

# TRANSFORMING TRUTHS *FOR* TROUBLED TIMES

DANIEL HENDERSON

## **Transforming Truths for Troubled Times**

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*Transforming Truths  
for  
Troubled Times*

*Daniel Henderson*

# *Transforming Truths for Tough Decisions*

## *What To Do When God is Silent*

*“To You I will cry, O Lord my Rock: Do not be silent to me,  
Lest, if You are silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit.”  
Psalm 28:1*

Recently, I returned to work after a brief mini-sabbatical, my first real break of this type in almost 30 years of pastoral ministry. It was designed to be a time to refuel, renew and recalibrate the patterns of my heart. In that respect, it was a needful and very helpful time.

However, I also spent this time seeking the Lord for some clear direction on personal and ministry issues that have been heavy. I needed direction and guidance for the next chapter. Even though I spent extraordinary time in prayer and Bible study, journaled extensively, read numerous books and sought the input of wise friends – the sabbatical ended with no clear answers from the Lord. I know this is not unusual for many believers and there are times we feel that after we have done all we know to do – the Lord seems to be silent in response to our prayers for guidance.

### **Aligning the Channels**

You may remember the old technology of an “iTrip” which was a little device you plugged into the cigarette lighter of your car. This device allowed you to play songs from an iPod through the radio. To make it work you pushed a button and the iTrip found a radio station that was not being used in your present location, with no interference. Then, you had to tune the dial on the radio to that exact station in order to clearly hear the music.

Sometimes our prayers are like that connection. We must be sure our frequency is aligned to the Lord's in order to hear the music of His guidance. Unconfessed sin, selfish motivations and broken relationships can keep us off frequency.

### **When the Silence Is the Answer**

Yet, there are other times (maybe more than most of us would want to admit) when we feel we are on frequency, but the music of His guidance seems like nothing more than silence.

C.S. Lewis, in his story *The Magician's Nephew*, tells of a boy named Digory whose mother is dying. Digory encounters Aslan and pleads, "May I – please, will you give me some magic fruit of this country to make Mother well?" As desperate and heart-wrenching as the cry for help is, Lewis writes,

He had been desperately hoping that the Lion would say "yes"; but had been horribly afraid it may say "no." But he was taken aback when it did neither.

Many times in our struggle, we look to the Lord for a "yes" or a "no" but only discover silence. Later in the book, Digory again asks Aslan for help:

"But please, please – won't you – can't you give me something that will cure Mother?" Up till then he had been looking at the Lion's great feet and the huge claws on them; now, in his despair, he looked up at its face. What he saw surprised him as much as anything in his whole life. For the tawny face was bent down near his own and (wonder of wonders) great shining tears stood in the Lion's eyes. They were such big, bright tears compared with Digory's own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be sorrier about his Mother than he was himself."

Digory's exchange illustrates our reality as well. We often interpret His silence as unconcern but if we will look to His face and understand His nearness, we will experience His deep care and intimacy. In that moment, everything can change, if we have the wisdom to embrace the power and beauty of His tender, necessary silence.

In his fascinating book *God on Mute*, author Pete Greig reveals the journey of God's silence he and his wife have endured through the trauma of her brain tumor and subsequent years of debilitating seizures. He writes, "God is enjoying the way we are wrestling with Him in prayer through this process. To put it another way, He may consider our wondering and questions more important than the relatively simple act of supplying us with an answer."

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Greig admits the agony of this journey but clarifies, "By holding back blessings from our lives, God beguiles us to tarry in His presence . . . In God's kingdom, happiness

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is not marked out primarily by popularity, fat bank accounts or clean bills of health but rather by proximity to the Father.” He then states, “Sometimes, He may deprive us of something in order to draw us to Someone.”

### **The Answer of No Answers**

As I look at this moment in my life and the apparently “unfruitful” pursuit of guidance, I have come to realize the deeper answer that comes from the compassionate, all-wise and always good heart of the Father. I began these weeks looking for answers from His presence. He wanted me to have a deep awareness of His presence. I wanted direction from Him. He wanted to give me a greater desire for Him. I wanted firm conclusions. He offered a fruitful contentment.

Today, as you read this devotion, you must also have issues you have brought to him. They may concern physical health, financial provision, a struggling marriage, a wandering child or an uncertain future. The silence seems agonizing, yet His face reassures you of the beauty of His presence and His all-knowing compassion for your deepest need – to be more like and nearer to Jesus.

P.T. Forsythe wrote, “We shall come one day to a heaven where we shall gratefully know that God’s great refusals were sometimes the true answer to our truest prayers.” He added, “The outer need kindles the inner and we find that the complete answer to prayer is the Answerer.”

With all this in mind, I hope you will join me in embracing the longing of the Apostle Paul, “But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Philippians 3:7-11).

### *Weapons of Mass Distraction*

*“But Martha was distracted with much serving... ” Luke 10:40*

One particular Sunday as I finished preaching at church in Virginia, the senior pastor came to the pulpit to share his personal response to the message. He noted his ongoing battle with distraction in the ministry, citing it as a primary ploy of the devil in making Christian leaders ineffective. He described Satan’s effort as being “Weapons of Mass Distraction.” I’ve been pondering that statement, and I’ve concluded that the enemy does not have to destroy us, but simply distract us. Little distractions

tolerated over a long period of time result in big disasters.

Twice in my ministry as a pastor, I have come to a megachurch in the wake of scandalous moral failure by my predecessor. The mass destruction is beyond imagination to the casual observer. But for the clean-up man who arrives next, the fallout is heartbreaking and long-lasting. Each of these disasters started with little distractions in the heart of good men. Fueled over time, the distractions led to spiritual disabilities. Eventually, those distractions became decisions that brought shame and reproach to the name of Christ. I've learned that the enemy does not have to destroy us. He simply needs to distract us.

### **The Best Choices**

Yet, some of the most dangerous distractions are the “good” ones. They are tolerable, but they eventually ruin our trajectory in the journey of honoring Christ with a well-lived life. It is said so often that we almost become numb to its truth: “The good is usually the greatest enemy of the best.”

I tell people often, “The power of ‘no’ is in a stronger ‘yes.’” The ability to discard distractions is rooted in a firm understanding of the best priorities. We must embrace these priorities with a passionate “yes” in our heart of hearts. When distractions come, “no” becomes a positive Christian word, because it is rooted in strong convictions about the best and highest commitments. I hold high my own conviction to help current and future leaders identify biblical priorities and then equip them to become confident and competent in implementing those priorities.

### **Choosing Your Yes’s**

These priorities are salient in the Scriptures. The familiar story of Martha and Mary comes to mind. Busy and distracted, Martha became frustrated and critical in the moment. Her sister Mary embraced a clear yes as she prioritized seeking Christ over serving Christ. Jesus commended her for her focus as being the best choice and the one that would ultimately matter in eternity (Luke 10:38-42).

I often preach on Acts 6:1-7. The early apostles refused to get distracted with the broken program for feeding the widows. They directed a process of finding qualified and godly servants to solve the problem, but they would not compromise their own commitment to “prayer and the ministry of the word.” The result was that God blessed their focus with a powerful unleashing of His power. The word of God spread, the disciples multiplied greatly, and great numbers of hard-liner Jewish priests were miraculously converted. There was no such mass distraction among them.

Perhaps an even more powerful and clear reiteration of this principle is found in

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Exodus 18. Moses was overwhelmed and weary from judging the people. His astute father-in-law offered him some life-saving wisdom:

*So Moses' father-in-law said to him, “The thing that you do is not good. Both you and these people who are with you will surely wear yourselves out. For this thing is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself. Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God will be with you: Stand before God for the people, so that you may bring the difficulties to God. And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do. Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. And let them judge the people at all times. Then it will be that every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they themselves shall judge. So it will be easier for you, for they will bear the burden with you. If you do this thing, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will also go to their place in peace.” (Exodus 18:13-23)*

Jethro charged Moses with three essential priorities: pray (v. 19), teach the Word (v. 20), and train leaders and delegate important responsibilities to them (vv. 21-22). It is also notable that these are the same three priorities, in the same order, that we see in Acts 6.

It is clear that this is a simple but profound defense against the devil's weapons of mass distraction. Yes! Yes! Yes! My friend, join me in asking God to deliver us from the ploy of the enemy to distract, discourage, disable and destroy our lives and ministries. The power of a focused life is like a laser-powered defense system against any weapon that is formed against us by the “master of distraction.”

