



# FINISH STRONG

MOVING FORWARD IN GOD'S VISION

## 21 Day Devotional Journal

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## FOREWORD

Dear Suntree Family,

As we continue in the Finish Strong campaign to move forward in God's vision, we must recognize the essential role of prayer, especially the power of a congregation united in prayer for our shared mission to love God, love each other, and love our neighbors in extraordinary ways.

We are asking everyone in our church to join in praying our campaign prayer, **“God, what do you want to do through me?”**

With the power of prayer in mind, we offer this 21-day devotional guide. Using this guide, we will walk together as one congregation through scripture and see God's guiding hand at work in the lives of God's people. Each day will include questions to guide your devotion time and a prayer to offer God.

We believe that faithful, God-honoring stewardship is always **grounded in gratitude, revealed in prayer, and then, ultimately, lived out in faith.** Through these 21 days, we hope to discover how God is calling each of us to express our gratitude and to live out God's purposes for us as individuals and as a church. We hope you will join us as we cover this campaign and the work of Suntree UMC in prayer.

Together we can discern God's vision for the next chapter in our church's extraordinary journey.

## DAY ONE

*They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large.*

Numbers 13:27-28

We're doing what? Haven't you read the headlines? Haven't you seen the news? How can we even think about having a stewardship campaign in this kind of an economy? You must be nuts. It doesn't require a great deal of imagination to think that some of the same comments were being made to Moses after the return of the spies from their visit to the Promised Land. Even without headlines screaming disaster and 24 hour news trumpeting crisis after crisis; one can almost imagine the people of Israel saying some of the very same things. You want us to do what? You expect us to go into that land with those giants and those walls and forts. You're crazy!

Then, as well as now, the issue is the same: Faith or Fear. There is the voice of the great tempter shouting to us words of fear; you can't, you mustn't, what if. But that is not the only voice. If we take the time to be quiet, to turn off the news, to put down the newspaper we will hear another voice, the voice of One who owns all of the cattle on the hillside; the voice of One who is the great I Am, not the small and insignificant what if.

The question, of course, becomes, which voice will we listen to? One wise pastor said that every church has two basic committees; a Back to Egypt committee ruled by fear and anxiety and an Into the Promised Land committee ruled by faith and hope. Which committee will you serve?

Remember, God isn't asking for a decision about giving today. He is only asking you to listen to His voice.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. When have I listened to the voice of fear over faith? What were the results?
2. When have I listened to the voice of faith over fear? What were the results?

## PRAYER

*Thank You, God, for Your calming voice of faith and hope in the midst of a world filled with fear and anxiety. Help me in the days that lie ahead to take time and listen for Your voice. Give me the courage to stand on the side of faith and hope rather than fear and doubt, Amen.*

## DAY TWO

*Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and see this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."*

Exodus 3:3-4

A murderer, a runaway, a shepherd, yet called by God to be one of history's greatest leaders. As this stewardship adventure begins there may have been no burning bush or voice from God, unless you count the call from your pastor, one of the directors, or an invitation to a campaign event. And yet make no mistake, no matter your background; you have been called by God to be part of this exciting adventure of faith. Just as God chose Moses, you have been chosen. Can you imagine that possibility? Can you begin to even consider that your participation in this adventure is not simply random chance, not simply a last gasp attempt to raise money? Can you believe God chose you; God called you?

Her name was Brenda. She was not the first choice of anyone for her particular position on the campaign leadership team. By all accounts, except God's, Brenda was a "last resort." As the campaign developed Brenda became a driving force, not due to influence or power but simply due to her quiet willingness to listen to the voice of God. As Brenda listened and opened her heart to God she became a powerful witness to God's love and mercy. And, out of a profound sense of gratitude, Brenda made one of the lead gifts to her church's capital campaign.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do I believe that God has called me to be part of this adventure?
2. Will I take the time to listen to the voice of God in the midst of this adventure?
3. Will I be willing to say yes to the call of God?

## PRAYER

*Thank You, Lord, for calling me to be a part of this adventure in faith. Help me to be open to Your voice, to listen to Your call and to finally discern Your will for my life. "Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to thee." I now pray for the rest of my church family, help us to be open to Your voice, to listen to Your call, to discern Your will for our lives. I pray in the name of Christ, Amen.*

## DAY THREE

*But Moses said to the Lord, "Oh my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."*

Exodus 4:10

Even though called by God, even hearing the voice of God from the midst of a burning bush, Moses was filled with doubts and questions. In chapters three and four of Exodus, Moses offers to God no fewer than four questions or doubts: Who am I to go; who shall I say has sent me; what if they don't believe me; and finally, his slowness of speech. In each case, each question, each doubt, God provided the way. God provided the answer.

