

Tuesday – April 1

“Our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are.” 1 John 3:1 NLT

Rejection-proofed

Ever wonder how anybody could find you lovable? For many of us the question becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The fear of rejection is so intense that we protect ourselves by: (a) Vowing never to let anybody get close enough to hurt us again. Sounds good in theory, but by closing others out we close ourselves in, and all our relationships suffer. (b) Putting on our best “game face.” I’m tough! Who needs other people anyway? As a result nobody meets our needs. (c) Pushing others away. When we feel rejected we imagine we’re being attacked even when we’re not. So we put on our boxing gloves and come out swinging. (d) Trying to buy rejection-protection by doing favors for people. Or by putting up with abusive relationships because we think it’s what we deserve and it may be our last chance at love. (e) Practicing perfectionism. Give it up! God already loves you unconditionally, and human standards vary so much that you’ll never make everybody happy however you try. As long as you keep trading with a diminished sense of worth, you’ll keep attracting the wrong people. So listen up. “Our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are.” And “that’s only the beginning...when Christ is... revealed, we’ll...become like him” (1Jn 3:2 TM). If your self-worth comes from any opinion other than God’s, you’ll always be vulnerable. Your critics will diminish you; trying and failing will keep you from rising again. Worst of all, you’ll never discover or be discovered for the unique and wonderful person God made you to be.

Wednesday – April 2

“Find out and do whatever the Lord wants you to.” Ephesians 5:17 TLB

Overcoming procrastination!

To overcome procrastination you must: (1) Take responsibility for your life. No matter how hard you wish, the tooth fairy isn't going to come while you're sleeping and replace failure with success. Great souls have wills, feeble souls have wishes. You need to do something! (2) Examine your excuses. An excuse puts the blame on something other than you, which means the solution is beyond your reach. Excuses are like exit signs on the road of progress; they take us off track. It's easier to move from failure to success, than from excuses to success. So examine your excuses and eliminate them. (3) Focus on the benefits of completing a task. To get you over the hump, focus on what you'll "get out of it" when you get it done. Will it bring you benefit? Clear the way for something else you'd like to do? Be a milestone in your personal development or the completion of something bigger? Will it help to clear the decks for you emotionally? Admiral William Halsey said, "Problems become smaller if you confront them. Touch a thistle timidly and it pricks you, grasp it boldly and its spines crumble." (4) Ask for help. Columbus didn't discover the New World on his own, he needed a crew. Speaking of the church, Paul writes, "Each part...helps the other parts grow" (Eph 4:16 NLT). There's no way to value the assistance others can give you when it comes to breaking old habits and beginning new ones. Yes, it means taking a risk because you will be vulnerable in sharing your hopes and fears. But the risk is worth taking.

Thursday – April 3

“This treasure...is from God.” 2 Corinthians 4:7 NIV

Discover what's within you!

Do you know you have treasure within you? God put it there. It's in your unique qualities, plus the fire in your soul. Life may have thrown cold water on that fire but God can rekindle it. Note, this treasure within you “is from God.” And what He owns He protects, He nurtures, and will use to His glory. But God is a wise businessman; when He invests He expects a return! It's said that the wealthiest spot on this planet is not the oilfields of Kuwait or the diamond mines of South Africa. No, the richest deposits lie in your local cemetery. Buried beneath those sacred grounds are dreams that never came to pass, songs that were never sung, books that were never written, ideas that were never shared, inventions that were never designed, plans that never got beyond the drawing board of the mind, and purposes that were never fulfilled. Only a tiny percentage of those who live on this planet will discover and fulfill their true potential. Do you want to be one of them? Ask yourself: “Who am I? Why did God put me here? How much potential do I have? How can I maximize my ability for His glory?” Within the answers to these questions lie the keys to a fulfilled life. If you haven't found your life's purpose yet, talk to God. “Everything...finds its purpose in him” (Col 1:16 TM). Before you spoke your first word or took your first step, God had a plan for your life. You say, “But I have failed so badly.” Maybe, but it's amazing what God can do with a broken life – when you give Him all the pieces!

Friday – April 4

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.” Hebrews 12:2 NIV

Becoming unselfish

The Bible says: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Now we might be tempted to think that Jesus is just the finish line, and that we should keep our eyes on Him as a runner would focus on the tape. No, this Scripture is urging us to think of Jesus as our example. As the starter and finisher of our faith He not only designed the course of the race, He ran it perfectly and completely. The Greek term which is translated, “Fix our eyes on Jesus,” means to look exclusively at something and study it intently while looking away from all distractions. As great athletes study the films of champions to discover their techniques, we are encouraged to go to the film vault and peer intently at one scene after another as we study Christ. In other words, “look exclusively and thoughtfully at the one who not only designed the course, but ran it flawlessly. And run exactly as He ran.” As He lived, you are to live. As He decided, you are to decide. As He obeyed, you are to obey. As He pleased the Father, you are to please the Father. As He surrendered, you are to surrender. Do you want to be like Christ? Begin thinking less about yourself. Work toward becoming unselfish. For one full day, let go of anything that serves your own interest to the exclusion of others. On that same day, fix your attention on Jesus by surrendering in complete selflessness.