### *Faithful in Little Things, Fruitful in Big*

*“Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities.”*  
Luke 19:17

I've heard it said that when you do today what you have to do, the day will come when you can do what you want to do. And I believe Jesus established this principle with even greater clarity when he said, “He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much” (Luke 16:10, NASB).

Scripture abounds with illustrations of this truth. I

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think of Joseph who was faithful in his service to Potiphar, in spite of many setbacks, and became second-in-command in Egypt. Moses was faithful to the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro for 40 years before he became a great deliverer of God's people. Joshua was a brave soldier and dedicated assistant to Moses before he led the conquest of the Promised Land.

Furthermore, David was a faithful shepherd, protecting his father's sheep from lions and bears, before God elevated him as King over Israel. Nehemiah was a loyal cupbearer to a foreign ruler before God summoned him to lead the effort to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. Matthias had faithfully followed Christ in the shadow of the "greater" apostles for several years before the early church chose him to replace Judas. The writer of Hebrews even speaks of our Lord Jesus describing Him as "Christ Jesus, who was faithful to Him who appointed Him" (Hebrews 3:1-2).

Acts 1:21–22 states the criterion for his selection, "Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection." For years, Matthias lived and served willingly, apparently without significant recognition or responsibility. Yet, he remained true. I like to describe him as a faithful man whose time had come. is usually the greatest enemy of the best."

Jesus told the parable of the talents, commanding the one who had been faithful with what he had been given: "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things. I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord." Of course, our ultimate reward is eternity with Christ, but it is encouraging to see him reward the faithful sacrifices of a diligent life by opening doors of greater responsibility and impact.

The writer of Hebrews even speaks of our Lord Jesus describing Him as "Christ Jesus, who was faithful to Him who appointed Him" (Hebrews 3:1-2). That same letter calls us to "Look unto Jesus" who is our example as the "author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

What about your journey? In a world of short-term and shaky commitments, do you trust Christ for the grace to endure hardship and misunderstanding and to remain faithful to your duties? Are you resolved to endure in your responsibilities after the spotlight is turned off? In a world of unreliability, can you be counted on to remain faithful in and out of season? It is not always easy to keep your hand to the plow, but it is always worth it.

**WE SO EASILY RELY  
ON VARIOUS FORMS  
OF ALTERNATIVE  
POWER WHEN WE  
FACE THE BATTLES  
OF DAILY LIFE.**

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I am reminded that much of life seems mundane. It is important to let every occasion be a great occasion, for we never know when the Lord may be measuring us for a greater realm of influence. Be assured that our Lord sees and rewards it all. May you sense His pleasure today, and trust Him to greater measures as you serve Him faithfully.

### *The Blessing and Blight of Alternative Power*

*“. . . without Me you can do nothing.”*

*John 15:5*

When we experience a power failure in the physical realm, having alternative power can save the day, and even save lives. In the spiritual realm, we should never have a power failure. It happens, not because of the Generator, but because of the recipient.

Scripture reminds us that “His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3, NASB). We are urged to live by “the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power” (Ephesians 1:19). We have access to ultimate, supernatural, and uninterrupted power.

#### **Plugging Into the Wrong Source**

Yet, I find that we so easily rely on various forms of alternative power when we face the battles of daily life. This was illustrated to me recently as I read in 2 Chronicles 25:5-13. Amaziah, the king of Judah, had an adequate army of 300,000 as he prepared for war. Yet he still hired 100,000 soldiers to assist him in his military endeavors. A prophet of God told him that if he chose to rely on the additional troops, he would lose the battle, because “the Lord was not with them.” Amaziah had already paid them an equivalent of 4 tons of silver. The account reads like this: “Amaziah asked the man of God, ‘But what should I do about the silver I paid to hire the army of Israel?’ The man of God replied, ‘The LORD is able to give you much more than this!’” (2 Chronicles 25:9-10, NLT).

Amaziah sent the 100,000 soldiers away and went on to win the battle without his “alternative power plan.” Sadly, he did not learn his lesson and immediately reverted to the use of his own power. He shamefully set up the gods of the defeated armies as his own gods, and rejected the correction of the prophet sent by the one true God to warn him.

Alternative human power is so available to us today. It is convenient, and it makes a lot of sense. It is enthusiastically recommended to us by other believers. It is promoted in our Christian magazines, leadership conferences, and pragmatic religious culture.

### **Trusting in Primary Power**

To set aside alternative power choices may be costly, as it was to Amaziah, because we are often well down the road of pragmatism when we realize it is a tragic trajectory. It is at this point that we must obey the voice of the Spirit and exercise complete trust in the primary power source.

Offers of alternative power are nothing new. In the early church, Paul opposed those who offered alternative power through the human works of circumcision and keeping the law. Paul stood with firm resolve, pointing out the contrast and trusting in the real power of the Christian life. He wrote, “Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more” (Philippians 3:2-4, ESV).

I don’t know about you, but my heart longs to walk in the way of the true circumcision, as I put no confidence in the flesh. My flesh is so often drawn toward the logical, clever, intelligent, relevant, and natural. But these are too often contrary to a full-hearted trust in the sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

Alternative power is a blessing in the physical realm. In the Spiritual realm it is blight. May God give us wisdom to know the difference every day of our lives as we trust Him to live in and through us in the fullness of His unparalleled and unfailing power.

# *Transforming Truths for Tough Trials*

## *A Healthy Reaction to Trouble*

*“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace.  
In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”  
John 16:33*

Good Christians are always in trouble — not with the law, but with the devil and his loyalists. Sometimes our God, who is more interested in our character than our comfort, allows troubles of a different kind in order to make us more effective and exemplary in our Christward journey.

The early Christians were facing constant trouble. It came in the form of persecution (Acts 4), corruption (Acts 5), potential division (Acts 6:2) and pressing distractions (Acts 6:2-4). They were praying menaces to the kingdom of darkness, and the ruler of this dark kingdom was on constant counterattack.

If we are going to follow Christ with a serious dedication, we too will encounter many troubles. It is a promise (2 Timothy 3:12). The question is not if we will go through difficult times, but how we will react to them.

I remember reading a chapter by Watchman Nee many years ago where he wrote on “The Christian Reaction.” He concluded that we can tell a lot more about a Christian by his reactions than by his actions. Actions can be calculated and manipulated. Reactions tend to come straight from the gut and expose the nature of our soul. In studying Acts 4:23-31, I am impressed and helped by the reaction of the early Christ followers. Their leaders, Peter and John, were sequestered, questioned and threatened with a warning to stop preaching the Gospel. In Acts 4:23 they went back

to the gathered Christians and reported on the trouble they had seen. Then the text says in verse 24, “So when they heard that . . .” Stop. Read carefully here.

But before you do, ask yourself a few questions. How do I respond to bad news? What do I feel when someone I love has been maligned or mistreated? When my safety is shaken or even when my life is threatened, what do I say? How do I respond to unanticipated and painful difficulties in my life? Think about your answers honestly and candidly before proceeding.

Now, let’s glean some inspiration from these early believers. The account goes on to say, “So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: ‘Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them . . .’” (v. 24). They did not protest, send nasty e-mails, appeal to Caesar or grumble among themselves. They worshiped God!

#### **Reaction One: Worshiping God for Who He Is**

When in trouble, worship should not be our last resort, but our first response. In my first book, *The Deeper Life*, I noted that the most important question in every life is, “Who is God?” This is especially true in times of trouble.

When facing difficulties, we tend to ask questions like, “Why is this happening?” or “What did I do to deserve this?” or “Now what is going to happen with my life and my plans?” Instead – and instinctively – these believers went back to the foundational issue. They worshiped God.

In this passage, the early Christ followers proclaimed God’s character with united hearts and voices (a strong statement about the need to stay and pray in community when you face problems). They extolled Him as the Lord, the Sovereign God, the Creator and Controller of all things, the One whose Word is true and reliable. They acknowledged that these difficult experiences were clearly within the scope of God’s plan. They knew that all of human history, and their histories, centered in Jesus.

When we encounter overwhelming trouble, it is important to remember the reassurance of Scripture. Isaiah 26:3 says this: “You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.” Consider Daniel 11:32, which says, “. . . but the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits.” These promises were on practical display in Acts 4. They worked for these

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early Christians, and they will work for us as we allow them to regulate our thoughts and emotions.

