon did. They continued in disobedience and lost. Submit to God however, and you will finally graduate with honors – and with a ministry.

The Missing Link

We earlier used Abraham as a model. Like God himself, he proved his love by resolving to sacrifice his 'only'^d son. Here we see obedience in its noblest form, and service in its rightful place. But to submit like Abraham, we must believe like Abraham. Scripture is emphatic that Abraham believed the Lord would raise his cremated son back to life.^e God had promised that the boy on the altar would become a father. Abraham's obedience hinged on a belief in God's willingness to work an enormous miracle for him.

We, too, must believe in God's eagerness to perform miracles not for Noah or George Müller, but for us. We all affirm the omnipotence of God, but it's our workaday faith, not our doctrinal confession, that clears the path to service. Our estimation of God's desire to use his omnipotence on our behalf can even affect the crucial issue of obedience. It could make or break our ministry.

An elderly recluse never had a fixed abode. He never got around to fixing it. His self-esteem was abysmal. Rubbish piled up around him, but he didn't seem to care. One night, he awoke to find a rat gnawing his ear. Horrified, he chased it away. Next night, the same thing happened. Gradually, he began to befriend the rat, eventually carrying it everywhere he went. All the time the creature was feeding directly off the man, slowly eating him to death.

Ridiculous? Not if I tell you that hideous 'rodent' is doubt, gradually consuming the man's spirit and soul. The story then becomes all too familiar.

For some mad reason, we tolerate thoughts like, 'I'll never amount to much,' 'I'm a muddler,' 'God did it for her, but it would never happen to me,' 'I've left my run too late,' 'I'm not good enough,' 'I can't . . .' We passively allow such destructive thoughts to wreak havoc within us.

I was recently shamed by the way someone's faith clearly outstripped mine. The contrast was appalling. God had shone a light in a dark corner of my heart. There was that ugly rat, growing fat at my expense. No wonder I have a wait problem! For too long, I've tolerated that filthy thing. I've given it all sorts of pet names: 'a healthy fear of pride', 'being realistic', 'my personality', 'not getting my hopes up'. But now I see. Depressing thoughts defile God's work, keeping me from the greatness I was created for. My passivity towards defeatist thinking should be replaced by anger. How dare I let that rat chew holes in God's glory!

Some people have 'greater' faith than me, only because I've had greater disappointments. But I'm sick of being immobilized by excuses. I don't care how impossible things look, how many failures I have experienced, how lacking in ability I seem to be, how much the Lord appears to overlook me: God is still the God of the impossible. His Word affirms he is *my* God and he loves *me*, regardless of how abandoned, unloved and insignificant I feel. That makes success inevitable. All I need do is stop wallowing in doubt long enough to receive my rightful inheritance.

Faith is the linchpin.

Daze of Our Lives

God's saints accomplish great things while staggering around in dazed bewilderment. 'By faith,' says Scripture, 'Abraham, . . . went out, *not knowing whither he went.*'^f 'I go bound in the

^a Deuteronomy 8:2-6

^b Mark 14:72

^c Judges 16:21; 2 Samuel 12:9-15, 19

^d Genesis 22:2, compare with John 3:16

^e Hebrews 11:17-19 a

^f Hebrews 11:8 (emphasis mine)

Spirit to Jerusalem,’ said Paul, ‘*not knowing the things that shall befall me there.*’^a The disciples were frequently stunned or mystified by Christ’s words and behavior. The psalmists were forever asking, ‘Why?’^b And in the midst of his suffering, Job didn’t have a clue what was going on.

The curtains are often drawn in God’s waiting room. It’s exciting to gaze ahead, but faith grows best in the dark. Life in the sunshine is so exhilarating that we seldom notice our faith beginning to droop. It’s when things are dim, that spiritual life mushrooms.

Dark mysteries bring great blessings. At the close of the year that saw the death of his newborn son and then the death of his wife and then assaults on his own health, Hudson Taylor wrote, ‘This was the most sorrowful and most blessed year of my life.’^c When it’s sunny we want to run off and play. It’s when it’s darkest that we hold Father’s hand the tightest.

In the gloom, qualities like faith, grit, and dedication, are stretched to limits we have never before reached. Yet life seems so oppressive we are oblivious to our triumphs.

In pristine conditions eyes of faith can see forever. When storms close in, it is a mammoth task for those same eyes to even slightly pierce the swirling murk. It is the conditions, not you, that have deteriorated. Contrary to every feeling, you are not regressing.

Though offered with the best intentions, much sentimental waffle is sometimes uttered about returning to one’s ‘first love’, as if the starry-eyed euphoria of new Christians is greater than the mature depths of your average older Christian. Popycock! Most spiritual honeymooners are radiant primarily because they think they have entered a blissful world of near-perfect Christians, instant answers to selfish prayers and a life forever free from pain, heartache and trials. Theirs is most likely mere puppy love, relative to the ardor moving you to tough it out.

Never confuse devotion with emotion. By way of illustration, consider the dangers inherent in the most intimate human relationship. Though in a romance, love and physical desire can be intertwined, heartache and tragedy looms for anyone who fails to recognize them as separate entities. What if a person’s marriage plans are swayed by an inability to distinguish between love and sexual appetite? What if in marriage a loss of sexual function is viewed as a decline in love? Such a misconception could threaten the whole relationship. Similarly, in the spiritual realm a failure to distinguish between feelings and love for God has serious implications.

Though I’m all for emotional exuberance, the Bible measures love, not in tingles per second, but in putting one’s life on the line.^c It’s pain endured in the valley, not gooey feelings in the afterglow of mountaintop ecstasy, that validates love. By all means, passionately seek the face of God, but don’t assume that emotional deadness – a normal phase of anyone’s spiritual life – implies spiritual deadness. We march by faith, not by warm fuzzies.

An athlete, in the midst of a record-breaking run, has never in his life been so fit and strong. Yet his pain-racked body may have never felt so weak. Likewise, in the midst of a spiritual trial, it is not uncommon to be stronger and yet feel weaker than ever before. And to fellow Christians you might seem hopeless. An ultra-marathon champion staggering up the final hill looks pathetic. A child could do better. Anyone not understanding what this man has gone through would shrink from him in disgust. Only someone with all the facts would be awed by his stamina as he stumbles on.

You’ve hit so many brick walls, it’s no wonder your nose is out of joint. Life seems hopeless. Every day it feels you’ve slumped another notch. A ministry seems beyond belief. To maintain even a glimmer of faith in such darkness is a spectacular victory. It may take everything you’ve got just to hold on. But do it. You are pumping spiritual iron.

If your blossom is dying, it’s so that the fruit can grow. Remember the cripple at the temple gate: he hoped for alms and got legs.^d Creator God loves surprises. And he loves you.

Earth sees us flattened on the wrestling ring canvas in faith’s fight. Heaven sees us forming on the canvas of the Great Artist.

Half-completed works of art look ugly. All that matters, however, is the finished masterpiece. Forget appearances. Yield to the Artist. The result will be breath-taking.

^a Acts 20:22 (emphasis mine)

^b E.g. Psalm 10:1; 22:1; 42:9; 43:2; 44:23; 74:1; 88:14

^c 1 John 3:16-18

^d Acts 3:1-3

State of Play

Phillips Brooks was pacing the floor. ‘What’s the trouble?’ asked a friend. ‘The trouble is that I’m in a hurry and God isn’t!’⁵

Our Leader often had to wait. Timing was of critical importance in every aspect of Jesus’ ministry.^a His followers can expect the same. In fact, ever since Adam waited for Eve’s formation – the fulfillment of a divinely-created longing for a mate – waiting has been an integral part of God’s plan for humanity. It’s thrilling to realize, however, that though life seems at a standstill, things are slowly moving, like the hour hand of a clock. Moreover, we are discovering that many of the retarding factors are within our powers of influence.

^a Matthew 26:2-5, 45; Mark 1:15; Luke 9:51; 13:32-33; 22:53; John 2:4; 7:6,8,30; 8:20; 9:4; 12:23,27,35; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1; Galatians 4:4; Ephesians 1:10

CHAPTER 9: WHY LORD?

The torment of waiting is often intensified by the delay seeming pointless. I aim to clip the barbs from that agonizing ‘Why?’ that twists inside us.

Prayer Drought

In the game of life, how long you stay on the bench often depends on how you pray in the trials.

Israel prayed and God called Moses.^a Israel prayed and God called Othniel.^b Israel prayed and God called Gideon. Israel prayed and God called Barak and Jephthah and Samuel and Saul and . . .^c You get the picture.^d

Individual prayers are also spectacularly potent. Moses prayed and God ordained seventy elders.^e Jesus prayed all night and twelve disciples were chosen.^f

As thunder follows lightning, ministry followed the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus. His disciples’ experience was similar. On both occasions, prayer predominated, as it did when Paul and Barnabas received their missionary call.^g And I sense the air was heavy with prayer when elders imparted to Timothy his ministerial gift.^h

‘Pray the Lord of the harvest,’ instructed Jesus, ‘that he will thrust laborers into his harvest.’ⁱ Prayer and the emergence of ministries march arm in arm. Heaven is a bit old-fashioned. The ‘buy now, pray later’ philosophy has never caught on up there.

I was threatened with a change that would have robbed me of so much time that continuing this book seemed impossible. While writing, I can convince myself that this time will be different; this time God will choose to use me. The possibility of having even that straw snatched from me swamped me with near-panic. I was agitated, worried, almost angry. The anguish of life in deep freeze is indelibly chiseled into the cortex of my mind. Who could forget month after month of coveting death? I dreaded even the briefest return to that dank hole.

I was ashamed of my feelings. They hardly seemed Christian. Why not add a dash of condemnation to the devil’s brew bubbling through my brain?

Looking back, I’m grateful for my ‘unchristian’ emotions. They drove me to fervent prayer. Pain is infinitely preferable to prayerlessly drifting from the will of God.

Character Development

To follow in the footsteps of ‘the sweet psalmist of Israel’^a we would need more than musical genius. If we added David’s extensive theological understanding and spiritual insight, we would still be hopelessly deficient.

^a Exodus 2:23; 3:9-10

^b Judges 3:9

^c 1 Samuel 8:22; 12:10-11

^d See also Judges 3:15; 4:3 ff; 6:7-8,11,14; 10:10-16; 11:1 ff; Nehemiah 9:27;

^e Numbers 11:10-25

^f Luke 6:12-13

^g Luke 3:21-22; Acts 1:14; 2:1 ff; Acts 13:2-3

^h 1 Timothy 4:13-14, compared with Acts 13:3; 28:8

ⁱ Matthew 9:38

WHY LORD?

We would have to match his patient, forgiving spirit,^b his humility,^c faith,^d intense yearning for God,^e his desire for personal holiness^f and eagerness to obey the Lord.^g

Even then, there would be a hollowness about our lyrics unless we shared David's privations and exposure to danger. His sufferings lifted his songs from 'contemporary' to timeless.

According to Paul, the ability to serve hurting humanity comes not from a textbook but from hardship.^h Not even the Son of God could begin his high priestly duties until he had undergone temptations and sufferings.ⁱ The principle was established long before Jesus' birth: levitical priests, though born for the ministry and surrounded by it all their lives, had to wait for their thirtieth birthday before entering the priesthood.^j And the principle is still in force: Scripture stipulates that church officers must not be new converts.^k

Perhaps, like me, you have envied people who because of a dramatic conversion or worldly fame are quickly thrust into the Christian spotlight. Giving a ministry to a new Christian, however, is like handing your car keys to an eight-year-old.

Nicky Cruz tells of a man born to a drug-selling family. His conversion and subsequent business success brought him to celebrity status in Christian circles. As speaking invitations mounted he felt pressured to sacrifice truth in his quest to satisfy his thrill-seeking audience. This apparently contributed to him seeking the cruel solace of crack. He became tragically addicted.^l

'I thank God that I was struck down in a quiet, little, obscure place to begin my ministry; for that is what spoils half of you young fellows,' Alexander Maclaren told ministerial students. 'You get pitchforked into prominent positions at once, and then fritter yourselves away in all manner of engagements that you call duties . . . instead of stopping at home and reading your Bibles, and getting near to God.' Added the man revered as one of the greatest preachers ever, 'I thank God for the years of early struggle and obscurity.'^m

King Rehoboam should have heeded his elders – men older and wiser. Instead, he foolishly took the advice of friends his own age.ⁿ In the words of Scripture, he was 'young and inexperienced'.^o After all, he was only forty-one years old!ⁿ

We readily admit the folly of youth – after carefully defining 'youth' as an age we have past.

In a world of prickly people, Gerald^o stood head and thorns above the rest. The venom he spat would inflame a corpse. A church worker struck up a conversation with him. Within five minutes, he later confessed, he felt like smashing Gerald's head in.

And Don had to work with this piranha-mouth. For five arduous years Don worked with him. Time and again that canon of bile blasted Don's self-control. But Don was a Christian. He resolved not to pray that his tormentor change, but that he would learn love and mastery over self. For years the inner battle flared. Finally, Don won through. Soon after, he was called into full-time service.

Now an ordained pastor shepherding several hundred people, Don looks back just two or three years to the time of his call and sees a direct link between his character development and the call to his present ministry.

Don is in his fifties.

A magazine put it well when it spoke of a certain Christian artist becoming ' . . . an "overnight sensation" after a ten year apprenticeship . . .'³ Godly character and mature, effective service come neither quickly, nor cheaply. But the Lord is worth the costliest sacrifices. Moreover, he has already deposited at Golgotha the highest possible price to ensure you will make it.

^a 2 Samuel 23:1 b

^b E.g. 2 Samuel 16:6 ff

^c E.g. Psalm 51:1-5

^d E.g. 2 Samuel 12:15-23

^e Psalm 143:6

^f Psalm 139:23-24

^g 1 Samuel 13:14

^h 2 Corinthians 1:3-6

ⁱ Matthew 4:1-2; Hebrew 5:8-10

^j Numbers 4:3

^k 1 Timothy 3:6 – the term 'bishop' in the King James Version is misleading.

^l 2 Chronicles 10:1-16

^m 2 Chronicles 13:7 – several translations

ⁿ 2 Chronicles 12:13; 1 Kings 14:21

^o Names changed to protect the guilty.

A weed may peak in a few months. A mighty tree certainly won't. Things of great worth are rarely produced quickly.^a

The Growth Factor

When I read that throughout his life George Müller 'never stopped learning' and 'was always willing to change' I knew I had found a vital root to his fruitfulness. While laboring in close association with Henry Craik, Müller discovered that Henry's sermons were saving more souls than his own. I'd have assumed my mix of gifts was different and resigned myself to smaller yields. Müller was smarter. Careful observation revealed that Henry was more spiritually-minded, more fervent in prayer for soul-winning power and had a more direct approach. George prayerfully and humbly appropriated these elements into his own life and became an equally effective evangelist.⁴

John Pollock writes of D. L. Moody's amazing 'capacity for growth right until the end.'

When eighteen-year-old Moody was interviewed for church membership he was asked 'what has Christ done for us all – for you – which entitles him to our love?'

'I don't know,' confessed Moody, 'I think Christ has done a good deal for us. But I don't think of anything particular as I know of.'

Two deacons were assigned to instruct him. Nearly a full year past before he was finally accepted into membership and even then, commented his kindly Sunday School teacher, 'little more light appeared.'

After about another year his ungrammatical attempts at prayer made people so uncomfortable that he was asked to keep silent in future.

Eventually he decided that although he could not possibly teach children, he could at least bribe them with sweets and kindness to lure them to Sunday School. Once, to his horror, he found himself with a small group of children and no speaker. He was forced to stumble through a Bible story. He gradually discovered he could tell a story to children, provided no minister was within earshot. Addressing adults was unthinkable.

At age twenty-eight he would invite seminary students to preach at a church. One day a student failed to arrive and he felt obligated to act as an inadequate substitute. Slowly, year after year, decade after decade, he developed into an outstanding evangelist.

He once invited theologian Henry Weston to address his conference. Moody could draw far bigger audiences, and, through Christ, save thousands more souls than this man. In fact, it is conservatively estimated that in an era before microphones, not to mention radio or television or jets, 100 million people seized the opportunity to hear Moody. Of the eight encyclopedias, biographical and Christian dictionaries I consulted, all devoted space to Moody; Weston did not rate a mention. So vast was Moody's influence that Weston's own students challenged his views on the basis of what they had heard from Moody. Yet when Weston rose to speak, Moody carried his chair off the platform, placed it literally at Weston's feet and sat there soaking in every word. Suddenly he shouted, 'There goes one of my sermons!' Startled, Weston asked for an explanation. Moody replied that he would now have to dump one of his favorite sermons because Weston had just proved to him that it was based on a misconception. Weston recommenced his address only to be interrupted a little later by, 'There goes another . . .'

Small wonder that like a towering tree, Moody kept growing and growing, eventually making those who had originally outstripped him look like stunted bushes. He developed gifts so vast that it is said he could have run for President of the United States.⁵

To turn a vibrant, growing Christian into a tragedy, convince him he has already learnt all that he needs to know. It's not where you start that matters; it's where you end.

A New Dimension

Thirty seconds before the parade Private Goodfellow (his real name) glanced in horror at his boots. He quickly rubbed his boots on the back of his trousers and prayed it would suffice.

The inspecting officer seemed to be flaying everyone that day. And he was edging closer and closer to Goodfellow. Finally, they were nose to nose. Cold, experienced eyes scanned him from head to foot. 'Private Goodfellow, fall out!' he barked.

^a Compare Proverbs 20:21 and 13:11; 21:5 – especially in the Revised Standard Version

‘Take a good look, men,’ he bellowed, ‘this is what you should all look like!’ When it seemed they had stared at Goodfellow’s front long enough, he ordered Goodfellow to about-turn so they could admire his back. He proudly turned, displaying the back of skillfully pressed trouser legs plastered with black blotches of shoe polish.⁶

Are you as prepared as you think?

A number of books hit the Christian market about losing weight. I’m told that after publication some of the authors ballooned to a size that suggests they know less about their subject than they thought.⁷ Embarrassing, but not surprising. Most of us imagine we have arrived long before we reach our destination.

You may have appropriated more spiritual knowledge and power than anyone on this planet – had so many heavenly visitations that your house is knee-deep in angel feathers – yet in the vastness of God there is still more. From the day of his conversion, Charles Finney had overwhelming experiences with God and was mightily used. A full quarter of a century later, after participating in most of the revivals for which he is now famous, he entered a new level of God’s holiness.⁸

Though your present endowment be enormous, of greater value is a yearning for more. ‘I would rather have a man on my platform, not filled with the Holy Ghost,’ said old-time Pentecostal, Smith Wigglesworth, ‘but hungry for God, than a man who has received the Holy Ghost but has become satisfied with his experience.’⁹

Only the Lord knows if in the realm beyond your present experience is something you critically need for your divine assignment. For Hudson Taylor a momentous spiritual discovery came after fifteen years of missionary endeavor. In the words of one writer, ‘he was transformed.’¹⁰

This issue is not the theological minefield it is often made out to be. Though many of us believe Christians receive every spiritual gift at conversion, the practical outworking is that regardless of when or how we think we were endowed, we need heavy duty prayer, faith and revelation for the rest of our lives to discover and live in the power of just a fraction of our enormous inheritance.

As his closest friends, the disciples shared a unique intimacy with the Son of God. Besides having front pew whenever he preached, Christ confided in them, sharing spiritual secrets hidden from the crowds. For three intensive years they devoured his precious words.

Not only did they witness his power, they were often active participants. Peter walked on water and hooked the money-hungry fish. They cast out demons. They hauled in the net miraculously teeming with fish. They amassed much practical experience while ministering in twos.^a Finally, they spoke with, and even handled, their Lord newly risen from the grave.

Yet still they were sidelined. They needed a further experience – the Spirit’s empowering – before they were ready for effective service.^b

It was hardly a contest: two elderly ladies on their knees, versus a confident evangelist in the prime of manhood. They wanted Dwight Moody to have the Spirit’s power. He thought he already had it. But for him to resist was to pit his power of positive thinking against their prayers to the invincible Lord of every universe. A worn-out pop-gun versus a nuclear arsenal might have been less one-sided.

The One who hears the prayers of the frail gave power to the ‘strong’. The impact shook the planet. Moody preached the same sermons but suddenly hundreds were being converted. He declared he wouldn’t return to his earlier days if offered the entire world.¹¹

Lest we confuse heaven’s endowment with human ability, consider A. B. Earle. With 150,000 people professing conversion in his meetings, Earle was one of the most powerful evangelists earth has seen, and his power defied natural explanation. A writer for a leading British religious paper analyzed Earle’s facial expression, emotions, voice, rhetoric and natural wisdom, and there was nothing to account for his impact. Every facet of his delivery ranged from poor to very ordinary and the content of his message was equally unremarkable. The writer said, ‘When he preached on the value of a human soul, I do not remember a single thought or illustration that was new to me; and yet I came away overwhelmed in this realization of the infinite preciousness of each child of Adam, and

^a For example, Matthew 10:1 ff

^b Luke 24:48-49

found myself as I awoke the next morning, weeping in sorrow and anxiety for lost sinners.’ Stirred to the core, that very day the journalist led two people to the Lord in private conversations.¹²

V. Raymond Edman, fourth president of Wheaton College, devoted an entire book to his thesis that truly effective Christians are those who have been reduced to discouragement, dissatisfaction and defeat until finally entering a new spiritual dimension that transformed their ministry. To prove his point Edman focused on the spiritual crises of twenty famous Christians, including Andrew Murray, John Hyde, Eugenia Price, Oswald Chambers, Charles Trumbull, Handley C. G. Moule, Walter Wilson and Major Ian Thomas. Yet even his twenty, he said, was but a tiny selection from a vast multitude.¹³

After thirteen crammed years as an ‘ordained minister’ Francis Schaeffer became so aware of spiritual deficiencies within him that he devoted a long winter to seeking God and re-examining his entire spiritual life. Schaeffer maintained that what he gained spiritually from this crisis played a critical role in the fruitfulness of his later years.¹⁴

It is undeniable that vast numbers of people have exploded into ministry because of a full, no-tongues-barred, pentecostal experience. Yet there are also innumerable tongue-speakers who seem less effective than they could be, and certainly less effective than thousands of outstanding non-pentecostals.

Malcolm Smith – a tongue-speaker from his early teens and a pastor thoroughly conversant with Scripture – could have continued to impress his loyal congregation, yet he resigned, overwhelmed by the consciousness that the power in his preaching fell far short of that of the first apostles. Finally, after much prayer and anguish, a truth he had paid lip service to for years broke through his darkness. God is *All*. Malcolm’s only contribution was yieldingness. It suddenly dawned he had been trying to serve God in his own strength. An outstanding ministry was born that day.¹⁵

I cannot nominate which truth you must surrender to. The critical factor in your life might be an experience frighteningly foreign to you, or a truth so familiar that you imagine you are living it. We can only maximize our fruitfulness by appropriating *every* spiritual truth.

Cuddly Strait-Jacket

The benefits gained by entering a new realm in God extends beyond raw power. A disturbing number of powerful ministries have collapsed, sometimes tragically, due to burn-out.

In an hilarious story Jamie Buckingham describes his attempt to install a second-hand sprinkling system. The result sort of worked but he decided it needed more pressure. He connected a new pump and threw the switch. Geysers suddenly shot skyward. Water-cannons blasted grass and dirt to the roof of the house. Previously unnoticed pin-pricks transmuted into impish water pistols. Underground connections burst. Sprinkler heads blew off. Disaster rained (I think that’s the right spelling).¹⁶

What will increased pressure do to you?

Heaven knows when you are equipped. What feels like an infuriating strait-jacket could be a protective cocoon within which you are undergoing crucial, though almost imperceptible, changes. You’ll emerge not just with a ministry, but with wings to lift you above every danger. Waiting for the right time will reduce the dangers of future burn-out or serious blunders.

Though the tragedies of premature entry into ministry take many forms, I’ve seen enough to conclude I’d rather be on ice now than in hot water later.

Team Power

The oil that rolled down Aaron’s beard and is likened to the unity of God’s people was fragrant. Was this all that the psalmist had in mind or was it significant that he was recalling the event that ushered the high priest into holy service? Could it be more than coincidence that by employing this analogy the psalmist linked the harmonious working together of God’s people with the launching of a highly significant ministry?^a

Thomas Edison’s unbelievable succession of inventions – 1093 patents – becomes believable when we learn that he worked with a team of 3,600 experimenters and helpers.¹⁷ ‘Two are better than

^a Exodus 30:22-25, 30 Psalm 133:1-2

one’ and ‘a threefold cord is not easily snapped,’ declares Scripture.^a It expands this principle to larger numbers, implying a hundred of us, unified and involved in the same task will accomplish far more than if the hundred were split into a score of unrelated groups.^b ‘In a multitude of counselors there is safety.’^c

Even the Lone Ranger had Tonto. If you can’t find that in your concordance, try the book of Jeremiah. If anyone was a loner, it was Jeremiah. He was one of the few Bible saints who never married.^d Nonetheless, he had Baruch as companion and assistant.^e Elijah had Elisha.^f Elisha had Gehazi.^g Jesus had not just his twelve disciples, but an important band of female supporters^h and other loyal companions like Matthias.ⁱ

Moses had Jethro, Miriam, Aaron, Joshua and many others, yet he faltered because his ministry team was still too small.^j

If anyone could succeed alone in Christian work, it would surely have been the apostle Paul. Nonetheless, just about everything he ever did was in partnership with fellow believers. Look at his letters: though we call them Paul’s epistles, most were not from Paul, but from ‘Paul and Timothy’,^k or ‘Paul, Silvanus and Timothy’,^l or ‘Paul and Sosthenes’.^m He was out of fellowship when he first returned to Jerusalem from Damascus. This exceptional situation had to be quickly corrected. Barnabas came to the rescue.ⁿ

Although Paul received his call years earlier, it was only after his call was confirmed in a church context that he set off.^o From then on it was Paul and Barnabas and Mark, or Paul and Silas and Timothy, or some other combination, such as the band of believers Luke referred to as ‘we’. And at each stopping point they would soon gather a new church around them.

Motivate fellow Christians to become involved in your ministry. Show them that their interest, encouragement, prayer, comments, and other support, significantly contribute to your work for God.

Few of us fully appreciate the importance, or discern the difficulties, of ministries we are not involved in. If she doesn’t share her need, how will we know the lady preparing the communion cups needs a helper? If he doesn’t remind us, few of us would think of praying that the usher’s responsibilities don’t detract from his need to enter into congregational worship. Educate the rest of us about how we can support you.

Making others feel an important part of your mission encourages them to contribute more. Your labors will be multiplied, the Lord will receive greater glory and more people will know the joy of being involved in Christian service.

Naturally, you should also support the ministries of others.

God made you a star, not the movie; an essential instrument, not the orchestra. We need each other. To reach our full potential we must nestle into the exact part of Christ’s body divinely prepared for us.

The Power of an Ancient Secret

We now come to what for many readers will be the most liberating truth in the book. It’s a trigger with the power to fire thousands of people into ministry. And as I share it, I expect to be greeted with a heartfelt round of bullets.

^a Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

^b Leviticus 26:8

^c Proverbs 11:14

^d Jeremiah 16:1-2

^e Jeremiah 32:12-16; 36:4-32; 43:1-6; 45:1-2

^f 1 Kings 19:19-21

^g 2 Kings 5:20

^h Luke 8:1-3

ⁱ Acts 1:21-23

^j Numbers 11:14-17; Exodus 18:17-24

^k 2 Corinthians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; Philemon 1:1

^l 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1;

^m 1 Corinthians 1:1

ⁿ Acts 9:26-28

^o Acts 13:1-3; Acts 9:15-16; 22:21; 26:17-18

WHY LORD?

Let's plunge in at the deep end. You will see immediately why we're pressured to reject a significant part of Holy Writ. After the initial shock, you'll conclude my thoughts are like rare porcelain – old and cracked. I've had a brain storm and now all the lines are down.

Contrast present day society with the submissiveness of God's people when:

☆ Eighty year old Moses sought permission from his father-in-law before beginning his divinely-commanded return to Egypt.^a

☆ Ruth pledged total obedience to the mother of her dead husband;^b seeking her leave before doing the simplest, most logical thing.^c

☆ Verbal abuse of one's parents incurred the death penalty.^d

☆ Abigail, upon receiving David's marriage proposal, bowed to the ground saying, 'Let your handmaid be a servant to wash the feet of the *servants* of my lord.'^e

'Tradition! Culture! Custom!' I hear you scream, 'That's not for today!'

Even onions disagree with me. If you think I'm a perfect idiot, it's kind of you but I'm not quite perfect.

Clearly, the instances cited have outmoded elements, but something deeper is involved. It's on the same level as the command not to covet a neighbor's ox. Stripped of its dusty, middle-eastern clothes, it's a moral issue.

Though we are not obliged to mimic the outward forms of the above examples, the spirit they display is much closer to the heart of God than the stain the world has left on us. And we find it as comforting as a leaky water bed.

We acknowledge the need to submit to Christ, but the thought of submitting to fellow Christians is anathema. Such an attitude is blatantly unscriptural. It is not even rational. How can we submit to God, if we don't submit to his delegated authority?

The implications for ministry are enormous. Vying for top spot on the list of factors keeping dedicated Christians from effective service is the desire to do our own thing. Sure, we'll submit to God. If things get really tough, we can always convince ourselves that we didn't hear him. We don't even mind having a team of helpers, as long as we're top dog.

I urge the prayerful study of the Scriptures dealing with this matter.^f Until we take submission seriously, we will miss the freedom and fulfillment divinely planned for us.

You might think Bruce Olson an exception. As a 19-year-old, he arrived in South America independent of any church or organization. Convinced that this proved he was not submissive, other missionaries snubbed him.¹⁸ Little did they realize he was in submission to the sovereign Lord and that it was he, not they, who had the greater respect for human authority. Olson is credited with being the catalyst for the 'fastest economic growth of any primitive group in the world'.¹⁹ The secret was his submissive spirit. Stone-age Indians would ask his advice. Instead of seizing the opportunity to assert himself, he repeatedly turned each problem back to them, pledging submission to whatever they decided.²⁰ He even respected witch-doctors, seeking not to undermine, but to sustain their authority. This radical approach proved far more powerful than the white arrogance of many missionaries. Before long, those same witch-doctors were combining modern vaccinations and pills with genuine faith and prayer to Jesus their Lord, in a manner that makes most western medics look like pagans.²¹

Florence Nightingale knew how to assume authority and maintain discipline. She could blast bureaucracy, apathy and prejudice. But this high born lady also knew the power of submission. She arrived at a military hospital to find appalling need. Everything within her screamed at the urgency and immensity of the task. Yet the doctors rejected her nurses and even her supplies. With iron will she suppressed the Krakatoa rumbling within her. She restrained her nurses and stood by until officially asked. Miss Nightingale was tough, and submission was arguably the greatest proof of her strength.²²

^a Exodus 4:18

^b Ruth 3:5

^c Ruth 2:2

^d Exodus 21:17; Leviticus 20:9 – note also Exodus 21:15; Deuteronomy 21:18-21

^e 1 Samuel 25:41(emphasis mine) – note also 1 Peter 3:6

^f Exodus 22:28; Numbers 12; 1 Samuel 24:4-6; Ecclesiastes 10:20; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Corinthians 4:15-21; 5:12-13; 16:16; Ephesians 5:21; 1 Thessalonians 5:11-14; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 2:5,9; 3:1-2; Hebrews 13:7,17,24; 1 Peter 2:17; 5:5

There is nothing noble about forced submission. That's humiliation. Nor is there anything Christ-like about yellow-livered submission. That's cowardice. What I praise is a virtue of the highest order: submission that flows from inner strength. Different settings reveal its many facets. Submission is sometimes a daring experiment. The shock we feel when first hearing of Bruce Olson's collaboration with witch-doctors, highlights this facet. In another setting, it is an exquisite display of love and trust; a beauty from within that shines so brightly that even physical beauty pales in its presence. Such grace is not so much the opposite of dominance as the antithesis of selfishness. In yet another context, submission is a powerful manifestation of mastery over self, as we saw in a snippet of Miss Nightingale's life.

Attitudes

'He who is greatest among you shall be your servant.'^a Don't be like the Pharisees who enjoyed the spotlight.^b

Like Naaman fuming at being told to have a bath,^c we might do something heroic for God – terrorize demons, hang by our thumbs in the heart of Islam, rush an injured angel to a vet (who else sets broken wings?) – but when it comes to the mundane – well I stacked the chairs last week. And you had a bath last Christmas.

Miracles we do immediately. The menial takes longer. If it dulls our pride, it saps our enthusiasm. We want the glory. God can find his own.

There's no such thing as an inferior calling; only inferior love. For Simon the Pharisee, washing Jesus' feet was a chore beneath his dignity. For the woman he despised, this same task was a wondrous privilege.^d For John the Baptist it was an honor so immense it seemed unattainable.^e It's our love and adoration, not the task, that's too small.

To thwart God's plans to bless you:

☆ Defer serious preparation for ministry until after he places a first class opportunity in your lap.

☆ Refuse to encourage and help those who have already entered their calling.^f

☆ Be too proud to remind your leaders you are still available, if needed, in whatever capacity.^g

☆ Neglect being faithful in the little God has provided for you to do. Feel too superior to clean the church or befriend social outcasts. Should, for example, you want a singing ministry:

- Consider it beneath your dignity to do your bit in the pew to lift congregational singing.
- Conclude that if God will not provide you with a human audience, he does not deserve to hear you sing to him in private.

I know, you're already well-heeled – everyone walks all over you. You've taken the back seat for so long you've worn out two sets of binoculars trying to see the action. Hold on: the lower you stoop, the taller you stand.

Of course everything changes once we find our true calling. When Gladys Aylward arrived in China she instantly leapt from her former status of domestic servant to the giddy heights of mule-attendant. Scraping mud off mules and feeding them was one of her main duties. Eleven years later, vastly more experienced and fluent in the language, she became a Bible woman for a local church. In China this position was so common and lowly that no Westerner before her had ever stooped to it.²³

Rivers feed oceans because oceans keep low. Valleys teem with life, while lofty peaks stay barren.

Did you know that for seventy years North America sent thousands of Protestant missionaries half way around the world to Africa and Asia, while completely neglecting the countries on its doorstep? In all of Central America, for instance, there was just one Protestant Spanish-speaking

^a Matthew 23:11

^b Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18

^c 2 Kings 5:7-14

^d Luke 7:36-47

^e Mark 1:7

^f Compare Hebrews 10:24

^g Compare Titus 3:1

WHY LORD?

witness. A reason cited for this tragically bizarre situation is that these countries ‘lacked the glamour’ of other mission fields.²⁴

Bill Greenman had an unusual vision: a circus (no, not your church – a real circus) that extolled the name of Jesus. For a time no one on the planet shared his dream, yet he refused to let it fade. While awaiting God’s timing, Bill threw himself into helping others reach their ministry goals, especially the goals of his pastor. He ushered, ran errands, mowed lawns, cleaned toilets – all the inspirational tasks we love to let others do. He now has his circus and a veritable army of enthusiastic helpers. Bill is astounded at their dedication and the way they flocked to him to offer their services. Without them his vocation would still be floundering. He is convinced their priceless help is a manifestation of the law of sowing and reaping. He dedicated himself to helping the ministries of others. Now he’s reaping a bumper harvest.²⁵

We applaud the inevitable. Heaven applauds the groundwork. It’s what is accomplished in obscurity that makes a person – and a ministry – truly great.

CHAPTER 10: HOSTILE FORCES

I say it with tears: relative to our enormous potential in Christ, most, perhaps all of us live stunted, malformed lives. As we enter the second half of our exploration of barriers to ministry, it's easy for the eye to glide over our growing list without the significance hitting us. Almost certainly, somewhere in the completed list will be the very reason, or combination of reasons, why you and I lack the fulfillment we crave. As you read, keep praying for a revelation.

We have identified the need to:

- ☆ be true to our individual call
- ☆ recognize our utter dependence upon God
- ☆ mature in Christian character
- ☆ enter new spiritual realms
- ☆ be correctly integrated into the body of Christ
- ☆ persist in faith-filled prayer
- ☆ take pleasure in humble tasks
- ☆ realize service has nothing to do with earning God's favor
- ☆ ensure devotion to ministry does not mutate into idolatry
- ☆ acknowledge the possibility of God's discipline.

With so many possible responses required of us, it's a relief to know the ball is sometimes the other side the net. The delay is not always our responsibility. Let's flick through the Bible for insight into this.

Waiting for Others

Gideon's army of thirty-two thousand had to dwindle to a mere three hundred before God could use them.^a A susceptibility to pride was apparently the problem. In Gideon's case, however, the snag probably stretched beyond any personal weakness to that of the whole of Israel.^b We'd have to live on another planet not to know that even the sporting victories of a few citizens can send an entire nation giddy with conceit. For Israel's sake, God refused to move until the danger of arrogance was removed from the spectators as well as the heroes.

Even if *we* know God deserves all the credit for our success, it may be too early for observers to be convinced. We are not the only ones who receive God's loving consideration.

Jesus' deliberate delay in ministering to Lazarus transformed what would have been just another healing into arguably his greatest miracle.^c If God moved too soon, he could be robbed of glory he deserves, and onlookers bereft of a special blessing.

Consider Abraham's long wait for Isaac's conception.^d The passing of each barren year made it increasingly obvious that the birth would be an act of God. Abraham might have been ready years before, but the delay turned the common event of fathering a child into an inspiring story that has retained its power for thousands of years. His example lifts the faith of Christians, even in our sophisticated era. The delay was perhaps more because of *our* need for a stimulus to faith than because of any need in Abraham.

^a Judges 7:2-8

^b Judges 7:2

^c John 11:3-6, 14-15; 12:9-11

^d Hebrews 11:11-12

You, too, can inspire others. So don't be surprised if, like Abraham, the passage of time seems to be making ministry increasingly unlikely. You are a child of Abraham.^a Like father, like son.

God is moving, not just in our lives, but in every part of an exquisitely intricate mosaic. When all is complete, his artistry will be revealed.

