

Five-Star Athletes – God’s Process for Building Men (Learning to “Trust the Process”)

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Athletes – God’s Process for Building Men

Learning to “Trust the Process”

“...and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” (Hebrews 12: 1)

Out of the gate, I may lose part of my audience due to comments on what has become, in the last decade or so, a time-consuming area for men in the months leading up to the next major sport season, especially football, the draft. The amount of hyperbole surrounding star ratings of young men for their athletic prowess is (in my humble opinion) over the top. In some circles (not all), there is more concern for ***developing performance over the person—competitiveness over character.***

That said, do not think for one second God is not interested in ***building high-performance men.*** He absolutely is! He just defines them differently. On the surface, His process (compared to those above) seems doomed to fail. God does not care how fast we run the 40, how many reps we bench press 225 lbs, or how high we jump. We will not run through cones, but we may run through fire!

Biblical and modern history have demonstrated God’s process can be widely successful. But many find it troubling. The reason is simple. His methods are not natural—they are ***supernatural.*** They do not build on the physical man, but the ***spiritual*** one. God builds His men ***inside-out.***

God does not care what we look like or the physical attributes we bring to the field when we join His team. I hope this has piqued your curiosity. Throughout this study, you will be given the opportunity to peak into His playbook. But first, **The Process.**

Following are five facets of God's process for building biblical Christian men. This overview is neither exhaustive nor original—just a humble attempt to call attention to another aspect of our Father's love for you and me. He invests heavily in His boys with hope that we become godly, young men, and, ultimately, maturing men after His own heart—soldiers of the Cross fit for our King. I chose present participles because God never stops the process this side of Heaven.

★ **Providing**

The first, and best, provision is obvious—Jesus our Savior, Who redeemed us from our sins because He alone could, and did, satisfy the mandatory death penalty that accompanied them. Neither our fathers nor we, ourselves, had any chance of doing that. Neither can we do it for our children. The best Old Testament foreshadowing of this provision is the very familiar story of Abraham and Isaac.

*“Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” And he said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham said, “**God will provide for Himself the lamb** for the burnt offering, my son.” (Genesis 22: 7-8 NASB)*

Jesus often spoke in parables to His disciples. As His crucifixion drew nearer, He spoke directly that He was God's provision (the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world as John the Baptist called Him).

"From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, be killed, and be raised up on the third day." (Matthew 16: 21)

That satisfies the most important provision, but God did not stop there. He knows all our needs and delights to make provision for them throughout His process. These two verses give me great assurance of that—one from David; the other the Apostle Paul.

"I have been young and now I am old, Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken Or his descendants begging bread." (Psalm 37: 25)

"And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4: 19 NASB)

★ **Protecting**

God is not about to let our enemies, especially Satan, score early victories over His men in process. We are safe under His wings, the sanctuary of His Word, and fellowship with other brothers also in the process and older men of God, mostly on the other side of it. Consider two verses citing God's protection. Many believe Moses wrote Psalm 91, as he did Psalm 90, though it is not confirmed. King Solomon wrote the second. God does not want us to think He bails on us when the going gets tough (which we know it does). He reminds and reassures He is our Protector Who goes before and after us.

"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High Will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress, My God, in whom I trust!" For it is He who delivers you...He will cover you with His pinions, And under His wings you may seek refuge; His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark." (Psalm 91: 1-4)

"The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous man

runs into it and is safe.” (Proverbs 18: 10)

★ **Purifying**

Now the process gets harder and hotter!

“Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.” (Isaiah 48: 10 ESV)

I chose the following powerful verse from the Apostle Peter because he went through as visible a purification process as any man in the Bible. Boastfully zealous and outspoken at times. Swore to his willingness to die for or with Jesus. Slept on His command in the garden. Ran away when the soldiers came. Denied Him three times. Somewhere weeping and hiding as Jesus was crucified. Wow!

But Jesus, loving, forgiving Lord that He is, restored Peter. On the other side of his intense purification process fell out a man useful for Christ’s service—one of the key leaders of the early church.

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” (1 Peter 4: 12 ESV)

So take heart, brothers. For we have in our own ways slept on Jesus’ commands to us in Scripture, run away during tough times, denied Him with our words, and, more so, our lives for which we have wept bitterly in the shadows hoping no one would see us.

