

30 Days of Perseverance, Character and Hope



Lessons Through Suffering Quiet Time Studies by the Lazarus Ministry

“Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.”

Romans 5:3-5

TABLE OF CONTENTS & AUTHORS

- **JAMES**..... Greg Gaumond
- **PHILIPPIANS**..... Carol Gaumond
- **1 PETER**..... Ed Damien (ch. 1-3) & Greg Gaumond (ch. 4-5)
- **2 PETER**..... Ed Damien
- **2 CORINTHIANS**..... Gye Hobbes & Alyson Clennon

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Carol Gaumond: the wife of Greg Gaumond, co-leader of the Lazarus Ministry, and a full-time teacher. Since the development of Greg's Lupus in 1993, she has proven herself to be a strong disciple and friend to many people who have had to similarly accommodate for their spouse's illness. Carol opens her home to any in need, serving alongside Greg without complaint. She is an inspiration to all who know her depth of love, knowledge of Scripture, and servant's heart.

Ed Damian: at 60 years old, Ed travels almost 60 miles each way to church, accompanied by Marna, his wife of 39 years. They have been faithful disciples for over 11 of those years, serving God's Kingdom in many ways. Ed has been afflicted for over 10 years with insulin-dependent Diabetes. He also has chronic arthritis in both hips, leaving him unable to walk unless aided by a walker or scooter. In addition, he suffers from severe respiratory distress. Despite all of Ed's afflictions, he serves as a leader in the Lazarus Ministry. Ed always has the wisdom of experience, a big smile, and overflowing love for everyone.

Gye Hobbs: whether as an usher at church or the single men's leader of the Lazarus Ministry, Gye strives to serve God's Kingdom with all the strength he has been given. Afflicted with chronic arthritis, insulin-dependent Diabetes, and having survived a major heart attack, his acute pain levels have limited his ability to work. Nevertheless, as a faithful disciple he manages his life in such a way that he is never absent from meetings of the body, courageously making every effort to love and serve all those in need.

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The authors, having worked for 3 months on this project, want to encourage all disciples of Jesus Christ to courageously embrace whatever afflictions God has blessed you with. It is our hope that your afflictions serve to draw you closer to God and spur you to develop an ever more powerful, effective, and intimate relationship with him. As we share in the fellowship of suffering alongside our Lord Jesus Christ, we look forward to the promise of heaven for ourselves and all those who will be persuaded to go with us.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY!

DAY 1

James 1

2-12 – suffering and perseverance lead to maturity

James, Jesus' younger brother, was a vocal proponent of Jesus' ministry during his life (Ac 15:13), and became one of the leaders of the Jerusalem church (Gal 2:9). But he didn't turn to having faith until after he had seen his brother suffering and persevering for the sake of his belief in God's purpose for his life (Mk 4:21; Jn 7:3-5). He had watched Jesus become mature under the pressure of his suffering (Heb 5:7-9). To open his letter, James explains that the trials we face in life are meant to build our hearts in perseverance, because ***perseverance helps make us mature and complete in our faith*** (vs.2-5,12). James adds that we will gain the crown of life through our trials and perseverance, but *only* if we have stood the test, refusing to become faithless.

- Are you willing to persevere, no matter how great the trials are that you face in life?
- What trials in your life do you need to sincerely pray through each day and understand according to the scriptures, to persevere in your faith (vs.5-8)?

Daily, I deal with a number of trials related to my Systemic Lupus. Pain, fatigue and weariness are the main issues. It has only been through ***prayer*** and ***consistent, perpetual, probing study in the Word of God*** which allows me to find the encouragement and strength to make it through each day. I fight constantly to not feel sorry for myself. I fight to stay strong and maintain a righteous heart, and I do both of these things through prayer (vs.19-21, 26-27).

Much like sin makes war against my soul (vs.13-15), my disease is continually warring against my body. Because I am forced to rely on prayer in light of my physical trials, the Holy Spirit helps me be more focused on our Father in Heaven and His glorious plan for my life each day (vs.17-18). I have also ***dedicated myself to seeking godly discipline*** to make sure my heart isn't being deceived by the trials of my disease (vs.13-16).

- Do you seek discipline from godly disciples to help you see the truth of your life clearly?
- Do you understand and consider the danger it is causing to your salvation if you do not rely on prayer, the Word of God, and seeing advice from godly people?

There is an overriding point to James' message in this chapter: we ***must obey*** the Word of God very closely, because when we ***humbly accept the Word planted in us*** (v.21), it can – and will – save us (vs.22-25). James understood that Jesus gave us the greatest gift ever given, and we must fight hard for this salvation through the blood of Jesus.

DAY 2

James 2

14-24 – only two choices: acting in faith or being hypocritical in faith

In the religious world today, many people misleadingly teach that belief alone is sufficient to please God. James, the brother of Jesus, saw his older brother *live out his faith through his actions*. All that Jesus did had a *purpose*: to glorify His Father in Heaven. And he asks, in light of Jesus' example: "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?" (v.14) The question to each of us is: Do you live your faith by your actions, or do you believe, with nothing to show for it?

Years ago, I challenged my own father on his commands versus his actions. His response was: "Don't do what *I do* – do what *I say*". Even at the young age of 8, I understood the hypocrisy in that statement. James counters this sort of double-mindedness by challenging us: "show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do" (v.18b). Clearly, our faith is empty if we are not living it out to glorify the Father! Will any of us live this out perfectly and sinlessly? NO! But God calls us to make every effort to live out our faith as completely as possible.

God, our heavenly Father, doesn't say one thing as an expectation and then do something different Himself! As a father, I desire to raise my children so that they see how someone seeks God. If I *only talk* about my faith, and *don't reach out* and help people – strangers, those who are sick, hurting or lonely – what kind of example am I setting for them? If I don't live out what God teaches me, then how can I hope my children will live it out?

- What are your actions like? Do they reflect the commands of Jesus that you claim to follow?
- What do you need to repent of so that you won't be hypocritical in your faith?

"You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?" (v.20). James explains this convicting question clearly, using the example of Abraham. It is obvious that Abraham made his faith complete by his actions in being willing to sacrifice his son Isaac (vs.21-24). Abraham was called "God's friend" because he *never doubted God's word*. When commanded by God to sacrifice his promised son, it is written: "Early the next morning Abraham got up..." (Gen 22:3). The story goes on to tell us how he lived out his faith with determination, and without pause.

Yet can you imagine what was going on in Abraham's heart and mind? Can you picture the response in his heart when Isaac asks his dad where the sacrifice is (Gen 22:7)? All we know is that Abraham's response was: "God himself will provide" (Gen 22:8). I urge you to dig deep into your heart, see whether you are willing to "get up early the next morning", go out, and *obey a costly command of God!*

- Are you willing to sacrifice precious dreams and relationships in this world to live out your faith?
- What is the biggest area of faith that you must grow in, to show the world your faith by deeds?

Part of me living out my faith with actions is pushing past all the challenges of my illness. It is simply impossible for me to survive every day without surrendering the pain, fatigue, and frustrations to God. I had to *learn this character from Jesus' example*. Sometimes just making it to Sunday worship, Bible talk, Wednesday men's night out, and Bible studies is *all I can do*. Daily, I push past in order to spend time with my wife and children, doing things *they want to do*. This does not make me a hero. It is only doing what I am commanded: living out my faith!

When the days come that I simply can't push past, I surrender these days and am not burdened with guilt. I know that God is understanding, merciful, and loving. God alone knows my heart, desires, and motivations; He does not punish or rebuke His children because they are too sick to go out that day.

Finally, James brings this powerful lesson to a close with one of the most compelling and demanding passages of Scripture: "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead" (v.26). *Faith alone* is never used in the context which many teach. God calls us to live out our faith *by loving others, helping others, serving others and sacrificing for others*. If anything in your faith is dead, take that to the Father, consider the example of Jesus, and beg God to raise your faith from the dead! I urge you to really study this out, and then seek growth through prayer, advice, and fasting. Bring your faith back to life for the whole world to see!

DAY 3

James 3

1-6 – understanding and gaining control over what we say

The tongue set the course for our lives each and every day, as compared to a ship's rudder which sets its direction. James talks about our tongues being such a small part of our body, and yet it causes the biggest problems for our whole lives. "The tongue is also a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (v.6). James uses examples that are self-evident to anyone's understanding: if our *little tongue is such a problem*, and causes *such great trouble* in our lives, so are *the small sins we hang onto*.

Can anything be more obvious than what James has to say about our relationship with what comes out of our mouths? Do we boast, brag, lie, say hurtful things, curse, or mock and rail against God? Jesus teaches us that, from overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks, and we will be judged according to the words that we say (Mt 12:34-37). All sin starts in our hearts (Mk 7:20-23), all sin that is spoken uses our tongue to form the words, and all of us use our minds to put it into action. As you study out this chapter, ask yourself the following questions:

- How hard is it for me to keep my mouth shut when I get upset?
- Do I speak out and then regret my words because they hurt someone I love?

7-18 – causing good or causing evil

Do you seem to be confessing the same sins of saying things that hurt the people around you, and no matter how hard you try it continues to happen? This is what James is getting at when he says, "All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (vs.7-8). Through repentance, God can change our hearts, show us the way, and give us the strength to keep our tongue under control.

When we speak, we have to think first! Remember, our tongues truly can be used for either praising our God and Savior and for cursing God. When we pray, we have to ask God for humility and mercy. We have the choice, we have the free will, and *we must take responsibility for our own decisions* to either obey God, or cause evil around us by what we say.

For years, I was full of anger and hatred for certain people in my life growing up. I thought that they had betrayed me, and in fact, they had. What I didn't realize was that *my own anger was the root of so much sin that came from my mouth, and my words hurt many people around me*. Over time, God showed me that I *couldn't* keep my tongue under control because I *wouldn't* humble myself enough to look at the cause of my uncontrollable tongue (v.14). When I decided to *be humble and find help*, God provided a brother in the Lord, who guided me to see my anger clearly, work through my anger deliberately, and choose to forgive those who has hurt me so much. When I forgave others, I could accept God's forgiveness for myself (Mt 18:35). Over time, my anger subsided and my tongue was not the cause of continual, devastating fires.

If you are struggling with what comes out of your mouth, having trouble surrendering your poisonous and evil words, go to God in prayer about it; he clearly understands this problem and has answers. Talk specifically through your particular issues with people who will discipline you with the Bible, fast, and pray more. *It is only God who can teach our words to be sweet and loving* (vs.17-18).

DAY 4

James 4

1-10 – God loves humility and hates pride

James hits on a profound truth when he quotes: “God *opposes* the proud, but *gives grace* to the humble” (v.6b). This one proverb gives us the complete and precise recipe for a stable, growing, and life-changing walk with God! God loves the humble-spirited person who is willing to learn and change in every situation, and hates the prideful soul who rejects his commands and believes himself to be right and justified in everything he does (Pr 8:14).

Just think about this: *what happens when you are prideful* in your walk with God? What happens when you are defensive and arrogant with your spouse, parents, or friends? Can anything good ever result from choosing to be proud? NO!

Now, *what happens when you are humble* in your walk with God? What happens when you are humble with your parents, family, friends, teachers, brothers and sisters? Can anything but good come out of a soft and considerate heart that always seeks to take personal responsibility?

Many times we don’t concentrate on *the heart God is trying to convey*. We can get caught up in the details and totally miss the most important and impacting words he says. God will not answer pride-filled prayers; we must be humble when we pray (vs.1-3). In our hearts we can’t be a friend of this world and arrogantly think we know better than God when he tells us we are his enemies as a result (vs.4-5).

James says that if we humble ourselves before the Lord, he will lift us up (v.10). It makes sense: how do you want to respond to people who always *work hard to see your point of view*? How do you feel about the people in your life who never get *defensive*, never think they *know better* than you, and never try to do what’s *best only for their own benefit*? How do you feel about people who *don’t believe* in your character or anything you have to say, even when you prove it? It is obvious why God would love humility. This is a *choice* that each person makes, and the choice to be humble is the most important decision that leads to great relationships with God and man.

When I first sat down to study the Bible in 1990, the brother leading the studies looked straight into my eyes and said: “You obviously love Jesus a ton, but you’re *so spiritually arrogant it’s disgusting!*” We then went on with the Discipleship study, and I was never more convicted, more angry and more certain that this study couldn’t possibly be right (*God was revealing my pride, since I wouldn’t just listen to the brother*). I went home that night, and spent until 3 a.m. trying to prove the Discipleship study wrong! The more I studied God’s word on my own and prayed it through, the more I realized how true this Bible study had been, and *exactly how prideful and arrogant I was*. I was broken; I had never cried so hard over this sin of pride before in my life.

- Does your life portray opposition to God, or believing him and responding to his grace?

DAY 5

James 5

7-11 – pressure and blessings

Our lives are so full of expectation, both from people outside of us and from within ourselves and our families. Along with these expectations arise serious challenges to our character, our physical capacity, and our ability to remain spiritual under pressure. If we entertain faithlessness and refuse to rely on God's commands and prayer, our lives quickly become overwhelming!

James knew this well; he calls each disciple to meditate on this illustration from history: "Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, ***we consider blessed those who have persevered***" (vs.10-11). The prophets suffered because they were compelled from the inside to live up to the expectation of God, but they were opposed from the outside by people who refused to submit. They had to be patient, choosing to do what was right in the eyes of God regardless of the opposition. They had to decide to be righteous even when people around them refused to do what the prophet ***said they should and hoped they would***. The only way to avoid becoming embittered and angry under the pressure of this situation is to persevere faithfully in prayer, surrendering all expectations to God. James tells us that this way of living leads to ***being considered blessed***. Perhaps at the time, the prophets ***didn't feel like they were blessed***, but their faith, working with their perseverance to do what is right, makes them an example that we can follow for all time.