Stand by for a miracle.

Innocent Victim

For centuries, Israel's appropriation of the promised land was blocked. It was beyond their control: they had to wait until 'the iniquity of the Amorites was full'.^b

That time finally arrived and Joshua was ready. But forty years limped by before he could begin Canaan's conquest. His mission was mothballed because of the sins of his people.^c

And while he was waiting, he couldn't even begin his vocation as leader of Israel. This, too, was outside his control. Moses was still alive and Israel needed only one leader.^d

So what was he doing during this time? Elisha, centuries later, was known as the man who poured water on Elijah's hands.^e Joshua, too, might have been little more than servant to the man of God.^f No matter how valuable and potentially satisfying this service was, I suspect he sensed a niggling emptiness about it. He was marked for other things. But the time would come when all the pieces were divinely fitted. He could then triumphantly assume the role he was born for.

Star Wars

Like Joshua, we can be ready, yet have to wait for others. Like Job, we can be mature, dedicated Christians and yet be buffeted by undeserved adversity. Or our quandary might be more like Daniel's.

Satanic opposition hampered Daniel's ministry. He had sought a revelation. Heaven was silent. Though uncertain about what was happening, Daniel fought on in prayer and fasting, day after day. Heaven's reply had been dispatched on angel's wings, but evil powers blockaded it. When the celestial courier finally arrived, he revealed he had been engaged in heaven's answer to Star Wars.^g Spiritual powers had been locked in supernatural combat. For twenty-one earth-days the battle raged. Perhaps the weapons used defy our comprehension, but I believe a deciding factor was something we know a little about – the impassioned prayers of a man who longed to serve God. With the resolve of a marathon winner, Daniel prayed on and on and on. Had he accepted the hold-up as heaven's final answer, the enemy might have successfully intercepted the prophetic message.

With Satan lusting after our ministries like a crazed beast, we either pray or are preyed upon.

The presence of obvious physical reasons for our problems does not reduce the likelihood that they are shots fired from the spirit world. Paul faced enough natural dangers to seize anyone's attention – wild seas, infected wounds, bandits – yet he focused on spiritual battle.

Humanists imagine they have suddenly become incredibly smart, being able to discern physical and psychological reasons for phenomena. They have actually become incredibly thick, being able to see nothing but the blatantly obvious. Paul's words stick with appalling accuracy: 'Professing to be wise, they became fools.'^h Don't catch their blindness.

Though Paul regularly bled at the hands of human opponents, he insisted that our fight is not with people but with spiritual powers.ⁱ His gospel threatened the livelihood, pride and traditions of thousands. Wherever he looked, human reasons for his struggle glared at him. Yet he saw the human component of his conflict as inconsequential. Either Paul was a fruitloop or we clash with the non-physical realm more than most of us suppose.

^a Romans 4:16-17; 9:8; Galatians 3:7,14

^b Genesis 15:13,16

^c Numbers 14

^d Joshua 1:1-2

^e 2 Kings 3:11; 1 Kings 19:21 b

^f Numbers 11:28 a; Joshua 1:1

^g Daniel 10:12-13

^h Romans 1:22

ⁱ Ephesians 6:12

Foot-sloggers are no match for the prince of the power of the air. If we neglect prayer, dark forces will forever sabotage our labors; our attempts to attack their kingdom will never get off the ground. Join the prayer force. A defiant fist amuses Satan. An uplifted hand terrifies him. Prayer will shoot him down.

Prayer is Not Enough

Prayer is fearsome ammunition. Without a canon, however, even the deadliest ammunition cannot pound the enemy. For faith-packed prayer to reach its full ferocity it must be used in conjunction with two other aspects of spiritual warfare. One aspect – legality – is automatic for the born again warrior. It is the other – authoritative aggression – where many of us falter. Add this to prayer and you have an arsenal against which the combined forces of hell are reduced to a cringing rabble of terrified wimps.

If undesirables have moved into our house, it is insufficient to establish that their action is unlawful. Nor is it enough to complete an assertiveness training course. Confirming our legal standing and strengthening our resolve to enforce our rights are both vital steps, but it is futile to stop here. We must actually evict the squatters.

Our spiritual union establishes the illegality of Satan's move against us. Without this, as the sons of Sceva discovered, good intentions and pious or aggressive ranting achieves nothing.^a

In addition, we need prayer to build us up, empowering us for spiritual confrontation. We often so focus on Paul's itemization of the armor in his classic on spiritual combat that we forget it culminates in 'praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit'.^b The disciples, bewildered by their inability to expel a demon, needed Jesus' revelation that there is no alternative to prayer.^c No matter how intimately they knew Jesus, prayerlessness still meant powerlessness.

Yet with our union with Christ resolving the legal issue and prayer girding us with divine strength, insidious trespassers will continue until we enforce our blood-bought rights. Jesus, 'who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed of the devil,'^d not only spent entire nights in prayer, he authoritatively confronted anti-God forces. Time and again he rebuked opponents to God's will, be they fevers, storms, demons or whatever. We must follow his lead.

The Bible opens by affirming that God created humanity to rule. From the onset, the Lord of hosts delegated authority to man and woman.^e Humanity lost much when it lost its innocence, but with the breaking of sin's curse by the shed blood of the innocent Son of God, we are again expected to rule, acting like Jesus in ousting evil hordes.

If you were granted police powers, would you tolerate a law breaker vandalizing a sacred place, or assaulting someone, or molesting a child? Well aren't *you* the Spirit's holy sanctuary, part of Christ's body and God's own child? Is it proper for you to passively endure an evil assault upon your person? Shouldn't you be incensed that defeated low-life, whose surrender cost the very life of the Son of God, would have the audacity to trespass onto God's turf, insult a work of God and violate a part of Christ's very body? When opposed by vile spirits, rise with indignation and enforce your Christ-won authority by ousting those frauds.

When buffeted by malicious powers we are likely to feel as green and as limp as wilted spinach. We must understand that authority has nothing to do with how vibrant we feel. A police officer has as much authority when he is tired as when he is fresh. A bed-ridden king has more authority than a nobleman in the prime of manhood. The issue is not how strong we feel, but whether we are bound to the One granted all authority in heaven and earth.

The Showdown

It was a duel between spiritual super-powers: the false gods of Egypt versus the one true God. Aaron throws down a rod. The stick becomes a writhing snake. What a victory – the raw power of God spectacularly displayed in the very court of Pharaoh. Face it, Pharaoh, you've backed a loser!

^a Acts 19:13-17

^b Ephesians 6:18

^c Mark 9:17-18,28-29

^d Acts 10:38

^e Genesis 1:26-28

HOSTILE FORCES

Heathen sorcerers step forward. They drop their rods and each squirms to life. Before Pharaoh's eyes is Moses' solitary snake, hopelessly outnumbered by the magicians' slithering brood.^a

A homeward-bound Levite needed to lodge for the night. Though a pagan place was more convenient, he chose the security of an Israelite town. Here he'd sleep peacefully, surrounded by God's people. But to his horror, he discovered these people, despite having known God's blessing and his laws, were more depraved than the heathen. Given half a chance, they would have raped him. They abused his concubine all night. She was dead by morning. An Israelite town had slumped to the putrid decadence of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Outraged, the Levite summoned the whole of Israel. God's law was explicit: those murderous perverts must die. But their tribe refused to hand them over. The entire tribe was so committed to wickedness that the Benjamites resolved to fight, if necessary to death, against the united armies of the whole nation, rather than allow the execution of God's law.

Greatly disturbed, the faithful sought God. It would have been tempting to by-pass this step. They were obviously in the right and the odds were heavily in their favor. Though the Benjamites had a few skilled fighters, they were their brethren, not some super-race, and Israel outnumbered them, 400,000 to less than 27,000. But they did the right thing. They consulted God, and he so approved that he gave them his strategy. On their side was natural superiority, righteousness, divine approval, and the wisdom and infinite might of the Lord of hosts. In obedience to their Lord, they marshaled their forces, high in faith and in the power of God.

And they were slaughtered. In one day 22,000 of them were slain.

They wept. They prayed. They sought the Lord again. Empowered by a fresh word from God, they mobilized for the second day. And 18,000 more of them were massacred.^b

The mighty Son of God came to earth. This was the climax of a divine plan conceived before the earth was formed, and for millennia intricately woven into the fabric of human history. It was the showdown: creature versus Creator, dust versus divinity, filth versus purity, mortality versus immortality.

And Jesus died.

In Pharaoh's court, occult powers miraculously produce many times more vipers than God. In the time of the judges, God's forces are routed by an army of inferior strength. At Calvary, God's Son is dead.

How I thank God for the Bible! Few other Christian books tell it as it really is: you can be flowing in the power of God, following his instructions to the letter in absolute purity and be routed by Satan's puny forces.

But only for a season.

Moses' rod swallowed up the sorcerers' rods. On the third day, Israel crushed the Benjamites. Jesus, on the third day, swallowed up death, having crushed the devil.

When Oppressed, Bless

Three times Paul's missionary aspirations were blocked. The inspired account attributes two of the blockages to the Spirit^c and one to Satan. (Satan's win was minor – Timothy broke through and Paul ministered by a letter that eventually touched millions of lives – but nevertheless the devil caused a delay.)^d

That seems to sum up the possibilities. Ultimately, a bottle-neck is from God, for our final good, or it's from the Evil One. Either way, prayer, not tantrums, is the appropriate response. Don't get mad at the music director, the pastor, or anyone with toenails. If they have skin, they are not your enemy.^e

Resentment is a deadly heart disease, whether the object of our ill-feeling is God, the agents he has presently allowed to curb our ministry, or those who get all the 'lucky' breaks. Harboring

^a Exodus 7:9-12

^b Judges chapters 19-20

^c Acts 16:6-7

^d 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2:17-18

^e Ephesians 6:12

HOSTILE FORCES

wrong attitudes undermines God's plans to bless us. And the healing referred to earlier in the book will continue to elude us.

People engrossed in the joy of Christian service seldom have time for nitpicking. The ravages of ministry restrictions, however, cruelly needle us to vent our frustration by criticizing other ministries. Though our accusations will seem justified, they are probably more an eruption of our own inner turmoil than we realize. As we writhe in personal torment we could easily squash a work of God in someone else's life. Be careful. Any fool can crush a flower, but who can uncrush one?

Criticism is spitting into the wind. 'Give and it shall be given unto you,' is as fundamental as the law of gravity and it applies to every area of life. Kindness is a homing pigeon. Anonymous gifts bear a return address. So will you give – and afterwards receive – condemnation or encouragement; assistance or hindrance?

CHAPTER 11: CONQUEST

It's becoming obvious that though roadblocks to fulfillment may originate outside us, our reaction to them is often crucial. Sometimes there may be nothing we can do. Usually, however, the ball sails over the net and suddenly all eyes are on us.

Let's expose further assaults from the nether world and draw up strategies for counter-attack.

Fear of Pride

The Enemy almost robbed the world of Charles Wesley's magnificent hymns. Peek over his shoulder as he writes his diary entry for May 23, 1738, immediately after his conversion.

'I began a hymn . . . , but was persuaded to break it off for *fear of pride*. Mr. Bray coming in, encouraged me to proceed in spite of Satan. I prayed to Christ to stand by me and I finished the hymn. Upon showing it to Mr. Bray the devil threw in a fiery dart, suggesting that it was wrong and that I had displeased God. My heart sank within me until I discovered that it was the device of the enemy to keep back glory from God'^a

The Dark Chameleon shines with a dazzling veneer of piety. How can we unmask him?

Note the value of Mr. Bray's counsel. While the Swindler is focusing his powers of delusion upon a key individual, there will always be other Christians temporarily left in peace. (You can't stall all the people all the time.) Seek mature Christian advice before assuming your labors don't have heaven's blessing.

Pride-avoidance can produce some weird creatures. I've convinced myself I'm a spineless yellow-bellied chicken-mouse. That should keep me humble. But something happened recently to change all that.

A woman was praying for the home-fellowship I attend when she saw 'mighty man of valor' written above me. I don't care whether you think that was of God; when she shared her experience with me it put steel in my wishbone. That boost has given me an inkling of why God speared those very words into Gideon's head.^a I'd have worried about Gideon staggering around with a size 20 head. A healthy self-image must be more important to God than I thought. Those ego-inflating words coincided with Gideon's divine call. I believe faith in those words played a critical role in his future ministry.

We consider it saintly to engage in ego-bashing, especially when it's our own ego, but is the result saintly? What if we started acting like the witless witness we tell ourselves we are? What if our Lord was serious when he said that as a person thinks in his heart so he is?^b I've dismissed gibbering about a positive self-image as so much worldliness, viewed self-praise as sin, and largely disbelieved even God's affirmations about me. The result has been an ailing ego so craving attention that I've become dangerously vulnerable to the opinion of others.

Mutilating one's ego in an attempt to conquer pride is as unspiritual as mutilating one's body to secure divine favor. Nothing is authentically Christian unless at its core is faith in the work and revelation of the Lord Jesus. A key weapon for slaying ego-related hindrances to ministry is faith in a two-edged sword from heaven. On one edge is written, 'I can of myself do nothing'^c and on the

^a Judges 6:12

^b Proverbs 23:7

^c John 5:30

other, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me'.^a Wield that sword in faith and I can't conceive of an ego-related problem that could resist you.

Under-Rating Your Ministry

Another well-loved hymn was nearly lost. Just in time, the only surviving manuscript was discovered in a rubbish bin. This was not the slip of a careless cleaner. It was a deliberate act. Someone had almost succeeded in defrauding God and countless people of a blessing.

After investigation, the offender finally confessed. It was the writer himself! John Henry Newman had judged his beautiful work as worthy only of destruction.² One wonders how much such distorted judgment is the work of the Evil One.

'The devil is trying to make me think my talent is no good,' Andraé Crouch confessed to Oral Roberts. He had just finished performing for Oral Roberts' television program.³ If such a famous singer can be afflicted by these feelings, few of us can hope to avoid them.

Surprisingly, this fact constitutes a first line of defense. The Enemy gains an advantage if he can isolate us, convincing us our trial is unique. Scripture affirms that every type of temptation is normal.^b

To prove how common it is to be blitzed by temptations to underrate ourselves, study the following enthralling, though drastically shortened list. Skim over it, if your need is superficial. If you are as dry as me, however, you will imbibe each instance, savoring every hope-giving drop.

☆ In 1933, Malcolm Muggeridge wrote that nothing but failure lay ahead of him. (His biggest failure was his prophecy.)⁴

☆ He had no voice at all, said his teacher. Nevertheless, Enrico Caruso became the greatest opera singer of his day.

☆ Beethoven's music teacher declared him 'hopeless' at composing.⁵

☆ 'Balding, skinny, can dance a little,' they said of Fred Astaire at his first audition.⁶

☆ 'What will they send me next!' said Edmund Hillary's gym instructor of the puny school boy now known as the man who conquered Mount Everest.⁷

☆ Said Professor Erasmus Wilson of Oxford University, 'I think I may say without contradiction that when the Paris Exhibition closes, electric light will close with it, and no more will be heard of it.'⁸

☆ An invitation was extended to witness one of humanity's most historic moments – the Wright brothers' first flight in their heavier-than-air machine. Five people turned up.⁹

☆ Walt Disney was fired for 'lacking ideas'.¹⁰

☆ H. B. Warner of Warner Brothers fame scoffed at the notion of 'talkies.' No one would want to hear movie actors talk.¹¹

☆ Television, too, was once written off. It would never appeal to the average American family, pronounced the *New York Times*.¹²

☆ 'Sit down, young man, and respect the opinions of your seniors,' chided the man of God. The seasoned pastor was just one of an army of saints opposed to this young upstart's radical ideas. 'If the Lord wants to convert the heathen, he can do it without your help.' But William Carey (1761-1834) didn't 'sit down'. Instead, he spearheaded the modern missionary movement.¹³

☆ For years, Hudson Taylor tried to glean knowledge about China – a difficult task in his era. Then up jumped a chance to be advised by a missionary with experience in that very country.

'Why, you will never do for China!' exclaimed the missionary. He glared at the blue-eyed youth, certain that the Chinese would find his features grotesquely alien. 'They would run from you

^a Philippians 4:13

^b 1 Corinthians 10:13

in terror! You could never get them to listen to you,' he told the founder of the China Inland Mission.¹⁴

☆ It is Kenneth Pike's genius as a linguist that earned him acclaim as 'one of the great missionaries of the twentieth century'. He has been ranked with 'the most brilliant and highly honored linguists of the twentieth century, recognized the world over in secular as well as Christian circles'. Inadequacy at language learning was cited as a major reason for his rejection as a missionary candidate. Humiliated, he continued writing to different mission boards until at last one did not reject him, and even they reportedly exclaimed, 'Lord, couldn't you have sent us something better than this?'¹⁵

☆ Mentally backward Max Raffler loved to paint. Over the years, as his paintings piled ever higher, his sisters would burn them to make room for more. Finally, when an old man, his artistic ability was recognized. The well-meaning sisters had destroyed paintings that would have sold for tens of millions of dollars. (Quick! Where are my finger paintings?)

☆ It was the dead of night. A shadow slunk down the street. It was Charles with the dickens of a problem. He was off to mail his manuscript, huddling his guilty secret, petrified lest friends find out and ridicule him. The manuscript was rejected. More rejections pierced him before he won the hearts of millions with such classics as *Oliver Twist*.¹⁶

☆ 'All his discourses are redolent of bad taste, are vulgar and theatrical . . .' said a newspaper. Another paper described his preaching as 'that of a vulgar colloquial, varied by rant . . . All the most solemn mysteries of our holy religion are by him rudely, roughly and impiously handled . . .'¹⁷ They were referring to C. H. Spurgeon, the man routinely hailed as the prince of preachers. Moreover, they were writing after he had already attained immense popularity.

☆ As Billy Graham preached, a missionary's daughter battled an almost uncontrollable urge to run out of the meeting. It was his future wife, and it wasn't conviction that made her squirm. It was her response to what she considered appalling preaching.¹⁸

☆ To these could be added a gaggle of other instances, too humorous to mention.

If only we could laugh in the midst of our trial. Coping with rejection and apparent failure is a serious matter. The tragic death of John Kennedy Poole screams this truth at anyone lucky enough to need an explanation. No publisher would touch Poole's book. In a vain attempt to kill the pain, he suicided. Posthumously, his book was published. It won the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for fiction.¹⁹

But don't knock the knockers. In its early stages, virtually every great achievement has seemed pathetically insignificant.

The pressures to undervalue your contribution may be even greater than Poole faced. Spiritual work, not secular writing, is the focus of Satan's rage. Through Jesus, however, your power over oppression is greater still.

The Critics

'There was an old stone,' said the warner,
'Continually mocked by the Scornor.
'It was neglected,
'Despised and rejected,
'Yet became the head of the corner.'

(What do you mean you've 'found better poems in alphabet soup'? Soup-slurper! The only thing separating me from Keats is ability.)

Many of us have stifled our calling by heeding some misguided critic who implied we were not good enough.

Few things in life are certain. For Christians, not even death is guaranteed.^a But criticism is.

^a 2 Kings 2:1,11; 1 Thessalonians 4:17; Hebrews 11:5

Though spineless people-pleasers try hard, no one totally avoids criticism. Being right doesn't help. Neither does loving everyone, or being perfect. The world crucified the only One with these qualities. Everything he did upset someone. He was criticized even by friends, family and religious leaders.^a Twenty centuries later, with the advantage of hindsight, he is still slandered.

Our highest ideal is to be like Jesus – like the One accused of being in league with Satan. If you know the pain of being misunderstood, spare a thought for the early Christians. They renounced Roman, Greek and Egyptian gods, called each other brother and sister, and partook of their Lord's body in communion. As a result they were thought guilty of atheism, incest and cannibalism.

John Bunyan, of *Pilgrim's Progress* fame, was variously accused of being a witch, a Jesuit, a highwayman, having a mistress, and having whores and several illegitimate children.²⁰

Whitefield and Wesley, acclaimed leaders of a revival that blazed through Britain and America, were bludgeoned by allegations with the graciousness of a meat-axe. Whitefield's first sermon was said to have driven fifteen of his hearers insane.²¹ Bishop Lavington published a blistering attack upon the Methodists, accusing Whitefield of horrendous sins. It so confused the author of Whitefield's obituary that he penned two portraits. One was of a saint and the other of a rogue.²² The revival leaders were blasted from every side. Wesley's wife broke into her husband's cabinet and stole correspondence which she doctored to appear he had been unfaithful to her. It poisoned many. Toplady, writer of *Rock of Ages*, believed her. Even on his death-bed he summoned strength to affirm he still despised Wesley.²³

Hudson Taylor, outrageously in love, wrote a letter proposing marriage to a teenage girl in China. Unknown to him, Maria's feelings were almost as hot. Excitedly, she took the letter to Miss Aldersey, a remarkable and dedicated missionary who deeply cared for her. 'Mr. Taylor!' exclaimed Miss Aldersey, 'That unconnected nobody!' She pressured shy, inexperienced Maria to rebuff the proposal. Fearing she may not have done enough to destroy the relationship, Miss Aldersey sought out Hudson's friends to tell them he was 'fanatical, undependable, diseased in mind and body . . . totally worthless'. She even threatened with a lawsuit that 'uneducated' 'unordained' and 'uncouth' excuse for a missionary, while his darling Maria was kept under virtual house arrest, charged with being a maniac, indecent, weak-minded and obstinate. Later, with his *China Inland Mission* in its vulnerable infancy, the entire work was threatened by the unrelenting onslaught of a missionary who thought it his godly duty to oppose the work. Not only did newspapers in Shanghai ruthlessly attack him, Hudson was blamed even in England's parliament for political strife in China.²⁴

Equally grave examples could be drawn for the lives of countless thousands of God's storm troopers.

So let's not waste our lives trying to hide from criticism. If even cowardly yes-men cannot avoid it, the righteous don't stand a chance. In fact, Jesus said 'Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you.'^b Ministry that impresses heaven and ministry that impresses earth are popularity polls apart.

Anyone highly respected by sections of the Christian church – Billy Graham, Robert Schuller, Richard Wurmbrand, Mother Teresa, Ian Paisley, Johnny Cash, Rodney Howard-Brown, to name a few – will invariably be scorned by other sections of the church. Few of us could read the above names without feeling negatively towards one or more. Born again Christians disagree wildly about which of the above are even Christians.

Great men and women of God, however, do not crumble under criticism. It may wound them, but they push on with what they believe is God's calling. Spurning the way of least resistance and its pseudo peace, they choose what I call the peace de resistance.

No one who always surrenders to criticism will achieve anything significant for God. There is no type of music, for example, which appeals to every Christian. Suppose ninety-nine per cent of people find your ministry atrocious. If your band played at an anti-nuclear rally, they wouldn't know whether to ban the bomb or bomb the band. What should you do? Assuming they are reacting to your style, and not spurning spiritual truth, it would seem desirable to serenade the one per cent when the others were out of earshot. That should make the unappreciative less inclined to consider a lynching. However, we established in chapter 5 that heaven does not measure a ministry by the number of people influenced.

^a For example, Matthew 16:22; Mark 3:21; 6:2-4; John 7:1-5; Matthew 12:24

^b Luke 6:26

If you appeal only to a minority, it could well be a minority that is not being reached by other means. If so, the church would be poorer without your specialized ministry. Heaven's approval outlasts earth's applause.

Even if I spent hours producing something I liked, I used to worry others wouldn't like it. But that was five minutes ago. Now, I'm learning to trust God.

Though bent by Adam's crash and bashed by my own sin, God gave me my personality with its tastes, and for years I've been looking to him to mould me. So I believe that somewhere are people with cerebral plumbing like mine. They will appreciate my style and are most likely the ones God has called me to minister to. Should there be millions of them, I'll be famous; if only a few, I'll blend with the wallpaper. But it won't affect God's view of me. If popularity is a valid measure of success, our deserted Lord was a failure.

Take my poetry (not everyone can take it). I actually found someone who *likes* it (and they have pretty good poems at pre-school these days). Audience-wise, that's all I need to validate my ministry. What would it matter if everyone regarded my admirer and me as literary nincompoops? I'd rather win an illiterate to Christ than be hailed a genius. The person who appreciates my poetry is just as precious to God, just as worthy a recipient of ministry, as all the critics.

'Experts' regularly berate the simplicity of Fanny Crosby's hymns. It is said she had the literary skill to silence her critics but she deliberately simplified her songs to meet more powerfully the needs of the distressed, the infirm and the poorly educated.²⁵

That does not mean I can be lax. To limit oneself to a particular style can be very demanding but because Fanny considered it the most effective way to reach her target audience she strove for perfection within this framework.

Since my actions reflect on my Creator and Redeemer, living below my best tarnishes God's glory. In Christ, however, my best is powerful. Within the framework God sets me, my best, nothing more and nothing less, is just what the Father ordered. Too bad if people think I'd be a greater blessing selling inflatable dart-boards. If God has commissioned me, that's all that matters. And if my poems make Shakespeare turn in his grave, I'll assume he needs the exercise. If it turns the experts off their food, I'll be the envy of the weight loss industry.

You don't like my humor either? It makes you want to *what*? Well, if it's that bad, how come you've read so much? Oh. Well, how was I to know you would open the book at this very page? I was going to produce a book you couldn't put down but I couldn't figure out how to stop the superglue from setting until the critical moment.

It's a gift. Some people turn heads, I turn stomachs. Stomachs are important, too. Being a stomach specialist^a need not automatically disqualify my writing. I could still be in business if all humanity despised my writings. I know of at least one person soundly converted by a song he loathed.²⁶

You needn't concern yourself with such extremes, however. We are often so over-awed by God's moral standards that we overlook other aspects of his nature. Our Lord is Creator as well as Savior, and the Maker of rainbows and nightingales didn't suddenly lose his creative urge at the close of Day Six. God's creativity is inexhaustible. And you were made for him. He longs to express his creativity through you. As an instrument and musician together make beautiful music, you and your Lord can unite to create exquisite beauty. What you can do together defies imagination. You make an awesome team.

Yield to Christ, like a brush to the artist, and from your life will flow unearthly beauty.

Disclaimer

I don't like to brag, but I have a certain air about me – especially after eating garlic. Check out a few possibilities before assuming the cause of unpopularity is divine.

The Arm-Chair Army

Those who share the fragrance of Christ with a putrid world may receive much flak from Christians. It is such a difficult task in the front line that many of us desert our posts and become self-appointed critics of those who remain at the front.

^a I could market myself as the kingdom's gastroenterologist

CONQUEST

Methods that most effectively win new converts will seldom woo long-established Christians. Their needs and tastes are a world apart. So an effective evangelist will probably incur the displeasure of those Christians who want to be the center of attention.

When the critics start, determining who is right can be difficult. Christians with the greatest enthusiasm are often the least experienced. The ones best equipped for evangelism are sometimes those who have succumbed to pressure and abdicated their responsibility.

Your critics might know more than you do. Their advice could be from God. So it demands prayerful consideration.

When Rev. Oldschool gives us a hard time, it's tempting to stray to greener pastors. We must be cautious. If we cannot find Christians as mature and experienced as our critics who fully support our actions, we are probably the ones who are wrong.^a

Nevertheless, Scripture narrates the tragic consequences of a man of God who mindlessly followed what an old prophet claimed was divine guidance.^b Though we should humbly respect our elders in the faith, we each have a personal responsibility to seek God on matters related to ministry and guidance.

If the Lord clearly indicates our critics' opinion is not from him, we must reject it, though without rejecting the critics themselves or spurning their advice on other matters.

So love and respect your knockers, but don't let them stunt a God-given ministry.

^a Proverbs 9:8-9; 10:17; 12:1; 13:18; 27:5

^b 1 Kings 13:11-24

CHAPTER 12: GOD'S MEASURE OF SUCCESS

Alexander Maclaren was usually jittery before a sermon and afterwards crushed by the knowledge he had made a hash of it. People rank him with the greatest preachers earth has heard.¹

Most of us are convinced our ministry attempts languish far below the feats of fellow Christians. We peer over our shabby efforts to the sparkling success of others and almost quit. We are barraged with deadly fallacies about what constitutes effective service. My aim in an earlier chapter was to alert you to the dangers of narrow thinking and to arm you for this war in which we are taunted to surrender. My plan now is to hone those weapons and begin using them so that together we may engage this insidious foe.

Let's look to Jesus for light to repel these dark forces of discouragement.

Never in human history has facing an average congregation been so daunting. For a wide range of ministries it's a harrowing fact that your audience has seen/heard/read the world's best. If you are a musician, for instance, you know the moment your listeners slip inside their homes, or even their cars, they have instant access to recorded music of the highest caliber.

But the Lord will honor your courage. As you humble yourself, for God's sake exposing your limitations to the world, the King of glory will be proud to call you his child.

Your loving Father is far more moved by your attitude than your eloquence. One feeble, broken sentence empowered by the Spirit of God can accomplish more than the greatest talent earth has seen.^a

From the age of four, I loved helping grandpa lay cement paths. Almost anyone could do a better job than a little child, but that was irrelevant. I was irreplaceable. I had a special place in grandpa's heart.

And you have a special place in God's heart. Physically, the Lord is totally self-sufficient. He needs us no more than a handyman needs the services of a four-year-old. But the Father's joy could never be complete without your contribution.

A handicapped person might need your help, and despise you because of it. How much better it is to be wanted, than needed!

Has ever a father's heart swelled with loving pride at a child's pathetic attempt to help him? Then how much more will the boundless love of your Father in heaven be stirred by your attempts – even your weakest attempts – to honor him with your service.

To strangers, your ministry may just be one of thousands. But not to someone who loves you. And you mean most to the One who willed you into existence, fashioned you, redeemed you, and longs to fulfill your every need. Expect a personal invitation to a royal command performance in the presence of his Majesty, the King of kings.

Is it hard to believe the exalted Lord would like the sound of your voice or the work of your hands? Remember who created that voice and those hands. Beware: denigrating our gift comes close to denigrating the Giver. There's a point where humility degenerates into an insult to One who made you and empowers you. I've fallen over the edge too often.

You have advantages over all mass ministries. No book, record, or television program can tailor its message to the specific needs of an individual. In our cold world, personal attention is more important than ever. It is better to transform an individual, than tickle the ears of millions. The

^a 1 Corinthians 2:3-5

person receiving all the accolades could merely be entertaining, achieving for the Kingdom far, far less than that house-bound, godly mother.

We are not responsible for the paucity of our talents. We are accountable, however, for the level of faithfulness with which we honor God with whatever we have. Could we have used our supposedly meager talent in a way that would have given God greater honor? That's the burning issue, not whether we are as talented as Fred Nerk.

In the parable of the talents, it was the servant given the least who buried his gift.^a Don't imagine the master said, 'That's okay, son. I didn't give you much anyhow. I know you're incapable of anything. Come, enter into the joy of your lord.'

For me, a single sentence is a man-crushing python – a writhing anaconda to be wrestled into submission only through a virtual life-and-death struggle. It is not uncommon for me to spend an hour formulating one sentence. The reward for such care? A tangle of half-strangled sentences squirming for more attention. On rare moments my word-groping lurches beyond snail-pace to a teeth-rattling tortoise-trot. Moments later I hit the dust again, compelled to retrace my route on hands and knees, scouring the text for hours like a near-sighted Mr. Magoo, convinced I must have missed something in my inordinate haste.

Words! There's never one around when you need it. I try on a dozen for size, and even the best hangs off the cuff, is unfashionable and forever needs ironing. At school my English grades were so poor that I dropped the subject the first opportunity I had. There must be thousands of Christians who could have written this book with greater ease.

But they didn't.

'You have a very readable style and some of your expressions and word usages are brilliant,' wrote a magazine editor about an early draft of this book. I cherish that quote, but could any average person pour such torrents of prayer and effort and submission to God, year after year, into a project and the result be anything less than brilliant?

A boy had such intellectual limitations that his parents feared he was subnormal. He later remarked that being a slow learner lengthened his thinking time and caused him to focus on simple things.² His perseverance paid off. His name: Albert Einstein.

You will achieve as much as megastars who have twice your ability if you have twice their diligence. More importantly, your greater faithfulness will bring more glory to the Lord. It will thrill him. And your ministry in the world to come will far exceed the future ministry of a lax megastar.

The most significant work is not the one displaying the highest skill, but the one most used of God. The Lord is not seeking people who astound audiences with their talent. He wants ministries who will leave people exclaiming, 'That had to be God!' Our inadequacies are often the perfect backdrop for displaying God's splendor.^b

Our lack of ability will never thwart God – only our failure to draw upon his abilities. So if you feel too inadequate to minister effectively without miraculous intervention, I envy you. God's strength is made perfect in such weakness.^c You sound desperate enough to keep pounding heaven's door until you receive an exceptional blessing.^d And that blessing will overflow to those you touch.

I often mourn the flaws in this book, but the grey is tinged with gold. The hope of improvement dies only when we think our labors are satisfactory. Provided we don't bow to discouragement, the more failings we see in our efforts, the higher our motivation to improve and the brighter our future.

That sickening awareness of inadequacy can be turned around; hastening, rather than hindering, our future ministry.

Success Heaven Style

There was an old man in a dither;
All that he sowed seemed to wither.
Yet a voice from above
Said in words full of love,

^a Matthew 25:14-18

^b 2 Corinthians 4:7

^c 2 Corinthians 12:9

^d Genesis 32:24-28; Matthew 15:21-28; Luke 5:18-26; 11:5-13; 18:1-7; John 16:24

GOD'S MEASURE OF SUCCESS

'Of you I'm so proud, come up hither.'

(Well, what else rhymes with 'wither?')

There is unrivalled fulfillment inherent in serving the Lord in the exact capacity he has chosen for us. And the Evil Genius knows it. We have a formidable arsenal with which to smash the power of demonic brain-washing. Many of our weapons are variants of one irrefutable truth: as we cannot say an ear is superior to a mouth or an eye, so it is folly to regard one calling as superior to another. We are all essential parts of the incorruptible body of the risen Lord.

Every ministry is beautiful, precious, vital. Too often, however, we are blinded by what we see.

Most Old Testament prophets looked like failures. If they weren't experts at handling rejection, it wasn't through lack of practice.^a They were as much fun as bathroom scales at a banquet. Their message would curdle the milk of human kindness. In just two minutes their hearers' faces would take on the appearance of used chewing gum. Jeremiah was branded a traitor.^b Elijah was a fugitive.^c Many were ridiculed. Few managed to slow the moral landslide.^d Some may not have understood their own prophecies.^e But their heavenly assignment touched none of these things. They were simply God's mouth-pieces. Results were not their responsibility.^f

'For twenty-three years,' moaned Jeremiah, 'I have spoken to you again and again, but you have not listened.' The heart-piercing thing is that at this point Jeremiah had about as many years of rejection *ahead* of him as the twenty-three years of ostracism he had already endured.^g (There's something to be said for having a short ministry.)

Yet though they rasped a message as comforting as burrs in bed-linen, these prophets were the talk of the nation. As welcome as slugs in cabbage soup, but their names were on everyone's lips. They were Israel's most wanted – special guests at rock concerts; proudly hung in public exhibitions; sawn in half by popular demand; that sort of thing. Centuries later, Paul so excelled that everyone thought of him as the man to beat. Some left no stone unturned in their eagerness to leave a lasting impression. A few even took the time to rock him to sleep.^h It's hard not to be envious, isn't it?

Such vocations, by their very nature, grab the headlines. They get the bouquets and the bricks through the window. Other ministries send tremors through the spirit-world without attracting human attention.

Of necessity, singers perform in public; sound mixers and prayer fighters serve off-stage. Everyone sees your eyebrow. No one sees your liver. But which is more important?

Your average evangelist steals glory for soul-winning from those who prayed, witnessed and worked the miracle of enticing non-Christians to a Christian meeting. Many of the evangelist's 'converts' either found Christ before he arrived or through counseling after he left. Though few preachers are deliberate glory thieves, there will be many reversals in the next life.

We are pressured to evaluate a ministry by how much it reaps. But this is an invalid measure. It often reflects merely the nature, not the success, of one's service. 'One sows, another reaps,' taught Jesus.ⁱ If you are called to sow, then to reap is to abdicate your responsibility. You might impress a few people, but not the One who counts.

If neither 'reaping' nor public acclaim indicates success, neither does the amount of time devoted to spiritual work. We've established that part-time service is by no means intrinsically inferior to full-time service. And we know that in just three days our crucified King accomplished more than the combined efforts of the entire human race from Adam until now.

^a Hebrews 11:36-38

^b Jeremiah 38:4-5

^c 1 Kings 18:10; 19:2-3

^d Isaiah 6:9-13

^e Daniel 8:26; 12:8-9; 1 Peter 1:10-12; compare John 11:51

^f For example, Jeremiah 1:7-9, 19; Ezekiel 2:3-7; 33:7-9; Isaiah 6:9-13

^g Jeremiah 25:1-3; 1:2-3

^h Acts 14:19-20

ⁱ John 4:37 – note also verse 38; 1 Corinthians 3:5-10

The Measure of a Ministry

After only thirteen years of preaching, Frederick W. Robertson (1816-1853) died, convinced he was a failure. Today, his sermons still in print and his influence incalculable, he is known as the 'preacher's preacher.' Warren Wiersbe suggests that Robertson's feeling of failure was intensified by his military background that enticed him to expect more definitive victories than preaching usually allows.³

We view Jonah's ministry as exceptionally successful. Single-handedly, he saved the entire populace of magnificent Nineveh. You'd expect him to be as excited as a centipede at a shoe sale, yet his face was a good imitation of half a squeezed grapefruit.^a His whole message had been, 'Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.'^b Forty days later, Nineveh was celebrating and Jonah was suicidal. The envy of evangelists, perhaps, but as a prophet this man was a write-off.

'Success' hinges entirely on the measure used. Genuine success – the synthetic varieties don't last – is achieving what God expects of us. Only God can measure it. Don't gauge hurdlers by how high they jump, or pole-vaulters by how fast they run. Judge archers by their accuracy but don't apply this measure to javelin throwers. If that seems obvious it's because sport lacks the mystery of real life. In the game of life spectators speculate, the Judge judges.