Saturday – April 5

“If the Lord is with us, why has...this happened?” Judges 6:13 NIV

Trusting God in the dark (1)

A hundred years ago Germany's exclusive textile mills had special rooms dedicated to spinning the world's finest lace. Each room was dark, except for the light falling from a small window onto the weaver's work. That's because lace is more beautiful when the weaver is in darkness and his work is in the light. Usually God's purposes are revealed and His power displayed, in our darkest experiences when like Gideon you ask, "If the Lord is with [me], why has...this happened?" When there seems to be no rhyme or reason, God's promise is, "I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the Lord ...who [calls] you by name" (Isa 45:3 NIV). Anybody can be faithful in good times, but standing "by night in the house of the Lord" (Ps 134:1 NIV) takes real commitment. Hymn writer George Matheson wrote: "Will I remain in God's house at night...love Him for who He is...know I desire not the gift but the Giver? When I can remain...during the darkness of night and worship...I've accepted Him for Himself alone." When the Israelites faced their greatest challenge, the Red Sea, the Bible says, "All that night the Lord drove the sea back" (Ex 14:21 NIV). Be encouraged, God is working, even though you can't see Him. After all, how can God give us "songs in the night" (Job 35:10) if the sun always shines? Jesus said, "What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight" (Mt 10:27 NIV). It's in life's dark places that God shares things which strengthen you, and encourage those around you.

Sunday – April 6

“You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will.”

John 13:7 NIV

Trusting God in the dark (2)

Mary and Martha were upset that Jesus didn't come until their brother Lazarus was dead. “Lord...if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (Jn 11:21 & 32 NIV). But instead of giving them reasons, Jesus replied, “Did I not tell you...if you believed, you would see [God glorified in this?]” (Jn 11:40 NIV). When God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac he didn't understand, but later he witnessed God's faithfulness when Isaac was restored to him. Moses didn't understand why he had to spend 40 years in the wilderness, but later when God called him to lead Israel to freedom, he got it. Joseph didn't know why his brothers mistreated him or why he was imprisoned unfairly, but later he saw God's hand in everything. His father questioned why Joseph had been taken away from him, but later, looking into the face of the man who had been made governor and who'd saved the lives of the nation, God's purposes became clear. Just like your children don't always think your decisions make sense, we don't understand God's ways. That's why Jesus said to Mary and Martha, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will.” God doesn't expect you to understand, but He does expect you to trust Him. In spite of his boils, bankruptcy and bereavement Job said: “When he has tested me, I will come forth” (Job 23:10 NIV). Is God testing you in this situation? If He is, what are you learning? Is the experience making you bitter, or making you better by causing you to draw closer to Him?

Monday – April 7

“Commit thy way unto the Lord.” Psalms 37:5

Give it to God

One day a child playing with a valuable vase got his hand stuck in it and couldn't get it out. Before resorting to breaking the vase, his father said, “Son, relax, just open your hand and pull it out.” To their astonishment the little guy said, “I can't. If I do I'll drop my penny.” A lot of us are just like him, so busy holding onto something of little worth that we can't accept what God offers! Let go! Let God have His way! Loretta P. Burns writes: “As children bring their broken toys with tears for us to mend, I brought my broken dreams to God because He is my friend. But then instead of leaving Him in peace to work alone, I hung around and tried to help with ways that were my own. At last I snatched them back and cried, ‘How can you be so slow?’ ‘My child,’ He said, ‘What could I do...you never did let go.’” “Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Delight thyself also in the Lord; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass” (Ps 37:3-5). The words, “trust, delight, and commit” are your keys to success. Give up trying to handle life by yourself. Put it into God's hands and allow Him to work. He's neither intimidated nor stumped by your circumstances. Check His résumé. Do you seriously think your problem is too big for Him, or that He can't do it without your help? Come on, give it to God and watch what happens!

Tuesday – April 8

“Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial.” James 1:12 NASB

Seeing your trials the right way

Too many of us view our trials the way we watch television. Some televisions have a second channel in the corner of your screen that enables you to divide your focus and watch 2 programs at once. A lot of us try to superimpose our human viewpoint on the screen of God’s will for our lives. God gives us a divine perspective, then we open up a second screen, a human one, and try to figure it all out. Don’t waste your trials by trying to fit them into your limited vision and understanding or you’ll end up frustrated. It’s much better to trust God, rest in His wisdom and take Him at His word. A spiritual perspective on your trials will keep you from buckling under the weight of them when times are hard. When you begin to look at your trials from God’s perspective, your spirit is renewed and you’re enabled to press on and receive what God has waiting for you. James writes, “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of Life.” Now the Crown of Life is not just something you receive in Heaven, you can enjoy it today. And who’s it for? Those who “persevere.” When God gives you this Crown, He’s saying, “You’ve passed another of life’s tests, now you’re ready for a new level of blessing.” Remember the wonderful feeling you had when you passed some of your hardest tests in school? Don’t get discouraged. God is up to something good. Keep going – don’t stop until you receive the Crown of Life.