But there is great news and encouragement! The same loving, forgiving Jesus meets us where we are and restores us to Himself to put us back in His service—a more purified and useful vessel.

★ **Pruning**

Late Winter or early Spring (depending on where you live) is a time many prune trees and shrubs to prepare them for the new growth of Spring and Summer and fruit in late Summer or Fall . Cutting back select branches on a fruit tree to make them more fruitful is not painful to the tree, but it sure is for men. Horticulturists tell us pruning directs more of the trees energy into producing fruit. So does God's pruning!

God prunes the tree (man) to see who is a genuine disciple of Christ, grafted into the vine, versus those simply holding onto it (like kudzu) for the sake of convenience and appearance. Jesus' words:

"Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." (John 15: 2 ESV)

He also prunes the forest (the church) as well—again to separate out the real from the pretender.

"Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire..." (Matthew 3: 10-11 ESV)

(I feel it is important to interject a quick note on these verses. These verses can be misinterpreted to mean one can lose his salvation if you are not bearing fruit. The reality is Jesus is calling men out to examine our hearts to see if we are born-again in the first place.

The issue is not losing your salvation. The compelling issue is whether you ever had it! Jesus made perfectly clear the consequences. So be sure to examine your hearts, brothers!



Perfecting

Most are familiar with the adage, *"Practice makes perfect."* That was *one-upped* by someone else who said, *"Perfect practice makes perfect."* Perhaps the most glaring difference between

this athletic analogy and real life is this. There is no practice field in the Kingdom walk.

If you have been born-again into the army of the Lord, you are in the fray. You do not get to sit on the sidelines and wait your turn or sit behind a veteran to learn the ropes. It could be argued our churches and discipleship ministries serve that end for “rookie” Christians. They can/should serve that purpose,

but at no time is the Christian man not in the battle—it is not a game.

“Trust the Process.” I attempted to trace the origin of this oft used expression in sports. It has been used by winning schools and organizations that took a very process-oriented approach to all aspects of building their respective programs. One recent use that is now deemed “successful” is a pro team that lost for years so they could get the best draft picks—the most five-star athletes. Interesting, but painful and expensive for the season tickets holders to watch during those years. I thought the object was to compete as hard as one can to win; not lose to get better the next year. Silly me!

I do have the answer to the question, *“Who first said that?”* The most important thing to note is this. It was the *second* phrase spoken because it paled in comparison to the first.

The Lord God said to man in the beginning and throughout His-story. “Trust Me.”

From Adam to Noah to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons, Moses, all the subsequent judges, prophets, kings, and the rest of the boys in the band, God kept saying, “TRUST ME! Good things happen when you do. Bad things happen when you do not.”

God’s process is about perfecting you and me. I know that

sounds crazy to some, but if you will not believe me, believe Jesus. **He commanded us to be perfect.** The following was not a suggestion.

“Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5: 48)

That is as impossible an assignment for us as obeying all those laws was for the Israelites in the OT. God is always giving His men impossible assignments. Is He setting us up to fail? Of course not. He does that so that we come to the end of ourselves (my definition of a *desperate man*) and have no choice but to turn to Him in complete dependence. Then, and only then, can Holy Spirit power, wisdom, and guidance take control of our lives and this seemingly ridiculous assignment.

One key to success was given to us by James, the half-brother of Jesus, and leader of the new and very fragile Christian church.

*“And let **endurance** have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”* (James 1: 4)

If we trust God first and best, then we can learn to “trust His process” and stay the course. On the other side, you will look in the mirror and see a man who looks more like Christ than we ever thought possible—more fit for war than we ever imagined or hoped.

Performing

My dear brothers, if we endure God’s “five-star” process, we are ready to perform for Christ’s sake and His glory. The Apostle Paul must have had some athletic skill and experience as he used numerous analogies to things like I discussed above and the Christian life. Consider these two passages.

“...Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable

(one). So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” (1 Corinthians 9: 24-27 ESV)

*“But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. **Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus...that you **keep the commandment without stain or reproach** until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (1 Timothy 6: 11-14 NASB)*

The only stars you and I should be concerned with are those that will bejewel our crowns when we have kept the faith, fought the good fight, and finished the race He assigned to us. Our race does not end at a finish line. It ends at the Beginning Line we call the entrance to Heaven—finally Home. Hallelujah!