Eleven thousand teachers competed with Christa McAuliffe and lost. The winner of a seat on space shuttle Challenger was the envy of millions – until the shuttle disintegrated. Eleven thousand losers suddenly became winners.

In the twinkling of an eye, the first shall be last.^c Until that wondrous moment, don't assume you're a loser.

Many of us are far more successful than we imagine; perhaps more than our humility could handle. It is tragic to find in the body of Christ an ear accused of failure because it cannot see, or an eye that thinks it's let the body down because it cannot smell.

What the world thinks, what other Christians think, what you think, is irrelevant. Nothing matters except God's approval. It is the sole measure of a ministry.

'Wasted' Years

If we knew God's evaluation of our labors, much frustration would evaporate.

Remember Father Abraham. Able to see just one layer of God's artistry, he thought having physical descendants would be his greatest achievement. On that basis, waiting made little sense. As we saw earlier, however, his main ministry lay in having spiritual descendants – saints inspired by the faith he displayed during the delay.^d Instead of deferring ministry, his childlessness enabled him to exercise his highest calling – inspiring faith. What to Abraham seemed wasted years were among his most productive.

When Daniel's three friends were pushed into the furnace, it looked like the end of ministry hopes. Instead, it became their finest hour.^e

Paul's epistles seem a desperate reaction to the annoyance of distance or prison keeping him from his 'real' mission.^f He might have felt as frustrated as an injured sportsman reduced to urging his team from the sidelines. Yet it is this 'side-line' ministry, rather than his 'real' one, that has snowballed down the hills of time. According to Andrew Bonar, we have gained more from Paul's imprisonment than from his visit to the third heaven.⁴

From the time he was licensed to preach, Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661) served for nine years in a church so tiny that it could not have held more than 250 people. 'I see exceedingly small fruit of my ministry,' he lamented, 'I would be glad of one soul . . .' Then church leaders silenced him. Stripped of his church and forbidden to preach, he penned some private letters. He had no idea that after his death his mail would be read by countless thousands, powerfully touching generations of Christians.⁵

^a Jonah 4:1-3

^b Jonah 3:4

^c 1 Corinthians 15:52; Matthew 20:16; Luke 16:15

^d Romans 4:12-13, 16-24; 9:6-8; Galatians 3:6-9, 14; Hebrews 11:11-12

^e Daniel 3:1-30

^f Romans 1:10-13; 15:22-23; Philippians 4:1 a; 1 Thessalonians 2:17-18; 3:10

Though the pool of examples seems bottomless, to dip further is superfluous. 'In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established.'^a The case is proved: we may be mightily used of God when least aware of it. What seems an infuriating hindrance to service could actually be eliciting vital ministry.

See Jesus naked on the cross, scorned by demons, soldiers and Jews. To even his supporters his failure was undeniable. Thousands were ashamed of him. We, too, may be pounded within and without by accusations that we are weak, ineffectual, useless.

Brilliant Disaster

My invitations to speak are as common as leap years. I even pounced on the chance to speak at my father's funeral.

I had on paper words with the power to comfort and challenge, and the Lord enabled me to deliver them without embarrassment. God's so gracious. From an eternal viewpoint, however, saving face was inconsequential. Ultimately, nothing mattered, as long as Spirit-charged words entered needy hearts. It could easily have happened this way:

I arrive at the pulpit only to discover I have the wrong folder. In naked horror I bolt up the aisle to drive home to my notes, then remember my keys. I sheepishly return, groping over stunned mourners in a blind hunt. Keys in hand, I storm out again and drive off with blunder and lightning, side-swiping the hearse on the way.

Finally clutching my proper notes, I flee my mangled car and burst through the church, knocking a vase of flowers. In cold obedience to Murphy's Law, the vase nosedives, drenching the coffin and drowning my trousers. I stagger to the pulpit, terrorized by mind-freezing humiliation. Convulsed by a giddy whirl of sobs and stutters, I crash over words, slipping and slurring through a minefield of bloopers, until I close; an hysterical disaster.

Yet if those mashed, soggy words still fulfilled their intended mission, my blubbing disgrace would have been a howling success from eternity's view.

I could have wanted to slither under the nearest rock. Heaven could have wanted to give a standing ovation.

We have no right to imagine we have failed unless heaven expressly reveals it to us.

Precisioned Blunders

John Pemberton formulated a potion to 'whiten teeth, cleanse the mouth, harden and beautify the gums, and relieve mental and physical exhaustion.' He named his chemical concoction Coca-Cola.⁶

Locust plagues were receiving media attention in Australia when Peter McFarlane hatched a practical joke. He fooled the press into thinking he planned to export candied locusts as a gourmet food. Newspapers around the world picked up the story and McFarlane was inundated with inquiries. (Multitudes of non-Westerners share John the Baptist's appreciation of these tasty critters.) It was hilarious – until the joke took a U-turn. As expressions of interest mounted, candied locusts began to look too commercially attractive to pass up. The last I heard, he was planning serious production trials.⁷

Then there's Christopher Columbus's trip to Asia. To America's delight, that, too, went strangely haywire.

If people following their own impulses sometimes achieve things delightfully different to their intentions, who knows what wonders await Spirit-led individuals?^b

Though many of us seem blown off-course by fickle winds, these perplexing diversions could be divinely-tuned course adjustments. Often the frustration is because we are heading for a vocation quite different – and ultimately more rewarding – to the one we imagine.

You might, for example, be hoping to win hundreds to Christ and succeed only in raising up another evangelist. He may win countless thousands and they in turn win still more. You could go to the grave thinking you have failed, oblivious that heaven credits a million souls to your name.

^a 2 Corinthians 13:1; Deuteronomy 19:15

^b Note Proverbs 20:24

In fact, your greatest contribution might flow from your greatest weakness. If you find my book useful, it's because I have felt useless. It's the spear through my heart that binds me to the pain in yours. It's years plagued with questions that have unearthed answers. Had something dulled my pain, you would not be reading this book.

John Bunyan's spiritual torment was horrific. With a severity that few of us could even conceive, year after year he was repeatedly overwhelmed by sin, hopelessness and the seemingly certain prospect of an eternity in Hell. Then followed long years of harsh imprisonment, intensified even when not in prison by the very real threat of execution or deportation. No wonder *Pilgrim's Progress* is such an outstandingly powerful book. Much of it was virtually autobiographical.⁸

Great men like Whitefield and the Wesleys suffered enormously in their struggle to find salvation. Whitefield's spiritual need was so all-consuming that his fastings almost killed him. John and Charles were inconsolable until at long last they found salvation. Not surprisingly, their subsequent ministries eclipsed that of almost all Christians who have been spared such anguish of soul.⁹

Mark Virkler's torment was his inability to hear God's voice. In vain he sought the help of those who regularly heard from God. They could not even understand his problem. For them, it's as easy as prayer. Year after year, Mark wrestled in the agony of silence. Why would a Father who longs to communicate with his treasured children, allow him to suffer so cruelly? Because, unlike those for whom hearing comes easily, Mark now has answers which have swept thousands to 'the other side of silence'.¹⁰

Traumas qualify us for ministry like nothing else can.

After losing his sight, Dr. William Moon prayed a prayer that was powerfully answered: 'Lord, help me use this talent of blindness in your service . . .'¹¹

Barbara Johnson has touched incalculable numbers of people for the glory of Christ, because of the numbing horror of being robbed of two sons through death, losing a third to a gay lifestyle, and her husband being critically injured.

Who would have heard of Corrie ten Boom or Richard Wurmbrand if they had not suffered in prison camps?

Rather than test your patience by citing hundreds more examples, let me conclude by stating the obvious: for vast numbers of Christians, the spiritual impact of their lives seems directly proportional to their past agony. Situations they would have most wanted to avoid – times when death seemed preferable – empowered their lives like no other experience.

Cut Off

Ever had a ministry cut off from under you?

The divine vinedresser prunes every fruitful branch.^a Twigs with great potential are lopped off. That way, God's life and our attention are channeled into those parts that will ultimately achieve the most. For months the vine seems cruelly maimed. But what seems a senseless waste produces better fruit.

On the steps of an opera house, gifted vocalist Peter Cameron Scott yielded to his Lord. In 1890, he set sail for the wilds of Africa.¹² Cricketer, C. T. Studd was rich and famous in his home country. His reputation alone could draw a large crowd. Yet Christ inspired him to dispense of his wealth and trek to China, where he was neither rich nor famous. An irresponsible waste? Perhaps – if the Supreme Being were a celestial talent scout.

The Almighty is not frantically scouring the planet for someone with the natural ability to fill a particular role. Nor is he obligated to use our every skill. He is as capable of by-passing native talent as he is of supernaturally giving us new abilities.

Yet you are tenderly pruned with boundless wisdom. If a part of your life is thrown in the fire, another branch will bud, bearing bigger fruit.

Though groomed for it from his infancy, Ezekiel was barred by divine law from entering the priesthood until his thirtieth year. Finally, the day arrived. Can you see him, as excited as a flea at a cat show? Then you don't know Ezekiel. In exile, Ezekiel was a priest without a temple. That's like being a sailor without a ship, a painter without a brush, a carpenter without wood. Poor man. Instead

^a John 15:2

of ministering rituals to his tiny nation he had to be content with shaking the entire world for millennia as a powerful prophet.

Brooks' failure as a school teacher was so complete that he had to quit the profession forever. And the headmaster was as comforting as sandpaper. He informed the shattered man that he had 'never known anyone who had failed as a schoolmaster to succeed in any other calling.' The pain intensified. Utterly devastated, he intended spending the rest of his life as a recluse. Little did he know that one day someone would write, 'What a blessing it was that Phillips Brooks was not permitted to be successful' as a school teacher. Otherwise, 'the brilliant, soul-winning, character-building minister might have been lost to the world.'¹³

The Vinedresser is always right. And he still saves the best vintage until last.^a Disappointments are divine appointments to a later, richer harvest.

Perhaps you incorrectly discerned heaven's call. (You thought it was heaven but it turned out to be a local call, not long-distance.) If so, quitting is no failure. You have given it your best and grown in the process. There is no shame in changing direction when that change aligns you closer to the perfect will of God.

One of the greatest preachers ever, Alexander Maclaren, has retained his influence for generations because he shunned what we consider the usual duties of a pastor to concentrate on sermon preparation.¹⁴ He would spend up to sixty hours preparing a single message. 'He did more by doing less,' concluded one biographer.¹⁵ I am reminded of the early apostles who offloaded responsibilities they had originally assumed, to limit themselves to prayer and preaching.^b Should this principle be applied to your ministry?

Some of us either get involved in too many things at once or flit from one activity to another before getting established in any. We're shooting out in all directions and wonder why we produce so little fruit. Welcome the pruning hook.

The Danger of Preconceptions

Some of the hostile forces arrayed against us are locked within our own minds.

Our lives could be shadowed with disappointment because our preconceptions have fogged God's call.

Young Samuel initially failed to respond to God's voice.^c It sounded too ordinary. He probably expected God to thunder his commands with booming voice and technicolor vision.

God often breathes through thoughts, desires, circumstances or human agencies. If we are looking for something more spectacular, we might not recognize his call.

Yet we can just as easily err in the opposite direction, missing the Spirit's leading, not because it seems too ordinary, but because it seems too bizarre.

Earlier, we skimmed the mad-cap exploits of Spirit-intoxicated saints. We didn't so much as mention such star performers as Elisha who made the weirdest UFO claim ever concocted, whacked a river with his coat, threw salt in the town's water supply, lay on a corpse, and urged followers to eat poison.^d So obviously we've left untold the antics of lesser-known oddballs like Agabus, who tied himself in knots.^e But despite this book being shorter than the Bible, I hope I've squashed any illusion that your ministry will be 'normal', because everyone else will expect it of you.

It was hard to rate a mention in the Bible unless you made a laughing stock of yourself. God hasn't changed. You can be as conservative as God allows, but that will not be nearly as innocuous as the world, the flesh and half the church want you to be.

It's scary being different. We'd rather hide, trying to clone someone else's ministry. But there's simply no demand for more impersonators. There is, however, a demand for your unique contribution.

Resist the pressure to conform. You may die of embarrassment, but you'll live in glory. The world needs your distinctive ministry.

^a Compare John 2:9-10

^b Acts 6:2-4

^c 1 Samuel 3:3 ff

^d 2 Kings 2:11-18, 13-14, 20-21; 4:32-33, 40-41

^e Acts 21:10-11

CHAPTER 13: FEAR

‘You’re a real spiritual dynamo,’ said the devil.

‘Well thank you!’ I gushed, surprised to find the enemy in such a good mood. ‘A dynamo, eh?’

‘Yeah, I get a charge out of seeing you go around in circles!’

If I say so myself, my plans are executed brilliantly – by unseen assassins. Just when life seems all peaches and cream, I have to go on a low cholesterol diet.

‘It is always darkest just before the day dawneth.’ A book of quotations ascribes those words to Thomas Fuller, but it didn’t say what planet he lived on. You need only see a Warner Brothers cartoon to know it’s always darkest just before a large falling object flattens you.

The occasional disaster aside, things go almost perfectly. I almost marry. I almost get a better job. I almost catch my notes before they fall into the shredder. My car almost starts.

‘It is always darkest just before the day dawneth.’ A book of quotations ascribes those words to Thomas Fuller, but it didn’t say what planet he lived on. You only have to see a Warner Brothers cartoon to know it’s always darkest just before a large falling object flattens you.

I tried my hand at rowing on a sea inlet in Kangaroo Island. I rowed furiously and got nowhere. I couldn’t figure it out. I later learnt that the tide is particularly strong in that area. (At another place my father had a similar rowing experience. He found pulling up the anchor helped considerably.) Years later I received a word from the Lord. I had been rowing against the tide, it said, but the tide would turn. Me? Rowing against the tide? Everything I do works like a charm – hangs around my neck and achieves nothing. My idea of a record year is being needled as I go around in circles. Murphy’s laws are parts of my autobiography that slipped out before I could copyright them. Why does my bread always fall butter-side down? Why are the lights always red? Oh, no! My pen’s run dry. (Really!)

Now, where was I? O yes – why does everything go wrong for me? Why do my hopes die with their legs in the air? Why would people rather read a soap wrapper than something I’ve written? I begin to wax eloquent and the wax sets. I try to witness and my mind goes blank. I try to sleep and my mind fills up. It’s a miracle. I know when the rapture will occur – ten minutes after I make the final payment on a prepaid funeral. Just call me the Aluminum Kid – foiled again. I have more problems than a chiropractor with a waiting-room full of giraffes. Another day another bother.

I wasn’t aware of doing anything wrong. In fact, I was told the tide would change, not that I would change. Why would God allow these frustrations?

All I know is that rowing against the tide builds muscles and stamina. Imagine how I’ll power through the waves when the tide turns.

George Müller seems to have suffered from tide problems, too. Though he enjoyed God’s miraculous provision daily for more than sixty years, the life of faith never grew easy for him. Even in his latter years when he gained international fame, he still had to pray in every penny, often having to economise and wait virtually to the death knock before it arrived. The Lord so believed in Müller and so cared for his continued spiritual development that he kept the tests coming for sixty years until finally granting him a financially easier life when Müller entered his late eighties.¹

I started writing this book using the services of a typist. This was a wonderful answer to prayer. Not only was Lorraine willing to type without charge, she had a computer ideally suited to my needs. (The way I write – faster than a speeding eraser; more change than a thousand piggy banks; able to spell a single word in a hundred ways – a computer is essential.)

Weighed down by past failures, I had little faith to pay a typist big money for work that might end up with my dust-covered previous efforts. For the same reason, I was loath to buy my own equipment and I was convinced I'd type like a one-armed sloth with arthritis.

Suddenly, Lorraine was unable to complete the work. Another ministry attempt bites the dust. No! Surely the Lord provided her! What's going on?

The typing already done enabled others to view samples of my work. Their response nerved me to buy a computer and learn new ways to lose data. My writing soared. Never again would I want to be dependent upon a typist, no matter how willing, available and skilled. What seemed an inexplicable obstacle has propelled me into a new realm of efficiency.

Those contrary winds are not as fickle as they seem.

Paralysis

Edison invented the light bulb not by trial and triumph, but by trial and error (over 1600 errors, I'm told). During his life, he didn't stop at mere failures. He made some spectacular blunders – like when he was meant to be selling newspapers and ended up setting a train on fire. (I must look into this: Edison and I might be related.)

Mistakes are rarely the black ogre they seem. We've seen how failure can be a valuable asset, cleansing us of ugly pride; correcting and directing us; barricading enticing avenues that meander away from heaven's best, or purging us of reckless independence and pushing us deeper into the heart of God.

Out of control, however, the fire that warms can destroy. When failure piles on top of failure, the hideous shadow of a psychological barrier slithers across our mind. As failures mount ever higher, we all begin to quake. Yet Edison refused to be intimidated, though the dark mountain grew every day. With a mere three months of formal schooling and considered to have had a learning disability, Edison eventually became one of the most prolific inventors of all time. In his struggle to invent a method of storing electricity he is said to have had tens of thousands of failures. Attempt 50,000 – or thereabouts – worked.²

We can cower in defeat like the mass of humanity, afraid of shadows, or we can become Edisons.

It's been said Oral Roberts has been used of God in the miraculous healing of more people than anyone else in human history. Just one humiliating complication – it is also estimated he has prayed for more people who *haven't* been healed than anyone else ever has.

Many people call C. H. Gabriel the king of hymn writers. His most famous work, 'The Glory Song,' translated into almost every major language, is estimated to have been printed over one hundred million times. He earned a reputation of being better than anyone in the world at putting the finishing touches on a hymn. Yet he claimed he experienced more failure than success.³

'The way to succeed,' said Thomas J. Watson, 'is to double your failure rate.' Watson isn't your average crack-pot. He founded IBM.

What often distinguishes successful people is the uncommon number of failures they suffer. The rest of us give up before experiencing our full quota.

If failures are rungs on the ladder to success, we reach the top not merely by seeing failures, but by mounting them.

One rejection from a publisher would send me reeling. How many blows could you sustain before forever abandoning the idea of becoming a writer? Ten? Fifteen? Fifty? Would-be novelist John Creasey received an unbroken succession of 743 rejections. I'd be throwing in the towel, the soap, the bath water, my rubber duck, my little red tugboat, everything I could lay my hands on. Few people would ever expose themselves to such devastating failure. That's why so few enjoy the renown he finally achieved. While unsuccessful, he was forced to write deep into the night. He came late to his paid employment so often that he was fired from twenty-seven different jobs. Undaunted, he continued to perfect his writing, striving to be so good that his skill could no longer be ignored.

Shy success crept near, then swept him to fame. Over sixty million of his books have been published.⁴

The chilly winds of rejection can ruffle our feathers or carry us to new heights. Sag in doubt or stretch wings heavenward and soar: the choice is ours.

It is not arid persistence that success finds irresistible, but a dogged resolve to improve. Don't huddle in self-pity. Harness rejection's power. Let it spur you to a greater commitment, inspiring you to new levels of excellence.

We often let God down. It is even worse if Satan persuades us that the resulting failure is God's fault, rather than our own.^a But we must not let past fizzlers paralyse us. Acting outside of God's time will hurt. It is ludicrous, however, to let such traumas darken our expectations of future service. Moving in God's time and manner will be markedly different.

Escape

Experimental psychologists designed a dog enclosure, divided by a low barrier and wired to deliver electrical shocks to half the cage. Dogs quickly learned to cross the barrier and avoid the unpleasant shocks. New dogs, however, were given the shocks no matter what they did. The 'mad scientists' then changed the conditions so that these dogs, like the first ones, could easily avoid the shocks. Yet they never learned. Being subjected to a no-win situation had rendered the second group of dogs incapable of succeeding. Even in their home cages they seemed lethargic and dejected.

Psychologists call this phenomenon *learned helplessness*. The only way they could get the dogs to avoid the shocks was to physically drag them over the barrier.⁵

Can I ever identify with those pathetic creatures! It's as if for my whole life I've been victim of a sadistic conspiracy to crush me into a whimpering defeatist. Yet even if your experience has been more harrowing, there is one thing distinguishing us from those dogs. Though racked by failed ministry attempts, we can know when conditions for ministry have changed, because we're in union with the God who knows. The sovereign Lord enjoys certain advantages in being omnipotent, one of which is the ability to communicate with even the deafest, densest (why are you looking at me?) of his children.^b We may still question whether it was God, but after entreating him we will receive enough confirmation to warrant giving it a go.

All we then need is faith to mount the barrier.

Use steps. Start with a minor challenge. Slowly, methodically, climb higher. Even if your situation seems a case of all or nothing, prayer, creativity and persistence will usually carve a series of steps into a towering barrier.

Try spending fifteen or more minutes a day simply imagining yourself totally at ease, doing something you presently find just a little daunting. Over days or weeks, slowly advance – moving in your mind to the next stage only when you can picture the scene in detail without experiencing the slightest tension in your body. Research has convincingly demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach in breaking fear's fangs. Add to this the prayer of faith and the power of knowing that Jesus is with you, and in a few weeks you will mount that barrier.

You'll find this method far more dignified than having to be dragged over. I am not too keen about the whole of heaven looking on while I'm madly yelping, claws dug in, being yanked by the scruff of my neck to a place of joy and fulfillment that my foolishness imagines to be a den of terror.

There's an alternative to volunteering or being forced. And it's even worse. Geriatric specialist Dr. Peter Rowe reported in a British medical journal the case of a thirty-four-year-old lady who caught influenza. She was examined by a doctor who told her to stay in bed until he saw her again. He never returned. She never got up. Forty years later a doctor examined a plump, seventy-four-year-old, bed-ridden spinster. He found her in perfect health, still refusing to get up. It took seven more months of coaxing before she left the comfort and security of her quilt-covered prison. Then followed three 'fairly active' years until she met her Maker.⁶

You may be a pew-warmer for a while, but don't get too comfortable! I'd prefer the torment of endless striving. Better to chase a God-given dream through a minefield, than be as snug as a slug in the mud.

^a Proverbs 19:3

^b Compare John 10:4, Romans 8:14

The cost

Though underemployment can be agonizing, the greatest horror is when the pain subsides. We begin to feel safe in our hole and imagine all sorts of horrors are poised to savage us should we step into the security of God's will. Such fears are largely Satanic bluff,^a doomed never to materialize.

Nonetheless, heaven's assignments aren't always a piece of angel cake. There are times when the only thing more frightening than doing the will of God is *not* doing his will. We have as Leader and Supreme Example, One who suffered immensely.^b

When people came to Jesus desiring to serve him, you'd think he would have smothered them with praise. But he knew the human heart. His blunt response shocked would-be followers into a painful realization of the great cost involved.^c 'Sell all you have and give it to the poor.'^d 'Wild animals will better shelter than you'll have if you follow me.'^e

'To serve me,' he declared, 'you must take up a cross.'^f Two thousand years later, it is easy to romanticize that brutal statement. Carrying one's cross involves nothing less than anguish and devastating humiliation. It is suffering inflicted as a direct result of serving God; torment you could avoid by compromise. Jesus wasn't looking for adherents; he was looking for martyrs. He wanted not admirers but imitators – volunteers who could shoulder a gibbet of pain.^g The person more concerned about his neck than the exaltation of God, is unworthy of ministry.^h

Many are called, but few rise to the challenge. 'Let me first establish my business.' 'Let me first raise my family.' 'Let me first . . .' Not surprisingly, few are chosen.ⁱ

Those who shrink from hardship or danger shrivel up inside; dead, long before their hearts stop. Don't throw your life away, enslaved by the allure of opulence; lazing while suffering humanity floods past your door. The easy path leads to destruction.^j

How would you like the incomparable thrill of being greeted by the strains of native voices singing 'All hail the power of Jesus' name' on the very spot where twenty years before you had been driven off by a frenzy of spears aimed at your heart? Imagine savoring the ecstasy, the satisfaction, the triumph. That was George Grenfell's reward for putting his life on the line; for boldly defying a hostile government; for suffering bereavement after bereavement until finally his young wife and four of his children were buried; for serving in a place so dangerous that three out of every four missionaries died before completing their first term.⁷

'Count the cost,' ordered Jesus, using parable after parable to hammer the point.^k Will you pay the price and take the risks, or become a laughing stock, melting away when the heat is on?

The cost is exceeded only by the glory. So immense is the glory, in fact, that the cost fades, totally eclipsed by the reward.^l

Why should serving God involve humiliation, hardship, and toil? 'Writing is the work of a slave!' lamented C. H. Spurgeon – the man who wrote 135 books, edited 28 others and whose 3,500 sermons were published as 75 additional books.⁸ Why must missionaries waste years wrestling with a language that God could miraculously impart to them? Why does uplifting music demand hours of irksome practice? Why do church floors get dirty? Why . . .? Because it frees us to express the depth of our devotion. Moreover, it's the cost that produces the exhilaration, the fulfillment, the honor. Look at any field of endeavor: we admire heroic achievements; people who overcome the odds, who endure hardship and succeed where others would have slunk away. That's the glory of Christ-likeness. There's no honor in being swept along by a godless throng; no satisfaction in fleeing at the sight of a challenge; no glory in being dominated by fear or frozen by doubt. Limp-willed, lily-livered pretenders turn God's stomach.^m We either walk through the curtain of fear or end up a

^a Take comfort from Philippians 4:6-7 and 2 Timothy 1:7

^b John 15:20-21; Hebrews 12:2-4; 1 Peter 2:19-21

^c Luke 14:25-33; Matthew 10:21-22

^d Luke 18:22

^e Luke 9:57-8, loose paraphrase

^f Luke 9:23

^g Matthew 20:22-3

^h Luke 9:23-6

ⁱ Matthew 22:14; Luke 9:59-62

^j Matthew 7:13

^k Luke 14:28-33; Matthew 13:45-6

^l 2 Corinthians 4:17; Revelation 7:16,17

^m Revelation 3:16

broken shell of the person we could have been. To choose the soft life is to turn our back on our bleeding Savior and lose ourselves in Satanic deception. It's those who sow in tears who reap in joy;^a those who endure who win the crown.^b Insipid, half-hearted 'Christianity' is sickening to God, the world and the devil.

That's not for you. You belong in heaven's hall of fame. You were born with the desire for it; born-again with the power for it. You were made for daring persistence, stunning triumphs, awe-inspiring excellence. While others wallow in the mud of mediocrity, sentenced to eternal obscurity by their half-heartedness, you're changing the face of the planet, bringing honor to the One who redeemed you.

If you're crazy, they say you ought to be committed. I reckon if you're *not* committed, you're crazy.

Fired by the love of God, live life to the full.

Christ's Champions

In a heart-stopping display of skill, Blondin pushed a wheel-barrow along a tight-rope over Niagara Falls. 'Who believes I could carry someone across the falls?' he asked. The crowd went wild. Of course he could. So he asked for a volunteer.

Shocked silence.

Ministry is like that. Anyone can slip into Christ's embrace and be carried to startling conquests, but when the call comes, knees begin to quake. The weakest saint who dares follow Christ will excel; the strongest who stays behind will be crushed.

There are many different callings, but no one is called to be a spectator. There is a cost and a degree of involvement in being a spectator, but higher things are expected of you.

Spectators pay at the gate. They have read their subject until they're self-declared experts. They clap and cheer. They view the victory celebrations. But there's seldom sweat on their brow. They know nothing about bruises and aching muscles. They are foreigners to the thrill of personal achievement, the exhilaration of record-breaking performances, the satisfaction of a job well done. Their greatest accomplishment is to guzzle a drink in the midst of a jostling crowd without spilling it. They are potential champions pouring their lives away; non-achievers who love their bed more than success.

There's a world of difference between these Walter Mittys and players on the bench. Players kept in reserve are red hot in a tepid world. They don't flinch at pain. They have toughened their minds and hardened their bodies; drilled to spring into action the instant they are needed. They are champions in the making.

Conquest

The last time I flirted with danger was when I decided against a double knot to tie my shoelace. I have a heart of gold – yellow to the core. Yet Christ died that I might rule. Yield to my old nature and I cower; yield to my Christ-bought nature and I conquer.

Fear will come. I can't avoid it, but through Christ I need not bow to it. Victor or victim: it's my decision.

The tragedy is that we are often enslaved by forces that are meant to be *our* slaves. Rather than being tyrannized by fear, we should rise up and let it serve us. Fear's duty is to impel us to prayer. Deprived of this faithful servant we might foolishly expose ourselves to danger without activating God's wall of safety.

Ensure your plans are in the will of God. Then list every fearful possibility. Pray through each point for as long as it takes to muster the faith that God has taken control. Now you have divine protection, the highest conceivable security. Fear has done its work. Bid it farewell. Like a naughty puppy, fear may still tag along, but ignore it. Reciting the fear-crushing promises of Scripture, fix your eyes on the goal and stride toward it.

^a Psalm 126:6

^b 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; James 1:12; Revelation 2:10; 3:11

FEAR

Waiting for fear to fade before advancing is like Peter waiting for the lake to evaporate before stepping out of the boat. Faith is the defeat of fear – not usually by fear’s removal, but by moving us to proceed despite fear’s yelps.

Where acceptable, take small steps. If the torment is intense, the support of experienced counselors can be valuable. Be prayerful about your choice of help, however. Unwise counselors can wound.

When the pressure is on, there are just two types of people: those who cling to Christ and those who run away. Heaven’s heroes are natural weaklings who are willing to let Christ make them supernaturally strong.

All of heaven is on red alert when you follow Father’s orders. Help is a prayer away. Heaven’s resources – infinitely more than you will ever require – are available the instant you need them.^a As you march forward in obedience success is certain.

Money

How would you like to amass so much wealth that you could educate 122,683 children; buy 282,000 Bibles and one and a half million New Testaments; give away 112 million books, pamphlets and tracts; support hundreds of missionaries; and feed, clothe and house 10,000 children from the time they were orphaned until becoming independent? George Müller did. And he achieved this not by sweat and business acumen, not by garage sales and mailing lists, not by borrowing or asking for help, but solely by faith and prayer. He refused to let his needs be known to anyone but God. Fifty times in just one two-year period there were insufficient funds to see them through the day, yet what was needed always came in time.⁹

Trans World Radio, with an annual budget of little more than \$10,000, faced a half-million-dollar down payment, to be paid in \$83,000 installments every second month. On the deadline day for the second installment they were \$13,000 short. \$5,000 arrived that morning, but nothing more. The director shuffled to the bank with the knotted stomach of schoolboy sent to the principal’s office. Before he reached the bank a worker handed him an unexpected mail delivery containing another \$5,000. Missed by just \$3,000! A knife to the stomach would have been less painful. As he slumped in the seat of the bank president’s office, contemplating the hefty penalty for not meeting a payment, money was wired to the TWR account – \$3,000.

On the day the next payment was due, after every piece of mail had been scoured they were \$1,500 short. Not another cent arrived. Most of the donations were in German marks and they had checked the exchange rate the day before. They re-checked. The money was now worth \$1,500 more.

And the miracles kept coming.¹⁰

Lack of money never stymies God’s work, but materialism does. This disease of the mind comes in two deadly strains. One is loving luxury more than God – television reception is atrocious in the West Papuan jungles, so I refuse to go. I’ve caught the other strain if money gives me a greater feeling of security than having the Creator of the Universe as my Father – I know my cold-hearted, money-grubbing boss will pay me every week, but I’m not so sure about God, so I squelch his leading to leave my job.

As a law-abiding Jew, the rich young ruler was, by common Christian standards, remarkably liberal in his giving. His contemporaries may have regarded as obligatory the giving of up to thirty per cent of one’s income.¹¹ At the very minimum this man must have been offering expensive animal sacrifices in addition to his ten per cent. Yet he was still so entangled in the deadly web of materialism that not even the lure of eternal life could entice him to break free. He could not obtain salvation for himself, let alone live a profitable life for others. He was poor indeed.^b

A Look Within

I once spent an entire year rejoicing in God. I was sure I would never see depression again. Then I lowered my gaze from the beauty of Christ to my own imperfections. Depression returned. So

^a Matthew 21:12-19; Luke 10:19; 21:12-19

^b Mark 10:17-31

FEAR

I try to avoid self-examination. Occasionally, however, peering into the dingy world within can be helpful.

Perhaps part of me – the part that gets its way most often – wants me to fail. That seems incredible. Success is a delicious daydream. But maybe cowering on the fringes of my consciousness is a fear that success would lose its savor if it stepped into reality. When I succeed I shrink from mollycoddling my ego lest it become inflamed with the puss of pride. The only time it gets the comfort and attention it craves is when I fail. I hold my ego close and whisper in its ear, ‘You poor dear.’

Mediocrity has been such a part of my life that though I imagine I hate it, it brings with it the warmth of familiarity.

The things we tell ourselves can become powerful forces. If, for instance, I tell myself that no one likes me, I will lack the confidence to mix freely. My aloofness will turn people away and constantly affirm my belief that no one likes me. The result? A seriously hampered ministry.

Often there is just one thing holding us back. I know someone with wisdom in almost every area. Many people could benefit from his wisdom, but what he lacks is the wisdom to know when and how to share his insights. He comes across as an interfering know-all, turning away the very people he longs to help. The thing keeping us in a wilderness of lost opportunities may be easily correctable, but it can become such a part of our lives that we are oblivious to it. Blindness to our weaknesses is one of several reasons for holding Father’s hand when we look within.

If prayer sheds no light, however, we must leave these murky depths lest we begin to assist the Accuser in his attempts to torment us. Drop the accusations and mind-dredging, but keep praying in faith for the strength and wisdom to triumphantly hug success.

Synopsis

From a history of repeated real or imagined failures to a love of money, we have exposed, and will continue to expose, things that make us reluctant to fully embrace ministry. We will find, however, nothing worth the price surrendering the challenge of Christ-likeness.

If Jesus suffered for us when we didn’t deserve it, how can we refuse to suffer for him when he does deserve it?

To snuggle into the will of God is to be enveloped in the fiercely protective love and infallible wisdom of the Omnipotent One. Outside that warm cocoon lurk genuine reasons for fear, but inside the Almighty’s perfect will, fear – no matter how intense – is ultimately an illusion. The pain is transitory; the fulfillment, eternal.

CHAPTER 14: DISASTERS – DIVINE AND DEMONIC

In 1950 Siamese twins were born. Separation was impossible. They shared the one bladder, lower intestine, rectum and reproductive system. Of their three legs, two were functional. Masha controlled one, Dasha controlled the other. Yet though they shared organs and even the same disease-carrying blood, they contracted illnesses separately. When one was stricken with measles, for instance, the other was perfectly well.¹ If you think that's bizarre, read on.

Willie Burton, pioneer missionary to the Congo, prayed for Chief Lubinda's withered arm. As he prayed the arm healed. Moved by this spectacular proof of divine power, the chief pleaded with the missionary to bring the gospel to his people. But it was impossible. 'God's miracle worker' was too sick to go.²

Sickness and disability seem to bar so many of us from service that I cannot avoid the issue, though unraveling the easy cases would take a spiritual Sherlock Holmes. Desiring to simplify the complexities of life, we tend to ram the many reasons for affliction into just one or two categories and then wonder why our answer doesn't work with everyone.

By re-weaving several threads in this book we will produce a simple but revealing tapestry.

You will recall, at his royal command performance, Moses' rendition of *If I had a stammer*. That song and dance didn't go down too well. Like his speech impediment, some disabilities are toothless tigers. Mrs Scudder was denied mission board support because they were sure she could not withstand the harsh conditions in India. She went despite their protests, and remained for sixty-three years.³ We could cower before our limitations, unaware that we are being terrorized by a set of gums!

On your behalf I have researched the lives of hundreds of people. Of all the things that moved me, I was perhaps most powerfully struck by those who faced crippling health problems and won. I refer to people who won, not in the sense of quickly regaining health, but by achieving amazing things in the face of infirmities that would have rendered other people helpless. Earth owes much to tough people in weak bodies; people like Livingstone, Brainerd, Finney, Hudson Taylor, 'Praying Hyde,' Catherine Booth, 'Granny' Brand and a multitude more. A strong spirit brings more glory than a strong body.

So some afflictions can be ignored. Others are oppressive obstacles that must be blasted by the explosive power of faith. But some are a friend.

God can make disability a ministry launching pad.

'Why was this man born blind?' the disciples probed the Son of God.

'That the works of God might be manifested,' came the reply.^a Then Jesus healed him.

Instantly, a flood of ministry opportunities engulfed the beggar. It seemed everyone wanted to hear his story.

Healing is a striking testimony to God,^b but this thrilling opportunity has one drawback: to receive a miraculous healing you must first be sick. And the longer and more chronic your illness, the more powerful the testimony.

But ill health can launch us into service without such fireworks.

'You have heard of the endurance of Job,' wrote James as he sought to spark his readers.^a From a ministry perspective, the most productive part of Job's long life was the time of his illness. Even today Job lifts us. We know he understands.

^a John 9:1-3

^b Matthew 11:21-24; Mark 16:20; John 5:36; 10:25,38; 11:4; 14:11; 15:24; Acts 4:14; 14:3; 15:10-12; Hebrews 2:4

Some people suffer so greatly that all they need do is remain remotely Christ-like to achieve more for God than a thousand sermons. You'll find that unbelievable until touched by someone whose flickering love for God continues despite intense suffering.⁴

Leslie Lemke, whose story I related earlier, personifies another route to ministry. Severe handicaps have heightened his ministry by focusing the world's attention on the musical gift God has given him.

Then there's the pruning principle.

It is said George Matheson's blindness sharpened his spiritual sight.⁵ Pious nonsense? Fanny Crosby wouldn't think so. She claimed that if offered the chance to regain her sight she would refuse. Fanny believed she would not have been such a prolific hymn writer if forced to cope with the distractions presented to seeing eyes.⁶

Call me a skeptic, but Fanny was blinded soon after birth. How accurately could she guess the 'disadvantages' of sight? Was she over-zealous in wanting to see blessing in tragedy? Surprising confirmation of her view flows from a secular source. In *Creative Malady*, British medical professor, Sir George Pickering, explored the lives of five famous people whose work, he believes, benefited from psychosomatic illnesses.⁷ Pickering also noted that one of his students was unexceptional until tuberculosis confined him to a sanatorium for a year. The man read and thought and emerged a changed person who extended the boundaries of human knowledge. The professor tells of another colleague whose great intellect apparently benefited from the 'enforced solitude' of illness. For similar reasons, when Pickering was cured of a painful arthritic condition, he admits his relief was mixed with sadness.⁸

New Zealand artist, Rei Hamon, discovered his unique ability when as an injured logger he began filling the empty hours by making little dots on paper. Similarly, for Geoff Goodfellow, back pain boarded up previous openings and turned a poetry-hater into one of Australia's most popular poets.