Wednesday – April 9

“The Father seeketh such to worship him.” John 4:23

Worth-ship

Jesus revealed some of His greatest insights on worship to a flawed woman with 5 failed marriages and a live-in boyfriend. No wonder His disciples were “shocked to find him talking to [her]” (Jn 4:27 NLT). So what is Jesus teaching us about worship? (1) That anybody can do it! True worship has nothing to do with your religious denomination (Jews and Gentiles), and cannot be limited to a physical location (Mount Gerizim or the temple in Jerusalem). Once you’ve made Him Lord of your life, Jesus accepts your worship. You’re in! (2) That God is actually looking for people who will do it. Here’s a stop-you-in-your-tracks thought: God created you to do the only thing He cannot do for Himself – worship! “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created” (Rev 4:11). We were actually created to worship God! (3) That there’s no “only” way to do it. According to Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, “The worship of God is nowhere defined in scripture.” That’s because it’s such a powerful outpouring of our hearts toward the Lord and represents such love, gratitude and devotion that it cannot be put into words; nor can it be defined by a song, a shout, or silence. Jesus said, “True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:23 NIV). True worship comes from the depths of your spirit and is based on the truth of God’s Word. To understand worship, think: worth-ship! How much do you value the Lord? We never get tired of talking about what we value most!

Thursday – April 10

“You become the slave of whatever you choose to obey.”

Romans 6:16 NLT

Don't cross the line

Set clear boundaries for yourself—and keep them! Wisdom says: (1) Don't cross the line. The first time you do you tell yourself, “just this once.” But what you don't know is, you've opened a door you may not be able to close. (2) It's easier to cross it the second time. The man who slips downstairs while his wife's sleeping to watch pornography on his computer soon discovers that, like an addict, you have to increase the dosage. Before you know it you're driven to seek ever higher states of arousal. Paul writes, “Don't you realize that you become the slave of whatever you choose to obey?” (Ro 6:16 NLT). (3) Eventually the line gets blurred. You keep commuting between what's right and what's wrong, thinking, “I can quit any time I want,” and Satan whispers, “Gotcha!” (4) Finally the line disappears. Like the Prodigal Son, you lose everything. Spiritually, you lose your confidence before God. Personally, you lose your sense of self-worth. Publicly, you lose respect and influence with others. And “good” things can hurt you too. A work ethic is a good thing, but lack of balance can make you neglect your family and lose your marriage. Rest and relaxation are good things, but too much time “vegging out” in front of the TV will stunt your spiritual growth. Caution and thoughtfulness are good things, but too much of them will clip the wings of your faith and keep you from rising to fulfill your God-given destiny. So draw a clear line for yourself – and stay on the right side of it!

Friday – April 11

“Let’s keep focused...those of us who want everything God has for us.”

Philippians 3:15 TM

Stay focused (1)

You become effective by being selective. It’s human nature to get distracted. We’re like gyroscopes, spinning around at a frantic pace but not getting anywhere. Without a clear purpose you keep changing directions, jobs, relationships, churches, etc., hoping each change will settle the confusion or fill the emptiness in your heart. You think, “This time it will be different,” but it doesn’t solve your real problem – lack of focus. The power of focusing can be seen in light. With a magnifying glass the rays of the sun can set paper on fire. But when light is focused even more as a laser beam, it can cut through steel. Nothing is as potent as a focused life. The men and women who make the greatest difference in life are the most focused. For instance, the Apostle Paul said, “I am bringing all my energies to bear on this one thing” (Php 3:13 TLB). Paul’s obsession was to make Christ known. So if you want your life to have impact, focus it! Stop dabbling. Stop trying to do it all. Do less. Turn away from even good activities and do only that which matters most. Never confuse activity with productivity. Poet William Matthews wrote, “One well-cultivated talent, deepened and enlarged, is worth a hundred shallow faculties. The first law of success in this day when so many things are clamoring for attention is concentration – to bend our energies to one point, and to go directly to that point, looking neither to the right nor to the left.” Does focus come easily or naturally? No, it’s a discipline that must be practiced every day.