### **Reaction Two: Seeing Ourselves for Who We Are**

In a modern world where so many people react to trouble by claiming their rights in an aggressive display of ego or in coddling their fears in a fit of depression, the early church was a refreshing contrast. Having embraced a solid picture of God, they went on to declare the truth about themselves. Verse 29 says, “Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants . . .”

Servants. The Greek here is *doulos*, more literally translated “slave.” That’s how they saw themselves. Slaves have no rights, only the honor of accomplishing the agenda of the one to whom they are subject. Trouble has a way of revealing our true view of our place in this world. I remember Gordon MacDonald saying, “Everyone wants to be a servant until someone treats them like one.” Problems and pain test our commitment to servanthood.

Our identity in Christ is a powerful and fundamental truth for surviving tough times. Remembering that we are beloved, accepted, righteous and complete in Christ gives us real security. Recalling that we are members of His body, the light of the world, the salt of the earth, ambassadors and slaves, keeps our focus on something other than ourselves.

### **Reaction Three: Embracing Our Purpose in His Power**

As I have reviewed this story over and over, my personal summary of this account is, “When trouble comes, it’s not about us. It’s about Jesus – His name, His fame and His claim on our lives. Trouble is a fresh call to stay on task and remain faithful to His mission.”

Acts 4:29-31 describes it this way, “Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.’ And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.”

It is notable to see how willing God was to take control of these yielded hearts and lives by His Spirit. Again, this picture of the central role of the Holy Spirit reminds us that we don’t ultimately endure troubled times by our own strength and resolve. In spite of how we might feel, we have to make the right choices, open our hearts to the right truth and submit to His available power.

### **The Three Most Important Questions**

Years ago as the Lord began to inspire my heart with The Deeper Life renewal

process, I concluded that the first three questions we must answer from the truth of God's Word are these:

- Who is God?
- Who am I?
- Why am I here?

I find it fascinating that these early Christians seemed to come back to this vital focus during a very threatening moment. As we affirm our answers to these questions and rehearse them daily, we will be ready for disappointments, dilemmas and difficulties.

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The Deeper Life is available in book form, a small group study and a 21-day devotional . To learn more, click the appropriate link.

## *The Divine Movie Maker*

*For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted;  
Nor has He hidden His face from Him; But when He cried to Him, He heard.  
My praise shall be of You in the great assembly;"  
(Psalm 22:23-25).*

You've probably had those crazy moments in the middle of watching a movie. The scene is tense – filled with drama and danger. The characters are at risk. The dark music draws you in. The apprehension builds. Your palms are sweating and your pulse is elevated as you grip the armrests of your theater seat. The moment rivets your mind, body and soul. Suddenly the scene ends, often with the main characters surviving the immediate risk. The story ensues and you calm down, realizing – it's just a movie.

### **The Movie is Not Over**

Of course, life is not a movie – but it is filled with scenes that feel very traumatic and threatening at the moment. As a pastor for almost 30 years, I've sat, shared and prayed with many people caught in the middle of a situation of heartbreak, trauma, loss or fear. I've had my share of those scenes in my own story along the way.

The truth that brings great comfort in times like this is the reminder that the movie is not over yet. As bad as the present scene feels, it will pass and the story will unfold under the hand of our gracious and loving God. I am also reminded that even when

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we do not understand the movie, we know the Movie Maker – and He is good.

### **Feeling Forsaken but Clinging to His Faithfulness**

In a recent early Sunday morning prayer time, our group prayed from Psalm 22. This well-known Messianic Psalm reflects Jesus' agony on the cross – in many ways the most painful, cruel, unjust “scene” in history. The Psalm begins, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning? O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; And in the night season, and am not silent.” (Psalm 22:1-2). This reflects the real emotions of the Psalmist (and of the Savior in a prophetic sense) at that dreadful moment.

Yet, the next verses focus, not on the feeling of the present scene, but on the character of the “Movie Maker.”

**AS BAD AS THE PRESENT SCENE FEELS, IT WILL PASS AND THE STORY WILL UNFOLD UNDER THE HAND OF OUR GRACIOUS AND LOVING GOD.**

“But You are holy, enthroned in the praises of Israel. Our fathers trusted in You; They trusted, and You delivered them. They cried to You, and were delivered.”

The rest of Psalm 22 goes back and forth between the pain of the immediate scene and the greater reality of the character and promises of the Movie Maker. The last section of the Psalm is filled with praise, in spite of the excruciating pain of the moment. If you have a minute, read Psalm 22:22-31 and rejoice in the character of your Movie Maker. For example, we read, “You who fear the LORD, praise Him! All you descendants of Jacob, glorify Him, and fear Him, all you offspring of Israel! For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; Nor has He hidden His face from Him; But when He cried to Him, He heard. My praise shall be of You in the great assembly” (Psalm 22:23-25).

### **Our Moments – His Movie**

The New Testament also offers encouragement for those caught in a painful and confusing moment. Allow me to paraphrase some familiar verses for your encouragement.

When you fall into various trials, you can consider it all joy – knowing that your sovereign and caring Movie Maker is allowing this test in order to produce endurance. In the midst of your difficult scene, cry out in faith for His wisdom to persevere, and he will give it generously (James 1:2-6).

When you face spiritual failure and confusion, hold to the truth that the Movie Maker is faithful. He has called you into fellowship with Himself through Jesus, and will keep you strong until the end of the movie and present you blameless in His presence when it is over (I Corinthians 1:8-9).

When you are tempted, overwhelmed and despondent, cling to the faithfulness of the Movie Maker, who will give you strength to bear up under the burden and bring you out of it by His enabling grace (1 Corinthians 10:13).

When you waver and lose your confidence, the Movie Maker will give you endurance to do His will and will reward you according to His faithful promises (Hebrews 10:35-36).

### **Embracing the Greater Reality**

Today, you may be in the midst of a horrible scene in connection with your health, your job, your finances, your marriage, your family or even your internal thoughts and emotions. The scene is real. The struggle is genuine. Yet, the greater reality is that the movie is not over yet. Above the story line of your journey is a divine Movie Maker, and He can be trusted.

### *Losing Some to Gain More*

*“But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.”  
Philippians 3:7*

One of my favorite sermons as a young college student came from Philippians 3:7-8, where Paul wrote:

*“But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.”*

I spoke passionately about how we needed to count our plans, people, and possessions as “rubbish” compared to knowing Christ. I even had the audience write down the specific descriptions of things they valued, and then challenged them to bring that piece of paper forward to deposit the list in a trash can in front of the auditorium. I felt so inspired, and the sermon seemed to be truly effective.

Actually, my experience with the biblical text was very shallow. For any of us to say we have “suffered the loss of all things” is disingenuous in our prosperous American society where everything is about upward mobility and accumulation of more stuff. I was young at the time, with the promise of the world in front of me – so I knew very little about “loss.” How could I really understand the depth of this passage? I was sincere, but shallow in my efforts to embrace and teach this passage.

Our good and loving God has a way of making truth real in our lives in order to make us more mature and authentic in our faith. He has kindly helped me in this way, allowing me to understand a little more about “losses” and “gains” in my spiritual pilgrimage.

## TRANSFORMING TRUTHS FOR TROUBLED TIMES

### **Possessions, People, and Plans**

In 2007 our family has experienced some fresh losses as a direct result of our obedience to the call of God on our lives. Because of our commitment to pursue full-time ministry with Strategic Renewal, we left the security of the senior pastor role and followed the Lord's direction to launch out in faith. In the process, I had to give up my plans for the security and "success" of a megachurch pastor.

We eventually sold our home in Minnesota (after two long years of double mortgage payments). This was an answer to prayer. Along the way, we lost a lot of savings and all of our home equity. The reality of losing possessions for the sake of Christ is much more real during those days than it was in college.

Not long after that step, we lost the physical presence of all three of our children in our home as each one has followed the call of God to marriage, work, or school. This is a "gain" for each of them, and a blessing to Christ's kingdom, but the void parents feel is very real in such seasons. We learned to count even our children as "loss" for the sake of Christ and His purposes.

In a variety of other ways, our obedience to the call of God has involved loss of status, security, certainty, friendships, and even sleep. Of course, these losses are minuscule when contrasted with eternity's reward for obedient service. Compared to the painful "losses" others we know are experiencing right now, our sacrifice may seem trivial. I have friends who have lost a spouse, a career, all financial security, and even their health in recent days. Still, they love and serve Christ.