People are amazed at what physicist Stephen Hawking has accomplished despite his chronic limitations. Yet the world-famous scientist achieved little before contracting motor neuron disease. There were too many other things to do, and no apparent urgency. Hawking, like so many people before him, seems to have excelled because of his handicap.

So there are at least four ways in which the wall of affliction can become a door to service.

☆ Your ailment could be used to display the healing power of the risen Lord, blazing new avenues for witness.

☆ It could highlight your godliness, inspiring others and demonstrating the reality of God, even if, like Job, you lack special talent.

☆ Or, like black velvet behind a diamond, it could draw people's attention to your talent, as it has done for Leslie Lemke, quadriplegic Joni Eareckson Tada and many others.

☆ It could seal off distractions, funneling your efforts into those skills the Lord wants you to excel in.

Irrespective of whether it is hepatitis or a broken leg, chicken pox or cancer, sickness is sometimes the physical manifestation of a mental problem.

If, for instance, we fear God's call, sickness can be an agonizing but effective way of avoiding commitment, without the need to consciously rebel. Be it social or family or work pressures, competitive sport, exams or whatever, if an individual finds something sufficiently traumatic and yet feels obliged to do it, medical illness is an escape hatch the unconscious mind is likely to seize.

Or illness could be our psyche's attempt to entice the attention or sympathy of someone, perhaps even of God.

Another possibility is that we are unconvinced of our right to vibrant health. Again, this may be conscious or unconscious, spiritual (e.g. guilt), or non-spiritual (e.g. parental messages received as a child). Whatever the cause, a weakened will to resist illness can make us vulnerable to almost any illness. As we saw from twins Masha and Dasha, there is more to illness than the chance exposure to disease.

^a James 5.11

It may be liberating to prayerfully and gently let God examine our hidden motives, but in the lives of other people, we should play amateur psychiatrist no more than we would become a back-yard surgeon. Consider Amy Carmichael, who spent twenty highly productive years in India with seldom a pain-free moment and practically never venturing out of her room.⁹ I dare not touch even her memory by wondering whether Amy sought healing with sufficient intensity; whether, for instance, her subconscious found sickness a way, albeit a tortuous one, of avoiding distraction, thus empowering her to focus on more critical work. Since God has vowed to mould all things for good in the lives of his darlings, it is hardly surprising if we could see certain advantages in Amy's tragedy. So rather than flirt with the devil, who delights in turning the screws on suffering Christians, I exalt Amy as an inspiration to all who are afflicted by limitations that will not budge. As distressing as infirmity is, we should follow her lead of refusing to use painful limitations as an excuse for opting out of divine obligations.

More Possibilities

☆ Poor health could be a leash used by God as the only way of restraining us from a foolish move.

☆ It could be the product of an ungodly lifestyle. I'm sure you could denounce drunkenness, drugs, smokes and promiscuity as eloquently as me. Most of us are also alert to the health-destroying sins of anger, envy and bitterness. But I draw attention to lack of faith, manifesting itself in worry, frantic activity and a refusal to delegate. More subtle still is the pressure to be over-zealous, slaving dangerously long hours 'for the Lord'.

☆ We have noted that frail health could be a Satanic obstruction against which we should call down fire from heaven. On the other extreme, however, Scripture is emphatic that illness could be divine punishment.^a (We need go no further than Job's counselors to see how this truth can be horribly abused.)

☆ Arthritis might be a cross to bear – if it resulted from languishing in a damp cell while awaiting trial for one's faith. We saw earlier that, as Jesus used the term, a 'cross' is suffering *voluntarily* embraced in order to follow Christ. Paul's wounds and Epaphroditus' illness fit this narrow slot.^b Looking down from heaven, earth's events are seen upside down: Paul's marks of shame, for instance, become medals of honor. Causes of pain can be reasons for joy.

☆ Could a heavenly experience make you ill? It happened in the Bible and a refusal to lower God's Word from the status of God's book for today to spiritual ancient history compels the conclusion that it could happen to you. Paul's encounter with the risen Lord damaged his eyes.^c On Patmos John fell down as if dead.^d 'No one can see my face and live,' the Lord warned Moses who had to settle for a lesser revelation.^e After a vision 'Daniel fainted and was sick' for days. Another vision physically overwhelmed him and temporarily left him dumb.^f For Ezekiel and John the Baptist's father, their loss of speech lasted much longer.^g It is difficult to gauge how serious such afflictions would have been had the Lord not intervened with healing. I would like to argue that in such circumstances God would always heal. However, many scholars believe that Jacob's heavenly wrestler left both Jacob and my argument permanently lame.^h Such mysteries highlight my ignorance, bolstering my suspicion that there are causes of sickness I have not even identified. Certainly in the realm of rare events one might find almost anything. For Bruce Olson, lone missionary in the jungles of South America, life-threatening illness was the only thing keeping him alive. The savage he loved wanted to kill him but superstition forbade the murder of anyone critically ill. Chronic hepatitis not only saved Bruce's life, it played a key role in winning over an enemy and proved a significant factor in Bruce's eventual success.¹⁰

^a For example, Numbers 12:8-10; 2 Samuel 12:13-14; 24:10-15; 2 Kings 15:5; 2 Chronicles 21: 14-15; 26:18-20; John 5:14; Acts 13:10-11; 1 Corinthians 11:29-30; Revelation 16:2

^b Philippians 2:27, 30

^c Acts 9:3-18

^d Revelation 1:17

^e Exodus 33:20-23

^f Daniel 8:27; 10:8-17

^g Ezekiel 3:23-27; 24:27; 33:22; Luke 1:19-22

^h Genesis 32:24-32

God's leash, Satan's hammer, rod of correction,^a black velvet, red herring, pruning hook, sin's fruit, mental trick, badge of honor, springboard to service, glory aftermath, sealed mystery – who knows the true character of your disability? God. And with those who press him, he shares his secrets – on a need-to-know basis. (Sorry about that last phrase, yet even that is comforting. Seek, however. Your need to know may be greater than you think.)

Before abandoning you with this seething brew of possibilities, I offer a suggested vantage-point from which to view the cauldron.

We should not exalt infirmity, nor bow to it. Even if through divine genius sickness often ends up more a surge than a scourge, all affliction, like death, can be tracked back to Adam's sin.^b If God ever uses sickness, it displays his terrifying power: he can even compel evil to perfect his holy purposes.

Regardless of whether Paul's 'thorn' was sickness, it has much to teach us. Christ deflected the Devil's dart with such precision that it punctured only that part of Paul that was in danger of bloating with pride. Though hurled in Satanic wrath, it passed through the scarred hands of Jesus and entered Paul as a manifestation of divine love and wisdom. Nonetheless, we can so focus on the good God squeezed out of this that we overlook the key elements. Paul's discomfort originated with the Evil One and became necessary because the sin of pride lurked dangerously near.^c

Poor health is not God's first choice – Adam and Eve were created whole. Neither is it his final solution – sickness has no place in the world to come.^d

Aeneas was bedridden 'eight years, and was sick of the palsy'.^e 'After eight years, I'd be sick of the palsy, too,' cracks some clown. Not necessarily. Remember Fanny Crosby. Remember the British spinster in bed forty years with 'the flu'. 'Wilt thou be made whole?' queried Jesus.^f For the long-term patient, full health often means an unnerving disruption of lifestyle. Even when infirmity is spiritually beneficial, we can dwell too long in that state. If we need a pride pricker, we obviously have a problem with pride. If we need the pruning power of sickness, it suggests inadequate self-restraint, insensitivity to the Spirit's leading, or some other spiritual deficiency. We should seek to overcome the deficiency so we no longer need our sickness.

If you lie awake worrying about how they'll fit all your medical conditions on your death certificate – even if you are so near death you look like your passport photo – I believe you have a right, almost a duty, to pray for healing. And unbelieving prayer is wasted prayer.

Never give up your quest for healing. Remember the cripple who habitually begged at the temple gate. Innumerable times, possibly every year since his childhood, the Son of God must have walked past this man. After more than forty years of disability, even after the Messiah had left the planet, God healed him.^g

One final reassurance: agonizing health problems can never thwart the Almighty's love. It was somewhere in the midst of the apostle Paul's amazing catalogue of trials that he made the triumphant discovery that nothing – not deprivation, starvation, torture, or lingering death – can remove us from the love of God.^h Job's ailment was not allowed to be lethal and his reward was great.ⁱ Willie Burton's fever limited his ministry but not God's work. I'm told a friend went in his place and a Mission Station was established, though beyond that, my source is silent. The intricacies are kept from me. I'm used to that. But I know enough about God to know it worked out perfectly.

Reason Unknown

Tucked in the heart of the Bible sleeps a tiny psalm of priceless truth.^j The singer confessed that as a mother denies her baby access to her milk when it's time for her darling to be weaned, so God sometimes denies us things we crave. Yet as a weaned infant lies warm and secure in its

^a For example, Psalm 119:67,71

^b Romans 5:12; 8:18-23

^c 2 Corinthians 12:1-7

^d Revelation 21:4

^e Acts 9:33

^f John 5:6, see also Luke 18:41

^g Acts 3:2,10; 4:22

^h Romans 8:35,38-39

ⁱ Job 2:6; 42:10 ff

^j Psalm 131

mother's bosom, our soul can nestle into God, not knowing why we have been denied what we have clamored for, but content to draw love and comfort from the Father's heart.

As the heavens soar far above us, high and unreachable, so is God's wisdom.^a Our tiny minds may understand the Father's ways no more than a babe understands its mother, yet still we can rest in him, bathed in the certainty that when the omnipotent, omniscient Lord lets the inexplicable touch a child of his, it is a manifestation of unfathomable love. In the hands of the One who wouldn't so much as break a damaged reed or snuff a smoking wick, you are safe.^b

The Story So Far

Since our last review we have uncovered another set of hindrances to ministry. If it involved just God and us, ministry would be complex. Yet this is complicated many times over by the involvement of other people and even demonic powers. Nevertheless, every impediment to service will break under the weight of stubborn, faith-filled prayer. It may take days, months or years, but it will happen – provided we don't let doubt, disobedience or bitterness sap our prayers of power.

Christians are surrounded by serious problems. For us, problems *have* to be serious – if they smiled we'd see they have no teeth.

Spiritually enthroned in heaven with Christ, we have instant access to the Father. Though evil forces of incredible power impinge upon us, resident within us is One greater than the combined forces of hell.^c So we are never helpless pawns in a battle between spiritual superpowers. And divine omnipotence doesn't sag when adversaries take human form or merge with psychological factors. The origin of our difficulties may be outside of us, but not, in Christ, outside our sphere of influence.

We serve a God in whose presence impossibilities cringe in defeat. Our mighty Lord can manipulate Satan like a puppet. Rest in the love of God, and a hostile world becomes a feather-bed. 'You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good'^d describes every calamity we could ever face.^e

Hold on. Victory is certain.

^a Isaiah 55:8-9; Psalm 139:6; 147:5; Job 11:7-9; Romans 11:33-34

^b Matthew 12:20

^c 1 John 4:4

^d Compare Genesis 50:20

^e Romans 8:28

CHAPTER 15: KNOW THE TIME

We have established that a delay does not negate the certainty of ministry. Indeed, a delay makes sense.

‘Did you ever hear of anyone being very much used for Christ who did not have some special waiting, some complete upset of all his or her plans?’ wrote Frances Ridley Havergal, whose life made those words throb with truth.¹

So it’s time to wait. Or is it?

Moses was trapped. Ahead of him lay the sea. Behind him was Pharaoh’s fast-approaching army intent on revenge. Time for a prayer-meeting? ‘Why are you crying to me?’ said God. ‘Grab your rod and advance.’^a Time for action.

The Israelites spent about a year at Sinai, resting, worshipping and receiving instruction. Though marred by sin, it was primarily a needed time of refreshment, edification and preparation. Then came the marching orders. ‘You have dwelt long enough at this mount . . . Go in and possess the land . . .’^b

God’s Word is packed with material showing that if there is a time to wait, there is also a time to move. Lest I labor the point, I’ll confine myself to three more incidents.

☆ Samuel was angry. He was miserable. He was hurting. The king he had anointed had let God down. ‘You’ve been sulking long enough,’ said God, ‘Get up and minister to David.’^c

☆ If Elijah’s spirits were any lower, they’d be in Sheol. The cords of depression were dragging him ever closer to the precipice of suicide. The Lord’s response went along this vein: ‘Snap out of it Elijah, you’ve got work to do.’^d

☆ ‘It’s too soon for ministry. I’m too inexperienced,’ Jeremiah told himself. The Lord had other ideas.^e

Though covered in a few pages, if the importance of this matter were reflected by volume of words, it might fill half the book. Many of us are tempted to barge on when we should be waiting. The remainder are passive when we should be forging ahead.

How do we know when to move? I’d lend you my crystal ball but my gold fish need it. I wish I could give a definitive answer. But I know God loves a keen seeker. If I had half a chance to quit my job, you wouldn’t see me for dust. The cleaner only dusts me once a month. I could still be there because my temptation is to hibernate, ceasing to actively seek God’s leading, hoping instead that he will shake me awake when the time arrives. In this case, ‘faith’ is an excuse for laziness. In Scripture after Scripture God pleads with us to ask and seek. We don’t find many verses saying, ‘Just go about your own business and God will get your attention when he’s good and ready.’ It seems to me that someone frequently and enthusiastically asking, ‘Now Lord?’ is more likely to get ahead.

^a Exodus 14:15-16, paraphrase

^b Deuteronomy 1:6,8

^c 1 Samuel 16:1, paraphrase

^d 1 Kings 19:4, 15-16, paraphrase

^e Jeremiah 1:4-8

When Habakkuk wanted to hear from the Lord, he said he was like a sentry.^a Presumably, that meant he was constantly alert for the slightest sign from God; eager to respond immediately. What would you think of a sentry who dozed, expecting – should he be needed – to be awoken by the commotion?

Cab-driver, Martin Holloway, took waiting seriously. On September 20, 1887, Lord Draggs told him he would like to be driven home later that afternoon, after trying out his new yacht. The yachtsman sailed off and enjoyed it so much he decided to complete an around-the-world voyage without returning to notify poor Martin.

Meanwhile, Martin was at the pier wondering what had become of the lord. Early next morning Martin returned. Still no Lord Draggs. Undeterred by a full day's waiting, he refused new customers and returned the next day, and the next. Days blurred into weeks. Weeks lumbered into months.

After 599 days, Draggs alighted from his yacht to be greeted by – you guessed it. Martin handed him a bill that now totaled almost one thousand pounds. The lord raised his eyebrows, agreed to the amount, and asked to be driven home.

We would have gone about our normal work, assuming Draggs would hail us when he was ready. Our behavior, even our thoughts, would be little affected by him asking us to wait. But not this cabby. He retained the initiative, waiting daily at the pier.^b

Of course, we should not abandon other responsibilities until clearly led of God, but he who has ears, listen to the parable of the cab-driver.

Wrapup

When George Müller, meditating upon the Psalms, came to 'The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord,' he scribbled in the margin 'And the stops too.'^c

Without attempting an exhaustive list, this book tells the stories of over twenty Bible characters whose earth-changing ministries suffered delay. Heaven's heroes – Jesus, Abraham, Moses, David, Paul, to name a few – all spent years on the sidelines. I'm honored if God considers me worthy of similar attention.

You are God's gift. I know you would often find it easier to wrestle a tiger than believe it, but you really are God's gift to the church and the world.^d No wonder you've been kept under wraps – you're gift-wrapped! You don't give Easter eggs at Christmas. The perfect occasion for your unveiling might have not yet arrived. We have discovered the following reasons why that day may still be future:

☆ God is waiting for circumstances to become more desperate or even humanly impossible.

The final result will then be more glorious.

☆ The exact position in which you will minister has not yet been vacated.

Driving blind-folded through the church car-park might create a vacancy or two. Nonetheless, God's ways tend to be more refined than ours.

The time-honored approach to creating vacancies is attempted character assassination. But criticism and gossip are no smarter than my first suggestion. There isn't a great demand for Spirit-filled assassins.

☆ The people you will eventually minister to, or with, need to change.

An evangelist may have to wait until non-Christian hearts are ripe and until the church is primed to receive an influx of new converts. Other ministries might have to wait until the baby Christians are delivered. Such factors are beyond our control. This gives us a choice: we can bewail our helplessness, beating our heads against the nearest pew, or we can rest in the blissful assurance that 'beyond our control' does not mean beyond his control.

Your name is on God's calendar.

^a Habakkuk 2:1

^b Compare Proverbs 8:34

^c Psalm 37:23; Tan, p 1567

^d Romans 12:5 b (NIV); 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 4:11; Numbers 8:19; 18:6 (NIV); Matthew 5:13-14

☆ **You have not snuggled into that part of the body of Christ ordained for you.**

At the minimum, this involves being in submission, receiving the ministry of others, and being where you can best minister to others.

☆ **You are giving undue attention to a ministry you have not been called to.**

If you're trying to ape someone else's ministry, no wonder your life's a circus.

Presumptions often throw us off balance. The One who gave you a unique fingerprint will give you a unique ministry. He who gave you an individual voice will speak to you in an individual way.

☆ **You are trying to live without goals.**

A basketball court without goals makes more sense than a life without goals.

☆ **False confidence has lulled you into not drawing upon God's resources or not receiving the finer details of his direction.**

'Only when we come to the end of ourselves,' wrote Colin Whittaker, 'do we come to the beginning of God.'² We are strongest when most conscious of our weakness.

☆ **You tend to regard service as a means of gaining God's love.**

Love cannot be bought. Christ's sacrifice is not for sale.

☆ **You think you can earn the right to minister.**

Like salvation, ministry is not a reward for faithfulness; it's a gift. It's not something we attain; it's a miracle.

☆ **You need more biblical knowledge or practical training.**

Train, and you won't miss the bus.

☆ **Your store of life experiences is too small.**

Paul instructed older women to teach the younger ones how to love their husbands and children.^a We hardly need spiritual revelation to know why this task was not entrusted to ten-year-olds.

The more problems you face, the more solutions you will have.^b

☆ **You have yet to prove yourself faithful in humble tasks.**

You start from the top to dig a grave. You don't begin a life-giving vocation that way.

It is usually the lowly tasks, not the great ones, that best reveal the heart. Like a stone in a slingshot, the lower you sink, the higher you will soar.

☆ **You need a further spiritual experience.**

Though he had served his apprenticeship, Elisha could never have the mission of Elijah without the Spirit of Elijah.

The sons of Sceva attempted the ministry of exorcism by making what seemed the right noises, without the right spiritual experience. Are you familiar with the scandal? More than their folly was exposed as they high-tailed it out of there.^c To their dying day they must have tried to live down that red-faced exit.

Don't imagine your task is any less perilous. Every ministry enrages demonic powers.

☆ **You need further character development.**

For instance, you can curb pride now, but could you humbly handle success beyond anything you have ever experienced? God knows.

For fruitful spiritual service you must be full of the fruit of the Spirit. And that fruit grows slowly.

☆ **God is disciplining you.**

Can you be ripe for ministry if you're green with envy? Who could make a sweet offering to God with bitterness in their heart? Can you enter holy service with unclean habits?

^a Titus 2:3-5

^b Compare 2 Corinthians 1:3-6

^c Acts 19:13-17

Steal righteousness from ministry and you are left with a charade.

☆ **Had you a vocation now, you would become so engrossed in it as to let it ruin your health, rival your love for God or encroach on other responsibilities.**

It's better to stew for a while than end up in the soup.

☆ **You lack faith.**

Bowed by the weight of time or buoyed by the wait of faith: it's up to you.

Royal blood flows in your veins. Dam-busting, mountain-blasting, Satan-crushing power resides in you. You are in Christ, incandescent with God's glory; one spirit with the almighty Lord of heaven and earth. Jettison the dead-weights of doubt and defeatism and wing to the heights you were born for.

☆ **Your prayers lack penetrating power.**

'If you don't spare your people, Lord, I don't want to live,' cried Moses.^a Does that mirror the intensity of your prayers for service? A half-hearted request invites a half-hearted reply.

We must pray like the widow badgering the judge, and the neighbor hammering the door in the dead of night until receiving the thing desired.^b

☆ **You have chosen the soft life.**

If your God is not worth suffering for, you don't know the God and Father of the Lord Jesus. Don't sell your Savior for the price of a house.

☆ **Satan is hindering you.**

If oppression brings you to your knees, remember what Christians do best in that position, and victory won't be far away.

Winds that kill candles make coals glow brighter. We're a new creation, nothing like the insipid weaklings we used to be. Opposition will merely toughen us. Rise up and assert your Christ-bought authority.

☆ **Psychological forces are undermining your progress.**

Perhaps in the lower realms of your consciousness is a growing fondness for the sympathy failure attracts, or a driving fear of the disruption, responsibilities and temptation success might bring. Do what were once cruel bars now seem more like friendly protectors against a cold, unpredictable world? The crucified Lord has made your fears groundless. Push on and watch mountains crumble.

☆ **You have let past ordeals so discourage or alarm you as to leave you virtually paralyzed.**

Success is failure that tried one more time. As we look to God and courageously move ahead, stumbling blocks turn to stepping stones to a beautiful ministry. Not only are apparent failures rarely the disasters we imagine, they are often not even failures. God's definition of success may be far more generous than you imagine.

Even monsters like sickness and disability might not be hindrances at all.

☆ **You have confused waiting with stagnating.**

Are you really serving God to your maximum? Though your ultimate service may be out of reach, that is no excuse for doing less than you are presently able. What seems a blocked tunnel is actually a maze. There are always openings. It may be befriending someone, weeding a widow's garden, intercession or witnessing.

If people are of value only in so far as they further our ministry opportunities, most people are trash. To give them so much as a grunt is to waste your precious time. But if the measure of people's worth is the price Christ paid for their friendship, then you are surrounded by people of incomprehensible value. To do the tiniest thing for the least of them is an enormous privilege. Grasp this and you will discover that unless you are marooned alone on an island (and even then you can worship and intercede), you are constantly inundated with ministry opportunities. Whenever you

^a Exodus 32:10,32 paraphrase

^b Luke 11:5-10; 18:1-7

meet someone, think to God, ‘How may I show this person your love?’ Anything could happen. You might end up being a little friendlier or breathing a five second intercessory prayer. By some measures the result may seem small, but for a few moments you have allowed yourself to be a critical link in a flood of love from Almighty God to a person of infinite importance. That’s an honor of the highest order.

Ex-slave-trader, John Newton, became an Anglican cleric. His preaching was poor and the results discouraging, but he found an avenue that worked for him: letter writing.³ You could be bed-ridden and too weak to write, yet still bless people over the phone. Ferret opportunities.

Last week, God’s word to you may have been ‘wait’, but is that his word for today? If God has locked a door, has another clicked open without you noticing? Keep testing the locks. Keep looking for alternatives.

Opportunity knocks. It doesn’t gatecrash.

☆ **The twenty-fourth possibility is that the obstruction is beyond my discernment, perhaps even beyond human comprehension.**

Face it. God does not have my intelligence. If only he would put me in charge. In five seconds islands would be spinning off the globe, angels begging for death, cats giving birth to giraffes, and I would have a ministry.

Until then, know that when unfathomable love and inexplicable wisdom hold you in divine embrace, life will be tinged with mystery but aglow with glory.

Phew! With so many possible holdups, you might wonder if you will ever make it. You will. Anyone itching to serve will come up to scratch. God’s love and power will see to that. Provided you are laying the right foundation, an effectual ministry is certain. In fact, it may be surprisingly close.

How would you feel if while you were away from home suffering rejection, thugs broke into your home, stole everything they liked and burned your house to the ground? What if, in addition, they kidnapped your entire family? What if the same happened to all your friends and everyone for whom you felt responsible? What if all those friends then turned on you, blamed you for the disaster and in grief-blackened rage conspired to kill you? And what if that was just another blow after years on the run as a fugitive, trying to escape the clutches of a king who mobilized your nation’s entire army to kill you? That’s was David’s numbing horror. Just days later – his family, his honor and his possessions restored – he suddenly became king.^a

We have established that our term as under-employed saints is neither exceptional, nor unreasonable, nor endless. Delay is almost as inevitable as it is that in God’s perfect time we will receive our heart’s desire. Knowing this may not dissolve our frustration, but it will keep it within manageable proportions.

Our conviction is now rock-hard that, in God, a delay is not some capricious inconvenience. It’s a time of preparation for a Spirit-empowered ministry that outshines your fantasies. You might be on the back burner, but something’s cooking!

Divine Impatience

When the doubled-over woman met Jesus he could have said, ‘See me at sundown.’ That was the end of the Jewish Sabbath and presumably no more than twelve hours away – a mere 0.0076% extension to her eighteen-year wait for healing. To heal on the Sabbath was to gush petroleum upon the smoldering wrath of his enemies. The inferno could even offend sincere believers and convince the undecided that his powers were Satanic. But to the eternal Son of God those few uneventful hours in the life of a nameless woman – a 0.0076% deferral – was too high a price.

For the One to whom a thousand years are as a day, one day is like a thousand years.^b Infinite Love will restrain himself until the perfect time, but not one second longer.

Waiting, Not Rusting

You are in excellent company if you seem to have spent your entire Christian life crying in pained desperation, ‘How long?’^a Patience frays. Anger builds. A sobering fact, however, sleeps in a

^a 1 Samuel 30:1-6

^b 2 Peter 3:8

Bible statistic. The number of Scripture references to people asking God ‘How long?’ is matched almost exactly by the times God asks this question of humanity.^b

Waiting is a fundamental spiritual principle. For example, it is ‘through faith *and patience*’ that God’s promises become reality in our lives.^c

If God really loved me he would act differently. Though that thought that may often sneak in, what we are actually saying is, if God cared for us as little as we do for ourselves; if he were as short-sighted as us; if he knew as little as we do; he would immediately gratify us. If God were as dumb as us, there would be no delay. We have every reason to revel in the certainty that our Lord does not share our inadequacies.

Having explored reasons for delay, luxuriate in the following Scriptures, resting in them like a soothing spa:

I had fainted,
Unless I believed to see
The goodness of the Lord
In the land of the living.
Wait on the Lord:
Be of good courage,
And he shall strengthen your heart:
Wait, I say, on the Lord.^d

Trust in the Lord,
And do good . . .
Delight yourself also in the Lord;
And he shall give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way unto the Lord;
Trust also in him;
And he shall bring it to pass . . .
Rest in the Lord,
And wait patiently for him . . .
Cease from anger,
And forsake wrath: . . .
For evil doers shall be cut off:
But those who wait upon the Lord,
Shall inherit the earth.^e

For the vision is yet for an appointed time,
But it hastens towards the end,
And shall not lie.
Though it tarry, wait for it;
Because it will surely come,
It will not delay.^f

Such waiting has no partnership with vegetating or sloth. It is characterized by faith and faithfulness; prayer and preparation. The lazy person craves yet gets nothing, says Scripture, but the diligent will get what they desire.^g

^a Job 7:19; Psalm 6:3; 13:1-2; 35:17; 74:10; 79:5; 80:4; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3; Isaiah 6:11; Jeremiah 12:4; 47:6; Daniel 8:13; 12:6; Habakkuk 1:2; John 10:24; Revelation 6:10.

^b Exodus 10:3; 16:28; Numbers 14:11,27; Joshua 18:3; 1 Samuel 16:1; 1 Kings 18:21; Proverbs 1:22; 6:9; Jeremiah 4:14,21; 13:27 (NIV); 23:26; 31:22; Hosea 8:5; Matthew 17:17; Mark 9:19; Luke 9:41

^c Hebrews 6:12 – for an almost random sampling see Psalm 40:1; Luke 8:15; 21:19; Romans 8:24-25; Galatians 6:9; Hebrews 10:36-37; James 5:7-8

^d Psalm 27:13-14 – see also Psalm 123:2; Isaiah 40:31

^e Psalm 37:3-9

^f Habakkuk 2:3

^g Proverbs 13:4

KNOW THE TIME

Were it not for delays and rejection you would be reading an inferior book. Each rejection by a publisher has been a gift from God, providing me with months and even years in which to refine the manuscript.

No matter what the vocation, with every delay comes a Satanic invitation to ease off, and a divine invitation to tighten your schedule, polish your talents, hone your Bible skills, extend your faith, broaden your experience, stretch your prayers, prime your body, purge your thoughts, gird your character, and home in to the heartbeat of God. Accept heaven's invitation and you will enter ministry so qualified that the result will be beyond anything you could otherwise have touched.

You're forever doing nothing,
A useless pebble on the beach.
They pass you by without a thought;
A useless pebble on the beach.
You're cold, common and lifeless;
A useless pebble on the beach.

God looks down and sees you there;
A precious egg within his nest.
Nurtured, warmed, protected;
A precious egg within his nest.
Divine life stirs inside
That precious egg within God's nest.

From stony shell bursts forth
A tiny chick, so strong and free.
People gather and stare amazed:
A lovely bird, so strong and free!
Wings are stretched and upward soars
That mighty bird, so strong and free.

'What grace, what power!' they gasp in awe,
'Who'd have known in a stone
Slept a life so rare, so full of beauty!'

Christians have got it made! Talk about having a friend in high places! It is impossible to conceive of a more binding or intimate union than the one joining you to the Ruler of the universe. With the omnipotent Lord of glory in control, those annoying, embarrassing, perplexing delays can do nothing but become things of beauty, bearing all the marks of divine perfection.

CHAPTER 16: WAITING IN STYLE

Identifying the problem is half the solution, but only half. Disarming the ‘whys’ that regularly bomb our brains has inflamed the ‘hows’. Let’s get practical. How can we blast through the mountain of hindrances? How can we accelerate spiritual maturity? How can we strengthen our faith? How can we prove our readiness? How . . . ?

Turning over the problems unearthed crude answers. Excitement mounted as we brushed off the dirt and saw facets glint in the light of Christ. Let’s now gather those gems and polish them until we hold such riches that we can buy whatever needed to speed our entry to ministry.

First, a warning.

Escape Plan

Wherever you look the lights are red. You smolder. Nothing green in sight. Your blood ignites. You select first gear and – S-T-O-P!

If there is a right way to hasten ministry, there most certainly is a wrong way. Let’s take our lead from David, the man after God’s own heart.^a

As anointed king-to-be, waiting for Saul’s death was not just frustrating and humiliating, it was almost suicidal.^b Saul wanted him dead. Twice, this would-be murderer fell into David’s hands. A single blow would ensure David’s survival and give him the throne. Each occasion was so remarkable it seemed an act of God.^c

But David is an inspiration. He sensed evil cowering behind those apparent answers to prayer. Stifling urges for self-preservation, revenge, and instant promotion, he resolved to let his dream harden to reality in God’s time and manner.

Regrettably, not all ‘Daddy’s little helpers’ are as smart. Many of us are allergic to waiting. We get itchy feet and come out rash. Ask Abraham.

Instead of heeding God’s calendar, Abraham tried to force the pace.^d In fathering Ishmael, he chose what in his era was the obvious solution to his plight, but not God’s solution. The result was a family upheaval^e that has apparently continued in his descendants down to present times.^f

Can you prize a plant out of a seed? Can you release a rose from a bud before its time? Can you hasten the rising of the sun? Can you achieve anything worthwhile outside of God’s time?

The time of waiting – the time when nothing seems to be happening – can be the most critical time of our lives. It was while the Israelites were waiting for Moses to return from the mountain that they committed the grievous lunacy of worshipping a golden calf.^g It was while Saul was waiting for Samuel that he recklessly assumed a role never ordained for him (that of priest) and consequently lost his own calling (that of king).^h

^a 1 Samuel 13:14

^b For example, 1 Samuel 19:10-11; 21:12; 23:3; 27:1

^c 1 Samuel 24:4; 26:8

^d Genesis 15:4; 16:1-4

^e Genesis 16:3-6; 21:9-16

^f Genesis 16:12 seems to prophecy that Ishmael’s descendants would be hostile towards Abraham’s legitimate descendants. Modern Arabs claim to be descended from Ishmael. Ishmael even became the symbol of those who persecute Abraham’s *spiritual* descendants (Galatians 3:7; 4:28-29).

^g Exodus 32:1-4

^h 1 Samuel 13:8-14

If you are rash, you will end up in a spot.

Among the rash, fools rule.
They that dash, crash
To fate so cruel.

Though slow the rate,
The wise rise.
The great, wait
And conquer all.

An Anglican priest in Sri Lanka was openly opposed by Buddhist monks. What should he do? Preach harder, of course. No need to pray about that. If necessary, he could get the government to enforce his rights. But instead of falling for the obvious, Rev Mendis sought the mind of God. The response was staggering. Quit preaching, the Lord seemed to say, and befriend the monks. Within months he was invited to conduct Christian services in the Buddhist temple! Several of the monks were converted. Some, wrote John Haggai later, ‘are studying for the [professional] ministry’.¹

It is sometimes the ‘obvious’ decisions that pose the greatest danger.

I trust I will always recall the sickening blow to my stomach when I read a mercifully brief biography. Had it merely been an iron fist that had sent me reeling, I would have recovered by now and I would be glad to let the memory fade. But what drained the blood from my face was seeing my own potential etched in the life of a Negro-loving, Bible-adoring, devout Christian who gave God all the glory as he prayerfully and heroically massacred hundreds of Americans in a doomed attempt to wrest victory for the South during America’s Civil War. I gained the impression that, spiritually, Thomas ‘Stonewall’ Jackson would in many ways have left me for dead; but then again, on those blood-soaked fields he left many Christians dead. Without contemplating the rights and wrongs of the causes fought for, it is an appalling historical fact that Jackson was vainly fighting for a lost cause; passionately inspiring the butchering of thousands of people for a dead dream. If it is a tragedy to waste your own life, what is it when you waste the lives of hundreds of people? Given that the South finally lost, his every victory was a disaster – inflaming the war; delaying the peace and sanity that everyone yearned for; prolonging the slaughter that finally claimed more than half a million lives and inflicted unthinkable suffering. (In an era when artificial limbs were crude and cheap, one state – said to be typical – blew a fifth of its annual budget on artificial limbs in just one of the four years of carnage.²) Surely something went horribly wrong within the man who attributed his bravery to his childlike trust in Christ. Had a twisted sense of duty and loyalty, perhaps coupled with a sense of urgency, somehow tragically interfered with his ability to hear from God?³

Don’t be like a child thinking only of his toy as he chases it onto a busy road. First, look to Father. Ensure it is his choice, his way of attaining it and his timing. Then, remaining sensitive to his leading, you can move with confidence.

If after seeking the Lord, you still feel uncertain, proceed with care, eyes peeled for heavenly warnings.

A vehicle may be easier to steer when it is moving, but don’t forget the obvious: this is only safe when proceeding cautiously, alert for signs to veer or brake. As we continue with this attitude, we will receive the needed confirmation. The guidance we need, however, is rarely the detailed explanation we would like. Distant objects become clear after travelling that part of the road we can see. The Lord seldom squanders further revelation until we respond to the leading he has already given.

Faith Soothes Itchy Feet

It was wrong for Abraham to play God in begetting Ishmael. It would have been appropriate, however, for him to get ready for Isaac’s birth. He could have increased Sarah’s health insurance, wallpapered the nursery, practiced burping a cucumber, bought some Kimbies,^a started knitting booties, or whatever fathers did 2000 BC.

Such planning is faith in action, as contrasted with his faith-less action of fathering Ishmael. Preparing for a promised ministry is a spiritual world away from storming out of God’s plan, trying

^aRegistered trademark

to gatecrash into ministry. Discerning the difference, however, sometimes demands heavy duty prayer.

In Abraham's case, planning was barely necessary. He was rich and Sarah's figure would give adequate warning. Many ministries, however, require years of preparation.

If faith affirms that a heavenly assignment lies ahead but the details are hazy, how can we prepare? Joseph's life yields a valuable clue. The rise of David, shepherd-boy-cum-giant-killer, confirms it. Let's consult heaven's file on these men.

The Dreamer

Joseph plummeted from the life of despised brother, to rejected slave, to forgotten prisoner. Had there been a spark of hope when he interpreted the butler's dream, the swirling fog of two interminable years had snuffed that out.^a Suddenly he was spectacularly catapulted into an astounding vocation. He went from being ridiculed as a dreamer, to being incarcerated as a rapist, to being revered as a head of state.

What an encouragement! Joseph's God is our God. The time for your challenging, fulfilling ministry may be startlingly close.^b Playfully hiding behind the gloom might be a dynamic vocation ready to spring into sight, shout 'Surpri-i-ize!' and joyfully embrace you.

This is no fantasy. Scripture was penned to show what we can expect from our amazing God. But forget it – unless you act like Joseph.

Having been wrongfully enslaved, it was natural to detest the foreign tyrant who claimed literally to own his body and mind. Like a POW sabotaging his enemy's plans wherever possible, Joseph should have rebelled. He should at least have resolved to do only what was essential to avoid a beating from his hated owner.

But this was a man of God. He refused to let discouragement, bitterness or sloth ensnare him. He chose to be diligent in the menial, degrading tasks thrust upon him.

A despised slave he may be, but Joseph determined with God's help, to be the best slave his master had ever seen.

'God has abandoned me. What's the point of remaining true to him?' Such Satanic thoughts must often have invaded his mind. Yet he remained steadfast, no matter how lonely he felt in a foreign land, no matter how delightfully seductive and powerful Potiphar's wife was. It might cost his life – if exceptionally lucky he would merely rot in prison – but he preferred to be a frustrated virgin, publicly branded a rapist, than become a favored trustee, guilty of secret sin.