Saturday – April 12

“Do not swerve to the right or the left.” Proverbs 4:27 NIV

Stay focused (2)

Focus does 3 things for you: (1) It keeps you on target. We find ourselves pulled in a dozen different directions, spending much of our time and energy on things we don't really care about. Author Don Marquis put it this way: “Ours is a world where people don't know what they want, and are willing to go through hell to get it.” The Bible says: “Let your eyes look straight ahead...Do not swerve to the right or the left” (Pr 4:25-27 NIV). (2) It increases your energy. Attempting everything, like attempting nothing, will suck the life out of you. Focus gives you energy. Admiral Richard Byrd, the Polar explorer, said, “Few men come anywhere near exhausting the resources dwelling within them. There are deep wells of strength that are never used.” One of the reasons those wells go untapped is lack of focus. The mind doesn't reach toward achievement until it has clear objectives. (3) It lifts you. It's been said that “the world stands aside to let anyone pass, who knows where he or she is going.” In a sea of mediocrity, just knowing what you want to do and making an effort to pursue it, distinguishes you from almost everybody else. Henry David Thoreau asked, “Do you ever hear of a man who had striven all his life faithfully and singly toward an object, and in no measure obtained it? If a man constantly aspires, is he not elevated?” Just by striving to become better than you are, you become elevated – even if you don't accomplish what you desire, and even if others don't step aside for you. By trusting God and aiming higher, you move to a higher level.

Sunday – April 13

“Acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.” Proverbs 3:6

Stay focused (3)

When it comes to staying focused, keep in mind: (1) Focused people always look for a better way. What got you where you are, won't necessarily get you where you need to be. A family who moved into a new neighborhood got a late start one morning. As a result their 6-year-old missed her school bus. Though it would make him late for work her father agreed to take her to school if she gave him directions. After 20 minutes of going in circles they finally arrived at the school, which turned out to be only a few blocks away from where they lived. Steaming, her dad asked why she drove him all over the place when the school was so close to home. “We went the way the school bus does,” she said. “That’s the only way I know.” (2) Focused people concentrate a little harder and a little longer. Hall of Fame baseball player Hank Aaron says, “What separates a superstar from the average ballplayer is that he concentrates just a little bit longer.” Focused thinking is the ability to remove distractions and mental clutter so that you can concentrate with clarity. (3) Focused people make commitments, not excuses. A sign on the desk of an officer at the Pentagon read: “The secrecy of my job does not permit me to know what I’m doing.” It’s a cute joke, but not so cute when it’s true. When you don’t know what you’re doing, you become frustrated and end up failing. That’s why praying and getting direction from God, is critical for your life. “In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.”

Monday – April 14

“Forgetting the past.” Philippians 3:13 NLT

Stay focused (4)

Notice: (1) Focused people don't live in the past. Too many of us yearn for the past and get stuck in it. Instead we should learn from the past and let go of it. Elbert Hubbard wrote, “A retentive memory may be a good thing, but the ability to forget is a token of greatness. Successful people forget. They're running a race. They can't afford to look behind. Their eye is on the finish line. They're too big to let little things disturb them. If anyone does them wrong, they consider the source and keep cool. It's only the small people who cherish revenge. Be a good forgetter... success demands it.” (2) Focused people don't think about the difficulties, but the rewards. If you dwell on the difficulties too long you'll start to develop self-pity instead of self-discipline. As a result you'll accomplish less and less. By focusing on results you'll stay encouraged. Make Christ your example. “He was willing to die a shameful death on the cross because of the joy he knew would be his afterwards” (Heb 12:2 TLB). (3) Focused people choose their friends carefully. Here are 5 types of people you'll encounter: (a) Refreshers – who strengthen your faith and energize you. (b) Refiners – who sharpen you and clarify your vision. (c) Reflectors – who mirror your energy, neither adding to nor subtracting from it. (d) Reducers – who try to diminish your goals and efforts to their comfort level. (e) Rejecters – who don't understand you or what God's called you to do. So, remain focused and you'll stay grounded; the praise of others is less likely to go to your head, and the negative impact of your critics will be minimized.

Tuesday – April 15

“That special gift...you were given...keep that dusted off and in use.”

1 Timothy 4:14 TM

Stay focused (5)

Paul told Timothy to focus on his strengths. “That special gift...you were given...keep that dusted off and in use.” Focused people don’t hide their weaknesses or excuse them; instead they focus on their strengths! There’s a story about a couple who decided to build a farm. Then they began to argue. The wife wanted to build the house first. The husband wanted to build the barn first to house the animals. They went back and forth until finally the man said, “Look, we have to build the barn first – because the barn will enable us to build the house, the garage, the silo, the kids’ swing set, and everything else!” When you focus on putting first things first, everything else is more likely to fall into place. Anthony Campolo says, “What you commit yourself to, will change what you are and make you into a completely different person. The future conditions you, not the past. What you commit yourself to become, determines what you are – more than anything that ever happened to you yesterday. Therefore, I ask you, ‘What are your commitments? Where are you going? What are you going to be? Show me somebody who hasn’t decided, and I’ll show you somebody who has no identity, no personality, no direction.’” Focusing on weaknesses instead of strengths is like having a handful of coins, a few made of gold, the rest of tarnished copper, and setting aside the gold coins to spend your time shining the copper ones in hopes of making them more valuable. No matter how long you spend, they’ll never be worth what the gold ones are. So, stay focused on your God-given strengths!