This same dynamic applies to our call to give. Everyone has a multitude of reasons to not give. There is no good time for a stewardship campaign. There is always something else, a new car, a re-modeled house, braces for the kids, college to save for, and retirement to worry about. And yet as God calls us to give, as God asks us to be generous, if we listen, if we are open, God also provides the way.

Terry wept at the possibility that she might not be able to give what she thought would be a generous gift. She was faced with braces, college and a cut in her husband's pay. As she prayed about how to respond to her church's campaign, she became aware of ways in which she could give with generosity and joy. Terry began with all the reasons she couldn't give but, through prayer, discovered the joy of generosity. She responded out of a sense of gratitude for God's generosity rather than her fear of scarcity. When God calls, God also provides.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What are my reasons or doubts for not fully participating in this stewardship campaign?
2. How has God provided for me in the past, even when I have had doubts?
3. Can I be open to God and trust that as He calls He also provides?

## PRAYER

*Oh God, You know the many reasons I have for not wanting to serve, for not wanting to be generous. Help me to know in my heart that You have brought me to this time and this place and You will provide what I need to accomplish Your task. Help me, Oh God, to have an open heart, open eyes and open hands. I pray through Christ, Amen.*



## DAY FOUR

*After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." . . . And Abram said, "O Lord God what will you give me, for I continue childless. . ." He (God) brought him (Abram) outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the Lord...*

Genesis 15:1, 3, 5, 6

As golden sunlight slowly fades into the grayness of twilight, so the promise made years ago seems faded and distant. Abram had believed, had given up his home and traveled to a distant, unknown land all because of a promise. Excitement and enthusiasm have been replaced by questions and doubt.

On this journey of faith there will be times when excitement and enthusiasm are long forgotten; times when faith seems overwhelmed by questions and doubt. How does God respond? What does He ask? "Go outside Abram, count the stars, remember the vision, remember the promise." Just as we affirmed yesterday that this campaign is God's campaign, so too, we affirm that the vision comes not as the result of a board vote but instead is rooted and grounded in the promise of God. In the midst of our doubts, in the midst of wondering, "Will this really happen?", God invites us to count the stars, to remember the faces of the children, young people, families and elderly that will be touched because of what we are doing. Remember what this campaign is about; not buildings or bricks, dollars and cents; we are fulfilling God's promise and vision for ministry and mission. Remember, count the stars!

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Have I lost any of my original enthusiasm?
2. Do I believe in the vision?
3. What does God truly want from my church, this campaign and my life?

## PRAYER

*Dear God, I admit that sometimes I forget. Sometimes I get so caught up in the work that I forget the promise and the vision. Help me, Lord, to take the time to remember and like Abram to once again believe. In the name of Christ, Amen.*

## DAY FIVE

*Then Joshua said to the people, "Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you."*

Joshua 3:5

Finally, they were nearly there. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, after being so close and then being told they weren't ready, after so many false starts, and so many disappointments, they were on the verge of their heart's desire -- the Promised Land. And yet, even as they stood on the banks of the Jordan, gazing into the Promised Land, their hearts were undoubtedly filled with a mixture of joy, fear, excitement and anxiety. After all, the leader who had led them out of Egypt and through the wilderness; the leader who brought them God's word, the leader who time after time interceded with God on their behalf, their leader, Moses, was now dead. How could they do it? How would they manage? "Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you."

Perhaps some of the initial excitement of being a part of the campaign has evaporated. Perhaps, like the people of Israel, we wonder, "How can we do it? How will we manage?" Or perhaps the question is more personal, "How can I do my task? How can I give a generous and sacrificial gift?" God's response is the same. "Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders." To sanctify simply means to set apart for a holy purpose. We are called to set our lives, our church, this campaign and ourselves apart for God's use and God's purpose. Can we begin to set apart: our lives, our homes, our families, and our income, to be used by God and for God? If we can, then truly, "tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you."

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Am I beginning to experience any doubts or questions about our church, our campaign or my involvement?
2. Are there parts of my life that I am holding back from giving to God?
3. How can I intentionally set my life apart to be used by God?