He was so diligent as a slave that he became head-slave; so reliable as a prisoner he became head-prisoner.

The Nightmare

His own dream mocked and haunted him.^c To cling to it now was preposterous. Yet, clawing up faith's cliff-face, he sought God on behalf of his fellow prisoners, interpreting their dreams.^d

Though the interpretation was verified, his cell-mate treacherously abandoned him – just like his former master's wife and even his brothers. Yet the candid biblical record reveals no hint of bitterness.^e

Lesser people would have despaired. Others would have held grudges. But whatever the task before him, no matter how loathsome, he did energetically,^f always keen to give God full credit for any praise that came his way.^g He clasped God's promises, choosing to fixate on them, rather than on his plight.

This man of God was faithful, not just in major moral issues, but in everyday affairs; not only for weeks, but for years. That's waiting in style. God loves rewarding such persistence.

^a Genesis 40:20-23; 41:1

^b Ephesians 3:20

^c Genesis 37:5-11

^d Genesis 40:5 ff

^e Compare Genesis 45:1-15,24; 50:18-21

^f Compare Ecclesiastes 9:10; Colossians 3:23

^g Genesis 40:8; 41:15-16, 51-52; 45:7-8; 48:9; 50:19-20

A Platoon of Sheep?

Who would have thought the key to becoming a war hero would be the experience gained in minding Dad's sheep? It happened to David. He owed his magnificent triumph over Goliath to the faith and skills developed in playing nurse-maid to sheep.^a By regularly proving God in his everyday work, he was ready to be used in an astonishing way when the occasion arose.

His path took an unexpected turn. So might yours.

Our present experiences may seem utterly irrelevant to future service, but with David's God in control, you never know. The secret is to maintain the daring faith and faithfulness of David and Joseph. It transforms mundane, irksome tasks into powerful preparation.

Scripture: Our Launching Pad

There is a man who is not only unmusical, he likes music less than almost all of us. Yet there are musicians who value his contribution to their subject. Why? Because of his Bible knowledge.

The most helpful book I have seen for Christian singles is by Michael Cavanaugh. He is not only married, he married early. I seethed as I read it. I have suffered immensely as an unmarried without discovering the truths he knows. Here is a married person with a ministry to thousands of singles and I can't even help myself. Why? I have equal access to truth's source – God and his Word. Cavanaugh has made better use of this privilege than me. He's the one with the ministry.

Anyone steeped in Scripture, thoroughly taught of God through his Word, is an expert on the spiritual side of *any* topic. Could it be otherwise, given the finality of Scripture in spiritual matters? Truth will evade us, however, until Bible study moves beyond brain stimulation to a dynamic interaction with the living God.

I recently learnt you should never write on an empty stomach. Surveys confirm that manuscripts are more likely to be published if written on paper or a computer. It has taken me years to pick up tips like that. Had I devoted more of my earlier life to developing writing skills, you might be reading a better book. I did not realize writing would assume such importance in my life. When it comes to Bible study, however, I have no excuse. I don't need the vaguest clue about the future to know my need for thorough Bible knowledge. It's the basis of all service.

Can you imagine:

- ☆ a weaponless warrior?^b
- ☆ a sower without seed?^c
- ☆ a Moses without the commandments?
- ☆ a Job not treasuring God's words above his 'necessary food'?^d
- ☆ a Psalmist not devoted to God's Law?^e
- ☆ a Jeremiah who couldn't say, 'Thy words were found, and I did eat them'?^f
- ☆ a Jesus inept at wielding those authoritative words, 'It is written,' to defeat Satan, shame his opponents and comfort the hurting?^g
- ☆ a Peter not spicing such phrases as, 'This is what was spoken by the prophet . . .'?^h
- ☆ a Paul more familiar with the gladiatorial results than Scripture?ⁱ
- ☆ a Book of Revelation without Old Testament allusions in nearly seventy per cent of its verses?

You're either grounded in the Word or grounded. And don't think a spectacular spiritual experience makes you an exception.

The Spirit, Jesus told his disciples, will bring to their minds all that he had taught them.^j Note the order: first teaching is embedded in the mind, then the Spirit activates it. That's the norm. A self-induced ignorance is unlikely to inspire God to miraculously compensate for our laziness.

^a 1 Samuel 17:34-37

^b Ephesians 6:17

^c Luke 8:11

^d Job 23:12

^e For example, Psalm 1; 19; 119

^f Jeremiah 15:16

^g For example, Matthew 4:3-11; 11:10; 26:24,31; Luke 19:46; 24:32, 44-46

^h Acts 2:16, 1:20

ⁱ For example, Acts 17:2

^j John 14:26 b

Saul of Tarsus was no sooner converted than he was preaching with amazing power, proving to Jews that Jesus is the Messiah.^a How? By the Spirit drawing upon Saul's lifetime of intense Bible study.

Peter's Pentecostal sermon was more than the flash an explosive spiritual experience; it was the climax of Bible studies that began as a child and culminated with years of teaching and interaction with Jesus.^b His whole sermon was Old Testament quotes and allusions, laced with a brief reference to his experience of Jesus' ministry. Check it out.^c

Our Lord will not perpetually pump life into the shriveled ministry of anyone unwilling to embrace the pain and joy of serious Bible study.

Perhaps the most valuable time of John Bunyan's life was his lengthy imprisonment when he was locked up with the Word of God. All sorts of wondrous truths opened to him, girding his future service with divine power. Would God have to resort to such drastic methods before we will give adequate attention to his Word?^d

Many people have needlessly perished in Australian deserts beside disabled vehicles. Though modern technology has changed things, what magnified the tragedy of past incidents is that people died because they forgot that the drinkable water they critically needed was in the engine radiator. A tragedy of potentially equal proportions is people who carry Bibles around and fail to imbibe its life-giving sustenance or, more likely, fail to appropriate its truths into their everyday living.

God commanded Joshua to meditate upon Scripture 'day and night.'^d But this was not an end in itself. The goal was to 'observe to do according to all that is written.' Whoever does this, God promises, will be 'prosperous' and 'have good success.'

Likewise, the psalmist 'hid' Scripture in his heart, not because of some holy ritual, but so that he 'might not sin.'^e

In Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish builders, both classes of people represented were familiar with the Word of God. The foolish ones, however, did not put it into practice.^f

In a daring experiment Dr Masanore Kurantsune and his wife – while she was nursing her infant – limited themselves to the same impoverished diet that caused horrific malnutrition in Japanese concentration camps during World War II. After 233 days on this apparent death-diet the couple and their baby showed no ill effects. Their secret? Instead of cooking goodness out of their food, they ate it raw.^g

Doubt, liberal theology, or not seeking the Spirit's interpretation of the Bible can leach the goodness out of life-giving Scriptures, leaving even avid Bible readers malnourished.

We all talk about it, but I wonder if any of us fully recognize the power in those pages. Great wisdom is the inheritance of those who devour its words.^g Every time we open the Bible, we are investing in a future ministry. Every word adds power to that ministry. There is no substitute.

Plunge deep enough into the Word, and you will emerge with a ministry.^h

Divine Preparation

Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers are God's way of fitting us for service.ⁱ That's what the Word says. So I need to come under the sway of people exercising these gifts.

These offices are Christ's victory gift to the church; the expression of his love and the climax of his triumph over the forces of evil.^j To proudly imagine we don't need them is to slight our mighty Deliverer, spurn his loving gifts and insult his unapproachable wisdom.

Further Training

Between lion and bear attacks, lost sheep, pasture finding, lambing, sling practice, running errands for Dad and being picked on by his brothers, David developed his musical talents. He would

^a Acts 9:20-22; 13:16-41

^b Luke 24:27,44-47; Acts 4:13

^c For example, compare Acts 2:14-36 with Psalm 16:8-11; 110:1; 132:11; Isaiah 57:19; Joel 2:28-32

^d Joshua 1:8

^e Psalm 119:11

^f Matthew 7:24-27

^g Psalm 19:7; 119:98-100; Proverbs 1:1-5

^h John 15:7-8

ⁱ Ephesians 4:11-12

^j Ephesians 4:8

sing to the sheep, the rocks, the fields, but most of all, to the Lord. Perhaps none of his early songs were published, yet from this embryo grew some of the most precious parts of Holy Writ. Try figuring all the nations, generations and individuals indebted to his devout busyness. (If that calculation doesn't boost paracetamol sales, nothing will.)

A psychologist handed people a basketball and asked them to shoot a few baskets. After recording their scores they were divided into three groups. The first group did nothing, the second practiced daily and the rest spend twenty minutes a day just vividly imagining they were practicing. Twenty days later they were retested. Those who did nothing showed no improvement, the practice group improved 24%, while those who simply used their imagination showed a virtually identical improvement of 23%.⁶ That's astounding, but of little practical help to people able to engage in full practice. For people unable to practice physically, however, a torrent of exciting possibilities rush to the brain.

If you presently have no invitations but by faith you see yourself as a preacher, you can (and should) engage in regular sermon preparation and preach it to the dog. Practice in front of a thousand people would be a valuable but unlikely experience. That's where the above finding comes in. In your daydreams, you can preach to whatever size congregation you feel comfortable and over time gradually increase its size in your mind until it is enormous.

That goal-shooting experiment is a fragment of a strong body of evidence suggesting that such regular, detailed employment of your imagination will empower you to be dropped into the pulpit of a large church and begin a hundred sermons ahead of where you would have had it not been for your mental practice. With sufficient prayer and diligence you could almost start from the top. There is nothing miraculous about this, because you actually started below what most people consider bottom – an audience of zero – and for this approach to reach its full potential you must in faith devote as much effort to your non-existent audience as you would for a real audience. By faithfully doing this, however, you could save yourself much embarrassment and jump years ahead in the maturity of your preaching style – to say nothing of what your hearers might be spared.

Many salespeople have more than doubled their selling by mentally going through their sales pitch and answering every objection they could possibly think of.⁷ The implications for improved witnessing are obvious.^a So, I hope, are the ways this principle can be applied to the particular ministry you are believing for. Of course, we must remain as dependent as ever upon the Holy Spirit, who powerfully compensates our inadequacies, not our laziness.

In his late teens, Hudson Taylor (1832-1905) felt the call of China. How could he ready himself? Language was an obvious start. He scrounged a Chinese Gospel of Luke, but everything else eluded him – no dictionary, no grammar, no teacher. Language study would have to wait. Yet such a cop-out was intolerable for this determined teenager. He analyzed that Chinese Gospel, comparing verse after verse, checking and rechecking until he ascertained the meaning of a single character. By this tedious method he unlocked the meaning of over five hundred characters, saving valuable time on the mission field. No wonder God empowered this man's ministry.

As a child he had learnt to dress quickly because, lectured his godly father, that is something he would have to do at least once, every day of his life.⁸ Such discipline enabled him to cram further studies into a busy life. Having learned that medical knowledge would be useful in China, he revised his Latin. To this he added the theologically significant languages of Greek and Hebrew.

While undergoing medical studies in London he received two offers to bear all his expenses. He declined both, forcing himself into a situation where he had to trust God for his finances, like he knew he would have to in China.⁹

Spiritual preparation received the priority it deserved. Was there anything he could do on the physical level? Life in China would be rough. He decided to toughen himself by discarding his mattress. He exercised, economized and ate plain food.

So rigorous and daring was his preparation that his time in England makes as fascinating reading as his time in China. In fact, the two volume biography by his son and daughter-in-law, devotes an entire volume (a mammoth five hundred-plus pages) to Hudson's first twenty-eight years of life. This is despite the fact that his influence continued to expand right up until his death at age seventy-three, and despite the fact that his biographers could better use their personal knowledge in

^a Note the relevance of 1 Peter 3:15

the later years. After sifting the evidence, they concluded that this emphasis on Hudson's preparation and early ministry years was warranted if one were to adequately account for his eventual success.¹⁰

Don't Spend Time; Invest It

When fifteen-year-old Samuel Chadwick felt the call of God, he did something about it – five hours study a day after a twelve-hour stint at the mill.¹¹

Perhaps, as was my lot for several years, even secular employment has shunned you. Yet if you are not trimming your rest and leisure to the minimum, something is amiss. We should be constantly cultivating our skills, striving to enhance every ability divinely entrusted to us. To cease to grow is to begin to die. Formal training is wholly compatible with being Spirit-led. God deserves our best. Sure, it's hard work. Frame the words of George Bernard Shaw, ' . . . the harder I work, the more I live.'

There is a world of difference between trusting and rusting.

Most Christian service involves communicating with people. So even if the nature of our calling is uncertain, training in communication skills or interpersonal relationships is likely to be helpful.

A second language or culture presents innumerable ministry possibilities. For instance, the sparseness of Christian material in most languages is appalling. No one has bothered to translate more than a shamefully small portion of the spiritual riches available in English. Consider Hindi. There has been a Christian witness in India for more than a millennium. I could not guess how many missionaries have toiled on that sub-continent. And yet the world's third most spoken language can boast not even one complete Bible commentary.¹² It does not require great proficiency to be part of a translation team – the final polishing could even be completed by non-English speakers – but if you already have some familiarity with another language or culture you are so far ahead of the rest of us that I suggest you need nothing less than a revelation from heaven before allowing that knowledge to fade.

Indeed, be cautious about allowing any past skill or experience to fall away. John Bunyan, the most published and most translated writer in all of Christianity since the completion of Scripture, did so little to maintain his meager education that he apparently lost the ability to read and write. When he finally recognized the value of these skills he had to arduously relearn them.¹³ Consult the only One who can see ahead, before acting as if your past is of no relevance to your future.

To write this book efficiently, in addition to the mandatory prayer and Bible study, I learnt ~~to~~ touch twyping. To that I added computing. (I can now talk authoritatively about software problems without once mentioning moth holes, too much starch, or stretched elastic.) I crammed what I could about publishing, grammar, prose, and poetry (Mary had a little lamb . . .). I spent hours trying to nurture writing skills, stretch my vocabulary, and so on. Audio recording, drama, music, video production, public speaking and speed reading are other areas I would like to explore. They might open new ministry possibilities for me. At the least I will have some useful skills, even if I never get the hang of television viewing.

Your list will be different. It might entail perfecting your culinary skills for the ministry of hospitality, learning a musical instrument for possible use in a home fellowship, developing your artistic flair, attending a counseling course and gaining experience in personal evangelism.

A married couple may feel led to develop complementary skills – while he's learning Thai cooking, she's studying first aid.

Don't learn short-hand in the hope of finding a church that's short-handed. Seek divine direction.

Some activities God suggests may surprise you. Before her seventeenth birthday, Florence Nightingale felt a call of God on her life. She longed to prepare but the nature of her vocation remained a mystery. So she studied mathematics. Don't laugh. Biographers insist that mathematics was a key to Miss Nightingale's success.¹⁴ On the other hand, Martyn Lloyd-Jones believed his famous preaching and counseling owed much to his medical training.¹⁵ Let me confuse you further: one of my Bible College lecturers claimed his study of mathematical statistics had positively influenced his thinking more than his theological degree. We must quash the lie that only a few spheres of knowledge are of value to God.

Several times, a photograph of an ancient moss-covered tree caused my spirit to leap, filling me with love, praise and adoration for the Creator of that tree. Many respected Christian songs, books and sermons have moved me less than that photo. Yes, God can empower even photographic ability.

When every area of your life is submitted to God, every area is impregnated with heavenly glory. If God used Peter's shadow and Paul's handkerchief,^a he can use your hobby.

Two years after Stella Cox arrived in Japan she discovered the potential of American cooking as an evangelistic tool. Over the years Stella has become one of Japan's 'experts' on American cuisine and has published a book on the subject. Before her class taste their day's cooking they sing a Christian song and hear a Bible story. Stella's commitment is typified by the story of one of her converts who came to Christ after attending these classes for nine years. Missionary to Africa, Joy Johnson, would pooh-pooh the idea of using cooking for soul-winning. She uses crochet.¹⁶

Michelangelo had great potential as a poet, yet he let the gift stagnate for thirty adult years. Perhaps he made the right choice, but who knows what he might have given the world had he, even as a hobby, infused more of his life into his literary gift?¹⁷

Paul Brand's contribution to the treatment of leprosy is legendary. His name will always appear in the history of medical advance, and his prominence has afforded him unique opportunities to magnify Christ. Yet he nearly missed it. Several times he rejected the opportunity to study medicine; first, because the thought of doctoring turned his stomach, and later because he could not bear the thought of deferring missionary work for all the years that medical study demands.¹⁸

The *place* of study can be as crucial (and as surprising) as the field of study. Union Seminary taught John Sung liberal theology that caused this brilliant academic to drift from God and brought such distress that he was confined to a mental asylum. It was in that asylum that he received his valuable theological training through studiously reading the Bible from cover to cover forty times.¹⁹

The automatic telephone was developed by an undertaker, Kodachrome film by a musician, the pneumatic tire by a veterinarian, the typewriter by a farmer, the locomotive by a coal miner. The father of the electric motor was a bookbinder; of photography, an army officer; of the telegraph, a portrait painter.²⁰ These facts whisper two things. First, what you do outside your working hours can be highly significant. Second, you probably have latent abilities in fields you have hardly explored.

Last Chance

For many types of preparation it will be too late when an avalanche of ministry invitations begins to rumble. This could be your last chance.

Elisha spoke about defeating the Syrians and told King Jehoash to strike the ground. Jehoash grasped his arrows and struck three times. Elisha was furious. 'You should have done it five or six times! Now you will strike Syria only thrice.'^b Jehoash imagined he could be slack now and valiant later.

Right now you are concreting the limits of your future ministry. Grasp every opportunity. Hit the ground with your knees. Do all you can before your destiny sets.

For our sins, the Lord has promised forgiveness, but for our procrastination, observed St. Augustine, God has not promised tomorrow. What a tragedy if we frittered away present opportunities and lamented it forever.

Kill time, and eternity bleeds.

The clean-living servant who buried his gift is typical of too many of us. He did not blow his talent on an orgy of self-indulgence. He simply neglected what was loaned to him. (Luke tells us he kept it in his handkerchief, of all places.^c) his implied excuse of fear of failure merely incurred the master's wrath. 'You wicked, lazy servant!' he growled, as he cast him into the outer darkness.^d Moral: if you hide your gift in a hanky, you're sure to blow it.

The division of the Bible into verses is perhaps the most significant Bible aid ever devised. Without it, such valuable helps as concordances would be hobbled. For this breakthrough we are indebted to Robert Stephens' resolve to make full use of his time. He divided the New Testament

^a Acts 5:15; 19:12

^b 2 Kings 13:15 ff

^c Luke 19:20, most modern versions

^d Matthew 25:24-30

into verses while riding horseback from Paris to Lyons.²¹ John Wesley, too, is renowned for the things he accomplished on horseback, riding from one preaching station to another.²² Anyone in their era could harness a horse. What made these men great, was their ability to harness time.

Before reaching the mission field, William Carey and David Livingstone both had jobs that seemed incompatible with study. Nonetheless, they snatched glances at books as they labored. It was twenty seconds here and thirty seconds there,²³ but this regular priming of their minds exploded in achievements that rocked the world.

‘I learnt all the Italian verbs,’ wrote Frances Ridley Havergal, ‘while my nieces were washing their hands . . . because I could be ready in five minutes less time than they could.’²⁴

I heard of a literary work that owes its existence to a man’s use of the time taken to heat his shaving water each morning. Even the book you are reading has benefited from traffic lights, waiting rooms, meal breaks, traffic jams, disturbed sleeps. If your boss grants you a ten-minute work break a day, he has given you the same amount of time as a week’s vacation each year.

Have you read *The Cross and the Switchblade*? The whole story – *Teen Challenge*, the conversion of Nicky Cruz and countless manifestations of God’s power – hinged on David Wilkerson’s decision to sharpen his use of time. He substituted prayer for television-viewing.

‘I can get up at nine and be rested,’ said Jimmy Carter, ‘or I can get up at six and be president.’²⁵

I could cite a thousand examples. Instead, I will distil the truth: show me a great person and I’ll show you someone who treats minutes like diamonds. ‘All my possession,’ cried Queen Elizabeth I as she neared death, ‘for a moment of time.’

No matter how much you underrate it, your life is a banquet set by God in a starving world. Wasting time is slinging onto the dung heap random portions of that life-giving meal. It differs from suicide in that suicide restricts the waste to the final courses.

I wish to induce neither a frenzy of activity, nor guilt about things that of necessity must be left undone. Our gentle Lord looks at the heart. For someone in the midst of a grievous trial, the smallest thing might be a mammoth task. If no one on earth understands, heaven does. Nonetheless, the greater our limitations, the more vital it is that we optimize every opportunity we can scavenge. The person found faithful in little, pledged Christ, will be given much. So we have no excuse for squandering whatever strength we can muster. Even life’s backwaters are too exciting for that.

Getting our Bearings

We opened this chapter, having just completed a thorough exploration of factors that might defer ministry. We were thus ideally placed to discover how to hasten ministry and how to make that ministry as glorious as possible. We will keep these twin goals for the rest of the book, whilst remaining conscious that they are only sub-goals. Our ultimate goal is not to discover methods but actually to enter the fulfillment and achievement we were born for, without needless delay.

We have highlighted the importance of this, the climax of the book, by acknowledging the perils of resorting to wrong methods to speed ‘answers to prayer’. If Satan sets traps on the path it is because the path leads to glory.

CHAPTER 17: THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

Having warned against idleness, I am duty-bound to mention the other danger.

Henry Kirke White was a young man of exceptional promise, preparing at Cambridge, England for full-time service. He seemed poised for greatness when he suddenly died, aged 22. It is thought his fragile health was shattered by excessive study.¹

At age forty-three, Peter Marshall, chaplain of the United States Senate, had a heart attack. Though urged to slow down, he didn't. He died three years later.²

Toward the end of his life, Charles Dickens so pushed himself that it is said 'he slowly committed suicide' by overwork.³ May the sting in the word 'suicide' prick the arrogance of an over-inflated work-ethic before it claims more victims.

I suspect a full list of Christians hampered by overwork would rival a telephone directory for length. Happily, most stop short of disaster. There is a tragic minority, however, whose zeal dulls them to the Spirit's pleas to ease up.

On the seventh day, God rested. If it is good enough for him, it is good enough for us. A substantial portion of Scripture is devoted to this subject. It even prescribes that land be rested.^a To the impatient, fallow times seem a waste, but the resultant rejuvenation increases productivity.

Two researchers frivolously threw paper darts at each other. The result? A breakthrough in aeronautic design.⁴ If necessity is the mother of invention, play, insists Dr. Roger von Oech, is its father.⁵

Because over-work is futile, God gives his beloved sleep.^b That's one interpretation of Psalm 127:2. Another rendering is that God gives to his beloved *while* they sleep. Either way, I would say feverish activity is for the birds – except that birds are smarter than that. Sleep on it.

God formed Eve while Adam slept. Ever since, wonderful things have happened during sleep. Peter – key figure in one of heaven's jail-breaks – only fully awoke when it was all over. The bleary-eyed saint would have still been in his night-shirt, had the angel who woke him not reminded him to dress.^c Abraham, Abimelech, Jacob, Laban, Joseph, Pharaoh, Solomon, Jeremiah, Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar, Mary, her husband, and the wise men, all received divine revelation while they snored.^d

Susie Spurgeon coaxed her distressed husband to bed with the promise to wake him at dawn. Charles had to address a large congregation next day and a sermon refused to form. He awoke even more upset. His wife had let him oversleep and his mind was still a desert. Yet agitation turned to awe when Susie recited the sermon he had muttered in his sleep. It was exactly the sermon he needed.^e

The history of Christian music sparkles with instances of people receiving words or music during sleep.^e Indeed, that's the story behind the first English (Anglo-Saxon) hymn.⁷ The original tune to *O little town of Bethlehem* also came that way.⁸

Pilgrim's Progress owes much to a dream that came to Bunyan while he slept.⁹

^a Exodus 23:10-12

^b Compare Psalm 4:8; Proverbs 3:24

^c Acts 12:6-11

^d Genesis 15:12-13; 20:3; 28:11-16; 31:11-13,24; 37:5-10; 41:25; 1 Kings 3:5-15; Jeremiah 31:26; Daniel 2:19, 28; 4:4 ff; 7:1 ff; Matthew 1:20,24; 2:12, 13,19,22; cf Acts 2:17

^e I have pursued this subject further in my book *In Tune With God*.

To this, one can add scientific advance. Neils Bohr formulated his atomic model, Otto Loewi devised a significant physiological experiment, and Elias Howe perfected his sewing machine, each as a result of a dream.¹⁰

There are times when the most spiritual thing we can do is to belt a ball; times when it is Christ-like to depress a mattress and give a pillow plenty of cheek. Picture Jesus asleep in the storm^a and dream your way to success.

Rest is the ingredient every ministry needs. Like polishing a car, too much promotes rust but in measured dollops it makes us shine. Leisure for people of work, and work for people of leisure will increase joy and fruitfulness for all.

The theory is as easy as breathing. Like drawing back a bowstring, inhalation takes effort. Exhalation is letting go. Breathing life into a ministry also requires a continual alternation of effort and relaxation.^b Unfortunately, as the world's laziest workaholic, I can say authoritatively that achieving the right balance can be quite a challenge.

Besides rest, Scripture suggests a positive mental attitude will do more to protect us from illness than most of us realize.^c If Scripture had advised 'have a little whine for your stomach's sake,' we'd all be in peak health. Instead, the God of the Bible extols the medicinal value of a merry heart and urges us to rejoice when overwhelmed with trials. 'He who laughs, lasts . . .'¹¹ We are wrong to treat joy as a spiritual luxury. It is a virtue of the highest order, rubbing shoulders with such essentials as love, goodness, kindness, faithfulness and self-control.^d 'He who laughs, lasts . . .'¹²

Norman Cousins – the incurable who laughed himself to health by watching comedy movies – cited in his famous book *Anatomy of an Illness* the brilliant Dr. Albert Schweitzer's belief that the best medicine for any illness is a sense of humor and the realization that you have a [vital] job to do.¹³ The bracketed word was added by the not-as-brilliant Grantley Morris, but I'm sure you will appreciate its significance. Dreary, meaningless work is barely enough to inspire a *healthy* person out of bed!

We want to live forever when refreshed and clearly accomplishing things of obvious importance. Such zest for life, however, is hard to maintain when sidelined for years or after attempting so much that we are near exhaustion. We can end up as vibrant as a dishcloth. The health implications can be critical.

Open your eyes to the reality that no matter what your situation, your life is an exciting challenge to excel. Dare for a place in Heaven's Book of Records for the person who maintained the highest level of joy in circumstances as bleak or mundane as yours. Pay attention also to good food, exercise and healthy habits.

The crumpled remains of a one-time prophet dragged through the desert. His face was that of a century-old tortoise with a hangover. 'I'd be better off dead,' whimpered Elijah. God's forty-day revitalization program included sleep, food (and fasting), exercise, communion with God, a new challenge, and getting away from it all. It worked.^e

Health is crucial for a busy ministry. It is another of heaven's gifts entrusted to us. Be faithful in this area, and when the time for action is ripe, you can offer the Lord a sound body along with your other responsibly-developed assets.

Finding Answers

As long as God, the Genius running my life, knows what he is doing, I can tolerate being mystified. Even if he told me, there are sure to be aspects of God's wisdom beyond my intellectual grasp. Moreover, it could be dark in the nest because God is hatching something. It might be humility (better to be blind-folded by God than blinded by arrogance), it might be faith or patience, but when God keeps us in the dark, something good is incubating.

Too often, however, we remain ignorant for a less profound reason: we have not bothered to ask. The possibility of hearing from the Lord seems too remote to warrant the effort of genuine prayer.

^a Luke 8:23

^b Compare Mark 4:26-28

^c Proverbs 3:7-8; 4:20-23; 12:25; 15:15; 16:24; 17:22; 18:14

^d Galatians 5:22-23

^e 1 Kings 19:4 ff

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

I am like the prodigal's brother in Jesus' parable.^a 'The father doesn't give me so much as a kid,' I almost grumble, forgetting that guidance, revelation – everything the Father has – is mine for the asking.

'Ask . . . seek,' said Jesus. Dare I ignore his plea? How else can I know whether I should work harder or sleep longer; study engineering or needle-work; live off widow's tithe's or support myself?

As I entered an office to pick up rubbish for shredding I spied a woman penning the details of a phone message. She held the pen with her toes. Most of us were born with feet like that.

I know a man who gives an impressive rendition of the *William Tell Overture* by tapping his teeth with his fingernails. We have teeth like that.

All but a speck of our inborn potential has atrophied. So much depends on where we channel our efforts.

I could hardly expect high achievement pouring my life into work God has not planned for me. And if I treat as a mere sideline what God regards as my vocation, I am unlikely to nurture it adequately through prayer, faith and practice. Even moderate success would be dubious.

Without a goal to aim at, we are aimless. It's taken me far too long to grasp that simple logic. Discussions of goals merely used to depress me because I had no goal. Now the fearful prospect of an aimless existence at least drives me to form one goal – to seek God until he reveals the goals he wants me to have. Until we can have at least a short-term goal, we are powerful vehicles revving in neutral.

It must have looked a funny sight – Henry Ford attacking his work shed with an axe. With the door frame in pieces he started on part of the wall. Henry had just completed building his first automobile. Things has gone rather well, except for one detail. Trapped inside his shed was a car bigger than the door.¹⁴

If we do not plan ahead, we could end up looking a little ridiculous.

We must hound God for goals, priorities, direction.

Imagine an abandoned seal pup reared in a dog kennel. See its exhausted waddle; a pathetic attempt to keep up with its friends. It is outclassed at everything – even at tail wagging!

Yet, if only it knew it, this lumbering laughing stock is the embodiment of grace and beauty. Plop this clumsy fool in water and marvel. See its lightning reflexes as it traps elusive fish by raw speed and intelligence; diving, leaping, somersaulting with awesome ease.

Many of us are like that. We look and feel hopeless, simply because we have yet to find our sea.

It would be presumptuous to take natural ability, or a love of a specific ministry as conclusive proof of God's call. God ordained that only people born to Levite families could become temple singers or musicians. Do you think that in all of Israel only Levites loved music or had musical ability? Or do you imagine that God despised the musical gifts of everyone else?

Hymn-writer and skilled violinist Hugh Haweis wrote, 'Music is not the business of my life, but it remains its sweetest recreation.'¹⁵ He served as an Anglican priest.

A housewife with a mediocre voice decided to play some Christian music while she worked. As she switched on the stereo she felt the Lord say, 'You are blessed when you hear this music, but I am blessed when you sing to me.'

Our wonderful Lord deluges us with gifts, some of which may be intended only for private enjoyment.^b Let's underestimate neither the honor of a private audience with the eternal King of creation, nor the joy it gives him. Don't be like Judas who considered it a waste when Mary poured all her valuable perfume upon Jesus alone.^c

Even if God has already used us in a certain ministry, it would be short-sighted to conclude the Lord wants us to remain in it for life. Many people who started as youth workers, for example, have become pastors. Others, contrary to popular brain-washing, have found their highest calling only after leaving pastoral work. Duane Logsdon reeled with guilt-feelings when he concluded he was called *out* of an effective pastoral ministry into the business world. It seemed to jar, not just

^a Luke 15:29-31

^b For instance, 1 Corinthians 14:28

^c John 11:3-5

against his upbringing, but against the values he himself had passionately preached. Despite hurtful accusations, Duane submitted to God's call and accomplished much for the kingdom, including financing missions to the tune of millions of dollars.¹⁶

Satan does all he can to deviate us from God's calling. A world-famous evangelist revealed in a seminar that he had received countless alluring offers to engage in teaching or pastoral work. He believed yielding to such a request would divert him from the evangelistic ministry God has chosen for him.

Discerning your gifts and discovering how God intends you to use them are often difficult, but never impossible. You are on this planet for a purpose. Find it.

Grab God's Ear

Barbara Cartland, the world's most successful romantic novelist, kept hearing complaints from budding writers. They alleged that publishers were rejecting excellent manuscripts simply because the authors were unknown. Deciding to test this, Barbara submitted her next manuscript under a different name. It was rejected. She resubmitted it under her real name and it outsold even her previous works.¹⁷

Don't imagine the Christian world is free from such prejudice. Gifted poet, James Montgomery, regarded George Sandys' poetical paraphrase of the Psalms as easily the best in the English language. 'Yet,' lamented Montgomery, 'they are scarcely known.'¹⁸

Some Christians believe that since God has given them a gift, they can just passively wait and their ability will eventually be recognized. Proverbs 18:16 is often used to support this notion:

'A man's gift makes room for him, and brings him before great men.'

Bible scholars generally concede, however, that this Scripture refers not to the inevitability of a God-given talent being widely recognized, but to the enticing power of a present or bribe!^a

It is hard to conceive of Americans better suited to serve in Africa than Afro-Americans. Yet – I feel sick to mention it – mission after mission in the past either resisted or utterly refused on racial grounds black applicants to the African mission field.¹⁹

If we cannot glibly assume things will work out, there is a solution:

'I'm stuck in this awful job,' said Miss Fit.

'I wish I had it so good!' retorted N.V.

'My ministry attempts are just one disaster after another,' said Miss Hap.

'I can't get experience,' complained Stayz Green.

'I know what you mean,' said Mrs. Often.

'You're just not good enough,' declared Eymer Payne.

'They say I'm too old,' groaned Mr. Boat.

'I'm fed up with waiting,' said Patience Small.

'Well if it's that bad why waste time moaning when you could be praying?' asked Ben Yaknees.

(For the enthralling solution for the above nine puns please write, enclosing a fifty dollar check.)^b

Too often we speak piously of 'closed doors' as if Christ had never uttered those potent words, 'Knock and it shall be opened.'

Power resides in persistent prayer; never in prayerless passivity. And it is faith, not fate, that releases us into ministry.

We all wish we had better prayer lives and we would pray more, if only it sapped our powers of concentration less. Yet for most of us an easier way of praying actually exists. There are innumerable possibilities. You can pray on a hill, in a garden, in bed; kneeling, jogging, driving; out loud (a great help to concentration), in a whisper, in song, in your mind, in inarticulate longings or groans; by yourself, with a friend, in a group; at night, in the morning, at lunchtime; and there are too many other variations for me to list or even think of. Experiment. You will discover methods that boost your prayer life remarkably, either by making prayer easier or by giving you more hours in the day by letting you pray in circumstances where you would normally be prayerless. I especially urge

^a Compare Proverbs 17:23; 19:6; 21:14 – note also Proverbs 17:8; Genesis 32:20; 43:11, 15; Exodus 23:8; 1 Samuel 25:18, 27-28.

^b Well I thought it was worth a try.

you to find a prayer partner. It may be quite a search. Many people will have a manner of praying or prayer burdens quite different from your own. And praying together often creates such a bond that it is usually inadvisable to choose a prayer partner of the opposite sex unless you are both willing to risk romantic involvement. Find the right person, however, and you will be amazed at how fast an hour of concentrated prayer can whiz by.

Life is too short to skimp on prayer.

An American army chaplain served in Germany with little success. When he transferred to Korea, he unpacked his old sermons and preached them to the American soldiers there. Suddenly, he was winning souls at a phenomenal rate. He was preaching the same sermons in the same manner to the same type of audience. There seemed just one difference: Koreans were interceding for their country, launching prayer assaults against the powers of darkness, at a level beyond anything known in Germany.²⁰

Prayer and ministry are hammer and nail. But don't bother praying for anything that you consider too unimportant to work sacrificially for.

The great mystery of Christian life is not unanswered prayer, it's unfinished prayer. Prayer that quits before the answer arrives is like a mansion carefully constructed, almost furnished, and then abandoned.

As days snake by with no apparent change, our prayers become less passionate, less hopeful. We must fight this tendency with all we've got, employing to the full the irresistible force of prevailing prayer.

It was persistence in prayer that made George Müller great. In the last year of his life he revealed that every day for over sixty years he had prayed for the salvation of two people, resolutely refusing to imagine they were beyond the touch of believing prayer. Though sixty years had passed without an answer, he publicly affirmed that he expected to see them in heaven. One of the two was converted just before Müller's death and the other some years later.²¹ Such determined persistence – far more than any instantaneous, dramatic answer to prayer – reveals one's faith.

Passive people rust;
Fools stay in bed.
Prayerful people trust;
Kneelers surge ahead.

Sluggards keep their faults;
Loafers end in shame.
Pray-ers get results;
Kneelers always gain.

Pain raged through his body, muscles pleading with him to ease up. Ron Boehme kept running. His heart thumped. His lungs burned. On and on he pushed himself until finally completing his run. 'Very good,' the Lord seemed to say, 'Now do the same in prayer.'²²

Prayer can be a battle we must slog out in the face of bitter opposition. We must fight on when everything within us seems to scream out 'S-t-o-p!' Even so, we must not turn prayer into a works program, hoping we can earn divine answers by the length of our prayers or the sweat on our brow. Prayer is casting ourselves upon the Lord. It's declaring, 'I can't; you can.' It's delighting in him. It's resting in him. It's loving him. It's yielding to him.

Even misdirected prayers throb with power. Adoniram Judson, yearning for the privilege of evangelizing Jews, prayed to be sent to Jerusalem. When divine orders finally arrived they said 'Burma'. There he suffered in prison. News of his torment spread as far as Turkey, where it moved Jews to yield their lives to Christ. When Adoniram learnt of it, he was awed. That prayer for Jews was decades old.²³

The spent prayers of yester-year still echo in the heavenlies. Don't waste them; amplify them.

Is God Asking for a Fight?

I was driving home from church, dejected. Prayer had been offered for people who felt any special call upon their lives. Though I longed to respond, God has never spoken to me about future service.

‘The Lord gives almost everyone a personal word to cling to while waiting,’ I mused. Abraham may have languished for years, but God had promised him descendants. Young Joseph had a dream. David was anointed with oil. And the names kept coming.

‘Lord,’ I complained, ‘you’ve never given me a promise!’

‘Except the million in God’s Word,’ came the thought.