### **Trading Loss for Gain**

Having said all of this, I am not whining – but I am seeking a deeper level of worship. Sure, times of self-pity and carnal regret can surface. At those moments I am reminded that a man's life does not consist of the abundance of his possessions (Luke 12:15) and that we must be willing to leave all, take up our cross, and follow Christ if we are to be classified as a true disciple (Luke 14:26-27).

Clearly, the trade-in is worth it – even though it is not easy. It is good to remember that with every loss, we can gain:

- A deeper knowledge of Christ, who was unencumbered by the trappings of this world. This knowledge is truly priceless (Philippians 3:7-8, 10).
- A mature and biblical perspective about the things that really matter in this life (Philippians 3:8).
- A powerful sense of Christ-reliance rather than self-reliance, where we discover the sufficiency of His work on the cross and His righteous life in us (Philippians 3:9).
- A new experience of the power of His resurrection, which brings new life out of death – and ultimate gain from our losses (Philippians 3:10).
- A fresh infusion of grace, that works most powerfully when we are weak (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Our losses in life are God's way of prying our fingers off our comfortable idols in order to free our hands to more fully embrace Christ as our all in all.

### **The Positive Pathway of Price**

The challenge we face in today's world is that we can actually prefer the commonplace pathway of our easy idols. It is the "broad way" of our culture and a difficult thing to relinquish.

That is why we have to turn our eyes on Jesus – so that the things of earth might grow strangely dim. He is our model in all things. Even though He knew all the glories of Heaven and had authority over the riches of this world, He described His lifestyle as one where He did not even have a place to lay His head (Matthew 8:20). No single life has transformed this world more than His, but His impact was completely unrelated to His net worth. It was directly connected to His selfless sacrifice.

In Philippians 3:7-8, Paul shows us how he was walking in the pathway of Christ. Paul counted all reliance on formal learning, social status, and notable accomplishments as "rubbish" or "dung." The idea of "counting as loss" represents an accounting term and reflects a deliberate business transaction that rejects certain assets to gain something more valuable.

Although a brilliant, accomplished, and gifted leader in every respect, Paul always pursued the pathway of price. We read about the detailed losses he faced in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28. This list included a variety of dangers, life-threatening situations, and incredible traumas. This was all a testament of his resolve to be a "servant of Christ" – but in all of these situations, he received abundant grace and was laying up a sure reward in eternity.

Today, you may be facing loss. Consider the example of Paul. Turn your eyes on Jesus. Open your heart to the incalculable "gains" of knowing Christ. No matter what, keep living for the ultimate prize of a life that really matters.

### *Turning Negative Emotions into Positive Faith*

*"And without faith it is impossible to please Him . . ."*  
*Hebrews 11:6 (ESV)*

Each one of us on the human journey has experienced some degree of unpleasant and tormenting emotion. Maybe you are in the middle of a storm that has you reeling to find true north in your feelings and thoughts. Many of the great people in

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the Bible can relate. So can I.

Let's revisit Psalm 22. We know it as a "Messianic Psalm" because it echoes the very words and experiences of Jesus during the darkest moment in human history. He hung on the cross in agony and utter rejection, bearing the full weight of His Father's wrath against our sin. He cried, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

Yet, the Psalm was also written as an expression of the real-life distresses of David. We read of his genuine battle to keep faith and embrace hope while grappling with deep anguish and pain. The focus of the Psalm bounces back and forth from descriptions of David's misery to declarations of God's character and ways. This is clear when you see him interrupting his emotional struggle with the repeated declaration of faith, "Yet You, God, are . . ." (vv. 3, 9 & 19). His emotions swing repeatedly from his real feelings of pain to his faith in his God.

### **Our Struggle Through Feelings to Embrace Faith**

In so many ways, this is a picture of our own struggle to survive and endure the trials of our lives. The battle is not just daily – it is moment by moment. Observe this basic outline of the Psalm that I composed as I have meditated on it in recent days:

- FEELINGS: The agony of feeling utterly forsaken – vv. 1-2
- FAITH: The truth of God as the holy, reigning God in whom his fathers trusted – vv. 3-5
- FEELINGS: The pain of repeated rejection and ridicule – vv. 6-8
- FAITH: The truth of God's care and presence in his life since birth – vv. 9-11
- FEELINGS: The torment of being threatened and attacked by evil – vv. 12-18
- FAITH: The truth of God's present help and deliverance – vv. 19-21

### **A Breakthrough Perspective**

It seems that a breakthrough occurs between verses 21-22. The remainder of the Psalm reflects a restoration of perspective and hope. Here is how it unfolds:

- LOOKING OUTWARD: Enlisting others to praise the Lord for His saving help – vv. 22-24
- LOOKING UPWARD: Receiving grace for continued praise, obedience, and satisfaction from God – vv. 25-26
- LOOKING FORWARD: Declaring God's ultimate victory and the eternal worship of His glorious name – vv. 27-31

Of course, if we go back to the Messianic relevance of the Psalm, we know it is only through the suffering and finished work of Christ in death and resurrection that we

can have such a powerful perspective of victory and hope as seen in verses 22-31. Praise God for the indescribable gift of Christ and His salvation.

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OF PERSPECTIVE IS OPTIONAL.**

**Our Choices Today**

All of this brings us to the fact of human suffering and the basic set of choices we face every day. Pain, disappointment, fear, and trouble are inevitable in this life. A positive breakthrough of perspective is optional. I have learned – and have to re-learn every day – that in the midst of trials I must make a choice:

- Will I believe what I feel, trusting my emotions in the midst of the storm?
- Will I believe what I see, settling for the temporal problems that surround me?
- Will I believe what I know to be true about God, keeping my eyes on the eternal reality of who He is and what He will accomplish?

Today, your life may be painful – but God is still holy and faithful. Things may seem out of control – but God is sovereign and wise. The situation you face may feel very unfair – but God is just and righteous in all His ways. Things may appear to be very bad – but God is good and compassionate. You may feel all alone – but God is ever-present and able to comfort your heart. The horizon may seem dark and hopeless – but God is glorious and victorious.

Our emotions are very real, and sometimes troubling. Yet, as David demonstrated in this Psalm, we must keep subjecting what we feel to what we know to be true in order to experience a positive breakthrough in perspective. Jesus also understands our pain and agony. He went from the cruelty of a cross to the darkness of a grave to the glories of Heaven. He lives today, making intercession for us and sympathizing with our weaknesses. He can give us grace to manage our emotions and live in dynamic faith today. Yes, it is a battle – but it is a battle that has been won, and can be won, through Christ.

# *Transforming Truths for Tough Relationships*

## *A Sensible Forgiveness*

*“But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”*  
*Mark 11:26*

I am convinced that a primary strategy of the enemy is to destroy Christian relationships and specifically encourage a spirit of unforgiveness. Twice the New Testament speaks of this as the primary area where our spiritual enemy gains advantage over Christians. In speaking of the dangers of unresolved anger and coddled bitterness, Paul warns us not to give a foothold to the devil in our lives (Ephesians 4:16-31). In speaking of the need for forgiveness, Paul also warns that we cannot let the devil take advantage of us (2 Corinthians 2:11).

### **The Importance of Forgiveness**

We know how important forgiveness is because we realize how many people truly need to experience forgiveness in this life. Ernest Hemingway writes about a Spanish father who decided to reconcile with his son who had run away to Madrid.<sup>9</sup> In an attempt to locate his son, the father took out an ad in the El Liberal newspaper: “PACO, MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY. ALL IS FORGIVEN, PAPA.” Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father went to the square, he found 800 young men named Paco waiting for their fathers.

We know that forgiveness is commanded, even “seventy times seven” times (Matthew 18:21-22). Forgiveness is essential to our commitment to be like Christ. We are required to extend forgiveness if we are to enjoy the full experience of forgiveness with our Heavenly Father (Mark 11:26).

### **The Sensibility of Forgiveness**

Of course, because God is wise and His ways are always good, forgiveness also makes sense. It leads to a sensible freedom, a sensible fellowship, and a sensible future.

### **A Sensible Freedom**

When we forgive, we enjoy a practical freedom. It's been said that, "Forgiveness doesn't make the other person right, it makes you free." Unforgiveness is a "control mechanism" whereby we try to exercise some kind of emotional jurisdiction and power over the situation and the other person.

When we forgive, we become free of all the exhausting attempts to manage the situation in our flesh. We are free to trust God for the outcome.

As author Phil Ryken<sup>10</sup> has written, "Forgiveness brings great joy, not only to the forgiven, but especially to the forgiver. The Greek term for 'forgiveness' (aphiemi) comes from a word that means 'to let go.'" Forgiveness is a release, a letting go of self-destructive feelings such as anger, bitterness, and revenge.