Patience is not my strongest natural character strength, which means that I have learned a lot about it over the course of being a disciple! It is easier for me to lose my patience on the road driving than any other place in life. Jesus' example shows me that even when people around me don't do the things I think they should be doing, I am the one who ***must decide to be patient***. The same is true with my pain and fatigue. When my body ***refuses to do*** what ***I think*** it should or what ***I hope*** that it can, then I have no other righteous option but to patiently endure and learn from it.

- In what area of your life is God calling you to learn patient endurance?
- When pressure is put on you, do you turn to God's will and prayer to guide you?

13-20 – be humble and be healed!

When I persevere patiently and wait for God to give me strength, help, and guidance, I am learning just like Jesus did. Scripture clearly says: "(Jesus) learned ***obedience from what he suffered***". Because Jesus had never dealt with the pressure caused by living a limited body in the flesh, subject to Satan, he had to ***learn how*** to reverently submit to "the one who could save him from death" (Heb 5:7-8). When we don't decide to learn obedience in every situation where life puts pressure on us, we are bound to turn to the world's way of dealing with pressure: harboring sin. The pressures of pain, hardship, confusion, despair, and anxiety are roots behind many of the sins we indulge in to protect our hearts when we don't rely on God.

Even if I am able to patiently persevere with my disease, I cannot be happy or fulfilled in my relationship with God if I choose to carry around the guilt of my sin. James explains how to relieve ourselves from the burden of our sinful nature. Even though we are forgiven by Christ's blood, the key to accessing the healing that comes from forgiveness is this: "confess your sins to each other and pray for each other that you may be healed" (v.16).

The Bible clearly teaches that when I repent and pray to God to forgive my sins, but don't confess them to someone in the fellowship, I ***won't find healing***. Simply put, without confession to our fellow man or woman, we are ***not being humble***. Without humility there can be ***no true repentance***. Without true repentance, there is ***no freedom*** in Christ Jesus. It is in the humble act of confession, the lowering of pride's guards, which frees us up to be able to live an effective and spiritually healthy life.

This passage also clearly teaches that when we encounter a brother, sister, or non-disciple in sin, we ***can't do nothing***. We must be willing to work at turning them from their sin (vs.19-20). Why would God ask us to fight this battle? Because we save them from sinning continually against God, protecting them from a multitude of the same sins which will eventually destroy their lives.

DAY 6

Philippians 1

9-11 – concerned with discernment and righteousness

Paul maintained in his prayers that *he wanted more* for the church: he wanted their *love to abound* with *more knowledge* and *more insight*. His heart was that he wanted them to discern what was best, remain pure and blameless, and be filled with the fruits of righteousness. In expressing the character that he prays for the Philippians to develop, we begin to see the higher standard to which we are called for the sake of the gospel. Paul's life proved that the only way to uphold this standard is *by prayer*.

As I deal with my husband's health on a daily basis, I need to *use discernment constantly*. Throughout each day, we have many difficult decisions to make. Is what Greg wants to accomplish the best thing to do right now? Should he wait? If he does it, will he make it to church or the Bible talk that is coming up? How will that decision affect the family?

Even though I am his wife, I *cannot make these decisions for him*. I have to let him make his own decisions between himself and God. I might offer my advice (and that is all that it is); then, I need to trust God in whatever decision he makes. My *role is to support* him in those decisions, with a heart that is pure and righteous.

I consider that this dynamic must be the same between all people. The Bible teaches that we *must ask for advice if we want to be successful* in anything we set our mind to do (Pr 15:22). Certainly, we need to look for wise advisers and humbly consider whatever advice we are given. Ultimately, however, our decisions need to be made with the discernment that only God can give us through prayer.

- In what situations do you need to dedicate yourself constantly to praying for discernment?
- Are you trusting in God, maintaining a pure and blameless heart when you make decisions?

18b-26 – rejoicing for real: under real pressure and real pain

While reading this letter, we must constantly keep in mind the fact that Paul is *writing while he is in prison*. Paul shares humbly that he *wants to depart from this world*, be freed from his chains, and go home to be with Christ. Yet, he starts out this section of his letter with rejoicing! When you face real pressure and really overwhelming circumstances, are you *determined to rejoice*? Often we whine and complain about how rough things are – upset about the things that we don't have – rather than considering all the incredible blessings God has given us.

Paul realizes that he still has work to do on earth, so he believes that God is not ready to take him home yet. When we adopt this attitude: "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (v.21), we become unstoppable. Nothing is able to phase us or touch us. Paul had learned this secret: as we *focus on the glory of heaven* and realize that *our death is the way we get there*, then we will become bold in everything we do. As the song "A Prayer for Boldness" states, "Criticize us we grow stronger / Kill us and for sure we win / For our battle is not earthly / And our souls will never end!"

- Write out a list of blessings that God has given you. Pray over them and rejoice in these things
- What are the things that stop you in your evangelism, boldness, and standing up for Christ?
- In every situation where you face cowardice, ask: what is the worst thing that can happen to me?
- Consider how each of these scenarios pale in comparison to spending eternity with God

DAY 7

Philippians 2

1-11 – becoming one in spirit and purpose

Paul clearly understood that the way to become “like minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose” (v.2) is by **adopting the attitude of Christ**. To become like Christ means this: “...he **made himself nothing**, taking on the very **nature of a servant**, being made in human likeness” (v.7). If Jesus made himself nothing by becoming a man – and he was a perfect man – that makes me less than nothing, because **I am far from perfect**. This is not natural to either Jesus or to ourselves. He had to deliberately make himself something which he was not accustomed to being, in order to fulfill God’s purpose for him here on earth. Only if we are determined to truly make ourselves nothing, taking on the nature of a servant as Jesus did, we will be able to remain united with one another. If we are proud and self-seeking, it will be obvious in our lack of submission to each other and towards God (v.8).

Perfect unity does not mean that everyone is expected to see things from the same point of view. It *does* mean that even though people have different opinions, we still have to accomplish the same spiritual purpose which God assigned to us. Jesus was perfectly united with the Father. Even though he trusted that God’s point of view was perfect, there were times when his own point of view differed (Mt 26:36-46). In these situations, he had to **change his viewpoint through prayer** in order to become submissive to God.

The word of God has not changed, and it is still our standard for living. Taking on the nature of a servant means that we trust other people will know what is best for their own lives more than we do, and our role is to **support them in their decisions**. Among the fellowship, God calls leaders to a higher standard of serving than others (Lk 22:24-27). However, for leaders to work powerfully means that those they lead must be willing also to humbly submit themselves to the direction set by a “less-than-nothing-man”. It reveals our trust in God’s sovereign power to work through man’s decisions when we are willing to accept what is best for the entire group and not only ourselves.

- Are you using the Bible to discern how to be perfectly united with others in every situation?
- Are you more concerned daily with proving your opinions to be right, or advancing the gospel?
- Do you believe that your leaders have your best interest in mind?
- Are you like-minded with your evangelist, your Bible talk leader, and your discipleship partners?
- Are you like-minded with your spouse and your family?
- Leaders, are you listening carefully and responding decisively to the needs of those you lead?
- Do you consider that you must both **listen** and **change** if you are to be perfectly united?

12-18 – work out your salvation

Paul knew that each person would be responsible before God for their own soul, and he directed the church to **work out** their salvation **with fear and trembling**. When we are baptized, it is only the beginning of a **long journey called life**, and whether we respond by being **faithful to God’s leadership** during this journey will determine the rest of our eternity. No person can work out your salvation for you, and nobody else can have a heart for you that is reverent and sensitive to God’s desires and power.

Our enemy, Satan, desires nothing more than to destroy our faith, obedience, and trust in God before our journey is completed (Jn 10:10). Satan is very patient in his character. He will slowly erode away various portions of our faith, so we cannot even discern the heights from which we have fallen (Rev 2:5). If the height of glory is to be perfectly unified (Jn 17:22-23), then when we find ourselves complaining and arguing (v.14) it is a red flag that we are losing sight of God’s ability to work for the good in all things for those are called according to his purposes (Ro 8:28). If Satan has undermined our **belief in God’s sovereign leadership** and **our role in this world** (v.15), it is easy for him to make us angry, discouraged, and disunited with the people God has given us to love in this world.

DAY 8

Philippians 3

2-11 – our confidence needs to be in God alone

Be honest: what do you put your confidence in? Your health? Your status, strength, intelligence, or good looks? Paul was *completely aware* of the things which, for good reason, gave him *confidence in the world* (v.4). Because he was in touch and not deceiving himself with false humility, he was able to use these things as an example of his attitude spiritually. Paul considered that all things were a loss, but he still used all of the talents and worldly benefits God had given him for the sake of advancing the gospel. What gifts and abilities has God blessed you with? In the world, we use these things to gain confidence for ourselves. But for the sake of advancing the gospel, these things are meant to be applied toward building the kingdom of God.

God has blessed me with an understanding of mathematics, and has given me also the ability to teach it to people. I use this talent to tutor children whose parents are in the kingdom, helping them to glorify God by setting an example of excellence in their education. For each of us, we need to consider our specific talents and inheritance, and how we can apply these things to build God's kingdom.

- What are the talents that God has blessed you with?
- Are you using them to the fullest extent for God?
- Are you using your ability to learn the Bible so you can teach others?
- How equipped are you to disciple and encourage others using God's word?

Paul says that, because of his actions arising from his attitude of considering everything in the world a loss compared to knowing Christ, he had indeed *lost all things* (v.8). The things he valued at this point in his life were what he would gain from faithful obedience to his relationship with God (vs.9-11). Because he knew that all his worldly accomplishments and inheritance meant nothing in the face of death and dishonor, he learned to value instead those things which *could never be taken away* from him.

What if God took the things away from you that bring you confidence in this world? What would you be left with? Consider the worst scenario you could imagine. For example, if you were in a car accident today and ended up a quadriplegic for the rest of your life, would you still be able to praise God and rejoice? Or would you become bitter?

Usually, we think that we would be more noble under circumstances that are more difficult. So now consider this: do you become bitter and defensive when somebody says something evil about you behind your back? If it is *this easy to shake your peace and confidence in God's ability to protect you*, how do you think you would respond if people spit on you and tortured you publicly, to the death, without a fair trial? Now, consider Paul's attitude of rejoicing. Consider that he is writing this *from prison*, and that he believes it to *be his honor to have fellowship with Christ through his sufferings* (v.10-11). Only if we put our confidence in God alone will we be able to rejoice no matter what the circumstances.

12-21 – keep moving toward the goal

Paul knew that he could not live in the past. He acknowledged freely that he had not yet taken hold of his purpose to the extent that he was fully able. In his heart, he was *always aware of where he had fallen short* and the greater perfection to which he aspired. However, in his maturity, he knew: whether there are glories or defeats in our past, they are gone. We can learn from them, but then we must focus and move forward. The only way to maintain the strength to keep persevering is by *constantly keeping our focus on heaven*, striving to attain the goal of salvation and eternity with God.

- If you are successful, consider the specific reasons why
- What can you do to help others duplicate your success?
- If you have fallen short of God's will for you, how can you change and take hold of it?
- If you are hurt or angry because of how people have treated you, consider specifically why
- How can you *change your responses* to these situations and bring them under the control of Christ's example (vs.20-21a)?

DAY 9

Philippians 4

4-9 – face everything in prayer

These verses have always been both challenging and encouraging to me. Everyone struggles with anxiety at some point in their lives, but God clearly has a better plan for us. He wants us to rely on him in prayer, **guarding** our hearts and minds with **his own peace** (v.7); the peace that comes from his being perfectly secure and perfectly in control. Paul teaches that, when we pray, peace will come to us if we mix our requests and petitions **with thanksgiving** (v.6). Ever prayed and felt like you were more stressed out at the beginning than you were at the end? This means that you weren't giving enough **discipline** to being truly grateful. If you **spend as much energy** thinking through and focusing on **what God has given you**, then your anxiety about what you clearly cannot control will subside.

Paul also gives specific direction about the discipline we need to have in our minds concerning **what we think about**. We need to focus on the true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy things in our lives (v.9). Can you imagine how grateful, peaceful, and loving we would be if these things were continually at the forefront of our minds?

- Do you take genuine time to thank God in your prayers, or do you turn them into a “**God-do**” list?
- Are you taking the time to pray through the situations in your life?
- Do you compartmentalize your life so that you are done with your quiet time and then go about your day without giving much thought to God or prayer?
- How can you change your attitude so that God is involved in every aspect of your life?
- Write a list of things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy
- Carry this list around and decide to focus on it, building a habitual mindset

10-19 – learning the secret of being truly content

Paul relates that he **learned the attitude of contentment** through many different situations in his life (v.11). Although nothing in the world teaches us or expects us to discipline our attitudes in this way, by following Paul's example, we can learn it also. In the world, we are taught that the only **right** attitude is to **continually want more worldly things**. God gave us the desire to want more, but Jesus teaches that this can only be righteously applied to those things which can never be taken away (Mt 6:19-20).

The way Paul learned this attitude was by undergoing **both** the circumstances of **being in need** as well as **having plenty** (v.12). We have all had to experience both of these circumstances, but do we view them as opportunities to learn the secret of being content? Paul viewed his physical situation as simply a training ground for his heart. Whatever circumstance God allowed him to live with, he recognized that his attitude needed to be consistently trusting and faithful to God.