Walter

From a Donkey Ride to an Empty Tomb – Four Lessons from the Most Important Week in His-Story



The King of Kings on a Donkey's Colt – The “*Un-triumphal*” Entry

First, I should write that I looked long and hard for the origin of the phrase “triumphal entry” used to refer to Jesus’ ride into Jerusalem on a donkey of all things. I could not find any specific references other than the words were assigned based on the response of many Jews to Jesus riding into Jerusalem accompanied by a crowd.

His arrival seemed “triumphal” to observers. These people (not their leaders or the Romans) were shouting and singing—praising God and calling on Jesus to “save them now” (Hosanna in the highest”). They threw palm branches in His path.

But Jesus and the crowd had very different agendas. The Jews wanted a political Messiah who would throw off Roman rule and return Israel to them—not at all what Jesus had in mind. He came to save them (us) from their sins—not the Romans! (Luke 5: 32)

The importance of this event and amazing scene is underscored in that it appears in all four gospels. What lessons can we learn from our own observations on what we now refer to as Palm Sunday? Two things stand out regarding Jesus’ *ride*—a small donkey.

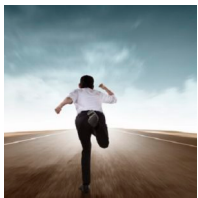
- **Jesus’ abject humility.** It is both interesting and exciting that this humble (and probably uncomfortable) means of travel also fulfilled OT prophecy.

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous

and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Zechariah 9: 9 ESV

- **Beast of Burden.** Donkeys carried loads for their owners that would be too burdensome, if not impossible, for them to bear. Jesus carried our sins to the Cross, and there bore our burden “once for all” who repent of sins and receive Him as Savior.

What a great start to the most difficult week in His-story!



The First Streaker Recorded in the Bible

“Then all the disciples forsook him and fled. Matthew 26: 56 KJV/ Mark 14: 50

“Every man for himself” may have been what the disciples and others who followed Jesus were thinking or screaming as they literally ran for their lives. All deserted Him—every man who swore they would stand by Him to the end, walked with Him three years—the men Whom He referred to as ***friends!***

Mark shares in his gospel that one young man (himself) was grabbed by the cloak and ran out from under it—naked and very afraid, escaping with his life (v. 52). Only John, is accounted for at the Cross. We know Peter was hiding – crying bitterly at having denied Jesus three times. And a distraught Judas hung himself.

Honest Christian men will admit to times we also ran away when standing up for Christ got tough, or we were afraid it could cost us our standing with others; perhaps even our jobs.

Like His disciples, whose feet Jesus' knelt and washed during the Last Supper, we have experienced His humility, drank from His cup of grace, yet withheld it from others whose needs were no more than our own.

Peter's denial offends no more than ours as we stand nervously in silence or curse Him, not with words, with deeds that reflect our true nature, not His.

The first half of Holy Week was all good for these devoted followers of Christ. It brought popularity and fanfare. The second half brought fear and failure.

Yet out of despair and defeat looms forgiveness and victory. Jesus is heading to the Cross for your sin and mine. We just have to make it 'til Sunday. Happy days lay ahead.

As we approach Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, let's do some introspection that will lead surely to confession as the desperate men we are apart from Christ.

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The "King of the Jews" is Dead – Long Live the King!

"When the sixth hour came, darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour (12-3 pm) ...And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed His last." (from Mark 15: 33, 34 37).

Only John recorded His words, *"It is finished."* (John 19: 30)

Luke recorded these as His last spoken words before dying.

"And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, INTO THY HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT." And having said

this, He breathed His last.”” (Luke 23: 46)

Imagine the defeated and hopeless feelings of Jesus' followers, who despite being with Him three years – listening to and living with Him – still did not get it. All they knew was the man who was supposed to save them was dead. How many times did He tell them He had to die to accomplish His purpose. Now He had.

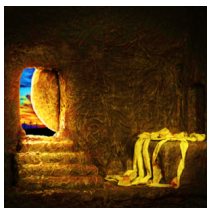
Even nature could not bear to watch, so the sun turned away and darkness covered the earth for three hours. God turned His back on our sin as Jesus became sin. Only now could God's holy demand for justice be satisfied.