All of us experience pain in life. We can be deeply hurt by abandonment, criticism, lies, slander, abusive words, and disappointed expectations. Pain is inevitable. Bitter misery is optional. When we know that God gives us the grace to forgive and be forgiven, but refuse to make that choice, we live in unnecessary, self-inflicted pain. That makes no sense.

### **A Sensible Fellowship**

God created us with a deep need for intimacy with Himself and others. Forgiveness opens up the supply line of indescribable blessing both in our relationships with God and with other people. Often, the very person toward whom we are angry or bitter is one from whom we need to receive love, affirmation, and grace.

Unforgiveness keeps us from enjoying the benefits of this relationship. It is like a person who intentionally starves himself to death while a table full of delicious and nutritious food is within reach.

A failure to forgive soon turns into bitterness, which in time also defiles and wounds many other people (Hebrews 12:15). No rational, loving person would detonate a hand grenade at a gathering of friends and family. Yet an unforgiving spirit has that very effect spiritually, emotionally, and relationally on anyone close to an embittered person.

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I've heard it said that unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. Not only does anger and bitterness eventually kill us emotionally, it negatively impacts our very ability to relate to others in a healthy way. In a world where we all need the support, grace, counsel, and love of other believers, forgiveness makes a lot of sense.

### **A Sensible Future**

God's forgiveness has unleashed a real and abiding hope in our lives. Forgiveness always brings hope to troubled relationships. Conversely, unforgiveness kills hope. An embittered heart sees only the worst in others, in themselves, in situations, and in the future. This pessimism is in opposition to the truth about God and His plan for our lives.

A life that chooses forgiveness, extends blessing, and pursues peace is a life that will be richly rewarded by Christ. The person living this kind of life has been a careful and thoughtful steward of God's grace. It just makes sense to live this way.

### **Forgiven Much to Forgive Much**

In Luke 7:47, Jesus explained that when we are forgiven much, we love much. The great English preacher Martin Lloyd-Jones said, "Whenever I see myself before God and realize something of what my blessed Lord has done for me at Calvary, I am ready to forgive anybody anything. I cannot withhold it. I do not even want to withhold it."<sup>11</sup>

Ken Sande, in his book *The Peacemaker*, writes, "We take God's forgiveness for granted when we stubbornly withhold our forgiveness from others. In effect, we behave as though others' sins against us are more serious than our sins against God."<sup>12</sup>

When the power of the Gospel has made sense to us – forgiveness makes sense. It is the good and right thing to do.

Henry Ward Beecher stated that, "Every man should keep a fair-sized cemetery in which to bury the faults of his friends."<sup>13</sup> It is God's will that our cemetery of forgetfulness grows as our commitment to truly and completely forgive increases. The devil hates it when we truly understand these things. But, it just makes sense.

### **The Eagle, the Weasel and the Need to Let Go**

Recently a friend shared a remarkable story that delivered an insightful lesson. It was told to him by his friend. Let's call the story-teller "Jay."

One day while enjoying the great outdoors, Jay witnessed an eagle as it swooped down suddenly and then immediately rose into the sky with an unsuspecting prey in its talons. Suddenly, the eagle fell from the sky, thrashing about as it sped toward the

ground. Curious about what he had seen, Jay hiked to the spot where the eagle landed.

Coming upon the scene, he discovered the eagle dead, with its chest ripped open. Locked in his talons was a weasel that decided to fight back. Using its sharp teeth and claws, the weasel attacked its captor. Both fell to their death.

In commenting about the scene, Jay said, “Stupid eagle. Why didn’t it just let go of the weasel?” In response to Jay’s account, my friend said to him, “Jay you are the eagle.” Jay had been struggling for many months with bitterness over a family break-up. The story served as a riveting reminder of the foolishness of holding on to disappointment, conflict and anger.

Yes, forgiveness is sensible. May God give us grace to come to our senses on a daily basis and live in the freedom of His forgiveness in every relationship.

## *The Value of Suffering in Relationships*

*“The fruit of the Spirit is . . . longsuffering”*  
Galatians 5:22

Many years ago, I sat with a friend and highly respected marriage counselor. As he spoke about the many couples he had worked with over the years, he made a statement I will never forget. He said, “The problem with American Christianity is that we have no theology of suffering.”

Many marriages and friendships end because one or both parties are unwilling to endure suffering. In our self-centered, consumer-driven culture, we tend to view relationships like a convenience store, which exist to meet our needs and improve our lot in life.

From a biblical standpoint, relationships are indeed vital to a wholesome existence and the fulfillment of God’s purposes for our lives. However, they are also one of God’s primary character development tools. Over the long haul, relationships bring incredible joy – but they can also be an avenue of necessary suffering. Both sides of the coin are essential.

One of the keys to healthy, enduring relationships is the quality of “longsuffering.” This biblical idea is not popular in today’s world, as we tend to turn away from anything that involves intentional pain. Yet the power of this quality in our lives is profound and essential in every lasting relationship.

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### **Definition and Source**

The original Hebrew word for longsuffering means “long of breathing” and is the opposite of anger (“short of breathing” or “violent breathing”). In the New Testament, the idea involves a person who is “long of soul” and indicates bearing long with people. One definition I like defines the word as “refusing to give up hope in a relationship.” One synonym for longsuffering is “fortitude.”

It is often translated “patience.” Of the two Greek words used for “patience” in the New Testament, one refers to patience with people and the other speaks of patience with circumstances. Longsuffering is the first term and is vital in dealing with others. God is the author and ultimate example of longsuffering. Numbers 14:18 states, “The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression.” Psalm 86:15 affirms, “But You, O Lord, are a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth.”

Of course, God is the source of our ability to experience and express longsuffering. Our very salvation is an expression of His longsuffering. Romans 2:4 tells us, “Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?” His longsuffering heart towards us motivates us to repent and pursue intimacy with such a wonderful God.

As believers,  
we can  
expect that  
His Spirit in  
us will

### **GOD IS THE AUTHOR AND ULTIMATE EXAMPLE OF LONGSUFFERING.**

manifest longsuffering. Galatians 5:22 tells us that one of the fruits of the Spirit is long-suffering. Colossians 1:11 promises that God will strengthen us “with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy.” When friends get on our nerves, children let us down, spouses become difficult, and work associates stab us in the back for the tenth time – His longsuffering heart can control our attitudes and actions if we yield to His power.

### **Four Keys to Practicing Longsuffering**

In considering the value and practice of longsuffering, here are four specific points of advice:

#### **Refuse to give up positive hope**

As long as God’s character of longsuffering does not change (and it never will) and as long as His Spirit lives in our hearts (and we are “sealed” in this assurance), we can believe that God is able to impart all we need for the positive progress of a relationship. He is able to change hearts and lives. We should always let Him start with our own – then trust Him to do the same for others.

### **Resolve to speak helpful truth**

In his book *The Last Lecture*, author Randy Pausch states, “When you’re messing up and no one says anything to you that means they’ve given up on you.” A longsuffering heart is willing to “speak the truth in love” even when it involves temporarily risking one’s standing with that person. This enduring commitment to the highest good of another person compels us to give him or her helpful, honest input even when it hurts. To do otherwise is to give up on that person. A longsuffering person doesn’t make that choice.

### **Resist giving in to negative emotion**

It’s been said, “Emotions have no brains.” Longsuffering is violated when we allow our emotions to rush beyond the controlling power of the Holy Spirit. Our thoughts become irrational and our words unloving. We react in ways that we later regret. As the definition suggests, longsuffering involves being “long of breath,” which implies a steady, measured response as compared to a hotheaded impulse.

### **Remember character over convenience**

Relationships are not a disposable convenience. They are a gift from God that must be treasured and embraced, even when it seems difficult and painful. A convenient life is seldom a life of deep character. It is in the fire that we are refined and made strong. Sometimes this refinement involves a demanding marriage, a rebellious child, an unreasonable boss, or a less-than-perfect fellow Christian. These relationships may not be easy – but they are worth it, because God uses them to make us more like Jesus.

English historian and novelist Arthur Helps said, “Strength is born in the deep silence of longsuffering hearts; not amid joy.”<sup>5</sup> We all love the joyful highs that come with our relationships. This, too, is a gift from God. But if you are in the midst of a hard time in a relationship, be assured that God is pouring strength into your soul and that He will be sufficient in this season – as you learn the value of Christ-honoring and Christ-empowered longsuffering.