Because of Paul's faith and actions, he was subject to circumstances where he was imprisoned, pursued by murderous religious leaders, and both hungry and naked. The one thing which he relied on in all of those situations was **God's ability to give him strength**. Though he was grateful when people came to his aid (v.14-16), he only saw it as an opportunity to encourage them that they also had treasure in heaven (v.17). Because Paul continually stepped out in faith to obey God's will, and watched as God faithfully gave him everything he needed along the way, he was able to believe for all people that God would do the same for them (v.19).

- Where do you get your strength from as you go through your day?
- Do you consider your current circumstances to be a training ground for the attitude of your heart?
- What is the difference between what you **need** and what you **want**?
- How has God **proved himself faithful** in meeting your needs perfectly?
- In what areas do you need to adopt the attitude that God will meet your needs perfectly if you step out in faith?

DAY 10

1 Peter 1

1-2 – *chosen, sanctified, and obedient*

Do you believe in the Trinity? Many people have decided not to believe in this spiritual reality, or they get bogged down in theology concerning the relationship between the three incarnations of God. Peter had a solid grasp on the Trinity, which was both *practical* and *relational*. He believed that God *chooses* us, *sanctifies* us by the Spirit, and *sprinkles* us with the blood of Jesus for the sake of producing *obedient children*. This relational connection that God creates with us is so strong, setting us apart so severely from the rest of the world, that Peter calls the people of God both God's *elect*, and *strangers* in the world.

God chooses people to be Jesus' saved disciples because he wants to *have a relationship* with us and wants us to *have hope*. In Jeremiah 29:11-13, God assures us that he has plans to give us both hope and a future. However, in order to have that hope, we must also be willing to seek him; those who are *found* by God and *chosen* are those who *seek for him with all their hearts*. In the Message Bible, God's words are translated this way: "...when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I'll make sure you won't be disappointed".

What we value most is what we get serious about finding, and God desires that his people *value* their relationship with him the way he values ours: *exclusively* and *wholeheartedly*. The way you search for something reveals how much you value it. If you lost a quarter, it would be no big deal if you didn't find it. But if you misplaced a thousand dollars, how do you think you would search for it?

- Judging based off of how hard you search for him, what value do you place on God in your life?
- Is it worth giving up your relationship with everything in the world, in order to find God?

3-8 – *God is our living hope*

Peter tells us that it is through God's great mercy that he has given us a new birth into a living hope. Jesus made it clear that, unless we are *reborn*, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven (Jn 3:3-7). So, in this life we have two births: one physical, the other spiritual. When we realize that we are *not able to make it on our own* in this life simply through our physical ability, and that we will *never be made right with God* even by our best worldly efforts, we understand what a *gift* it is that we can have a new beginning, and *live every day* with the hope of spiritual power and salvation.

Rebirth came at an unusual time in my life. I was 50 years old, and pretty set in my ways. If you wrote a biography of my life, you would have to write two books. The first one would be titled, "Unsafe at Any Speed." Before I was baptized on June 30th 1995, I had lost all hope. Thank God that he opened my eyes to my need for rebirth! God graciously allowed me to find all the "living hope" I needed in having a relationship with him, living every day of my life *with him and for him*.

The second biography would be titled, "My hope is Through My Suffering". God fetched me at a time in my life when I was going to need him the most, due to my failing health. While my physical health has diminished, my spiritual health has gotten so much better over the course of time. It is true that even though I haven't seen Jesus, I love him. And though I don't see him now, I believe in him, and have an inexpressible and glorious joy at the hope of being with him one day in heaven (v.8).

- Make a list of how God is a daily, *living hope* in your life, through spiritual rebirth

13-16 – *be holy, because God is holy*

If we want to call God our Father, then we have to see things the way that he sees it, *desiring to become just like him*. God says that we both conformed to evil desires (Ro 12:2) and lived in ignorance (Eph 4:18) before we had a relationship with him. Being called *ignorant* was something that stood my neck hairs up when I as a kid, because I took it to mean that someone was calling me *stupid*. But are we not acting stupid if we're reborn, and then don't make every effort to live a disciplined, holy life (Pr 12:1)? If this world is no longer our home, why shouldn't we live a life leading to the home God has prepared for us in heaven?

DAY 11

1 Peter 2

1-10 – becoming a chosen people

Once I was told that the word B-I-B-L-E was an acronym: “Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth”. As an instruction manual, the Bible is meant to be not only clear, but *practical* and *useful* for our lives. After we have initially *tasted the goodness of the Lord* – perhaps enjoying the benefits of his kingdom, or reaping the fruits of repenting from sin through the power of the Holy Spirit and obedience – then we must decide to *grow up in our salvation*. The only way to grow up is by *craving the word of God and righteousness* (vs. 1:25-2:1), *desiring* it more than anything in the world. When I was young, I was told that I couldn’t understand the Bible on my own because it took the knowledge of an educated priest. When I became a disciple, I discovered that I had been *chosen* to be a priest (v.5), and could not only read the Bible, but I could *clearly understand* it and was responsible for *teaching* it to others! I began to crave and desire the Word more than anything else, and am only fulfilled spiritually through deep, intensive study of God’s word on a daily basis.

The fact of the matter is, all men are meant to have an *opportunity* to hear God’s word and respond (Eph 2:11-22), but only those who choose to *respond with trust and obedience* are those who will be chosen by God (vs.6b & 8b). Just as with any other relationship, after we are chosen, we have an entire lifetime of continually choosing to desire and crave growth in our relationship with God. If it is not our goal to grow closer to him every day and through every circumstance, then we are bound to leave our relationship with God eventually.

Many people refuse to trust and obey God because they feel that the Christian life is *foolish* (1 Co 1:18) and they are afraid of being *shamed* in front of man by *being proven wrong* or sacrificing and having *nothing to show* for it. In order to truly obey, we have to trust that *God will never put us to shame* (v.6). The men of the Bible are those who trusted and obeyed *regardless* of what the people around them decided to do. One example of this is Joshua, who said, “...as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (Jsh 24:15).

- Write a paragraph about your desire for God, choosing to crave his word, and spiritual growth
- Write a paragraph about why you have chosen to trust and obey God no matter what

13-22 – submission to all authorities

The concept of *submission* is one that Peter revisits several times in the *context of different relationships* throughout his letter. Each time, he links the concept of *submission to man* with the idea of *submitting to the Lord*. We might cringe over the word ‘submit’ because we are proud and independent, holding it as our highest ideal that we would need nobody else in this world to be successful.

Peter says, in the context of our *relationship with every authority* instituted among men, that we are to “submit for the Lord’s sake” (v.13). The reason that God wants us to submit to authority among men is because it *tests our character*. One of the roles that God plays in our lives is the *role of ultimate authority*. If we don’t have the character and the heart to submit in general to authority, we will never be able to submit to God as our final and sovereign spiritual authority.

There are two reasons why Peter say that it is “for the Lord’s sake” that we submit to men? The first is that *Jesus himself submitted* to the authority of men (Is. 53:9). Even though worldly authority was used to kill him, this was not outside of God’s plan or will (Jn 19:11, Ac 2:23). The second is that it *ruins* God’s plan to *uphold his people* among the men of the world when we *refuse to respect* the authorities God has instituted (Titus 2:9-10). Lack of trust in leadership is lack of trust in God’s sovereign power, and all men are witness to the testimony of our lives in this area. For God’s sake, Jesus was righteous toward authorities (v.22), and for the Lord’s sake, we shouldn’t ruin God’s good name through disrespecting the leadership God has given us on earth (1 Tim 6:1).

- List 3 ways that you can better submit this week to every authority in your life

DAY 12

1 Peter 3

1-7 – wives and husbands

Just as our character is revealed by our relationship to authority, so is our *character exposed* in our relationship with our spouse. Along with being our ultimate authority, another way that God views his *relationship with his people is as a husband* (Hos 2:14-20). Peter makes the connection between submitting to our spouse and submitting to God, because both reveal how our character responds in relationships of *committed love*.

Peter tells wives to be submissive to their husbands, and that if their husbands are not believers they will be *won over by their life's example* (vs.1-2). But this principle works regardless of whether the husband is a disciple or not. In my own life and marriage, my wife wins me over all the time; even though I am a believer, her spirit makes me hold on to my faith even harder. She is not a woman who adorns herself with jewelry or fine clothes, but she is a beauty in my eyes and I know she is a beauty in God's eyes (vs.3-4).

The most important relationship God created for me was my marriage. If God gave me no other blessing in my life than my wife, who I like to call "the bride of my youth," I would feel like the most blessed man on earth. But in my relationship with my wife, I constantly battle against my *prideful and selfish character* in order to be *considerate* and *respectful* as I live with her (v.7a).

I make jokes about growing up in a big household, and that I am the youngest of a family with one child. The fact is, I really never had to *share anything* through my childhood. My wife, however, grew up having a sister with special needs, and knows a lot more than I do about being considerate and sharing! I have had to humble myself and learn many things from her in this area, because just as Peter says, only when I am considerate and respectful towards her, am I able to *connect well with God* (v.7b).

- If you are married, think of 5 ways to be more submissive and considerate toward your spouse
- If you are not married, think of how you can choose to be submissive toward 5 other people

8-17 – suffering for doing good

One of the first scriptures that I memorized after becoming a disciple was v.13: "Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?" And my heart knows that I should consider myself blessed even if I do suffer (v.14a, Mt 5:11-12). Sometimes we can think that this *suffering is dramatic*, like dying on a cross or being exiled from your country. It is easier in our minds to think this way, because it is far from home, and *removed emotionally*. But what about suffering for being open about sin? Or exposing and disciplining people's unrighteous actions in the church? What about losing friendships for the sake of preaching the word? Or leading someone who doesn't respect or like you? What about submitting to harsh authority? Or being honest about personal challenges that make you look weak, when you could easily be deceitful and cover them up? What about losing a job for the sake of integrity? What about continually facing your own character weaknesses honestly, even though it causes you to lose the respect of the people you love? What about taking on an ambitious, godly project, and then failing miserably? What about being patient, forgiving, and loving even when someone takes advantage of you for it?

Peter links *suffering* with being *unafraid* (v.14b); in each of these potentially painful scenarios, what would make you compromise your integrity? *Cowardice*. But if Christ is the Lord of our hearts – the Lord who loved men and then died on a cross for us all – can we shrink back from suffering and maintain our integrity before God? Job, one of my heroes, suffered when he was doing good, but refused to break his integrity to believing in God's sovereign power, no matter how terrible the pressures and suffering he faced (Job 2:10). God promises that if we are willing to suffer for doing what is right, bringing all things into the light and keeping a clear conscience (vs.15b-16), we become witness for God's power (Jn 3:21).

- Examine how you have suffered for doing what is right in God's eyes
- How have you been strengthened in your relationship with God and your character as a result?

DAY 13

I Peter 4

1-3 – attitude is everything!

Peter links suffering in our body with having the attitude of Christ, and then connects the two with being done with sin. Now, if we're supposed to be done with sin as a result of suffering, then why do we all suffer and still struggle with sin? Because we have to **deliberately adopt the attitude of Christ** when it comes to suffering, and be **trained** by it to become more obedient (Heb 5:7-9).

What was Jesus' attitude toward suffering? First, that suffering taught him about the human condition; it **taught him wisdom** as he saw men suffer and lose faith because their eyes are fixed on what is seen, rather than what is unseen (Lk 5:1-9; Mk 5:6-10). Because he himself was **willing to experience** this human condition without attempting to use his power to be rid of it, he is able to **advocate on our behalf** before God (Mt 4:3-4; Lk 23:35-37; Heb 2:17-18). Second, Jesus' attitude was that he would obey the will of God, at **any cost to himself** (Mt 26:51-56; Jn 12:23-27). Clearly, the cost was his own life – not something that any man easily gives up for even the best cause. But because of this attitude of humble submission, Jesus was lifted up by God and proves to us that God is both **willing and able to reward** those who stop at nothing in order to serve and obey him (Phil 2:5-11).

Now that I am a disciple and know the truth about how much my sin causes destruction in my relationships, I no longer turn to sin because I am ignorant and blatantly desire the world. Now, I turn to sin in my life because it **covers up the pain of living**. While I don't still run to carousing, drunkenness, and orgies, I still struggle with lust, pride, impatience, and being unloving (v.3), to protect myself from pain when something about me is threatened or hurting. When I take on the attitude of Jesus, being **willing to experience** the full human condition and **submitting** to whatever God's will is – regardless of the cost to myself personally – I find myself unwilling to disobey God for the sake of covering up my pain with sin (vs.4-5).

7-11 – the fruits of clear-mindedness and self-control

Peter exhorts us to be **clear-minded** and **self-controlled** so that we **can** pray (v.7). Ever tried to pray when you have a bad attitude toward God? Ever tried to talk with your spouse when you feel like they're deliberately making you suffer? Peter knows, because God is sovereign and perfect in his leadership of our lives, that if we have a problem with what God is doing with us, the **problem is ours, not God's**.

Peter had watched Jesus struggle to get his own attitude under control, so that he could be giving consistently to those around him. The qualities of loving deeply, offering hospitality, serving with our various gifts, speaking confidently, and glorifying God with our lives are **fruits** arising from having a righteous attitude toward God (vs 8-11). Without clear-mindedness and self-control, and without being able to pray, we will never have the **strength** or the **spiritual focus** to be able to obey God in these ways.