## PRAYER

*Oh Lord, give me the courage and the faith to give my life and all I have, to be used by You. Show me ways, Oh Lord, that I can set myself and my life apart for You, Amen.*

## DAY SIX

*Thus says the Lord to you: "Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude; for the battle is not yours but God's... This battle is not for you to fight; take your position, stand still and see the victory of the Lord..."*

2 Chronicles 20:15, 17

Come on, Lord, get serious: Surrounded by enemies, threatened with destruction and you want us to stand still. Let's be honest, there is something about this story that just doesn't feel comfortable. Many of us would really prefer to "take the bull by the horns." More often than not we are encouraged to be a people of action. Yet this story from 2 Chronicles stands as a powerful reminder that there are occasions when the best thing we can do is stand still and wait upon God.

Over the course of the next month there will be considerable action in and around the church. Many will be feverishly working to accomplish all of the tasks for this stewardship campaign. And in the midst of all of your hard work there will actually be those who will complain about the campaign, about the process, about the project itself and who knows what else. You may be tempted, at times, to leap into battle, to answer all of the complaints, to convert the unconverted.

Remember, this is ultimately God's project, God's campaign, and God's battle. No matter what we do or how we do it, there will be opposition. We will do everything we can to answer questions and deal with criticism, but in the end it is God who will make us successful. In the midst of all the business and activities of the next few months, remember to take the time to stand still.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How do I respond to criticism and complaints?
2. Do I feel a pressing need to make everything right?
3. What might be some ways that I can stand still and trust God?

## PRAYER

*Teach me, Oh Lord, to stand still and wait for You. Help me to pause and remember that ultimately our success is in Your hands. Teach me to trust, Amen.*

## DAY SEVEN

*Now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever, Amen.*

Ephesians 3:20

How many times do we limit God? How often do we fail to recognize the wonderful power that God gives us through Jesus Christ. Look again at the words used by Paul, “abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” Often we find ourselves saying “yes, but...” There are always reasons why something can’t happen. We’re too small; we could never do that. We’re too poor; we could never afford that.

During the course of a stewardship campaign, churches often do more than they ever imagined. Individuals, by God’s grace, end up being able to give more and do more than they had ever dared dream. Her name was Sally. She was devoted to her church, to their project and to their campaign. There was only one problem; her husband. He controlled the finances, never attended church and seemed not to care at all about the church’s need. Sally worried and worried about her pledge, convinced she would be forced to give a token pledge at best. Sally was encouraged to pray. Finally, the night arrived when the leadership would fill out their pledges. Lo and behold, Sally’s husband came with her. As the time arrived to fill out the cards and return them, Sally and her husband were the last ones to turn in their card. As they came forward Sally was smiling from ear to ear even as tears coursed down her cheek. Her husband had filled out the card and had placed an amount higher than even Sally had dared hope or pray for. Now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever, Amen.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Are there ways in which I am limiting God's impact in my life?
2. Are there ways in which we are limiting God's impact in our church?
3. Am I limiting God as I consider my gift?

## PRAYER

*Abundant God, forgive me for the times that my lack of faith has limited what You can do. Help me to believe that together we can truly accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine. Help me to dream with faith and trust. In the name of Christ, Amen.*



## DAY EIGHT

*I pray that according to the riches of His glory, He may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through His spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.*

Ephesians 3:16-17

Evelyn Underhill in *The Spiritual Life* puts it this way: “For a spiritual life is simply a life in which all we do comes from the center, where we are anchored in God...”

Consider the power and awe inspired by watching the mighty Mississippi River. The sound and flow of the river fills us with a sense of peace and joy. Amidst the peace and joy, however, exists a powerful current that must be taken seriously. Imagine being on the river and losing an oar -- and then having an engine that won't start! Looking around, you discover you are without an anchor -- drifting rapidly downstream with the current.

In Ephesians 3, Paul speaks of being rooted and grounded; Evelyn Underhill speaks of being anchored in God. True stewardship begins with the realization that we are called to live our lives being rooted, grounded and anchored in the love of God. How many of us spend most of our lives being swept away by the currents of life, the demands of our jobs, family, education and even church responsibilities? We search in vain for a rope and anchor. We think if only: if only I could make more money, if only I could save more money, if only we had a bigger home, a better car or a faster computer. And still we find ourselves swept downstream. True stewardship begins with a life that is rooted, grounded and anchored in God's love.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do I have an anchor in my life?
2. Do I find myself being swept away by the demands of society and culture?
3. What are some practical ways I can begin to be grounded, rooted and anchored in Christ?