Wednesday – April 16

“His sheep follow him because they know his voice.” John 10:4 NIV

Learning to hear God's voice

One evening a friend visiting Peter Lord's home told him he could hear no fewer than 18 different kinds of crickets in his garden. Peter was amazed – he'd lived there for years and never heard one. The difference was, this man was a professor of entomology and he had learned to distinguish over 200 different cricket calls with his natural ear. Imagine learning to listen to crickets! Looking back, Peter wrote, “I suddenly understood that a person must want to hear, and learn to hear, and there were many sounds I was not hearing.” Think what you've been missing all these years because you haven't wanted or learned to hear the voice of God speaking to you. God often speaks to us through others. But the very gifts He speaks to us through can weaken our desire to hear from God for ourselves. The children of Israel said to Moses, “We want you to hear from God for us” (See Ex 20:18-19). The problem is, when you only hear from God through secondary sources it's easier not to make any real commitment, or to obey what you've heard. But when you know God is speaking to you personally you must make a clear-cut decision. Jesus said, “His sheep follow him because they know his voice” (Jn 10:3-4 NIV). Examine the “heroes” in your Bible. They were all flawed! So what gave them the strength to accomplish such great things? They knew God's voice! Nothing, absolutely nothing in your life is more important than learning to know God's voice when He speaks to you!

Thursday – April 17

“I have...plans to give you the future you hope for.” Jeremiah 29:11 TM

There's hope for you

No matter where you are at this moment, if you haven't found God's plan for your life – stop what you're doing and start looking for it! There's nothing in your past or your present that He can't use. Maybe you've veered off course; we all have at one time or another. Read the stories of those God used and you'll discover that “blowing it” isn't unusual. It's actually part of the learning curve. When we come into this world kicking and screaming, none of us know exactly what we're supposed to do with our lives. That's okay. Just start where you are right now. When God puts your life on track, He begins by giving you a sense of hope. Only God-given hope will sustain you through the tough times. Maybe you're wondering, “Am I ever going to get to where I'm supposed to be?” If that's how you feel today, read these words spoken by God to a group of people who'd spent their last 70 years in Babylonian slavery as a result of having done things the wrong way: “I know what I'm doing. I have it all planned out – plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for. When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I'll listen. When you come looking for me, you'll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I'll make sure you won't be disappointed...I'll turn things around for you” (Jer 29:11-14 TM). And those words are from God's mouth to your ear!

Friday – April 18

“Do not be wise in your own eyes.” Proverbs 3:7 NIV

Overcoming your pride

To overcome your pride you must: (1) Recognize your pride. Benjamin Franklin observed, “Not one of our natural passions is harder to subdue than pride. Even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility.” In *The Indispensable Man*, Saxon White Kessinger writes: “Sometime when you feel that your going, would leave an un-fill-able hole, just follow these simple instructions, and see how they humble your soul. Take a bucket and fill it with water, put your hand in it up to the wrist; pull it out and the hole that’s remaining, is the measure of how you’ll be missed.” It’s humbling how quickly the hole we think we’re leaving, disappears or gets filled in by others. (2) Express gratitude often. Paul writes, “No matter what happens, always be thankful” (1Th 5:18 TLB). Oprah Winfrey suggests, “Keep a gratitude journal. Every night list 5 things that happened this day that you are grateful for. It will change your life. If you concentrate on what you don’t have, you’ll never have enough. If you focus on what you have, you will always see that the universe is abundant and you’ll have more.” Selfish people never think they get as much as they deserve. Continually expressing gratitude helps to break that kind of pride. (3) Learn to laugh at yourself. The Chinese proverb says, “Blessed are they that laugh at themselves for they shall never cease to be entertained.” People who have the problem of pride rarely laugh at themselves. Engaging in humor at your own expense shows that pride isn’t the problem, and that if it is, it’s one you’re determined to deal with!

Saturday – April 19

“Then you will understand what is right and just and fair.”

Proverbs 2:9 NIV

Shukhov's standard

It's not easy to maintain a strong work ethic when you feel overworked, underpaid and under-appreciated. But that's the point at which your character is tested – and developed. Having a work ethic means (a) doing what you don't feel like doing, in order to achieve the results you want; (b) paying a higher price than others for something worthwhile; (c) standing up for your principles when someone's trying to knock you down. In his first novel, author and Nobel prizewinner Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote about Ivan Denisovich Shukhov, a political prisoner in a Siberian labor camp. Shukhov is forced to build a wall in weather 20 degrees below zero. As it gets darker and colder the foreman gives the order to hurry the job by throwing leftover mortar over the wall instead of using it, so they could be finished for the day. “But Shukhov wasn't made that way,” wrote Solzhenitsyn, telling how the man resisted the order, determined to finish the job right. “Eight years in a prison camp couldn't change his nature. He worried about everything he could make use of, about every scrap of work he could do – nothing must be wasted without good reason. The foreman yells at him and then hurries away. But Shukhov – and if the guards had put the dogs on him it would have made no difference – ran to the back and looked about. ‘Not bad.’ Then he ran and gave the wall a good look-over, to the left, to the right, his eye as accurate as a carpenter's level, straight and even. Only then did Shuklov stop working.” So, measured by Shukhov's standard, how's your work ethic?