12-19 – the attitude of rejoicing

How many times have you blown off somebody's encouragement or correction because you think bitterly, "you don't understand what I've been through"? Peter knows that it is man's nature to think that we are the only ones who have suffered so much in life, and he lets us know that our suffering is neither surprising nor strange. In fact, he says that we are "participating in the sufferings of Christ" – meaning that all the things we suffer are meant for **us** to be able to understand **him** better. If we approach suffering from this attitude – using what we go through to be able to relate better to Jesus' afflictions and respect him all the more for his righteousness – we can rejoice that we are able to grow closer to him through this "fellowship of suffering" (v.13; Phil 3:10b).

Peter also mentions that when we suffer for obedience, we will be overjoyed when Jesus' glory is revealed. It is the truth that what we **suffer for is what is really worth having** in our lives. It is also true that it is far **easier** to live our lives by **avoiding** suffering. But if we truly consider it better to be right with God than to be comfortable and safe here on earth, we will commit ourselves to God and willingly do what is good, regardless of the cost (vs.16-19).

- How can you use your current suffering to understand and respect Jesus' character better?

DAY 14

1 Peter 5

1-4 – setting a willing and eager example

Elders are those who have spent a lifetime training themselves in various ways and who have inherited authority as a result of their age and example. Therefore, whatever direction is given to elders is something that all disciples ought to consider for their own character, training themselves over time to be leaders by experience.

Peter gives some specific direction to elders, warning them against greed, arrogance, and taking on the title of leadership without any heart for those they shepherd. He explains first that they ought to be **willing**, as God wants them to be. God knows that when we serve out of **obligation**, rather than genuine concern or desire, we become **unloving** and **arrogant**. When we feel obligated, we are religious according to rules made by men. When we are **obedient**, our religion is according to the rule of right relationships.

Jesus never had the attitude, “I have to do this so let’s get it over with”. Rather, his heart was always to serve others out of a genuine concern for their spiritual welfare. As the Chief Shepherd, he knows when those who are meant to set a willing, eager example are “just doing their job” or laying their lives down to serve God’s chosen people.

- When you serve, disciple, and give to others, what is your heart and attitude behind it?

5-7 – all in due time

We follow a Lord who, after he had dedicated himself to a life of service, obedience, and humility, was lifted up **in due time**: approximately 33 years and one crucifixion later. What amount of suffering or anxiety would cause you to disbelieve this promise for your own life? To what lengths are you willing to go to humble yourself among the fellowship (v.5)? In the meantime, is your **relationship with God sufficient** to encourage and inspire you, as you humble yourself before men? It was for Jesus, our perfect example. And what is your vision of being lifted up? For Jesus, it meant “drawing all men to himself” – through a torturous, unfair death (Jn 12:32) – his reward for having obeyed God perfectly on earth.

In light of God exalting Jesus for his humility and obedience, proving that he cared for him and was able to save him from death (Phil 2:9; Heb 5:7), do you have any reason to disbelieve that God is **able** to take care of everything which makes you anxious and **tenderly care** for every aspect of your life?

8-11 – better be humble: you are that ‘someone’

Satan is looking for any prey that he can get his teeth into. Have you ever felt like you have been devoured by events in your life? I have! Usually, I am devoured spiritually as a direct result of my **pride, self-focus, and resistance to the Holy Spirit’s direction**. When my life is ‘clothed in pride’, it is like deliberately basting myself in spiritual barbecue sauce and cooking over the fires of hell on a spit. Wouldn’t you dig in, if you were a hungry carnivore?

There are **two extremes of pride** in the face of suffering. The first is: “you (God, man) can’t (teach, tell, give) me anything I can’t come up with on my own”. This pride is defensive, harsh, angry, and independent. The other is: “you should (could, might) have helped (saved, directed, protected) me if you (God, man) had really wanted to”. This pride is self-indulgent, passive-aggressive, bitter, critical, and immature.

Paul was the man who had **run away from suffering** – after his pride had led himself and others to be defensive toward Jesus’ discipling (Mt 26:31-35), and his self-indulgence had led him to deny the example which would have made him strong enough to withstand the pressure (Lk 22:45-46). He had learned such powerful lessons about **faith being devoured** by Satan in the midst of overwhelming anxiety, and the compassion of the Lord in **forgiveness and restoration** through love and repentance (Lk 22:31-32, Jn 21:15-17), that what was once his greatest weakness became his **greatest strength**. His depth of conviction regarding suffering had become unshakable: he knew that God himself would graciously be the source of our strength if we humbly submit to any suffering involved in living a righteous life (v.10).

- How could your greatest weaknesses become your greatest strengths if you choose to be humble?

DAY 15

2 Peter 1

3-11 – *making your calling and election sure*

God promises that he gives us everything we need for living a righteous life (v.3), justifies us (Ro 8:30), and gives us a spirit of power, love, and self-discipline (1 Tim 1:7). Why, then, do so many disciples believe themselves incapable of righteousness? Remember that the concept of **righteousness** means **to have right relationships**. This applies to any relationship we have: with God, our family, our job, our past, our government, ourselves, etc. The concept of **sin** is **anything which hurts our relationships**. Of course, everyone will find themselves sinning every day. When we see our sin, God's goal is to empower us to live righteously, being able to repent and reconcile our relationships quickly and lovingly (v.4). Satan, however, makes us believe that we have no power and that, if we see our sin, we must have lost the justification and power of God. It is essentially **prideful** to believe that God is lying and his promises and spiritual gifts are no longer true for us, simply because we see the truth of our own sinful nature (v.9, Eph 2:11-18). We are destined only to turn to more and more sin out of frustration, if we trust Satan's teachings more than God's.

The way to combat powerlessness and hopelessness is by focusing on what we are meant to do, regardless of what we see coming out of our sinful nature on a daily basis (vs.5-7). What, after all, makes us ineffective and unproductive in our knowledge of God? It is when we **lack the confidence to act boldly** on behalf of what we believe. Peter gives a list of actions which we can focus on, promising that we will be both effective and productive for God if we singlemindedly focus on developing these qualities (v.8).

Peter admonishes us to be eager, pouring out hope by focusing us on the rich welcome we will receive as we work out our relationship with God. He expresses that if we remain eager, we will never fall (vs.10-11). Eagerness means that we are **willing, excited, and continually active**. It means that each of us has to set our minds on growing every day and increasing the righteous qualities of our character.

- How does your pride come out when you see your own sinful nature?
- What do you most need to focus on **increasing**, to become effective and productive spiritually?
- What do you need to become more eager in doing, to make your calling and election sure?

16-21 – *prophecy of scripture*

God's plan has always been relational, rather than informational. While Satan is the master of information, acknowledging what is true according to the standard of the world and without any of God's qualities of character, God works through the **authority of relational connection**. Peter knew that men are always prone to thinking that God's plan is simply a lot of cleverly invented stories (v.16a). But according to God's plan, his relational authority arose from the fact that he was an **eyewitness**. Therefore, he could confidently say, "I know because **I was there**" (v.16b-18).

Because Peter trusted in God's plan to work through relationships, he became the man who opened doors for others to understanding God's plan and purpose for all men (Mt 16:19; Ac 2:22-24). He was well aware of how God chooses men for their own particular ministry, and because he had been chosen himself, regardless of his own desire or will, he had great confidence in other prophets' relationship with God (Lk 5:8-11; Jn 21:15-22). He intimately understood what it meant to be "carried along by the Holy Spirit", and therefore he knew that the ancient prophets' words were made more certain by his own experiences (vs.19-21; Ac 2:1-4,14).

- What has God done in your life, which make his words more certain to you according to your experiences in your own relationship with him?

DAY 16

2 Peter 2

1-3 – understanding false teachers

Peter warns disciples explicitly against false teachers. These teachers have some things in common: they deny the sovereign Lord, they uphold shameful practices, and greedily exploit people with stories they have made up (vs.1-3a).

God will hold these teachers accountable for their own actions (v.1b & 3b), but why does Peter warn the disciples against them? Because they will destroy disciples with heresy (v.1), causing people to follow their shameful ways and bring the truth into disrepute (v.2b). Those who follow these teachers will be held equally accountable with them, because they had the opportunity to know the truth but were swayed from it even though they have been warned (2 Tim 4:3-4).

- What are some heresies and shameful ways that false teachers have upheld in the religious world?
- What are things you have believed, which are contrary to the Bible's teaching or God's purpose?
- Find three false prophets, list how God dealt with them, and how you can avoid being like them

4-9 – God is able to protect godly people from the world

Just as God is powerful in dealing with those who are *determined to cling to their sin* (vs.4-6), he is also perfectly capable of *protecting and delivering righteous people* from the corruption of the world (vs.7-9). Peter refers to just a few commonly known examples from the Old Testament which highlight this truth, and explain the hearts of righteous men which might not be clear from the original accounts.

Peter mentions that Noah, who lived in the ancient world among “ungodly people”, was a “preacher of righteousness”. What would this mean practically? He didn't have scriptures, since none were written. He had only his *conscience* as a guide to teach him what righteousness meant, which God considers an acceptable substitute when scriptures are lacking (Ro 2:12-16). Knowing that *unrighteousness* means anything which *violates or damages relationships*, he must have understood that being *godly* meant to maintain right relationships between God and people; his understanding of God must have been that God wanted us to have a right relationship with himself and others (Gen 6:9). Because of this, he decided to be both *non-violent* and *uncorrupt* among the violence and corruption of his age (Gen 6:9-11).

Noah's righteousness *led him to act in faith* based off of what God commanded him to do (Gen 6:22), *obeying* God in everything he commanded. These commands of God were neither *comfortable* nor seemingly *rational* (vs.14-21), but Noah believed in God regardless of how he felt or thought about these commands. Peter also records that Noah was a “preacher of righteousness”. This means that he not only quietly went about his work to save himself and his family, but he *preached right relationships* among the people of his time. Doubtless, he did this before God revealed his plans to him, but all the more so as he believed in the destruction God was bringing on the earth, attempting to save those around him (Gen 6:13).

The account Peter gives of Lot was that he was daily “tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard” (v.8). His heart was *soft and uncalloused* toward sin, no matter how long he lived among it. He never considered that the violence and shameful deeds of the people around him was either *normal* or *acceptable*. He also attempted to save those who were close to him when he heard about God's plans, not only caring about his own life but the lives of those he had relationships with (Gen 19:14).

- Do you believe that God is capable of rescuing you and others from the corruption of this world, if you choose to live by faith?
- Are you a preacher of righteousness, wanting to save others from violence and corruption relationally?
- If you know about God's plans to save the righteous, how willing are you to tell others about them?

DAY 17

2 Peter 3

1-7 – the day the Lord will come

Peter spent the end of chapter 2 explaining the character of people in the world “who follow the corrupt desire of their sinful nature and **despise authority**” (2:10-ff). He wants to both expose these men and prevent the church from becoming like them; his concern is to “stimulate wholesome thinking” among them, helping them to focus on God’s ultimate plan and purpose (v.1-2). Those who despise authority are those who don’t understand or don’t care that there is a power greater than themselves, **more important than their immediate desires**, which they will be held **accountable** to at some point.

Peter explains the character of a **scoffer** – one who follows their own evil desires because they do not believe that God will come back with power. They **deliberately choose to forget** that God has always been true to every promise and prophesy he has ever spoken, and that his words are the only thing which will remain after everything that is seen and experienced has passed away (v.4-6; Mt 24:35). God’s authority comes not from man’s belief in him, but from his sovereign control and omniscient character. When men choose to disbelieve what they have heard of God’s character and plans, they do not understand that they are being reserved for the judgment and destruction due those who despise God’s authority (v.7).

This heart which is ungodly is a stark contrast to the hearts of the righteous men Peter exemplifies in chapter 2. Whereas those men were soft-hearted, concerned, and obedient out of the fear of destruction, scoffers are those who are **calloused, unconcerned, and unafraid out of ignorance** and self-deception.

- In what areas of your heart do you despise God’s authority, entertaining disobedience or disbelief?
- Is your heart soft and concerned with your own godliness and the salvation of those around you?
- Do you continually keep God’s coming in mind, stimulating you to godly thinking and action?

8-15 – God’s incredible character of patience

It is a dangerous thing that man’s character tends to forget anything which is not pressing on the forefront of his consciousness. God, because he **does not need man** for anything (Ac 17:25), tends to take a backseat to all the very important and pressing busy things which need us so badly to pay attention to them (Lk 14:16-24). One of the qualities of God’s character which Peter has had personal experience with is his **infinite patience**. God is in no hurry; his concept of time is outside of the linear way of the created world (v.8), and therefore is never slow or neglectful in keeping his promises. God, in his righteousness, tenderly cares that we all have an opportunity to seek him if we choose to (v.9). When we scoff at God, we believe him to be somehow **incapable** simply because he doesn’t do things the way we would like him to.

People tend to be impatient and critical because we believe that we are independent and self-sufficient. Somehow, though it does nothing but hurt relationships, we have come to hold these qualities as our ideal. Another reason for impatience is because things are **not the way we expect that they should be**. My mother is about to turn ninety-two soon, and I am learning patience in caring for her on a daily basis. I had always known her to be sharp as a tack mentally, and I find myself becoming impatient, because now she is not the mother that I have known so well. Today, I helped her get on her jacket the same way she helped me with my jacket so many times as a child. I consider how patient she had been in helping me, and how God is so patient in the same way, helping us over and over because we are not able to take care of even our simplest needs without him.

It is a tragedy that, because God chooses to be patient, **people do not listen** to him. Isaiah 65:1-2 records that men weren’t listening to God 700 years before Christ, and it should come as no shock that we do not listen to him 2000 years later. But if we do listen to him, our hearts need to respond with godly action, making every effort to be found right with him for the day of his coming (vs.11-15).