## PRAYER

*Oh Lord, I confess that I often find myself being swept along by the currents of life. I put my faith and hope in power, people, and possessions. Forgive me. Help me to turn to You during this campaign that my life would be rooted, grounded and anchored in You and Your wonderful love. In the name of Christ, Amen.*

## DAY NINE

*For God so loved the world that He gave...*

John 3:16

The candles cast a beautiful glow about the sanctuary; the choir raised their voices in a magnificent song of praise to honor the birth of the Savior. Yet, in the midst of such beauty and pageantry, tears slowly rolled down his cheeks. David had just returned from his third mission trip to Russia and all he could imagine was the children he had visited in the orphanages; children who would not hear the story of the babe lying in a manger, children who would receive no gifts, no candy, and no Christmas meal.

For God so loved the world that He gave...

The greatest gift the world has ever received was given for one reason and one reason alone -- love. It was a love so strong and powerful that He gave His only son. Our stewardship emphasis is not about bricks, buildings or budgets. Ultimately, we are about love; a love that desires to reach out and bring people into the family of God. A love so strong, so powerful that we want to give and give and give some more; not from obligation or guilt but from heartfelt desire that people would come to know the wonderful and saving love of God through Christ.

For God so loved the world that He gave...

We don't need to travel to rural Russia to find those in need. How many children and young people in your own community will not hear the Good News, will never grow up knowing the joy that comes from being a part of God's family? How many families in your own congregation desperately need to hear the good news of God's love in the midst of divorce, death, sickness or unemployment? How many elderly people need to know God still loves them? Think for a moment of co-workers, family members and friends who desperately need what the church has to offer -- love.

*For God so loved the world that He gave...Will you?*

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why do I give?
2. Does my gift adequately reflect God's love for me and others?
3. Who do I personally know who needs to know the love of God through Christ?

## PRAYER

*Loving and Giving God, thank You for loving the world so much that You gave up Your only son that I might live. Help me, Oh God, to give like You. Help me to give with a generous and loving heart. Open my eyes to a world that stands in desperate need of Your wondrous love in Christ. I pray in His name, Amen.*

## DAY TEN

*For God so loved the world that He gave...*

John 3:16

His name is Andre, Director of the orphanage in Kaigorodok, a small rural village approximately 600 miles northeast of Moscow. In 1996, Andre and his children were desperate with little hope of help for the barest of necessities, even food.

Through the generosity of God's people in the church, Andre was able to provide for the children's basic needs and see them through the cold Russian winter. The following year, members of the church that provided financial support visited Andre and his children -- finding them better fed, healthier, and happier. Andre was smiling from ear to ear. The children performed skits, sang songs and treated them to a wonderful feast: the reason, gratitude. Andre and the children were genuinely thankful and out of gratitude they wanted to, perhaps even had to, give.

After working in rural Tennessee with his youth group, a 16-year-old boy experienced this same type of response from an elderly woman for whom his group had been working. Even though she could afford very little, she had been deeply touched by the work that had been done for her and wanted to give something in return. The woman went to the dollar store and purchased socks for each of the kids. Normally the 16-year-old would have scoffed at such a gift, but he knew this gift was given with profound gratitude and was a real sacrifice.

*For God so loved the world that He gave...*

Generous and sacrificial giving begins with gratitude; gratitude for what God has done through the gift of His son Jesus Christ; gratitude for what God has done for us through the family of God we know as our church. For those who make incredible, truly sacrificial gifts, it is an expression of their deep gratitude for what God has done for them through their local church -- the family of God.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do I recognize the blessings that God has poured forth on my family and me?
2. How has God blessed me through the people in my local church?
3. Does my gift recognize the extent of God's blessings in my life; is it generous and sacrificial?
4. Is my gift grounded in gratitude?

## PRAYER

*Oh God, I have so much for which to be thankful. You have blessed me in ways that are too numerous to even count. Forgive me for not being always grateful. Forgive me for focusing on what I don't have instead of all You have given me. Fill my heart with gratitude and show me how I can give with generosity and sacrifice. In the name of Christ, Amen.*

## DAY ELEVEN

*We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.*

2 Corinthians 8:1-2

Artyom is a ten-year-old Russian orphan. When the church group visited Artyom, for some reason, latched onto Scott. He took Scott by the arm and led him through the orphanage showing off his room and the place he ate meals. All the while Artyom's eyes were filled with joy and laughter. In spite of the fact that Scott spoke little Russian and Artyom spoke no English, the two connected. As the church group prepared to depart, Artyom sat beside Scott, pulled a silver ring from his finger and held it out for Scott to take. Scott eyes filled with tears and he spoke the only Russian word he knew -- nyet, nyet -- no, no. This child, who had nothing in the world to call his own except this ring, desperately wanted to give this ring to Scott. For Artyom, his abundant joy and extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity. Like the Macedonians, Artyom desperately wanted to give.