When Jesus breathed His last and yielded His spirit back to God, strange physical manifestations occurred in response. (Matthew 27: 50-53)

- First, the veil of the temple was torn in half from top to bottom – an unimaginable feat. The veil was ~ 60 ft high x 30 feet wide x 4” thick. Only God could rip it in half. He did!
- The earth shook, and rocks split.
- Graves opened, and the bodies of saints came alive again. After Jesus resurrection, they came out and walked around the city.

That's the Good News, brothers, but what a price! Deserving death, Jesus bought us life. So, as you spend this Good Friday and the Saturday Jesus spent in the grave, I challenge you to consider your life in lieu of His death. Ask yourself this question,

“Has His death made an eternal and obvious change in my life?”



He is Risen Indeed!

He is risen indeed! – the greatest expression in history. Jesus had risen from the grave as promised. Those words of confirmation were first used by eye witnesses and spoken to disbelieving disciples to whom Jesus had not yet appeared. All four Gospels give resurrection accounts, but the Apostle Paul cut to the heart of the matter in terms of its significance in 1 Corinthians 15.

*“if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain...and you are still in your sins...If in Christ we have **hope in this life only**, we are of all people most to be pitied.”* (from verses 16-19)

But Hallelujah, He is risen. Only fools will pity us as we celebrate and share this Good News. If you are in Christ, He lives in you. This is Resurrection Sunday – a day set aside by the Christian church long ago to celebrate His resurrection and the future hope with certainty of ours as well.

My prayer for true believers is that our lives are filled with such undying gratitude and joy that all whom the Lord puts in our paths will want to know the reason for the Hope we have. Our response? **HE IS RISEN INDEED!**

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Celebrating our risen Messiah with everyone who has received Him as Savior,

Caregivers



Caregiver has taken on new meaning for many of us from the “baby-boomer” generation as our parents age, and we find ourselves in role reversals of sorts. We are now called upon to provide care for those who spent much of their lives caring for us as we have for our children.

In our home, we went down this path with my dad and my wife’s mom a number of years ago. For the last few years, we are back in that hard place with my mom and her dad—both hundreds of miles away in opposite directions. We are thankful for care from family who live closer and staff where they reside. Above all, we are thankful they are still with us—knowing sooner than later, we will get THAT call. Until then, like so many of our friends and peers, we are doing our best to honor our parents and, collectively, be good stewards of their care.

A few weeks ago during my time with the Lord, the Holy Spirit brought this subject, **care**, to mind in the broader context of **caregiving and the Christian life**—God, our Chief Caregiver, and *care* that flows from our thankful hearts into the lives of

needy people.

Care is not mentioned among the *fruit of the Spirit*, nor is it found among the *attributes of God*. But we know from the beginning of the Bible to the end, God takes great care of His people because He cares deeply. The care of God flows from the love of God as do many other benefits toward man. We could say, without error, ***care is love poured out***.

Care is one of those great words that serves as both a noun and a verb. The Apostle Peter did a wonderful job using both in one sentence (just like your English teacher used to ask.)

*“Casting all your **care** (n) on Him because He **cares** (v) for you.” (1 Peter 5:7 NKJV)*

There are many ways to demonstrate care. I chose three based on what we learn from God’s Word (how He dealt with His people in the OT and how Jesus did in the NT), our personal familial situations dealing with aged parents who sometimes act like children, and years of work among homeless, addicts, and prisoners.

♦ Protection

♦ Provision

♦ Patience

God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – Principal Caregivers

There are so many verses that reassure us as sons of most high God that we are His, and He promises to be our strong defender and shield. Here is one.

“The LORD is my protector; He is my strong fortress. My God is my protection, and with Him I am safe. He protects me like a shield; He defends me and keeps me safe.” (Psalm 18: 2 GNT)

We know God has always provided for His children in many ways. Consider the fur in the Garden that clothed Adam and

Eve, the ram in the thicket for Abraham, manna in the desert, and all the times He made provision for His wayward people. Then consider His final provision—Jesus Christ the Lamb sacrificed for the sins of the world.