- Is your relationship with God taking a backseat to things which **need and demand your attention**?
- What are ways which God has proved his powerful character of patience in your life?
- How can you make a greater effort toward being found blameless for the day of judgment?

DAY 18

2 Corinthians 1

3-11 – PRINCIPLE: being needy vs. being open

Paul, in his maturity spiritually and as a leader, opens 2 Corinthians with a powerful example highlighting the difference between being needy with God and open with man. Both incorporate the qualities of honesty and truth, but are applied with a different goal and expect different results. Both serve powerfully to build relationships if applied maturely, and both, if applied in the way which is natural to the world, can forcefully tear apart relationships.

Neediness in a relationship must be reserved for God alone, if we are to imitate Jesus (Jn 5:19,30,41-44). The character of neediness is that we are **lacking**; we are looking for hope, strength, comfort, direction, salvation, clarity, purpose, etc... we are **looking for God to give to us** (Ps 86:1; 1 Sam 30:3-8). The natural state of man is to be needy; we are born needy into the world, and we die needy in the spiritual realm – in need of salvation. Once we are able to take care of our own needs physically and can function without our parents, God alone is responsible for meeting our needs as they arise. **God is sovereign** in his control over our lives.

We can see from Jesus' character **how** to be needy with God; in Matthew 26:36-46, it is clear how he applied himself both to being **honest** and submitting to the **truth**. Spiritually speaking, honesty is acknowledging and sharing our **internal reality** (Lk 22:42,44); telling the truth is understanding and submitting to **God's reality**, as revealed through his word (Jn 17:17). In his relationship with God, Jesus demonstrated how to be honest and wrestle with his own will in order to bring it under the control of the truth of God's will for his life (Mat 26:42, Is 53:10). He wrestled to **choose to trust God in all situations, and rely on God alone** to meet all of his needs. Jesus also **deliberately broke neediness** with man, refusing to rely on men's approval or perspective for his life (Jn 5:41; Mt 16:21-24). Paul shared this quality of Jesus' character in the midst of great affliction, which brought him in contact with circumstances – both internal and external – which were entirely beyond his own control. He had to choose to trust God, and rely on God's power and perspective alone, as he lived by faith.

Openness is a very different quality, arising as a **fruit** of getting our needs fulfilled in our relationship with God. It is a spiritual reality that when we are open, we are able to build fellowship among believers (1 Jn 1:7). It gives others a piece of our relationship with God, letting them in on our internal circumstances. The goal of openness is that we are **looking to give of ourselves to others**. Paul demonstrated mature openness with the Corinthians: he related honestly what he had been through (v. 8), as well as acknowledging the truth arising from God's will, words, and character (v. 9). Paul's openness was not, however, looking for answers or hope from man. After getting his needs met in his personal relationship with God (vs. 3-5), openness was something Paul deliberately applied in an effort to build strong, encouraging relationships (vs. 6-7).

- What is one pattern you could change in your relationship with God that would produce greater **neediness** with him?
- What is one pattern you could change in your daily relationships with people to grow in your **openness** with them?

12-22 – PRINCIPLE: breaking the pattern of neediness between men

Paul knew that he had disappointed the church in Corinth by not showing up when he said he would, and knew that this was an opportunity to direct the Corinthians to **rely on God and not himself**. He expressed that they could trust in God's character at all times, in all circumstances, to meet their needs perfectly. He redirected their thinking away from himself and onto Christ, and God's perfect integrity as manifested through Christ (vs. 18-20). He also directed them to consider God's ability to equally protect and uphold each individual (v. 21). In order to build the maturity of the church, Paul knew that they had to develop their own convictions about God's faithfulness and integrity, regardless of man's actions.

It's **natural** to people - normal, easy - to **think like the world**. Until we make the effort to adopt godly convictions and attitudes in every area of our lives, we are bound to rely on the training we received in the world as our way of perceiving and understanding things (Eph 4:22-24). Using every situation as an opportunity, Paul called the church to learn a **godly way of thinking**. To process experiences in a godly way means to **perceive situations the way God would**, relying on an understanding of God's character and purpose. It means that we refuse to rely on man as our ultimate power or trust in man to give us direction or strength. It also means that, though man is not our sovereign authority, we trust God to work powerfully through men, providing us with leadership, advice, and encouragement. First, we have to decide to trust that God will always prove himself faithful to meeting our needs through Christ (v. 20; Ro 8:28-32). And second, we have to believe that true servants of God must make decisions that are most beneficial: not for themselves, but for the sake of obeying God's will and building up the body of Christ (vs. 17, 23-24).

- How can you use each situation arising in relationships to direct others to trust and rely on God alone?

DAY 19

2 Corinthians 2

1-11 – PRINCIPLE: external weakness promotes godly relationships

Paul immediately took initiative to address the prior issues of gross sin which he had tackled in his first letter. Knowing that his relationship with this church had been considerably strained, he chose to adopt an attitude of external weakness through his entire letter, working hard to try and strengthen the bond between himself and the group. Without their full mental and emotional trust, he knew that he could not possibly influence their spiritual thinking or direction. He displayed the qualities of *openness* (vs. 1-2, 5), *vulnerability* (v. 4), *affection* (v. 3), and *humility* (v. 7,10), which all lead to closer relationships with God and man.

These godly qualities are inherently *externally weak*; they expose us to the possibility of pain. They open us up to being influenced; when we adopt these qualities, we are soft, moldable, and responsive on a personal level. They are also the qualities which attach one heart to another. However, the softer, more tender aspects of relationship need to be led by *choice* and *conviction*; in themselves, they are untrustworthy leaders and will not necessarily lead us toward righteousness. While Paul consistently relied on external weaknesses to strengthen his relationship with the church throughout this letter, it is also clear that these qualities need to be *guided by internal strength*.

PRINCIPLE: internal strength produces godly leadership

Worldly, natural ways of leading are marked by *relying on external strengths*. These methods might look good in the eyes of the world, but they don't develop any depth of relationships or the drive to be more righteous in relationships with God and man. Jesus warned against such leadership (Luke 22:24-27), instead building the foundation of his kingdom on the love of the brotherhood (John 13:35).

Godly Leadership is the fruit of taking internal strength seriously and working to develop it. For Paul, whether leading his own life, a small group, or taking responsibility for leading whole churches was irrelevant; he regarded each one with equal seriousness. He *considered himself a leader without being told* to by any man: his leadership arose as a fruit of obeying God's calling and developing his own leadership capacity. The qualities of *neediness, openness, trust* in God and *reliance* on God's character, *strength of Biblical conviction* and *personal righteousness*, complete *personal responsibility* for choices and actions, the determination to *love others as Christ had loved him*, and the decision to *live his life as an offering toward fulfilling God's purpose*, were what drove Paul. Throughout this entire letter to the Corinthians, different aspects of his internal strength become evident. These qualities of heart are developed between one person and God; other people might be useful to help train, inspire, and provide an example, but no person can confer these qualities upon another.

Paul worked diligently in prayer and understanding the word of God to clarify and take hold of his weaker, more tender self, bringing it under the control of internal strength (vs.5-6,9-10). His maturity allowed him to display a depth and breadth of emotion and action, holding more than one concern in his grasp at a time and being able to choose how he would feel and respond towards a given situation (vs. 2b-5). He expressed these emotions maturely – that is, purposefully – for the benefit of those he led; both the group and the individual (vs. 6-9). And his quality of neediness with God alone, rather than relying on man's acceptance, allowed him to expose his heart to potential hurt and betrayal. He trusted that God would lead, protect, and comfort him, regardless of how men chose to respond to his leadership (vs. 15-17).

- What are 3 things you need to work on in order to develop your internal strengths and leadership capacity?
- In what current situations do you need to adopt an attitude of external weakness in order to strengthen the relationship?

12-17 – PRINCIPLE: fight to maintain spiritual partnerships at any cost

Spiritual partnerships are imperative for an effective ministry, God never intends for people to work alone for his purpose (Lk 10:1; Ac 3:1). Paul was *self-sufficient without being independent*. He understood that daily, personal relationships are one of the ways which God meets our needs and builds his kingdom, as men work together to grow and strengthen the body of believers. In this way, godly leaders admit their *desperate need for partnerships that work on a daily basis*, and both *actively build* them and *make sacrifices* in order to remain close to them. Paul's relationships with the men he chose as spiritual partners took precedence *even over ministry opportunities* (v. 13b). Paul and Titus had been separated because of ministry work, but Paul was determined to do anything to find him, even pass up an open door in preaching the gospel. He had the confidence in his relationship with God to act for the sake of his own peace of mind in his partnerships (v. 13a), trusting that God would use his decision to spread the gospel everywhere (v. 14).

- Who are you working with to develop a *daily partnership*, for the purpose of advancing the Gospel?

DAY 20

2 Corinthians 3

1-3 – External weakness: relying on the bond of relationship rather than spiritual credentials

The way the world establishes trust is by presenting a **strong outward appearance**. Every effort goes towards building credibility; one of the ways to do this is by relying on credentials and recommendations which one man gives to another (v. 1). Knowing that the only reason the Corinthians were open to being swayed toward other leaders was because his own relationship with them had been weakened, Paul directly addressed the issue by appealing to the relationship which **God, not man**, had clearly established between them (v.2-3; 1 Corinthians 4:15). He understood that when a leader loses the trust of the group, it is because they are **not trusting God's sovereign leadership**, and need to be called back to the standard of strong commitment between believers. He was determined not to rely on worldly methods; he chose rather to present himself from a position of external weakness, working to win over the hearts of the congregation, and trusting in God to establish his authority as a result of maintaining right relationships.

From a worldly point of view, it is “weak” to be committed to the bond God establishes between people's hearts, especially if the other person seems to have caused any hurt, confusion, or distress. From God's point of view, this is **the only way he chooses to build his kingdom** (Jer 3:15-17; 1 Pet 1:22). God isn't nearly as concerned with the petty problems men have between each other as much as he is concerned with **unity** (Jn 17:20-23), **obedience** (Jn 15:10), and **fulfilling his purpose** to seek and save the lost world (Jn 15:8,16, 1 Tim 2:3-4).

- How do you rely on your outward appearance to maintain trust or establish authority with people?
- Do you trust in God's concerns with unity, obedience, and purpose, regardless of how his people have hurt you?

4-6 – Internal strength: confidence and competence are both the fruit of embracing the role of a minister

Paul was **confident** that he had taken on the role of imitating Christ's leadership wholeheartedly, and had applied all he could toward being faithful to this trust from God as a spiritual leader (v.4, Isaiah 50:4-9). His confidence gave him great boldness to **always take initiative**. Throughout his letter, it is obvious that he led by example: he is **open first** (2:4), **vulnerable first** (1:8), **unselfish first** (1:6), **aware of the spiritual battle first** (2:11).

Paul didn't wait for someone else to interpret situations as they arise and tell him what to do; rather, he took responsibility to act on behalf of building up the fellowship. Paul knew that his **competence** came from God alone (v. 5-6, Isaiah 55:3-5). As he acted powerfully in faith, and applied himself to the ministry God had given him, he was trained along the way - as Jesus had been - through suffering and relying on God (Heb 5:7-9).

- In what areas do you need to act **first** and take confident action to imitate Christ's leadership?
- How has God built competence in you so far, as you take on a disciple's ministry in leading the lost world?

7-18 – Internal strength: creative use of scriptures in developing convictions

Paul's **convictions always drove him toward bold action**. He was compelled internally, even when he was opposed externally, and he took on his role as a minister independent of any man's encouragement or expectation. One of the ways that Paul worshiped God with his mind (Matt 22:37b) was by **reasoning on his own** through the scriptures to understand different aspects of his ministry (vs.7,13). He shared his convictions about the glory of Jesus' covenant, which **led him to act boldly** (vs.8-12). Though the circumstances of his own personal life did not appear glorious, Paul had rock-solid convictions – by faith, not by sight – that **God's ministry is glorious**. Being convinced that this new ministry was led by the Spirit, rather than by a worldly set of laws, and as he believed that the “veil” of attachment to worldly religion is only taken away in light of faith in Jesus, he was determined to make every effort to bring people to Jesus (vs.14-18).

- What scriptures **compel** you, regardless of external circumstances, to share your faith in Christ?
- What holds you back from evangelism? Address 3 areas of weakness with **scriptures**.

DAY 21

2 Corinthians 4

1-6 – External weakness: adopting the attitude a servant

As a leader, Paul understood that Jesus had called him to adopt the weakest external attitude among men: being a *servant* to those he led (Mark 10:42-45). He clearly acknowledged that God is ultimately in control of salvation; God's servants are not, nor could Paul attribute anyone's salvation to himself (Matt 23:8-12). This took ultimate responsibility for others' salvation off of himself, *breaking his neediness toward man* by putting himself in a position where he *did not need man to respond well* in order for him to go about his work (vs. 2-4, 6).

To be a servant means that one is *immediately responsive* to the needs of their master; the better they are at it means the better they are at *bringing their own will, thoughts, and actions* under *the control of their master's* (Luke 17:7-10). As they have *willingly subjected* themselves to another, the masters' *needs, wants, and feelings are more important* than those of the servant (Matt 24:45-51). The better the servant, the better they *anticipate the needs* and *think through the potential weaknesses* of their masters, and *work hard to make their lives better – without making them look bad* – so they can turn their attention away from the daily working of their lives and focus on accomplish greater things (Gen 39:6.22).