## *A Gentle Spirit*

*“Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me,  
for I am gentle and lowly in heart,  
and you will find rest for your souls.”  
(Matthew 11:29)*

Recently I was engaged in a conversation with a group of brothers who were discussing a meeting they had all just attended. Brother “A” asked if the others felt he had been too forceful in injecting his opinions. Brother “B” responded, “Not at all. You

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are a gentle spirit.” I know brother “A” well enough to know that he was a bit surprised. I know him as a very type “A” driver with strong opinions and a dominant personality. I suppose he was not sure what to think about being called a “gentle” spirit. Maybe he is just getting soft as he gets older. Maybe he was just having a low-key day. Perhaps he is becoming more Christlike, in spite of his natural personality.

In our culture of dog-eat-dog work ethics and assertiveness training in most realms of business, gentleness is just not esteemed as an important ingredient for leadership and effectiveness. However, the Bible is clear about the virtue of gentleness.

### **Who Needs to Be Gentle?**

The Lord Jesus spoke of His gentle character when he said, “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:29). The great Apostle Paul described his leadership with these words, “But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children” (1 Thessalonians 2:7). Describing the qualifications for all church leaders, Paul said that they must be “gentle” (1 Timothy 3:3). Later, in the same epistle, he wrote that a man of God must pursue gentleness (1 Timothy 6:11). Then he noted that a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be “gentle to all” (2 Timothy 2:24).

Galatians 5:23 lists gentleness as a fruit of the Holy Spirit’s control in our lives. When we are restoring a sinning fellow-believer we are to do it in a “spirit of gentleness.” Ephesians 4:2 commands us to relate to one another with all gentleness. Philippians 4:5 says that our gentleness should be evident to all men.

### **What is Gentleness?**

So what is this often ignored character quality of gentleness? Greek scholar W.E. Vine describes it as an internal “grace of the soul; and the exercises of it are first and chiefly towards God. It is that temper of spirit in which we accept His dealings with us as good, and therefore without disputing or resisting.” It is virtually synonymous with the quality of “meekness” – which is not to be confused with “weakness” but is rather a disciplined strength. As Vine states, this quality “manifested by the Lord and commended to the believer is the fruit of power. . .the Lord was 'meek' because he

## **REAL GENTLENESS IS THE MARK OF A SECURE AND SELF-LESS HEART, RULED BY THE CHARACTER OF JESUS CHRIST.**

had the infinite resources of God at His command.” Finally, he says that biblical gentleness is “neither elated nor cast down, simply because it is not occupied with self

at all." It seems that real gentleness is the mark of a secure and self-less heart, ruled by the character of Jesus Christ.

### **The Competitive Alternative**

In contrast to this quality of gentleness, I remember asking a friend about the new pastor of his church. His first response was, "I like him. He is a real competitor. I've played basketball with him several times, He's aggressive and has a temper." I grew up playing competitive sports and still enjoy them. However, to hear this ideal described as a primary trait of a Christian leader gave me cause for a reconsideration of the Biblical standards of leadership.

Granted, the New Testament does talk about us being in a contest – an intense war. The Apostle Paul used athletic and military terms to describe the Christian life and spiritual leadership. He taught that we are in competition with a spiritual enemy over the eternal destiny of souls. There is a place for "righteous indignation" toward sin and the dishonoring of God's word and character, like the scene of Christ casting moneychangers out of the Temple.

Yet, the idea of being a "competitor" so we can gratify our ego with a win over some inferior human is far removed from New Testament leadership. Intimidation through anger in order to assert our will in some selfish battle of personalities is not affirmed in Scripture. At the root of this drive is pride, often fueled by insecurity.

C.S. Lewis wrote in his book, *Mere Christianity*: "Pride...is competitive by its very nature...Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others...Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone."

### **The Balance**

There is a fine line between striving for excellence and competitive pride — just as there may be a fine line between gentleness and weakness. But there is a wide divide between a gentle spirit and a competitive spirit in our spiritual journey. One is the fruit of security and selflessness while the other is evidence self-absorption and pride.

The bottom line is that we must live from the strength and security that is only found in Christ. We must lead like Paul. We must love with a Spirit-produced gentleness. The promises for this kind of character are clear. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). The praise of Psalm 18:35 should be our declaration, "You have also given me the shield of Your salvation; Your right hand has held me up, Your gentleness has made me great."

## *Living in your Own Lane*

*“He who passes by and meddles in a quarrel not his own  
is like one who takes a dog by the ears.”*

*Proverbs 26:17*

I was a sprinter in junior and senior high school. One of the core rules of track is that a runner must stay in his own lane. Lanes are helpful in defining an exact path and distance for each run. In the longer sprints, they ensure an equal distance as runners round the track. They also ensure safety by preventing trips and tangles that occur when competitors get too close to one another. If you step out of your lane, you are disqualified from the race no matter how fast you may have run. I know. I did it once.

### **Our Assigned Race**

In life and ministry, it is also essential that we learn to stay in our own lane. Paul referred to this idea in 2 Corinthians 10:13-16 to confront the false teachers infiltrating the church. They instigated the confusion by comparing their “lanes” with others. Paul then explains that they had stepped “out of their lane” in trying to exert spiritual authority in the church that Paul had planted and nurtured. He wrote, “We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the limits of the sphere which God appointed us — a sphere which especially includes you.” He went on to talk in more detail about the “measure” and “sphere” of his ministry, which gave him spiritual responsibility for the Corinthians.

These are interesting words. The Greek word for “measure” (metron) is the idea of a determined and limited standard or a measuring stick. The word “sphere” (kanon) refers to a rule, boundary, or realm of activity. Paul often illustrated his calling and the Christian life as a race. These are words typically used in the athletic events of the day. Paul’s reference to his divinely ordained realms of ministry remind us that we have specific assignments from the Lord and should pay attention to our race, not intrude in someone else’s lane.

In modern vernacular, we speak of “sticking our nose” in someone else’s business. We are familiar with the concept of meddling in another person’s life. Perhaps you have witnessed the confusion and conflict of what happens when get caught up in unnecessary and curious comparison, giving ear to gossip or simply trying to control another person’s “lane” in life.

### **Three Keys to a Good Race and a Focused Life**

Here are three ideas that will help you run responsibly in your own lane and avoid the problems that come when you stray from the race God has given specifically to you.

### **Understand Your Lane**

At the outset of a race, runners are assigned their lanes. Winners focus all their energies on running well within that lane with their eyes on the finish line. We all have clear God-given roles. It may be as a spouse, parent, employee or worker in ministry. It is important for each of us to accept these roles, understanding our clear biblical responsibility, then embrace that calling each day with a whole heart and a focus on the one who called us – and who will wait for us at the finish line to reward us for the faith and passion with which we ran OUR race.

### **Guard Your Investigations**

Another key rule of the race is to not look around or glance back at the other runners. Sometimes our assignments seem difficult or mundane. We find interest in someone else's "lane" or decide we do not like the way they are running their race. It's been said, "Curiosity killed the cat." Distraction and inappropriate curiosity can also impede personal effectiveness in running your race and damage interpersonal harmony on the "track" of family and ministry life. Proverbs 4:25-27 affirms this idea, "Let your eyes look straight ahead, and your eyelids look right before you. Ponder the path of your feet, and let all your ways be established. Do not turn to the right or the left." Proverbs 26:17 offers this wisdom, "He who passes by and meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a dog by the ears."

If we get too involved in another runner's lane, we can soon find ourselves playing control games in matters that really are not our business at all. Pretty soon the deacon is telling the pastor how to do his job, the employee is trying to run the department across the hall and the dad is trying to tell the daughter-in-law how to raise her children. Conflict and confusion erupt. Before long, it is hard for anyone to run their own race.

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### **Run Your Own Race**

No runner gets the credit or the embarrassment of another competitor's time. Some-day when we see Christ, we will give an account first and foremost for our own lives. Christ will not ask us why we did not run like someone else or finish in the same way they did. As 2 Corinthians 5:10 underscores, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." Like Paul, each of us must "press on for the prize of the call of the high call of God in Christ Jesus," ready to give an account of our own race.

### **Facing the Judge at the Finishing Line**

Perhaps these ideas were crucial in Paul's final words of testimony found in the last letter wrote. He stated, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have

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kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:6-8). Clearly, at the end of the race, each of us will give an account to the righteous Judge for how we ran. We should live for that moment with a genuine love for the Lord who waits for us in eternity. I am sure you want to hear His words, “Well done – and well run” as a result of finding your lane and running with focus and passion. I know I do. So let’s run with endurance the race set before us – keeping our eyes on Jesus the Author and Finisher of our faith. I’ll see you at the finish line.