*“But God proves His own love for us in that while we were still sinners, **Christ died for us!**”* (Romans 5: 8 HCSB)

Many OT verses speak to and demonstrate God’s patience with His disobedient, obstinate people. After Jesus patiently endured shame and suffering to death (that had our names on it), He kept His promise to send the Holy Spirit. The Spirit not only gives us power to live and comfort in hard times, He patiently works in our lives to produce fruit—one of which is ***patience***.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is...patience” (Galatians 5: 22 excerpted)

All of that makes sense from the point of view of the Holy Trinity, but how do they (*protection, provision, patience*) find expression in and through us?

Christians as caregivers.

God has great expectations of His children. We are His sons—adopted into His family through the finished work of Christ on the Cross. While His atoning work is finished, He continues to work on and in us by the Holy Spirit until He takes us Home. His expectations are that we learn from Him (Matthew 11: 29) and do what He did:

Love one another. Do unto others. Go tell others about Him.

Here are three ways His care and caring are poured out through our lives.

1. Protection. This response is two-part, and the first

will shock some. (1) As biblical Christian men, our first responsibility is ***we must protect God.*** Before I lose you with that strange response, let me clarify. We must *protect His reputation.*

If you are in Christ, you no longer have a reputation of your own to maintain. You gave up your right to yourself and laid it, along with the rest of your life, on the cross to be crucified. The Apostle Paul said it best,

"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2: 20a)

As Christian men, we protect God (His reputation) by first laying our lives down, then living before the world in humility—intent on loving and living as He did. When we worry about our own reputations (pride), we may be certain we will at some point fail and bruise His reputation as the world watches and scoffs.

The other side of protection as a caregiver for Christ is this. We look out for the interests of others—those who are unable to protect themselves. Our world is full of needy, helpless people, some more than others. We have the poor and disenfranchised, orphans, widows (single moms), the addict and the prisoner, and perhaps the least cared for in our nation, the unborn child whose cries have been muted over four decades.

2. **Provision.** As caregivers, we must make provision for the physical and emotional needs of people. But the most important provision does not cost a dime or take up any space.

We must be providers of truth of the Gospel of Christ to the lost.

"Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who

comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst." (John 6: 35 NASB)

Many Christian organizations attend to both as they provide care. Consider first how well God has cared for and attended to your provision (and your family). Then ask yourself how you are caring for others according to the example and instruction of Jesus.

3. **Patience.** Just as God has been and remains patient (long-suffering) with us, so we must do a better job of demonstrating patience. Consider three means of *proving patient care*:

- ♦ Patient with unbelievers—praying and believing the Holy Spirit is working on them just as He did with you and me. Most, if not all, of us did not pounce on the Gospel the first time we heard it. Some wait and watch. And remember, they are watching you and me!

- ♦ Patience with believers who are not as far along in the process of sanctification or who have taken more steps back than forward. I believe it is safe to say, we have all been there at some point in our walks with the Lord. Three steps forward—two back. Two steps forward—three back. Pray for, encourage, and walk with those brothers who will let you do so. And we can pray for those who will not. Prayer = Care.

- ♦ Finally, be patient with yourself. God is! He knows we are works in progress. We are made in His image. Yes, it was tarnished, dented, even broken in places because of sin. But Jesus removed that, and the Holy Spirit is patiently reforming us from the inside out. We can either go at His pace or run ahead. We know what that brings!

I am so thankful to be counted among you dear brothers, knowing our Father is our Protector, Jesus our complete Provision, and the Holy Spirit patiently working on, in, and, hopefully, through us for His glory.

Walter

Billy Graham – Another Mighty Soldier of the Cross Goes Home! Hallelujah!



Chose this pic because Billy Graham always pointed people to the Cross of Christ and told them the empty tomb secured our salvation.

So many great and wonderful things have been written, posted, and said concerning Billy Graham, such an amazing, faithful man of God who finally arrived safely Home today.

I can only add to such beautiful testimonials what the Holy Spirit impressed upon me this morning as I sat praying and

praising the Lord for his life during my QT. I found myself in Isaiah 50—a passage that is both poetic and prophetic. The Servant (Jesus) spoke clearly—calling out the unfaithful nation of Israel, reminding them (us) of His power and willingness to help. He was faithful and obedient to the Father's work. Verses 4-5 stood out to me.