Servants *clean up the messes* of their masters and *minimize their weaknesses* of character through action they take on their own initiative. They know that they are subject to *bear the brunt of any failings* on their masters' behalf, and this knowledge compels them to work with *all their intelligence, heart, and resources to protect them* against their own shortcomings (1 Sam 25:3,14,18,23-25). Taking on the role of a servant means that ultimately the masters' lives *are their own to decide* whatever they choose; a servant's role is to *help* their lives run *smoothly, effectively, and with greater focus* (2 Kings 5:2-3, 13).

7-18 – PRINCIPLE: neediness and openness revisited: applying honesty and truth

Having a right perspective on neediness and openness can powerfully strengthen our relationships. However, if we have this principle on *backwards*, in a way that is *natural to the world*, we will find ourselves growing further and further apart from both God and man. God is not concerned with theology or religious structure. He is consumed with one thing alone: *having right relationships*. The very concept of *righteousness*, a quality of God's character, is relational: it means *to have right relationships*.

We are trained by the world to be needy with people; before we come to God, the only answers man has are found in the world. Until we train ourselves to develop godly convictions in this area, we are bound to approach spirituality from a backwards, *worldly* perspective: that is, being *open with God and needy with man*. There is great danger in trying to live as a disciple, while submitting to the world's way of relying on ourselves or other people to fulfill our needs. First, when real suffering hits our lives and we haven't developed deep convictions about trusting and relying on God's power alone, our faith crumbles as we attempt – and fail – at trying to get our needs met by man. Then, as we *turn to being open with God*, neither choosing to trust in his character nor relying on his power, we take him out of sovereign control over the situation and further frustrate our faith, as our prayers go unanswered and our needs go unmet. Both those who are *needy with man* and those who *attempt to meet the needs of others in a worldly way* are bound to disappoint each other: confusion, bitterness, emptiness, and disillusionment are the fruits of such a relationship. In order to rightly understand the principle of being needy with God, we first have to understand how to rightly apply the qualities of *honesty* and *truth*.

Honesty means that we clearly express both our own and others' circumstances, emotions, sin, past, etc., connecting both our *hearts* and our *minds* in relating these situations. Honesty is the *vulnerable telling of our internal truth*. When we are honest, we are led toward proficiency in dealing with the world around us; how it affects us, and how we affect it. But it is only the first step; it does not necessarily lead us toward God. If we turn to the world for answers at this point, we will only perhaps find ourselves more proficient at interacting with the world. We must *turn to God with our honesty* in order to bring our will and perception under the control of the *truth*, which belongs to God alone. He expresses the truth through his words (John 17:17); as disciples, he also counsels us through his Holy Spirit to lead us into the truth (John 15:26; 16:13). Confession is one example of godly honesty; it is clearly expressing both our *internal circumstance of sinfulness*, as well as agreeing with God – with both our mind and our heart – about *his point of view, which is the truth* (Ps 51:3-6).

Openness means that we tell our internal truth through the convictions that come from surrendering to God's truth. To *surrender to God's truth* means admitting that we need God to teach us how to see from a correct spiritual perspective. Adopting an attitude of neediness towards God in this way serves to strengthen our ability to direct others to God. We become very proficient in getting our own needs met by God, making us competent in leading others to do the same. The more we allow ourselves to admit to our own weakness, the more we are undecieved about our real ability to meet anyone else's needs. Paul was open in admitting his weaknesses, his confusion at times and his hardships (vs. 8-11). In openness, however, (v. 15) he also related that these things wouldn't crush his spirit (vs. 16-18). He trusted that suffering produces strength of conviction, solidifying and refining faith in God's power (vs. 7, 13-14).

DAY 22

2 Corinthians 5

1-15 – Internal strength: *action is compelled by God's commission, not controlled by circumstances*

Paul, who allowed himself to constantly be in contact with his physical mortality and the impermanence of this mortal life, developed several practical convictions about *the way that he viewed himself*, which served to strengthen him and give him the courage to continue living by faith. One of these convictions was that he inhabited a body which could be compared to a tent (v.1). A *tent* is the most minimal of shelters, light and portable so it can be subjected to the *purpose of constantly moving*. The point of living in a tent is not to be *comfortable*, but to be *mobile*. He was given confidence in God's plans through this understanding, since he clearly *wasn't physically designed to settle down* into a stable situation in this life (vs.5-8). With this kind of imagery in mind, it was easy for Paul to work toward moving on to more permanent circumstances, being with God forever in heaven (vs.2-4). His perspective of himself as temporary allowed him to *break his neediness with his own flesh*, acting according to his convictions in all circumstances instead of being controlled by the circumstances that his body and mind endured.

The natural conclusion of this is to consider all decisions, actions, and feelings in light of pleasing God. Since Paul believed he would be judged one day by Christ's standards, he desired to be found blameless on that day of judgment more than he desired to be comfortable or safe here on earth. All of Paul's convictions led him to *act in obedience* to God and please God, even though it meant dying to himself every day (vs. 9-10; John 12:23-26; 1 Co 15:31).

Pleasing God is deeply wrapped up in *persuading men to be made right with him*; naturally, God wants more than anything for men's souls to be with him in eternity (1 Tim 2:3-4). Because Paul's convictions led him to action, and his actions would be the basis of God's judgment over him, out of his *fear of God* came one of his motivations to evangelize (v.11; Luke 12:4-9). Another motive to persuade men was in light of *the love of Christ*; he was thoroughly convinced that, as Christ's sacrifice had brought about life for him where there should have been death, his own life was saved in order to fulfill Christ's purposes on earth (vs.14-15; Ro 6:3-5; 1 Pet 2:24).

- In what ways can you die to yourself *today* so that you can *fulfill God's purpose* to seek and save the lost?
- What convictions can you develop about your view of life, which would compel you to willingly die to yourself?

5:16-6:2 - Internal strength: *people in spiritual perspective*

Paul was very much aware that God viewed people's hearts, but that man was determined to make judgments on outward appearances (v. 12, 1 Sam 16:7). He considered that people regarded Christ from a worldly point of view (Isaiah 53:1-3), and that just as God had proved Christ to be not worldly, but spiritual (Isaiah 53:4-6,12), so he would prove all men to be spiritual (v.17). As Paul disregarded the world's point of view and instead adopted God's view of man, he was *free to minister* to them as Jesus would have. He was also not bound to rely on worldly attitudes, judging and comparing peoples' outward appearance and accomplishments against each other. In this way he deliberately *broke neediness with man*; he was not driven by a worldly viewpoint of any man, nor did he submit to being motivated based on man's comparisons or judgments of him.

Paul knew that one of the spiritual aspects of Christ was that he served to *reconcile* us to God. He came to help us understand God's point of view (Jn 1:18), and to help God understand our point of view (Ro 8:34). Having been given the commission to imitate Christ's ministry led Paul to another practical conviction about *how he viewed himself spiritually*: that he served as an ambassador for Christ (v. 20). An *ambassador* works as a liaison in a foreign land for some distant party, serving as a representative of one to the other, and working to build peaceful and fruitful connections between both. Paul's view of himself was that he served only as an *extension of God's purposes* and God's agenda. His role was not to find a "better" way than the one God had already determined through scripture, but to submit wholeheartedly to the same ministry of Jesus, reconciling men with God. Because this was his complete focus, each of the *convictions* and *directions* he established for the churches were designed to accomplish this end (vs. 21-6:2).

- Throughout your day, notice how you judge people in a worldly way. Work to see people the way God sees them.
- How do you try to find "better" ways to serve God other than simply following Jesus' example?
- What do you need to change to be a better ambassador, serving as a liaison between God and men?

DAY 23

2 Corinthians 6

3-13 – Internal strength: concerned with commending, not comparing

Ultimately, Paul was consumed with commending himself in God's eyes. However, he also *respected the gravity of his example*. He knew that if he called men to follow it (Phil 3:17-18), then he had to expect that everything he did would be imitated. Any weakness of integrity, conviction, or focus would prove to be a stumbling block to others' faith and possibly prevent them from either being reconciled to God or submitting to God's purpose in their own lives (v.3).

It is *natural* for men to *compare* themselves against each other. The way of worldly leadership, viewing everyone from a worldly point of view, requires that we constantly measure ourselves against those who appear weaker or stronger. Because of his convictions to reject the world's way of leading, Paul concerned himself with living up to the standard of Christ alone. In his maturity, Paul knew that he would be held *completely and personally responsible* for all of his actions before God. He was driven by the desire that God would consider him faithful *according to the standard of Christ*, rather than the standard of men (Jn 13:15). Despite his external weakness, Paul revealed his maturity of conviction by maintaining a clear spiritual perspective. Perceiving his life through the control of faith, and in light of the hope he clung to about his future, even the most overwhelming sorrow, confusion, and pain had no ability to dissuade him from attaining his goal of being found right with God (Is 50:5-10).

We are forced, in the face of great suffering and difficulty, to be honest with the fact that man is completely under the control of God's will; we *have to acknowledge* our own limitations. Paul respected this, knowing that hardship would come to him as he followed Christ by faith (vs. 4-10). But he had developed a relationship of neediness with God where he chose to both trust and rely on him, believing that God would give him the means to be *obedient regardless of his circumstances*. Obedience to God *means at whatever cost*; Paul knew that he would not be forgiven for disobedience or faithlessness, even when his circumstances were appalling or desperate (1 Pet 2:21-24).

As Paul imitated the example of Jesus, he *chose to give his heart* to the Corinthians, whether they decided to give their heart back or not (v. 11; Matt 26:50; Ro 5:6-8). However, he is very bold in challenging the Corinthians, in light of his openness and vulnerability, to *reciprocate* (vs. 12-13). Revealing his affection for them and calling them to open their hearts in response was a position of *external weakness* as well as *extreme courage*, since he was well aware that he appeared laughably weak. But Paul knew that if their hearts were not bonded with him, they would be threatened by all manner of worldly relationships becoming their primary source of strength and direction.

- Do you rely on the standard of *Christ* or *men* when you consider your personal obedience to God?
- What can you change to better submit to Christ's standard in your decisions and actions today?

14-7:1 – PRINCIPLE: developing a godly and holy standard in relationships

When one person is *yoked* to another, the image means that they are bound to go forward in the same direction together. This connection comes from an *emotional binding*, as with a friend or a mentor, or a *contractual binding*, as with a business partner or a spouse. God holds his people *fully responsible for these bonds* (v.17). It is *always* the disciple's responsibility to maintain strong boundaries and reject sentimentality concerning worldly relationships. Because the Corinthians had pulled their hearts back from Paul, they were left wide open to corruption and compromise, having nobody looking out for the purity and purposefulness of their relationships. Immediately after Paul calls the Corinthians to give their hearts to him fully, he calls them to maintain strong boundaries against forming binding relationships in the world (v. 14).

Rather than rebuking the Corinthians on this point of weakness, Paul instead works to develop this principle in a different way. He first *appeals to their logic*, trying to build their own sense of questioning themselves and empowering them to develop their own convictions (v.15). He then *appeals to their sense of the glory* of their new life in Christ, calling them to be respectful of their place in the world as God's temple (v.16). Even a worldly, pagan-trained mindset can grasp the vision of *respecting and protecting* a temple; it is a sacred place set apart for a distinct purpose (made *holy*), regardless of the religion. Paul then *appeals to scripture*, using their existing frame of reference and linking it to God's specific perspective in relationships (v.17). This scripture also *appeals to the Corinthians' desire to have a close relationship* with God; the link is clearly made for them that they cannot have both a close relationship with God and maintain their ties to the world (v.18). Finally, Paul *appeals to their own sense of conviction*; in light of scripture and logic, *he calls them to act* according to a higher standard of purity and holiness (7:1).

- Who can you give your heart to that could help you maintain a godly standard in your relationships?
- Who do you need to appeal to in order to help them build and protect holy attachments with godly people?

DAY 24

2 Corinthians 7

2-9a – External weakness: openness about emotions

Openness doesn't only mean that we are honest and tell the truth about God's faithfulness in rescuing us *physically*. It also means being *honest and truthful about internal conditions*, both emotional and mental. The only way for people to remain soft-hearted and humble in their responses is for both sides to have the conviction that they must be open about their real emotions toward each other. Paul knew that, when he disciplined someone, the potential was there for them to respond out of fear and insecurity, leading to defensiveness, division, and breakdown in the relationship (v.2). To protect the Corinthians' hearts against this, he took *great care* and shows *tremendous courage* in sharing his whole heart with them, building their relationship by taking initiative in being open. In these few verses, Paul is *honest* about more than a dozen emotional and mental responses between himself and the Corinthians. The way that he *perceives and expresses* these responses is *truthful*: determined by his faithful relationship with God, setting an example for how they might react in a godly way toward him.

Because of his own heart for the Corinthians *themselves*, he is encouraged, and his joy is boundless in the midst of all his many hardships (vs.3-4). He showed the church that he would have been encouraged, proud, and confident of the church, *by conviction, regardless of how they acted or responded toward him* (Ro 14:4). Paul didn't put any responsibility for his emotional state on the Corinthians, but he shared vulnerably that their righteous response was one of the ways God used to comfort him. He shared – while acknowledging that God is sovereign and met his needs perfectly – about his terrible hardship and his comfort through Titus (vs.5-6), and how Titus had been encouraged by the Corinthians – which then encouraged Paul (v.7). He revealed how, in his needy relationship with God, he knew that *God would use people to meet his needs*. By setting an example of both emotional encouragement *by conviction* and *by God providing people* to comfort him, he showed how to be *self-sufficient*, without being *independent*.