I went to bed, still agitated. As I lay there next morning my mind floated to Ruth, who found God’s blessing by stubbornly resisting the pleas of the most godly woman she knew.^a My thoughts flashed through the centuries to the Canaanite who won her daughter’s healing and Jesus’ praise by persisting, despite being ignored, called a dog, and told her request was improper.^b

My heart leapt. Maybe God is doing the same to me! Surely, despite heaven’s silence, God’s heart is still open to my cry. I recalled something I placed in an early draft of this book:

Most biblical teaching on prayer can be summarized thus: God delights in lavishing his blessings upon those too resolute to take ‘No’ for an answer.

It’s true, and I hate it. Not only does it sound like a grueling endurance test, I loathe arguments. I cringe at the thought of pestering the One I love, or grieving him by not instantly yielding to the slightest indication of his wish. Further, I’m awed by the realization that God’s wisdom is infinite. That makes mine infinitesimal. Who am I to haggle with the greatest Mind in the universe?

Jacob was blessed because he wrestled with God – and won.^c I thought we scored by letting God win! This side of prayer seems to tear up everything Scripture teaches about love, submission and respect.

After years of confusion a gleam penetrated in the guise of a startling thought: ‘God is a tease’. I slammed shut my mind. It couldn’t be. God’s not like that! Yet as I dared peek at that mysterious ray, light flooded my understanding. It’s true! God is a beautiful, loving tease! He declares he is the giving God^d and then lets everything suggest he is a tightwad. ‘You can’t have it! It’s not worth having. You’re not good enough!’ heaven and hell seem to howl. All the while he is hoping we will see through the jest to the heart of God.

Play-fights with God make us strong. They are not to be taken lightly, however. Eternity holds its breath. Ruth’s sister-in-law surrendered to Naomi’s repeated pleas and returned to her people, turning her back on God’s blessing.

Elisha wanted a double portion of Elijah’s spirit. The hide of the man! Time and again God’s oracle tried to shrug off that bald-headed upstart, yet Elisha clung to him with the obstinacy of a blood-sucker.^e That’s what made him grate – er – great.

Heaven’s strong room is plundered by everyone with the audacity to ask and the tenacity to receive. And God is tickled pink! Look above the stern ‘No’ on God’s lips to the sparkle in his eyes.

Mind Maneuvers

With God as my co-author, I write best-sellers. That’s my new self-image. (More accurately, my Lord, Creator of humanity’s creative writers and Author of the world’s best-seller – the Bible – in his exorbitant love dares share his ability with me, and lets me tamper with his perfection. If only I can stifle my tendency to write solo, the result will be stunning.)

So new is this self-image that the cement hasn’t set. I had hardly finished shaping it when along came some ‘helpful’ criticism. ‘I hope you find these comments encouraging,’ he said. I didn’t. My revamped self-image oozed back into a nebulous blob. It had to be laboriously rebuilt. That meant hours of prayer and dwelling on faith-building truths; constant battles against negative thoughts, when surrender seemed perversely alluring. Without frequent repair and maintenance, my new image would soon be flattened by life’s squalls.

So far, I have nothing tangible to show for my inner struggles, but whenever I have patched things up and look in the mirror of my mind, the image I see causes less nausea than it used to. I bounce with new zing toward the goal.^a

^a Ruth 1:4-17

^b Matthew 15:22-28

^c Genesis 32:24-30

^d James 1:5, literal translation

^e 2 Kings 2:1-15

Too often I think and act as if the darkness of my inadequacy could extinguish the brilliance of Christ. I have seen myself as a failure and I have seen the results of such thinking. Now I endeavor to see myself as a born failure, born again a success. That's scriptural. Without Christ I am brain-frozen with inadequacy. But I am not without Christ. I am tired of being hauled through the sludge by my former view of myself. I had backed off so far from the monster of pride that I had almost fallen into the ditch of despair, dragging God's glory with me. Though I hate egotism, I must hate doubt with equal passion.

(I suspect that if I truly knew my Lord, self-image would be a non-issue. I would be so in love with Christ, so captivated with his splendor that I couldn't bear to wrench my eyes off him long enough either to berate or congratulate myself. I'm not there yet, however.)

William Carey's relentless succession of achievements in the face of oppression suggests he was no more deterred by tragedies than a locomotive by butterflies. I was stunned to learn he sometimes suffered what one biographer called 'sheer black depression'.²⁴

C. H. Spurgeon, revered as last century's greatest Baptist preacher, was so plagued by discouragement, depression, fatigue and illness that he tendered his resignation thirty-two times in thirty-nine years. Interestingly, he gradually discovered that such lows always seemed to precede new times of empowering for ministry.²⁵

A modern preacher, world-famous for his emphasis on possibility thinking, sat dejected on a building site and pronounced the death-sentence on his pet project. 'You can't give up,' gasped his advisers, 'the whole world is looking at you!'

'If only I could have a good old-fashioned heart attack and fail with dignity,' was his pathetic reply.

Such grim anecdotes charge me with hope. If past heroes and modern champions of positive thinking can have such bouts, I need not let the Accuser belittle me just because I am appallingly negative at times. For twenty-four-year-old David Brainerd, thrilling experiences in God's presence were regularly interspersed with deep bouts of melancholy in which he despaired of ever achieving anything in God's service. Three years later, an unprecedented outpouring of the Spirit upon American Indians erupted after his preaching. This move coincided with a time when the clammy clouds of dejection were so thick that he was seriously contemplating ending his missionary endeavors.²⁶

A. B. Simpson – that highly respected missionary statesman, exceptional preacher, and founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance – was yet another great achiever who 'was always susceptible to periods of despair.' Though his highs soared to supernatural visions, they did not prevent his lows.²⁷

I don't make excuses. Having the disposition of a professional prune taster is nothing to boast about. Depression usually marks lost faith in the One with whom I have entrusted my future. It dishonors the One who floods my life with endless love and manipulates for good everything that touches me. When I'm low, however, the last thing I need is despondency about my despondency. Though we slide on a downer, that does not make us losers. A horde of spiritual giants have been on the slide before us and lived to excel.

Take heart from the man exalted as Scripture's prime example of faith.^a In an early chapter of Genesis, God tells Abraham on two separate occasions that he will give him the land and descendants.^c Just four verses later we find Abraham humiliating Sarah, denying that she is his wife. In cowardly deceit, he stands dumbly by as Pharaoh marries Sarah and takes her into his harem.^d Next chapter, God yet again details the promise of land and descendants.^e Nevertheless, two chapters on, we find Abraham expecting to die childless. For a fourth time God insists he will give Abraham descendants. At last the old fossil believes. The Lord, thrilled with Abraham's reformed faith, repeats his vow to give him the land. In disbelief, Abraham asks for a sign.^f With divine patience God dramatically shows the mighty man of faith not only his future descendants, but what will happen to them. In the next chapter we find our faith model throwing away any hope of a miracle from God.

^a Compare 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Philippians 3:13-14

^b Romans 4; Galatians 3:6-9; Hebrew 11:8-19; James 2:21-23

^c Genesis 12:2,7

^d Genesis 12:10-16

^e Genesis 13:14-17

^f Genesis 15:2-8

He resorts to dubious natural means to forcibly accomplish what God seems unwilling to do. He bypasses his wife and turns to her maid for a baby.^a Years later, the Lord yet again reaffirms his promise to Abraham and declares that Sarah would conceive. Abraham laughs. He is sure his wife has more potential as an Egyptian mummy than as a Hebrew one. ‘She’s too old. Just bless Ishmael,’ is the crux of his reply.^b Yet the Lord persists. One more time our hero gropes for that slippery fish called faith. Before long, he is again passing off Sarah as his sister, showing more faith in his powers of deception than in God’s integrity. This time it is King Abimelech who almost has a go at impregnating Sarah.^c Just weeks later,^d she conceived Abraham’s baby.

Faith is not a non-stop flight above reality; it’s a fight. What distinguishes people of faith is not how rarely they hit the dirt, but how often they get up again. To be perpetually positive is impossible. The mere attempt embroils us in prayer battles and Abrahamic effort. The enemy often flees to his corner, only to prepare for the next round. You might even have climbed out of the ring, but the reward for getting back in exceeds anything anyone could offer.

‘Lord, increase our faith,’ pleaded the disciples.

‘If you have faith the size of a mustard seed . . .’ came the reply.^e

Perhaps our greatest need is not huge faith, but to fully use our small faith. Perhaps we miss out because we devalue our faith, not using it to the fullest because we wrongly imagine that tiny faith is too insignificant to move the hand of God. If faith is more valuable than gold,^f the merest speck is too precious to despise. Do not let feelings of inadequacy strangle your faith. Just keep pressing on. Past greats achieved much with floundering faith. So can you.

Like everyone, my faith levels fluctuate. Usually I am aware that a few moments dwelling on faith-building truths or squashing negative thoughts would boost my faith a little, but I foolishly let myself remain at a lower faith level than I know I am capable of. I have failed to take faith as seriously as Scripture does. If it is as valuable as Scripture affirms, then only a fool would pass up an opportunity to slightly increase it. If our Lord valued faith at a dollar, then a one per cent increase is not worth bothering about. What can you do with a cent? If common faith is of immense value, however, everything changes. On a million dollars, one per cent is \$10,000 – well worth a little effort!

Ishmael Paranoia

Among the lessons to be learnt through Abraham becoming a father is not that we should do nothing and leave it all to God. Had this been Abraham’s attitude, the miracle would never have happened. The key lay not in doing nothing, but in doing the *right* thing – trying yet again to fill a barren womb.

We can be so paranoid about conceiving an Ishmael, that we fail to produce an Isaac. To stop trying for a child through Sarah would have been just as devoid of faith as using her maid.

Faith is leaving the security of inactivity and deliberately exposing ourselves to the painful possibility of defeat. It is Jonathan and his armor-bearer going out to meet the enemy; not his comrades hiding in holes hoping for a miracle.^g It’s Peter saying, ‘If that’s you, Lord, bid me come . . .,’ and then stepping out of the boat.^h It’s that same fisherman saying, ‘Lord, we’ve toiled all night and caught nothing. Nevertheless, at your word . . .’ⁱ It is Paul, once again facing a hostile crowd. It is you, trying one more time.

Faith is fundamental to all Christian service.^j Like a seedling, it should constantly grow.^k It is easier on ourselves if we start exercising faith now, in minor things, than to expect to pluck out of the air mountain-moving faith when it is critically needed in ministry.

A delay either quickens your faith to rise to the challenge, or it’s a dead wait.

^a Genesis 16:1-3

^b Genesis 17:17-18

^c Genesis 20:2-3

^d Assuming Genesis 18:10 to 21:2 are in chronological order.

^e Luke 17:5-6

^f 1 Peter 1:7

^g 1 Samuel 14:1-15

^h Matthew 14:28-29

ⁱ Luke 5:5

^j Mark 11:24; John 14:12; Galatians 3:2-3; Hebrews 4:2; 11:6; James 1:6-7; 1 John 5:4

^k 2 Corinthians 10:15; 2 Thessalonians 1:3

How to Boost Faith

I can easily believe the atom-holding, earth-spinning, galaxy-sustaining, life-giving Source of everything wonderful can do whatever he likes. Even the devil believes it. My difficulty is believing that his special love for me makes him long to use that power on my behalf.

Few of us doubt that God can do amazing things. The weak link in our faith is believing that he would do such things for ordinary, inconsequential you and me. We suspect that in the Almighty's eyes we are not sufficiently special to warrant such attention. Oh yes, 'God loves everyone,' but we have a hunch that by the time that love reaches us it has spread pretty thin. I'm just one of millions. Why would God want to focus his omnipotence on me?

If we could grasp the enormity of God's love for us, our faith would sky-rocket. Pray for a revelation.^a

Awareness of how much we are loved is forever slipping from our consciousness. Partially in sight for a few days, it begins to fade again. The following suggestions might help.

When we let God down – even if we really foul things up – picture the proudest father the world has seen. The baby screams, dribbles and soils itself, yet Dad still glows with pride. God is like that.

When you feel like a tiny blob in the seething mass of humanity, see the shepherd of a hundred sheep frantically searching for one. If he can be personally concerned for one, the omnipotent Shepherd of our souls can love all humanity and still be devoted to you. In the beautiful words of Isaiah, 'As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.'^b

When you feel you can do nothing right, picture a child, paintbrush in hand, gleaming with excitement. Enveloping her hand is the gentle hand of the world's greatest artist. 'And what shall we put in this corner?' asks the man, as his skill and the girl's imagination merge into one. See the artist's smile and the child's delight as together they create stunning beauty. Under God's guiding hand, your possibilities are mind-boggling.

No matter how you feel, you are the focus of God's attention; doted on as though you are the only friend God has. If ever a man wanted to shower his bride with love, or his son with gifts, God longs to lavish you with his extravagance. Expect great things from God. Anything less is an insult to your almighty Savior. With your Lord impossibilities are playthings.

Let faith mushroom by seizing the fact that the Omnipotent Lord is powerful enough to use you – over-riding your every inadequacy – and loving enough to want to. And believe that though he may lovingly delay your mission, his timing is perfect. Everything God touches is destined for glory. Even now, you are God's 'filthy rags to heavenly riches' success story.

The Kingdom needs prayer warriors, not prayer worriers. No matter how much you cry, beg, and wish, you have not moved from superstition to authentic Christian prayer until you can thank God for the answer, knowing it is yours before you hold it in your hand. Faith is not thinking that God *can*; it is knowing that he *will*.^c

You will see it when you believe it.

Praise-Fest

Paul's patience was at breaking point. Day after day, wherever they went, the demonized slave-girl kept shrieking that Paul and Silas were God's servants. Then, in a moment of desperation, he did it. He expelled the demon. And his greatest fears froze to excruciating reality.^d

They were arrested, tortured and thrown in prison. Incarcerated like common criminals? No such luck. It was the maximum security block for them. Everything pointed to a painfully long stay.

Put ourselves in Paul's stocks and our thoughts might be something like: 'What an ant-brain! I walked right into Satan's trap! Things were going so well – converts were being baptized, Lydia had opened her house to us – and like a twit I blew it! Now I've been flogged. Poor Silas is in agony. Both of us are in the slammer, no longer free to preach the Gospel. All because of me! If only I'd kept my cool . . .'

^a The necessity of divine revelation is highlighted by Paul's prayer that the Ephesians 'comprehend . . . and know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge' (Ephesians 3:18-19).

^b Isaiah 62:5

^c Mark 11:24; James 1:5-8

^d Acts 16:16-24

I'd have been as miserable as an elephant with sinusitis.

Yet instead of berating himself or being bullied by pain, the apostle sang praises. Almost instantly, tragedy yielded potent ministry. Not only was the Lord blessed and fellow prisoners touched, the jailer and all his family were converted. Praise turned misery into ministry.

Praise snaps locks. If a door to ministry slams, praise can burst open another.

If you think praise is hot air, you are right. It's the hot air that makes faith balloon, lifting us to new heights in God, while warming the Father's heart.

Praise is life-changing. I could extol it for pages, but singing its praises is often easier than singing praises. It takes enormous energy for a space vessel to blast off from earth on its way to another world. As it continues to leave earth's gravitational pull, however, progress gets easier and easier until it is actually pulled along by the heavenly body it is headed for. With praise, too, it is the first part of the journey that is so demanding. The wonders of the rest of the voyage, however, makes the sometimes-huge initial effort so worthwhile.

The less we feel like praising, the more we need its power. I suspect Paul used a couple of tricks to break through despair into victorious praise.

Paul and Silas had so mingled worship with life's humdrum that when things soured, their lips were still warm with his praises. There was no groping for a half-forgotten praise vocabulary; no brain-racking to find something praiseworthy in God. Praise was not a pill in their emergency kit; it was their way of life.

If one of their helps was habit, the second was song. When praise is a struggle, melody and beautiful words can bear us forward.

A third help was fellowship. They joined their praises. Where possible, do the same.

My next suggestion, like the others, is far from original. Multitudes have found that it works. Don't try to start at the top; just find a few reasons to be grateful. Things could be worse. Thank God they're not. Thank him that things have not always been as dire as they now seem. Lean heavily on tiny blessings. As they multiply in your head, they will provide a rich array of praise material.

You can even turn negative tendencies into an asset. We all need reminders to praise throughout the day. If your mind regularly clogs with negative thoughts, train yourself to use each recurrence of doubt or fear or gloom as a reminder to praise God. Each negative thought is packed with potential praise material. If, for instance, you are hounded by the thought that you are getting older, let it nudge you to thank God for the years he has given you. Praise him that your times are in his hands. Take comfort that at least someone is older than you – God – and revel in the knowledge that he will never fall for modern society's infatuation with youth. Every time you feel old, rejoice that Jacob was in his nineties when he had his all-night wrestling match with an angel.^a Exalt the One who empowered eighty-five-year-old Caleb to conquer the enemies' mountain strongholds,^b gave Job his greatest blessings in his latter years,^c and bypassed millions to show the Christ child to elderly Anna.^d

Yet if being filled with the joy of the Lord were as easy as flicking a switch, there are still times when we would prefer to sulk. Forgetting that it is faith, not tears, that most moves our Lord, we secretly hope that if we are sufficiently miserable, he will have pity on us. That's like trying to scale a mountain by digging a hole. Praise achieves things self-pity or self-recrimination could never do.

'I will give you all my praise,' I sang in a congregational song. Suddenly I realized I had lied. Every time I grumble I am praising the devil. Every complaint is an insult to God.

For balance, however, listen to Psalm 13. This dirge opens with, 'How long will you forget me, Lord? Forever?' With similar moans in the next few verses, the ancient blues singer continues his sob story. Then, just when we know where he is heading, he suddenly slams his song into reverse and declares, 'I will sing unto the Lord, for he has dealt bountifully with me.' The tail end of that little psalm looks as out of place as a fan of peacock feathers on the end of a pig. Yet no matter how odd it seems, psalm after psalm confirms that we can mingle praise with our pain. These inspired

^a Joseph was 30 when he began serving Pharaoh (Genesis 41:46). When Jacob arrived in Egypt about nine years later (Genesis 41:48,53,54; 45:11), Joseph was 130 (Genesis 47:9). Jacob was therefore about 91 years older than Joseph, and the time between Joseph's birth and Jacob's wrestle was long enough for him to engage in an extensive animal breeding program (Genesis 30:25-28,31-32; 31:7-9).

^b Joshua 14:10-15; 15:13-15

^c Job 42:12

^d Luke 2:36-38

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

prayers prove that our Lord wants us to vent on him our grief and frustration. He wants honesty, not denial, and still he wants our praise.

Try hard enough and in every circumstance we can find reason to complain and reason to rejoice. To praise is to feast on the goodness of God. To complain is to languish in the squalor of self.

It's your choice to rejoice
Or to blame and complain.
To sing a refrain
Or refrain to sing
Is to gain new ground,
Or go round and round.
Raise your praise
Or weep in defeat;
Make the gain
Or remain the same.
Curse and be worse;
Praise and be raised.
It's you who choose
To win or lose.

To praise is to party. It is cutting the cords to earthly burdens and heading for heaven's joys. It infuriates the devil because it not only plucks us out of the misery he had meticulously planned, it lets us sneak into the victory celebration ahead of time. To praise is to cheat the devil, laugh in his face and step into God's time machine.

Praise magnifies God. The alternative magnifies the problem. The last thing we need is a 'small' God and large problems! What will we choose to exalt: the mighty, eternal God, or the puny, temporary problem? Praise pricks bloated problems by empowering us to glimpse the enormity of God.

Build muscle on your faith by constantly praising God, delighting in his answer ahead of time. It takes the wait off your mind.

CHAPTER 18: BREAKTHROUGH

Defeatists say ‘Yesterday’; winners say ‘Yes’ today. It’s too late to lament the past. That’s lost forever. But it’s never too late to move into overdrive. The present is ours to charge with defiant faith.

‘You’re too old,’ the mission board told a rejected candidate. God, who’s a little older than most of us, must have thought she was too young. He waited two more years before sending her to the field.¹

Perhaps you have heard it calculated that John Wesley preached over 40,000 sermons and travelled 225,000 miles (his horse had never heard of kilometers). Did you realize these figures belong only to the latter part of his life, from age 36 to 88?² I was impressed; until reading George Müller’s figures. He is said to have travelled 200,000 miles, using his linguistic ability to preach in several languages to an estimated three million people. Now admittedly, Müller travelled extensively overseas. If I had a choice between travelling a thousand miles on horseback or a thousand miles by sailing ship, I’d go by plane. But here’s the spice: Müller’s statistics only began after his seventieth birthday and continued for the next seventeen years.³

Dr. Robert Lowry, renowned for many accomplishments as a Christian musician, first undertook the serious study of music after turning forty.⁴ Fanny Crosby was forty-three when she found her life’s work – she wrote her first Gospel song. So many songs followed, under so many different pen-names, that no one could keep track of them. Informed estimates range to beyond 8,000 (some say 9,000), with more than a hundred pseudonyms.⁵

Francis Schaeffer was little known until he was in his fifties.⁶

Child Evangelism Fellowship was founded by a sixty-year-old, who remained at its helm for the next fifteen years.⁷

At sixty-three, Clara McBride Hale began caring for addict babies. The number she has helped now runs into the hundreds.

Peggy Smith, eighty-four and blind, and her sister Christine, eighty-two and crippled, were key people in the world-famous revival in the Scottish Hebrides.⁸

Elizabeth Wilson felt the tug of China when she was twenty. She arrived thirty years later. Conditions were harsh and dangerous, yet her age proved a treasured asset. The Lord had called her to the Orient, where – as in most societies outside our own – age is honored.⁹

Paul Kuo presented the administrators of Hong Kong Theological College with a headache. He was already sixty and he wanted to enroll. By the time he graduated he would be too old for any church to want him. He was reluctantly admitted and although he learned, he failed to obtain a degree. In 1975 he left for Thailand’s ‘Golden Triangle’ to labor for Christ amongst mercenaries, bandits and opium farmers. His past military training earned him respect and his age made him a celebrity. He dived so deeply into ministry that he soon had to recruit other missionaries. Before long, Paul was heading up a large missionary venture.¹⁰

In 1968, two middle-aged tourists, florists for over thirty years, were so moved by what they saw in Kenya that they decided to return as missionaries. Denny and Jeanne Grindall, with no engineering skills or even formal Bible training and very little money, instigated the building of a dam almost eighty foot high and piped the clean water nearly three miles to tribespeople. The Maasai gradually became so responsive to the Grindall’s message that twenty churches were opened and hundreds came to Christ.¹¹

Black American missionary to Liberia, Eliza George, was forced by her mission to retire at age sixty-five. Undeterred, she raised her own support and continued independently for the best part of three more decades.¹²

‘I want to go to the mission field as soon as I can,’ announced an enthusiastic teenager on the day of her baptism. She made it – as a seventy-one-year-old widow. In Papua New Guinea, Guatemala, Thailand, Burma and Communist Russia, Margaret Cole squeezed more excitement into a few years than most people ever see.¹³

Cam Townsend, founder of the Wycliffe Bible Translators, flew to Moscow and began learning Russian to assist in Bible translation work in the Caucasus. The nation was still under the iron grip of Communism and he was seventy-two.¹⁴

At that same age of seventy-two, Maude Cary accepted her missionary society’s plea ‘to open the city of El Haheb [in Morocco] to resident missionary work.’¹⁵

Evelyn Brand came to India as a young missionary. After her husband’s death she pressed on, living on a pittance, caring for villagers scattered over five mountain ranges. At age seventy-five, Granny, as she was now known, had grown too old for such arduous work. Having fallen and broken her hip, she had to be carried down the mountain by stretcher, then driven 150 bone-jarring miles to the nearest hospital. By the time her son – a brilliant medical missionary – finally arrived, she was walking with two canes and managing to ride a pony to outlying villages. The skilled doctor mustered all his persuasive powers to lovingly convince his ageing mother that she ‘presented a constant medical hazard,’ riding horseback to such remote, rugged mountains with her paralyzed legs and deficient sense of balance. Brushing aside his pleas, Granny toiled for eighteen more years, despite being ravaged by tropical diseases and suffering concussions and fractures from falls off her pony. She was ninety-three when she reluctantly exchanged her horse for a stretcher; continuing her work by being carried from village to village by devoted Indians for her two remaining years.¹⁶

In modern China the seventy-year-old wife of a persecuted pastor travels extensively distributing Bibles at great risk. In another part of the nation a ninety-year-old prayerfully studies a map, wondering where to lug her next bundle of Bibles. She hugs her books, rejoicing that the Tiananmen Square massacre increased not just the danger but the demand.¹⁷

Think of it this way: if growing old is as bad as is sometimes claimed, how come so many people do it?

I don’t care if you’re so long in the tooth you’ve blown your entire savings on toothpaste; so out of touch that you’re fazed by newfangled things like the King James Bible; so old your grandchildren are in nursing homes; so frail you have to rest up to watch television: God can still use you. Of course, if you’ve already passed eighty-five, I can’t promise you’ll write 8,000 songs. You might, like Fanny at that age, have to settle for only 250 hymns a year.¹⁸

If you’re ninety-one and still don’t know what you’ll do when you grow up, throw a party. If you’re ninety-five, it’s time to go to Bible School. That’s what David Sizer did. The last I heard, he was 101, still preaching in a prison and five retirement centers every week.¹⁹

Dr. Bernhard Johnson tells of a tiny Negro in Brazil aged 105 who had led hundreds to the Lord. Uninspired? A further detail should cure that. He did not know the Lord until he turned 103.

So if you’ve graduated from make-up to poly-filler, hang on to your dentures, it’s ministry time.

No More Excuses

If age is not a legitimate excuse, neither can we hide behind the negative comments of fellow Christians. Take Kenneth Taylor for inspiration.

Over thirty million copies of his *Living Bible* have been sold – literally a thousand times more than most Christian titles. Every publisher in the world would like a stake in such phenomenal success. But the story was once very different.

Taylor used to work for a Christian publishing house. Not even they would touch his manuscript. In desperation, (not to mention faith) he published it himself. Even then, he suffered an entire four-month period without one new order, before sales began to climb.²⁰

If you ever see a publisher with blue ankles, he’s been kicking himself again over that one.

It’s tales like this that keep my pen wriggling.

I long to buoy you by citing the story that snugly fits your circumstance. Alas, there are too many possibilities. I limit myself to two more examples, trusting your imagination to adapt them to your situation.

George Beverly Shea started his celebrated music ministry behind the barn. His music was quarantined. Any closer to civilization seemed to induce an epidemic of earache.²¹

Gladys Aylward, the now-renowned missionary to China, wasn't good enough for a missionary society. She was too dull, too old, too common. No one wanted that parlor maid – except the King of kings. Before God had finished, even Hollywood wanted the story.

Though multitudes pronounce the death sentence on our efforts, we believe in resurrection.

When they were young, Glenn Cunningham and Tenley Albright had legs so mutilated that they were told they would never walk again. Cunningham became one of the greatest runners the world has seen. Albright won the world figure-skating championship.

A young man almost won the ten mile swim in the Canadian championships. I see you at the finishing line, laughing at his style. He emerges from the water and you almost choke. This swimming marvel has only one arm.

The sport of hammer-throwing requires two powerful arms. Everyone knows that – except Olympic gold medal list Harold Connolly. One of his arms, broken thirteen times when a child, is barely two-thirds the size of the other.²²

You would need the fish fingers of a frozen food factory and the toes of a mutant millipede to count the times these athletes must have been told they would never make it, but they didn't let up.

The achievements of people who draw solely upon human resources set me on fire. How dare we surrender to barriers that even non-Christians can conquer.^a We're Christ's champions, empowered from on high. It's about time the whole world knew it.

Never Give Up

Jeremiah dictated a prophecy to his secretary.^b I guess it was lengthy, though able to be read in an hour or so. If the prophet had a hunch it would reach the king, it was probably written ornately with the best writing materials.

It reached the king all right. King Jehoiakim took to it straight away – with a pen knife – and fed the fragments to the fire.^c

In destroying the scroll, the king dealt four crushing blows to Jeremiah. First there was rejection. Then there was the loss of the manuscript. It was probably the only copy. I panic whenever I lose a few edits of this book by absent-mindedly putting them through the shredder. (All geniuses have brain-waves, it's just that my brain waves goodbye and visits another planet.)

The next blow was financial. Living in an era far removed from Jeremiah's, we might have missed this, but the significance was not lost to Jeremiah. Enough papyrus for one gospel would cost a skilled workman his entire pay for a year.²³ The book of Jeremiah, as it appears in our Bible, is twice that length.

Then came the final blow: he had incurred the king's wrath. Orders were out for his arrest.^d

What did Jeremiah do, reeling under rejection, loss and fear? He did what Tyndale did when a shipwreck sent a significant portion of his Bible translation to the bottom of the sea.²⁴ He did what William Carey did when fire ripped through his print room, reducing his crowning glory – his massive polyglot dictionary, painstakingly prepared grammars and precious translations of the whole Bible – to ashes.²⁵ He did what Gospel singer Ira Sankey did when the sole manuscript of his book, written under the hardship of advancing years, was destroyed. He did what Frances Havergal did when her lengthy music manuscript was burnt at the publisher's – a nightmare painfully intensified by frail health.²⁶ He laboriously rewrote it. What's more, he added to it.^e

Pondering the enormity of losses these saints suffered is like a knife through my own flesh. Why God would allow such havoc I can hardly imagine. But I know their refusal to let tragedy beat them, their dogged determination to do it all again, and their resistance to Satan's whisperings that

^a This is not a comment on the spiritual standing of the above athletes.

^b Jeremiah 36:1-4

^c Jeremiah 36:23

^d Jeremiah 36:26

^e Jeremiah 36:32

God was against them, is a profound inspiration; an enduring testimony to the strength of God's people.

Hailed as the forerunner of Protestant missionary glory, the missionary pioneers' hero, the Bible translators' inspiration, William Carey founded several schools, translated Scripture into forty-four languages and dialects, established missions in India, Burma and Bhutan, was appointed professor of Oriental languages by the Governor-general and became an authority on Indian agriculture and horticulture. Yet he reached these heights not on the wings of genius, but on plodding feet; not by bursts of inspiration but by a determined, daily slog. It was as a plodder that Carey wanted to be remembered. 'To this,' insisted the great achiever, 'I owe everything.' When he headed for India, his wife had refused to go, his church resisted the move, and his parents thought he was mad. He plodded on. In India he was lonely, poverty-stricken and spiritually barren. When his son died, Carey was too ill to bury him and so friendless he almost despaired of finding anyone to assist in the burial. He plodded on. For the first seven years, there was not one convert. He was strongly opposed by governmental and commercial authorities. He had coerced his wife to join him, but she became mentally deranged and grew progressively worse. He plodded on. He had left for India, having failed as a farm laborer, a shoemaker, a school-teacher, a preacher, a husband and a father, but the old trail blazer left for heaven a master of plodding.²⁷

Our spiritual forebears can so motivate us that the furnace they endured can harden the steel in our own spines. Let's look at a few and see if it works.

Though he died before the Reformation, Luther honored Savonarola with the title of Protestant martyr. Savonarola preached, pouring out his soul to congregations of less than twenty-five. The impact could hardly have been less had even those few stayed away. It slowly dawned with heart-crushing certainty that whatever gifts he had, preaching was not one of them. He reverted to teaching convent novices. Later, he again thought he should face the daunting task that had so devastated him. Again his preaching made little impression. He continued, and in time the great Duomo cathedral was so incapable of containing the eager throngs flocking to hear him that queues regularly formed in the middle of the night, waiting for hours for the doors to open.²⁸

Clarence Jones' dream of a South American Christian radio station was known in his local church as 'Jones's folly'. Hurt, but not defeated, he invested in an exploratory trip to South America, praying for the Lord to do 'great and mighty things'. Instead, heaven slammed doors in his face. He courted government officials in Venezuela, then Columbia, then Panama, then Cuba. All refused him.

He returned home in agony to acquaintances who continued to laugh, and to a wife who was secretly elated about the failure. Finally, it got too much. He decided to chuck his family and local Christians by joining the navy. The navy rejected him too.

Eventually he met a missionary couple who claimed that Ecuador was the place to go. He had no sooner received the necessary government clearances than he learned from officials and radio engineers that the site was utterly unsuitable for radio. The mountains and proximity to the equator were insurmountable obstacles to acceptable transmission. Yet it seemed God's leading, so 'Jones's folly' continued.

In 1931 his 250-watt transmitter in a sheep shed beamed its first message. Many missionaries were strongly opposed to the whole idea of Christian radio, but people were at least curious. That day, every radio in the country was tuned in. That's right; all *thirteen*.

Donations fell off due to the Depression. In the entire year of 1932, he received less than a thousand dollars. In 1933 the bank through which he operated folded. Then the Chicago Gospel Tabernacle, the mainstay of his mission's support, went bankrupt. As he staggered on, it began to be said that you could hear the sounds of his station from behind doors displaying *Protestants Not Welcome* signs.

In 1940 he expanded to a 10,000 watt transmitter and started receiving letters from New Zealand, Japan, Germany, Russia. . . . Contrary to expert opinion, he had located on one of the best spots for radio transmission on the entire planet. He later moved up to half a million watts and 'Jones's folly' became one of the Christian wonders of the world.²⁹

‘It seems as though everything I do is wrong,’ cried Gladys Aylward in a letter from China.³⁰ Great men and women of God often long to quit, but they wobble on.^a When they are hit, they bounce – like flat footballs usually, but enough to stay in the game. After a while they are pumped up again and their erratic zigzag course resumes that vaguely goalward trajectory that sends angelic cheer-leaders wild.

Break the Drought

In the 1850s, Jeremiah Lanphier gave up his business and walked the streets of New York, his heart throbbing with a divine obsession. He distributed leaflets inviting people to attend an hour-long prayer meeting. No one turned up. Half an hour late, someone arrived, followed by five others. Next week, twenty came. Within six months they were meeting daily, and the number had risen to ten thousand. People were being saved. Diverse denominations were working together in unity. Revival sparks flew to other parts of the nation. In two years over a million converts were added to the churches and a further million church-attenders revived.³¹

What if, twenty-nine minutes into that first prayer meeting, Lanphier had left in despair?

Elijah prayed for rain. Not a cloud in sight. He prayed again. Nothing. Six times he prayed. Six times there was no response.

Time to implement plan B. This is how it went: if prayer doesn’t work after six times, try seven.

Israel got wet.

God’s chosen were in a desert facing starvation. And it was God’s doing. The Lord later revealed he had engineered it to see what his people were made of.^b Would they fall into faithless despair, or would they muster faith and declare, ‘Somehow, some way, God will bring us through’?

Unlike the Israelites, we may not be in a life-threatening situation, but our ministry hopes could be staring at death. We’re wasting in a wilderness where through sickness or whatever, there’s not a crust of ministry to be found. This is not the time to crumple in a whimpering mass. This is our moment of glory. It’s the time to display our faith to the entire spirit-world, declaring, ‘God is the God of the impossible! Somehow, some way he will fulfill my heart’s desire.’

The Spirit can thrust us into a wilderness for testing as he did Jesus. But like Jesus and through Jesus we can emerge Spirit-filled and burst into ministry.

In Christ, our possibilities would blow the circuits of anyone’s imagination. Let’s not succumb before discovering at least a fraction of the astounding things God can do through us.

Cultivate the blind optimism of a love-crazed boy forever pestering his vision of beauty for a date. She’s so sweet his tooth aches. His physique is a stretched rubber band and his face an acne war zone. He is certainly no oil painting, but something had to be making his skin that oily. She is the most popular girl at school. In a world of shining lights he is a black hole. The very thought of her sets the butterflies aflutter. He does something to *her* stomach, too. Finally, after his thirty-fifth refusal his enthusiasm skyrockets. He knew he was making progress the moment she uttered those magic words, ‘I’m telling you *no* for the last time.’

God has a bigger crush on us than we have on him.

Remember Elijah and pray up a storm. Remember Lanphier and never walk away.

From Crushing Defeat to Eternal Fame

We find him lurking in the shadows of Scripture. He was a breath of fresh air in a whirlwind. John Mark was bad news. In the human race he led the field from go to woe. He has often been identified with Christianity’s first stalker – the man who blurred through Gethsemane’s garden with the raw grace of a plucked chicken, leaving behind his clothes and his Savior.^{32 c} More humiliations were to follow.

His unflattering nickname, stub-fingered, suggests he was physically impaired.³³ To this he added a handicap of his own making: he was branded a deserter – a second time.

^a For example, Jeremiah 20:7-8

^b Deuteronomy 8:2-3

^c Mark 14:51-52

BREAKTHROUGH

When the pressure mounts, the last thing you need is for a trusted companion to abandon you. That's what Mark did to Paul and Barnabas.

His desertion seems to have deeply hurt Paul. The apostle was adamant that hanging out with this dodo was a no-no. Barnabas, who always stood up for the under-dog,^a defended his cousin Mark. The result was a rift between old friends; the shattering of a great missionary team.^b We never hear of Barnabas again.

One look at 'stump-finger's' yellow face and you knew this jinx had had mistake and eggs for breakfast again. Whenever this egg-head cracked, everyone got egg on their face. Just what the church needs! He must have felt as blue as a browned off white man seeing red because he's accused of being yellow.

Mark could have drowned in self-pity. He could have resented Paul. He could have turned back to Judaism. Instead, he redoubled his efforts, eventually being recognized even by Paul as having an outstanding ministry.^c Peter also spoke affectionately of him.^d As writer of possibly the earliest gospel and a primary source of Matthew and Luke, Mark's contribution even to today's church is beyond measure.³⁴ This planet is a better place today because nineteen centuries ago a 'no-hoper' called stub-fingered decided to tough it out.

Knowing our weaknesses, our loving Father has preserved many such stories for us to gain strength.

'Then will I teach transgressors your ways,' crooned David. When? After a calamitous moral fall.^e

'Simon . . . feed my sheep.'^f When? After denying his Savior.

'He slew at his death more than he slew in his life.'^g When? After Samson's greatest humiliation.