*"The Lord God has given Me the tongue of disciples, that I may know how to **sustain the weary one with a word**. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple. **The Lord God has opened My ear; and I was not disobedient nor did I turn back.**"* (Isaiah 50: 4-5 NASB)

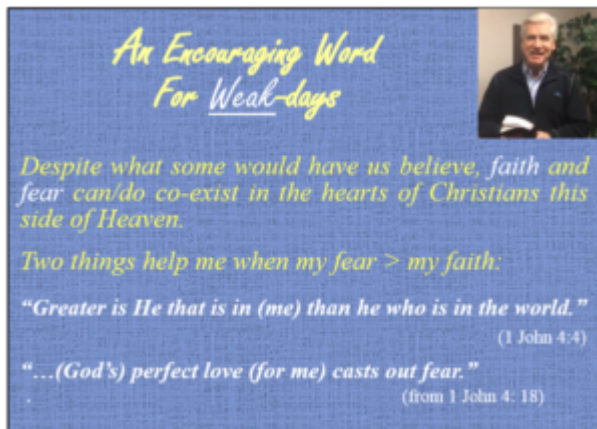
I could not help but think of Billy Graham and his amazing ministry of more than seventy years. I feel certain God would have no problem with me saying the words of verse 5 about this dear preacher and evangelist. For clearly the LORD God opened his ears, and Billy Graham was not disobedient – neither did he turn back away from this powerful and profound call on his life.

Praise God, not only for not turning away from our sinful nation, but loving us enough to send Jesus as our Savior to redeem us from death into life eternal. Those of us who are in Christ long to join you, our dear brother. And until He also calls us Home, may He find us faithful as you were.

For Christ's sake

Walter

Faith and Fear in the Hearts of Christians



The Greatest Impossibility of All – Eternal Life

The Greatest Impossibility of All – Eternal Life

Exchanging Difficulties for Impossibilities (Part Four)

*But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, **but with God all things are possible.**” (Matthew 19: 26 ESV)*

While this sounds encouraging, the disciples were very disturbed over the whole conversation. The preceding verses contained the discourse between Jesus and the rich young ruler who asked Jesus the question, “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” He was ill-prepared for Jesus’ answer. Most of us know the story well. (Matthew 19: 18-23) The rich young man did a good job of justifying himself based on his obedience to the law – keeping the commandments.

The Difficulty: When Jesus gave him the final qualification, the rich young man did not like the terms of the deal sheet (as we might say today)—*go sell everything, give the proceeds to the poor, and come follow Me.* We are told he walked away *grieving* because he was very rich. Jesus took this teaching opp to say what has become troubling to many today because of our wealth as individuals and a nation because we are so financially blessed compared to most of the world.

“I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven...it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (vs 23-24)

The stunned disciples responded by asking Jesus who *could* be saved. They must have thought *the rich man wanted to know the answer to eternal life and lived a good life, obeying the commandments.* Just because he would not give up his possessions and become a follower of Jesus, he would be kept out of Heaven? Really? Not really.

The Impossibility: In the lesson verse today, Jesus gave His disciples the only correct answer to rich man’s question—one asked by millions who want to know how they can live forever – get to Heaven; avoid Hell (if either really exist—get “fire insurance” of a sort).

The rich young man gave the answer many do today. I have been “good” and done “good things”. As Christians, we know our best behavior and works do not qualify us for the Kingdom of God. Jesus said it best, ***“with man this is impossible.”*** Simply stated, that means *you cannot work your way to Heaven, nor are you good enough to ever get there.*

But Jesus also gave the simple answer to everyone who seeks the Truth with a contrite, repentant heart, *“with God all things are possible.”* That is the great news of the Gospel. When we had no way to God—lost in our sin and without hope,

God made THE WAY. It cannot be any more simply stated than the first verse taught to children in Christian churches.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3: 16 NASB)

God made the ultimate *impossibility possible* through Christ. The rich man's issue was his money had become his 'god' and stood between him and becoming a follower of Christ. Money is just one of many 'gods' that can do that. Are there any in your life doing the same or keeping you from going deeper in your relationship with Him?

Walter

What Men Can Learn from the Most Amazing Girl in His-Story

What Men Can Learn from the Most Amazing Girl in His-Story

Exchanging Difficulties for Impossibilities (Part Three)

“For nothing will be impossible with God.” (Luke 1: 37 NASB)

The Difficulty: Biblical experts put her age as young as thirteen—no older than sixteen. By our standards today, if age is the discriminator, she was just a girl. But God in His infinite wisdom chose Mary, out of all her gender who came before or would follow, to be the earthly mother to bring His Son into the world. Wow! is about all that comes to mind.