Paul also revealed *great sensitivity* in regard to having disciplined the Corinthians sternly in his first letter. He acknowledged that they had been sorrowful and hurt, and he was open about how his disciplining of them had hurt him as well. Paul hadn't enjoyed rebuking them, and he had regretted it as he was made aware of their pain (v.8). He allowed himself to feel their pain, as well as allowing himself to be made happy by their decision to respond righteously (v.9a).

- In what relationships do you need to decide to be *encouraged by conviction*, according to faith and not sight?
- How has *God used people* to comfort and encourage you by meeting your needs?

9-16 – PRINCIPLE: a discerning heart and pleasant words promote instruction

Paul took initiative in revisiting the rebuke he had given the Corinthians in his first letter, but he approached the situation from a *positive* point of view, using the situation to teach the church powerful lessons about having a godly response to discipline (Prov 16:21). He led the Corinthians to focus primarily on how God was pleased that they had responded how he intended (v.9b). A *godly response to disciplining* understands that *discipline through man* is *God's way of protecting our salvation* (1 Kings 8:46-50, Hosea 6:3-6), and a *godly response to sin* is one that is focused on *how sin affects God alone* (2 Sam 12:7-13, Ps 51:1-12).

A *worldly* response, on the other hand, is one which focuses on *how sin affects people*; either yourself or others (v.10; 1 Sam 15:24-25,30). Paul made certain that he helped the Corinthians by taking the focus off of people entirely (v.12), knowing that it is *natural* for people to perceive their sin from a worldly point of view, becoming consumed with how it affects either themselves or the people around them. He made much of pointing out *specifically* how they had responded in a right way (v.11). He was sensitive to the fact that people need to be reminded as much of what they do that is right as what they have done which is wrong.

In the same breath, Paul made the connection for the Corinthians that their righteous response to God also affected the people around them in a positive way. After taking initiative to address the difficult things he had heard regarding the church, he then moved on to *adopt an attitude of complete trust and belief* in their solidarity with him, their desire to be close to God, and their love for people (v.16). He shared with them, through *specific encouraging words*, how God had used them to refresh Titus and make him happy, which delighted and encouraged Paul personally (v.13). He made the connection for the Corinthians about how his faith in their righteousness was proof that he had been telling the truth in other areas as well (v.14), and he also helped the Corinthians see the relationship between *obedience* and the *affection of spiritual leaders*. When those who are being led *open their hearts vulnerably to being obedient and easily influenced* by their leaders, then *leaders find it easy to feel affection* for those they lead, and *find reason to put complete confidence in them* (vs.15-16).

- When someone confronts you on your sin, do you respond in a godly way or a worldly way?
- What *specific encouraging words* can you use in your relationships to promote instruction and build others' faith?

DAY 25

2 Corinthians 8

1-15 – PRINCIPLE: giving godly advice

First, Paul related a *positive example* in the story of a local church, their heart to be spiritual and to give willingly to other churches (vs.1-5). He appealed to the Corinthians by using the Macedonians as a positive and godly example, as he was about to challenge the Corinthians on their own heart to give. This example was meant to *set the tone*; to show that it is not only *possible* to be spiritual about such things, it is *evident* in the attitude of a contemporary, local congregation. Paul then *positively referred to their excellence* in several areas of their character, showing them by this *evidence* that it was *possible* for them to excel in the matter of giving financially (v.7).

Then, Paul said plainly that in this matter he was *testing the church*, using this challenge as a means of building their own convictions and developing their spiritual self-sufficiency (v.8). He referred to an *example of Jesus' nature*, teaching them how they might consider their own actions and test themselves against the example of Jesus (v.9). In giving the Corinthians advice, he was concerned with helping them *complete the work, for the sake of their own character* (v.11), but even more so he was concerned that they *have a righteous heart* about the matter (v.12). He directed them to consider the focus God has on *the heart, not the amount* of the sacrifice (Lk 21:1-4), and he *referred to a scripture* to illustrate God's heart behind his desire for financial sacrifice between churches (v.13-15).

- When giving advice, do you build your direction on scriptural precedent, or opinion and experience?
- Do you point people toward considering God's heart and purpose in each decision they make?

16-24 – PRINCIPLE: promoting trust and respect between churches and people

Paul understood that if God had not given someone their own heart to sacrifice, whether financially, spiritually, emotionally, or with their time, then they *would give grudgingly if compelled or pressured*. The sacrifice would be unacceptable before God, because it would be *unrighteous*, serving more to break relationships than build them. Out of his respect for God's sovereign leadership over each man's life, Paul praised God for his partner, Titus, and another brother who had developed their own heart to sacrifice in serving the Corinthians (vs.16-19,22). Paul did much to recommend both Titus and the brother accompanying him; he understood the value of *setting the tone* for the church to *respect and honor the servants of God*, so they would honor these men's hearts and work with them willingly and humbly. He was concerned that the representatives of the other churches who will arrive with Titus are *shown proof of the Corinthians' love*, and he directed them plainly to love and honor these men so that all the churches will be able to see it (v.24).

This served two purposes. First, as a good servant, Paul was concerned with *setting the Corinthians up for success*. Though it is possible that Paul's first letter to them may not have been widely read, Paul included *all those in the region* of Achaia in the greeting of this letter (1 Co 1:2; 2 Co 1:1). This indicates that those in the surrounding churches would have been informed of the sin which the church had indulged, and the precarious condition of the relationship between the church and their rightful spiritual leader. The Corinthians were then in a position where they would probably *be perceived as weak and possibly dangerous* to the faith of others. Paul knew the *real danger* to the churches' fellowship was that there would be *defensiveness and fear* on both sides, causing *division and mistrust*. For the Corinthians to have an *opportunity to show their love* to the representatives of other churches would go a long way in proving their devotion to God. The second benefit in preparing the Corinthians would be that all the churches could *see the fruit of repentance*: when a church repents, it is immediately evident in their ability to love and serve those who are visiting their fellowship.

Paul never attempted to use his authority to make the people around him adhere to his personal agenda or what he thought best for them to do, even when his cause involved the spiritual welfare of an entire church. Paul had originally hoped that he would send Apollos to strengthen the Corinthians (1 Co 16:12). This would have made the most sense relationally, since Apollos had moved to Corinth after being briefly trained by Priscilla and Aquilla in Ephesus (Ac 18:18-19, 24-28). During the year and a half period in which Paul and Timothy co-founded and built the early church (Ac 18:1-11), Apollos became a prominent leader and authority regarding the scriptures (Ac 18:27-28, 1 Co 3:5-6). Apollos and Paul maintained closeness relationally, despite the worldly divisions and opinions among the Corinthian fellowship, which could easily have torn their partnership to pieces (1 Co 1:10-13, 3:3-4). Though he was bold in urging Apollos according to his best judgment, he recognized that *God led each person separately*, and each one was responsible before God alone for his actions. He had allowed Apollos to make spiritual decisions independently, *breaking his neediness with man* by not needing man to submit to his opinions and desires.

- What do you do to respect the representatives of other churches who visit your fellowship?
- What can you do to take responsibility for showing proof of your church's love to visiting disciples?
- Do you trust God enough to allow people to make their own decisions spiritually as they strive to serve God?

DAY 26

2 Corinthians 9

1-5 – External weakness: a servant in action (see Chapter 4)

As a wise servant, Paul understood that even the *best intentions are useless without adequate preparation* (v.3b). He *anticipated* that the Corinthians would need a driving leader available to *focus their intention* in the matter of financial giving (v.3a). And he *applied all of his intelligence, heart, and resources* in considering how he could *minimize their potential weaknesses* (v.5a), knowing that the church's integrity and character might both be compromised if they were found unprepared at the expected time (v.4). He knew the great danger in having too little effort, too late in the game: that people under the pressure of making themselves look competent in other people's eyes become unspiritual, anxious, and grudging in their sacrifices (v.5).

Paul knew that he was also liable to *bear the brunt of their shortcomings*, but his use of leadership wasn't to get the church to do what they didn't already have a heart to do (v.4). They had *already decided* to give; Paul's role as a servant was to *provide support* and *help them to work effectively* toward meeting this goal (v.2a). In sending Titus, Paul was *personally suppressing his own desires* in order to meet the needs of this church; where he had formerly given up ministry opportunities to find his partner, here he was voluntarily giving him up for the sake of sending him to serve the Corinthians (2 Co 8:17,23; v.5a). He set the stage for their trust in his sending of men to help them complete the work by expressing his belief that the Corinthians are eager, enthusiastic, and prepared to do what is right spiritually (v.1-2).

- In what areas of your character do you need to grow to become a better servant to those around you?
- How do you concern yourself with setting other people up for success?

6-14 – Internal strength: using positive examples as an opportunity to teach scriptural conviction.

Making the spiritual connection: Paul knew that he had an opportunity to use the Corinthians' good heart to further teach them spiritual convictions and disciple them to adopt God's point of view on giving (v.6; Lk 21:1-4). He showed that, while he was clearly concerned that the Corinthians have integrity to giving generously (Pr 25:14), he was just as concerned that their hearts were prepared to give in a way which pleases God. He had to teach them that each one is to *consider the quality of their heart* in their own relationship with God, *deciding for themselves* (Ex 25:2) what they are *willing to give* (Ex 35:4-5, 21-22, 29) and then having *integrity to give cheerfully* what they had decided (v.7; 1 Chr 29:17). Also, knowing that *faith pleases God* (Heb 11:6), he challenged them with a clear spiritual truism arising from a scripture, to believe that *God will give them far more in return* than they would be sacrificing for the fellowship (vs.8-9).

Making the relational connection: To spur the hearts of the church into action, Paul appealed to their desires to *glorify God* and to *restore their right relationship* with neighboring churches (v.10-12). Clearly, Paul didn't assume that any church could stand being independent; his goal was to produce a solid fellowship *between* the congregations as well as *within* each church. Paul appealed to the fact that the Corinthians had been known to set an example of *disobedience* among the churches, and that they were being afforded an opportunity to *repent and set an example of obedience*, which would result in others glorifying God on their behalf (v.13). As well, Paul understood the principle that: "where your treasure is, your heart will be also" (Mt 6:19-21). In addition to the opportunity the Corinthians have to invest their treasure in the fellowship, Paul highlighted the fact that when someone receives a gift, their heart naturally goes out to the one who has given it (Pr 19:6). He taught the Corinthians that, after they had given to the surrounding churches, they would be rewarded by the fruit of secure and loving connections between them (v.14-15).

- In giving direction, do you help people make the spiritual connection between their actions and their relationship with God?
- Who needs help in repairing broken relationships around you?
- How can you encourage them by making the relational connection between their repentance and the fruit they will be rewarded with as a result?

DAY 27

2 Corinthians 10

1-11 – External weakness: relying on action, not persuasion (having faith vs. using force).

Paul led by **action and internal strength**, rather than by external strength or forceful personality, in imitation of Christ (vs.1,10-11; Is 42:1-4). He revealed that his understanding of Christ was one of meekness and gentleness – not loud and demanding, but serving and interceding on our behalf (v.1; Mt 11:29; Ro 8:34; Heb 7:24-28). He was not afraid to **beg** the church that he would not have to make some sort of bold and authoritative display in their presence, simply because they refuse to respect his authority despite his servitude and fruitfulness (v.2a). Contrary to the world's way of leading, he was **determined to have faith** that his actions would persuade the church to follow his example, as they saw the fruit of his life and ministry (v.2b; Heb 13:7-8). He went to lengths to reassure the church that he would not be ashamed of using his authority, but also that he was not trying to frighten them or abuse them in any way; the authority God gave him was meant for building them up, rather than tearing them down (vs.8-11; Lk 22:25-27; Heb 13:7).

- How do you need to grow to better imitate Jesus' heart in leading others?
- How can you better use your authority to build people up?

Internal strength: fighting the right battles in a righteous way.

Paul separated the "some" who were clearly unspiritual from the majority of the congregation; he fought the battle not against the grumbling minority, but on behalf of **strengthening the convictions of the unified majority** (v.2b; 2 Thess 3:2-5). He appealed to them to understand the **spiritual nature of the battle** they were fighting, and that this would not look or feel anything like what they had seen in the world (v.3; Eph 6:12). These battles are fought on the ground of men's souls, over the spiritual strongholds of **sin, arguments, pretensions, and thoughts** (vs.4-5).

Knowing that God's word is meant to judge the thoughts and attitudes of men's hearts (Heb 4:12), this was the conflict which Paul chose to engage in every situation. The spiritual weapons he alluded to (v.4) – all the tools God had given him – were meant to be applied toward protecting the purity of obedience to God's word among his people (1 Jn :6), first in attitude and then in action. Ultimately, **victory means to produce obedience** to Christ in every way (v.5b; Jn 14:21-24). If that obedience necessitated punishment, it would be a last resort and only if there was an unwillingness to submit to any other means of persuasion (v.6).

- What is your focus in the battles you fight spiritually?

12-18 – Principle: hope in expanded ability for evangelism.

Paul refused adamantly to get involved in the games of men, comparing and judging worth based off of how he looked in the eyes of other men (v.12, 17-18). His **bottom line was evangelism**; he was concerned only with preaching in regions even beyond where he had already been able to spread the gospel (Ro 15:16-21). As he worked hard to build the Corinthians' faith, he never took his eyes off the goal, sharing vulnerably with the Corinthians that he hoped, as their faith grew, that he would be able to work even beyond them. He put a subtle pressure on the Corinthians, explaining to them that **his continued evangelism was contingent on the health of their faith**; naturally so, since they would be the more mature example to any other churches which were planted beyond themselves (vs. 13-16; 2 Thess 1:3-4, 11-12).