Sunday – April 20

“Forgive – only then will your heavenly Father...wipe your slate clean.”

Mark 11:25 TM

Forgiveness (1)

How heavy is a glass of water? That depends on how long you have to carry it. A minute is no problem, and after an hour your arm might ache. But after 24 hours you'll probably be in bad shape! In each instance the glass weighs exactly the same, but the longer you carry it the heavier it feels. And it's the same with a grudge; it can get so heavy it stops you from living. People will hurt you; that's the reality of sharing this planet with others. Sometimes it's intentional, other times they've no idea they upset you, far less broken your heart. Does that mean you should go around pretending nothing's wrong? No, the first step is to confront your feelings. And when the hurt is deep, it's even harder to forgive. That's when you need to pray, "Lord, change my heart and heal me." Jesus said, "Pray for those who mistreat you" (Lk 6:28 NIV). When you do that something unexpected happens; your heart softens and you start seeing them through God's eyes instead of your raw emotions. Jesus said, "If you have anything against someone, forgive – only then will your heavenly Father...wipe your slate clean." When you sow unforgiveness you reap unforgiveness – even from God! Isaac is a prime example of practicing forgiveness. During a drought he dug wells that his enemies moved in and claimed. But instead of retaliating, he moved on and dug new ones. As a result God filled Isaac's empty wells and promised to bless him, and his children too! (See Ge 26:22-23). And He will fill the emptiness in your life, when you forgive those who have hurt you.

Monday – April 21

“People insulted Christ, but...He let God...take care of him.”

1 Peter 2:23 NCV

Forgiveness (2)

A little boy who'd been rude to his Mom started sneaking off upstairs. “Where you going, young man?” she asked. “To my room to talk to God,” he replied. “Isn't there something you want to tell me first?” she said. “Nope,” he said, “You'll just get mad. God will forgive me and forget about it.” Long after you think you've forgiven somebody you can still be harboring hard feelings. Here are some clues that you've still got work to do: you get angry thinking about what happened; you give the offender the cold shoulder; you rehearse the incident mentally and in conversation; you seize every opportunity to remind the offender of what they did. Refusing to forgive and forget is just another way of justifying an unforgiving attitude. The Bible says there are two things God won't share: (1) His glory (See Isa 42:8); (2) His right to settle old scores. He said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay” (Ro 12:19). Don't usurp His authority by trying to get even; take your hands off the situation and let Him work it out. When “People insulted Christ... he did not insult them in return...He let God...who judges rightly, take care of him.” A grudge shackles you to the offender, and you become the hostage! Dwelling on something your parents did, or on how an associate took credit for your work, or on what someone said about you, makes you, not them, miserable. You walk around in turmoil and they don't even know you're upset! Why give somebody that kind of control over your life? What's important is what happens in you, not to you. So forgive, forget, and move on!

Tuesday – April 22

“[I]...could never have made it apart from...mercy.”

1 Timothy 1:15-17 TM

Forgiveness (3)

If you're finding it hard to forgive yourself for something you've done in the past, it may be that you're reaping what you have sown. And it's particularly hard (but not impossible) to keep from feeling bad when you've condemned somebody else for doing the same thing. Here's a scriptural truth you need to understand, accept and live by: as long as you're alive you will have to keep forgiving – yourself and others! When guilt and condemnation tell you your sins are too big for God's forgiveness, remember what Paul said: “Jesus...came...to save sinners. I'm proof – Public Sinner Number One ...someone who could never have made it apart from sheer mercy...evidence of his endless patience.” Before his conversion Paul persecuted the church, killing and torturing believers. It's how he made his living! And if he could learn to forgive himself, you can too! In fact, when you don't you're implying that your transgressions are beyond the scope of God's grace to forgive and Jesus' blood to cleanse. And that's a bigger sin – pride! Plus, when somebody always has “issues” with other people, they may be looking for somebody to offend them; that way they can point out how bad the other person is and feel better about themselves. Pride and a judgmental attitude feed off each other the way humility feeds off forgiveness. God said, “I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake. And I will not remember your sins” (Isa 43:25 NASB). When you adopt a humble attitude and work on forgiving yourself the way God has, it's a lot easier to overlook other people's mistakes. Give it a try; you'll be amazed!

Wednesday – April 23

“Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him.” Psalm 37:7

Be patient, it'll happen in God's time!