What do we want? For many of us who have so much, we want more. And truth be told, it's never enough. What would happen if, by God's grace, our desire to gain more and have more could be transformed into a heart-felt desire to give more? What would happen if we spent as much time figuring out ways to give as we spend figuring out how to earn, have and keep?

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Who has taught you about generosity?
2. Can you recall a time when someone who could least afford it gave you a generous gift? What was it like? How did you respond? Did it affect you in any way?
3. Can you recall a time when you were particularly generous? What was it like? What did you learn? How has it impacted your life?

## PRAYER

*Oh God, thank You for the examples of generosity You have sent into our lives. Forgive us Lord for being more concerned with how much we can earn, have and keep, instead of how much we can give. Open our hearts, Oh God, to the joy of generosity, Amen.*

PS. Yes, Artyom finally convinced Scott to take the ring. He wears it as a vivid and real reminder of what it means to truly give.



## DAY TWELVE

*For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints—and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and by the will of God to us...*

2 Corinthians 8:3-5

It simply makes no sense. The Macedonian Christians, in the midst of their own poverty, in the midst of their own struggles, begging earnestly for the joyous privilege of GIVING. IT MAKES NO SENSE. How could this happen? The answer is amazingly simple. They gave themselves first to God and then to others.

Her name was Michelle. As she considered her gift to the church campaign, she became increasingly upset. She desperately wanted to make a significant gift, but because of her life situation she thought it impossible. She was faced with medical bills for a child, college tuition for another child, and a 35% pay cut for her husband. Like the Macedonians, Michelle wanted to give. Her pastor listened to Michelle's frustration and suggested that she be open to what God may want, and in fact, what God may do. He suggested that she simply pray. Reluctantly, she agreed. As she gave herself to God in prayer, something happened. She became aware of ways she could give and give with generosity. It wasn't easy. It wasn't magic. It required prayer, faith, and trust. When Michelle arrived at the church on Commitment Sunday, her face radiated joy and peace. She gave herself first to God and then to others.

In every campaign the goal is the same, that each of us would give ourselves first to the Lord and then to others. If we truly give ourselves to God and then to others, we will raise all the money we will ever need. And far more importantly, lives and hearts -- like Michelle's -- will be forever changed and transformed.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Have I truly asked for God's guidance in giving?
2. Am I open to what God would have me do?
3. What might prevent me from being open and obedient to what God wants from me?

## PRAYER

*Oh God, I am frightened to think about coming to You for guidance. I'm not sure I want to hear what You have to say. Forgive me. Help me to lay aside all of the reasons and fears and help me to turn to You in faith and trust. Help me, Oh God, to be open to whatever You would have me do. Fill my heart with the Macedonian spirit of generosity. Through Christ my Lord, Amen.*

## DAY THIRTEEN

*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved.*

1 Corinthians 10:31-33

In a wonderful devotional classic, *God Calling*, the two anonymous authors write on March 16 of the Christian's calling to reflect God to the world and to make God real in the world. Think of those phrases for a moment. Reflect God, and make God real in the world. Another way of saying, as Paul does do everything to the glory of God...not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Do I reflect God to the world in all that I do? Do I make God real in all that I do? Do I work that others may come to the saving knowledge of Christ or do I spend most of my time seeking my own advantage?

If I take the time to ask these questions, if I take the time to examine my life, I may not be pleased with the answers. The truth is most of my time is spent in seeking my own advantage. If I look at my checkbook or budget, I am confronted with the same questions. What do my spending patterns reflect? What do they make real? To whose advantage am I working? The answer is almost always the same, my family and me.

One of the benefits of a stewardship campaign is that it helps us re-prioritize our lives according to God's plan and not simply according to our own wants and desires. A young family had been saving for years to remodel their home and make it exactly what they had always wanted. As part of a stewardship campaign they began praying about what God wanted and not what they wanted. They looked at the project, they looked at their church, and they prayed with an open heart. They wanted to reflect to the world the love and grace of God. They wanted to make God's love real to their community. They intentionally decided to put their remodeling money to work for the advantage of others and not themselves. The process was not easy, the answers were not always clear, but as they told their story, their faces radiated joy and peace. Their house had not been remodeled, but their hearts and lives had been.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What does my life reflect?
2. Am I willing to honestly and openly seek God's will for my life -- even my finances?
3. How can I reprioritize my life in order to better reflect God and His love?