**SPECIAL FEATURE:**  
*Your Relational  
Game Changer*

Adapted from:  
The Prayer God Loves to Answer: Accessing Christ's Wisdom  
for Your Greatest Needs – By Daniel Henderson

*Relationships are the atmosphere we need in order to survive.  
Infants who are not held fail to thrive, life-long partners die  
within months of each other, and loneliness is the greatest cause of  
suicide. The religion of Jesus was relationship, not rules, because  
that is what we need to survive.*

**Mark Baker, Ph. D**

*As Christians we should be studying and modeling our lives and  
the life of the church on Jesus' relationships – with the Father and  
the Holy Spirit within the Trinity; with his followers, disciples  
and fiends; with the crowds, the poor, the marginalized and the  
disabled; with men, women and children; with his opponents  
and enemies, politicians and religious leaders; with his own  
fellow Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles . . . Jesus' relationships are  
an essential element in his calling. This was to reveal the nature  
of God and to be the model for the life of the church as a body  
and for each one of us individually as his followers.*

**Martin Goldsmith**

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We've all known highly successful and quite impressive people who have excelled in their professional pursuits but failed miserably in relationships. Without using names to expose the guilty, I think of:

- A wealthy businessman who knew how to run a company and achieved great financial success but destroyed his marriage and was despised by his children.
- A life-long pastor, skilled preacher and astute theologian who dishonored his wife and alienated his children.
- A community activist mom who helped organize school programs, drove her children to excel and was a go-to person for projects in the church but cheated on her husband.

I am guessing you have known these people too, plus a dozen more just like them. Although the names and locations vary, the behaviors are all too common.

Were these people wise? Well, yes – and no. They utilized knowledge and skill in order to accomplish something. They definitely demonstrate some of the qualities we often recognize as practical acumen and even found, to some degree, in the Book of Proverbs. However, from a New Testament standpoint, these high achievers were fools. Foolish people annihilate relationships on the altar of accomplishment.

An annual survey revealed recently that nearly 41 percent of Americans said they didn't take a single vacation day during the previous calendar year, almost exactly the same number as the previous year. According to the survey, almost 17 percent said they took less than 5 vacation days. Whatever this reveals about us, it is clear that many of us are so obsessed with the idea of "human doings" we may have forgotten how to be "human beings." As one mentor of mine used to say, "busyness destroys relationships."

### **Your Paramount Needs**

So as we jump all-in with the importance of wisdom in life, let me ask, "What are your greatest needs in this earthly journey?" Have you seriously pondered this question lately?

As a pastor for over 30 years, I have encountered sincere believers who have not given a lot of thought to this query. I've also known many whose answers were superficial and unsatisfying.

Distinguished author and Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote, "No one ever said on their deathbed 'I wish I'd spent more time at the office.'" The notoriety of this statement stirs something within us.

Let's be honest. No mother comes to the end of her life wishing she had organized

### **FOOLISH PEOPLE ANNIHILATE RELATIONSHIPS ON THE ALTAR OF ACCOMPLISHMENT.**

just one more cupboard. She does long for her children to be assured of her abiding love. No businessman desires to have his portfolios neatly stacked next to his deathbed as he takes his final breath. He does desire to be surrounded by caring, grateful family and friends. No wife comes to the end of the journey regretting that she had not acquired more decorating ideas from the DIY Network. She does hope to feel the warm embrace of a loving husband. No doctor takes his last breath obsessed with disappointment that he did not write just one more article for that medical journal. Rather, he longs to remember the faces of patients whose lives were changed by his attentive care. No Christian steps across the threshold to eternity regretful that she did not sign another petition protesting a liberal government. She does rejoice in the lives that came to Christ and will join her in heaven because of her personal influence for the Gospel.

So, I ask again, “What are your most profound needs in this earthly journey?” Instinctively we know that there is something beyond the noise of a society that allures us to pursue temporary notoriety, artificial accomplishments, shallow social media connections and the accumulation of more stuff.

But note: Our creator’s supreme commands for our lives are simple, pure, pointed. They stand out in the owner’s manual of scripture like Shaquille O’Neill at a family reunion of little people. They resound unmistakably: Love God. Love Others (Matthew 22:37-40). These are the highest and best prescriptions for a meaningful life. Because God knows our core longings and desires our highest good, He calls us to pursue loving, meaningful relationships with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

So I propose that your deepest needs are relational. When we reflect on the purpose of life, we are not compelled toward a greater sense of professional accomplishment but awakened to meaningful satisfaction with authentic relationships.

That is where wisdom intersects our path with supernatural force. New Testament wisdom is more than a set of pithy sayings to help us climb just a little higher on the ladder of secular achievement. I say it again, New Testament wisdom Jesus Christ – embraced, experienced, exemplified and exalted in our lives and relationships.

#### **Wisdom = Authentic Relationships**

Recently, I’ve been struck with an amazing truth, like a lightening burst of insight in the

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## TRANSFORMING TRUTHS FOR TROUBLED TIMES

dimness of a summer evening in Colorado. Here it is: New Testament wisdom always excels in authentic relationships. You could say that the acid test of real Gospel wisdom is the quality and godliness of interpersonal relations.

In fact, as I have been on this discovery, I was astounded by the parallels between four of the great “lists” of Gospel behavior. These passages are all familiar and famous to most, but each is primarily relational and they all have similarities. They are:

- The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:2-12)
- The Marks of Genuine Love (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a)
- The Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23)
- The Wisdom from Above (James 3:17-18)

When you understand the power of truly wise relationships it will bring life-changing empowerment to your marriage, your parenting, your friendships, your work interactions, your interface with non-believers and the future trajectory of your life.

In all probability, your traditional understanding of wisdom might be assisting you in spending more time, productive time, successful time at the office – or other tasks of choice. But the greater need is for insight and assurance that will eventually bring you to the final chapter of your life with a higher accomplishment – relationships that honored Christ and made the journey truly rewarding.

Gospel wisdom is not just about making good decisions concerning a future course. It is more about making the best decisions on how to love your wife, respect your husband, nurture your children and honor your parents. New Testament wisdom is not just about finding the right strategy to achieve a profitable outcome. Rather, it is about finding the best way to reflect Christ’s character as you esteem your friends, serve your neighbors, pray for your church leaders and inspire your work associates with the example of a godly – and relational – life. Why do I conclude this? Let’s visit some islands of New Testament truth and see.

### **The “Logos” of God’s Love**

The Apostle John helps us understand God’s plan for revealing His wisdom to us in Christ, even before creation, and in our lives today. This account of the Gospel starts off:

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men”*  
*(John 1:1-4).*

The eternal “Word” who created the world and came as Savior of mankind is identified here with the Greek term “logos.” Many insightful, and quite complicated theories exist concerning the background of this word, and John’s choice of it. However, the experts agree that that in essence this word demonstrates that Christ is the

personification and ultimate representation of the character and wisdom of God.

Not only did Christ preexist the creation of this world (as God) but John also says, “the Word was with God.” That is not just the idea of hanging out passively in the same space. It means “perfect fellowship. . .equality and intimacy, face to face with each other.” So this ultimate divine wisdom personified in Christ did not just exist in a vacuum but in a perfect coequal, loving, harmonious relationship with the Father.

***GOSPEL WISDOM IS NOT JUST ABOUT MAKING GOOD DECISIONS CONCERNING A FUTURE COURSE. IT IS MORE ABOUT MAKING THE BEST DECISIONS ON HOW TO LOVE YOUR WIFE, RESPECT YOUR HUSBAND, NURTURE YOUR CHILDREN AND HONOR YOUR PARENTS.***

As one writer explained, “If it was this same Word, and no other, who was Himself God, and who, from all eternity, was in active communion with God, then the statement follows naturally that all things were created through Him, thus bringing the essential nature of the Word and His manifestation in creation into connection.

As the idea of the Word involves knowledge and will, wisdom and force, the creative function is properly His. Hence His close relation to created things, especially to man, prepares the way for His incarnation and redeeming work.” Interpretation: Christ revealed his perfect, divine, eternal and relational wisdom by demonstrating his love for sinful mankind in order to bring them back to Himself in saving, transforming relationship.