This divine decision brought huge, possibly horrific, consequences. She was unmarried, although engaged to Joseph. She was a virgin and planned to remain that way until she and Joseph were married. If what this angel said came true, she would face embarrassment, ridicule, and, possibly, death.

The Impossibility: Who would believe such a ridiculous story from Mary? *“An angel showed up, told me God was going to get me pregnant, and I will give birth to the long-awaited Messiah.”* Let’s review this: (1) talking angel from God, (2) pregnant virgin, (3) and that with the Son of God-Messiah. Who among us would believe such a story?

Mary’s Response:

“And Mary said, “Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38 NASB)

Regardless of her physical age, here we are introduced to a very godly, young woman. No wonder she “found favor with the Lord.” (v. 30) Mary’s praise and prayer (known as the Magnificat vs 46-55) speak to her spiritual maturity as she quotes scriptures and accepts this incredibly difficult, yet awesome, assignment and responsibility. No equivocating or fear. Just incredible faith that her God was real and would do what He promised. Again, I say, Wow!

Our Response: What then do men of God learn from such a woman of God? Let me suggest (at least) three things. No matter how difficult our circumstances or God’s assignment may be today, our response must be that of Mary.

- **Surrender** our will to God’s will—His sovereignty.
- **Submit** our lives as “living sacrifices” as the Apostle Paul urged, and Mary demonstrated.
- **Serve** the Lord with gladness as David exclaimed and as Mary lived.

So easily said. So hard to live. Let us die trying.

LORD, thank You for incredible difficulties that grace our lives—particularly those that come at the worst times and are most unwelcome. Give us Mary’s strength and courage to walk in faith knowing, as she discovered nine months later, there really is “*nothing impossible with God.*” Amen.

Walter

Oil of Gladness – Pour It On!

Even those of us who do little cooking are familiar with the acrostic, EV00 – Extra Virgin Olive Oil. It has great use in healthy cooking and possesses proven health benefits related to cholesterol and CV disease.

The use of olive oil for anointing purposes throughout biblical history is well-documented. (Anointing typically means pouring over someone’s head.) We first see this used on Aaron (the brother of Moses and first high priest (Exodus 30)). David, the shepherd boy who became King, used this well-known phrase in his most eloquent psalm. “*Thou anointest my head with oil.*” (Psalm 23: 5). I imagine its greatest use was anointing Jesus’ body for burial (olive oil and spices).

There is another reference to the use of oil for anointing that grabs my attention every time I read two passages of Scripture where we find it—***the oil of gladness.*** The first use is found in a beautiful, messianic psalm.

you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions; (Psalm 45: 7 ESV)

The writer of the book of Hebrews began by diving immediately

into the fact that Jesus is God's answer for mankind. He quoted these verses from Psalm 45 in Hebrews 1: 8-9. Jesus was anointed with the oil of gladness.

The second use occurs in Isaiah 61: 1-3. This chapter also contains promises of God, reassuring the Israelites He would deliver them from their sufferings and captivity in the future. These verses also contain great messianic prophecy. Jesus read parts of this passage when He first taught in the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth. (He did not quote verse 3.)

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the LORD has anointed me, to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to prisoners...to grant those who mourn *in* Zion, giving them a garland instead of ashes, ***the oil of gladness instead of mourning,***"

Gladness. Perhaps when I give you my definition of that word, you will understand and even share, my conviction concerning this powerful anointing. Webster may disagree, but the Holy Spirit has impressed upon mine that...

"gladness is the absence of whining and the presence of joy".

I can be a real whiner sometimes. My wife has even asked (sarcastically) if I want some cheese with my "whine"! This year I am committed to experiencing more of the joy of the Lord, so ***His oil of gladness can pour over me*** and, just maybe, touch those with whom I come in contact.

Walter

The Difference Between “Wishful Thinking” and Living Hope

The devotions this week featured key words that are, for many, hard to swallow and even harder to digest:

♦ Surrender ♦ Slavery ♦ Failure ♦ War

Each was presented in a biblical context to give us *hope* that:

(1) **Victory** results when we *surrender* our wills to that of the Lord.

(2) **Freedom** found only in Christ breaks the chains of slavery to sin.