## PRAYER

*Dear God, I confess that I do not always reflect You and Your love. I confess that much of my time is spent in seeking my own advantage. Give me the courage, Oh God, to seek Your will for my heart, my life and even my finances. In all that I do and say, help me to reflect You and Your love. I pray through Christ my Lord, Amen.*

## DAY FOURTEEN

*...Children, how hard it is for them that trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God.*

Mark 10:24

Perhaps the saddest story in Scripture is of the rich young man who quietly and sadly turns away from Jesus when asked to sell what he has and give it to the poor. In his explanation to the disciples of this difficult teaching, Jesus indicates that the fundamental question is one of trust. In whom or what do we place our trust?

From our earliest days most of us are taught to make it on our own, to depend on no one but ourselves. We are continually reminded to value our independence. And yet God appears to call us to a radical DEPENDENCE on God as the ultimate source of life and blessing. Who do we trust for our happiness? For many of us the answer is rather simple and obvious. We trust in ourselves and our ability to take care of ourselves.

In *God Calling*, the authors write: I am your Lord, your supply. You must rely on Me. Trust to the uttermost limit. Trust and do not be afraid. You must depend on Divine Power only. In the midst of making your decision on giving, you are asked to prayerfully consider not only the question of sacrifice, but also the questions of faith and trust. Does the gift you are considering demonstrate that ultimate faith and trust rests in God and not in the accumulation of wealth and possessions?

The Williamsons were already committed to giving to their church. They were comfortable and felt good about their tithing. As they prayed and waited on God, they felt called to increase their tithe, to go up to the next step of giving. They said yes and made the commitment. THEN, this couple saw their stocks crash and they faced the difficult question of what to do about their commitment. Most of us would be shaken and afraid to see our commitment through. But the Williamsons were people who had ultimate faith and trust in God. They simply said, "Because of what God has done for us, because of His blessings we will trust and have faith that we will be able to keep the commitment He led us to make."

*...Children, how hard it is for them that trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God.*

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. As you look at our life, where do you truly place trust?
2. If you were the rich young man, how would you respond to Jesus?
3. Does the gift you are considering represent faith and trust in God and not in ability to accumulate wealth and possessions?

## PRAYER

*Lord, I confess that Your question to the rich young man deeply troubles me. I speak of trust and faith in You but often find myself living as if I only trust in myself, my abilities, my wealth and my possessions. Teach me Lord. Teach me to trust truly in You and Your love. Show me the gift You would have me make, a gift of sacrifice and faith, Amen.*

## DAY FIFTEEN

*But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

Isaiah 40:31

In our family, we all understood that if we went to a restaurant and the line was long and the wait more than a few minutes, we were not going to stay. We might spend an hour driving to different places but we weren't going to wait fifteen minutes just to get a seat at our favorite restaurant. I wonder how many good meals we missed just because we refused to wait?

In our current day of microwaves, 24-hour news, remote controls and drive-through windows, our ability to wait seems almost non-existent. I want it right now, and if you can't get it for me right now, I'll find someone who can.

*But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

Perhaps the most important task of the stewardship journey is to wait upon the Lord. Waiting upon God can take many different forms. One man turned his evening walk with his dog into his prayer and waiting time. Of course, after his potential pledge had more than doubled his wife told him, "Please stop taking the dog for a walk! I'll walk him from now on."

As we learn to wait upon God and listen for His still small voice, strange things begin to happen. We begin to experience renewal and strength, joy and peace. Waiting upon God can renew marriages, as couples wait upon God together. Career paths change as people seriously consider the question, "God, what do You want from me, not just financially but with my entire life?"

Waiting may not be easy. Waiting may require finding a specific time, perhaps in the car with the radio off, perhaps in the shower, perhaps taking an evening walk. Remember..

*But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Am I willing to wait upon God?
2. What are some of the barriers in my life that prevent me from waiting on God?
3. Is there a special time that I can devote to waiting upon God?

## PRAYER

*Dear God, forgive me for always being in such a hurry. Teach me to slow down. Teach me to wait. Teach me to listen. In my waiting and listening, Oh God, bring renewal to my heart, my life, my family and my church, Amen.*



## DAY SIXTEEN

*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I hope.*

Psalm 130:5

James loves to tell the story of a time when he went bow hunting. He was sitting under a majestic oak tree, and the sun was cresting over the ridge and beginning to warm his chilled body. As he waited, his eyes became heavy and soon he was sound asleep, the bow on his lap. Suddenly, he was startled awake to find himself nearly nose to nose with the largest buck he had ever seen. He's not sure who was more frightened, himself or the buck. The buck bounded away while James could only sit and wonder, "What if? What if I had been awake and alert?"