The old saying, “You can’t always have what you want,” isn’t necessarily true. When you “Delight yourself in the Lord...he will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps 37:4 NIV). But usually He makes you wait. Dennis Wholey says: “Waiting is an art....If you can wait two years, you can achieve something you couldn’t achieve today however hard you worked, however much money you threw at it, however many times you banged your head against the wall.” There are things you can’t have today that you’ll be able to have in the future. So it doesn’t make sense to drive yourself crazy and put your life on hold struggling to accomplish something now, that’ll be easy when the time is right. James says, “Don’t try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature” (Jas 1:4 TM). God allows certain things to take place in our lives to teach us important principles like: (a) developing new skills and ways of thinking; (b) showing grace and controlling our responses; (c) maintaining our faith when times get tough. Paul writes: “Patience...[is...the power to endure whatever comes, with good temper]” (Col 3:12 AMP); “Be glad for all God is planning....Be patient in trouble, and prayerful always” (Ro 12:12 TLB). When you spend time in God’s waiting room, He’s developing qualities in you that simply can’t be developed any other way. When He’s finished you’ll come out stronger and wiser. And you’ll have the maturity to handle what He has in mind for you. So don’t let the enemy rattle you or engineer circumstances that put you into overdrive. “Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him.”

Thursday – April 24

“Their weakness was turned to strength.” Hebrews 11:34 NLT

The overcoming spirit!

A grindstone can make a diamond shine, or reduce solid rock to dust. It depends what you're made of. Charles Steinmetz, one of the founders of General Electric, was made of the right stuff. Crippled from birth, he was so short in stature that he looked like a dwarf. His mother died before he was one year old. His father was poor but he determined that young Charles would have an education. Charles couldn't run and play games like normal boys, so he made up his mind to devote himself to science. He set this goal: "I will make discoveries that help other people." When Steinmetz immigrated to the United States he couldn't speak a word of English. His face was swollen from the cold he'd endured on the boat passage. His sight was defective. His clothes were shabby. The port authorities were tempted to return him to Switzerland. But he stayed and found a job that paid \$12 a week. There he showed amazing abilities. The infant company, General Electric, quickly realized his incredible potential. His career was marked by unparalleled research and development. When he died in 1923 one writer said, "He had the mind of an angel and the soul of a seer." What did Charles Steinmetz have? The overcoming spirit! Do you have it? If what you're doing doesn't produce resistance, it's not worth doing. The winners in your Bible are described this way: "Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle." What turns weakness into strength? Faith that refuses to back up, back down, or settle for less than what God has promised.

Friday – April 25

“Pray for those who persecute you.” Matthew 5:44 NIV

Responding like Jesus!

A soldier made it his practice to end each day with Bible reading and prayer. As the others gathered in the barracks and retired for the night, he'd kneel by his bunk. Some of them saw this and began to mock him. But one night the abuse went beyond words. As he bowed in prayer one soldier threw his boots and hit him in the face. The others jeered, looking for a fight, but there was no retaliation. Next morning when the boot-thrower woke up he couldn't believe what he saw. There at the foot of his bed were his boots – polished and returned. Imagine shining the boots that kick you! That calls for a new level of grace. It means deciding what your response will be, before the offence comes! Some of the guys in the barracks were “leaders,” motivated by pride and insensitivity. That's how darkness responds to light. Others were “followers;” they weren't necessarily bad, just weak and afraid to be different. Why did Jesus pray from the cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do”? Because He understood that people who have been raised a particular way, who are driven by certain forces, who wrestle with unresolved issues and fears, who are programmed with an unregenerate mindset, need God. And He saw it as an opportunity to put God on display. This requires more than Sunday-go-to-meeting religion. It calls for a Christ-like, example-setting, love-displaying response that makes others to sit up and take notice. Your “rights” and your wounded ego are not the issue – the One you represent is!

Saturday – April 26

“We who...believed are able to enter...God’s rest.” Hebrews 4:3 NCV

Wilderness attitudes!

After spending half their lives in the wilderness, the Israelites blamed it on their enemies. But it was their own attitude! Because God “was...angry...they were not allowed to enter...God’s rest, because they did not believe” (Heb 3:17-19 NCV). Their doubting, complaining and blame-shifting kept them stuck in the wilderness; and it’ll do the same to you. It starts with feeling sorry for yourself and thinking, “If only I’d been born into a different family, had a better paying job, a more spiritual mate, etc., this wouldn’t be happening.” And from there it spirals downward into a full-blown pity party where everybody else is responsible for your problems. The truth is, ninety-nine percent of the time the solution begins with a change of attitude – in you! Another wilderness attitude that’ll keep you stuck, is insisting on doing everything your way! Stubbornness will keep you stumbling around in the wilderness, seeing the Promised Land but never reaching it. Offering a sacrifice to God before going into battle was the way to victory. Only one problem: Samuel the prophet was the only one qualified to offer such a sacrifice. But pride and stubbornness made King Saul think he could. As a result he lost his life and Israel went down in defeat. Samuel told Saul, “Because you have rejected God’s word, God has rejected you as king” (See 1Sa 15:26). Understand this: you don’t have to do anything to earn God’s love, but you must obey Him in order to walk in His blessings. So, what has God told you to do? If you want victory in your battles and success in your endeavors, start doing it!