Throughout John’s account of Christ, whose “life was the light of men,” we see our Lord reconciling to Himself those lost in the darkness of sin. No better summary exists concerning the purpose of Christ as the personification of God’s wisdom than this: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

### **The Wise Young Relater**

In this book, most of our applications of Christ’s wisdom to our daily life and interactions will draw from all we know of his three-year public ministry and the teachings about his life and work in the epistles. However, his wisdom-filled relational model is seen even in his growing up years. While the accounts are scant, they are important as we think about his example. As one writer has said, we would do well in “going to the records of his life and painting his portrait with the colors they supply.” The “colors” of his childhood create an early portrayal of wisdom.

One of the summary glimpses we have of his growing-up years tells us, “And the

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child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40). A few verses later in this narrative, Jesus journeys to Jerusalem with his parents and somehow gets left behind but is enthusiastically embedded in an environment he loves.

“After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when his parents saw him, they were astonished.” (Luke 2:46–47)

As Joseph and Mary’s anxiety and amazement subsides, they return to the routines of life, prompting Luke to underscore some realities about Jesus and his home, “And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.” (Luke 2:51-52)

Writer Michael Green notes, “Jesus lived and pleased God as a child and a young man relating to his parents, brothers and sisters in the home, while engaged in an ordinary working life. . .He grew in favor with those who knew him in the village, people who knew him as the eldest son of Joseph and Mary, as well as with God.” He related in the day-to-day business of being the son of a carpenter for three decades.

While his family often misunderstood his earthly ministry, we see his relational intentionality as he endured final moments on the cross but still cared for his mother’s needs in committing her to the care of his treasured friend John (John 19:26-27). Eventually his brother James would believe and provide leadership for Christ’s mission (1 Corinthians 15: 7, Galatians 1:19). Of course, as we will see, this same brother would write the Book of James, teaching convincingly on the attributes of godly wisdom (James 3:17-18).

I’ve often heard it said that “if it doesn’t work at home, don’t export it.” Wisdom-guided relationships worked at home for decades. Eventually, Jesus would export it via his public ministry and finished work on the cross. We are in the faith today because he did.

### **Relational Teacher**

Our all-wise Jesus demonstrated the ultimate impact of biblical wisdom in the quality of his relationships. We see it throughout his ministry in caring for the outcasts, the diseased, the bereaved, the disregarded, the broken, the ignorant and the lost. Volumes have been written about the model of his life.

Of course, the bulk of his relational efforts were invested

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in his closest disciples. John 13:1 introduces the scene of Jesus as he gathers one final time with his disciples to celebrate the Passover, using this descriptor, “Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” The literal meaning indicates that he loved them “to the uttermost” or to the ultimate limits of love. This commitment was reflected in his heartfelt words to them as they gathered, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12-13). They were to respond by loving one another after his example. They would also eventually give their very lives for him and his life-changing gospel message but not before they had turned the world upside down (Acts 16:7) with the wisdom of his gospel of love and truth.

### **The Corinthian Call**

The application of Jesus’ wisdom to relationships also resonates in the letters of the Apostle Paul. In First Corinthians the Holy Spirit inspired the Paul to spend extensive amounts of effort describing the difference between the superficiality and insufficiency of the wisdom of the world in contrast to the wisdom that comes through Christ and the message of his cross. The theme of wisdom (both worldly and divine) is mentioned in the first two chapters no less than 19 times.

But, what prompted this flurry of wisdom-oriented teaching? What was Paul’s concern? Put simply, he was addressing a relationally broken church that was manifesting the negative effects that occur when believers operated on anything other than Gospel wisdom.

The springboard into his wisdom mini-sermon was this concern: “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10). At the end of his wisdom descriptions, he again reiterates, “But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. . .for while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?” (1 Corinthians 3:1, 3).

The context of Paul presenting Christ as our wisdom was to correct relational breakdown that had resulted from a reliance on the world’s way to thinking and relating. New Testament wisdom, if it has any application at all (which it does in paramount ways), must have ultimate relevance to how we relate to one another.

### **The Colossian Connection**

Another landmark declaration of Christ as the essence of wisdom is found in Colossians. Again, Christ is the one in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3). Based on this reality, Paul prayed that the believers in Colossae would be “filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and

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understanding” (1:9). Why did he pray this? The text explains, “So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (1:10).

What was the goal of this spiritual wisdom? The knowledge of more theological facts? Information for creating better Bible maps? Moral principles for getting ahead in life? No, those are good things, but the goal was a deeper RELATIONSHIP with the Lord that produced the fruit of an authentic, abiding life. As the theologian J.I. Packer explained, “The kind of wisdom that God waits to give to those who ask Him, is a wisdom that will bind us to Himself, a wisdom that will find expression in a spirit of faith and life of faithfulness.” The first goal of New Testament wisdom is that we would know Christ.

In the next chapter, Paul continues in his struggle on behalf of the Colossians as he prays for them (2:1). His goal in this exertion is that “their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love” (2:2). Again, his prayer is prompted by a relational concern for these believers – mutual encouragement and a loving, close interrelation to one another in Christ. This concern was rooted in strong assurance that they would “reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3).

To make the point again, this focus on the sufficient wisdom of Christ would ultimately be applied – not to some church building program, the solving of a complex problem, the charting of new ministry strategy – but in vital and growing relationship with Christ and one another as they encountered the onslaught of the false wisdom of their day.

### A Brother's Concern

We see the qualities of Christ in James' description of the “wisdom from above” in James 3:17-18. But in quick summary, we should note that James (the half-brother of Christ) had a primary concern for the relationship struggles that existed among the believers to whom he wrote. Specifically, he confronted them about:

- Anger (1:19-20)
- Prejudice and partiality (2:2-13)
- A lack of compassion for the needy (1:27, 2:14-17, 5:1-6)
- Unbridled tongues and relationally destructive speech (1:26, 3:1-12, 4:11-12)
- Jealousy, selfish-ambition and relational disorder (3: 14-16)
- Interpersonal quarrels and fights (4:1-2)

What did they require in order to remedy these relational woes? Not another self-help book about better communication. Not more savvy negotiation skills. Not a seminar on anger management. They needed “wisdom from above” (3:17-18) and were compelled to ask God for this wisdom with the assurance that He was generous in

giving it to them (1:5).

Again, the New Testament understanding of wisdom is all about genuine, transformed, Christ-honoring relationships. If we think we are wise, but our relationships are not authentic and Christ-worthy, then we have misunderstood the wisdom that is available and expected in the message of the Gospel.

### **Misrepresenting the Mission**

But more is on the line than simply our ability to hold hands, get along and sing songs about the love of God. As representatives of Christ we are on mission. We are the expression of his life on this earth. The local church is the agency for proclaiming this relationally powerful wisdom of the Gospel.

In his classic book, *The Mark of the Christian*, the late Francis Schaeffer reminded us of the relational core of our mission as he quoted these words of Jesus: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

### **IF WE THINK WE ARE WISE, BUT OUR RELATIONSHIPS ARE NOT AUTHENTIC AND CHRIST-WORTHY, THEN WE HAVE MISUNDERSTOOD THE WISDOM THAT IS AVAILABLE AND EXPECTED IN THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL.**

Schaeffer convincingly points out “This passage reveals the mark that Jesus gives to label a Christian not just in one era or in one locality but at all times and in all places until Jesus returns.” He drills the point home noting, “Upon his authority Jesus gives the world the right to judge whether you and I are born-again Christians on the basis of our observable love toward all Christians. . .if people come up to us and cast in our teeth the judgement that we are not a Christian because we have not shown love toward other Christians, we must understand that they are only exercising a prerogative which Jesus gave them” Shaffer goes on to advocate for true oneness, forgiveness and a visible, costly commitment to one another, despite our differences. He also notes, “Without true Christians loving one another, Christ says the world cannot be expected to listen, even when we are giving proper answers.”

Proper answers. I guess that's what I thought wisdom was all about for most of my Christian life. Of course, proper answers matter but fall short of the real power of our impact on a rapidly disintegrating and skeptical culture. Answers authenticated by true love are the need of the hour. Relationships authenticated by Gospel wisdom are absolutely critical. But how?

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We must rediscover the power and promise of Christ's supernatural, self-sacrificing love – living through us in relational legitimacy. We must abide in Him so that the true wisdom of His life emanates in all that we do and say – and in how we demonstrate His love to others. And, we must rediscover His eagerness to accomplish all of this, and more, on behalf of those who simply ask.

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STRATEGIC RENEWAL