Yesterday's devotion spoke of waiting. The truth is we can wait in many different ways. We can wait with expectation and hope, or we can wait convinced we are waiting in vain with little or no expectation of anything happening. The result? We fall asleep, like James, beneath the oak tree and miss the glorious opportunities God has in store for us.

*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I hope.*

As we learn to wait upon God we need to ask ourselves what do we expect? Do we wait with the hope that God will speak to us? Do we wait with the expectation that God will lead us and guide us, or do we perhaps wait like James asleep under the oak tree? If we wait with hopeful expectation we will not be disappointed.

*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I hope.*

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What do I expect as I wait upon God?
2. Do I believe that God can and will speak to me, lead me and guide me in my decision-making?
3. What keeps me from waiting upon God with hopeful expectation?

## PRAYER

*Oh God, forgive me for the times I have fallen asleep beneath the oak tree and missed opportunities to serve and love You. Help me to find ways in the midst of my busy life to wait on You. Help me, Oh God, to wait on You with faith, hope, and anticipation, Amen.*

## DAY SEVENTEEN

*Be still, and know that I am God!*

Psalm 46:10

We blast TV or radio on the morning run. Video game sounds have become normal background noise in our daily lives. Many of us are “connected” all day long in our jobs. Our computers, TVs, iPods, cell phones are all constantly providing the white noise of our lives. Moment after moment, day after day, we are surrounded by a cacophony of sound.

*Be still, and know that I am God!*

Silence! What, in the name of heaven, is silence except a long forgotten memory? Yet perhaps the psalmist knows a secret.

*Be still, and know that I am God!*

As we strive to be open to God, as we strive to wait upon God, perhaps we need to be silent and still. People who are busy, (and who isn't?) often say, “but I have no time to be quiet and still.” I promise, if you want to find an oasis of peace and quiet you will find it. Perhaps, we could turn off the radio in the car and drive in silence. Perhaps, we could turn off the TV while exercising. Go for your jog or walk without the headphones. Ask God to speak, take the time to listen and you may just be surprised.

*Be still, and know that I am God!*

His name is Paul. Paul took the call to wait on God seriously. His shower time became his prayer time. As he wrestled with the soap and washcloth he was wrestling with God and what God wanted for his life. After Paul went from a capital campaign pledge of \$12,000 to nearly \$30,000, his wife threatened to cut off the hot water. Paul listened and God spoke.

*Be still, and know that I am God!*

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What is it that may prevent me from listening to God?
2. What specific time could I devote to listening to God?
3. What do I want from God?
4. Am I willing to listen and obey?

## PRAYER

*Gracious God, forgive me for my failure to take time to listen and be still. Forgive me for filling my life with everything but You. Teach me, speak to me, help me to listen and give me the faith to obey. In Christ's name, Amen.*

## DAY EIGHTEEN

*You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.*

2 Corinthians 9:11-12

Generosity and gratitude, gratitude and generosity, these words somehow are nearly inseparable. Can one really exist without the other? Stewardship stories told during campaigns often include the sharing of what people plan to give but, more importantly, why they give. In nearly every instance one of the words that jumps to the fore is gratitude. A husband and wife standing in front of their church family, tears streaming down their cheeks as they speak of the love, support and strength given by God through their church when they experienced the tragic loss of their child. Such gratitude inevitably leads to generosity.

A young man whose entrepreneurial skills have led to considerable wealth at a relatively young age, speaks movingly of gratitude to God. He knows that everything he has and everything he has accomplished is a gift -- a gift from God. He tells his church family that their faith in him gave him the courage and faith to do more than he could have dared dream. Gratitude and generosity.

In our culture we are continually told to “pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.” We are told we have to “make it on our own.” Do any of us really make it on our own? I think not. God, parents, friends, teachers, youth leaders, pastors, Sunday school members, all have a part in our development. The only true response can be gratitude followed by generosity.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How has God blessed me?
2. Have I been truly thankful?
3. Have I responded to God's blessings with gratitude and generosity?
4. Does my gift adequately reflect the ways God has blessed me?

## PRAYER

*Forgive me, Lord, for sometimes thinking I am somehow self-made. Forgive me for not always being aware of how truly fortunate I have been. Help me, Lord, to have a heart overflowing with gratitude and hands reaching out with generosity. Help me make a gift that reflects all of the blessings that You have so richly poured out on me. In Christ's name, Amen.*

## DAY NINETEEN

*Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."*

Luke 19:8-10

The look on her face was a combination of anger and utter amazement, "You expect me to do what?" she nearly shouted. "You want me to stand in front of people and actually tell them what we are going to give? No way!" In a slow and measured response I said, "No, I am not expecting or telling you to do anything, I am asking you to pray about the possibility of talking with people about your gift."