Samson and David each knew the horror of spiritual failure. On the crest of their vocation, they plunged to abominable depths. Their lapses were inexcusable. Their ministries were desecrated. Yet they refused to dwell in defeat. They were failures for a moment, but they were overcomers forever. Grasping God's hand of forgiveness, they clambered to new heights for the exaltation of the One who washed them clean.

Oppression crushed Simon the rock into sand. On the brink of ministry, after years of grooming, he blew it. He lied. He invoked a curse on himself. He disowned his Lord.^h Yet though it rocked Simon, this one-time rock didn't peter. Empowered by his Savior, he again turned to stone.

Though the righteous – that's you and me in Christ Jesus – fall seven times, they rise again. That's a promise.ⁱ

It was just a hair-cut
For the plaything of Delilah;
And just a prayer-cut
For Peter the denier.
Strong they dozed
But weak arose,
And knew it not.

Men destroyed by fatal cuts;
Left to wallow in their ruts;
Left with blame
And haunting shame,
In sin to rot.

A seed so small and barely sown

^a Acts 4:36; 9:26-28; 11:22-25

^b Acts 15:37-39

^c 2 Timothy 4:11; Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24

^d 1 Peter 5:13

^e Psalm 51:title, 3-5, 12-13.

^f John 21:17

^g Judges 16:30, paraphrase

^h Matthew 26:74

ⁱ Proverbs 24:16, see also Psalm 37:23-24

Meant to die, but how it's grown!
Things so small
Grow so tall,
But marvel not.

If sin can grow,
So can prayer;
If prayers will flow,
So will hair.
With faith restored
Hope will soar,
And blunders blot.

His repentance real,
The victim of Delilah,
Had victories still.
And the spineless Christ-denier
Shed his shame
And became
The church's rock.

It's not necessarily a moral lapse that is hardest to recover from.

When his wife was pregnant with their only child, George Whitefield knew he had heard from God: it would be a boy and this son would become a great evangelist. Newspapers grabbed the story and mocked. Whitefield was unmoved. The whole world could laugh; time would vindicate him. Finally the baby was born. A boy. It died.³⁵

Doug Hunt, chief pilot for Wycliffe Bible Translators – dead. Dr Darlene Bee, brilliant linguist and Bible translator – dead. In all, seven mangled corpses lay strewn amongst the aircraft wreckage. All because a missionary-mechanic neglected to tighten a nut.

'The funeral was a ghastly ordeal,' confessed the shattered mechanic. 'The sight of those caskets lined up . . . hit me like a blow to the stomach. I wanted nothing but to get out of there. . . . How could I face my friends? How could I face myself?'

Anyone who can keep going after that is not a negligent mechanic. He's a spiritual giant.

'Except for God's grace,' he later wrote, 'I'd be somewhere cowering in a corner in guilt-ridden despair – the eighth fatality of that Aztec crash.'³⁶

Truth Distilled

The farmer who forever consults the sky will never sow, says Scripture's philosopher.^a We will always find reasons for deferring service or opting out, but are they God's reasons, or our excuses?

^a Ecclesiastes 11:4

CHAPTER 19: SURGING AHEAD

The Final Reward

When eight Englishmen left for Africa in 1876, they warned their supporters that the death rate amongst missionaries made it statistically inevitable that at least one of them would be dead within six months. All they asked was that others be sent out immediately to replace the dead. Within a year five had died. By the end of the second year only one remained.¹ It is a painful fact that missionary histories are filled with short stories.

Does death mean the death of ministry opportunities? If you spent years learning Cantonese and Jesus returned before you reached the mission field, would all that effort be in vain? Allowed to prowl unchallenged through our cerebral control room, such questions can sabotage a commitment to long-term ministry goals.

We don't know a lot about the next life. Perhaps Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego provide a clue. Faithful unto what seemed certain death, they emerged from Nebuchadnezzar's 'crematorium' with a greater ministry than ever before.^a I suggest this parallels the experience of all who die, faithful to the end.

My conviction is founded on the belief that, in every sense, we are Christ's followers.^b Our Forerunner received a ministry after death far superior to his earthly one.^c If after death we will receive a superior body like his, and a superior holiness like his, will we not also receive a superior ministry?

Several servants faithfully served their master, says Jesus' parable. Given some of their master's wealth, they increased it for him. Suddenly, their lord returned as king. (No prizes for guessing what this symbolizes.) he praised their efforts.

Can you imagine being praised by the highest authority, the Source of all wisdom and moral excellence, the King of glory? The very thought makes my mind cartwheel. It's the ultimate. Words of commendation from the Perfect One should keep me in bliss for all eternity. I can conceive no greater honor.

Yet, continues the parable, these dependable custodians received a further reward. And it was not a retirement plan. They had proved they could handle responsibility. Putting them to pasture, even a paradisiacal one, would be a waste.

In this new era, with their lord now ruling the land, they were promoted from controlling money to controlling entire cities.^d Found faithful with a little, they were given much. The king's return had signaled not the end but the commencement of service even more significant than their previous duties.

Not so the one who hid his gift. He lost everything.^e

Another line of thought also suggests that death opens wider opportunities than it closes. Cleansed of its sweat and drudgery, work is sheer joy. It's divine. From Day One God has been at

^a Daniel 3:28-30

^b 1 John 3:2; Romans 8:29

^c For example, Acts 2:33; 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23-26; Ephesians 1:20-22; 4:8; Philippians 2:8-11; Hebrews 7:24-27; 9:28

^d Luke 19:11-19

^e Luke 19:20-27

work.^a Can we enter the Master's joy, or become more God-like in the age to come, without being immersed in magnificent assignments?

A teacher asked her class to write about weddings. According to one child, after the celebrations the happy couple go home to eat wedding cake. I suspect we are equally naive about our heavenly honeymoon. Awaiting us in the next life are areas of fulfillment beyond our dreams.

Heaven is not a celestial retirement village, it's ministry headquarters. The risen Lord rules from its throne.^b Heaven's angels are 'ministering spirits'.^c Heaven throbs with activity. Isn't this a glimpse at *our* future?

I confess confusion over the myriad interpretations of the end part of the Bible. It is noteworthy, however, that martyrs – who of all people seem to have had their earthly ministries cut short – will apparently have unique ministries after death.^d 'They shall be priests [a ministry word] of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him [what a way to serve!] a thousand years'.^e

Those who triumph over the tribulation will 'serve him day and night in his temple'.^f 'Serve' implies ministry. 'Day and night' suggests a crammed agenda. The 144,000, says another passage, will 'follow the Lamb *wherever he goes*',^g suggesting service that is far from static.

We will all have ministries in the age to come. This will include inconceivable heights of ecstatic worship, probably linked with music ministries. 'His servants shall serve him . . . and they shall reign for ever and ever'.^h Worship is ministry, but surely reigning is also. *Revelation* impliesⁱ and *Corinthians* confirms^j that we will have a role in judging the world and even in judging angels.^k (Renown Nineteenth Century theologian, Charles Hodge, believes 'judge' is used here in the sense of rulership,^l i.e. we will rule the angels – an eternal ministry.²)

Yielded to God, our life's work is the unfinished symphony of an eternal Creator. Death marks the point where the divinely orchestrated score crescendos through the clouds, bursting into ethereal, endless stans. We will one day rest from the wearying aspects of service, but the fulfilling aspects will escalate. So pity not the missionary candidate who dies before reaching the field. Like the patriarchs acclaimed in *Hebrews*, she 'died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off'.^m She enters her new life with proven faithfulness – a flying start to a celestial ministry.

David's mind danced with a glorious plan. He would build a temple to honor the God he loved. God turned him down, but study the Lord's reply. First he commended David for his noble desire.ⁿ (Esteemed nineteenth century preacher and Bible scholar, F. B. Meyer, goes as far as concluding from this that our Lord credits to us the goals we would have achieved had we been permitted the opportunity.³) Then God promised David a future glory beyond what he had dared hope for. King David was stunned. He had been seeking to bless the One who had lavished blessings upon him and, in a stroke, God had reversed the scene and was promising David even richer blessings.^o God's commendation of the desire and a future beyond what one dared hope – declined ministry offers might not be so bad after all.

Even before he gained the throne David had uncovered a divine principle pertinent to this discussion. With his men, he had set off at a furious pace in pursuit of the Amalekites who had decimated their village and taken their wives and children captive. By the time they reached the ravine, a third were too exhausted to continue. The rest pushed on, overtook the Amalekites, and somehow mustered the strength to defeat them. As the victors returned, the baser ones began murmuring, 'Why should the wimps who stayed behind share the booty? They've been holidaying

^a John 5:17; Matthew 10:29; 1 Corinthians 12:6

^b Hebrews 7:25; 9:24

^c Hebrews 1:14

^d Revelation 20:4-6

^e Revelation 20:6

^f Revelation 7:15

^g Revelation 14:4 (emphasis mine)

^h Revelation 22:3,5

ⁱ For example, Revelation 2:26-27; 3:22

^j Corinthians 6:2-3

^k See also 2 Timothy 2:12; Luke 22:29-30; Daniel 7:22

^l For example, Ruth 1:1

^m Hebrews 11:13

ⁿ 1 Kings 8:18

^o 2 Samuel chapter 7

while we've been spilling our blood. Let's return their families but keep the plunder to ourselves.' The man after God's heart – the one chosen as living proof that God does not look upon outward appearance – rebuked them. It is God, not human strength, that brings victory and those who missed the battle were just as keen as those who fought. It became a permanent ordinance for the people of God that those staying behind with the supplies be rewarded as handsomely as those who enter the battle.^a

It's our passion, not our achievement, that counts with God. So nothing, not even the thought that Christ could return tomorrow, should hinder our quest for ministry.^b

'Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, for you know your labor in the Lord is not in vain.'^c

Wedding Bells

Jamie Buckingham describes the great love Kathryn Kuhlman had for the sick – a love intensified to almost tangible radiance whenever she pressed an ailing babe to her bosom, or tearfully hugged an alcoholic. The love of God, caught by a heart that could know no lover but the Holy Spirit and rainbowed through an empty womb, became a distinctly feminine love; love of a hue so special that it could only shine from an unfulfilled woman who had brought her pain to Jesus. 'No man could have ever loved like that,' writes Buckingham. 'It took a woman, bereft of the love of a man, her womb barren, to love as she loved.' In her younger days, however, she came within a hair's breadth of losing her ministry by marrying a divorced preacher.⁴

In the South Sea Islands – where beautiful, highly promiscuous, nude women mobbed unmarried men fresh from conservative Britain – tragedy struck.⁵ Marriage might have rendered them less vulnerable. On most mission fields, however, the greatest danger fell on married women. Had early missionaries treated New Testament teaching on singleness less as a Pauline eccentricity and more as a manifestation of God's benevolent wisdom,^d an appalling amount of death and suffering would have been averted. In harsh, disease-riddled environments and in an era when little was known about birth-control, child-bearing killed vast numbers of female missionaries. And the infant mortality rate was horrific. The dangers were great for all missionaries, but so many married women died that it was not too unusual for male missionaries to marry three times. One buried seven wives.⁶ I can only admire the enormous sacrifices godly women made for Christ in foreign lands, but I wonder whether they all died solely for Christ or whether some died because they preferred marriage to the solitude of singleness – a solitude tortuously accentuated by living in a foreign culture.

Today – though it's marriages, not women, that face a frightening mortality rate – high stakes and powerful forces still rule the marriage game.

More than almost any other decision, our resolution of the marriage issue shapes our lives and shrinks or expands our life's work. 'Family problems,' wrote Harold J. Westing, 'are the number one cause on the missionary casualty list.'⁷ Remain single, and some ministry opportunities remain closed. Marry a divorcee, and in some circles various ministry possibilities evaporate.

Baptist Billy Graham married a Presbyterian who refused to accept Baptist beliefs. Perhaps it helped in the long term, but in the early days it threatened his ministry.⁸

If the decision is still within your grasp, prayerfully consider the ministry implications before acting as if you were a slave to passion, rather than a slave of Christ. If you are already married, do everything to nurture that union to make it the best possible instrument for the Lord to wield for his glory.

Tragically, the people most potentially worthy of heaven's thunderous applause sometimes forget that self-denial loses its virtue when it inflicts involuntary suffering on loved ones. Married men are particularly prone to the noble sacrifice that turns sour. Like a powerful missile seconds from blast off, our sights can be so mindlessly locked on to a worthy target that we are a danger to anyone near us.

^a 1 Samuel 30:23-25

^b Luke 12:35-48

^c 1 Corinthians 15:58

^d 1 Corinthians 7

A pastor who was spearheading a significant breakthrough in an ethnic community, confided that his marriage was floundering. Overcome by the need in the community, he would have a guilt attack whenever he spent time with his family. I thought afterwards (that's when most of my gems turn up) I should have reminded him, 'With millions of Christians at God's disposal, our Lord has only to whisper and suddenly your community would be the focus of more evangelistic effort than you could ever equal. No evangelist is indispensable. Your marriage role, however, is far more serious. God cannot give your wife another husband – unless he kills you.'

Tend the marriage garden; nurture its delicate joys, not to withdraw into hedonism, but to avoid the complacency that turns a work of God into a desert.

If anyone ever had cause for complacency it was Adam. His was a marriage made in heaven. Like no other romance it had all the ingredients for the endless bliss reserved for fairy-tales. Yet even Eve, literally made for Adam, led her God-given partner into a spiritual nightmare.

Whether you are single, married or whatever, your marital status is a bed of roses, complete with thorns. Cultivate this garden with tender, holy devotion and, in season, your life will fill with fragrant beauty. Treat it roughly, and you'll bleed.

Pure as the Driven Smog

It was the most thrilling moment of his life. Isaiah was about to receive his call. Suddenly he was seized by an overwhelming consciousness of his 'unclean lips'.^a

Simon Peter fell before Jesus. 'Depart from me, I'm a sinner!' he blurted out. It was then that he received his call.^b

Scripture outlines the qualities God looks for when choosing people for the ministries of *elder, bishop, deacon* and *widow*.^c Prominence is given to moral attributes. The 'defiled and unbelieving', says Scripture, are unfit for any kind of service.^d It is the person who walks in a manner 'worthy of the Lord' who is 'fruitful in every good work'.^e Everyone who cleanses himself 'will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work'.^f

Joseph was so straight God made him a ruler. As humor, that might be weak, but as a truth it is powerful.

If the stench of self is contaminating our efforts, it's no wonder success treats us as if we have B.O. Ministry without morality is ministry without God. It's as useless as a meal without food offered to a starving world.

Anyone unwilling to be rid of sin, has not only no ministry, but no place in the kingdom.^g It is that serious. If you fail to grasp this, you fail.

We've felt the sickening thud as Christian superstars crash. If a man in the pew falls, few hear of it and the damage is contained. Satan gains more by bringing down key people. If we can barely survive on the fringe, dare we approach the vortex of Satan's fury? If our act is sometimes unseemly, dare we move into the spotlight?

Future service may bring us under the relentless eye of the public. Now is the time to shed ourselves of everything not Christlike. Any attempt to delay this purging may embarrass both us and the Lord. The time already passed is more than sufficient for acting like the godless.^h

Ministries wrecked on the rocks of greed and lust have sent shock waves around the globe. God has allowed ravaging publicity that the whole world may fear. And we dare not imagine there are only a few sins God hates. Any lack of self-control is likely to cause wait problems.

The following, though an arbitrary example in an ocean of possibilities, should suffice to warn us from the treacherous rocks lurking beneath the inviting waters of moral compromise.

Perhaps you have heard the expression, 'speaking evangelistically'. You know I love a laugh, but I can't smile at God's people telling lies in the name of Christ. This is serious. Dishonesty is sin.

^a Isaiah 6:5-9

^b Luke 5:8-11

^c 1 Timothy 3:1-13; 5:3-14; Titus 1:5-11

^d Titus 1:15-16

^e Colossians 1:10

^f 2 Timothy 2:21

^g Matthew 7: 21-23; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Galatians 5:17-21; Ephesians 5:3-8; Colossians 3:5-9; Revelation 21:8

^h 1 Peter 4:3

Each time an exaggeration is brought to light, a cloud of skepticism darkens the real work of Christ. New Christians can be so shaken as to endanger their spiritual walk.

Christian exaggerators are under enormous pressure to protect their deception. With their every struggle they sink lower.

We all want to tell of our triumphs rather than our defeats. It is easy to imagine such selective truth-telling magnifies God. Yet even this distortion could have dire results, pushing sensitive believers into despair because their lives do not approach the synthetic success stories they hear.

But who has the courage to be totally honest? To bear the pain of righteous living requires divine strength. Now is the moment to seek it. Why not pray this instant?

After years of intense experience and prayer for young people dominated by powerful addictions, David Wilkerson found the three-pronged weapon for crushing the power of besetting sin.⁹ It is so thoroughly Scriptural and so workable that thousands, probably millions, of us have received this revelation independently. Not only does it work, it applies to every area of spiritual life I can think of. Here is my version:

1. Desperately want God's best (in this case, victory over temptation).

2. Be convinced that your resources are woefully inadequate. Recognize that if it were up to you, you would never make it. Cease struggling.

3. Know that because of his incomprehensible, unstoppable, Calvary-proven love, his rock-solid commitment to his word and his white hot yearning to be glorified in you, the Most High will miraculously intervene in your life, giving you total victory. Against this knowledge, Satan is helpless. He can do nothing but bluff. Giving in to temptation is like handing over your valuables to a fierce-looking weakling brandishing a cardboard gun. Christians are never overpowered by temptation, we simply surrender before discovering that temptation's pull is hopelessly out-matched by the power of the invincible God who dwells within us.

Reading about this weapon will deliver you no more than reading a cookbook will feed you. As God's gladiator you must clasp that weapon and do battle in the power of the risen Lord.

Every few years, new movements sweep the Christian world, emphasizing particular biblical truths. God may well be in many of these but, sadly, it seems that for every truth rediscovered, another slips from our grasp. When I compare myself and other present day Christians with past generations, what shames me most is that few of us ache for righteousness. We might fast for a supernatural experience, but for holiness . . .? The power previous generations craved was power over sin – habits, selfishness, anger, covetousness, lust – not power over circumstances. For many of us, the miraculous – power over nature – is the ultimate. Power over our own nature languishes low on our priorities.

'It is not great talents God blesses, wrote Robert Murray McCheyne, so much as great likenesses to Jesus.' McCheyne spoke with authority. He lived just thirty years – only a dozen as a Christian – yet after more than a century this Scottish pastor is still revered. A holy minister, he believed, is an awesome weapon in the hand of God.¹⁰

God has a goal for your life. It's bigger than ministry. It is a goal so vast that everything that touches you works toward it.^a God's goal is that you become Christ-like.^b

Money

If you are unwilling to suffer financial hardship, you have disqualified yourself from service.

Yes, God provides. I'm not talking starvation, but I mean genuine hardship, nonetheless. Foxes have holes, but followers of Christ must sometimes forgo even that.^c For the sake of ministry, Paul knew what it was to be 'abased'^d and go hungry.^e

Love of money lights a fuse that has exploded many a ministry.

'It's a pity Roger's money is tainted,' said someone to Mark Twain.

'Twice tainted,' corrected the writer, ' 'Tain't yours and 'tain't mine.'

^a Romans 8:28-29

^b 1 Corinthians 15:49; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 John 3:2

^c Luke 9:57-58; see also Luke 14:34; 18:22-28

^d Philippians 4:12

^e 2 Corinthians 11:27

Certainly, Fred never seemed to have enough. He was always struggling with his meager salary. Observing his pastor only magnified his misery. He knew Pastor Bob received even less than he did, yet he always seemed to have plenty.

One day, after yet another frustrating battle with bills and bank accounts, Fred's pride finally cracked. Like a man repossessed, he burst into his pastor's office and demanded financial counseling.

'Well, er – , ' hesitated Pastor Bob, quite taken aback, 'perhaps you should see an accountant.'

'No!' said Fred, 'I want to know *your* secret. How do *you* make ends meet?'

'Well,' he replied, scratching the few hairs remaining on his head, 'I've never thought much about it. I guess it's just a combination of prayer and common sense. I – '

'Right! I'll do it!' With that, Fred shot out of the office, leaving Pastor Bob more mystified than ever.

It was weeks before the pastor mustered the courage to raise the matter again. 'How are things going – um – material – er – financially?'

Fred beamed. 'I took your advice and it worked!'

'It did?' said the pastor, betraying just a hint of amazement.

'Yes! Since I've been prayerfully using my common cents, my dollars aren't nearly so rare!'¹¹

We are duty-bound to use money wisely. Scripture tells us to do what we can to get out of debt^a and meet family financial responsibilities.^b But it goes further, encouraging us to believe God to provide us with an abundance for 'every good work'.^c

Paul urges us to follow his example – working hard to become financially independent; able to support our own, and even other ministries.^d Supporting your future ministry may be expensive, perhaps involving the purchase of costly equipment, in addition to living expenses.

The apostle began his stay in Corinth by dividing his time between leather work and preaching. He later put aside his paid employment and for a while preached full-time.^e No doubt, wise financial management helped release him into this narrower ministry. While Corinth sleeps, see his needle, almost hot, plunging in and out the leather, preparing him for a time when he would concentrate wholly on apostolic work.

Think of parlor maid Gladys Aylward – would-be missionary to China – saving her pennies for a one-way, third-class ticket to the fulfillment of God's call. Money spent on ice cream is lost forever. Money squirreled away may one day be invested in the kingdom.

Motivation

Being zealous is a cinch when throngs gather to hear your every sigh. It's quite another tune when nobody wants to hear us. Yet this is a blessing masquerading as a trial. Being stripped of an audience removes distractions and helps ensure we are serving God, not our egos.

Ultimately, there is only one ministry – to love the Lord. Every service is but an expression of this, or it is not ministry at all.

A woman trapped within a paralyzed body, unable to speak or move, yet filled with love for God, ministers far more nobly than someone seemingly doing great things, motivated by human praise. One serves God, the other only thinks he does.

Love for God should bring to flashpoint our desire to glorify the Lord. The purging of any lesser motives is worth it, no matter what the cost.

A common way of coping with not having the vocation we ache for, is to convince ourselves that we don't really want it. It's an enticing mental trick to ease our pain. But we must refuse this cowardly path.

The crux of Abraham's dealings with God was his yearning for a son. Try retelling this inspiring tale of love, trust and obedience, with an Abraham who was indifferent about having a son. The story would shrivel up.

^a Romans 13:8; 1 Corinthians 7:20-23

^b Mark 7:9-13; 1 Timothy 5:8,16

^c 2 Corinthians 9:8 – see also Ephesians 4:28

^d 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12; 1 Corinthians 9:12, 15-19; 2 Corinthians 11:7-12

^e Acts 18:1-5 – most versions

Small details must sometimes wane. There's no point itching to minister in India if the Lord wants us to go to Africa. But although God can modify our dreams, so can doubt. Before we allow any tempering of a desire, we must ensure the change is inspired by God and not by defeatism. When heaven speaks through the static of our wavering and restlessness, it's easy to confuse 'not yet' with 'never'.

A woman sang in church. I was captivated. To my ears, her voice was superior to many big-name singers. Yet it looks as if she may remain little known. I pondered and prayed about this, finally concluding that it's the most determined who make it to the top; not necessarily the best.

If that seems unfair, think again. You had no say about what talents you would be born with, but you have much to say about what you do with them. Other things being equal, the ordinary person who puts in a superior effort will surpass the superior person who puts in an ordinary effort.

A burning desire for ministry is a gift from God. Fan it. It will fuel your rise to success. The 'pole-vaulting parson', Olympic gold medalist Bob Richards, analyzed the distinguishing qualities of champions. Like many other investigators, he concluded that in any field of endeavor the critical ingredient is the will to win.

So let the urge to magnify your Lord consume you. Let it blaze till it drives you to your knees; till you hold the prize that thrills your Maker's heart.

Charlotte Elliott became an invalid in her youth and deeply resented the cruel restrictions. Decade after decade found her wrestling those same agonizing restrictions. Her brother's evangelistic success, contrasting so markedly with her own fruitless life, intensified her anguish. She longed to serve her Lord but instead she was incapacitated, isolated, useless. At age 47, still single, still sick, still cut off from ministry opportunities, she pressed into a poem her frustration, confusion and helplessness, with words like 'fightings and fears within, without'. The year was 1836. The poem became the hymn *Just as I am*. Years later, still a century before Billy Graham took up the hymn, her brother looked back on his productive life and confessed that he had probably achieved less in all his years than his sister had accomplished with one hymn.¹² Her hymn is now believed to have 'touched more hearts and influenced more people for Christ than any other song ever written.'¹³

Do not wait for tomorrow. Pour your frustration into daily fervor. Let it hound you each day to thrust aside personal comfort and squeeze more of God's grandeur into those 24 hours.

Gem Collecting

Harriet Auber found herself without writing materials. Rather than risk losing the words of a new hymn forming in her mind, she is said to have scratched them on a window pane with a diamond ring.¹⁴

I always take a pen and paper with me. It's cheaper than a diamond and people show an embarrassing amount of interest in what you do to their windows. Ideas have a habit of not waiting until I'm at my desk. They rarely wait till I'm out of the shower or until traffic lights stay red long enough for me to scribble furiously. (Why is it you can never find a red light when you want one?)

Whenever ideas flow – in my case, drip and dribble – record them. I have been thinking lately about how to write. Thoughts have formed about how to teach this subject. It's unlikely I would ever be asked, but why waste ideas? It takes almost no time to scrawl them. And even I can afford a scrap of paper. I'm sure to lose forever some good ideas if I don't record them, and if I am ever approached about the matter, I've saved time. All I have to do now is find a way of not losing the piece of paper . . .

Frances Ridley Havergal, an effervescent girl with golden curls, sat before a painting of Christ. Inspired, she grabbed a circular and scribbled on its back. Displeased with her effort, she threw it in the fire, then on impulse, retrieved it. She carried the crumpled, singed piece of paper in her pocket until showing it to a woman she judged too ignorant to see its flaws. The old woman's reaction moved Frances to retain the poem. Eventually it was published. This talented girl went on to write many fine poems and hymns, yet this product of her youth is ranked with the most popular she ever wrote. Thank God she reluctantly kept that 'useless' poem!¹⁵

Whenever a brainwave hit Frank Boreham (1871-1959) he would jot it down and file it away. Even after he retired as a pastor, 'he was still getting literary dividends from ideas he had noted years before.' So precious were his notes that every time he went on vacation he buried them in his

backyard in case his house caught fire.¹⁶ I don't know how he deduced that disaster could only hit when he was on holidays. (I'd avoid his travel agent.) Maybe vacations were the only occasion he let all his family out of the house at the same time. Maybe he conducted drills every week to ensure if fire broke out at 3 AM his family would instinctively charge through the flames, grasp his notes and carry them to safety before fully waking up. And maybe I am bone lazy, but the alternative of storing a duplicate set of notes off-site seems preferable. With the advent of photocopiers and computers, keeping copies of precious scribbles at a friend's place is too easy to even consider not doing it.

Smell the ascending smoke. See the crackling flames hungrily chomp the canvas. With a thud, two chattering sisters cheerfully toss another pile of Max Raffle's 'worthless' paintings on the fire – paintings that would have made them millionaires if only they had known. I think I'll stick to burning money.

You may be strongly pressured to under-rate your efforts, but don't be frivolous with the talent entrusted to you. Where appropriate, store your work. Record ideas. Don't destroy them in a fit of depression or spring-cleaning madness. One day you, or someone else, might recognize their worth.

Depression Beaters

There's something else I suggest you should record and horde.

I submitted to two publishers a book about principle of Bible interpretation. Both replied that they wanted me to consider serious discussions with them about publication only as a last resort. Another time, I received an editor's scribbled note at the bottom of a standard rejection form from an international magazine.

All three letters were a disappointment. I stuffed the letters into a filing cabinet and tried to forget. Years later, those same letter became prized possessions, nerving me to keep writing. Although not the response I had hoped for, I discovered that each of them contained favorable comments about the value and quality of my work.

Often words of encouragement are spoken rather than written. It takes a little more effort to jot them down while they are still fresh in your memory, but doing so could break depression's merciless grip at a later, critical moment.

Welcome Correction

Towards the end of his life, a famous author began to drift from the style that had set him apart. Publishers should have told him. He could have corrected it and maintained his high standard, but the publishers lived in fear of him. His books meant big money. One hint that his work was not the epitome of perfection and he would storm out, taking his business elsewhere. So he remained oblivious to his decline until it was too late. His failings were exposed to the world.

Perhaps pride was his downfall, but feelings of inadequacy can be equally dangerous. I'm usually so weighed down by negative thoughts I can barely stay afloat. It takes little extra to send me to the bottom. If anyone suggests the slightest flaw in something I do, it's as though every doubt and destructive thought is instantly confirmed. 'It wasn't your imagination after all!' says the evil one. 'You really are as smart as a pork chop in a Jewish sandwich.' I take it as final proof that I have as much potential as a moth taking swimming lessons. Why suffer more pain for something doomed to fail?

Knowing the negative spiral it frequently produces, I would rather tongue-kiss a crocodile than hear constructive criticism. There must be people who know more than me. Heeding their advice would improve my ability to serve, speeding my entry into effective ministry. Yet fear of correction numbs my mind to common sense. But it cannot rewrite the Bible. Scripture is adamant that we should seek and heed godly and practical counsel.^a

The enemy has declared war on me in this area. It's deliciously easy to wave the white flag, dishonoring the victory Christ won. I must counter-attack, praying in the Spirit hour after hour until Satan withdraws.

^a Proverbs 9:8-9; 11:14; 12:1; 13:18; 15:22; 17:10; 24:6

Delicious Sacrifice

The ministry that costs little is worth little.

Wrote one sage, 'It is simply remarkable how the apostle Paul covered so much territory and accomplished so much without a car.'¹⁷ My admiration runs deeper. In fact, of all ministries since Christ, I most admire Paul's. But what a price!^a

He's being flayed alive. With savage cruelty the whip rips his flesh. It could have all been avoided by compromising on the circumcision issue.^b Lash follows lash after lash. How much pain can one man endure? 'Light the fire!' someone shouts. He awakes with a shriek. Just another nightmare.

While preaching outdoors he suddenly swerves. Only a bird. Last week it was a rock. Deeply moved, a stranger approaches to pat his back. Paul doubles over, convinced he's about to be thumped.

The light begins to fade. He nears a corner. A rush of fear swamps him like an angry ocean wave crashing over him, chilling him. Would another gang of thugs be lurking there? He sees them in his mind, lunging out of the shadows, hate in their eyes, clubs in their hands. His old wounds throb madly, screaming for attention. His prayers intensify. Sanity returns. He rounds the corner.

It's painfully obvious that arrest, and probably worse, awaits him in Jerusalem. He trudges on.

He writes almost longingly about the possibility of marriage.^c Amongst his converts and admirers were enough eligible women to fill Solomon's harem. He denies himself.

Financial support from the churches was his apostolic right. He supports himself.^d What a burden, forcing him to work enormously long hours.

'Imitate me,' writes Paul, 'as I imitate Christ.'^e 'If we suffer with him,' he jubilantly cries, 'we shall reign with him.'^f Like Jesus, he endured for the *joy* that lay ahead.^g His ordeals were dwarfed by the grandeur awaiting him.^h

'Sacrifice is the ecstasy of giving the best we have to the One we love the most.' I applaud that quotation, but let love be genuine. As you ponder the euphoria of love, hear the tortured screams of martyrs, not the background strains of a church organ.

Tears produce the sweetest joy.ⁱ

The pain of service
Is soon forgotten;
The gain endures forever.
The painless service
Is soon forgotten;
The shame endures forever.

Roaring in eternal flame,
Idle ease is now forgotten.
Though soul be saved, empty days,
Like wood and stubble blaze.

Soaring in eternal fame,
Ministry in pain begotten -
Each hardship, each struggle won -
Outshines, outlasts the sun.

How much effort is God worth? Can we out-give God? Try as we may, we can sacrifice nothing for God. The most we can do is exchange fleeting pleasure for eternal joy. That's not a sacrifice. It's an investment.

^a 2 Corinthians 11:23-27

^b Galatians 5:11

^c 1 Corinthians 9:5

^d 1 Corinthians 9:4-19

^e 1 Corinthians 11:1, paraphrase

^f 2 Timothy 2:12; note also Romans 8:17-18

^g Hebrews 12:2

^h 2 Corinthians 4:17

ⁱ Acts 20:19, 24; Luke 6:21; Psalm 126:5

CHAPTER 20: TURNING BARRENNESS INTO BLESSING

She was ashamed. She was tormented. She was barren. Her husband tried to console her. ‘You already have a vocation,’ he virtually told her. Yes, Hannah was a beloved wife. Hundreds of lonely, rejected women would be content with that, but not Hannah. She could know no peace until she had borne a child.^a

This yearning for a baby arose from within, was fuelled by her society’s attitude and further intensified by her rival – her husband’s second wife. Ultimately, however, I believe the pressure was from God.

‘And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the Lord, and wept sore. And she vowed . . . , “O. Lord of hosts, if you will . . . give to your handmaid a man child, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life . . .”’^b

It seems the Lord had long been waiting for this degree of commitment. Perhaps reaching this point sooner would have shaved years off her wait. Nonetheless, to her vow of consecration she added faith. Before any tangible sign of answered prayer ‘her countenance was no longer sad’.^c Years of anguish fostered prayer, devotion, and now, faith. A miracle was hurtling toward this planet.^d

That’s how God moves. Isaac, Israel, Joseph, Samson, Samuel and John the Baptist were all born to women who had been barren.^e Barrenness forced these women to exceptional fervor in praying for conception. Little wonder that they conceived exceptional children.

Hannah nurtured the babe till he was weaned (probably, by Hebrew custom, about three years). She then plunged a knife into her heart, severing herself from her flesh and blood. Custody battles involving surrogate mothers expose the faintest echo of her agony. If the bond at birth can be strong, it was three years harder for Hannah. And this was her only child.

But the beautiful story continues. The Lord, having inspired her heart-rending vow, flooded her with blessings. Her reward went beyond giving birth to a son. It went beyond proudly viewing the development of one of the greatest men of God earth has seen. And it went beyond her acclaim ringing round the globe, generation after generation extolling her devotion. There were further treasures, but the path was steep.

As she surrendered to the priest the fruit of her womb, Hannah jubilantly sang, ‘The barren has borne seven.’^f Oh Hannah! Whatever do you mean? You have no abundance – only one, and even he has been torn from you.

Year by year she made a little robe for the child who was no longer hers. Every stitch was impregnated with love and thanksgiving, but many were dampened with tears for the child she longed to hold, but could not. Once a year she would journey to the house of God and hand over the robe – a pitifully small gift for the little boy she longed to wait on day and night. At each visit the priest would ask God’s special blessing upon this precious mother. And God heard. Radiance burst through the tears of sacrifice. That once-barren lady gave birth to three more sons and two

^a 1 Samuel 1:1-8

^b 1 Samuel 1:10-11

^c 1 Samuel 1:18

^d 1 Samuel 1:20

^e Genesis 18:11; 25:21-26; 30:22-24; Judges 13:3; 1 Samuel 1:20; Luke 1:7, 13

^f 1 Samuel 2:5

daughters.^a Her glory was complete. Yes, the Lord made her like other mothers as she had always wanted, but first he had exalted her above other mothers.

Hannah's vow of surrender unleashed the power of God. Is your life at a stalemate because heaven is awaiting a new depth of consecration from you? Search your heart and God's mind for an answer.

But never make rash vows. Always add, 'if it be God's will.' Otherwise, the vow, not Jesus, is our Master. Our humanity makes it impossible to know we have every eventuality covered. We may be certain our vow is divinely inspired and later discover to our horror that we have misheard. Even after careful consideration, it is usually best to bind ourselves merely to *try* to do it. Though such a resolve seems insipid, the Bible exposes the perils of disregarding this warning. Unless you are convinced of the gravity of this matter, I beg you to study the relevant Scriptures.^b Commitment is the key, not a rush of well-meaning words that flare and fizzle.

Ending barrenness involves being intimate with the one we love. We can think this a chore, and turn it into one, but it is meant to be delightfully fulfilling. Many times in this book I have had to cite intimacy with God – waiting on him, communing with him – as the answer to various aspects of our barrenness. We can treat this as a burden – struggling, straining and afflicting ourselves – or we can unleash love and let snuggling into the heart of God become the beautiful experience he intends it to be. To wish we could know everything about our calling without spending hours alone with God is to wish we could trade the pinnacle of human experience for the clinical coldness of some sort of spiritual in-vitro fertilization.

Since Hannah's experience blends many of the principles of entering fruitful service, let's recycle them, giving our minds the final rinse.

God's woman turned barrenness into a blessing not by suppressing her desires but by letting it bring her to her knees and to a rare level of commitment. Despite her husband's pleas, she would settle for nothing less than God's best. And God, in his grace, would settle for nothing less than *her* best. Creature and Creator wrestled in prayer until she finally yielded, reaching heights of devotion fertile women seldom know. Then she believed before seeing the answer. Closing her mind to a thousand previous failures, she again tried to be fruitful. Even when she held her dream in her arms, she did not slacken in her spiritual quest. She praised her Lord and mixed it with more faith. She kept her costly vow. She gave no space to bitterness. Without overstepping the mark, she faithfully did the little she could to serve the son who now was God's. Finally, the Lord poured upon her an abundance beyond her fondest hopes.

So if life seems barren, emulate Hannah and 'Sing, O barren, . . . for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, says the Lord.'^c

Worship

All service should be an act of worship; the overflowing of a heart brimming with love; a cascade of joyous thanksgiving to your wonderful Savior.

Picture Mrs. Average plodding away at the chore of baking a cake. Contrast this with a starry-eyed young wife, joyfully, almost reverently, pouring her love into a cake for the man of her dreams. See her striving for perfection, longing to thrill the object of her love. This will be more than a cake. Her sights are set on a work of art, a mouth-watering masterpiece, a culinary monument to love, meticulously fashioned to transport her man to gastronomic ecstasy. On wings of love, a mundane task soars to ethereal heights.