Sunday – April 27

“When I was...beside myself, you calmed me down.” Psalm 94:19 TM

When you're on overload (1)

Before a violin can produce music, stress must be put on the strings. But pull them too tightly and they'll snap. The same's true of you. Enough stress gets the juices flowing and helps you do what needs to be done, but beyond that you snap. Someone quipped, “You know you're on overload when you've no time to cook a TV dinner, the cat's on tranquilizers, and family reunions have to be mediated by law enforcement!” Seriously, before it gets to that point, do 2 things:

(1) Ask for help: During Hurricane Katrina 8 dolphins were swept out of their aquarium into the sea, but because they stuck together they were rescued. If one had tried to go it alone he'd have perished. When you're alone too much you lose perspective. If the enemy can isolate you, he can influence you. God designed His family to stay connected. Or as Paul says, “So that all the members care for each other” (1Co 12:25 NLT).

(2) Get real with God: Under stress the surge of negative emotions can be overwhelming, and unless you unburden your soul before God you'll explode at the wrong people. The Psalmist addresses this: “Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you” (Ps 55:22 NIV). “Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us” (Ps 62:8 NKJV). It's no mere coincidence that many of the Psalms start out with the Psalmist crying out to God for help, and end up with him rejoicing because he vented his pent-up frustrations.

“I’m awake all night.” Psalm 77:4 TM

When you’re on overload (2)

You can’t escape stress, but you can learn to cope with it by taking control of your life in small but important ways. Here are two:

(1) Think about someone other than yourself. David was so frazzled that he was awake all night. Ever been there? That’s when you need to “Let...praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God’s wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down” (Php 4:6 TM). Elijah was depressed and suicidal when God showed him how to help himself. How? By leaving the cave he was hiding in, and going out and ministering to others. Focusing on something other than yourself gives you perspective. Paul says, the “God of all healing counsel...comes alongside...when we go through hard times...and...brings us alongside someone else...going through hard times so...we can be there for that person...as God was there for us” (2Co 1:3-4 TM). Do you need help? Reach out to others. It’s in “connecting” that we are made whole!

(2) Don’t get bitter. Life is 10 percent what happens to you, and 90 percent how you respond to it. Archbishop Fulton Sheen said, “Nothing creates more deep-seated anxiety, than the false assumption that life should be free from anxieties.” When somebody you trust betrays or disappoints you, or you’re struggling financially after tithing faithfully for years, it’s easy to feel hard-done-by. But “Don’t...become bitter” (Heb 12:15 CEV); it destroys relationships and cuts you off from God’s presence. The answer is learning to “thank God no matter what happens. This is the way God wants you...to live” (1Th 5:18 TM).

Tuesday – April 29

“Don’t get worked up.” Matthew 6:34 TM

When you’re on overload (3)

Everything that can go wrong, has! Your teenager pierced his nose, the dog threw up on the carpet, the toilet’s overflowing, and the car’s leaking fluid. No wonder you’re stressed! When life gets overwhelming remember: (1) God’s still looking out for you. When things look bad, remind yourself that God’s bigger than your problem: “Don’t get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.” (2) Don’t think about quitting! Every time you reach the breaking point it’s a test. You have before you a series of choices that will add up to either quitting, or persevering through to victory. Paul was flogged, thrown in jail, shipwrecked and run out of town, but he refused to give in to circumstances and in the end he was able to say, “I have fought the good fight...finished the race, and... remained faithful” (2Ti 4:7 NLT). (3) If it doesn’t have your name on it, don’t pick it up! Stress comes from micro-managing others and assuming responsibilities that aren’t yours. Establish healthy boundaries. If you’re not sure what’s appropriate, ask God to show you how much to get involved in the lives of friends and family. (4) Your breaking point can be the start of a breakthrough. Ever heard the expression “hitting the wall”? Runners use it when they’re exhausted and feel like giving up. But seasoned athletes know if they push through the pain they’ll get their second wind and experience a “runner’s high” that’ll carry them over the finish line. So keep going – by God’s grace you’ll make it!

Wednesday – April 30

“I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.” 2 Peter 1:15 NIV

Making a lasting difference

Some of us think we deserve respect simply because of our position. No, respect must be earned – daily. General J. Lawton Collins asserted, “No matter how brilliant a man may be he will never engender confidence in his subordinates and associates if he lacks honesty and moral courage.” Ultimately, all the skills in the world won’t save you if your character is flawed. Author Stephen Covey writes, “If I try to use human influence strategies and tactics to get other people to do what I want...and my character is fundamentally flawed...in the long run I cannot be successful. My duplicity will breed distrust, and everything I do will be perceived as manipulative.” It makes no difference how good the rhetoric is or even how good the intentions are; if there is little or no trust, there is no foundation for permanent success. Character can be built, but only slowly. If you want to know how long it will take you to get to the top, consult a calendar. If you want to know how long it will take you to fall to the bottom, try a stopwatch. Dreams become shattered, possibilities are lost, organizations crumble and people are hurt when a person doesn’t have character protecting his talent. Character provides the opportunity for longevity in any career, any relationship, and any worthwhile goal. Author and Pastor J.R. Miller wrote, “The only thing that walks back from the grave with the mourners and refuses to be buried, is the character of a man.” What a man is, survives him, and that – makes a lasting difference!