Isn't it amazing how in most of our churches we will talk about anything and everything except our money and finances? In our scripture today Zacchaeus meets the Christ and his life is changed forever. Because of this encounter, his response is to boldly declare his faith!

The gift, the amount, is really secondary. The primary issue is gratitude for a changed life. In telling a stewardship story, the first question is always, "How and where have I met Christ in my church?" How have I been blessed? How has my life been forever changed? And, with a heart overflowing with gratitude, I may then, with Zacchaeus, boldly say, "because of what God has done for me, this is what I am willing to do for God."

And, oh, by the way, the young woman at the beginning of our story, after much struggle and prayer, told one of the most beautiful stewardship stories I have ever heard. She spoke about how she met Christ through the people of her church. And then, with a grateful heart, she told them about the gift she was willing to give.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How have I met Christ in my church?
2. How is my life changed because of meeting Christ?
3. How is my life different because of Christ and the church?
4. Can I pray about sharing with others, privately or publicly, about my willingness to give as a grateful response to God's love?

## PRAYER

*Oh, Giving and Loving God, remind me now of all the wonderful ways You have blessed me, touched me, and changed me. Give me the courage and boldness to share my story with others, through Christ our Lord, Amen.*



## DAY TWENTY

*And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."*

Mark 2:4-5

Four friends moved by an overwhelming sense of compassion and love for their friend. Four friends willing to pick up their corner of the blanket and bring their friend into the healing presence of Jesus Christ. Four friends determined and unwilling to be stopped by crowds, unwilling to say, "Sorry, we can't do it, maybe next time."

As we begin to wind down our devotional journey of faith, some may be thinking, "I can never do what the people in these stories have done." And yet the common thread for each story is simply the willingness, the overwhelming desire, to do their share, to pick up their corner of the blanket and bring their church, their community, their friends, the world, into the healing presence of Jesus the Christ. Each of us has been blessed in different ways and to different levels. God simply asks us to pick up our corner.

A rather well-to-do woman approached her pastor and asked if her gift of \$500 would be sufficient. The pastor's wise response was, "Does your gift represent the blessings God has given you?" The lady took the check back and departed without saying a word. A week later she returned with a check for \$5,000 and asked the same question. The courageous pastor gave the same reply and once again she took the check back and left. The pastor wondered if he would ever see her or the check again. But the scene repeated itself the following week. This time the check was for \$20,000. In response to her inevitable question, "Is it enough?" the pastor, swallowing the lump in his throat, gave his standard reply. This time with a smiling face full of joy, she replied, "Yes, pastor, this represents God's blessings to me."

She finally was willing to pick up her corner of the blanket.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do I believe that my church, through Jesus Christ, has the answer for a hurting world?
2. Am I willing to go the extra mile and lay aside my excuses so that people will come to know the healing, loving power of Christ?
3. Does the gift I am considering truly and fully represent how God has blessed me? Am I willing to pick up my corner of the blanket?

## PRAYER

*Oh Lord, thank You for friends who in the past have carried me into Your healing presence. I name them now...Thank You for all of the blessings You have so richly poured forth on my family and me. Help me to now give back, give me the courage to do whatever it takes for me to pick up my corner of the blanket. In the name of Christ, Amen.*

## DAY TWENTY-ONE

*They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road..."*

Luke 24:32

Two disciples, walking along the road to Emmaus, discussing the many events of the previous weeks; the arrest and trial of Jesus, the crucifixion and burial, and now strange rumors of resurrection. Along the dusty road to Jerusalem they find themselves in the very presence of their Lord and Savior, the resurrected Christ. Even though He was unrecognized, the disciples reported that their hearts were burning while He was talking to them on the road.

For some this stewardship campaign may have seemed like an endless walk on a long and dusty road. And yet, my hope and prayer for each of you is that at some place on this journey your heart has burned with the recognition that Christ is in our midst, that Christ is walking with us on this dusty road.

And so we conclude this devotional with the simple question. How have you met Christ on this journey? Has your heart burned with recognition that Christ is in our midst?

## **PRAYER**

*Thank You, Lord, for the gift of this journey we call a stewardship campaign. Thank You for meeting us on this road. Thank You for the burning in our hearts that we recognize as You and Your love. Help us now to continue this walk always mindful that You are walking beside us. Thank You! Amen.*



# FINISH STRONG

MOVING FORWARD IN GOD'S VISION

## 21 Day Devotional Journal

Written by Scott McKenzie, PhD