Make God the husband in our parable and we catch the spirit of all ministry, whether it be handing out hymn books or facing martyrdom; visiting sister Jane, or dispelling heathen darkness. Moreover, serving God is far more satisfying than our parable suggests. The bride's joy may be crushed by her husband failing to perceive the love in the cake. But every loving deed directed to heaven will be treasured in the heart of God forever. And serving God is not nearly as solitary as the bride's activity. Ministry is the height of intimacy. It is God and you in exquisite harmony bringing

^a 1 Samuel 2:19-21

^b Compare Deuteronomy 7:1-2 with Joshua 9:4-20; note also Judges 11:29-35; Psalm 15:4; Proverbs 20:25; Ecclesiastes 5:2,4-6; Leviticus 5:4; 27:28; Acts 5:3-5

^c Isaiah 54:1

heaven to earth. It is your spirit mingled with God's Spirit flowing out to a needy world. After refreshing the land, bringing life to desert sands, it ascends in clouds of adoration to heaven's throne.

Ministry is giving heaven your very best because you know your King is worthy of nothing less. And it is giving earth *more* than your best because you trust your Lord to surpass your natural gifts. It is giving to God everything possible and achieving through him things impossible.

Yes, ministry involves effort, you throw everything you have into it, but ministry is more than sweat. It is offering your life as clay to the Sculptor, saying in loving submission, 'Here I am Lord, create your masterpiece.'

In Christ Invincible

Faith is not escapism; it's inspiration to face problems head-on. If we're all wishbone and no backbone, we're in trouble. We can waste our whole lives, vainly imagining we will have an outstanding ministry 'one day'. We have no right to expect a ministry tomorrow unless we are moving towards it today. That means praying, planning, training. It means poring over the Scriptures. It means taking risks and continually looking to the sky to see if now is the time to take off.

Even if it takes years to come together, an outstanding ministry is never far away. It's as close as the prayer that you breathe. It's in your dreams and your labors; in your heart and your faith.

It was the end of a day and I was walking behind two office workers. Said one wearily to the other, 'Another day, another dollar.' I inwardly concurred. My work is such drudgery. From the moment I start, I look to its end – the end of the day, the end of the week, the end of ever having to come to this place. It's outside those hours that I 'live'; it's then that I do things of value.

But my eavesdropping wasn't over. With mock despair, her companion added, 'Another day closer to the grave.' That shook me. He's right! How could I wish a day away? I will never get it back. 'Another day closer to the grave.' If only those words could be tattooed into my brain. 'One of the illusions of life,' said Emerson, 'is that the present hour is not the critical, decisive hour.'

I must wring full value from every opportunity, no matter how wretched. If God gives me greater opportunities tonight or tomorrow or next year, that's marvelous, but *now* is the time to glorify my Lord. To say 'tomorrow' is to borrow time that isn't mine.

I'm told that Peter Ball, English monk-turned-bishop, begins each day by telling the Lord, 'This is the *best* day there's ever going to be in my life.' The notion horrifies me. *Today*, the best day of my life? Perish the thought! *Today*, while I'm still serving my sentence as a useless cog in a meaningless machine? *Today*, while I'm thrashing with all the frenzy of a wild animal caught in the cruelest of traps? *Today?* *Today*.

It's better to visit a house of mourning, says Scripture, than a place of enjoyment.^a A party lulls us into wasting precious, God-given moments. A stroll through a cemetery spurs us to invest in eternity while we still have breath.

Jettison an 'I will be happy when . . .' mentality. 'Rejoice evermore' commands Scripture, and it starts today. God is a 'now' God and his people must be 'now' people.

Let's seize every opportunity to magnify our Maker. We need special circumstances far less than we need special dedication. During the American Civil War 'Uncle' John Vasser labored long hours near the battle lines in personal evangelism to up to a hundred individuals a day. His capture made so little difference that the enemy general released him with the command, 'Take this man's promise that he will not tell of our whereabouts for twenty-four hours, and let us see him out of our lines, or we will have a prayer-meeting from here to Richmond.'¹

Hunt for opportunities to serve. Throw yourself whole-heartedly into everything God gives you, no matter how trivial.

Soldiers train by slaving at apparently useless chores. They relinquish civilian pleasures when the front line is half a world away. They obey silly orders, attack dummies, run till near exhaustion when neither attacking, nor being pursued. You are being steeled for valor; primed in every fiber of your being. Your Trainer is working powerfully no matter how empty your present service seems. At the right time you'll be in peak condition; in Christ invincible.

^a Ecclesiastes 7:2

A cure, Not an Aspirin

Despite my relentless longing to share these truths, it hurts to let this book be published. The more I work on the book, the more immersed in its truths I become. It's continually washing away layer after grimy layer of negativity and buoying me ever higher. I hate the thought of this process ever ending, but our experience affirms that it will – soon after I put the book down. I have had to reread it scores of times to halt my slide back into the bog. And still I need it.

Though my need is chronic, I doubt if the mildest affliction could be relieved forever through one reading of this book. I expect you to *feel* better after a single dose but regular doses are essential for a permanent cure. So I urge you to keep this book handy, even after completing it. Long-term problems need long-term solutions. I covet a new life for you, not just a momentary easing of the pain. Experience suggests you will need this book year after year. We never reach the point where temptation leaves us forever.

Negative thoughts have been roosting in our heads, pecking away at the fruit beginning to form in our lives. We've shooed these pests away, but they will stealthily return. That's our cue to skim through the book again. Highlight the parts that especially speak to you or uplift you. Personalize them. Write them out. Display them. Memories them. Add to them. Share them. Live them. They will keep the vermin away and bring you to new levels of fruitfulness.

Find ingenious ways to keep in your consciousness truths you particularly need. At work I must set and use several computer passwords. I might say to myself *I will praise the Lord at all times*, while typing the first letter of each word. IWPTLAAT then becomes my new password. No one could guess such an apparently random string of letters and I can remember it only by rehearsing in my mind that positive declaration every time I must use it. Perhaps you could put a little heart somewhere to remind you how much you are loved by God. There are thousands of possibilities. Finding some that work for you will be well worth the effort.

I'd be thrilled if my expressions sometimes help. I have tried to shape them to stick in slippery memories. But don't be chained to my words. Using your words will help the truths become yours. And don't be confined to the paltriness of my insight. Hound God with the passion and confidence of a cherished lover until you receive your own Bible-based, Christ-centered revelations.

No matter how hot it's served or how much it's sweetened, second-hand revelation is as insipid as second-hand tea leaves unless the Holy Spirit comes upon you, exploding those words within you with such power that it becomes your own divine encounter. A hand-me-down word from God might bring a little refreshment, but a truth super-charged by the Spirit of God percolating through one's life is so superior that no cost is too high a price to pay for it. Fervent prayer and Bible meditation is the usual price.

Though I have prayed incessantly that this book bless you as much as it has me, I fear I'm asking God to break one of his principles. Why should he command us to seek and to ask and devote our lives to poring over Scripture unless that's the way he prefers to reveal his truth? It is truths in the heart, not words in a book, that set us free. And lodging them there takes spiritual and mental effort. I crave the joy of serving you by doing all the prayer and study, but that's like trying to play tennis for you – I get the healthy exercise and you miss all the fun.

Surging Toward the Goal

John Towy was so short you might wonder why he bothered to line up. He competed against men whose elbows would literally hit his head as he ran. Once he entered a two-mile race – twenty-two laps of an indoor board track so cut up that it was mainly splinters. After the first half a lap, tragedy struck. His shoe came off. It was the end of the race for Towy. No one can compete against champions, with only one shoe. Yet he kept running: one leg now effectively shorter than the other; splinters, like fiery darts, shooting into his foot. Resisting the pain, closing his mind to the sheer insanity of it, he pressed on, lap after lap after lap. At the end of lap twenty, he took the lead. A lap later, still in front, gold seemed a certainty. Then Forest Efav, towering eleven inches taller than Towy, began to close in. Efav gave it everything he had. Towy kept pumping those aching legs; pounding that painful foot. The finish was just feet away. Towy was still ahead; Efav still gaining. Just before the tape, Efav burst through to win by a foot (take whatever way you like).²

TURNING BARRENNESS INTO BLESSING

If athletes do such things, often without Christ, just to prove they can rapidly put one leg in front of the other, then I can hardly wait to hear what you will accomplish, empowered by the Spirit, eyes fixed on eternal goals.

Born in despair; reborn to conquer.
Lost in defeat; saved to triumph.
Destined for greatness,
Bound for glory,
Held in love,
Girded with truth,
Filled with might;
Free the slave,
Heal the sick,
Raise the dead,
Astound the world.

Out on a Limb for God

We should not demand iron-clad guarantees of success before attempting something big for the Almighty. What value can we place on one human soul?^a The slightest possibility of winning someone for Christ should be enough to set us ablaze.

We must resist the urge to play safe and bury our talent.^b Why let fear of failure immobilize us? Look not at the impossibility of the situation; look at the impossibility of God ever failing. Like Peter walking the waves, if we begin to sink, Jesus is there, ready to grasp our hand.

Work hard. Make financial, social and recreational sacrifices, like an athlete training for Olympic gold. Invest time and effort into a ministry that is presently non-existent. That's faith in action. That's following the path of the good and faithful servant. In submission to God, ears tuned to heaven's frequency, such risks are honoring to God. You're investing in eternal glory.

Grub, stretch your wings;
Worm, you're gonna fly.
Dunce, astound the school.
Slave, prepare to rule.
Cleaner, address the throng.
Welder, inspire with song.
Plumber, rebuke that cancer.
Mother, kings you'll counsel.
Stone, you're gonna sparkle;
Rock, you're solid opal.

^a Psalm 49:7-8; 1 Peter 1:18-19

^b Matthew 25:25

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Though most of the following have little in common with the subject matter of this book, I have drawn from them in my search for powerful illustrations and for confirmation of my biblical expositions.

- Andersen, H. G. *Mark, John IN Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible in Five Volumes* Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1976, 4:88-89.
- Andrew, Brother with John and Elizabeth Sherrill *God's Smuggler* Hodder and Stroughton, Kent, UK, 1967.
- Avery, Gordon *Companion to the Song Book of the Salvation Army* Salvationist Publishing and Supplies Ltd., London, 1961.
- Bacon, Ernest W *John Bunyan: Pilgrim and Dreamer* Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1983.
- Barclay, William (1) *The Letters to the Corinthians* St. Andrew Press, Edinburgh, UK, 1956.
- Barclay, William (2) *The Masters Men* SCM London, 1959.
- Barclay, William (3) *Revelation of John* (Vol 2) St. Andrew Press, Edinburgh, UK, 1960.
- Barnes, Albert *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament* Kregel, Grand Rapids, Michigan.
- Beattie, David J. *The Romance of Sacred Song* Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London, 1931.
- Beeson, Ray & Hunsicker, R M *The Hidden Price of Greatness* Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois, 1991.
- Blundell, Nigel *The World's Greatest Mistakes* Octopus Books, London, 1980.
- Boehme, Ron *If God Has A Plan For My Life Why Can't I Find It??* YWAM Publishing, Seattle, WA, 1992.
- Breese, Dave *Seven Men Who Rule From the Grave* Scripture Press Foundation, Bucks, UK, 1990.
- Bridgeman, Harriet and Drury, Elizabeth, editors *The Last Word* Deutsch, London, 1982.
- Brown, Keith and Hoover, John *It's Never Too Late to Say Yes!* Regal books, Ventura, CA, 1987.
- Brown, Theron and Butterworth, Hezekiah *The Story of the Hymns and the Tunes* Geo. H. Doran Co., New York, 1906.
- Buckingham, Jamie (1) *Daughter of Destiny: Kathryn Kuhlman* Logos International, Plainfield, New Jersey, 1976.
- Buckingham, Jamie (2) *The Truth Will Set You Free But First It Will Make You Miserable* Creation House, Altamonte Springs, Florida, 1988.
- Carnegie, Dale *How to Win Friends and Influence People* Revised Edition, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, NSW Australia, 1981.
- Catherwood, Christopher *Five Evangelical Leaders* Hodder and Stroughton, London, 1984.
- Carpenter, E. E *Tithe* IN Bromiley, Geoffrey (Ed) *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* Vol 4:861-4, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1988.
- Cole, Margaret *Never too Old for God* Spire Books, Old Tappan, New Jersey, 1979.
- Corsini, Raymond J., (Editor) *Encyclopedia of Psychology* Wiley & Sons, New York, 1984.
- Cousins, Norman *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient: Reflections on Healing and Regeneration* Bantam Books, New York, 1979.
- Cowart, John W *People Whose Faith Got Them into Trouble: Stories of Costly Discipleship* IVP, Illinois, 1990.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cowell, F. R. *Everyday Life in Ancient Rome* Putnam, New York, 1961.
- Cruz, Nicky *Brothers & Sisters, We Have a Problem* Dove Christian Books, Melbourne, Florida, 1988.
- Cunningham, Loren *Is that Really You, God?* Chosen Books, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984.
- Douglas, J. D. (Gen. Ed.) *The New Bible Dictionary* Inter-Varsity Press, London, 1962.
- Dunn, John (1) *John Bunyan: A Biography* New Creation Teaching Ministry, Blackwood, South Australia, no date
- Dunn, John (2) *George Whitefield: Man of Grace* New Creation Teaching Ministry Blackwood, South Australia, 1992
- Edersheim, Alfred *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ* Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1876, reprint 1982.
- Edman, V. Raymond *They Found the Secret* Clarion Classics, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984.
- Finney, Charles G. *The Autobiography of Charles G Finney Condensed and Edited by Helen Wessel* Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, Mn, 1977.
- Finnie, Kellsye *William Carey* Baptist Missionary Soc., Didcot, Oxon & OM Publishing, Carlisle, Cumbria, England, 1986.
- Foulkes, Francis *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary* Tyndale Press, London, 1963.
- France, R. T. *The Gospel According to Matthew* Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1985.
- Gaebelein, Frank E. (Gen. Ed.) *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 8* Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984.
- Gilbert, Martin *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy* Collins, London, 1986.
- Greenman, Bill *How to Find Your Purpose in Life* Whitaker, Springdale Pennsylvania, 1987.
- Guthrie, Donald *New Testament Introduction* Third Ed. (rev.) in one vol., IVP, Illinois, 1970
- Guthrie, H. H *Tithe* IN *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* Vol 4:654-655, Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tennessee, 1962.
- Hacking, W *Smith Wigglesworth Remembered* Harrison House, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1981.
- Haggai, John (1) *Forward* in Reginald Klimionok *God Sent His Angel* Vision Enterprises, Mt. Gravatt, Queensland, 1984.
- Haggai, John (2) *Lead On! Leadership That Endures in a Changing World* Word (UK) Milton Keynes, Eng., 1986.
- Hanks, Geoffrey *70 Great Christians Changing the World* Christian Focus Publications, Ross-hire, Scotland, 1992.
- Hanks, Kurt and Parry, Jay A. *Wake Up Your Creative Genius* William Kaufmann, Inc., Los Altos, CA, 1983.
- Harrison, Frank Mott *John Bunyan* Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1964.
- Hart, William J. *Unfamiliar Stories of Familiar Hymns* W. A. Wilde Co., Mass., 1940.
- Havergal, Maria V. G. *Memorials of Frances Ridley Havergal* James Nesbet & Co, London, 1881.
- Hembree, Ron *The Mark Buntain Story* Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, 1979.
- Hendriksen, William *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1973.
- Hodge, Charles A *Commentary On 1 & 2 Corinthians* Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1974 reprint.
- Huxley, Elspeth *Florence Nightingale* Putnam, New York, 1975.
- Hulse, Stewart H., Egeth, Howard, Deese, James *The Psychology of Learning* McGraw Hill, Singapore, 1980.
- Inventors and Discoverers: Changing Our World* National Geographic Society, Washington DC, 1988.
- Johnson, Barbara *Pain is Inevitable but Misery is Optional so Stick a Geranium in Your Hat and Be Happy!* Word Publishing, Dallas, 1990.
- Kavanaugh, Patrick *The Spiritual Lives of Great Composers* Word Publishing, Keynes, England, 1992.
- Kenton, Leslie & Susannah *Raw Energy* Arrow Books, London, 1984.
- Knight, Peter *Positively No: The Book of Rejection* Unwin Paperbacks, London, 1985.
- Knight, Walter B. *Knight's Treasury of Illustrations* Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1963.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Knox, R. A. *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* Oxford Univ. Press, London, 1950.
- Koren, Tedd *Neurological Basis of Disease* Koren Publications, Philadelphia, 1990.
- Lawson, James Gilchrist *Deeper Experiences of Famous Christians* Warner Press, Anderson, Indiana, 1911.
- Leon-Dufour, Xavier Trans. by Terrence Prendergast *Dictionary of New Testament Times* Harper & Row, New York, 1980.
- Logsdon, Duane *Lord, Let Me Give You a Million Dollars* Kingsway Publications, Eastbourne, 1983.
- Lucado, Max *The Applause of Heaven* Word Publishing, Keynes, England, 1990.
- Lyall, Leslie T *John Sung* China Inland Mission, London, 1954.
- Mable, N *Popular Hymns and Hymn Writers: A Course of Lectures*, Second Ed. enl. Deighton, Bell and Co., Cambridge, 1886.
- Mackenzie, Norman and Jeanne *Dickens: A Life* Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 1979.
- McKenzie, E. C. *14,000 Quips & Quotes For Speakers, Writers, Editors, Preachers and Teachers* Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1980.
- Maltz, Maxwell *Psycho-cybernetics* Pocket Books, New York, 1960.
- Manning, Helen, with Sumner, Peter and Pearl *Through Blindness* The Christian Foundation for the Blind, Hawthorn, Vic, Australia, Second Edition, 1980
- Maus, Cynthia Pearl *Christ and the Fine Arts, An Anthology of Pictures, Poetry, Music and Stories* Harper & Bros, New York, 1938.
- Monty, Shirlee *May's Boy: An Incredible Story of Love* Mowbray Unity Press, London, 1981.
- Morris, Leon *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* The Tyndale Press, London, 1958.
- Morris, Leon *The Revelation of St. John: An Introduction and Commentary* The Tyndale Press, London, 1969.
- Mr. T *Mr. T The Man With The Gold* Allen, London, 1985.
- Norfolk, Donald *Farewell to Fatigue* Michael Joseph, London, 1985.
- Oates, Lynette *Hidden People: How a Remote New Guinea Culture Was Brought Back From the Brink of Extinction* Albatross Books, Sutherland, Australia, 1992.
- O'Connor, Greg *A letter to supporters* Open Doors with Brother Andrew (Australia), 13:7:90.
- Oech, Roger von *A Wack on the Side of the Head: How to Unlock Your Mind For Innovation*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, Australia, 1983.
- Olson, Bruce *Bruchko* Creation House, Florida, 1978.
- One Hundred Great Lives* Odhams Press, London, no date, no author.
- Orr, James *Bible in Bromily*, G. B. (Gen. Ed.) *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1979, 1:482-492.
- Petersen, William J (1) *Martin Luther Had a Wife* Bridge Publishing, Chepstow, UK, 1984.
- Petersen, William J (2) *Catherine Marshall Had a husband* Living Books, Wheaton, Illinois 1986.
- Petersen, William J (3) *Johann Sebastian Bach Had a Wife* Living Books, Wheaton, Illinois 1987.
- Phillips, J. B. *The New Testament in Modern English* Collins, London, 1972.
- Pickering, George *Creative Malady* Allen & Unwin, London, 1974.
- Pollock, John (1) *Moody Without Sankey: A New Biographical Portrait* Hodder and Stroughton, London, 1966.
- Pollock, John (2) *A Fistful of Heroes: Great Reformers and Evangelists* Marshall, Morgan & Scott, Hants, UK. 1988.
- Pratney, Winkie A. *Revival: Principles to Change the World* Whitaker House, Springdale, PA, 1983.
- Prescott, J E *Christian Hymns and Their Writers* Independent Pr., London, 1944.
- Renwick, A. W. *The Story of the Church* Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, 1958.
- Richards, Bob *The Heart of a Champion* Spire Books, Fleming H. Revell Company, Westwood, New Jersey, 1966.
- Robertson, Pat *The New Millennium* Word Publishing, Keynes, England, 1990.
- Robinson, J, Armitage *Commentary on Ephesians The Greek Text* Kregel, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1979 (reprint).
- Routley, Eric *Hymns and Human Life* J Murray, London, 1952.
- Ryden, Ernest Edwin *The Story of Our Hymns* Augustana Books, Rock Island, Illinois, 1930.
- Scott, J Julius Jr. *The Synoptic Gospels* in Gaebelein, Frank E (Gen Editor) *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1983 Vol I:501-516.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Searle, John D *Twentieth Century Christians: Twelve Mini-Biographies* St Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1977.
- Shea, George Beverly *Then Sings My Soul* Hodder and Stroughton, London, 1968.
- Sheppard, W. J. Limmer *Great Hymns and Their Stories* Religious Tract Society, London, 1923.
- Sherley-Price, Leo (Trans.) *Bede: A History of the English Church and People*, Middlesex, England, 1968.
- Skoglund, Elizabeth R. *Wounded Heroes: The Secrets of Charles Spurgeon, etc Who Triumphed Over Pain* Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1992.
- Smith, Malcolm *Turn Your Back on the Problem* Logos International, Plainfield, New Jersey, 1972.
- Spangler, Ann & Turner, Charles *Heroes: Five Remarkable Christians Who Influenced . . .* IVP, Leicester, UK, 1991.
- Tan, Paul Lee *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* Assurance Publishers, 1979.
- Taylor, Dr. and Mrs. Howard *Biography of James Hudson Taylor* Hodder and Stroughton, Kent, 1965.
- Telford, John *The Methodist Hymn-Book Illustrated* Charles H. Kelly, London, 1906.
- Temple, Arthur *Hymns We Love Stories of the Hundred Most Popular Hymns* Lutterworth Press, London, 1954.
- The Youth Bible: New Century Version* (Anglicized Edition) Nelson Word, Milton Keynes, UK, 1993.
- Tucker, Ruth A (1) *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions* Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1983.
- Tucker, Ruth A (2) *Guardians of the Great Commission: The Story of Women in Modern Missions* Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1988.
- Tucker, Ruth A (3) *Stories of Faith, Inspirational Episodes for the Lives of Christians* Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1989.
- Tucker, Ruth A and Liefeld, Walter *Daughters of the Church of Faith, Women and Ministry From New Testament Times to the Present* Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1987.
- Unger, Merrill F. *Unger's Bible Dictionary* Moody Press, Chicago, 1966.
- Virkler, Mark *Dialogue with God* Peacemakers, Woy Woy, N.S.W. Australia, 1986.
- Wallechinsky, David and Wallace, Irving *The People's Almanac 2* Bantam Books, New York, 1978.
- Ward, Geoffrey C, Burns, Ric and Burns, Ken, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* Pimlico, London, 1990.
- Wiersbe, Warren (1) *Great Christians You Should Know* Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, 1984.
- Wiersbe, Warren (2) *Living with the Giants: The Lives of Great Men of the Faith* Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1993.
- White, Paul *Alias Jungle Doctor* Paternoster Press, Exeter, Devon, 1977.
- Whittaker, Colin (1) *Seven Pentecostal Pioneers* Marshall Pickering, Basingstoke, Hants, 1983.
- Whittaker, Colin (2) *Great Revivals* Gospel Publishing House, Springfield, Mo., 1984.
- Whittaker, Colin (3) *Seven Great Prayer Warriors* Marshall Pickering, Basingstoke, Hants, 1987.
- Wilkerson, David *Beyond the Cross and the Switchblade* Hodder & Stroughton, London, 1975.
- Wilson, Dorothy Clarke *Ten Fingers For God: The Biography of Leprosy Surgeon Paul Brand* (Updated Edition) Hodder & Stroughton, London, 1985.
- Yager, Dexter and Wead, Doug *Becoming Rich* Freedom Distribution Co., Charlotte, NC, 1980.
- Zahn, Theodor Translated by J. M. Tout et al. *Introduction to the New Testament* in 3 volumes, Klock & Klock reprint, Minneapolis, Minn., 1977.

ENDNOTES

CHAPTER 2

¹ Carnegie, p 47-48

CHAPTER 2

¹ Wallechinsky & Wallace, p 1181

CHAPTER 3

¹ Pollock (2), p 94

² Tucker (1), p 308-312

³ Foulkes, p 114; Robinson, p 95

⁴ Haggai (2), p 20

⁵ Monty, p 142

⁶ Manning, p 52-61

CHAPTER 4

¹ Petersen (2) p 139, emphasis mine.

² Whittaker, (3), p 104-5

³ Hembree, p 236-7

⁴ Petersen (2), p 59

⁵ Tucker (1), p 69,71

⁶ Taylor, p 28

⁷ Wilson, eg p 92,94,97,123,230

CHAPTER 5

¹ Carnegie, p 54,63

² J. B. Phillips, The New Testament in Modern English

³ Cowart, p 49-53

⁴ Dunn, p 18

⁵ Wiersbe (1), p 83, 86

⁶ Zahn, Vol. ii p 149-151; Guthrie, p 779-781

⁷ Buckingham (2), p 78-9

⁸ Oates, p 77, 328

⁹ Cowart, p 112

¹⁰ Mr. T, p 105-192

¹¹ Huxley, p 120 and passim

¹² Petersen (3), p 206, Catherwood, p 137

¹³ White, p 37, 41-3, 56

¹⁴ Pollock (2), p 144; Wiersbe (2), p 100. At the time the man was gaining repute as an evangelist, but the words might have had as much impact if uttered while handing Moody some meat.

¹⁵ Andrew, p 56-7

¹⁶ Tucker (1), p 154

CHAPTER 6

¹ Pollock (1), p ix

² Pollock (2), p 118

³ Petersen (1), p 41-70

⁴ Tucker (3), p 201

⁵ Gilbert, p 19

⁶ Eg Tucker (3), p 65 Cowart, p 61

⁷ Tucker (1), p 147, 153

⁸ Lyall, p ix

⁹ Tucker (1), p 468

¹⁰ Beeson & Hunsicker p 121-9

¹¹ Hendriksen, p 879

¹² Douglas, p 840-1

¹³ Cowell p 50

¹⁴ Unger, p 725

¹⁵ Leon-Dufour p 162

¹⁶ Cowell, p 144-5

¹⁷ Commentaries by Barclay, Barnes and Morris on Revelation 6:6

¹⁸ Finney, p 125

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ¹⁹ One Hundred Great Lives, p 488 ff; Petersen, (2) p 48
- ²⁰ Petersen, (2) p 68
- ²¹ Pollock (2), p 29-33
- ²² Pollock (2), p 5,7
- ²³ Kavanaugh, 19-24
- ²⁴ Barclay (2), p 24
- ²⁵ Skoglund, p 121, quoting from A.J. Broomhall, *Hudson Taylor and China's Open Century: Book Seven*

CHAPTER 7

- ¹ Fictitious story
- ² Pratney, p 163
- ³ Petersen (1), p 199-226; Tucker (1), p 128-9
- ⁴ Tucker (3), p 12
- ⁵ Breese, p 189-90
- ⁶ Cowart, p 18
- ⁷ Tucker (3), p 326; Tucker (1), p 40
- ⁸ Cowart, op. cit. p 50
- ⁹ Cowart, p 76
- ¹⁰ Wiersbe (1), p 86
- ¹¹ Finnie, p 139-140, 151
- ¹² Tucker (3), p 92
- ¹³ Cowart, p 106
- ¹⁴ Wiersbe (1), p 15
- ¹⁵ Cowart, p 133, 135, 136
- ¹⁶ Spangler & Turner, p 82,85
- ¹⁷ Tucker (1), p 249, 254
- ¹⁸ Robertson, p 62
- ¹⁹ Manning, p 74
- ²⁰ Manning, p 9-13, 113

CHAPTER 8

- ¹ Shea, p 13-17, 60
- ² Maus, p 668-9 is the most authoritative source for this tale that I have been able to locate. There is doubt about authenticity of this story. As a parable, however, its truth is certain.
- ³ Cunningham, especially p 101-117
- ⁴ Whittaker (3), p 73
- ⁵ Tan, p 1568

CHAPTER 9

- ¹ Cruz, p 17-25
- ² Wiersbe (2), p 43
- ³ Keystone, No. 10, 1980, page 7
- ⁴ Whittaker (3), p 12, 20
- ⁵ Pollock (1), p ix, 25-26, 29, 38, 58, 80
- ⁶ Robert (now Pastor) Goodfellow related this story when I was a child in his Sunday School class. Some details are hazy.
- ⁷ Buckingham (2), p 102
- ⁸ Finney, p 194-202; Whittaker (3), p 102
- ⁹ Hacking, p 30
- ¹⁰ Edmond, p 1; Whittaker, p 72
- ¹¹ Lawson, p246-7; Beeson & Hunsicker p 161-2, 165
- ¹² Lawson, p 214
- ¹³ Edmond, p xiii-xv
- ¹⁴ Beeson & Hunsicker, p 26-27; Catherwood, p 118-9
- ¹⁵ Smith, p 19, 21, 51-58
- ¹⁶ Buckingham (2), p 39-43
- ¹⁷ Inventors and Discoverers, p 58, 61
- ¹⁸ Olson, p 49-56
- ¹⁹ Olson, p 8
- ²⁰ For example, Olson, p 19
- ²¹ Olson, p 129-136, 155-162
- ²² Huxley, p 77,80,99; Pickering. Sadly, not all her life reached these heights.
- ²³ Searle, p 10, 12; Tucker, p 249, 254
- ²⁴ Tucker (1), p 304, 307
- ²⁵ Greenman, p 151

CHAPTER 11

- ¹ Avery, page 71 – Italics mine
- ² Avery, page 7
- ³ Crouch – see bibliography
- ⁴ Knight, Peter, p 25
- ⁵ Health Yourself Newsletter, Nov 1994, p 3
- ⁶ Knight, Peter, p 22
- ⁷ Knight, Peter, p 8
- ⁸ Hanks & Parry, p 17
- ⁹ One Hundred Great Lives, p 150
- ¹⁰ Health Yourself Newsletter, Nov 1994, p 3
- ¹¹ Knight, Peter, p 38
- ¹² Knight, Peter, p 38
- ¹³ Renwick, p 177
- ¹⁴ Taylor, p 41-2
- ¹⁵ Tucker, p 357-360
- ¹⁶ Mackenzie, p 28
- ¹⁷ Petersen (2), p 134-5
- ¹⁸ Petersen (1), p 238
- ¹⁹ Knight, Peter, p 82
- ²⁰ Dunn (1), p 15
- ²¹ Knox, p 524
- ²² Bridgeman and Drury, p 16-18
- ²³ Knox, p 502
- ²⁴ Taylor, p 193-195, 199-200, 276-277; Tucker, p 178-9; Whittaker (3), p 71
- ²⁵ Beeson & Hunsicker, p 94
- ²⁶ Brown and Butterworth, p 453-454

CHAPTER 12

- ¹ Wiersbe (2), p 44-45
- ² Breese, p 99
- ³ Wiersbe (2), p 34, 38
- ⁴ Wiersbe (1), p 46
- ⁵ Wiersbe (2), p 11-17
- ⁶ Hanks and Parry, p 2
- ⁷ The Advertiser, Adelaide, South Australia, 11:3:93, p 3
- ⁸ Dunn (1), p 6-23
- ⁹ Dunn (2), p 3-4
- ¹⁰ Virkler – see bibliography
- ¹¹ Manning, unnumbered page between p 48-49.
- ¹² Tucker, p 300
- ¹³ Tucker (3), p 23
- ¹⁴ Wiersbe (2), p 42,44
- ¹⁵ Wiersbe (2), p 46

CHAPTER 13

- ¹ Whittaker (3), p 28
- ² The Youth Bible, p 17
- ³ Beattie, p195-199
- ⁴ Norfolk, p 116
- ⁵ Hulse et al, p 148-152; Corsini, volume 2, p 288-9.
- ⁶ Blundell, p 13
- ⁷ Tucker (1), 155-6
- ⁸ Skoglund, p 85
- ⁹ Lawson, p 212; Whittaker (3), p 21, 30
- ¹⁰ Tucker (1), p 384
- ¹¹ Carpenter; Guthrie, H.

CHAPTER 14

- ¹ Koren
- ² Whittaker (1), p 161
- ³ Tucker (1), p 335
- ⁴ In my case, it took part two of the film *Twice Pardoned* to convince me.
- ⁵ Wiersbe (1), p 26
- ⁶ Wiersbe (1), p 22-3

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ⁷ Pickering, p 19 ff
- ⁸ Pickering, p 7-8, 18
- ⁹ Spangler & Turner, p 91
- ¹⁰ Olson, p 124-129, 133-4

CHAPTER 15

- ¹ Wiersbe (1), p 37
- ² Whittaker (2), p 193
- ³ Petersen (3), p 50-53

CHAPTER 16

- ¹ Haggai, p 132
- ² Ward, et al, p404
- ³ Pollock (2), p 92-98
- ⁴ Dunn (1), p 18
- ⁵ Kenton, p 36
- ⁶ Maltz, p 35
- ⁷ Maltz, p 36-7
- ⁸ Taylor, p 13
- ⁹ Tucker (1), p 174
- ¹⁰ Taylor, p 26-7; Wiersbe (1), p 13; Whittaker (3) p 45; Wiersbe (2), p 69-70
- ¹¹ Wiersbe (1), p 119
- ¹² Finnie, p 8
- ¹³ Edman, p 16; Harrison, p 7, 211; Bacon, p 15
- ¹⁴ Pickering, p 100, 126, 144; Huxley, p 16
- ¹⁵ Catherwood, p 54, 57
- ¹⁶ Tucker (3), p 273, 297
- ¹⁷ One Hundred Great Lives, p 370-1
- ¹⁸ Wilson, p 21,48,50
- ¹⁹ Lyall, p 30-31, 36-38
- ²⁰ Hanks, p 28; Tan, p 1482-3
- ²¹ Orr, p 492
- ²² Eg Knox, p 425
- ²³ One Hundred, p 488; Tucker (1), p 147
- ²⁴ Havergal, p72
- ²⁵ Wallechinsky, p 212

CHAPTER 17

- ¹ Telford, p 278; Mable, p 188-9; Prescott, p 178-9
- ² Petersen (2), p 182, 184
- ³ Wallechinsky & Wallace, p 1186
- ⁴ Hanks, p 13
- ⁵ Oech, p 97
- ⁶ Petersen (2), p 140-1
- ⁷ Bede, iv.34 – Sherley-Price edition, p 250-3
- ⁸ Ryden, p 427-8
- ⁹ Dunn (1), p 22
- ¹⁰ Hanks, p 47-8; Pickering, p 271-2
- ¹¹ Quote found in Johnson, p 71, but might not have originated with her
- ¹² Quote found in Johnson, p 71, but might not have originated with her
- ¹³ Cousins, p 79
- ¹⁴ Inventors and Discoverers, p 92
- ¹⁵ Avery, page 204
- ¹⁶ Logsdon, p 13-15, 108, 180
- ¹⁷ Knight, p 82-84 and other sources
- ¹⁸ Telford, p 95
- ¹⁹ Tucker (3), p 281, 284
- ²⁰ From a tape of a sermon delivered in Korea by Yonggi Cho
- ²¹ Whittaker (3), p 29
- ²² Boehme, p 77
- ²³ Knight, W. B., p 276
- ²⁴ Finnie, p 146
- ²⁵ Haggai (1), p 9, Beeson & Hunsicker, p 52-53; Skoglund, p 83-99
- ²⁶ Whittaker, (3) p 112, 127-129
- ²⁷ Tucker (1), p 292-4

CHAPTER 18

- ¹ Beeson & Hunsicker p 133, 255-6
- ² Knox, p 423
- ³ Lawson, p 212; Whittaker (3), p 28
- ⁴ Avery, page 78
- ⁵ Wiersbe (1), p 25; Routley, p 241-2; Beeson & Hunsicker, p 243
- ⁶ Petersen (3), p 178
- ⁷ Tucker (3), p 345
- ⁸ Whittaker, (2), p 181-3, 185-6
- ⁹ Taylor, p 357-8, 372-3
- ¹⁰ Tucker (3), p 125
- ¹¹ Tucker (3), p 126
- ¹² Tucker (3), p 284
- ¹³ Cole, entire book
- ¹⁴ Tucker (1), p 356
- ¹⁵ Tucker (1), p 245
- ¹⁶ Spangler & Turner, p 16; Tucker (3), p 163
- ¹⁷ O'Connor
- ¹⁸ Beeson & Hunsicker, p 243
- ¹⁹ Information obtained through personal correspondence.
- ²⁰ Tucker (3), p 186
- ²¹ Shea, p 22
- ²² Richards, p 23, 57-58, 60
- ²³ Morris, p 179
- ²⁴ Hanks, p 122
- ²⁵ Finnie, p 128; Tucker, p 120
- ²⁶ Havergal, p190-191
- ²⁷ Petersen (1), p 161-196
- ²⁸ Lawson, p 59-68
- ²⁹ Tucker (1), p 372-7
- ³⁰ Beeson & Hunsicker p 143
- ³¹ Pratney, p 144-5; Whittaker, p 80, 85
- ³² Andersen, p 89
- ³³ Andersen, p 88
- ³⁴ Eg Scott, p 511
- ³⁵ Beeson & Hunsicker p 147-9
- ³⁶ Tucker (3), p 49

CHAPTER 19

- ¹ Tucker, p 157
- ² Hodge, p 95
- ³ Skoglund, p 56
- ⁴ Buckingham (1), p 259-260, 75-113
- ⁵ Tucker (1), p 198-200
- ⁶ Tucker (2), p 21-35
- ⁷ Tucker (1), p 16
- ⁸ Petersen (1), p241-2
- ⁹ Wilkerson, p 136-7
- ¹⁰ Wiersbe (1), p 16
- ¹¹ Fictitious story
- ¹² Tucker (3), p 10
- ¹³ Tucker & Liefeld, p256, quoting Kenneth Osbeck
- ¹⁴ Temple, page 138
- ¹⁵ Beattie, p 49-50, and other sources
- ¹⁶ Wiersbe (2), p 212
- ¹⁷ McKenzie, p 3

CHAPTER 20

- ¹ Tucker (3), p 370
- ² Richards, p 21-22