(3) Deep, abiding **faith** is often born out of abject failures.

(4) **Peace** that passes all understanding can be ours even in the midst of spiritual warfare.

Today our focus is this *hope* to which I referred above. Most people reach a point in life when we come to the realization that *human hope* is little more than wishful thinking. It has no basis in reality or foundation upon which we may build, much less cling to, such hope.

As discouraging as that is for most, in Christ we have **certain hope**. That may, again, seem somewhat of an oxymoron, but if you examine the Scriptures, it will become clear and make perfect sense. Here are a just a couple of verses to help encourage your heart when circumstances overwhelm, people disappoint, or it seems Satan has a special posse whose assignment is to attack you on every front.

♦ **Hope in and through the written Word of God (Bible)** – *“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.”* (Romans 15:4 NIV)

♦ **Hope that is alive because Christ died and rose again just as He promised.** – *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,”* (1 Peter 1: 3 NASB)

“Now may the God of all hope fill you with joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15: 13 NASB),

Walter

Twas the night before Christmas and what was God thinking?

Gigi and I attended the Christmas Eve service this morning, had lunch, and checked our list (one more time) to make sure I did not need to join the hoards of last-minute shoppers. Thankful I did not, my mind turned to hear what the Holy Spirit would breathe into mine regarding “just another Christmas Eve”. All I knew was I really wanted to share a brief word of encouragement on this joyous eve of expectancy – for little children who cannot wait to see what Santa brings and Christians who manage to clear our heads of all the

“Christmas clutter” and remember why we do this in the first place.

Expectancy. When I saw this picture of Mary kneeling beside the manger and holding her soon-to-be-born baby in her arms, as only an expectant mom can do, I knew this was the image that would best accompany these words of reminder to all who will celebrate the birth of Christ our Savior tomorrow.

Twas the night before Christmas, and there sat Mary (with Joseph not far away). We know, nine months earlier, the angel Gabriel appeared to her and shared the most amazing words ever. She was about to become pregnant and carry in her womb the Son of God Who would become the Savior of the World. You may also recall Joseph was told that “his son” would “save His people from their sins”. Both wondered what God was thinking?

Mary’s life was further disrupted and pregnancy made even more uncomfortable – if not dangerous – when Joseph told her they had to journey to Bethlehem for a census since he was of the line of David that originated in this small town outside Jerusalem.

As an expectant dad, I know from watching Gigi endure four full-term pregnancies what those last few weeks can be like for a woman. While she could not wait for the baby to be born, there was a lot of discomfort that leads up to the most uncomfortable part of all – labor and delivery.

We have no idea what Mary and Joseph thought after those “God invasions” into their lives, as no thoughts or words are shared. What we see are incredible demonstrations of faith and obedience that cause me to shrink back in amazement. Did Mary really think, as this picture presents, she would be giving birth to the Son of God in a nasty stable surrounded by animals and the fragrant aroma of ox poop?

Yet we see her kneeling faithfully beside a feed trough (where animals slobbered all over it as they ate) rubbing and

comforting her son in her womb, awaiting His arrival. Surely she must have wondered if this was really what God intended or was it just because the inn was full when they arrived.

No sterile surroundings of a birthing room. No nurses or midwives standing by waiting to help. Just poor old Joseph, perhaps just as clueless as the rest of us men who stood around awaiting the birth of our first child. I am sure he did what he could, perhaps laid out “fresh” hay and kept animals at bay while they waited for the arrival of the King Who would be their’s to raise.

One final “image of expectancy”. It could not be shown here because it exists only in the hearts and minds of Christ-lovers who pause long enough to consider the expectancy in Heaven as all angels, cherubim, seraphim, and every living creatures await the incarnation of the One they know already as King of Kings and Lord of all. Surely they were amazed that God would condescend to sinful, created beings such as humans to save and redeem us from our deliberate decisions of defiance and disobedience.

As I wrap this up, there are about six hours left before the day calendar gets flipped and “just another Christmas day” arrives. I hope you receive this message in time to enjoy, with child-like excitement and expectancy, the imminent arrival of our Savior.

*Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.” She will bear a Son; and **you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.**” Now all this took place to fulfill what*

was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US." (Matthew 1: 18-23 NASB)

Expectantly waiting with you,

Walter