Without a strong partnership with the Corinthians, Paul would not have been able to rely on them to help strengthen and inspire the new churches (Phil 3:17). He wrapped up **commendation from the Lord** in this concept of **continuing to preach** in areas where the good news of Jesus had not already been heard (vs.16-18). Clearly, he had the conviction that **God intends his word to reach into the entire known world**, and felt compelled to do whatever possible to see that this intention becomes a reality (Col 1:17-23).

- What is the bottom line in your focus as you build others up?
- How do you need to help your group to grow in their faith so you can evangelize in expanded regions?

DAY 28

2 Corinthians 11

1-17 – Internal strength: assuming personal responsibility before God

Because of Paul's heart to be a good shepherd of God's people, he had developed his own, internal drive to take personal responsibility for each church before God. For the Corinthians, he *felt passionately jealous* on their behalf for their spiritual welfare, because he had *made a vow to God* to present them as a bride of Christ. He had developed this conviction on his own, from his personal understanding of scriptures (Mt 9:15; Jn 3:28-30). He related serious concern for them: as Eve was swayed from obedience to God's command because Satan presented her with what seemed like a *better option*, Paul is afraid that the Corinthians were likewise being enticed away from dedication to their relationships within God's kingdom, because Satan presented them with what appeared to be a better option in leadership (vs.3-5, 13-15; Gen 3:1-6).

Paul also assumed responsibility before God by *maintaining confidence in his knowledge of God*, regardless of his training or lack of outward strengths (v.6). He expressed his sincerity before God by addressing the issue of having *chosen to remain financially independent* from the Corinthians. He had refused to be a burden while he was among them (vs.7-11; 1 Pet 5:2), and his resolution to reject financial assistance was only strengthened by his current concerns. He was willing to do anything to protect the church from feeling as if he had ulterior motives; he wanted to prove his sincerity in contrast to worldly preachers who were concerned only with financial gain. He had made *decisions that clearly delineate himself* from those who were working falsely, happy to take the church's money but had no heart for those they led (vs.12-15).

Finally, Paul took personal responsibility before God through *sensitivity in judging his own actions*, aware of when he was speaking as Christ would and when he was not. He was spiritually sensitive to the point where he was clearly aware when he was stepping outside of the precedent set by Jesus (Jn 8:26). He took great pains to keep a tight reign on his tongue (Jas 1:26), bringing all his actions under the control of Christ's example.

- What vows do you need to make before God on behalf of your group?
- How sensitive are you in comparing your own actions against Christ's example?

18-33 – External weakness: boasting in weaknesses, not strengths

Though Paul started out with the words that he was prepared to boast in the way the world does, "like a fool", and shamed the Corinthians by exposing their willingness to follow false teachers who do not really love them, simply because their pride and defensiveness toward Paul led their hearts away from righteous decisions in leadership, he quickly moved to speak of the circumstances and decisions which caused him great personal hardship (vs.18-23). His concern was that he wanted to uphold his sincerity to the Corinthians, as a desperate attempt to win over their hearts.

The situations he had faced for the sake of the Gospel were daunting and certainly demand respect, as Paul clearly had been protected and delivered by God alone. He related his *weakness of circumstance*: both the *responses of men* toward his work for God, as well as those circumstances *arising out of his choices to work exclusively for God* (vs.24-27, 32-33). Paul was never enticed to manipulate the gospel or God's commission for the sake of his own comfort or appearance (Mt 28:18-20). Whereas many disciples have one foot in the world and one in Christianity, believing that their lives can be equally comfortable and useful to God, Paul's life of faith demanded that he face extreme and tenuous circumstances every day. He proved that a true disciple *must sacrifice both comfort in relationships and comfort in personal circumstances* in order to fulfill God's calling to make disciples of all nations (Mk 16:15; Mt 10:22-23; Mt 24:9-13).

On top of the faith-testing personal circumstances he endured for the sake of living by faith, Paul related some of his heart towards the weaknesses of others in the churches. He expressed how he *daily faced the pressure of his concern* for all churches and individual disciples. He was willing to take on this pressure; his concern was internally driven and guided him to make his decisions on behalf of many churches and what was best for them. In addition, he *personally allowed himself to connect in his heart with others' spiritual weakness*: he related that he *felt weak* when others are weak. He *burned inwardly* as he saw others being led into sin (vs.28-29).

Because of Paul's *softness of heart*, God was able to use him powerfully to shepherd and care for his churches (Ez 34:2,11-16). In imitation of Christ, he set the example of a shepherd who cared so intimately and personally for his sheep that he would fight to the death on their behalf (Jn 10:11-13). He was aware that there was the danger, as a leader, of having the heart of a "hired hand", whose ultimate concern is in being paid for his effort; this heart "cares nothing" for those he shepherds, and in his heart he has no feeling for the weaknesses of those he leads. According to the extent of Paul's faith, he was willing to expend himself on behalf of many churches; he had no choice but to rely on God's strength as he allowed his heart to be soft and personally affected by the choices of those around him.

- Would Paul have reason to respect the hardships you have been willing to endure for the sake of living by faith?
- How soft is your heart toward individuals and churches, as compared with Christ's?

DAY 29

2 Corinthians 12

1-6 – External weakness: allowing people to form their own impressions

The way of worldly leadership is to “impress” – by deliberately considering how to leave an authoritative impression on others, so they will respect, comply, and submit to their leader’s agenda. It is easy to apply worldly principles of external strength to spiritual pursuits, relying on deceit, boasting, and comparing in an effort to look good in the eyes of men.

Choosing to adopt an attitude of external weakness is *more than a personality trick* to manipulate the hearts of those who are being led. It arises out of a genuine heart of openness, from the conviction not to build up an image of worldly, external strength. It takes genuine courage, faith in God, and truly humbling oneself like Jesus did (Phil 2:1-5), to adopt God’s method of leadership. Though Paul had clearly been touched in unique ways by God, he refused to boast of these things as if they were something to be used to win the respect of man (vs.1-5). If anyone was to gain any impression of him, it would be *by direct experience* and *without Paul trying to manipulate them* (v.6).

7-10 – PRINCIPLE: God speaks to us in our weaknesses

Paul put himself in the most humble position of weakness – he vulnerably exposed his condition of torment, as Christ was willing to do (1 Pet 2:21-24). *Torment* implies that this condition was overwhelming, constant, and consuming. It means that he *felt weak, looked weak*, and had a host of *intense emotional, mental, and spiritual pressures* that someone with a healthy body never has to consider. Every choice he made had to be done with faith that God would give him the physical and emotional strength to stand up under the pressure his body put on him to quit. The pressure of torment is something that can’t be *denied* or *overlooked*: the choice was only between relying on God, allowing himself to be weak and needy, or withdrawing into unopenness, pride, bitterness, and self-reliance.

Paul had found a way to faithfully explain this situation to himself: he knew that he would have become arrogant and self-righteous, looking down on others, if God hadn’t given him some weakening situation to keep him humble (v.7a). This extreme internal suffering, internally led by his convictions to be faithful, forced him into closer fellowship with God and others, producing the good fruit of right relationships. Though Paul attributed this affliction to Satan (v.7b), he didn’t allow it to discourage his relationship with God. Being spiritually mature, he understood that suffering is part of both God and Satan’s tactics: suffering is used by God to strengthen us, and Satan uses it to tear us apart. How *each person chooses to respond* is ultimately the deciding factor between whether affliction will draw us closer to God or tear us away.

When suffering and afflictions hit, true maturity is found when we turn, not to the world for final answers, but we put ultimate responsibility into God’s hands, struggling and wrestling directly with God (Gen 32:22-30). Reminiscent of Jesus in Gethsemane, Paul pleaded with God three times (v.8). In the times Paul wrestled, he was *spoken to directly by God* (Job 36:15). *Pleading* comes out of desperation; we have no other options but to beg the one in control to stop. But, as faithlessness – leading to bitterness and resentment – wasn’t an option according to Jesus’ convictions, nor was rebellion, his only choice was to surrender to God’s will (Is 53:10). In the end, God’s grace was sufficient for both Jesus and Paul (v.9). Grace, to Paul, meant far more than God keeping him out of trouble and giving him secure circumstances. First, it meant the forgiveness of sin, or *meeting his eternal need* through salvation. Then, it meant *being useful according to God’s purposes* here on earth. Paul was *made competent to minister* to others as a result of embracing and understanding his own weaknesses.

God also said, “my power is made perfect in weakness”. Paul didn’t have a life where God spoke to him of comfort, ease, wealth, or respect; just the opposite, actually. And Paul didn’t have a relationship with God where he arrogantly demanded those things. Rather, he submitted to God’s will completely, adopting an attitude that he would delight in hardship and be *glad to let God prove himself powerful* through the overwhelming circumstances he faced (v.10).

11-21 – Internal Strength: adopting the responsibility of a parent

A parent is always the parent, regardless of the emotional pressure their children put on them by rebelling against their authority. Like Jesus, Paul *refused to be swayed or made insecure* simply because of man’s reactions (vs.11-13; Is 42:4). Paul expressed clearly that he refused to take anything from them, but that as a parent he was happy to spend all of what he had – all of his money, time, and energy – for the sake of building the church up (vs.14-15). He appealed to their hearts, calling them to love him in return (v.15b). And he appealed to their common sense, calling them to consider the unity of loving conviction and action that Paul’s partners displayed. Just as *godly parents represent a unified team* in shepherding, training, and correcting their children, deliberately choosing what is best on their behalf, Paul explained that everything he and his partners did was not for their own sake, but for the deliberate strengthening of the church (vs.16-19).

If children’s hearts are soft, parents are able to mold and correct them gently. Because of this, Paul vulnerably shared his fears, knowing that if the Corinthians chose to be defensive and proud toward him when he visited, there would be arguing, divisions, and the need for painful, authoritative discipling (vs.20-21).

DAY 30

2 Corinthians 13

1-4 – PRINCIPLE: *crucified in weakness and living by God's power*

Jesus' attitude in dealing with sin was to ***take complete personal responsibility***, expecting those who followed him to do exactly the same (v.4a; Lk 9:23). Paul let the church know that he was unwilling to allow them to continue sinning without taking some more serious measures to call them to ***repentance and the standard of following Jesus' example***. Paul wasn't afraid to wrap up his letter with a strong warning about a coming discipling session if he found their lives testifying to the same sins they had been continually struggling with (vs.1-2). He brought them back not to himself but to Jesus; that ***Jesus was powerful among them*** and he would manifest power in disciplining them, if they were unwilling to quickly repent. He spoke of authoritative discipling as "proof that Christ is speaking" - and called them to remember that Christ was never weak in dealing with them (v.3). As Jesus had been crucified, in the world's eyes he was weak. Yet in the spiritual realm, he had been paying the price for all sins, through all time; certainly this is not a "weak" role in the spiritual world! He reminded them that his own weakness was also as a result of God's will, but that by God's power he had been made strong spiritually to serve the church by shepherding and training them (v.4b).

- How willing are you to disciple others' sin powerfully, if confronted with an unrepentant heart?

5-10 – PRINCIPLE: *teaching the tools of spiritual self-sufficiency*

Paul called the Corinthians to ***judge and test themselves***, so they wouldn't need him to do it for them (vs.5-7). Because he wanted them to be ***mature and able to discern*** right from wrong, he charged them to "aim for perfection" (v.11), as he equipped them with all the tools God provides in developing spiritual maturity.

Some tools of spiritual self-sufficiency are:

- 1 Co 11:28 – self-examination in light of Christ, crucified
- 1 Co 11:31-32 – self-judgment according to Jesus' standards
- 2 Co 1:9 – testing actions according to leaders' direction
- 2 Co 1:12; 4:2b; 5:11b – developing sensitivity of conscience
- 2 Co 1:20 – trusting and relying on God's perfect character
- 2 Co 2:11 – wisdom concerning the spiritual battle
- 2 Co 5:1-7 – relying on faith and the Spirit to produce bold confidence
- 2 Co 7:1 – perfecting holiness: continually purifying body and spirit
- 2 Co 7:6-7 – developing daily, interdependent spiritual partnerships
- 2 Co 7:11 – proving oneself innocent in dealing with sin righteously
- 2 Co 8:8 – testing actions against the example of other believers
- 2 Co 8:20-21 – avoiding criticism by taking pains to do what's right
- 2 Co 8:24 – proving love for God's servants among the churches
- 2 Co 10:7 – depth of spiritual discernment, as opposed to worldly comparison
- 2 Co 10:12 – refusing to measure against the standards of the world
- 2 Co 10:15 – hoping for opportunities of expanded evangelism
- 2 Co 11:20-21 – respecting spiritual confidence and rejecting spiritual aggression
- 2 Co 11:28-29 – taking personal, emotional responsibility for individuals and groups
- 2 Co 12:15 – loving the servants of God as a result of their service

Paul called the Corinthians to judge not only themselves by these standards, but himself and his partners as well (v.6). He was concerned not that they would find him worthy, but only that they would be strengthened spiritually, in light of his example, to be righteous in every situation (v.7). He ***couldn't do anything against the truth*** – he couldn't pretend, cover up, be in denial, deceive others, or choose to be faithless (1 Pet 1:21-23). Even if he ***appeared as though he has failed***, his convictions to ***live by the truth*** – both his own internal truth as well as the truth according to God's word – would remain unshaken and uncompromised (vs.7-8). He reiterated that he was concerned only that those he led would ***be strong spiritually and made perfect***, and that he desired to build them up with the authority given to him by God (v.9). His only motive in writing authoritatively was so that when he saw them, he would find them not needing harsh correction, but having taken the initiative to repent on their own (v.10).

- What can you do to develop the spiritual self-sufficiency of yourself and those around you?